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Michelle Carbone Loris, *Innocence, Loss and Recovery in the Art of Joan Didion*. American University Studies, Series IV, English Language and Literature, Vol. 74. New York: Peter Lang, 1989. 160 pp. \$29.95

by Angela DiPace Fritz

Nothing dissuades Joan Didion in her fiction and nonfiction, nor Michelle Carbone Loris in *Innocence, Loss and Recovery in the Art of Joan Didion* from the firmly held belief, an unflinchingly biblical echo reverberating in contemporary society, that "the story of the wilderness was and is redemptive," first enunciated by Didion in her pivotal essay "Thinking About Western Thinking" in 1976 (quoted in Loris, p. 1).

From this moral stance emerge several interrelated subtexts, or maxims, which, Loris persuasively argues, overtly or covertly find expression in all of Didion's *oeuvre*. Pervasive are the axioms: "everything we do counts" (p. 134); betrayal of primary loyalties impedes the exodus from the wilderness; we learn from the stories we hear that bear upon the moral obligations of the human race; and that "in our disintegrating culture which is fast losing a sense of moral order and meaning, we need to hear "stories in order to live" (Didion, *White Album*, p. 11; quoted in Loris p. 136).

Important, too, to Didion's moral vision is the tenet that her experience, interpolated in her writing, is a testament: I Joan testify Therefore, one finds not a suspension of authorial persona, but rather a superimposition of the "author-as-character" (p. 135), thus leading Loris to conclude that "Didion's involvement in both her fiction and essays expresses the way she lives out her own moral dictum of maintaining personal responsibility and loyalties of love amidst the chaos of contemporary American life" (p. 136).

Apt, then, is Loris' focus: Didion's schematic and moral paradigm of what it is to be an American in contemporary American society. Jettisoning the modernist obsession with epistemology, Didion opts (so it seems to this reviewer) for a postmodernist foregrounding of "ontological themes and differences, internal and external," as postulated by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (Boston: Routledge, 1989, p. 39), thereby

viewing America as an “‘ontological landscape’ of culture” (McHale, p. 36). “Ontological landscapes may be double, may occupy only a single plane, [or] may also be plural” (McHale, pp. 36-37). McHale further maintains that juxtaposition of “‘worlds in the plural’” accounts for the “‘anarchic landscape’” of contemporary society (p. 37).

In Didion’s America, one confronts a “‘social construction of (un)real worlds’”; “‘intertextual war zones’”; “‘worlds in collision’”; and “‘worlds under erasure’” (McHale, *passim*). Pivotal to Didion’s landscape is the American West, or, more accurately, displacement, erasure, and collision of cultures that are outcomes of the migration west, as well as the differences between the American dream of the past and its contemporary manifestation. That Didion explores frontiers which extend beyond California attests to her credo that, as Loris notes, the “‘frontier dream’” (p. 2) is not only symptomatic of the American society, but also of the entire, restive western world.

Although Didion exhorts that the “‘frontier dream’” is fraught with contradictions, such as “‘the image of California — as the promise of paradise and as the experience of hardship’” (p. 2), and often expresses her jeremiads starkly and pessimistically, Loris convincingly argues that Didion’s prophetic voice is not without a residue of hope. Moreover, Loris persists that this hope is based on what for Didion is both a biblical and contemporary societal verity: that “‘the story of the wilderness was and is redemptive.’” Loris demonstrates that Didion often succeeds in illustrating that redemption and damnation are invariably acted out in the American wagon-train story, a variant of “‘the Genesis narrative which recounts Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden,’” interpreted by Didion to signify our sense of “‘alienation and dislocation’” (p. 5).

Expressing this view as early as 1965 in the essay “‘Morality’” and persistently articulating it throughout her narratives, correctly viewed by Loris as “‘cautionary tales’” (p. 53), Didion steadfastly maintains that the “‘central commandment of [the] ‘wagon-train morality’ [is] that we must never forget ‘our loyalties to those we love’ ” (p. 53). Betrayal of self, as well as betrayal of others, of nations, or of international communities, all result in broken promises and failed loyalties which have contributed to the

“discontinuous drama” (McHale, p. 38) of the twentieth-century, visible, so to speak, in contemporary American society.

Didion points out that although Americans seem to be familiar with their cultural heritage that specifically alludes to the stories of those pioneers who traversed the desert and settled the West, they have not learned from these daunting experiences. For Didion, however, as Loris informs the reader, the nineteenth-century trip west out to California, the promised land, is a familiar and familial story, deeply personal, gender-related, and immensely significant — immemorial. Didion, writes Loris, “learned about being a Westerner from women in her family. . . . Vivid pictures of these women dominate Didion’s imagination and evoke for her this particular Western narrative” (p. 1).

It is Didion’s western narrative and its biblical analogue that Loris reconstructs, interrupting chronology only when thematic and stylistic concerns take precedence. Loris begins *Innocence, Loss and Recovery in the Art of Joan Didion* with an engaging analysis of the women characters in *Run River* (1963), Didion’s first novel which depicts the cultural disruptions caused by World War II. Located in the Sacramento Valley and focused on Lily, a California dreamer, *Run River* soon becomes familiar to the reader through the “Lily-of-the-Valley” topos (p. 13). Speeding the inevitable process of decay of Lily/Lily is the encroachment of “the machine in the garden,” a dynamic analogy delineated by Leo Marx in his 1964 book of the same title. Thus, Didion attributes the corrosion of the American paradisiacal idyll to the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society whose eventual displacement of moral values is associated with renouncing the “wagon-train morality.” The dire consequences for relinquishing this morality are evident in the changes that have taken place in the valley to those who live there and to the river that runs through it, as it also runs through the lives of the characters, resulting, as Loris best puts it, in “lurid tales of broken lives — divorce, murder, and suicide” (p. 4).

The aftermath of this transition/abandonment also serves as a point of departure for Didion’s second novel *Play It As It Lays* (1970), perhaps her most pessimistic writing to date. Migration west leads many to tinsel town, and it is to Hollywood, the city of dreams and anguish, that Didion transports “the Edenic dream

begun in Sacramento to its most disappointing frontier" (p. 31). Loris aptly writes: "Taking on the style of a Hollywood script, the second novel projects America's golden territory as a desert of personal dread and cultural dissolution" (p. 31).

Central to the concept of the dream gone awry, as Loris points out, is Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977) which takes the reader to Boca Grande (a fictional city in Central America) perceived "as the last outpost of the pioneer dream" (p. 4). Exiled and estranged from America, several women expatriates seek other frontiers, only to discover there what they once had heard on American soil: that the fragile fabric of human threads/bonds depends on weaving loyalties based on trust; that betrayal of loyalties brings forth a string of tragic events; but also that "remembering primary loyalties of love transforms . . . lives" (p. 54).

Grace Strasser Mendana, an expatriate in Boca Grande (what seems to be "the mouth of hell" [p. 59]), remembers and recounts Charlotte Douglas' life story. This story (relevant to both Charlotte and Grace) is a "cautionary tale," a story of redemption. "Charlotte becomes for Grace a shimmer of a rainbow slick — inexplicable, unfathomable, mysterious. And like the sign of the rainbow, Charlotte's story becomes for Grace a covenant of love and friendship" (p. 65), writes Loris. In this narrative, Didion attempts to unravel the efficacy of grace and prayer "for a community of believers" (pp. 65-66) that is outnumbered by non-believers, thus functioning as a testament of Grace/grace (p. 53).

The frontier, laden with ideologies of expansion, possession, and power, is pressed further in Didion's third novel *Democracy* (1984), where, along with Inez Christian Victor, the reader travels to Hawaii and Vietnam, finally sojourning in Kuala Lumpur. In the chapter "Didion Deconstructs Democracy," Loris informs us that nothing can stop *la forza del destino*. Invariably, America's Manifest Destiny reached a formidable impasse in Vietnam. All of our "nerves [were] shaken" (p. 69) by the Vietnam War.

Didion's deconstruction of America's fraudulent views of democracy, Loris writes, parallel the process of an atomic bomb's explosion, and Didion, the author-as-character, "puts herself on the line," only to discover "destructive and maddening truths embedded in cultural myths" (p. 77). Deconstructing a facile and

reductive view of democracy forces Didion to formulate a new reading of democracy/*Democracy*:

Consider the role of the writer in post-industrial society. Consider the political implications of both the reliance on and distrust of abstract words. Consider the social organization implicit in the use of the autobiographical third person. Consider, too, Didion's own involvement in the setting.

(p. 77)

In this novel, Didion dislodges the epistemological superiority of the authorial persona (the underlying subjectivity), by undermining, as Loris points out, "our tenuous hold on memory" (p. 78), and our "febrile" (p. 120) constructs of democracy. Didion's authorial intrusion has several functions. She "leads us to consider ego more as a fictional concept than as an objective reality"; and, she "deconstructs for us the romantic concept of the individual self upon which democracy is constructed" (p. 78). Conversely, Didion forces the reader to see the text as fiction and to see the fictions embedded in cultural myths.

Deconstructing democracy is synonymous to deconstructing the text. What is the point? "The constant interruptions," Loris perceptively surmises, "force us to view the fiction as fiction, and thereby, to see the fiction inherent in the controlling myths which form the basis of this text" (p. 79). By extension, Didion prompts us to examine the fictions that inform our lives, explicitly exploded in two of Didion's now-familiar collections of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979).

Whereas life stories and strategies for living inform Didion's fiction, literary devices reign supreme in her nonfiction. Dominant in her essays, testimonials of how we live in America today, are the tropes of "parable" and "epistle" (p. 84). The essays in both collections, Loris claims (and rightfully so) "enable us to see quite plainly, the values of moral responsibility, commitment, and self-respect which, Didion, cautions us, are sadly absent from our lives today" (p. 84).

Undaunted by the political amorality that surfaced throughout

the Vietnam War, Americans, Didion thinks, have continued their escalation of desolation in two other frontiers: *Salvador* (1983) and *Miami* (1987). In these two texts, our contemporary Jeremiah documents in a neo-journalistic style those crepuscular verities that otherwise might have remained inchoate. Both *Miami* and *Salvador* are chronicles of the "events of postwar America," or "stories of catastrophe" (p. 5). In effect, they are contemporary "parables of how we relinquish the promise of personal dignity and cultural prosperity to human arrogance and greed" (p. 5): here Loris forcibly restates Didion's indictment. Nationally in *Miami* and internationally in *Salvador*, Didion concretely demonstrates "America's betrayal of its moral trust" (p. 34). The abandonment originates, for Didion, in relinquishing the "central commandment" (p. 52) embedded in the "wagon-train morality."

Both *Salvador* and *Miami* are perceived as ambiguous cities or war zones where the battles are ongoing. Both are spaces of political and moral corruption, where the collapse of national, racial, and religious boundaries is brutally enacted. Appropriately, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* serve as trenchant allegorical analogues to Didion's critique of modernity in *Salvador*. Having spent several weeks in El Salvador in 1982, Didion recounts in the text what she had experienced during her stay: life in El Salvador is dominated by "ambiguity," "hallucinations," and "doubletalk" (p. 107). Everything seems; nothing is: "no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse" (p. 107). The ideologies of patriarchy and oppression are put into effect to the detriment of those of Spanish ancestry whose tyranny and arrogance are directed toward the denigration of the *latinos* and *mestizos*.

Fear and terror dominate in *Salvador*, a space where "the mechanism of terror" (p. 112) is rampant and ubiquitous. No place is safe; no space is sacred. Didion graphically creates for the reader, in one instance, the "brutalist space that was the cathedral," forcing the reader to recall the Metropolitan Cathedral and the murder of Archbishop Romero (p. 115). In the fiction of *Salvador*, Didion reenacts a "true *noche obscura*" (p. 116).

Recurrent also in Miami's neighborhoods are battles waged

between Americans and Cubans, between Black and White communities, and between Christians and Jews. That the battles are also waged on linguistic grounds suggests that the clashes between cultures may prove to be irreconcilable. That the "unbroken alteration of Spanish and English [has] become the local patois," or that "in Miami, Spanish was spoken by "the people who ate in restaurants" (p. 118) undercut the thin threads that might reconcile the Anglos and Cubans.

Politically, the Cubans in Miami feel that they have experienced a long string of betrayals, beginning with the Bay of Pigs incident in 1961. There have been too many betrayals, deepening the Cubans' mistrust of Americans and reinforcing their sense of isolation. Although approximately 125,000 Cubans live in Miami (p. 123), they feel isolated, rejected, and humiliated. Theirs is "the tale of a people in exile not more than ninety miles from their homeland" (pp. 116-17). Americans, conversely, are mystified and angered by the Cubans' rejection of the so-called immigrant pattern of assimilation in asserting the right to speak Spanish, in their allegiance to Cuba as their *patria*, and in their strong "anti-Kennedy sentiment" (p. 121), among their many other seemingly wrongdoings.

Complications of war arise more rapidly in Miami than in any other urban zone in America. Miami is more than dualistic or triadic; this war zone is pluralistic. Many worlds, albeit fragmentary microcosms, are juxtaposed in Miami, inhabited by groups intent on rendering a "*pas de deux* impossible" (p. 118). More so than any other of Didion's writing, *Miami* seems inconclusive: it does not have an ending because, for Didion, it "has yet to take place" (p. 131).

Yet Loris is quick to point out that Didion is not a prophetess of doom. "Caustic," "sharp," "ironic," and undeteringly "stubborn," Didion's is "a voice of prophetic warning" (p. 131). As Menippean satirist, Didion does not extinguish all light in her fictional/nonfictional narratives, discerned in the opening lines of *Democracy*:

"The light at dawn during those Pacific tests
was something to see.

Something to behold.
Something that could almost make you think you
saw God” (p. 11)

In *Innocence, Loss and Recovery in the Art of Joan Didion*, Loris succeeds by redirecting the reader to Didion's writing. In rereading Didion, the reader discovers that there is “something to behold” in her narratives. Loris, moreover, succeeds, not only because she does not deviate from her premise, but also because she reconstructs a viable paradigm for Didion's morality, tracing the centrality of the “wagon-train morality” to its biblical roots and juxtaposing the history of its continuity and discontinuity to fiction and nonfiction, stories of individuals, nations, or international communities, thus demonstrating that Didion's narratives are, indeed, parables for our time.