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Didion's "On Going Home": The Rhetoric of Fragmentation

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One of the recent developments in American letters has been the recent awakening of interest in the essay form, considered for long a subgenre of literary nonfiction. "A greater number of essayists," Scott Russell Sanders indicates, are "at work in America today, and more gifted ones, than at any time in recent decades" (qtd. in Atkins 13).

One of these gifted writers is Joan Didion. Chris Anderson contends that her essay writing "represent[s] the fulfillment and attenuation of the essay as a form" (141). In the history of the essay, he sees Didion following "the tradition of Montaigne" (143). Similarly, Katherine Usher Henderson, reminding that "in saying that his essays were about himself, Montaigne referred to the universal rather than the idiosyncratic aspect of the 'self,'" finds Didion often using "her 'self' in this manner, as both illustration of and authority for her ideas" (91, 92). In fact, for Anderson, Didion's characteristic strategy is "to reflect on contemporary life from the standpoint of her own experience or to engage in autobiographical narrative which ultimately leads to commentary on the social problems of the time" (142).

In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* her collection of essays published in 1968, Didion depicts events, places, and persons of the 1960s with a social as well as a philosophical concern. Michelle Carbone Loris sees her essays as "social histories with a literary structure—Acts of America." In these essays, Loris explains, Didion "foregrounds an historical event, a geographical place, or a well-known personality, but her intent is to get beneath the manners to the moral character of her community" (99). Henderson echoes the same opinion when she asserts that "Didion seeks to render the moral complexity of contemporary American experience, especially the dilemmas and ambiguities resulting from the erosion of traditional values by a new social and political reality" (146).

Didion's essays provide the reader with stories about herself and about the culture she carefully observes and analyzes; these stories work "as parables of

contemporary America" (Loris 96). In "On Going Home," one of the essays in the collection, Didion relates the story of her visit to her family home in California and elaborates on the dream of a close-knit extended family. This dream, she concludes, can not be realized in contemporary America. Thus, the personal story "brings a moral perspective to the cultural chaos that she records" and her writing becomes a "moral documentary of the way we live now" (4-5).

Written in 1967, this essay comprises Didion's reflections on the loss of home, on "whether or not you could go home again," while revealing her genuine concern with "the fragmentation [of America] after World War II" (165). While reflecting on and writing about this newly emerged fragmented world, Didion utilizes a non-traditional, alternate grammar of style, and the techniques of New Journalism become her means of conveying the sense of contemporary reality. In "On Going Home" she skillfully employs these techniques, while her style both interprets and mirrors the fragmented reality she is concerned with.

In the post-World War II period, not only Didion but many writers were aware of the fragmentation, separation, and discontinuity in culture and society, and searched for a new way of writing which would enable them to convey the sense of contemporary reality. The traditional grammar of style had "the characteristics of continuity, order, reasonable progression and sequence, consistency, unity, etc.," characteristics that did not correspond to new realities (Weathers 20), and therefore were not of much use to them.

In "Grammars of Style," Winston Weathers defends the use of an alternate grammar:

> Many writers believe that there are "things to say"... that simply cannot be effectively communicated via a traditional grammar; that there are "things to say" in a highly technological, electronic, socially complex, politically and spiritually confused era that simply cannot be reflected in language if language is limited to the traditional grammar. (4)

An alternate grammar, suggests Weathers, is "a variegated, discontinuous, fragmented grammar of style [which] corresponds to an amorphous and inexplicable universe and mentality" (4).

Although attempted earlier by experimental poets and innovative fiction writers, the alternate grammar of style, or "Grammar B," as Weathers terms it, has been established as a way of writing and interpreting reality by the "new journalism" in the mid-1960s. As one of the leading New Journalists, Didion both contributed to the development, and employed the techniques, of New Journalism, or Grammar B. The major techniques that she uses in "On Going Home" are, as I demonstrate below, the collage/montage, the list, the labyrinthine sentence, synchronicity, the "crot"-like paragraph, repetitions, and refrains.

Didion nostalgically entitles her essay “On Going Home” while regretfully recognizing its impossibility. Her topic is personal; a visit to her family home for her daughter’s first birthday. However, her use of Grammar B, with, as Weathers aptly puts it, “characteristics of variegation, synchronicity, discontinuity [and] ambiguity,” enables her to move from the personal to the social, and to express much more than individual words on the page denote (2). Her basic theme in this short essay is the fragmentation of contemporary life, and the disconnectedness of generations. In her attempt to connect the past with the present, and vice versa, she searches for threads of continuity in her own past and present. To reinforce her message, she employs throughout the essay the various techniques mentioned above which are all techniques of fragmentation. The stylistic fragmentation serves as a means of representing the fragmentation of American experience in the postwar era.

As a consequence of its stylistic fragmentation, the essay as a whole becomes a collage: a visual as well as a verbal collage. (Note 1) Fragmentary and unrelated scenes follow one another: the dusty houses “filled with mementos,” she and her family chatting around the fire, “a pretty young girl on crystal tak[ing] off her clothes and danc[ing] in an ‘amateur-topless’ contest,” the writer in her family home going “aimlessly from room to room,” the contents of an old drawer where she meets her past, “the broken monuments in the graveyard,” “the baby play[ing] with the dust motes in a shaft of afternoon sun,” she “kneel[ing] beside the crib” of the baby. (Note 2)

“Many of the stylistic devices that finally became a part of Grammar B,” Weathers argues, “are based upon cinematic techniques” (3). Yet, as a result of her attempt to reveal the fragmentation of contemporary experience, Didion’s prose is more photographic than cinematic.

Thus, the reader becomes a part of the fragmented reality conveyed on the printed page and experiences a sense of fragmentation during the process of reading. Yet, as Mark Royden Winchell points out, “the general consistency of ambiance and mood and Didion’s own artistic control are so nearly complete that these fragments form a larger mosaic; we are never lost in the incoherence of imitative form” (37). The stylistic device which contributes most to the creation of the collage effect is the list. “To create a list,” Weathers writes, “a writer presents a series of items, usually removed from sentence structure or at least very independent of such structure.” He likens such a list to a “still life”; all the objects are simply there “without any indication of relative importance, without any suggestion at all of cause-effect, this-before-that, rank, or the like.” In fact, for Weathers Didion’s lists in this essay are written “in a straight reading line,” creating a collage of images (6). While visiting her parents, she decides to meet her past “head-on” and spreads the contents of an old drawer upon the bed. Then she provides the reader with a list: “A bathing suit I wore the summer I was seventeen. A letter of rejection from *The Nation*, an aerial photograph of the site for a shopping center my father did not

build in 1954. Three teacups hand-painted with cabbage roses and signed 'E.M.,' my grandmother's initials, ... snapshots of one's grandfather as a young man on skis ..." (166). What is spread on the bed are broken images of her own past, a fragmented genealogy and an incoherent autobiography. These unrelated items given in an arbitrary sequence reveal the fragmented nature of her past. Not only are they all there in broken pieces, but they are also disconnected from her present. For Didion, there is no way either to build a connection between one's past and the present, or to keep the continuity any more. No continuous thread can be found in the texture of postwar American lives. That is the reason why she feels the need to close the drawer. The list works here as an important device which creates the effect of fragmentation in contemporary society and conveys the sense of discontinuity.

Didion also makes use of the labyrinthine sentence in this essay. For Weathers, this type of sentence is "a long complex sentence, with a certain 'endless' quality to it, full of convolutions, marked by appositives, parentheses, digressions ... which works for many writers as a correspondence to the complexity, confusion, even sheer talkativeness of modern society" (5). One such sentence displaying such characteristics is in the opening paragraph of the essay. It is a 104-word sentence:

> We live in dusty houses ("D-U-S-T," he once wrote with his finger on surfaces all over the house, but no one noticed it) filled with mementos quite without value to him (what could the Canton dessert plates mean to him? how could he have known about the assay scales, why should he care if he did know?), and we appear to talk exclusively about people we know who have been committed to mental hospitals, about people we know who have been booked on drunk-driving charges, and about property, particularly about property, land, price per acre and C-2 zoning and assessments and freeway access. (164)

Naturally, as a result of the parenthesis it contains, as well as of the numerous digressions, the sentence does not flow smoothly. Thus, its broken rhythm again suggests fragmentation and discontinuity. It reflects the complexity and the confusion of the relationship between the past and the present, and between the family and the individual. The sentence also works as a list of concrete details: dusty houses, mementos, canton desert plates, assay scales, people, property, land. ... All these bits and pieces of objects and information thrown upon the reader in one entangled sentence convey the sense of a world "relationally broken."

The labyrinthine sentence quoted above in the previous paragraph is the longest sentence of the essay. The shortest one is a two-word sentence. The variety of sentence length in the essay itself produces a fragmented rhythm. The abrupt move from a long sentence to a short one, or vice versa, causes a halt in the flow of the narrative, "creating," as Weathers notes, "a sharp, startling effect at times," with the "combination of various sentence lengths and types" itself bringing about "a

variegated, more sharply pointed kind of reading" (5,6). The length of the sentences (number of words) in the opening paragraph of the essay is as follows: 8, 33, 7, 29, 104, 57, 50, 12, 5; in the second paragraph: 7, 37, 38, 4, 3, 18, 48, 33, 27,1 4, 5; in the fourth: 2, 4, 58, 10, 18, 22, 14, 41, 10, 3. Thus, it is not only the longest sentence but the whole narrative in Didion's essay which does not flow smoothly. However, this is a deliberate effect the writer seeks to produce. She simply attempts to recreate the sense of the fragmentation of social order in her sentence patterns and in their jarring rhythms. She wants the reader to feel the potholes and discontinuities of experience and deliberately sets out on a bumpy ride.

To achieve synchronicity in "On Going Home," Didion makes use of the present tense. If traditional grammar deals with time diachronically, the alternate grammar attempts to transcend the chronological sequence of past, present, future (Weathers 8). In Didion's essay, past and present exist as time frames. She attempts to draw attention to the widening gap between the past and the present, and therefore, to the gap between successive generations. When she refers to events that happened in the remote past, she uses the simple past tense, while the near past, present, and future are blended into an all-inclusive present tense creating synchronicity. She writes: "Days pass. I see no one. I come to dread my husband's evening call"; or, "I go to visit my great-aunts. A few of them think now that I am my cousin, or their daughter who died young. We recall an anecdote about a relative last seen in 1948." Since the consistent use of the simple present tense disrupts the chronological sequence of events, it is possible to shuffle the paragraphs—excepting the opening and the closing ones (because they create circularity through the use of repetition and similar sentence structures)—without ever drastically changing meaning.

The use of the present tense also helps to create the effects of immediacy and spontaneity. The distance between the writer and the reader narrows, and the writer comes into existence before the reader as a person who, thinking and writing, records her personal experience. This sense of immediacy and spontaneity creates what Atkins sees as the general effect of the essay form, that is to say, "the artistic or literary effect of illusion, of witnessing, thinking in progress, in process"; of a mind flowing naturally, "instead of a systematized outline of ideas" (14). Thus, the writer becomes an individual: she is "here and now." (Note 3)

In Didion's essay, the past is viewed from the present moment and glimpsed in broken images: letters, pictures, teacups, rivers, picnics. ... The present is the only reality; it is "here and now." That is why, although she would like to give her daughter what she has had as a child, she knows that this is an impossibility. She is painfully aware that the entire culture and social structure of the past, whose images she glimpses in her girlhood home, are swept away by "the fragmentation after World War II." As Winchell observes, "Didion would like to pass on to her daughter the various traditions she associates with the stable agrarian life of her childhood, but she realizes that she cannot even recover those traditions for herself

except through memory." The fact is that her daughter, "like the girl in the amateur topless contest, was 'born of the fragmentation after World War II'" (10). For the daughter's generation, a close-knit family and community, a web of great-aunts and uncles and cousins and of lifelong neighbors are all part of a lost and irretrievable past.

Didion's use of the paragraphs in this essay is not much different from the use of the crots in the alternate grammar. The word "crot," an obsolete word meaning "bit" or "fragment," was given a new meaning by Tom Wolfe, the leading New Journalist. Accordingly, in the alternate grammar of style, a crot is "fundamentally an autonomous unit, characterized by the absence of any traditional devices that might relate it to preceding or subsequent crots ..." An independent unit of meaning, the crot varies in length; it may consist of one sentence as well as of twenty or thirty sentences. A crot is purposefully kept free of verbal and logical relationships with other surrounding crots because the absence of logical ties enables the writer to make "leaps of logic" and suggests correspondence with the fragmentation of contemporary experience (Weathers 4-5).

The paragraphs in Didion's essay are likewise characterized by the absence of transitional words or phrases that tie them to the previous or the following ones. Breaking the continuity of the narrative, this omission of transitions becomes an important technique of fragmentation. For example, the fourth paragraph closes with these sentences: "Once home I mention the broken monuments in the graveyard. My mother shrugs." The following paragraph starts: "I go to visit my great-aunts." The last sentence of the fifth paragraph is "Questions trail off, answers are abandoned, the baby plays with the dust motes in a shaft of afternoon sun." The following paragraph opens with "It's time for the baby's birthday party." As a result, although she follows the order of occurrence in her narrative, the omission of transitions together with the use of the present tense brings a crot-like quality to her paragraphs. By leaving out transitions, Didion creates a prose which both imitates and reflects the disconnectedness of contemporary experience. Children of all ages are cut off their families, as people are from their roots. The old order is lost and there is no new one to replace it. This is a world where traditional connections no longer exist.

Anderson terms Didion's deliberate omission of transitionals "the rhetoric of gaps," and finds that her "withholding of interpretation and commentary at every level of language ... requires the reader "to engage in a split-second more of active interpretation" (136, 137). For Janis P. Stout, "Absence becomes a presence in Didion's work. Vacancy becomes a force." Stout sees this quality of Didion's writing as being essential to her style and meaning. "Critics and reviewers have been correct in viewing Didion's silences, the voids represented by abrupt disjunctions," Stout writes, as "the failure of meaning" (148-149). Such a style evidently reflects a disjointed reality.

Repetition is another stylistic device Didion employs in this essay. Weathers reasons that "the concern with repetitions in the alternate grammar is compensatory for a pervasive acceptance of fragmentation and discontinuity" because the repetitions are used as binding devices (7). This is certainly the case in "On Going Home." An effective example of repetition occurs in the closing paragraph of the essay. Talking about her baby daughter's birthday, she writes: "I would like to give her more." Then comes a 65-word-long labyrinthine sentence:

> I *would like to* promise her that she will grow up with a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her great-grandmother's teacups, *would like to* pledge her a picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed, *would like to* give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that. (168. Italics mine.)

Here the phrase "would like to" creates, as Weathers notes about the repetition, "a certain rhythm that carries the reader through disjointed [images] ... (7). Cousins, rivers, teacups, picnic on a river, home. The sentence is another collage of seemingly unrelated images. The refrain "would like to" is repeated four times in two successive sentences and the repetition creates a rhythm. The narrative flows beautifully in its chant-like tone; Didion the narrator transforms into a chanter and "would like to" becomes the refrain of a magical verse. With it, Didion strives to cast a spell, to create, or better to say, to recreate the past with a sense of community, harmony, and relationship. However, we know as well as she does that it does not matter how many times she repeats the magic refrain, it cannot, and it will not work. Although she grew up with "a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her great-grandmother's teacups," she knows that the break between generations has already taken place in her own generation. She experiences the failure of communication in her own family. She writes: "We miss each other's points, have another drink and regard the fire" (165). While visiting her great-aunts, "Questions trail off, answers are abandoned ..." (167). When she tells her mother about the vandalized cemetery and the broken monuments, her mother shrugs. It is not an act of indifference, though. It is simply the tacit acceptance of the inevitability of the loss of tradition and of community. And the writer's choice of the refrain, "would like to," reveals grammatically the impossibility of her wish-fulfillment.

An individual word repeated frequently throughout the essay is "home." Excluding the one in the title, "On Going Home," the word is repeated eight times in this short essay. In the same labyrinthine sentence quoted above, the last repetition of "would like to" is followed by the last repetition of "home," italicized. She says "[I] *would like* to give her *home* for her birthday." Here "home" becomes a single word which summarizes everything that has been said earlier and contains in itself

the sense of “cousins” and “of rivers” and “a picnic on a river.” It seems to be italicized in an attempt to draw attention to itself in order to reveal its significance. It also creates a circularity: the word *“home”* is in the title of this little essay; it is also in the very first sentence of the opening paragraph—-this time capitalized. In the second sentence it appears again, in quotation marks this time. This is the sentence where she explains the “troublesome” yet “vital” distinction between the place she lives with her husband and the baby, and the place where her family is. However, the italicized “home” of the closing paragraph is neither, or means neither. It does not indicate a place, but it is a concept, and a significant one. It means family, community, close ties, relatedness; it is continuity; it is meaning and harmony. The most significant and painful recognition comes from the fact that “home” is lost. “Unfortunately,” writes Winchell, “it would be wrong to assume that because Didion’s present life is different from the one she knew as a child that she has succeeded in finding a new kind of ‘home.’ On the contrary, she depicts herself as presently a lost soul cast adrift in the modern world” (10). The loss of “home” signifies a rootless existence.

The rhetorical sentence types she employs in the second sentence of the opening paragraph, and in the second to the last sentence of the closing paragraph, also contribute to the effect of the circularity. Both are antithetical sentences where Didion contrasts the past with the present and the family with the individual. In the labyrinthine sentence quoted earlier, the writer combines words, phrases, and clauses in a parallel structure using “and,” then the “but” abruptly; yet she inevitably separates the present from the past (“but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that”) just as the “but” in the second sentence separates her from her family. In this second sentence she combines her own nuclear family by using “and” (“my husband and I and the baby”), then she separates the two homes, or families: “By ‘home’ I do not mean the house in Los Angeles where my husband *and* I *and* the baby live, *but* the place where my family is, in the Central Valley of California“ (164; italics mine). The young family is not a continuation or an outgrowth of the old one. They are separated rhetorically as much as relationally. The two “buts” painfully yet inevitably cut off the present from the past, and the individual from his own roots and traditions.

Didion’s attitude towards the past is not naïve, however. She is aware of “the ambushes of family life.” Still, she “would like to give her [daughter] more [of that]” (167). She “would like to give her *home* for her birthday” (168). Instead, as she tells us in the very last sentence of the essay, she gives her “a xylophone,“ and “a sundress from Madeira,” and promises to tell “a funny story.” This is once more a list of unrelated items, and is also the last one in the essay. A xylophone, a sundress, and a funny story make up the list of the birthday presents to the baby from her mother. These may entertain the baby, make her play or laugh, but they will never replace what Didion would really like to give her: home. Not a list, this time, but a single word; yet a word loaded with meaning. Home. The key word of

the essay. Finally she comes to terms with the contemporary reality and admits that "we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that."

Yet, using the techniques of an alternate grammar of style and of New Journalism, Didion gives her readers a precious gift: a warning against the disintegration of social order, apparent fragmentation and resultant rootlessness.

The changes Didion witnessed and experienced in her world and time were much slighter than the earthshaking changes which had prompted John Donne to write in his poem "The First Anniversary": "'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone."

For a generation largely unaware of literature and its record of human experience, Didion in her essay "On Going Home" provides a personal, empirical account of finding "all coherence gone."

Notes

1 Anderson writes that "[i]n a world where the conventional connections no longer obtain, the form of discourse is reduced to particularity—'flash pictures'—and gaps—the blank space transitions of the 'cutting-room.' Discourse becomes a collage of images, not a 'narrative'" (148).

2 For Janis P. Stout, the main characteristic of Didion's prose is "the broken or fragmented reality of her narrative, that is the juxtaposition of abrupt images and sequences in the verbalized prose itself" (213).

3 Weathers points out that "[s]ynchronicity is often achieved simply through the scrambling of sentences or paragraphs ..., scrambling them out of ordinary time sequences ..." so that the events told become "indistinguishable within one large time frame." The stylistic effect of synchronicity is "to support a writer's concern with the 'here and now,' the contemporary" (8).

Since "she records the quality of life in places where civilization and tradition are either memory, twisted to self-serving ends, or simply exhausted," Didion is one the writers who cannot convey their meaning(s) via the traditional grammar of style (Friedman 1).

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