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Postmodernism and the Ideology of Form: The Narrative Logic of Joan Didion's *Democracy*

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Although postmodernism sometimes has been equated with the death of narrative, this equation reflects a slippage in terms, a conflation of the basic narrative impulse and the desire for "grand narratives" that offer a totalizing view of a sphere of knowledge. However, the most careful postmodern theorists preserve a distinction between these two functions and in doing so acknowledge a role for narrative in a postmodern culture. For example, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in an analysis of the postmodern condition in science, notes that "[w]e no longer have access to the grand narratives"; however, he also notes that "the little narrative [*petit recit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science" (*Postmodern* 60). In historiography Hayden White acknowledges the death of the grand narratives while also noting that postmodernism "is informed by a programmatic, if ironic, commitment to the return to narrative as one of its enabling propositions" (*Content* xi). And, in a recent study of postmodernism in the verbal and visual arts, Linda Hutcheon argues that "[w]e may no longer have recourse to the grand narratives that once made sense of life for us, but we still have recourse to narrative representations of some kind in most of our verbal discourses . . ." (50).

Hutcheon adds that one reason for the continuing recourse to narrative "may be political" (50), and—in a passage that inspires my own study—she notes the existence of a postmodern fiction "that works toward a critical return to history and politics *through*—not despite—metafictional self-consciousness and parodic intertextuality" (61). Here I will examine the metafictional narrative technique used in one postmodern novel: Joan Didion's *Democracy*. In doing so I will use a conceptual framework provided by Hayden White's analyses of historical consciousness—a framework in which a characteristic mode of consciousness "prefigures" the technique in a narrative. Didion's novel, I will contend, is prefigured by a postmodern mode of consciousness that is itself an ideological construct. This postmodern consciousness imposes what Fredric Jameson has called an "ideology of form"—a set of demands, both esthetic and ideological, that necessitates Didion's metafictional technique. This technique enables Didion to offer an ironic narrative that calls into question the grand narrative of American democracy.

Prefiguring a Postmodern Mode of Consciousness

In a recent effort to impose precision on the recondite vocabulary of narratology, Seymour Chatman proposes the term "esthetic rhetoric" to describe "a fiction's suasion that its unfolding *form* be accepted" (44). Chatman characterizes esthetic rhetoric as "the urging of the audience to accept the form of the narrative as most appropriate to its content" (45), and he asserts that esthetic rhetoric succeeds when it uses narrative techniques to create a fictional world that "is coherent, believable, verisimilar in itself" (46). However, the criteria for successful esthetic rhetoric become problematic if one assumes that formal considerations necessarily possess an ideological dimension. This is a position that Fredric Jameson advances in the opening chapter of *The Political Unconscious*. Jameson posits an "ideology of form" when he asserts that it is possible to grasp formal processes as "sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works" (99). These messages are ideological in the Althusserian sense, formulated elsewhere by Jameson as "the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence" ("Postmodernism" 90).

Jameson's "ideology of form" may become clearer if considered in light of his application of Louis Hjelmslev's form/substance distinction. Jameson, in his appropriation of Hjelmslev, offers a broad division between form and substance, then he divides each into content and expression. This suggests that a text's form itself has a content that is distinguishable not only from the content of its substance (that is, from the existents and events in its story) but also from the expression of its form (that is, from the structural properties of the narrative). Jameson characterizes "the content of the form" as "the semantic 'meaning' of a generic mode" (*Political* 147). The important point here is that Jameson's "content of form" suggests that the form of text itself has meaningful import. For Jameson, this import is ideological in that it reflects a subject's view of the structure or sense of events in the world—a view that, for the author who seeks to write relatively realistic fiction, determines the possible stories that can be told about a world and how they can be told.

As Hayden White observes in his Introduction to *Tropics of Discourse*, "Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them" (1). In this regard a discourse or text is "prefigured" by a mode of consciousness that precedes it. White argues that discourse "moves 'to and fro' between received encodings of experience and the clutter of phenomena that refuses incorporation into conventionalized notions of 'reality,' 'truth,' or 'possibility'" while also oscillating "between alternative ways of encoding this reality, some of which may be provided by the traditions of discourse prevailing in a given domain of inquiry and others of which may be idiolects of the author, the authority of which he is seeking to establish" (4). Regardless of whether the sources of its encodings are traditional conventions or authorial idiolects, a discourse establishes its authority by establishing the adequacy

of the language used to create its representation. In this regard the expression of its form has an ideological substance that reflects a characteristic mode of consciousness.

White suggests that a progression typifying analyses of consciousness is "growth from what might be called naive (or metaphorical) apprehensions of reality to self-reflective (ironic) comprehensions of it" (12). In his earlier work, *Metahistory*, he considers the Ironic mode of consciousness in more detail, and there he notes, "In Irony, figurative language folds back upon itself and brings its own potentialities for distorting perception under question. This is why characterizations of the world cast in the Ironic mode are often regarded as *intrinsically* sophisticated and realistic" (*Metahistory* 37). White continues, "The trope of Irony, then, provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language. It is, in short, a model of the linguistic protocol in which skepticism in thought and relativism in ethics are conventionally expressed" (37-38). It is also, I believe, the mode of thought informing both the content and the narrative technique in works of fiction characterized as postmodern.

White himself associates postmodernism with the Ironic mode in his recent work, *The Content of the Form*:

And cultural critics, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, have commented on the death of the great "master narratives" that formerly provided precognitive bases of belief in the higher civilizations and sustained, even in the early phases of industrial society, utopistic impulses to social transformation. And indeed, a whole cultural movement in the arts, generally gathered under the name post-modernism, is informed by a programmatic, if ironic, commitment to the return to narrative as one of its enabling propositions. (xi)

Here it is important to note White's inclusion of the qualifier "if ironic." This qualifier suggests that postmodernism imposes new conditions on narratives that purport to be realistic, and it distinguishes the postmodern return to narrative from the master narratives whose demise White and Lyotard have noted. In returning to narrative, the postmodern mode of consciousness uses an Ironic trope to prefigure narrative rhetoric. That is, in its effort to convince the reader of the appropriateness of its representation, the postmodern text manifests an "ideology of form" by encoding within itself self-referential commentary on its own limits. As Lyotard notes, in postmodernism the "narrative view" loses "its great goal," which becomes "dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements . . ." (*Postmodern* xxiv). The result, however, is not necessarily a denial of narrative per se but rather a denial of *master* or *grand* narratives. Hutcheon makes the crucial point: in some postmodern novels "there is no dissolution or repudiation of representation; but there is a problematizing of it" (50).

"A Hard Story to Tell"

Lyotard has followed Adorno in using "the name of Auschwitz" to typify postmodernism in that Auschwitz reveals "the irrelevance of empirical matter, the stuff of recent history, in terms of the modern claim to help mankind to emancipate itself" ("Defining" 9). However, the name of Hiroshima serves as an equally potent symbol, one marking the beginning of a nuclear arms race that could result not only in an end to master narratives but also in an end to all life on this planet. And, given the waning of historicity that characterizes postmodern consciousness, more recent names also must serve. For example, Jameson has described Vietnam as the "first terrible postmodernist war" ("Postmodernism" 84), an apt description in that Vietnam signifies a crisis in the master narrative of American democracy.

Democracy, Joan Didion's fourth novel, opens with the sentence, "The light at dawn during those Pacific tests was something to see"—a sentence that invokes the legacy of Hiroshima while evoking the opening line of the national anthem.¹ The sentence, we learn later in the chapter, is spoken to Inez Christian Victor by Jack Lovett in 1975 during the evacuation of Saigon. Thus Didion establishes a historical backdrop spanning two decades, a backdrop that stretches from the nuclear tests of the 1950s to the Vietnam War and its aftermath. The novel's core story details the years that Inez Christian spends married to a liberal Congressman named Harry Victor, years during which she sustains a sporadic relationship with Jack Lovett, a shadowy operator in global politics. During these years Inez is "immersed in Harry Victor's conviction that he could be president," and she leads a public life in which her every move is photographed. Meanwhile Jack Lovett works in secrecy serving the national security apparatus in troubled spots around the globe. The novel traces the intersections of their lives, plotting their personal stories against the larger events in which they are caught up.

Insofar as *Democracy* presents a fictional story, one task of its narrative technique is to render the fictional world "coherent, believable, verisimilar in itself." This task requires appropriate techniques in "matters of point of view, narrative choice, chronological relations between story and discourse, and so on"—matters that Chatman would classify as internal to the text (46). However, Didion's choice of techniques is complicated by an external factor: the historical backdrop against which the fictional story is set. Jameson has asserted that the story of the Vietnam war "cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie" ("Postmodernism" 84). His assertion—offered in 1984, the same year that Didion published *Democracy*—suggests that, within the postmodern mode of consciousness then in ascendancy, the historical context of the Vietnam era cannot be evoked by the long-established conventions of narrative representation. However—and here is the crux of a dilemma—it is extremely difficult to narrate a story without using some of those conventions. How then could Didion tell the story of the homefront politics and clandestine operations of the Vietnam era?

Let me stress that the problem in representation described here does not depend

on whether Jameson is correct in asserting that the Vietnam era defies traditional modes of representation. Instead, the problem results from a postmodern mode of consciousness—that is, from an ideological position that *presumes* the inadequacy of traditional techniques and accordingly casts into question the verisimilitude of representations that employ those techniques. Insofar as a postmodern consciousness prefigures the historical context as unfathomable by traditional means, it imposes limits on the techniques available to the author who seeks to write realistic fiction. These limits are similar to the “strategies of containment” that Jameson describes in *The Political Unconscious*—strategies that he notes can be either “intellectual or (in the case of narratives) formal” (53). However, in that early work Jameson explores such strategies as products of the unconscious which become apparent “only when the appearance of formal unification is unmasked as a failure or an ideological mirage” (56)—that is, when the “unconscious” of the text is revealed. In contrast, postmodern fiction itself consciously asserts that formal unification is illusory, and it demands a narrative rhetoric that eschews traditional techniques of representation. Here an ideology consciously determines an esthetic.

Indeed, Didion herself acknowledges the problem of representation in a sentence of free indirect discourse that ends the first chapter of *Democracy*: “This is a hard story to tell” (15). Then she reveals her solution: a metafictional strategy in which a narrator details her efforts to make sense of the events in the core story. As I will show, this strategy allows Didion to displace key events from the core story into the metafictional frame, thus establishing an alternative set of narrative conventions. It also allows her to offer an ironic commentary on conventional narrative techniques—a commentary that de-naturalizes those techniques.²

The second chapter of *Democracy* opens with the narrator—who is named Joan Didion—introducing herself, first in direct address and then in the autobiographical third person:

Call me the author.

Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon whose character and doings much will depend of whatever interest these pages may have. . . . (16)

Leaving in abeyance the question of whether Didion the narrator mirrors Didion the actual person,³ one may safely venture—and Booth’s terminology proves useful here—that Didion intentionally minimizes the distance between the “implied author” and the “dramatized narrator” of her novel. This ploy is itself an instance of narrative rhetoric that is both esthetic and ideological in that the use of the author’s name for the narrator lends verisimilitude to the fictional events of the novel while relating those events to a historical reality.

However, the narrator also serves a more important function: she provides the center of consciousness for the novel. As such, she allows Didion the author to prefigure the core story in the Ironic mode—the characteristic mode of consciousness for postmodern fiction. This mode of consciousness becomes evident as the narrator

explains the difficulties she experiences in writing her novel. One source of these difficulties, she professes, is her lack of stylistic facility, her own limitations as a storyteller. A second source is the intrinsic complexity of the narrative she wishes to offer—a narrative that resists the emplotation needed to turn a chronicle into a story. In the analysis that follows I will devote particular attention to the narrator's claims concerning these sources of difficulty, because in those claims I see evidence of both an esthetic and an ideology that typify postmodernism.

“The Usual Problem of Literary Form”

Didion the narrator claims to use “an essentially reportorial technique” in her effort to shape a coherent story from the disparate, self-serving accounts offered to her by the other principals in the novel (105). However, the reportorial technique employed in *Democracy* has less to do with the traditions of “objective” journalism than with the New Journalism that the actual Didion practices, and Didion the narrator is not simply a device for conveying the events of the core story. Instead, she frames her narration with autobiographical anecdotes that establish the ironic mode of consciousness in forming the novel. For example, early in the novel the narrator quotes a textbook assignment on an essay by Didion:

A poignant (to me) assignment I came across recently in a textbook for students of composition: *Didion begins with a rather ironic reference to her immediate reason to write this piece. Try using this ploy as the opening of an essay; you may want to copy the ironic-but-earnest tone of Didion, or you might try making your essay witty. Consider the broader question of the effect of setting: how does Didion use the scene as a rhetorical base? She returns again and again to different details of the scene: where and how and to what effect? Consider, too, Didion's own involvement in the setting: an atmosphere results. How?* (17)

In fact, the composition assignment offers an apt description of the strategies that Didion employs in *Democracy*: an “ironic-but-earnest tone” is evident throughout the novel, and the story advances through the accumulation of telling detail drawn both from the fictional events and the historical record. However, the assignment serves a larger purpose in that it provides an opportunity for Didion to comment on her facility as a writer. To do so she sandwiches the composition assignment between two disclaimers that debunk the mystique the assignment invokes, a mystique of Didion the author's conscious control and technical mastery. The first of these disclaimers is direct:

I began thinking about Inez Victor and Jack Lovett at a point in my life when I lacked certainty, lacked even that minimum level of ego which all writers recognize as essential to the writing of novels, lacked conviction, lacked

patience with the past and interest in memory; lacked faith even in my own technique. (17)

Then Didion follows the assignment with an ironic assessment suggesting that facility for her is a thing of the past:

Water under the bridge.
As Jack Lovett would say.
Water under the bridge and dynamite it behind you. (18)

Didion later quotes the composition assignment again, this time in another autobiographical passage that comments at greater length on issues of literary style and the condition of the writer. In this passage she discusses a course she taught at Berkeley in 1975 on "the idea of democracy in the work of certain post-industrial writers" (68):

I spent my classroom time pointing out similarities in style, and presumably in ideas of democracy (the hypothesis being that the way a writer constructed a sentence reflected the way that writer thought), between George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway, Henry Adams and Norman Mailer. "The hills opposite us were grey and wrinkled like the skins of elephants" and "this war was a racket like all other wars" were both George Orwell, but were also an echo of Ernest Hemingway. "Probably no child, born in that year, held better cards than he" and "he began to feel the forty-foot dynamo as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross" were both Henry Adams, but struck a note that would reverberate in Norman Mailer.

What did this tell us, I asked my class.

Consider the role of the writer in a post-industrial society.

Consider the political implications of both the reliance on and the 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: an atmosphere results. How? (68-69)

Here Didion links her own autobiographical third-person references with those employed by Adams and Mailer. However, in doing so she implies a broader comparison with other post-industrial writers, one that extends beyond surface similarities in the structure of their prose. If the way an author constructs a sentence does in fact reveal something about the way the author thinks, then the affinity in style should reveal an affinity in thought between Didion and other post-industrial writers. An affinity with Henry Adams seems particularly plausible, given that Didion quotes from *The Education of Henry Adams* and borrows the title of

Adams's 1880 political novel for her own work.⁴ This intertextual connection proves useful in following Didion's directive to consider the role of the writer in a post-industrial society.⁵

Here again Hayden White is instructive. As White notes, the Introduction to *The Education of Henry Adams*—an introduction attributed to Henry Cabot Lodge but actually penned by Adams himself—explains that Adams sought to prevent publication because of dissatisfaction, “not with the content of the work, the matters of facts or judgments rendered in it, but what ‘Lodge’ calls ‘the usual [problem] of literary form’” (*Content* 199). In an insightful analysis, White notes that Adams's reticence “suggests the *topos* of the isolated artist struggling to express a truth too deep to be rendered in mere words and refers us not so much to an actual fact or condition (since Adams's sense of his own stylistic capability was as inflated as that of Henry James or any other mandarin writer of the time) as to a specific ideology of a certain kind of artist . . .” (*Content* 199).

A similar case could be made concerning Didion's strategy. Like Adams, Didion is suggesting a specific ideology of a certain kind of artist—in Didion's case, a postmodern artist. As White has noted, postmodernism provides a linguistic paradigm of a radically self-critical mode of thought, a mode of thought characterized by its skepticism concerning the adequacy of its own representations. However, if Didion is critical of her own technical facility, we should be skeptical in considering her disclaimers. Indeed, Didion herself notes that writing a novel requires at least a minimum level of ego, and Didion the author has written the novel that Didion the narrator professes an inability to write. It seems plausible, then, that Didion's sense of her own stylistic capability is as healthy—if not inflated—as that of Henry Adams. The narrator's disclaimers are best understood as ploys of narrative rhetoric, ploys consistent with the “ironic commitment to narrative” that White identifies as one of the “enabling propositions” of a postmodern esthetic. As such, Didion's disavowal of technical mastery cannot be taken seriously as an explanation for her unconventional narrative technique. Instead, her technique is a calculated response to the problem of representation in a postmodern era.

For Didion, the problem of postmodern representation results from her experience of time. Here again a comparison with Adams is productive. Near the end of his *Education*, Adams proposes that from 1200 to 1900 history follows “a law of acceleration” wherein an earlier equilibrium is destroyed by the expansion of forces that defy human comprehension. He asserts that this acceleration, if extended one generation longer, will propel humanity into “a new phase subject to new laws”—a phase of existence incomprehensible to a mind formed by the events of 1900 (488–98). Didion's experience of history is similar—it also is an experience of the acceleration of forces beyond comprehension: “In 1955 . . . I had first noticed the quickening of time. In 1975 time was no longer just quickening but collapsing, falling in on itself, the way a disintegrating star contracts into a black hole . . .” (69).

The time frame here coincides with the two-decade span of Didion's core story, and Didion's sense of collapsing time—a sense that is characteristic of a postmodern consciousness—poses constraints on her narrative technique. For Didion, the events of recent history constitute a chronicle rather than a story; that is, they occur in a sequence but lack the discernible connections necessary for a coherent plot. However, insofar as Didion does wish to tell a story—the core story of her novel—she must establish connections among events that are plotted against her historical backdrop. The danger of a conventional narrative strategy, then, is that in imposing a logic on her core story it also will impose a narrative logic on a historical period that is characterized by chaos rather than connection.

To resolve this dilemma, Didion uses her metafictional technique to render self-conscious the novel's narrative artifice while also establishing the discontinuity that marks recent history. The narrative artifice of *Democracy* is revealed as the narrator details the options she considers and then discards as she ponders both the form and content of her novel. For example, in the third chapter Didion offers fragments from the novel that *Democracy* could have been—fragments that she claims to have abandoned in the course of writing her novel. The first fragments detail the narrative approaches that she considered but rejected:

"Imagine my mother dancing," that novel began, in the first person. The first person was Inez, and was later abandoned in favor of the third:

"Inez imagined her mother dancing.

"Inez remembered her mother dancing." (21)

Then a fourth fragment offers an ironic commentary on the others: "You will notice that the daughters in romantic stories always remember their mothers dancing . . ." (22). After offering three possible openings for her novel, she rejects all three with an ironic assessment of romantic stories—an assessment implying that the romantic conventions are inappropriate for the story she wishes to tell. Thus her metafictional technique reveals a narrative consciousness that is postmodern rather than romantic. In rejecting what White terms the "received encodings of experience" and the "conventionalized notions of reality" available in the romantic tradition, Didion opts instead for "alternate ways of encoding reality," encodings that are "idiolects of the author, the authority of which [s]he is seeking to establish."

The narrator's "rejection" of earlier material serves other purposes that become clear as the third chapter progresses. Some of the "rejected" material provides details concerning the other members of Inez Christian's family and relates events that happened before the two decades chronicled in the core narrative. After offering these fragments the narrator characterizes them as "the shards of the novel I am no longer writing" (29). This abandoned novel, she says, would have been "a study in provincial manners, in the acute tyrannies of class and privilege by which people assert themselves against the tropics; Honolulu during World War Two . . ." (22).

But, of course, Didion has not really rejected this material; instead, she has used her metafictional artifice to establish background for the story that she does tell, the background of "a family in which the colonial impulse had marked every member" (26). The metafictional artifice provides Didion with an economical technique for including important material outside of the core narrative, and in doing so she achieves an esthetic effect that Linda Hutcheon describes as "postmodern de-naturalizing—the simultaneous inscribing and subverting of the conventions of narrative" (49).

This effect also is evident as Didion offers a truncated account of key events. In fact, by the end of the third chapter the narrator has detailed many of the events in the core narrative. Working within the metafictional framework the narrator lists facts available for the story she is trying to tell: that Inez and Jack Lovett began an affair in 1952 and resumed it in 1975 during the evacuation of Saigon; that Jack Lovett is a political operator who "could put together an observation here and a conversation there and gauge when the time had come to lay hands on a 727 or C-46" (30); that Inez's father, Paul Christian, has killed Inez's sister Janet in 1975; that at the end of the core story's chronology Inez is living in Kuala Lumpur. Thus the metafictional technique provides an efficient method for narrating key events without relying on traditional narrative conventions. Furthermore, as Didion notes, her narrative strategy allows her to reveal the essence but not the context of the key events (220), a ploy that prevents her story from becoming predictable.

Throughout the novel Didion continues to displace key events from the core story into her metafictional frame; however, as the sequence of events nears its end, the mood of her metafictional narration shifts from indicative to conditional. The shift further highlights the narrator's role in constructing the core story:

I could still do Inez Victor's four remaining days in Honolulu step by step. . . .

I could give you Jack Lovett walking unannounced into the dining room. . . .

I could give you Inez looking up and seeing him there. . . .

"Do you want to go somewhere," Jack Lovett would say, his voice low and perfectly level. . . .

"Here it is," he would say in the same low level voice. "I don't have time to play it out." (153-54)

Didion then paraphrases Jack Lovett's words and announces that she does not have time to play out a conventional narration of her core story:

[L]ike Jack Lovett and (as it turned out) Inez Victor, I no longer have time for the playing out.

Call that a travel advisory.

A narrative alert. (155)

This “narrative alert” serves notice that the narrator will offer an increasingly compressed account of the events in her core story. She is able to do so because within her metafiction she already has revealed enough of the core story so that now a compressed account will be intelligible. The narrative alert also offers Didion’s reason for compressing her account. As Didion nears the end of her novel, she plots the convergence of Inez Victor’s personal crises and the larger political upheaval of 1975. During the final days of the Vietnam War—the “first terrible postmodern war” that defies traditional methods of representation—Inez Victor’s world collapses into chaos: her father kills her sister, her daughter flies to Vietnam to seek work during the evacuation, and her husband seems most concerned with managing the political fallout of these personal tragedies. The rapidity with which Inez’s world collapses parallels the rapid collapse of the American venture in southeast Asia, and Didion’s compressed narrative style seems an appropriate method for conveying what the narrator describes as “the convulsions of a world largely unaffected by the individual efforts of anyone in it . . .” (201).

Here, near the end of her story, Didion the narrator abandons her earlier pose and acknowledges her storytelling ability:

Well, there you are.

I could definitely do that.

I know the conventions and how to observe them, how to fill in the canvas I have already stretched; know how to tell you what he said and she said and know above all, since the heart of narrative is a certain calculated ellipsis, a tacit contract between writer and reader to surprise and be surprised, how not to tell you what you do not yet want to know. (154)

By this point Didion’s mastery is sufficiently established so that there is no point in her denying it. In her ability to simultaneously subvert and inscribe the conventions of traditional narrative, Didion belies her earlier disavowals of technical mastery. By this point, too, the logic informing her metafictional technique is apparent. As her narration “folds back upon itself and brings its own potentialities for distorting perception under question,” it results in a sophisticated, realistic characterization in a postmodern mode.

“The Options Remain Open”

White has suggested that “with any weakening of narrativizing capacity, the group loses the power to locate itself in history, to come to grips with the Necessity that its past represents for it and to imagine a creative, if only provisional, transcendence of its ‘fate’ ” (*Content* 149). Clearly Didion’s *Democracy* attests to a weakening of narrativizing capacity: when, in the final chapter, the narrator assesses her story, she notes that “nothing in this situation encourages the basic narrative assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present . . .” (221).

However, as I noted at the outset of this study, careful postmodern theorists such as White distinguish between grand narratives that offer a totalizing view of the world and a more basic narrative impulse independent of those grand narratives.

Certainly Didion questions the grand narrative of American democracy. As Michael Tager suggests in his study of the political dimensions of Didion's *Democracy*, her novel offers a "bleak political vision" that exposes "three factors overwhelming popular sovereignty: a national security apparatus designed to maintain America's global influence; a media-based politic that elevates style over substance; and a loss of connection with the past" (173). At the conclusion of the core story Harry Victor's political fortunes are in decline and Jack Lovett has died (apparently of natural causes); however, the future of American democracy continues to be contested by other opportunistic, ineffectual politicians and capable, anti-democratic, behind-the-scenes operators. Furthermore, Didion's perspective provides little basis for judging operators like Jack Lovett—operators who undermine democratic processes. Didion asserts, "What Jack Lovett did was never black or white, and in the long run may even have been (since the principal gain to him was another abstraction, the pyramiding of further information) devoid of ethical content altogether . . ." (209). This assessment exhibits the relativism in ethics that White sees as characteristic of postmodern consciousness.

However, what Linda Hutcheon notes concerning postmodern fiction in general also is true of Didion's *Democracy* in particular: insofar as the novel tells a story—however problematized the telling of that story—it cannot be taken as a repudiation of narrative per se. Instead, Didion's *Democracy* stands as evidence that the basic narrative impulse can survive the death of master narratives. Moreover, the actions of Jack Lovett and Inez Victor at the end of the core story attest that relativism in ethics does not entail the abandonment of all standards of behavior. Instead, their actions reveal what Didion elsewhere has termed "wagon-train morality"—a morality wherein, in the absence of absolute standards to govern all our actions, we nevertheless are obliged to keep our promises—to "try to retrieve our casualties, try not to abandon our dead to the coyotes" ("On Morality" 158). This is a standard for behavior that even Jack Lovett acknowledges: when Inez's daughter flies into danger during the evacuation of Vietnam, he goes to Saigon and rescues her. Inez Victor also understands this code: when her sister is dying in the hospital she stays with her until she is pronounced dead; when Jack Lovett dies in Jakarta she brings his remains to Hawaii for burial. Thus Didion's *Democracy*, despite its bleak political vision, offers not only a story but possibly a moral as well.

If Didion cannot imagine even a provisional transcendence of fate, neither is she willing to close the door on possible revisions of the political landscape she has sketched. As the narrator notes in the last pages of the novel, the story she has told does not produce a "rush of narrative inevitability" (220). At the end of the story Inez is working in a refugee camp in Kuala Lumpur, but, the narrator informs us, "the options remain open here" and "anything could happen" (221). If Inez's options remain open, the option of democracy remains open as well. Although time is

accelerating and collapsing in on itself, the final chapter for American democracy has not yet been written. In the interim, even though the grand narratives of emancipation are now suspect, the basic narrative impulse endures.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Michael Tager for the insight concerning Didion's paraphrasing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Tager notes that "[t]he novel's opening, with its parallel to the national anthem ('by the dawn's early light'), establishes an arm of the government clandestinely exploding a tremendously destructive weapon designed to enhance American security against unseen communist adversaries" (176).
2. Janis Stout suggests that "[t]he narrator's struggle to understand her characters' story becomes part of the fiction, which is a fiction of reporting rather than creating" (176). However, insofar as the narrator does claim to be writing a novel, I believe that the fiction is actually one of reporting *and* creating.
3. For Didion's avowedly nonfictional account of her experiences during the time period of her novel—an account that offers numerous details concerning the settings and events represented in *Democracy*—see the essay "Pacific Distances" in her most recent collection, *After Henry*.
4. Didion's *Democracy* borrows its title from Henry Adams's 1880 political comedy of manners, a novel that Didion's resembles in several other regards. Adams's *Democracy* chronicles the adventures of Mrs. Madeleine Lightfoot Lee, a wealthy Philadelphia widow who goes to Washington intent "on getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government" (1.13). There she is courted by a prominent senator, and through her relationship with him she discovers that the ambitions of politicians turn American democracy into "a lurid nightmare" in which principle is sacrificed for power. Disillusioned, she flees Washington to travel abroad.
5. In the essay "Pacific Distances" Didion reports that she first read *The Education of Henry Adams* in 1954 while a student at Berkeley (123). Her discussion of that reading counterpoints images from Adams's text with images of her own perception of the world in the atomic age.

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