

Joan Didion and "Company": A Response to John Whalen-Bridge*

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"TO BE CONTINUED" are the last words on the final page of Norman Mailer's long novel *Harlot's Ghost*. The ending is thus rendered problematic even beyond the author's characteristic ambiguities of outlook. But the phrase—as noted in John Whalen-Bridge's fine essay—resonates as well with questions regarding "Adamic" tradition as it plays into Mailer's later work, and as it persists (covertly or otherwise) in contemporary American writing more broadly surveyed.

Professor Whalen-Bridge, in his introductory and concluding remarks to "The Myth of the American Adam in Late Mailer," stresses the issue of "American Exceptionalism" with a view to defending Mailer's recent work (*Harlot's Ghost* in particular) against accusations of such heresy. Fair enough, to be sure, so far as it is true that authors in the "classic" American tradition have tended toward reflex refusal to recognize the political dimension of identity and experience as a primary force in American social and cultural dynamics. But in the main body of his discussion, while he persuasively maintains the continuity of his argument that Mailer "declares the futility of any search for 'a virgin land' or 'a world elsewhere' beyond political consequences" (to whatever extent "classic" American writers claim the reverse), Whalen-Bridge also considers *Harlot's Ghost* in a range of other interesting terms inviting a different order of response. American literary "continuations" of more than one sort, fanning out through the work of more than one author, are suggested by his discussion.

*Reference: John Whalen-Bridge, "The Myth of the American Adam in Late Mailer," *Connotations* 5.2-3 (1995/96): 304-21.

Joan Didion has said that Mailer possesses (along with Fitzgerald, she suggests) an “instinct of the essence of things, that great social eye. It is not the eye for the brand name, not at all the eye of a Mary McCarthy or a Philip Roth. It is rather some fascination with the heart of the structure, some deep feeling for the mysteries of power.”¹ This is borne out in Whalen-Bridge’s probing of Mailer’s fascination with (“treatment of” would be at once too pale and too conclusive a phrase) the Central Intelligence Agency in *Harlot’s Ghost*. The CIA is the immediate subject of this novel, but in Mailer’s analysis it is also an encompassing type—in something like the sense of Puritan typology, hence much more than merely a comparative “model” or “analogy”—of the subversion of American ideals in the name of those ideals, as if this were an inevitable result of the conflictive “essence” of American self-projection, since the founding of the Republic if not indeed since the first Colonial arrivals. *Harlot’s Ghost* itself in this respect stands in a “classic” American tradition of engagement with certain primary American postulates, Emerson’s notion of “the simple genuine self against the whole world” (as quoted by Whalen-Bridge) among them.

That Mailer’s attraction to such an idea—at its core and in the context of its articulation no less a political than an apolitical notion—is adversarial and argumentative as well as participatory and affirming in no way negates its power (this too potentially as political as not). In the same way, Ralph [Waldo] Ellison’s *Invisible Man* simultaneously affirms and refutes Emerson’s famous exhortation, “Build therefore your own world,” Ellison’s epilogue feeding back into his prologue both the utter exhaustion of the attempt so to “build” and a sense of unexhausted possibility still fraught with political implication. So too Thomas Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, celebrates as much as he ironically undermines the efforts of Oedipa Maas to decode her encrypted world (and hence to reconstruct it), even as Henry James, his initially ironic portrait of Isabel Archer notwithstanding, commits in the end to the counternarrative of *her* consciousness, a source of selfhood in the world, not simply of self-isolating refuge from it.

So as well, in novels by Joan Didion ranging from *A Book of Common Prayer* to *Democracy* to her recently published *The Last Thing He Wanted*, characters (including the author herself)—alienated from their American

identities yet also *as Americans de afueras*, outsiders, in various regions of American "interest" and "intelligence"—probe the gaps they themselves inhabit between American ideological theory and practice, between official American projections on the world and the world as otherwise available to more detached personal observation. Such protagonists no less than Mailer's Harry Hubbard are of the "Company" (in CIA parlance but in a far different sense than institutionally professed) of those for whom the twin dilemmas—and chimeras—of absolute autonomy on one hand, pure community on the other, are at once inescapable and necessarily unresolved.

There is indeed, as Whalen-Bridge puts it, "a political strain within the Adamic tradition," to whatever degree that tradition may be generally defined in terms of its presumption to transcendence of the political. Within this strain in turn, however, there has long been a lively argument in which many if not most American writers have taken part, an argument often if not always turning on tensions between the claims of self as against those of society, the essence of political life even where unacknowledged as such, rather than a presumption to choice for or against political *engagement*. And not just as a matter of conflict between figures who may be imagined (whether or not actual contemporaries) as argumentatively opposed in debate, but something also to be heard and seen in the conflicted voices and visions of many of these figures individually considered. The currency of Perry Miller's well-known "pairings" aside—William Bradford and Captain John Smith, Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin—or extrapolations forward in time from such paradigms of the "inward" vs. the "outward" view, each at odds with yet inherent in the other, Mailer's melding in Harry Hubbard of these prototypically American impulses, the "Company man" and the self-narrating isolato, not only fits the pattern but proclaims it. Who or what is "Adam," after all, but a character or concept consisting of two contradictory yet interdependent potentialities?

Whalen-Bridge unassailably makes the case for *Harlot's Ghost* as an exception to the proposition that (as he summarizes it) "Adamic ideology . . . stands between American novelists and political fiction of the first rank." (It is not altogether clear, from Whalen-Bridge's point of view

or that of those to whom he ascribes this proposition, what authors might best exemplify the first rank of political writing—Conrad? Kafka? Graham Greene? John LeCarré? What of someone like Robert Stone, if not indeed Mailer or, say, Didion?) But his essay serves less to establish an exception to a rule than to create new perspectives on the “rule” itself. It shows that *Harlot's Ghost* is a journey into “the heart of the structure” (in Didion’s phrase) rather than a singular detour around it. But in the process it also suggests that “Adamic ideology,” far from standing *between* the American novel and its prospects for political insight, is in fact by its very nature the problematic premise, not the oversimplifying prior assumption, to long-standing American novelistic inquiry into what John P. McWilliams has called (with primary reference to James Fenimore Cooper) the issue of “political justice in a republic.”² American politics are profoundly, to this day, a reflection of America’s deep preoccupation, not in literature alone but significantly enough in literary terms, with the notion of “a world elsewhere,” in the manifest political consequences of its unattainability as well as in its recurrent, romantic allure.

This is demonstrable in the “classic” tradition, as Whalen-Bridge in effect makes clear through his triangulation of *Harlot's Ghost* with R. W. B. Lewis on one side and Lewis’s detractors on the other. Whalen-Bridge means neither to bury nor to praise Lewis, but intends in the main instead to contextualize both viewpoints as parts of the problem at the self-embattled heart of Mailer’s text. From Edwards to Emerson, but also in such as Cooper or Parkman, Melville or Margaret Fuller, James or Wharton, Howells or Clemens (to say nothing of the interrelations of Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain), seekings in the world and strainings beyond it clash and recombine, ultimately and always *within* a social reality that reasserts its claims, rather than “*Beyond!*” (the motto finally more subverted than sustained in *The House of Mirth*). In the work of these and other American figures—whether or not in the taking of explicit positions, more likely in the dramatization of divided awareness (which is not necessarily evasion or avoidance)—something like what Whalen-Bridge ascribes to Mailer, by way of quoting Richard Slotkin’s advice to critics, is apparent: “We can only demystify our history by historicizing our myths—that is, by treating them as human

creations, produced in a specific historical time and place, in response to the contingencies of social and personal life."

More to the point here, however, in terms of a brief "response" to a skillful demonstration of the political reality of the apolitical impulse in the case of Mailer, is perhaps a word of contemporary comparison with a set of novels, and a novelist, on the surface utterly unlike *Harlot's Ghost* or its author, yet similarly drawn (once again in Didion's description of Mailer) by "some fascination with the heart of the structure, some deep feeling for the mysteries of power." (As with, say, James on Hawthorne, Twain on Cooper or Joyce Carol Oates on Chekov or Joyce, the speaker is also or even primarily speaking of his or her own art.)

In *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), *Democracy* (1984) and *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996), differently but with a cumulative consistency, Didion has sought to see the point at which history and personality converge, where lines of political force cross trajectories of presumptively autonomous self, in such intersections for her both the fact and the fiction of American pathologies of dream and delusion. That she finds a certain emptiness there—"cold at the very heart where one expects the fire,"³ as she says in *The White Album* of emeralds on display in Bogotá—is part and parcel of her sense of the "truth," not a sense on her part that she has missed the mark.

Indeed, seeking the depths in a stone from outside the strength of its crystalline structure, feeling pulled into those depths along one's line of sight, like being *de afuera* from an America with which one is nonetheless involved, not least through acts of witness to its influence elsewhere in the world, has something in common with Harry Hubbard's position, both "in" and "out" of the present-day CIA as such to be sure, but also in the mythicized history and historicized myth of America more transhistorically understood, as well as deep within himself.

In uncertain narrative alliance with Grace Strasser-Mendana in *A Book of Common Prayer*, each in turn sparring with Charlotte Douglas over what "may or may not" in fact have happened, personally or in connection with covert American action in Central America, Didion explores the permeability in both directions of the membrane between

political action and personal self-definition, capacities for individual or collective self-deception abundant on all sides. In *Democracy* (in the title a reference to Henry Adams's novel of the same name), Didion appears as author of her own book, working within narrative contingencies and complicities toward clarification of Inez Victor Christian's position, vis-à-vis herself and in relation to America, affiliation with which she both assumes and denies in the aftermath of the war in Vietnam. In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, again self-named and functioning in the narrative itself as the "not quite omniscient author," Didion deals the cards yet also plays them as they lay. She tries to tell in counterpoint with others (in such tellings lies the tale, here and elsewhere in her work) of Treat Morrison and Elena McMahon, of their reciprocal subsumptions of personal and political "information" and "interest," in a Caribbean setting suffused with interminglings of American history and myth.

To some degree in the writing of all three novels, even in the published books as "finished" physical objects, Didion ongoingly conducts *both* an "Alpha" and an "Omega" manuscript (just as two such manuscripts make up Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*). Each version refracts gaps in the other as together they drive toward a comprehensive understanding, confidence in the availability of which is at the same time radically undercut. A sense of "TO BE CONTINUED" is inevitably implied as each book concludes, beyond the extent to which this "sense of an ending" may be said to be common in the American novel from the start. And while they are anything but "sequels" or a "trilogy," the lack of traditional closure in each of these three works (if "closure" in fiction is even remotely "traditional" by now) endorses more than it calls into question the value of "continuing" speculation.

Such speculation is focused not only on what "may or may not" have happened (as Didion so often puts it), or indeed on the political or personal consequences (sometimes one and the same) of the sheer fact that "what happened happened" (in Michael Herr's phrase from *Dispatches*). It also entails—as it must in Didion's art no less than in that of Mailer, or for that matter (in receding-mirror sequence) than in Pynchon, Ellison or others in a *counter*-Emersonian tradition which is nevertheless a form of Adamic engagement—a continuing inquiry into

the discrepant spaces between American ideological theory and practice, between the self-narrations of myth and history. These are the regions, along the borders and in the margins, in which the American Adam, perhaps as well an American Eve, have always been problematically inscribed.

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NOTES

¹Didion, Joan. "A Social Eye." *National Review* (20 April 1965) 329-30.

²McWilliams, John P., Jr. *Political Justice in a Republic: James Fenimore Cooper's America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

³Didion, Joan. "In Bogota," *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 193.

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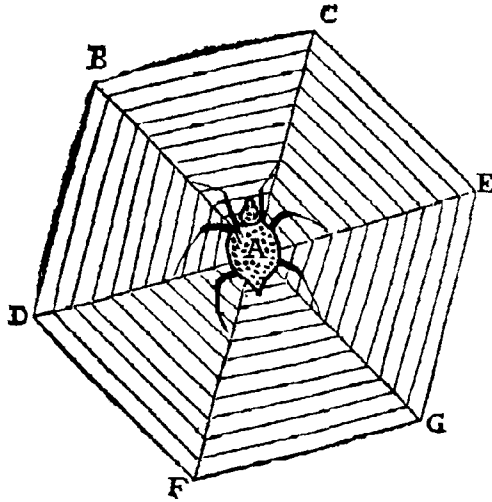
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