

REFLECTIONS ON JOAN DIDION'S *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*

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In 1993, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins published *Reconstructing Illness*, a study of memoirs about the experience of disease, dysfunction or death for which she coined a new term: pathography. In a move familiar from the brief flowering of the 'personal criticism' movement in the late 1980s, Hawkins confessed that her academic interest had been motivated by her own father's death: the critical work thus shared the very impulse it sought to analyse. In *Reconstructing Illness*, Hawkins noted a striking fact: before 1950, she had discovered only a handful of published pathographies. After 1950, the genre had haltingly emerged but then accelerated, particularly in the 1980s, with hundreds of texts published. But even more strikingly, the number of pathographies *doubled again* in just the six years between 1993 and 1999, when the second edition of Hawkins' book appeared.¹

This spike in production placed pathography at the heart of the contemporary boom in the trauma memoir. In the 1990s, life writing was partially re-oriented to pivot around the intrusive traumatic event that, at a stroke, shattered narrative coherence. The sociologist Arthur Frank saw illness as 'narrative wreckage' and pathography as a literal narrative salve: 'Stories have to *repair* the damage that illness has done'.² This formulation owed much to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who regarded narrative as an act of con-figuration which "'grasps together" and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events'.³ Trauma is a dis-figuration of that narrative possibility, but what the narrative memoir promises is a redemptive account of how the post-traumatic self might be re-configured around its woundedness.

The trauma memoir is one of the cultural symptoms that follows from the securing of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a recognised psychiatric illness in official diagnostics in 1980, after a long campaign of psychiatric advocacy in the 1970s by a coalition of activists. It has been my contention that many forms of culture have played a significant role in articulating how PTSD seems to affect the narrative possibilities of selfhood after 1980.⁴ The memoir boom is now a vast and complicated delta region with major channels but also curious back-waters, and is treacherous to map. However, it is important to distinguish the tributaries rather than subsume everything into an undifferentiated trauma discourse. For the record, we might distinguish five elements that converge to produce the memoir boom since the 1990s: 1) the feminist revaluation of the autobiographical utterance, at the level of therapeutic practice, life writing, and in critical theory; 2) a politicisation of

1. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography*, West Lafayette, IN, Purdue University Press, 1999.

2. Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p55.

3. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*, K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (trans.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, px.

4. See Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, London, Routledge, 2008.

the illness memoir by people with AIDS, producing a large body of testimony designed both to commemorate the dead and to denounce medical or governmental ignorance; 3) an expanding terrain of pathographies that began with cancer memoirs but soon moved into subsets including depression, exotic or bizarre disorders and parental illness or death; 4) the related rise of thanatography, or death writing, which might include memoirs by carers for the terminally ill, suicide in the family, or accounts of the mourning process; and 5) the re-programming of the celebrity exposé to be organised around the revelation of the traumatic secret (a boom begun in England with the phenomenal success of the autobiography of the glamour model, Katie Price, *Being Jordan*). These elements run the gamut from honourable and political interventions to the plain tiresome and narcissistic. But they are also only the most immediate determinants of the boom. Many of the questions of the ethics and aesthetics of narrating extreme and deathly experience have been determined by Holocaust testimony. This has held centre place in many cultural theories of the representation of trauma that emerged in the early 1990s.

In sum, we might regard the trauma memoir as the exemplary form of what Ross Chambers has termed ‘aftermath cultures,’ defined by a testimonial impulse that is nevertheless marked by ‘a strange nexus of denial and acknowledgement’.⁵ These memoirs at once allure with the promise of transgressive experiences but are abjected for precisely those revelations in an irresolvable tension of attraction and repulsion that accounts for the compulsion to publish so many similar confessions. In the midst of this torrent of memoirs came Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Didion’s memoir about the death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne, assumed an impressive gravitas given Didion’s status as one of the pre-eminent practitioners of the literary journalism that took the personal turn with Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson and others in the 1960s. At a time when disdain for the ‘misery memoir’ was regularly voiced in the so-called quality press, Didion’s signature prose style promised icy control and all the literary virtues.⁶ Within months, David Hare observed, the memoir had become ‘the one indispensable handbook to bereavement’.⁷ Critics had already spoken of Didion’s earlier accounts of the 1960s as using ‘her private and often anguished experience as a metaphor for the writer, her generation, and sometimes her entire society’.⁸ Startlingly, *The White Album* began with a transcript of her psychiatric report from her outpatient assessment, tartly observing ‘an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968’.⁹ It was unsurprising, then, that her contribution to contemporary trauma culture was a massive best-seller in America, filling the display windows of every bookshop in New York in the winter of 2005. It was also peculiarly horrible to read, because the reader knew more than the author. John Gregory Dunne died five days after his only daughter with Didion, Quintana, had been admitted to intensive care with pneumonia and septic shock. The stress of this event likely contributed to his

5. Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2004, pxxi-ii.

6. See, for instance, Tim Adams, ‘From Dave Pelzer to the latest women’s magazine, the Misery Memoir is a surefire bestseller. But why are we so addicted to other people’s agony?’, *The Observer*, 29/01/2006, pp4-5.

7. David Hare, ‘Introduction,’ *The Year of Magical Thinking: The Play*, London, Fourth Estate, vii-xvii, pviii.

8. Mark Z. Muggli, ‘The Poetics of Joan Didion’s Journalism,’ *American Literature* 59: 3 (1987): 402-21, 406.

9. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (1979), in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in order to Live: Collected Nonfiction*, New York, Knopf/Everyman, 2006, p188.

fatal heart-attack, re-constructed in obsessive detail in the opening pages of the memoir. The year of magical thinking follows not only the secret rituals of mourning her husband, but also Didion's anxious hovering at the bedside of her daughter through her severe illness. Because Quintana is in a coma and only fitfully awake, Didion has to break repeatedly the news of the death of her father, because the daughter keeps forgetting. The book ends with Quintana out of her emergency and Didion cautiously seeing the potential to re-figure her life after her husband's death. But the reader knows that after the completion of the book Quintana also died, aged 39. This already fragile narrative is therefore over-shadowed for the reader by the fore-knowledge of this second loss. Within weeks of Quintana's death, Didion returned to the material, but this time seeking a form that she had never used before, the better to express devastating loss. The dramatic monologue of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which a version of Didion was played by her friend Vanessa Redgrave, premiered in New York in March 2007 and repeated a sell-out run in London in summer 2008 at the National Theatre. The play rebalances the emphasis from the husband to the daughter: it was composed, Didion said, to 'tell me what I did not know when I wrote the book'.¹⁰

This essay is an attempt to reflect on why this memoir, amidst the hundreds of others in the current pathographic wave, became such a cultural event. James Womack, in a review that wanted very much to be iconoclastic, concluded that: 'The eagerness with which people have embraced *The Year of Magical Thinking* suggests that we are easily flattered ... The heroic scale of this grief is inclusive, it tells us what we might be capable of ... It confirms our human amplitude'.¹¹ There is something that he has discerned about trauma narratives and their magical contagion, but the reasons for Didion's cultural prominence are more complex and overdetermined than this.

At the core of the memoir is the attempt to convey the cognitive processes of grief, the secret behaviours of magical thinking in the traumatic aftermath. 'I knew that John was dead,' she reports. 'Yet I was myself in no way prepared to accept this news as final: there was a level on which I believed that what had happened remained reversible ... I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking'.¹² The autopsy will isolate the problem and thus cure him of death; she keeps his clothes and shoes for his return home; she avoids reading his obituaries; she develops circuitous routes in New York and Los Angeles to avoid associative memories to their married life; when she sees his face in a montage of the deceased at the Oscars (they collaborated on Hollywood scripts), she chides herself that 'I had allowed other people to think he was dead. I had allowed him to be buried alive' (*YMT*, p35). Repetitive syntactical structures convey both a sense of magical incantation to keep him alive, but also a kind of post-traumatic automatism - and these repetitions are accumulated throughout the book to brilliant effect. These tropes are at the foundation of literature's elegiac function, at least according to William Watkin, who suggests that in elegy 'language's assumed magical powers of naming, and thus of giving

10. Joan Didion, 'Author's Preface,' *The Year of Magical Thinking: The Play*, xix-xxxix, pxxv.

11. James Womack, 'Joan Didion: Giving us Grief,' *Aréle* 23 (2007): 132-42, 142.

12. Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, New York, Knopf, 2005, p33. References hereafter to *YMT* in text.

13. William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p4.

14. Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' Penguin Freud Library XI, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, pp245-68, p253.

15. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny,' Penguin Freud Library XIV, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, pp335-76, p365.

16. See the essays collected in Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, N. Rand (ed and trans), Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1994.

17. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, *Standard Edition of the Collected Works XIII*, London, Hogarth Press, 1955, p93.

18. Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' op. cit., p251.

or extending life, is called upon in the service of intense grief'.¹³ Didion develops, elaborates, and rhetorically conjures up the superstitions and rituals that she comes to regard, retrospectively, as a deranged form of this magical naming.

It is tempting to reach for Sigmund Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' to explore this suspensive psychological state. The griever struggles and resists the reality-testing that keeps confirming the loss in order that 'the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged'.¹⁴ In melancholia, the pathological intensification of mourning, reality-testing is completely abandoned for a full-scale incorporation of the lost other, keeping the dead alive in the psyche. Psychic defences produce an uncanny creature, hovering between life and death. It is at this border that Freud argues the uncanny produces unnerving regressions back to beliefs we thought that enlightened, sceptical civilisation had surmounted. 'All supposedly educated people,' Freud commented, 'have ceased to believe that the dead can become visible as spirits.' Yet, he pointed out, 'almost all of us think as savages do on this topic': the dead remain behind in some form or other.¹⁵ These Gothic-tinged formulations were fully elaborated for a theory of haunting as a result of melancholic incorporation by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok.¹⁶ From here, it is a short step to animism or magical thinking, for Freud the most primitive belief system, first developed, as he puts it in *Totem and Taboo*, to address the problem of death and 'the emotional conflict into which survivors are plunged'.¹⁷ Magical thinking, the omnipotent power of thought to reanimate the living, possesses the logic of renunciation, a refusal to accept the pain of separation. Following this trajectory thus brings us to an account of grief which can become thoroughly magical.

Aside from the difficulty of Freud's classically Victorian evolutionary alignment of what he calls the 'folly' of magical thinking with childhood wish-fulfilment and primitive omnipotent thoughts, Freud also moves rapidly beyond normal processes of grief, about which he has little to say ('it never occurs to us,' he says, 'to regard it as a pathological condition') and towards the extreme states of melancholia.¹⁸ What is affecting about Didion's portrait of grief is the everydayness of her small acts of magical thinking, their fleetingness and interstitiality, the way that they can co-exist with perfectly rational and ordered social behaviours. In this sense, her memoir chimes more with John Bowlby's attempt to provide an account of the normal mourning process that he contended Freud had overlooked. Bowlby identified three phases of mourning. The first is the overwhelming urge to recover the lost object, a distending grief that is then followed by the disorganisations of mourning proper and the eventual reorganisation of the survivor's sense of self that incorporates the loss into a re-configured life narrative. *The Year of Magical Thinking* dramatizes the first phase of the urge to recover the lost object. 'So long as the response systems are focused on the lost object there are strenuous and often angry efforts to recover it,' Bowlby says, 'and these efforts may continue despite their fruitlessness being painfully evident to others,

and sometimes also to the bereaved'.¹⁹ 'Many sufferers from pathological mourning,' Bowlby continues, 'have become fixated in the first phase of the mourning process and, without knowing it, are striving to recover the object'.²⁰ The language of the magical recurs in Bowlby's account too. In speaking of the exorbitant anger that can be directed at doctors or comforters or the lost object, Bowlby discerns 'a secret hope that perhaps in some miraculous way [wishes] to seek out the villain that will lead to the recovery of the loss'.²¹ Didion's focus on this phase, berating doctors and the bureaucrats of death, with only a very sketchy outline of her reorganisation a year on from her husband's death in the last few pages of the memoir, suggests she is interested more in communicating the secret life of this first phase of mourning. The fore-knowledge of her daughter's death adds to the fragility of her tentative re-organisation.

This convergence of theory and memoir is perhaps so well-oiled because Didion obsessively reads the literature of mourning, unable to switch off her journalistic impulse to accrue information. Yet the instant one repeats this research gesture, it reveals that the current psychological research on grief, trauma and magical thinking has largely peeled away from the psychoanalytic framework for more cognitive and information-processing models (in keeping with much of the discipline). Magical thinking is in fact an incredibly hot topic in empirical psychological research. One area is clustered around testing the limits of culturally specific forms of magical thinking. This work retains much of the intellectual framework set up by J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), in which sympathetic magic works through the laws of similarity and contiguity ('things which have been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed').²² Beliefs about who can and cannot catch AIDS and from what objects, for instance, differ around the world but consistently privilege magical and moral pollutions over the facts of viral transmission.²³ Another area of research focuses on magical thinking in children, now working to correct Jean Piaget's influential view set out in *The Child's Conception of the World* in 1929 that magical thinking is a universal and irrational set of beliefs retained up to the age of nine or ten. Children's belief in wish-fulfilment has been systematically tested (a Magical Ideation Scale for measurement has been developed), and is now seen in sophisticated inter-relation with the very early acquisition of rational and causative modes of thought.²⁴ Research has also targeted how stressful situations reduce the ability to control cognitive operations and thus amplify magical thinking, a process in which 'individuals may generate solutions that increase their control over the sources of stress'.²⁵ This stance leads into research that has examined bereavement. Martin Lunghi speculates that beliefs in continuity are biologically hard-wired, so that the discontinuity of death prompts all kinds of magical evasion and beliefs in forms of posthumous survival. It is only recently that Western cultures have begun to consider beliefs in continuity after death as 'disturbingly deviant' and that the 'magical thinking of the bereaved requires to be "cured"'.²⁶

19. John Bowlby, 'The Processes of Mourning,' *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 42: 4-5, (1961): 317-40, 319.

20. Bowlby, 'Processes of Mourning,' op. cit., p322.

21. Ibid., p334.

22. J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Part One: The Magic Art*, 3rd edn., London, Macmillan, 1932, p52.

23. See Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin, 'The Makings of the Magical Mind: The Nature and Function of Sympathetic Magical Thinking', in K. Rosagren, C. Johnson and P. Harris (eds), *Imagining the Impossible: Magical, Scientific and Religious Thinking in Children*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp1-34.

24. See Jacqueline Woolley, Katrina Phelps, Debra Davis, Dorothy Mandel, 'Where Theories of Mind Meet Magic: The Development of Children's Belief about Wishing', *Child Development* 70 (1999): 571-87.

25. Goira Keinan, 'Magical Thinking as a way of coping with Stress', in R. Jacoby and G. Keinan (eds), *Between Stress and Hope: From a Disease-Centred to a Health-Centred*

Perspective, Westport, CT, Praeger, 2003, p132.

26. Martin Lunghi, 'Ontology and Magic: A Conceptual Exploration of Denial following Bereavement', *Mortality* 11: 1 (2006): 31-44, 42.

27. Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (trans), London, RKP, 1948, p139.

28. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols., London, John Murray, 1871, I, p101.

29. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, op. cit., p53.

30. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, op. cit., p99.

31. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, op. cit., p236.

32. For a bad-tempered account of what he considered his master's greatest failing, see Ernest Jones' chapter on Occultism in *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, 3 vols., London, Hogarth Press, 1957. Also George Devereux (ed), *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, London, Souvenir, 1974.

33. John Jervis, *Exploring the Modern: Patterns of Western Culture and Civilization*, Oxford,

This kind of research offers one clue to Didion's success. Modernity has defined its rationality through the suppression of magical thought. This is what Weberian rationality means: 'the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means'.²⁷ Belief in magical agencies becomes aligned to the primitive and the child. Edward Tylor, one of the first professional anthropologists in England, argued in 1871 that the function of anthropology was to seek out and eliminate 'survivals' of primitive thought, the 'pernicious delusions' such as magic that could only be associated with 'the lowest known stages of civilisation'.²⁸ Frazer's study of magic was conceived within the same evolutionary framework. Magic was the most primitive set of human beliefs, 'a spurious system of natural law' that hadn't yet advanced to the more conceptually sophisticated delusion of religious belief, which was in turn finally overthrown by a rational understanding of causation.²⁹ Freud propped himself on Tylor and Frazer's model for his discussion of animism, magic and the omnipotence of thought in *Totem and Taboo*. Ascribing this management of death to a logic of instinctual renunciation, Freud even apologised for 'endowing modern savages with a subtlety in their mental activities which exceeds all probability'.³⁰

Every one of these theorists, however, was perplexed by the brute *persistence* of magical thinking into the heart of modernity. Tylor dismissed the late Victorian revival in occult sciences and spiritualism as perfect illustrations of savage survivals, yet could not stem their popularity. Frazer conceded that despite his linear developmental theory, magical beliefs continued 'among the dull, the weak, the ignorant, and the superstitious, who constitute, unfortunately, the vast majority of mankind'. European civilisation, he feared, stood 'on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by the subterranean forces below,' the magic flowing back into an only recently inoculated scientific world.³¹ Freud, meanwhile, adopted the public persona of a secular rationalist, but privately upheld all manner of superstitious and magical thoughts, ranging from numerology to telepathy, meaning that core psychoanalytic concepts like transference have been consistently theorised as occult transmissions.³²

This has prompted a rethinking of the relation between modernity and its (magical) others, which suggests less stark opposition than complex interdependence. After all, as John Jervis suggests, the supernatural 'is a product of modernity, since it only makes sense by contrast with the category of the "natural", the notion of nature as secular, law-governed, available for scientific investigation'.³³ Simon During has examined the rise of 'secular magic' in modernity, the imperfect stamping out of superstition creating instead 'a fuzzy and variegated vernacular modern magic' that is a strange mix of superstition, religious sentiment and a knowing suspension of disbelief.³⁴ Charles Taylor's reflections on the persistence of religious thought into Western modernity follows a similar path. He suggests everyone in the West 'as we grow up has had to take on the disciplines of disenchantment, and we regularly reproach each other for our failings in this regard, and accuse each other of

“magical thinking”, of indulging in “myth”, of giving way to “fantasy”.³⁵ Yet the vast work of his *Secular Age* is devoted to rethinking secularity so as to understand the persistence of the magical and numinous, despite the story of disenchantment we have told ourselves. This simultaneity is supported by current psychological theory, too. Nemeroff and Rozin conclude that ‘Magical thinking has stubbornly resisted the aggressive expansion of modern science ... and, if anything, appears to be making a major resurgence in terms of explicit and culturally (or at least, subculturally) supported beliefs’.³⁶

Didion’s memoir therefore speaks to a secret history of cognitions that have persisted yet been rendered shameful by modernity. It is no coincidence, I think, that the success of her book shares the same cultural moment as a renewed attempt to reinforce a violent opposition between science and religion, as ideologues of scientific materialism like Richard Dawkins bemoan the increase in superstition and pointlessly wrestle with their symbiotic other, fundamentalism.³⁷

But if Didion confesses to a mode of magical thought that is pervasive then why do we need to read a trauma memoir to be told the secret of grief’s magic tricks? There are standard answers for this. Philip Ariès addressed the progressive occlusion of the encounter with death in the West, including a ‘brutal revolution’ after 1945, where the culture of death ceases to be a ‘ritual ceremony’ and becomes instead ‘a technical phenomenon’: ‘mourning is no longer a necessary period imposed by society, it has become a *morbid state* which must be treated, shortened, erased by the “doctor of grief”’,³⁸ Anthony Giddens has argued in an allied way that late modernity is characterised by the ‘sequestration of experience’ in which encounters with extreme experiences such as birth or death are placed under institutional command, a protective cocoon that has its evident benefits but is also fragile and liable to crack if routine experience is disturbed. As Giddens explains, the modern individual ‘is likely to lack the psychic and social resources to cope with the issues thus posed’.³⁹ In this situation, every departure from the norm becomes catastrophic and a death cataclysmic. In Charles Taylor’s terms, the modern self is ‘buffered’, yet traumatic events puncture that protective sphere and return us instantly to the pre-modern self which is ‘porous’, and thus open to all kinds of belief in occult transmissions and sympathetic magic. Discussions of pathography typically account for the rise of the genre as a counter-reaction to the birth of the clinic - of technological medicine and the patient as a disarticulated vector of disease. For Anne Hunsaker Hawkins or Arthur Frank, the memoir returns a fragile holistic voice of the ill or bereaved person against the indifferent machineries of health. Because, it seems, we are able to have less and less *experience* of illness and death, the trauma memoir provides scripts for individual agency as much as narrative restoration.

Yet there is magic being worked at a different and perhaps more literal level. From the origins of dynamic psychology with Mesmerism in the late eighteenth century, many have regarded traumatic experience as a route to enhanced psychical - perhaps even supernatural - powers. The psychically

Blackwell, 1998, p183.

34. Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 2002, p37.

35. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA., Belknap, 2007, pp28-9.

36. Nemeroff and Rozin, ‘The Makings of the Magical Mind’, *op. cit.*, p25.

37. For commentary, see Roger Luckhurst, ‘Demon-Haunted Darwinism’, *new formations* 49 (2003): 124-35.

38. Philip Ariès, *Western Attitudes to Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp99-100.

39. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991, p167.

40. See Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

41. Sandor Ferenczi, 'Aphoristic Remarks on the Theme of Being Dead – Being a Woman', *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis*, London, Hogarth Press, 1955, p160.

42. Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: The Survivors of Hiroshima*, London, Weidenfeld, 1968, p479.

43. Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims Nor Executioners*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1973, p318.

44. *Ibid.*, p314.

45. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, London, HarperCollins, 1994, p96.

damaged gained remarkably heightened perception in the mesmeric rapport, and this has been consistently reported from Mesmer's practice in the 1780s through the experience of John Elliotson in London in the 1830s to the work of Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet who hypnotised hysterics in Paris in the 1880s.⁴⁰ The psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi believed the same thing. 'In the moment of trauma,' Ferenczi said in the early 1930s, 'some sort of omniscience about the world ... makes the person ... more or less clairvoyant'.⁴¹ He found it difficult treating his traumatised patients, ones touched by this little death, because he believed that their uncanny clairvoyance gave them the ability to read his mind, most particularly when he was failing to pay proper attention to them. These odd beliefs continue into those psychologists centrally involved in establishing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a diagnostic category in 1980. Robert Jay Lifton was the central advocate who argued that Hiroshima survivors, Vietnam veterans, disaster victims and survivors of what was then called Rape Trauma Syndrome shared enough symptom clusters to deserve the generic description that became PTSD. Lifton, at his most passionate, argued that trauma survivors served a prophetic function for a century that had 'imposed upon us all a series of immersions into death'.⁴² In 1973, he argued that 'the antiwar veterans take their place among a special contemporary group of "prophetic survivors"'. Their cultural centrality derived, he claimed, 'from the holocausts they have survived'.⁴³ The Vietnam veteran thus became a kind of shaman or seer, because, Lifton said, they had 'crossed over to the other side and returned'.⁴⁴ These were the agents who could shake America from the generalised post-traumatic numbing that had allowed the war to continue. The sense that trauma gives enhanced psychical powers recurred in the 'recovered memory' movement in the 1980s and 1990s, too. In Judith Herman's incredibly influential book on sexual abuse, *Trauma and Recovery*, it is suggested that the pathological environment of abuse 'fosters the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold. The language of the supernatural, banished for three hundred years from scientific discourse, still intrudes into the most sober attempts to describe the psychological manifestations of chronic childhood trauma'.⁴⁵ Intense stress and trauma, as we have seen, allegedly amplifies magical thinking.

On the one hand, a trauma memoir like *The Year of Magical Thinking* is extraordinary because of its very ordinariness: it tells us that we have become so sequestered from death that we need a literature to script our mourning behaviours. But on the other hand, it speaks volumes about the glamour that has accrued to suffering extreme and unusual experience far beyond the norm, the fascination in removing the veil from unbearable private experience that motors the memoir boom. 'Glamour' and 'fascination' retain, just about, their original magical meanings: we might say that the trauma subject casts a spell and generates a proliferating readership through a kind of empathetic or magical contagion. The idea of occult transmissibility or

contagion is at the heart of magical thinking: it is defined in one study as a belief that the ‘transfer of energy or information between physical systems may take place solely because of their similarity or contiguity in space and time’.⁴⁶ But transmissibility is also at the heart of trauma theory: it is a field that constantly worries about the dangers of traumatic affect ‘to confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions’ as it moves from primary to secondary victims, or induces what has been termed vicarious traumatising.⁴⁷ In one of the foundational texts of cultural trauma theory, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony*, there is a passionate advocacy that the affective contagions of trauma should be positively encouraged in the classroom as an educational tool. This problematic traumatic pedagogy is premised on the magical law of contiguity: to read traumatic affect is to imbibe its *mana* and be compelled to pass it on in some form of witness.⁴⁸

Thus far these reflections have rather remorselessly contextualised Didion’s memoir in highly abstract frames of reference - the kind of intellectual abstractions Didion herself claims she eschews for the specific, the tangible and the concrete.⁴⁹ But if we re-situate *The Year of Magical Thinking* back in Didion’s oeuvre there is one final ironic observation to make. Didion’s fame as a journalist resides in her searing critiques of America in the 1960s, portrayed in the essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album* (and figured fictionally in her novel of breakdown, *Play it as it Lays*). The Sixties are portrayed as profoundly ruptural and melancholic, an era that breaks catastrophically away from the certainties and entitlements of prior generations. At the famous opening of *The White Album*, Didion proclaims that ‘We tell ourselves stories in order to live ... We live, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience’.⁵⁰ The Sixties, she continues, was ‘a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself ... I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw’.⁵¹ Didion conveys what she terms the ‘authentically senseless’ nature of the 1960s by reaching for emblematic instances where meaning simply collapses: the Manson murders, the banality of Jim Morrison’s sex and death persona, the hippies of Haight-Ashbury. Each becomes an ‘uninterpreted image ... evoking a chaos indecipherable’.⁵² Indeed, one might argue that much of Didion’s writing relies on her repeated failures to perform the role of the investigative journalist, as the pieces of the investigation fail to come together and make sense. From *Salvador* to the California of her previous memoir, *Where I Was From*, Didion stages the limits of meaningful interpretation. This is the core of what Ellen Friedman calls the ‘Didion sensibility’ - an existentially meaningless, ‘melancholy and deprived world’.⁵³ In this sense, her journalism is all trauma memoir; since trauma is now conventionally represented as the disfiguration of meaningful sequence, the rock that produces narrative shipwreck. *The Year of Magical Thinking* would then appear to be merely the latest in this sequence

46. L. Zusne and W. H. Jones, *Anomalous Psychology: A Study in Magical Thinking*, Hillside, Erlbaum, 1989, p13.

47. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2001, p21.

48. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, London, Routledge, 1992.

49. See Joan Didion, ‘Why I Write’, in E. Friedman (ed), *Joan Didion: Essays and Conversations*, Princeton, Ontario Review Press, 1984, pp5-10.

50. Joan Didion, *The White Album in Collected Nonfiction*, op. cit., p185.

51. *Ibid.*, pp185-6.

52. Muggli, ‘Poetics’, op. cit., p410.

53. Ellen G. Friedman, ‘The Didion Sensibility: An Analysis’, in Friedman (ed), *Joan Didion*, pp18-90, p90.

of memoirs and reports in this mode, since it deals with grief as ‘the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself’ (*YTM*, p189). In a way it offers a curious kind of solace in this sequence, because it finally *fills* the Didionesque void with a specific content of meaninglessness: the brute and boring experience of mourning.

Yet despite the continuity of that empty iterative style, there is a difference. Didion gained leverage on the Sixties generation because she was not of it. When she says at the end of *The White Album* that ‘I am talking here about being the child of my time,’ she locates herself very specifically in the 1950s generation.⁵⁴ Her privileged Sacramento family upbringing and the solidity of her Fifties education gives her, she argues, the individualistic moral stance to critique conservatively what she regards as the senselessness of the collective Sixties revolution. Her stance is to be *disjunct* with the times in these earlier works, refusing identity by declaring that she is not the society in microcosm in *The White Album*. In contrast, *The Year of Magical Thinking* suggests that she has coincided with the times at just the moment she appears most asocial and secretive in the senselessness of her grief. What is the most private and atomised experience has become the most representative and public in a traumatophilic era. Now that, as Paul Daniels might say, is magic.

54. Didion, *The White Album*, *Collected Nonfiction*, op. cit., p329.