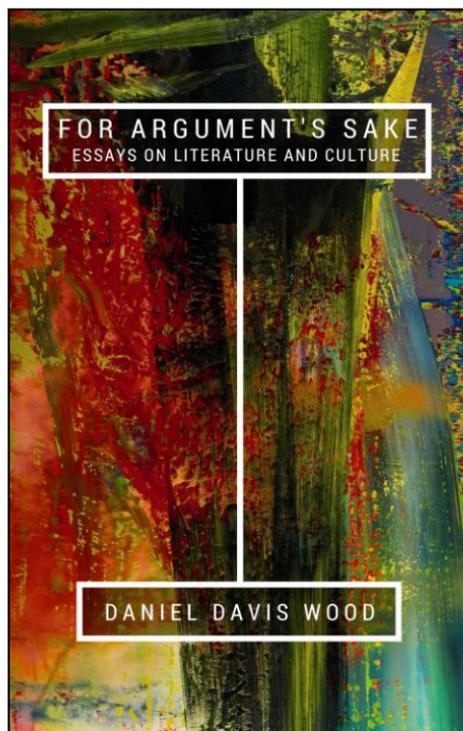


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 325-331.

It appears here, in PDF format, exactly as it appears in print.



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A QUESTIONABLE HAZINESS

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WHAT WE NEED HERE IS A MONTAGE, MUSIC OVER. *HOW SHE*:
talked to her father and xxxx and xxxxx—

‘xx,’ he said.

‘xxx,’ she said.

How she:

How she did this and *why* she did that and *what the music was* when
they did x and x and xxx—

How he, and also she—

So begins Chapter 19 of Joan Didion’s *Blue Nights* (103). “The above are notes I made in 1995 for a novel I published in 1996,” Didion explains. “I offer them as a representation of how comfortable I used to be when I wrote, how easily I did it, how little thought I gave to what I was saying until I had already said it. In fact, in any real sense, what I was doing then was never writing at all: I was doing no more than sketching in a rhythm and letting that rhythm tell me what it was I was saying” (103-104). The symbols that anticipated words to come were not random, Didion says, but were “arranged in specific groupings. A single ‘x’ differed from a double ‘xx,’ ‘xxx’ from ‘xxxx.’ The number of such symbols had a meaning. The arrangement was the meaning” (104).

“I supposed th[e] process [of writing over the arrangements] to be like writing music,” she continues:

I have no idea whether or not this was an accurate assessment, since I neither wrote nor read music. All I know now is that I no longer write this way. All I know now is that writing, or whatever it is that I was doing when I could proceed on no more than ‘xxx’ and ‘xxxx,’ whatever it was I was doing when I imagined myself hearing the music, no longer comes easily to me. For a while I laid this to a certain weariness with my own style, an impat-

ience, a wish to be more direct. I encouraged the very difficulty I was having laying words on the page. I saw it as evidence of a new directness. I see it differently now. I see it now as frailty. (105)

This admission dovetails with two scenes from Didion's previous book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, about the twelve months following the sudden death of her husband John Dunne.

In the first scene, Didion recalls her birthday on December 5, 2003, some forty years after she and Dunne were married and only twenty-five days before he suffered a fatal heart attack:

I remember [my] last present from John. ... Snow had begun falling in New York around ten that morning and by evening seven inches had accumulated, with another six due. I remember snow avalanching off the slate roof at St. James' Church across the street. ... Before dinner John sat by the fire in the living room and read to me out loud. The book from which he read was a novel of my own, *A Book of Common Prayer* [published in 1977], which he happened to have in the living room because he was rereading it to see how something worked technically. The sequence he read out loud was one in which Charlotte Douglas's husband Leonard pays a visit to the narrator, Grace Strasser-Mendana, and lets her know that what is happening to the country her family runs will not end well. The sequence is complicated (this was in fact the sequence John had meant to reread to see how it worked technically), broken by other action and requiring the reader to pick up the undertext in what Leonard Douglas and Grace Strasser-Mendana say to each other. 'Goddamn,' John said to me when he dosed the book. 'Don't ever tell me again you can't write. That's my birthday present to you.' (165-166)

In the second scene, not quite twelve months later, Didion recalls a writing assignment she completed for the *New York Review of Books* in the lead-up to the 2004 presidential election:

In August and September, after the Democratic and Republican conventions but before the election, I wrote, for the first time since John died, a piece. It was about the campaign. It was the first piece I had written since 1963 that he did not read in draft form and tell me what was wrong, what was needed, how to

bring it up here, take it down there. I have never written pieces fluently but this one seemed to be taking even longer than usual: I realized at some point that I was unwilling to finish it because there was no one to read it. I kept telling myself that I had a deadline, that John and I never missed deadlines. Whatever I finally did to finish this piece was as close as I have ever come to imagining a message from him. The message was simple: *You're a professional. Finish the piece. ...*

When I checked the piece for publication I was startled and unsettled by how many mistakes I had made: simple errors of transcription, names and dates wrong. I told myself that this was temporary, part of the mobilization problem, further evidence of those cognitive deficits that came with either stress or grief, but I remained unsettled. Would I ever be right again? Could I ever again trust myself not to be wrong? (213-214)

If these disclosures about her writing process cast a certain light on the aesthetics of Didion's work, in what ways do they particularly illuminate the aesthetics of *Blue Nights*?

John Dunne was Didion's first reader and fact-checker, as well as a voice of what seems to have been deep appreciation and reliable encouragement. Even though, as she reveals in *Blue Nights*, Didion was once able to write almost without thought of it, Dunne was nearby, as in *Magical Thinking*, both to amend the lapses of thought that left her work shot through with factual errors and to devote his own thoughts to the ways in which her literary skills left him in awe. In a formal sense, then, *Blue Nights* inevitably internalises the content of its predecessor: its architecture is an outgrowth of the events related in *Magical Thinking*.

Following on from *Magical Thinking*, *Blue Nights* does not revisit the death of John Dunne. It focuses instead on the death of Didion's adopted daughter, Quintana, in 2005, and, more broadly, on "illness [and] the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness" (4). But John Dunne's death appears in every sentence, as the absence of his corrections and appraisals leaves the prose in a shape it presumably would not have taken if he had still been alive at the time of writing. *The Year of Magical Thinking* thus offers a prospective explication of the aesthetic that governs *Blue Nights*, while *Blue Nights* retrospectively recasts *Magical Thinking* as a licence with which to explain away its

own errors, infelicities, and awkwardnesses, and even to transform them into aesthetic virtues.

One result of all this is a hazy, elliptical style which combines the two stylistic trends Didion identifies in her own work — the insistent forward momentum of “sketching in a rhythm” and the conscious encouragement of the “difficulty [of] laying words on the page” (105) — and suggests an intensification of the frailty she sees emerging. This style manifests in Didion’s repeated questioning of herself and of the origins of the world in which she now finds herself. By my guess, somewhere between one fifth and one quarter of all the sentences in *Blue Nights* take the form of direct but largely unanswerable questions, and questions about questions and the significance of asking them. Consider some early examples:

The stephanotis.

Was that another sentimental choice?

Did [Quintana] remember the stephanotis?

Is that why she wanted it, is that why she wove it into her braid? (7)

Two pages further on:

Why then did I feel so sharp a sense of betrayal when I exchanged my California driver’s license for one issued by New York? Wasn’t that actually a straightforward enough transaction? Your birthday comes around, your license needs renewing, what difference does it make where you renew it? What difference does it make that you have had this single number on your license since it was assigned to you at age fifteen-and-a-half by the state of California? Wasn’t there always an error on that driver’s license anyway? An error you knew about? Didn’t that license say you were five-foot-two? When you knew perfectly well you were at best... five-foot-one-and-three-quarters?

Why did I make so much of the driver’s license?

What was that about?

Did giving up the California license say that I would never again be fifteen-and-a-half?

Would I want to be?

Or was the business with the license just one more case of ‘the apparent inadequacy of the precipitating event’? (9-10)

One page after that:

'The hair, the golf, and the canary' had each been assigned an exaggerated value... but why? Dr. Menninger himself asks this question, although only rhetorically: 'But why should such extravagantly exaggerated over-estimations and incorrect evaluations exist?' Did he imagine that he had answered the question simply by raising it? Did he think that all he had to do was formulate the question and then retreat into a cloud of theoretical psychoanalytic references? Could I seriously have construed changing my driver's license from California to New York as an experience involving 'severed emotional bonds'?

Did I seriously see it as loss?

Did I truly see it as separation? (11)

Or consider other, later examples, from pages chosen at random. "A question occurs to me," Didion writes. "Did she emphasize 'new' when she mentioned 'the new problem'? Was she suggesting that there were also 'old' problems, undetailed, problems with which she was for the moment opting not to burden us?" (84). Shortly thereafter, her questions resurface: "When we noticed her confusions did we consider our own?" (92). "Did anyone use the word 'syncope'?" she asks later on. "Did anyone use the words 'pre-syncope symptoms'?" (152). These sharp sentences all possess something akin to the rhythm of Didion's more confident writing — "*How* she did this and *why* she did that and *what the music was* when they did x and x and xxx" (103) — but they lack the directness of that writing because, as unanswered questions, they render opaque our view of a life that declarative sentences would render starkly yet perhaps also falsely.

With each unanswered question, Didion affirms an unwillingness to commit decisively to a particular view of the events of her life. With each unanswered question, she traces the course of those events while also leaving them shrouded in doubt. With each unanswered question, Didion hedges her bets. But what else can she do? On the one hand, those questions are a blessing, an escape route from compositional paralysis. They allow her to gesture towards the facts of her life after having been robbed of the scrutiny of her lifelong fact-checker. On the other hand, those questions are a curse, an impediment to the usual directness of her diction. They drain her prose of the steely confidence it displayed when she wrote

it in the company of a lifelong admirer who would read it aloud to remind her of her own capabilities. If Didion allows Dunne's death to occupy only the background of *Blue Nights*, Dunne's absence nevertheless reaches into the foreground by touching the form of the book — the stringing together of sentences — and repeatedly calling attention to itself with each one of these: ?

Works Cited

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