Victor Strandberg

IN HER PREFACE TO SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM (which begins by reciting all of “The Second Coming”), Joan Didion wrote that for several years certain of Yeats’s images—“the widening gyre, the falcon which does not hear the falconer, the gaze blank and pitiless as the sun”—comprised “the only images against which much of what I was seeing and hearing and thinking seemed to make any pattern.” Above all, Yeats’s image of the dissolving center—“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”—has proved to be Didion’s master metaphor not only for society at large but for the individual personalities in her writings. Of her sojourn among the Haight-Ashbury dropouts that led to her title essay, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” she writes, “It was the first time I had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization, the proof that things fall apart.”¹ Not surprisingly, her subsequent novel Play It As It Lays portrays the effect of the missing center in the suicidal vacuity of her two leading characters, whose final “Why?” and “Why not?” mark a barely distinguishable to be or not to be.

In A Book of Common Prayer, the problem of the missing center

shows up not only in her fictional Haight-Ashbury type, the dropout-revolutionary Marin Bogart, but in all of her major characters. Discussing her novel with an interviewer from *The New York Times*, Didion responds to her interviewer's observation that Charlotte Douglas "doesn't seem to have a center, something in herself for which she's living," with this extension of the Yeatsian metaphor: "I don't know too many people who have what you could call clearly functioning centers. . . . It is a problem for all of us to find something at the center. . . . I think most of us build elaborate structures to fend off spending much time in our own center."² For lack of anything better in this post-Christian era, Didion observes that the center is likely to be filled with "certain contemporary demons"—Yeats's rough beast in the cradle—of which she specifies two: "flash politics, sexual adventurism."

Didion's disdain for flash politics is evident throughout her book, blatantly rendered in her juxtaposition of Latin American political violence against the playschool revolution of Marin's terrorist group, more subtly rendered in Leonard Douglas' radical chic activities, which include flying off to address a Day of Rage memorial fully aware that while he speaks another man is undertaking to run off with his wife. Sexual adventurism is the deeper issue, taking us into Didion's extended treatment of female identity that comprises the book's most original, profound, and brilliant achievement. In the end, what she has achieved is a female counterpart of *The Great Gatsby*—a book she favors in her essays³—redeploying in her own gender Fitzgerald's basic gambit of assigning a detective-narrator to search out the inner truth about a mysterious newcomer ("an outsider of romantic sensibility"⁴) who has set the neighborhood abuzz with reports of inexplicable behavior.

Like Nick Carraway, who begins by saying Gatsby "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn,"⁵ Grace Strasser-Mendana opens her narrative with a negative judgment: "Charlotte would call her story one of passion. I believe I would call it one of delusion" (BCP, p. 4). But in the end, it is the sophisticated observer, and not the inalterably naive main character, who is transformed by a correction of vision. As Grace comes to see it, "I am more like Charlotte than I thought I was." "I am less and less certain that this story has

---


²² MODERN FICTION STUDIES
been one of delusion. Unless the delusion was mine" (BCP, pp. 276, 280). Indeed, this alteration in the witness—from distaste and incredulity to affinity and admiration—gives both The Great Gatsby and A Book of Common Prayer their fundamental design, enabling Fitzgerald and Didion to defend America’s traditional middle-class ideals, which is what Gatsby’s “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (GG, p. 1) and Charlotte’s “delusions” turn out to encompass.

Among the passions and delusions that Grace discovers in Charlotte’s center, sexual passion—or “adventurism”—comprises the most ambiguous and the most typical of modern life. Whereas Gatsby had to settle for a single ecstatic kiss, approached “at an inconceivable pitch of intensity” (GG, p. 61), Charlotte Douglas practices free sexuality with a series of lovers. Grace’s earliest impression of Charlotte as a sexual adventuress, with a large emerald having displaced her wedding ring and with “clothes that seemed to betray in their just perceptible disrepair . . . some equivalent disrepair of the morale, some vulnerability, or abandon” (BCP, p. 19), is later borne out by the “sexual freight” of Charlotte’s gestures, her “reflexively seductive” manner (pp. 32, 33).

Underscoring the emergence of sexual adventurism as a final bastion of meaning in modern life is its concurrence with the holiest festivals of the Christian calendar: two of Charlotte’s most casual encounters, with Victor and with Pete Wright, take place on Christmas Eve and on Easter Sunday morning, respectively. By the time she meets Gerardo, her final lover, her sexual volatility is so obvious that his successful proposition comprises “the third thing Gerardo ever said to Charlotte Douglas” (BCP, p. 205). It is this volatility, and not the disappearance of his daughter—whom Warren Bogart dismisses with two words: “Fuck Marin” (BCP, p. 81)—that brings Warren across the continent in his effort to fill his own center with meaning before his time runs out. “You like it too much,” Warren says, apropos of arranging a ménage à trois; “You like it more than anybody I ever knew” (BCP, p. 191). But he likes it too; Charlotte’s passion is exactly what makes her his type of woman: “We could have been doing this all our lives. We should be doing this all our lives. We should have done this all our lives” (BCP, p. 192).

Unfortunately, Charlotte’s liberated mores do not suffice to define her sex life as merely harmless fun. Even apart from Grace’s rather old-fashioned tone of disapproval, Charlotte’s sexual passions lead inescapably to a messy, emotionally chaotic life, surrounded by embattled males. The pleasant thrill of being fought over by strong men implies a female archetype as old as Helen; Daisy Fay filled her vacant center similarly for a time watching her husband and Gatsby locked in that primeval battle. When the males are Latin macho types, however, the game may quickly become dangerously unpleasant. Charlotte’s eventual
murder seems ordained within hours of her first night with Victor, in a chapter that leads off with Grace's image of two mating flies and concludes with a sample of Antonio's pistol-packing violence and psychopathic sexual spite: "'Maybe I'll go get your norteamericana to sit on my face,' Antonio said to Victor" (BCP, p. 39).

Long before Antonio settles his account with Charlotte and Victor, however, her sexual freedom produces more emotional anarchy than fulfillment in her center of being. There is the delightful scene with the corkscrew, for example, which is worth citing in detail:

she was . . . incapable of walking normally across a room in the presence of two men with whom she had slept. Her legs seemed to lock unnaturally into her pelvic bones. Her body went stiff, as if convulsed by the question of who had access to it and who did not. Whenever I saw her with both Victor and Gerardo it struck me that her every movement was freighted with this question. Who had prior claim. Whose call on her was most insistent. To whom did she owe what. . . . If she needed a bottle of wine opened. . . . she could never just hand the corkscrew to Gerardo. Nor could she hand the corkscrew to Victor. Instead she would evade the question by opening the wine herself, usually breaking the cork. (BCP, p. 83)

And, much later, Grace complains that the "sexual current" in Charlotte threatens to "reverse the entire neutron field on my lawn." Certainly it does appear to be "disturbing and altering not only the mood but possibly the cell structure" of her three male spectators:

Gerardo watched her as she ran across the lawn.
Victor watched her as she ran across the lawn.
Antonio crouched on the lawn. . . .
"Norteamericana cunt," Antonio said. . . . (BCP, pp. 206-207)

In dealing with this motif of sexual current, Joan Didion has performed a badly needed service for American literature. John Updike—no novice at writing about sex in his own right—has observed that American literature is notoriously thin in its portrayal of women. For one thing, a number of our finest women writers have been less than typical of the gender—spinsters and recluses like Emily Dickinson or lesbians like Gertrude Stein and Willa Cather. For another, even our most sensitive male writers have displayed sharp limitations in their imag-ination of what it means to be a woman. Not Hawthorne or Henry James or Faulkner ever rendered woman's sexual energy (and Grace's response to it) with Didion's sureness of touch; nor did any of them ever reach far enough into the female psyche so as to come up with Didion's twin "commonplaces of the female obsessional life"—"sexual surrender and infant death. . . . We all have the same dreams" (BCP, p. 53).

So far as sexual surrender is concerned, Charlotte's "passion" involves one perfectly standard element of female psychology: the determination to entice and to capture the most superior—that is, suc-
cessful—male in the surrounding herd. Thus it is not surprising that she chooses as bed partners the dictator of Boca Grande and the playboy-scion of the island's wealthiest family, and as husbands a prominent lawyer and her college English teacher (a superior male from her coed's-eye-view, at least).

As a revelation of female sexual psychology, this latter relationship is the most complex and fascinating in the book. On the face of it, Warren Bogart's victory over Leonard in their battle for sexual possession of Charlotte appears to be a mystery. Unlike Leonard, Warren is crude, obnoxious, totally selfish, impecunious, professionally unsuccessful, and sexually unfaithful. But offsetting all those damaging characteristics are the intelligence and virility that give Warren "the look of a man who could drive a woman like Charlotte right off her head" (BCP, p. 104). That virility, beginning in the bedroom ("We should have been doing this all our lives"), focuses upon Charlotte with a flattering and exciting intensity. He has come these three thousand miles, Warren says, neither to save Marin nor to bring Charlotte home with him (her surmise) but simply because "I just wanted to fuck you again" (BCP, p. 163)—which had also been Leonard's suspicion. A coarse approach, to be sure, but one which renders sincere tribute to the woman's beauty. This biological nexus between female beauty and male potency has evoked a memorable and relevant meditation by Isaac Bashevis Singer: "The sexual organs are the most sensitive organs of the human being. . . . An eye will not stop seeing if it doesn't like what it sees, but the penis will stop functioning if he doesn't like what he sees. I would say that the sexual organs express the human soul more than any other limb of the body. . . . They tell the truth ruthlessly."6

Warren Bogart also tells the truth ruthlessly outside the bedroom. What perhaps most drives a woman like Charlotte off her head is the social virility and intelligence of the man, that total reliance on his own psychic resources which enables him to stand in clear definition against the spongy liberal chic of the times. Even his ethnic slurs—against Jews, Arabs, Armenians—are offered mainly as a liberal-baiting exercise (Charlotte had been to the Democratic National Convention in 1964, a year when Joan Didion voted for Barry Goldwater7); in any event, Warren evens the balance politically with his deft and total destruction of "Irving" the FBI man. For all his repulsive qualities, Warren Bogart exhibits a sexual magnetism that could be instructive to even our finest

---


A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 229
male writers.

So far as "passion" is concerned, in sum, Charlotte has been a sexually active, adventurous, liberated modern woman. But her sexual freedom has not filled her emotional center, as she makes clear in her parting remark to her last bed partner, Gerardo, when he begs her to flee with him on Day Eight: "I wasn’t connected to you actually" (BCP, p. 274). In the old-fashioned preliberation style, she has continued to focus her deepest passion upon Warren, her first lover and the only male able to dominate her psychologically. Not even her ploy of conceiving a baby with Leonard could succeed in stifling that innermost flame from flaring out of control in Warren’s presence. The reason Charlotte runs off with Warren, leaving Leonard, is no more mysterious in the end than the primitive rite on the Orinoco “where female children were ritually cut on the inner thigh by their first sexual partners, the point being to scar the female with the male’s totem”; and though Warren’s cut “doesn’t show” on Charlotte, he asserts that totemic power the moment he greets her: “Get somebody to wash and iron that, Charlotte. . . . The suit just needs pressing” (BCP, pp. 83-84, 91).

If Charlotte turns out to be, under her avant-garde veneer, an old-fashioned, middle-class, one-man woman, the book’s other characters cannot claim any superior success in more genuinely espousing the new freedom of sexuality. Apart from Warren, whose zeal appears heightened by his race against terminal illness, the sexual encounter does little for anyone’s emotional center: Victor is bored by his noontime manicurist; the “intimations of sexual perfidy” that abound at Morgan Fayard’s home (BCP, p. 167) lead to an evening of strident disharmony; the OAS man makes an ugly scene when Charlotte (who had saved his life with an emergency tracheotomy) refuses to fellate him on the hotel terrace; the two lesbians from Miss Porter’s School virtually break up when the younger one makes a pass at Charlotte (“The older one wept,” [BCP, p. 149]); and Bebe Chicago’s life as an aging gay seems pathetic: “ ‘Spare me any more of Bebe Chicago’s calls.’ Victor [having wiretapped them] mimicked a whispery falsetto. ‘Ricardo? . . . C’est moi, chéri. Bebe’ ” (BCP, p. 228). It all adds up to what Faulkner called “the vain evanescence of the fleshly encounter.” Regrettably, sexual passion appears even less viable within marriage than in these joyless fornications and adulteries. As though confirming Updike’s thesis (via Denis de Rougemont) about the incompatibility of marriage and passion,8 Didion portrays both Charlotte’s marriage to Leonard and the marriage of Dickie and Linda as having become sexless (BCP, pp. 88, 133), while Grace’s marriage to Edgar had never pretended to be anything more

---

than an economic arrangement. Perhaps Grace's aunt was right "to locate the marriage bed as the true tropic of fever and disquiet" (BCP, p. 82).

If "passion"—sexual passion, at any rate—clearly fails to fill Charlotte's center of being, especially after she has left Warren, that leaves the other wing of Grace's theme statement to consider: "I would call it [her story] one of delusion" (BCP, p. 4). It is this motif of delusion which, modulating into the book's master theme, most closely identifies Charlotte Douglas as a female counterpart to Gatsby, for her "delusions" originate, like Gatsby's, in her upbringing as the archetypal all-American girl dedicated to the quintessential middle-class ideal of self-improvement ("improving one's world and one's self simultaneously" is how Didion's essay "Good Citizens" puts it [WA, p. 93]). Thus Gatsby's regimen of self-improvement as a boy in North Dakota—"Dumbbell exercise," "Practice elocution," "Work," "Read one improving book or magazine per week," "Save $5.00 [crossed out] $3.00 per week," "Be better to parents" (GG, p. 116)—finds its analogue in Charlotte's girlhood in Hollister, California: "As a child of the western United States she had been provided . . . with faith in the . . . virtues of cleared and irrigated land, . . . of thrift, industry and the judicial system, of progress and education, and in the generally upward spiral of history. She was a norteamericana" (BCP, p. 56). To this portrait are added actions that bespeak the "diffusion of competence" that Eric Hoffer has pronounced a distinguishing characteristic of North American society. She kills a chicken with a bare-handed gesture; she field-strips her cigarettes; she performs a successful emergency tracheotomy; she dispenses cholera vaccine for thirty-four straight hours—actions that leave the Boca Grandeans "staring" and "speechless" (BCP, p. 44) and lead to Victor's violent revulsion: "Disgusting . . . Filthy. Crude. The thought of it makes me retch . . . the kind of woman who would kill a chicken with her bare hands" (BCP, p. 215).

This reaction reveals as delusory another crucial component of the North American ethos: "She believed the world to be peopled with others like herself" (BCP, p. 57). Loss of innocence concerning this delusion has been a prevalent theme in American literature—one thinks of Melville's Captain Delano, of James's Isabel Archer or Christopher Newman, and, again, of Nick Carraway, who had to find out for himself, through witnessing Gatsby's ruin, the truth of his father's warning that "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth" (GG, p. 1). In all these instances, passage from innocence to awareness involves a juxtaposition of cultures. Just as Scott Fitzgerald summoned Gatsby/Nick from their native midwest so as to limn their "fundamental decencies" against the corruptions of the Eastern elite, Joan Didion brings Charlotte/Grace to Boca Grande to establish in the

A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 231
highlight of contrast the superiority of their original norteamericana ethos. The quintessence of the North American ethic, outlined in Himalayan relief against the code of the jungle in Boca Grande, is summed up in four words: take care of somebody. "It doesn't matter whether you take care of somebody or somebody takes care of you," Warren says—"It's the same thing in the end" (BCP, p. 179). It's all the same, too, whether this moral stance is efficacious and reciprocal, or hopeless (taking care of the hydrocephalic baby) and without recompense (taking care of Marin). All that matters in the end is that this act of emotional investment fills Charlotte's center with an immensely vitalizing psychic energy and purpose, in the same way that Gatsby's impassioned devotion to Daisy fills his.

Having lost both of her husbands and both of her children, Charlotte finds in Boca Grande only one outlet for her norteamericana "delusions": she "takes care of" Boca Grande. Her work ethic, expanding in North American fashion from self-improvement to improvement of the surrounding environment, fastens upon three of the island's most dreadful needs: for cultural nourishment, she plans a film festival and boutique; for the public health, she dispenses cholera vaccine thirty-four hours without stopping; for limiting of population—Latin America's most desperate need—she works in a birth control clinic. In thus taking care of her South American environment, the norteamericana is as ineffectual as she was in her earlier attempts to take care of her husbands and children. Her film festival and boutique never get past the laughter stage, she loses control over the supply of vaccine, and in the birth control clinic she plumps witlessly for diaphragms, not discerning that the native women can use only the IUD effectively.

No question about it, in Boca Grande Charlotte's North American ideals are delusions. But these delusions are vindicated in the end by an insight perhaps best described by Joseph Conrad—a writer whom both Didion and Fitzgerald have acknowledged as a guiding influence.9 Conrad was speaking, in Heart of Darkness, of the concept of empire, which "is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea . . . and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . ." 10 The mistake does not consist in having the delusion; it lies in examining that vitalizing idea too closely, "not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." As Robert Penn Warren put it, speak-

---

9Didion expresses her debt to Conrad's Heart of Darkness in "VJD," pp. 514-515 and in WA, pp. 206-207. (See also page 134 for her debt to Victory.) Andrew Turnbull's edition of Fitzgerald's Letters (The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965]) includes seventeen references to Conrad, e.g. "God! I've learned a lot from him" (p. 482).

ing of Conrad, “the last wisdom is for man to realize that though his values are illusions, the illusion is necessary, is infinitely precious, is the mark of his human achievement, and is, in the end, his only truth.”

Both Gatsby and Charlotte become victims of delusion most of all by centering their passion upon love objects that are palpably unworthy of such devotion, creatures who in fact no longer resemble the sweetheart or daughter being lovingly remembered. In doing so, both characters exhibit arrested emotional development: “Can’t repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can” (GG, p. 73) is as much Charlotte’s delusion as Gatsby’s, despite the warning from Grace’s aunt—“Remember Lot’s Wife, avoid the backward glance” (BCP, p. 94). But in drawing this parallel between Charlotte and Gatsby, it is important to discern as well the differences between them grounded in gender identity. As a suitor who lost his woman to a superior male—superior by birth and wealth—Gatsby can repair his damage to his sense of worth, that “Platonic conception of himself” which Daisy suberves, only by making that woman admit she was mistaken; and this effort to make her admit “You never loved him” is exactly the point at which his five-year dream shatters (“Oh, you want too much! . . . I can’t help what’s past,” [GG, p. 88]).

Charlotte, woman-wise (as Didion would have it), grounds her identity in her “occupation Madre” (BCP, p. 15); her need is to repair the damage to that self-image caused by her daughter’s repudiation. By waiting for Marin to fly to Boca Grande, much as Gatsby waits at the end for Daisy’s phone call—and both wait faithful unto death—Charlotte illustrates a theme that was, again, of paramount importance to Joseph Conrad: “Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas. . . . It rests notably . . . on the idea of Fidelity.” For Joan Didion, who describes herself as “committed mainly to the exploration of moral distinctions and ambiguities,” fidelity translates into “our loyalties to those we love,” especially within the context of “the basic notion that keeping promises matters.” Inasmuch as Didion couches these precepts—the only absolutes in an age of moral chaos—in terms of woman’s psychology, perhaps her truest analogue traces back beyond Gatsby and Conrad to Henry James’s Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady (a work cited in Didion’s essay “The Women’s Movement”).

---

12Heart of Darkness, p. 140.
13STB, p. 161. I am indebted to a paper written by Professor Wister Cook, of the Georgia Institute of Technology, for the references to “loyalties to those we love.” The comment about “keeping promises” occurs in WA, p. 154.
14See WA, p. 111. For further evidence of Ms. Didion’s debt to Henry James, see “VJD,” p. 515, STB, pp. 45, 209, and WA, p. 154.
Especially in the image of "Charlotte's body . . . found, where it was thrown, on the lawn of the American embassy," do we see the elevation of the "Norteamericana cunt" (*BCP*, p. 277) to Portrait of a Lady status, both parts of Antonio's vulgar phrase being transfigured by Charlotte's martyrdom into her highest encomium. In James's novel, the distinctive American ideology—"Take hold of something"—begins with "the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one's energies to a point" and develops into an attitude perfectly descriptive of Charlotte in Boca Grande: "[Isabel] had said to herself that we must take our duty where we find it, and that we must look for it as much as possible."\(^{15}\) In the end, "Take hold of something" for James, as for Didion, means "take care of somebody," portrayed in Isabel's self-martyring care of Pansy.

Not even the imaginative empathy of James, however, can measure up to Joan Didion's rendering of the female psyche, especially as portrayed in her novel's prevailing Mother-Child imagery. The two supremely moving scenes in the book raise that imagery virtually to Madonna and Child magnitude. One of those scenes is that in which Grace reclaims Marin by the power of a single word ("'Tivoli,' I said," [*BCP*, pp. 297-298]), on behalf of Charlotte's memory. The other episode shows Charlotte, with her doomed baby, demonstrating exactly what it means to take care of somebody:

Mérida was where she had taken the baby to die of complications, her baby, Leonard's baby, . . . the baby born prematurely, hydrocephalic, and devoid of viable liver function in the Ochsner Clinic in New Orleans. . . . The doctors had said the baby would die in the hospital but it did not. . . . Toward the beginning of the two weeks she waited for the baby to die she moistened its lips with tap water and told it about the places they would see together. . . .

The night in Mérida when the diarrhea finally came Charlotte held the small warm dehydrating creature in her arms all night. . . . she had not wanted the baby to die without her. . . . She walked with the baby on the dark asphalt. She sang to the baby out on the edge of the asphalt . . . walked there with the baby in her arms, trusting at last, its vomit spent. The doctor . . . marked the death certificate in English: *death by complications*. (*BCP*, pp. 149, 151, 152-153)

Further heightening the maternal consciousness that pervades this book are numerous additional allusions to births, babies, and child-rearing. Boca Grande itself—the name "Big Mouth" could be a sexual pun—is a place of "amniotic stillness" (*BCP*, p. 157) to which Charlotte came in hopes that here her child would be reborn to her: "in a certain dim way Charlotte believed that she had located herself at the very cervix of the world, the place through which a child lost to history must

---


234 MODERN FICTION STUDIES
eventually pass" (BCP, p. 199). (In so far as Marin is in danger of arrest anywhere in the United States, Charlotte's move to Boca Grande is far from scatterbrained; it also shows yet a further dimension of her maternal self-sacrifice.) The references to child-rearing, in addition to the book's central focus on Charlotte's rearing of Marin, range from the anthropologically primitive (Grace's "extensive and well-regarded studies on the rearing of female children in the Mato Grosso," [BCP, p. 4]) to the radically modern:

... at Charlotte's table, an actress who had visited Hanoi spoke of the superior health and beauty of the children there.

"It's because they aren't raised by their mothers," the actress said. "They don't have any of the bourgeois personal crap laid on them."

Charlotte studied her wine glass. . . .

"No mama-papa-baby-nuclear-family bullshit," the actress said. "It's beautiful." . . .

"I know why you're crying," the actress said after a while. (BCP, pp. 129-130)

Implicit in some of Didion's baby imagery is her critique of an adult world that has lapsed backward toward infantile behavior. "More and more we have been hearing the wishful voices of . . . perpetual adolescents," she writes in her critique, "The Women's Movement"; "how much cleaner to stay forever children" (WA, pp. 116-117). Thus, in her novel, the political conspiracy in Boca Grande is led by a man named Bebe Chicago, while Marin's political aberration is strewn with reminders of her unformed adolescent condition: the orthodontal retainer that identifies her to the FBI; the impacted logic of the tape message; the fact that Marin's root motive appears to be her failure to get admitted (like her friend Lisa) to Stanford ("Marin cried when the letter came from Stanford" [BCP, p. 71]). And the book's theme of immature sexual conduct relates to the baby motif in Warren's outcry over oncoming impotence: "'I can't get it up,' Warren said when she tried to wake him. 'Baby, baby, I can't get it up'" (BCP, p. 191). Culturally, the "most offensive of the poets" at Charlotte's "evenings" exhibits a different kind of lapse from adult propriety in his "sequence of Mother-and-Child sonnets to present to the people of Cuba" (BCP, p. 23). Finally, there is Charlotte's own reversion to childhood behavior as a reaction to Marin's disappearance: lying all day on Marin's bed (BCP, p. 69) and developing the persona that initially impresses Grace as comparable to a seven-year-old's (BCP, p. 29).

But beyond these disparaging nuances in the baby motif lies a larger and opposite meaning: that dependence of every human creature, child and adult alike, on the care and fidelity of others, which makes their communal life a Book of Common Prayer. With respect to this theme, it is the relationship between Grace and Charlotte that proves, for Grace, radically transforming. At the beginning, Grace's persona evinces two paramount and—she comes to discover—related
characteristics: (1) absolute independence, financially, politically, and, above all, emotionally (she has no delusions); and (2) a hollow woman condition (she has no center). Like Charlotte, she has "lost" her child, Gerardo (BCP, p. 13), and has lost her husband, Edgar, but she has long since ceased to grieve over these losses—if she ever did grieve ("The morning Edgar died I called Victor, signed the papers, walked out to the Progreso as usual and ate lunch on the sea wall," [BCP, p. 120]). But this dead soul state, perhaps indicative of too long a stay in Boca Grande, gives way in the end to Grace's norteamericana mores, dormant for decades but now revitalized through her relationship to Charlotte. "For better or worse," Ms. Didion says in "On Morality," "we are what we learned as children" (STB, p. 158). Both Nick Carraway and Grace, by rediscovering the values of their respective midwestern and norteamericana upbringing, earn narrow escapes from the corruptions of a dangerously subversive alien society, Nick fleeing back West from "the rotten crowd" (though he had come "East, permanently, I thought," [GG, pp. 203, 202]), Grace filling her center by taking care of Charlotte.

The gradual rekindling of maternal care in Grace is related to an increasing use of child imagery to portray Charlotte in the book's closing chapters. Merely childish in her earlier encounters with Grace—using words "as a seven-year-old might" at the Christmas party and wearing a "bébé dress" the night she seduces Gerardo (BCP, pp. 29, 203)—Charlotte becomes appealingly childlike as the nature of her "delusions" becomes clarified. Her work with the cholera vaccine, when exposed as a delusion, evokes in Grace a powerful surge of parental feeling:

I think I loved Charlotte in that moment as a parent loves the child who has just fallen from a bicycle, met a pervert, lost a prize, come up in any way against the hardness of the world.

I think I was also angry at her, again like a parent, furious that she hadn't known better. . . . (BCP, p. 243)

It is Charlotte's fatal delusion, however—her refusal to flee Boca Grande—that brings this rendering of the mother-child motif to its highest expression. The episode opens with Grace's vain efforts at persuasion—"'Charlotte.' I felt as if I were talking to a child. 'I've told you before, there is trouble here. There is going to be more trouble. . .'" (BCP, p. 239). It continues with the scene of Charlotte's farewell to Grace at the airport: "The last time I saw Charlotte alive . . . she pinned her gardenia on my dress . . . [and] dabbed her Grés perfume on my wrists. Like a child helping her mother dress for a party” (BCP, p. 264). And it concludes, following Charlotte's overnight detention at the Escuela de los Ninos Perdidos (School for Lost Children), with Grace's rites for Charlotte's body—reminiscent of
Nick's last fidelity to Gatsby—which conjoin the *norteamericana* motif with that of the child in the image of "a child's T-shirt . . . printed like an American flag" on Charlotte's coffin (*BCP*, pp. 276, 278).

As the title implies, *A Book of Common Prayer* weaves its various motifs together—birth imagery, the mother and child motif, taking care of somebody—through reference to the central "delusion" of the Western world, the Christian faith. Though no longer an orthodox believer, Ms. Didion, who calls herself "quite religious in a certain way" (she was raised an Episcopalian ["VJD," p. 514]), renders her final meaning by touching deeply into our Western religious consciousness, most notably in her greatly original and powerful manipulation of Christian symbolism. In the end, Charlotte's martyrdom evinces a Christlike effect, such that the passion of Charlotte Douglas, sexually considered, gives way to the Passion of Charlotte Douglas, a sacrificial scapegoat and testament to grace who (as Didion put it in an interview) "finds her life by leaving it" ("VJD," p. 515).

Our first indication of Charlotte's assignment to this Christ-like role is the happenstance that she first appears before Grace at a Christmas party (*BCP*, p. 29), celebrating a holiday whose Spanish name—"*Feliz Navidad*"—Victor tells Grace (*BCP*, p. 39)—adds a double meaning to the book's birth imagery. Not only was this occasion the "birth" of her "child" Charlotte into Grace's life, it also presaged the Happy Birth (or rebirth) of Grace's own psyche, eventually rescued from its dead soul condition by the advent of this stranger on Christmas Eve. Among later echoes of the Gospel story, perhaps none is more poignant than the book's Communion symbolism, used in connection with those who are closest to Charlotte and betray her. Her brother Dickie, for example, fails to remember the burnt biscuits they had shared as children—this when Charlotte is deeply in need of this communal bond (*BCP*, p. 135). And her betrayal by Marin evokes not only the eucharistic "body and blood" but also a touch of the lama sabachthani: "she [had] believed that when she walked through the valley of the shadow, she would be sustained by the taste of Marin's salt tears, her body and blood. The night Charlotte was interrogated . . . she cried not for God but for Marin" (*BCP*, pp. 64-65). And perhaps even her menstrual issue when the bomb goes off is a kind of female stigmata ("She remembers she bled." [*BCP*, pp. 255, 280]); her immolation, after all, relates directly to her being female, a "*norteamericana* cunt."

Apropos of her name, Grace's own role is couched at last in terms of the Gospels. In an interview, Ms. Didion says "the whole thing was a prayer. You could say that this was Grace's prayer for Charlotte's soul" ("VJD," p. 514). Reinforcing that effect are not only the book's title and its paratactic, repetitive style, like that of the Bible or an Anglican litany, but also its use of the Gospel term, "witness." Between the

*A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER*
novel's opening statement, "I will be her witness," and its terminal line, "I have not been the witness I wanted to be," there transpires the change in Grace's personality—a religious conversion, in effect—that measures the efficacy of Charlotte's life and martyrdom. And perhaps the most crucial index of the change in Grace is something that her role as witness, chanting a prayer for Charlotte's soul, implies: her new attitude toward memory.

"This do ye . . . in remembrance of me." These words in I Corinthians 11:25 clearly aim at preserving the Savior's sacrifice perpetually in human memory, which is just what the Christian Communion ritual has achieved for two millennia now. But as a Waste Land figure (before her "conversion"), Grace knows well the meaning of T. S. Eliot's warnings, in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," for example, or at the outset of The Waste Land: "April is the cruellest month . . . mixing / Memory and desire." She, too, prefers the "Winter kept us warm" attitude—"covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers." Confirming Eliot's wisdom is the advice from Grace's aunt: "Dwelling on the past leads to unsoundness and dementia. . . . Remember Lot's Wife, avoid the backward glance" (BCP, p. 94). And, in less elegant phrasing, there is the corresponding advice of brother Dickie, just before the conversation about burnt biscuits:

"Listen," Charlotte said finally. . . . "Dickie, I've been remembering some things since Marin left."

"That's no good for you, Char, remembering. Remembering is shit. Forget her." (BCP, p. 184)

But in the end Grace devotes both her life—as in the "Tivoli" episode with Marin—and her narrative to the remembrance of Charlotte. In so doing, she finds the answer to two problems of our age that, for lack of a "converted" or religious sensibility of some kind, appear nigh insuperable in twentieth-century literature. The first of these is alienation, the condition that leads her to describe herself as "'de afuera,' an outsider. I am de afuera. I have been de afuera all my life." (BCP, p. 52). Even Warren Bogart, for all his social presumption, shares this malady: "He belonged to nothing. He was an outsider. . . . We were both de afuera, Warren Bogart and I. At the time I met him we were also both dying of cancer, Warren Bogart and I, which perhaps made us even more de afuera than usual. . . ." (BCP, p. 165). And Charlotte, despite her delusion that "Marin and I are inseparable," (BCP, p. 110), is so "afflicted by what she called the 'separateness'" (BCP, p. 111) that she telephones the California Highway Patrol just to hear (taped) voices. With sex proving a weak and evanescent bond at best, Charlotte's answer to this problem is Conradian—a total immersion in her work in Boca Grande that, though a delusion, evokes some
of Conrad's finest sentences: "From the hard work of men [is] born the sympathetic consciousness of a common destiny. . . . For the great mass of mankind the only saving grace that is needed is steady fidelity to what is nearest at hand and heart in the short moment of each human effort." For Grace, the answer to the de afuera state is finally her life of Common Prayer, her sense of her bond or communion that makes her "more like Charlotte than I thought I was" (BCP, p. 276).

The other great problem of our age—like alienation, it was once called an existential problem—is that of coping with mortality. Initially, Grace and Charlotte represent polar opposites of experience and innocence with respect to the Burial of the Dead. Grace, who lost her mother at age eight and her father at age ten, attained her freedom from delusion as a result of the latter bereavement ("I have been for fifty of my sixty years a student of delusion," [BCP, p. 4]). Without delusions, she has used her emotional independence as a stay against death, avoiding the backward glance as she does when her husband dies: "Unlike Charlotte, I learned early to keep death in my line of sight, keep it under surveillance, keep it on cleared ground and away from any brush where it might coil unnoticed. The morning Edgar died I . . . walked out to the Progreso as usual and ate lunch on the sea wall" (BCP, p. 120). Charlotte, by contrast, follows the norteamericana pattern of denial or suppression concerning awareness of mortality. She refuses to submit to Leonard's and Grace's assertions that Warren is dying ("He is not dying," [BCP, p. 239]), and she evades other intimations of mortality—including reminders of her parents' deaths—until the moment her lawyer recommends "declaring your daughter legally dead" (BCP, p. 114), whereupon Charlotte tears up the stock certificates that would thus have become cash-worthy. Now at last Charlotte realizes that "People did die . . . and she had been too busy to notice," an acknowledgment that prompts a momentary feeling of superiority in Charlotte's witness: "When I think of Charlotte Douglas apprehending death at the age of thirty-nine in the safe-deposit vault of a bank of San Francisco it occurs to me that there was some advantage in having a mother who died when I was eight, a father who died when I was ten, before I was busy" (BCP, pp. 114-116).

But here Grace herself is wrong. Though aware of mortality, she has not found a meaningful way of coping with it, as is evident in her inability to deal with fear of the dark. "Fear of the dark exists irrelative to patterns of child-rearing in the Mato Grosso or Denver, Colorado," she observes (BCP, p. 5), referring to her own North American habitat in childhood—an admission that, combined with her extravagant love for the light in Boca Grande ("I continue to live here only because I

14Heart of Darkness. pp. 141, 142.
love the light,” [BCP, p. 13]), indicates an angst beyond assuagement by her usual practice of emotional detachment. Because it is beyond assuagement, Grace commits her nearest approximation of self-delusion at this point, knowing very well the irrelevance (however clinically correct it may be) of her biochemical analysis: “Fear of the dark is an arrangement of fifteen amino acids. Fear of the dark is a protein” (BCP, p. 5). Once again, by way of effecting the “conversion” of Grace to a new sensibility, it is Warren Bogart who formulates the truth to live by (he had done similar duty for “take care of somebody”), and it is Charlotte Douglas who verifies the truth in act and deed.

As the pioneering figure for the theme of mortality—the first main character to die—Warren proclaims the subject at Morgan Fayard’s party with his typical truth-teller’s forcefulness: “You’re all dying. You’re dying, your wife and sister are dying, your little children are dying, Chrissie here is dying, even Miss Tabor there is dying. . . . But not one of you is dying as fast as I’m dying.’ Warren Bogart smiled” (BCP, p. 168). To cope with this fact, Warren turns not to Grace’s biochemical science but to passion (his sexual odyssey) and poetry. Although used in a partly satiric context, the poetry Warren selects is greatly moving and relevant in light of his own terminal illness: Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar,” Bryant’s “Thanatopsis,” Pope’s “that long disease, my life,” W. H. Auden’s “Time and fevers / Burn away / And the grave proves the child ephemeral” (BCP, pp. 103, 106, 168-169). In the end, Grace proves the efficacy of Warren’s example by abandoning her protein molecule in favor of poetry: “Sand-strewn caverns cool and deep / Where the winds are all asleep. . . . I will sit in the dark reciting Matthew Arnold as usual” (BCP, pp. 51-52). And, reversing her earlier judgment that “Also, for the record, Charlotte was afraid of the dark” (BCP, p. 5), Grace concludes her narrative with the image of Charlotte striding briskly through the dark the night she died: “All I know now is that when I think of Charlotte Douglas walking in the hot night wind toward the lights at the Capilla del Mar, I am less and less certain that this story has been one of delusion. Unless the delusion was mine” (BCP, p. 280).

Grace’s discovery that “I have not been the witness I wanted to be” recalls the conversion motif affecting previous witnesses in American literature such as Jack Burden, Nick Carraway, and Lambert Strether. But Joan Didion’s use of that tradition gains extra power from its apocalyptic setting, her analogue to Yeats’s line, “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” The anarchy in A Book of Common Prayer ranges from the political (the guerrilleros in Boca Grande, terrorism in the United States) to the moral (Charlotte’s norteamericana ideals are delusions) to—perhaps most important—the religious (the night Charlotte died, she cried not for God but for Marin). And for Didion the anarchy
seems ubiquitous and final: unlike Eliot, she poses no Anglican sanctuary from chaos; unlike Pound, she eschews the State as a conceivable refuge; unlike Fitzgerald, she has no friendly, stable middle West waiting back there to receive the lost child who has learned his lesson, (That lesson, Nick's discovery that "They're a rotten crowd" [GG, p. 103], has its analogue in Charlotte's "Goddamn you all," [BCP, p. 276]).

But Yeats, who posed the issue of the collapsing center, also went furthest to resolve it. In "Two Songs from a Play," Yeats acknowledges the mutability of all centers—including civilization-sustaining centers like Christ and Dionysus—but as against this "darkening thought" he ascribes to mankind an eternal flame of spiritual creativity: "Whatever flames upon the night / Man's own resinous heart has fed." That Yeatsian flame is exactly what Grace comes to see in Charlotte Douglas. She sees, moreover, that, delusory or not, it sheds the only light men have ever had, comprising their "perilous triumph of being over nothingness" (to quote one of Didion's essays), their taking up arms against "that dread of the meaningless which was man's fate" (to quote another) (STB, p. 66 and WA, p. 207).

In portraying this theme, Joan Didion thereby subjects "The Second Coming" to a significant correction. Although it may be true that in her book "the worst are full of passionate intensity," the novel belies Yeats's assertion that "The best lack all conviction." Isolated from her text, Joan Didion's central convictions—"take care of somebody," "keeping promises matters," "Loyalties to those we love"—may seem hackneyed or banal, but in context they are no more so than Henry James's "Take hold of something," Conrad's "idea of Fidelity," or Fitzgerald's "there is literally no standard in life other than a sense of duty." Further, although written in a mood of elegy, like Updike's tribute to "the Protestant kind of goodness going down with all the guns firing" in The Centaur, Ms. Didion's novel captures something of Updike's hope—"Only goodness lives. But it does live"—in her motif of the witness transmitting the flame or the memory into a morally darkening era.

In writing from these deep-seated convictions, Joan Didion clearly links herself to a major tradition in American fiction. But to say that she displays important affinities with these other artists is not at all to say that Ms. Didion is merely imitative or derivative. In fact, her fiction maintains T. S. Eliot's classic balance between tradition and individual talent. With respect to the artistic rendering of her moral vision, her

---


mastery of fictional elements like style, mood, characterization, narrative design, setting, and imagery, Ms. Didion is very much her own person, an original talent. "I think ... a novel is nothing if it is not the expression of an individual voice, of a single view of experience," she says, "— and how many good or even interesting novels, of the thousands published, appear each year?" (STB, p. 152). At the time this analysis is being completed, A Book of Common Prayer has lived barely two years within the public domain, hardly time enough to acquire a substantial readership, let alone ascend to permanent glory. Nonetheless, on the basis of its significant moral vision, its enviable artistic power, and—behind all else—its penetrating intelligence, A Book of Common Prayer easily transcends Ms. Didion's "good or even interesting" category and approaches the category of a great reading experience. It may, and I believe should, become one of the landmark novels of the decade.