In the Syntax

REWRITING JOAN DIDION’S “GOODBYE TO ALL THAT”

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It would be Joan Didion, were I facing gates inscribed “abandon all hope,” whom I would want to guide me through the architecture of hell. She is already half specter to me, a figure who walked my young mind until her pacings wore the floor. And she has already provided the most comprehensive tour of the damned I am likely to experience in this lifetime.

I read The White Album and Slouching towards Bethlehem in college, and then I read After Henry, Salvador, and Miami, and watched The Panic in Needle Park. I read and quickly forgot Run River, Play It As It Lays, and Democracy, but I didn’t forget any of the essays. I moved to New York and read Political Fictions. I began graduate school in the Midwest, bringing with me Fixed Ideas. My husband gave me a hardcover of Where I Was From shortly after we met, and I finished The Year of Magical Thinking shortly before we married.

“I don’t think someone your age reads the same book someone my age reads,” my grandmother said of The Year of Magical Thinking. And I have no doubt this is true. I spent nearly a decade with a copy of “Goodbye to All That” somewhere on my desk, but now I no longer teach it and I no longer feel compelled to revisit it. I can still, nonetheless, nearly recite the essay from memory, owing to having once copied it out word for word and then slowly rewritten it.

Before I studied writing, I studied painting, and my training in that medium was satisfyingly systematic—we began with charcoal, then we moved to acrylic paint but only black and white, then only two colors, and so on until we arrived at a full palette of oil. At every stage we copied the masters, Kathe Kollwitz in charcoal and Matisse in acrylic and Cézanne in oil. This may help
explain how I misread an interview with Didion in which she suggested that she taught herself to write by copying Hemingway. What she meant, in that particular interview, was that she learned how to use a typewriter by typing out the opening to *A Farewell to Arms*. But I wouldn’t return to that interview and see her meaning until long after I sat down with a rock propping open *Slouching towards Bethlehem* so that I could copy out “Goodbye to All That” and teach myself how to write.

“Goodbye to All That” is a narrative about narrative, like so many of Didion’s essays. The setting is New York, and the narrative in this case is the story of arriving in New York young and leaving for California not so young, with the point being something less readily condensed. “It would be a long while,” as Didion writes, “before I would come to understand the particular moral of the story.”

Like Didion, I arrived in New York young and left for California not so young. I had, in fact, just left New York for California when I sat down to copy “Goodbye to All That.” But very little of Didion’s experience in New York agreed with mine. I never spent a single afternoon there drinking Bloody Marys, for example, and I didn’t own perfume or nightgowns or chiffon scarves. I never set foot in Bloomingdale’s or Bonwit Teller. I ate peanut butter and pasta in New York, and making a living did not seem a game to me then. I never liked going to parties, and it never occurred to me, at any time, that the days before I knew the names of all the bridges were happier than the ones that came later. But that is beside the point, or so I came to understand. Because the essay remained, for me, true—despite the dissonance I felt when I inhabited Didion’s “I” by writing it with my own hand.

I was close in California to a composer who knew something about dissonance. He took me to concerts where one tone was played for 12 hours, and after hearing me argue with Didion’s essay for too long, he suggested that I rewrite it. This was all the permission I needed, as there was already some nerve in me that believed I might make the essay mine, might close some of the distance between me and the page with only the alteration of a few details, the correction of a handful of situations. That delusion was dead by the third sentence of Didion’s essay: “When I first saw New York I was twenty, and it was summertime, and I got off a DC-7 at the old Idlewild temporary terminal in a new dress which had seemed very smart in Sacramento but seemed less smart
already, even in the old Idlewild temporary terminal, and the warm air smelled of mildew and some instinct, programmed by all the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever read about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same again." The facts may not have been mine—I first saw New York younger, moved there older, arrived in a Greyhound, was not ever in a new dress, etcetera—but those facts could not be changed without marring the syntax of the sentence, the clauses stacked with commas, with "and" and "and" again, the cunning repetition of "temporary terminal," defining term of that first paragraph, and the effortless momentum of the sentence casting "never be quite the same again" into the foggy future.

I cannot read that first paragraph of "Goodbye to All That" now without being reminded of Didion's dissection of the first paragraph of A Farewell to Arms, in which she tabulates for the New Yorker Hemingway's words (126), his commas (4), his syllables (only one word has more than 2), and his repetitions (24 of the words are "the," 15 are "and"). There are faint echoes of those 15 instances of and in the third sentence of "Goodbye to All That," audible only after reading Didion's study of Hemingway. Some elements of syntax may be learned, evidently, some may be borrowed, but syntax cannot be copied. It is too fragile to bear transport, even syntax that seems, as Didion's has always seemed to me, carved of marble. I destroyed Didion's syntax as I rewrote her essay, and as the essay became mine, it felt less true, not more so.

I suspect what Hemingway was after, with his one true sentence, was something in the syntax. In its early usage, syntax described the arrangement of parts within any system, particularly the body. And the syntax of the body is still the best metaphor I can find for the syntax of a sentence. Balance is achieved in a still, standing body through the minute effort of an unknown number of muscles. Movement requires bracing and flexing all over the body, not just within the parts that move. I once dabbled with a computer program designed to generate simple sentences and found that some of the sentences the computer wrote were evocative in their strangeness, but they moved like robots. Science fiction aside, machines cannot move like bodies, automatons cannot write, and this is what makes syntax so very difficult to teach.

Syntax is an order that is not ordained, a system that is not systematic. There are no reliable rules. Orwell is helpful in this because he is less concerned with what is right or wrong than what is "ugly." Particularly instructive is his translation of Ecclesiastes into a parody of contemporary usage, in which
"I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" becomes "Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account."

Orwell's complaint is about diction, but we see the lovely syntax of Ecclesiastes and all its cadences fall away as well. Changing the words necessitates changing their order, which changes everything. So how do you write? "You don't talk to many people," Didion suggests, "and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture."

But Didion's grammar in the picture is not what most often gets quoted from "Why I Write." We prefer "Grammar is a piano I play by ear... All I know of grammar is its infinite power," which is pleasingly facile out of context, but considerably less disingenuous when reunited with the remainder of that thought: "To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object being photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive." Clearly, Didion knows more of grammar than its power. All she cares about is its power.

I don't find many of Hemingway's sentences true, after all. I don't believe him, and I often don't trust him, but I cannot deny the power of his clarity and precision. And there is a truth to that power. Syntax doesn't lie—it is above such things, in a celestial sort of way. After rewriting "Goodbye to All That," I found it was the sentences I agreed with least that I came closest to duplicating. Didion's "Nothing was irrevocable; everything was within reach" became my "Everything was irrevocable, and nothing was within reach." And it is here, in the syntax, where we are best instructed that authors' lives need not resemble ours, need not be relatable, whatever that means, or universal, perish the term—their lives need only provide a terrain over which their
minds can move nimbly, forging a syntax that the rest of us may use as a map for our own thinking.

A map, remember, that might or might not mark roads. A map that might suggest the shape of the coastline but nothing more, a map that might indicate elevation, which will be essentially relevant to the reader or not, depending on whether that reader is carrying something heavy a long way through the woods. As with all maps, it will require interpretation—the act for which syntax is composed, the playing of the music. The score for a piece of music titled “Goodbye to All That” hangs above my desk on campus. It was the last piece written by my composer before he stopped composing entirely. The opening notation reads: “slow—no rhythm.” I tell you this just in case you are still tempted to believe that “Goodbye to All That” is about New York.