Originally presented as a paper at the 2025 English Discipline Honours Conference at the University of Sydney.

Word count, excluding footnotes, captions, and bibliography: 3,300.

Towards a Glass Menagerie

Mourning in Joan Didion and Walter Benjamin

Antony Wu

Exergue

In a very curious way, mourning is a process of awakening. It is the process of reappearance, when the world returns in again (as it always does—as it always will do) on existence with a refreshed pallor that is indicative of the sudden moment of bereavement in its original meaning, of mere dispossession. It is that moment when what awakens awareness of its passing is but the caress of eddies of time—that can only lie in wake:—of a past that has already gone. Bereavement is thus a bestilled awakening, to a new crystalline day, that holds within the diaphanous the present now in mischievous mirage. The world returns in again,—as it always will do,—and the present overdetermines anent a receding past and future now figmental. Only the present is left,—there. Nothing else. Syntax demurs.

Joan Didion's syntax refuses its own labyrinthine subordination in favour for its rhythms that ascend in irrepressibility. They gather in incantatory celerity. What is laid out plain by them is this crystalline present that shimmers in its paradoxical rest. Mourning as bereavement has operated its dispossession: there is nothing left.—Thus explains the equanimity of a glass menagerie that has never stopped moving. It is as if, the moment history fails to pertain to the present, what is revealed are the rhythms of the world in habitus that lie there in a benign uncare all along as its operative

motion. A clinical contentment lies in this movement that is founded upon the bereft: perhaps indeed the bereft is but one cycle of the movement. This illimitable cyclicality is what defines one view of Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, in which the refuse of history piles ceaselessly, but impertinently, swirling in impertinence in the air as if teasing the suffusion of present-contentment into being. Another view is that of constellating thought, in which refuse is instead hoarded to constellation and the present overwhelmed under the onus of the past. In mourning, onus loses its legibility anent palimpsests of day.

1

The prose of Joan Didion has an enchanting, ensorcelling aspect. It has the capacity to found dreams and visions:—of the extreme frontiersmanship that lies right at the end of the world on the Pacific Coast Highway; of the febrility and desperation of the eventual search for a new way of living in the mirages of the Haight-Ashbury district;—and of the temporizations from existence, shuttling to and fro in the air, from the separate rhythms of Hawaii and New York.—And of that temporization from existence, in prolonged threnody, that is grief.

Fundamentally grief is the register of Joan Didion, whose writing lies so much in retrospect that it seems like the weaponization of the natural register of reportage when its resonance strikes us in the present day. Grief has a quality which cannot but pertain;—not in its overwhelm of sadness and agony but in its levity, which delicate, makes affordances and gives breadth—to life then, but then in a trompe l'oeil, to life now. There is about the journalism of Joan Didion an effect which can be gathered by looking at an old photograph,—for example that of Michael Dukakis (Fig. 1), Democratic nominee to the 1988 presidential election won by George H. W. Bush, on the tarmac at San Diego International Airport.

FIG. 1. Photograph from *Past Daily* (26 October 2023). https://pastdaily.com/2023/10/26/october-26-1988-bush-dukakis/. No rights have been obtained for this image.

In the photograph are one-thousand pinpricks of detail that protruding, pierce the viewer. The faded and out-of-focus 767 in the background which silhouettes with the inexorable the figure of the presidential candidate—which being photographed for *Newsweek* dated 12th of September 1988

carries with it the maudlin vitality of a political moment since passed;—and thus the maudlin equipoise of the wind-swept tie, of the fixity of the motion of the baseball, passed to whom, and for what, being long forgotten by wind-swept time;—and finally that fixity of his smile, made delicate now with history from all the years that have passed from 1988 to now, smiling into an audience and a future which attain only by the imagination. Right there then the punctum unfolds:—the sense of a delicate regret which has such aeration that it becomes its complete opposite, founding the suffusion of the possibility of things to come. Softness falls from the air.

This is the mourning register of Joan Didion. The very same vital inexorabilities, the fixities and puncta of her coruscating signifiers,—the very same delicacies of lent sentiment,—are present in her prose. It comes from an accumulation of detail in pleonasm;—but which temporally overextends beyond them, reaching into a world beyond their times. As she writes, about the very same Alaska Airlines 767:—

> About this baseball on the tarmac. On the day that Michael Dukakis appeared at the high school in Woodland Hills and at the office plaza in San Diego and in the schoolyard in San Jose, there was, although it did not appear on the schedule, a fourth event, what was referred to among the television crews as a 'tarmac arrival with ball tossing.' This event had taken place in late morning, on the tarmac at the San Diego airport, just after the campaign's chartered 737 had rolled to a stop and the candidate had emerged. There had been a moment of hesitation, or decision. Then baseball mitts had been produced, and Jack Weeks, the traveling press secretary, had tossed a ball to the candidate. The candidate had tossed the ball back. The rest of us had stood in the sun and given this our full attention: some forty adults standing on a tarmac watching a diminutive figure in shirtsleeves and a

red tie toss a ball, undeflected even by the arrival of an Alaska Airlines 767, to his press secretary.

'Just a regular guy,' one of the cameramen had said.[1]

The same one-thousand pinpricks are present from out of the passage at hand, ranging out from the rhythms of Woodland Hills and San Diego and San Jose as if in incantatory regret; from the baseball being tossed back whose motion remains in the prose mythological and whose Newtonian effect emanates out in palimpsestic ambiguity. The baseball's motion serves as a *gesture* of anachrony, and so does the stray commentary by the cameraman whose life tumbles vertiginously into the past. One regrets, one regrets it all—if only the world could have been different;—but then the softness. Amelioration. There is something shimmering—right there;—is it the epithelium of the world?

Thus there is this duality to the world, which is not quite a duality as much as a revolution of both predicated upon the lightness of understanding. Didion's political reportage is often regarded as an elucidation of spectatorship, a la Baudrillard's simulacrum, but it is likewise complicated in the same way by the fact that the phenomena they describe attract them just as much as they drive them away. This is a self-evident fact to anyone who has experienced grief: it is as much about a simultaneity of feelings as it is about the irresistibility of them. The attitude of mourning is precisely this inability to look away tempered by the relief of looking towards.

2

Truth as grief is what is shared by the mourning Walter Benjamin. Benjamin provides an archetype of mourning in his *Angelus Novus*: his angel of history, taken from a print by Paul Klee,

1 Joan Didion, 'Political Fictions', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*, Everyman's Library, 304, 13th imp. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 729–947 (p. 752).

whom he apposes against an understanding of history as linear progress. The angel of history, in contradistinction, stands in fixated horror as the res gestae of history as refuse without cease piles in front of their eyes that can do nothing but watch. Yet it is a watching that is a seeing.—A seeing of infinite and infinitesimal suffering that mounts with each passing day. Thus does he refer to the necessity of reading against the grain every single event, artwork, and utterance, since 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.[2] This is the attitude he ascribes to Sparticism in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', whose orientation to the political action of the uprising of Berlin was without exception in totality melancholy. With bloodshot eyes one stares into the abyss of history, and history does not stare back.

So too is this totalizing melancholy found in his *Arcades Project*, which are undergirded by the ethereal sadness of the sun-comprehending glass brought by the new Parisian arcades of the 19th century. Architecture—modern architecture—serves as a dream reliquary for Benjamin, with the whole phenomena of the world past and present all being as if trapped in the transparency of the vaulted arcade. In this, and in the appurtenances of the technological new, thus lies the haunting of the 'ghostly effect' of 'primal history',[3] which being caught in glass both seen and yet invisible, exists in the same way as the pullulating desiderata,—that are the ghosts,—spawned by the primal scene. This is the rag & bone shop of history and its snuffed dreams. The mourner is the antiquarian of the present, fully hurt, and yet stores confidence,—by the gathering irretrievability of their relics, as the 'now' gradually falls into the 'then'. This is Didion's reliquary:—

On the whole the lifeguards favored a diction as flat and finally poetic as that of Houston

2 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (Schocken, 2007), p. 256.

3 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, 1st Harvard University Press paperback ed. (Belknap, 2002), p. 393.

> Control. Everything that morning was 'real fine.' The headquarters crew was 'feeling good.' The day was 'looking good.' Malibu surf was 'two feet and shape is poor.' Earlier that morning there had been a hundred or so surfers in the water, a hundred or so of those bleached children of indeterminate age and sex who bob off Zuma and appear to exist exclusively on packaged beef jerky, but by ten they had all pocketed their Thanksgiving jerky and moved on to some better break. 'It heats up, we could use some more personnel,' Dick Haddock said about noon, assessing the empty guard towers. 'That happened, we might move on a decision to open Towers One and Eleven, I'd call and say we need two recurrents at Zuma, plus I might put an extra man at Leo.'
>
> It did not heat up. Instead it began to rain.[4]

This is Zuma Beach off Malibu, California, c. 1976 (Fig. 2). There in the ocean the individual lives of the hundred or so surfers come all not waving but drowning in the depths of time, as narrowing pinpricks in frozen gesture in the epoxy sea. The families of the children at the end of the day have congregated, congregate, and will congregate,—in the cars lining the road, whose engines running in quiet apprehension prepare to trace out lives and homes rolling in the sloe-black yonder of the rest of the continent beyond. Houston Control comes crackling on the radio in regular intervals, marking with each punctum the beats of the sempiternal rhythm,—once given to prelapsarians. The personages who in the past have manned Towers One and Eleven overhang into the drizzle, which refuses to dampen their slapdash conviviality which has long since stopped being alive. Constantly,—the world intends on slipping away from Didion until not a single person remains for her in it, but for some reason she is left suffuse in the slippage. There is a whole glass menagerie for

4 Joan Didion, 'The White Album', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*, Everyman's Library, 304, 13th imp. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 179–342 (p. 335).

her. From out of the margins of grief the full breadth of things to come beckons to both her and Benjamin.

FIG. 2. Photograph in *Surfer*, 58.1 (April 2017). No rights have been obtained for this image.

3

However, I would like to contrast this mourning Benjamin for what I call the anti-Benjamin in Benjamin's own text. There is an hint of it in Le Corbusier (Fig. 3), when Benjamin, instead of focusing on the quietus of transparent glass, focuses instead on the interpenetration *of* it by light & air in convolute M;[5]—all of a sudden, the garishness of the light hurts one with the bluntness with which it strikes; with the indiscrimination with which it strikes stark against the surface of existence, and indeed only upon one dimension! There is a brutality to light and an insouciance to air whereby every aerated balcony is turned into a stuffy closet. The colours become oppressive. In one's viscera the viscosity of the lurid light comes to weigh even more than the

5 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 423.

foundations of the building. Benjamin continues with this compulsive illumination in alternate parts of his *Arcades Project*, disturbing the mourning which he undergoes at others. This compulsion is what I refer to as the anti-Benjamin.

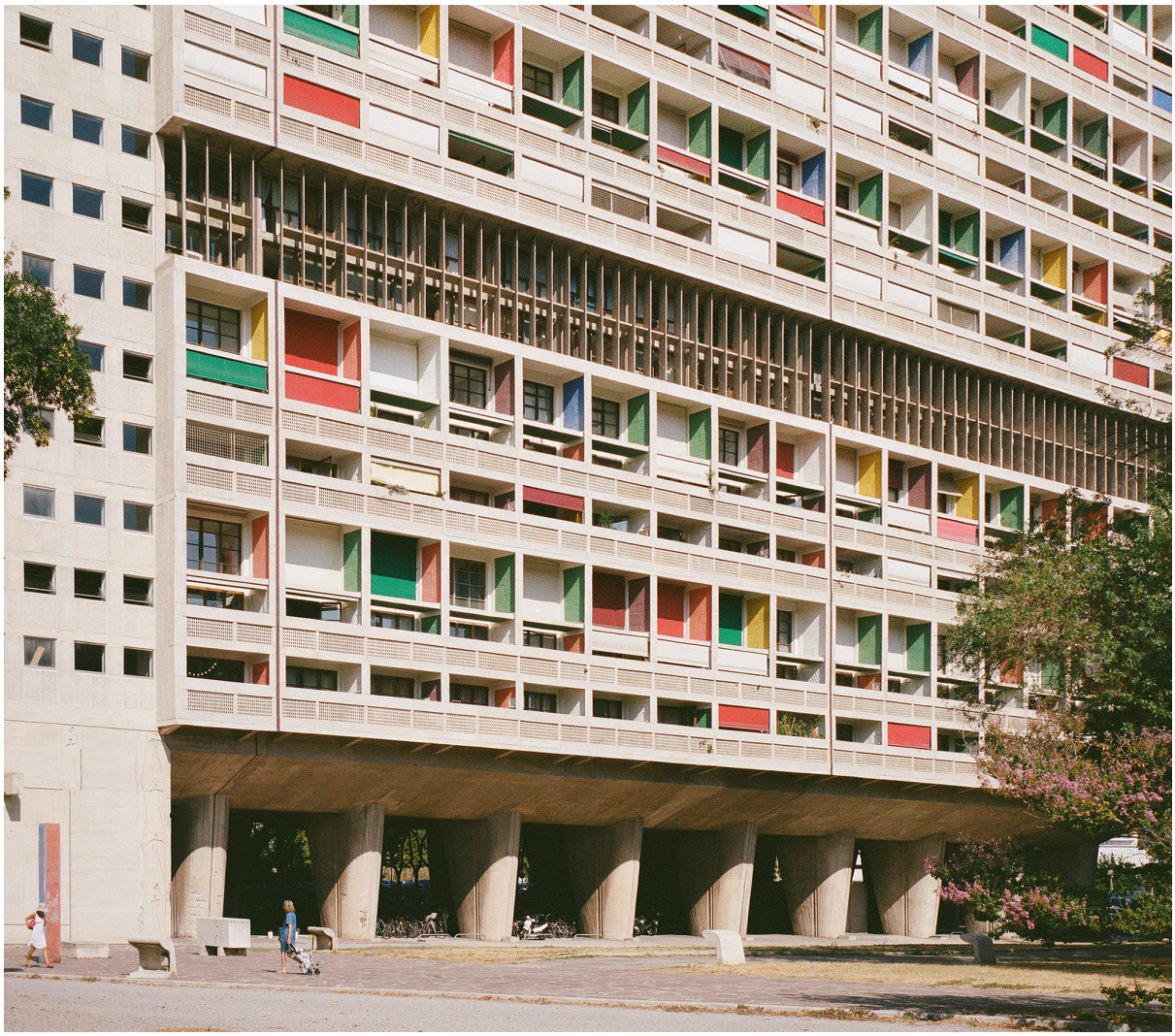

FIG. 3. Gili Merin, untitled photograph (2023), of Unité d'habitation, Marseille. No rights have been obtained for this image.

The anti-Benjamin rears his head again when he talks about the 'peculiar irresolution' of the flâneur, again in convolute M, with his heart posed in equipoise ticking 'like a clock' on the cusp of mounting élan.[6] It is the rapid versatility of the flâneur that gives him his wandering potentiality on the prowl in both psychogeography and temporality. Though this irresolution is, on the surface,

6 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 419.

similar to that of mourning,—it is this rapid impetuosity which underlying it renders it a diametrical opposite. Grief is anything but versatile and timely since it functions instead in the fullness of the off guard. The flâneur, striking pose, only *pretends* to catch the world off its guard. Benjamin cannot resist this other instinct of his—this terrible need to mount élan—encapsulated by his constellating thought in convolute N:

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein *what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation*. [...] The relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, *suddenly emergent*.—Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.[7]

Benjamin cannot resist the brilliance of light, cannot resist those moments of historical epiphany —'suddenly emergent'—where in a flash everything becomes tragically clear and revolution must be wrought. History is to be read not merely against the grain, but in active search for 'the process of splitting the atom[, which] liberates the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the "once upon a time" of classical historiography'.[8] The sinews of one's weapon hand are stiffened by those who have in past presented arms in exactly the same way only to be repaid with massacre. Yet it is only grief that allows, for loosening,—and for mercy to inaugurate new worlds since there is nothing at all else which can. He cannot seem to resist waking the dreamer from his reliquary and forcing him with the abruptness of the morning to volte face against that which suddenly impends; cannot resist disturbing the fixity of his angel in resounding witness, and instead compels

---

7 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462. Emphasis added.

8 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 463.

them to lower their eyes instead to the fray. Contrast Benjamin's constellating thought to his better instincts in the same convolute, where instead grief is composed of scenes from an existence:

> The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history.[9]

Winds scatter far and wide the feuilleton of history in montage, and flying through the air into the far distance into motes, one sees for the first time nothing but afore air in radiance. In all these scenes, of times past, and lives gone, and worlds to come, there lies a soft staunchness to mourning which cannot be named.

4

To return to Didion.—Didion's secret lies in her rhythms, the pleonasms which give her writing an incantatory nature. She takes comfort in these rhythms;—takes rest and respite;—and places an infinite and infinitesimal confidence in them.—In these rhythms of mourning which tell of things to come.

Coda

At the Honours Conference I was posed a question by Nicholas Osiowy, about whether this soft confidence in almost nothing at all to come can be understood as a form of reenchantment in an age of disenchanted modernity, who afterwards recommended me Charles Taylor on the topic in his essay 'Disenchantment-Reenchantment'.[10] Taylor understands the distinction between enchantment and disenchantment in their respective ages as a matter of porosity:

> The first feature of [the enchanted] world is that it was one filled with spirits and moral

9 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 461.

10 In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, by Charles Taylor (Belknap, 2011), pp. 287–302.

> forces, and one moreover in which these forces impinged on human beings; that is, the boundary between the self and these forces was somewhat porous.[11]

As such, good and evil and indeed morality can be and was located outside the 'locus of [...] what we call minds',[12] immanently in objects in possession of the supernatural or as talismans, or in the supernatural entities themselves. In comparison, now, our 'minds are bounded'. The mind becomes hermetic in modernity.

This is a distinction which was visible to Nietzsche, who saw the same movement in modernity towards this hermeticism through the concept of 'internalization',[13] and exalted the same porosity in the gods of the Hellenes. Good and evil perpetrated by a person was not seen through the moralization of guilt upon the individual personality—who is then able to be shamed as inherently flawed and not good enough—but instead the good or evil was blamed upon the gods who took advantage of our porosity.

> 'He must have been deluded by a *god*,' they concluded finally, shaking their heads... This expedient is *typical* of the Greeks... In this way the gods served in those days to justify man to a certain extent even in his wickedness, they served as the originators of evil.[14]

The crucial difference is that in this porous enchantment, moralization upon the individual fails utterly. Emotions and desires whether evil or benign flit in and out of minds on a whim, so what sense does it make to personally shame the individual in which they happen to reside? There is a strain of our modern psychology which recognizes this: that one should try and understand the

---

11 'Disenchantment-Reenchantment', p. 287.

12 'Disenchantment-Reenchantment', p. 288.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Genealogy of Morals', in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, Modern Library ed. (Modern Library, 2000), pp. 437–600 (second essay, sec. 16).

14 Nietzsche, 'On the Genealogy of Morals', second essay, sec. 23.

hidden reasons behind emotions—that inherently one cannot control. There is a soft levity to the unburdened Hellenic consciousness. Perhaps Nietzsche is not making any other point than merely this.

Taylor hints at the existential implications of his porosity, that 'our grasp of the world is not simply a representation within us [... instead] we are being in the world (Heidegger's *Inderweltsein*)'.[15] Indeed, Dasein is simultaneously themself and the world, the latter interpenetrating the former utterly such that it is impossible to speak of them separately.[16] Yet, Heidegger does speak of them separately, under cover of the *provisionality* of his ontological investigation;—which at times stretches credulity.

> Potentiality-for-being in which its ownmost Being is an issue, must be taken over by Dasein alone. Death does not just 'belong' to one's own Dasein in an undifferentiated way; death *lays claim* to it as an *individual* Dasein. The non-relational character of death [...] individualizes Dasein down to itself.[17]

The hermeticism of Dasein rears its head when it collides with temporality (ecstatic). A covert moralization appears when authenticity demands individualization from the 'they'.[18] Dasein at this juncture (of time) becomes burdened, and loses levity.

This hermeticism forms the basis of Emmanuel Levinas's criticism of Heidegger. It is

---

15 'Disenchantment-Reenchantment', p. 294.

16 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, First English ed. (Blackwell, 1962), H. 64: 'Ontologically, "world" is not a way of characterizing the entities which Dasein essentially is *not*; it is rather a characteristic of Dasein itself.'

17 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H. 263.

18 This I believe is the true 'distantiality' in *Being and Time*: that which is adopted by Heidegger, *personally*, in his covert approval of authenticity, and shaming of the 'they'. Of course, this lies in opposition to his ontology of 'distantiality' in his discussion of the 'they' in HH. 126–130.

Levinas's radical porosity with the Other that allows him to see Heideggerian solicitude as in fact the dominating 'murder' of the Other.[19] In contradistinction, radical porosity for him is exemplified in the vertiginous portal that is the 'face' of the Other: 'To be in relation with the Other face to face is to be unable to kill'.[20]

Individualization it seems requires temporality, which results in murder, both of others and of oneself with moralization. Perhaps the functioning of mourning lies in the palimpsesting of temporality, the montaging of history. What it enables is a temporal porosity that is the transparency of the glass menagerie. In contradistinction to murderous existentialism, this is a new form of embodiment, in atemporal levity.

tony9wu@gmail.com

19 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?', *Philosophy Today*, 33.2 (1989), pp. 121–29 (p. 127).

20 Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?', p. 128.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (Schocken, 2007)

——, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, 1st Harvard University Press paperback ed. (Belknap, 2002)

Didion, Joan, 'Political Fictions', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*, Everyman's Library, 304, 13th imp. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 729–947

——, 'The White Album', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*, Everyman's Library, 304, 13th imp. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 179–342

'Disenchantment-Reenchantment', in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, by Charles Taylor (Belknap, 2011), pp. 287–302

Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, First English ed. (Blackwell, 1962)

Levinas, Emmanuel, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?', *Philosophy Today*, 33.2 (1989), pp. 121–29

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 'On the Genealogy of Morals', in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, Modern Library ed. (Modern Library, 2000), pp. 437–600