

ANALYSIS BY 3 CRITICS

Play It As It Lays (1970)



Joan Didion

(1934-)

“What can people get from seeing themselves as the passive victims of chance? Didion’s heroines get off the hook of responsibility, and find the ignorance that is bliss. Didion is among the few women writers who see fragmentation as a force for survival, who applies anarchic, disintegrative themes to the lives of women. Her heroines split what they feel from what they do so radically that whatever happens seems like a surprise. They cannot put together what made them what they are.

Maria in *Play It as It Lays*, Didion’s most dismantled character, is developed through a series of disconnected memories that she will not permit to cohere. Her nerves have no synapses; no leaps take place to transmit the locus of pain to the mind. ‘What makes Iago evil?’ she says. ‘Some people ask. I never do.’ Her dullness is a form of relief, her numbness a saving grace. Who gave her this Novocain? ‘My mother’s yearning suffused out life like nerve gas,’ remembers Maria. ‘Cross the ocean in a silver plane, she would croon to herself and mean it, see the jungle when it’s wet with rain. The three of us driving down to Vegas in the pickup and then driving home again in the clear night, a hundred miles down and a hundred back and nobody on the highway either way, just the snakes stretched on the warm asphalt and my mother with a wilted gardenia in her hair.’ Evil as ‘nerve gas’ diffuse as a dream, evil as a ‘climate’ suffuses Maria’s life.

Maria feels she is ‘confirming a nightmare’ when she gets a hypnotist’s circular in the mail and reads, ‘YOUR WORRIES MAY DATE FROM WHEN YOU WERE A BABY. IN YOUR MOTHER’S WOMB.’ She recognizes her mother as a damaging force in her life but cannot face the fact that she was in any way against her. Her anger paralyzes her, produces no fury but only ‘nothingness.’ Depressed, Maria travels to Hoover Dam and begins to ‘feel the pressure of Hoover Dam here on the desert... All that day she was faint with vertigo, sunk in a world where the great power grids converged.’ The gigantic dam is an image for her anger. The closer her anger comes to consciousness, the more feeble she feels.

Anger is available to Maria as a negative space, a void. She expresses it through withholding. Quickly fulfilling her mother's dream life, Maria becomes a successful model, actress and producer's wife and saves enough money to send her mother around the world in a silver plane. But instead she lends the money to a man she barely likes. She cannot bring herself to give her mother what her mother wanted; nor can she enjoy the life her mother would have loved to live. Looking miserably on her easy winnings, she observes, 'I was holding all the aces, but what was the game?'

What Maria absorbs in infancy is her willessness, her paralysis of self, her habit of playing roles someone else assigns. Long after her mother is dead, she goes on woodenly saying 'I love you to her husband and 'you make me happy' to her lover, who makes her anything but happy. The experience of destructive love is so primal it becomes the eternal reality. Love and hate are so mingled she can't tell one from the other. Maria's anger at having complied her way through life is finally expressed through her love for Kate, her neurally damaged four-year-old daughter who responds to no one. Maria loves her as a sister in neural collapse. She has fantasies for Kate that are as unrealistic as her mother's were for her; she wants Kate to save *her*. She wants to be Kate. Kate has the absolute freedom of someone without attachment to anyone. Maria plans to build her life with Kate on their mutual inability to be reached.

Maria sees pure emptiness as her only available relief. She hopes for the invulnerability of the burnt-out case who has been hurt too much to be hurt again. Pregnant by her lover, about to divorce her husband, 'eager,' she says, to have a child, Maria nevertheless gives in to her husband's pressure to get an abortion. While she blames him for it, she clearly hopes to find some release through eliminating the possibility of a healthy child. She tells herself that 'she would do what he wanted, she would do this one last thing, and then they would never be able to touch her again.

How unreachable Maria becomes is underlined in one of Didion's best scenes. In a nondescript motel room Maria is aware of nothing but affection for her friend, the homosexual BZ. He puts a bottle of barbiturates on the bed between them, tells Maria he is going to take them and does, while she holds his hand and drowns naturally beside him. She sees her complicity in his death as a gesture of kindness. Like Lily, she is all love for the man she lets die. BZ is also a kindred spirit, a more aggressive self who does literally what she does spiritually.

Maria accepts a life with men in which she is a victim of their need and indifference. She plays so many bad scenes that they begin to seem rather alike, uniformly uninteresting, and reaches an erosion of herself that permits her to be free of caring. In a sanatorium like Kate's at the end of the novel, she throws the *I Ching*, but does not bother to read what it says. She thinks of her life as a gamble; but in fact she had made it certain and secure as paralysis."

Josephine Hendin

Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1979) 182-84

"In *Play It As It Lays* (1970), Maria Wyeth, formerly married to a movie director, Carter Land, is in a state of disintegration; everything she does pulls her away from a balanced life. When we first meet her she reviews herself for us, as Jean-Baptiste in *The Fall* attempted to do. While he paraded failure as success, she parades whatever successes she had as failure. She is the voice of the lower depths, the sense of the Kafkaen mole or beetle close to her sense of herself. Maria is in a hospital or institution under doctor's care, divorced, her daughter Kate a vegetable and under shock therapy in another institution.

In this, the first segment, where she begins the review of her 'career,' Maria is only a voice. One of Didion's triumphs in the novel is to make Maria's voice disembodied, as if it were prerecorded and the tape played quadratically. She explains her sense of life: 'I am what I am,' and as in craps, one must let it go 'as it lays,' or play it as it lays. Her father, we learn later, had told Maria life itself was a crap game: 'don't do it the hard way' was one of the two lessons she learned. This lack of resistance disallows any other voice, any textural variety, and, ultimately, any sense of the outside. Maria may be so terminally narcissistic that the world is miniaturized in herself; but from the novelist's point of view, in such minimalist art, there must be an 'other.'

After Maria's segment comes a brief episode with her sometime friend Helene and then an equally brief one with Carter, her former husband. Each speaks of her selfishness, her inability to live normally. Then follows the rest of the novel, divided into eighty-four brief segments. The effect is of a kaleidoscope, each segment being an image that plays off and back upon Maria. Holding it all together is her instability, her skewing relationships to everyone else's 'reality,' her adversary movement to their artificiality. The first person of the first segment gives way to the more impersonal third. At the start, Maria speaks of herself; then the authorial voice speaks of her. A first-person narrative running throughout would have thrown Didion's plan off, by personalizing what were to be voices coming from the dead. The dead Maria!

The eighty-four short chapters are concerned with running. The novel fits into our notions of the American as a spatial creature; although for Maria all spatiality is trap as well as escape. The road leads to death rather than to a dispossessed garden or a 'world elsewhere.' When internal pressures are unrelieved by sex or drugs, Maria takes to the freeways, driving from L.A. to Santa Monica, to San Diego, back and forth, like the human yo-yoing in Pynchon's *V.*: to create a sense of movement even when it is tied to nowhere. Her Corvette, that emblem of American success, becomes a mechanical extension of Maria's sense of herself; as do the freeways, which end up as they began. They are the central metaphor of the novel: free-ways offering speed and destruction....

We are troubled by the lack of resonance, the failure to locate context. Everyone around Maria in the novel is lost, but only she recognizes it; she refuses to delude herself as they do. Everyone is spaced out on drugs, sex, self-regard, artificiality. Fake is norm, counterfeit the mark of success. Maria marks herself as a failure, because her inability to 'play it as it lays' labels her as one of the crazies, excludes her from their games. The problem arises when we recognize that everything we know about her, and are expected to respond to, derives from the people she rejects.

Didion's choice not to provide another voice or dimension locates us so fully in Maria's consciousness that it is like Narcissus's circuitry of self-love. Her self-hatred is in actuality self-love, which is not what the novel is really about. Superficially, Maria recalls Jean Rhys's victimized females, but more substantially, Mailer's Sergius O'Shaughnessy and Rojack, prototypical ego-tripping males. Maria uses space to fill herself, but what she experiences is less a spatial dimension than a vacuum. She is the devourer of space, not so that she can fill it, but as a method of evading whatever she is. Didion's use of 'play it as it lays' is connected to Maria's ingestion of space. Rather than making coherent the interconnections of environment and being—what Camus did, minimally, in *The Fall*—Didion, failing to distance herself, provides no interchange, and being, here, is nothingness.

The reviewers praised Didion's prose in extraordinary terms, calling it 'dead-on dialogue,' or full of 'plastic ironies,' or 'capsuled brilliance,' or 'scrupulous, exact understatement.' The paragraph that begins the novel, set off from the first segment and then repeated in Chapter 52, reads: 'Maria made a list of things she would never do. She would never: *walk though the Sands or Caesar's alone after midnight*. She would never: *bal at a party, do S-M unless she wanted to, borrow furs from Abe Lipsey, deal*. She would never: *carry a Yorkshire in Beverly Hills*.' There is great economy here, and the sentence closing with 'deal' is beautifully cadenced. Apart from this, though, the passage is all tinsel, smart-alecky, a world without resonance, yet one Maria is serious about. Examined, the prose lends no meaning. Does one indict the counterfeit at that level? All the key factitious elements are there: the hotels and gaming places in Las Vegas; S-M, a relatively new social phenomenon in 1970; a frivolous event in Beverly Hills, whose mere mention is calculated to set off fireworks. In 'Slouching Toward Bethlehem,' Didion mocked just this kind of talk: 'But I'm holy on acid,' someone says....

Part of minimalist strategy is to omit background, history, even choice. It goes beyond existentialism, naturalism, supernaturalism, freeing the author from tradition. Didion has pursued this method, providing a scenario, a shooting script. But a script is later filled in by images, figures, gestures, angles. Here we stumble for reference, and we suspect that while the novel pretends to be everything, it is merely disguising nothing. Maria is a shell which she cannot fill, which Didion cannot, either; and the play on the determinism of craps is part of the disguise. A throw of the dice will never abolish chance, as Mallarme wrote, which suggests universal design, not Southern California chic.

Maria's emptiness, her own feminine mystique, her sense of herself as victim and victimized, her instability even as she observes sanely are vitiated. The novel pulls away from itself; expressing its own emptiness, it empties out. Maria has a moment in which she seeks an apartment, 2-D, once lived in by Philip Dunne—'Excuse me, it was Sidney Howard.' Dunne is the surname of Didion's husband, and Sidney Howard did exist. But the 'dream moment' has no significance, only the shock value of seeing Dunne's name. It is a name that holds no sense for Maria, only for Didion, who is not there.

Preoccupation with death, depression, the death of small children, the tragic end of innocent beings, fire and burning and apocalypse are of course valid concerns. But the fictional reference must be more than a woman who cannot deal with her own life, while she drives a Corvette, lives in expensive homes, props herself with drugs, occasional sex, and acts of humiliation. The banishment of self, here, is the equivalent of the vaunting of self, a twisting of meaning Didion seems unprepared for. There is, also, the sense that by being wounded severely enough, one can become one of the elect. Not by faith or by determinism is one elected, but by virtue of one's self-centeredness and being among the insulted and injured. By giving her body and mind over to male exploiters, and their female flunkies and whores, Maria rises above them, or so the narrative would have us assume. Her superiority is based on her ability to suffer, to endure their slings and arrows; her pain marks her as saint, martyr, sacrifice to modern artificiality. In this respect, Maria joins all the phonies she screens through her own sensibility; she becomes not the whore of Babylon, but of Narcissus."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 399-400

"Joan Didion, my second Sunshine Girl, is vastly superior as a novelist to Renata Adler. To begin with, she really is a novelist—that is, she has no bias against telling stories and she is interested in lives outside her own. Her vision is dark, her views are bleak, but she is richly talented....Her second novel, *Play It as It Lays* (1971), is her Hollywood book, but it might have been more accurately entitled *Fear and Trembling, and the Sickness Called the West Coast*. The philosophy behind it has been called, I believe, freeway existentialism.

Maria (pronounced Mar-AY-ah), the character in the center of *Play It as It Lays*, is a film actress whose career is in eclipse and whose marriage to a coming young director is shot. She has a daughter in a mental institution, has had an abortion, is on barbiturates. 'From my mother,' she announces early in the novel, 'I inherited my looks and a tendency to migraine. From my father I inherited an optimism which did not leave me until recently.' Along with migraine, she suffers dread. She feels the 'peril, the unspeakable peril, in the everyday.' Looking for some order in life, she finds none. Instead her portion in life is unrelieved, inmitigable anxiety. 'All along she expected to die, as surely as she had expected that planes would crash if she boarded them in bad spirit, as unquestionably as she believed that loveless marriage ended in cancer of the cervix and equivocal adultery in fatal accidents to children. Maria did not particularly believe in rewards, only in punishments, swift and personal.'

With *Play It as It Lays* Miss Didion acquired, as a novelist, a new in-group: those people who no longer believe in cause and effect, who feel, as a knowing Hollywood figure puts it to Maria, that they know something because 'we've been out there where nothing is.' Or, as Maria herself says, on the final page of the novel: 'I know something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you. I know what "nothing" means, and keep on playing.' Along with nothing, Miss Didion knows a thing or two about the Hollywood life about which she writes. She knows how agents think and talk; she knows the distinction between a tan acquired at a health club and one acquired during an entire life spent in season. Yet the question arises, why would a writer be drawn to the subject of a rather inarticulate young woman having a nervous breakdown in expensive surroundings? The inadequate answer is, I fear, because she is a Sunshine Girl, drawn to the dark and the hopeless in human affairs."

Joseph Epstein
"The Sunshine Girls: Renata Adler and Joan Didion"
Commentary (1984)

Michael Hollister (2015)