FICTION AS PATHOGRAPHY

Joseph P. Natoli

The term "pathography" was coined in Germany in the 19th century to represent biographies written from a pathological point of view. In 1910, Freud published his psychoanalytic biography, his pathography of Leonardo da Vinci, in which he attempted to establish a relationship between genius and mental illness. In their introduction to *The Index of Scientific Writings on Creativity: Creative Men and Women* (1974), Rothenberg and Greenberg define pathography within Freudian parameters:

Pathography consists of diagnosing and elucidating psychological factors in a specific individual, especially manifestations of psychopathology, through the systematic investigation of biographical data in conjunction with written or artistic works. (p. vii)

I should like to describe a phenomenological pathography which is not directed to the psychopathological relationship of creative individuals and their work, but to a psychopathology explored by van den Berg in which pathography refers to "a description of the pathological physiognomy of objects," a description supplied by the patient. (1955, p. 34). Van den Berg utilizes fiction, specifically characters in fiction, to illustrate and extent our understanding of a patient's description of his dilemma.

Fiction, therefore, has become a source of pathography, a pathography not of creative author, as traditionally understood, but of character. My purpose is to extend van den Berg's use of fiction, to transfer the entire phenomenological perspective from patient to fictional character and to present a model of how one can fruitfully approach fiction as pathography. I contend that this new approach is better able to uncover the psychological realities of fiction (and thus place fiction where it obviously belongs as an accessible resource for psychologists and psychiatrists) than either a psychoanalytic or behavioristic approach.

Basically, phenomenology supplies a method of "approaching mental phenomena themselves" (Birnbaum, 1933, p. 78). Phenome-
ology's emphasis upon a patient's own perceptions in relation to the world around him or her does indeed provide a direct tie with fiction which generates "phenomenal experiences similar to those evoked by 'real-life' situations" (Kendler, 1976, p. 617). The novelist is concerned with particularity and action, with description, with the world of appearances and the spontaneity of lived experience. Thus, it is conceivable that the psychologist would make use of fiction as pathography, a record of phenomenal experiences. Fiction may illustrate a psychopathology which may "represent rich, unmined beds of hard data on how man perceives," which may offer various interpretations and analyses, and which may, finally, clearly anticipate new theoretical directions (Hall, 1966, p. 75).

The fact, however, that we can accept fiction as illustrative pathography does not transform one into the other. Nor does a declaration of the supremacy of a phenomenological approach to fiction carry much weight without a survey of the weaknesses of other psychological approaches. I propose to consider a phenomenological aesthetic, and psychoanalytic and behaviorist approaches to fiction before presenting a pathography of Joan Didion's novel, *Play It As It Lays* (1970).

*A Phenomenological Aesthetic*

Bernard Paris in his *A Psychological Approach to Fiction* (1974) points out that "it is proper to treat literary characters as real people and that only by doing so can we fully appreciate the distinctive achievement of the genre (fiction)" (p. 4). He considers fiction to be concerned primarily with representation, interpretation and aesthetic patterning of experience, but sees these as separable aspects, variously emphasized. It is this aesthetic patterning formed by the activity of fictive consciousness which the phenomenologist Maurice Natanson (1962) sees as essential to our discovery of "the experiential foundation of our world" (p. 97). Natanson looks beyond mimeticism, "the literary microcosm reflecting the world," and associates a deeper, richer revelation of the foundation of human experiences with aesthetic patterning itself. Art, writes Merleau-Ponty (1945), is "the direct embodiment of truth" and it is this "embodying," this patterning which enables one to resee the world, to see things in the world more clearly (p. xx). "In this sense a simple story can present the world to us with as much 'depth' and meaning as would a philosophical treatise" (Merleau-Ponty, p. xx). This aesthetic patterning involves a "prereflective level" in which