

Writing as Life and Art : Annie Dillard's View of the World

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Annie Dillard (1945 -) is a contemporary American nature writer, best known for her first nonfiction work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1974 . In the years following *Pilgrim*, Dillard published an additional three nonfiction works, the last of which was *The Writing Life* (1989). Inherent in all Dillard's works are her focus on self-sacrifice and her attempt to reconcile life's beauty with its horror. Although she is known as nature writer, she can neither be described as an analyst, or an appreciator of nature. Rather, she is a student of the human mind and is interested in how people perceive their world. In fact, her idea of nature and art can be understood as the two sides of the same coin. This is especially clear in *The Writing Life*. The purpose of this article is to examine the world according to Annie Dillard and investigate her pursuit of artistic authenticity. How does Dillard understand the world and how is this reflected in her understanding of nature and art?

In her earlier works, Dillard views the world through her analysis of natural creatures, but in *The Writing Life*, she chooses the lives and stories of other artists to come to a deeper understanding of life and suffering. In this book, Dillard actually takes a huge step from what she did in her previous works, and deals with, what is ultimately, a false sense of seclusion from society, as if to say artists are fundamentally different from the public. It is clear that Dillard feels isolated from society and desperately longs to find others with whom she can identify. She seeks out the views of her neighbors and at some point reluctantly acknowledges that however noble her work might be, writing in the end is just a job.

Interestingly enough, *The Writing Life* has been classified as a guidance text for budding young writers, but on close inspection, one can see that Dillard does not intend to be instructive so much as to further her inquiry into the nature of life itself through her analysis of the process of writing and what it means to be an artist.

The main theme of *The Writing Life* is Dillard's pursuit of artistic authenticity, but most book reviews at the time of publication did not recognize this, mainly because they presumed that Dillard the nature writer had written another nature text, and were, therefore, somewhat thrown and also quite disappointed by the content. Favorable book reviews came later from naturalists who studied creative nonfiction ¹ . These reviewers tend to focus on the metaphors of wilderness, because they themselves are mountain climbers, rangers, and solitary lovers of forests. They are especially attracted by Dillard's use of metaphors relevant to the life of

woodcarving. Bob Martherne wrote about it in his essay, “*The Writing Life* by Annie Dillard”: “She writes beautifully crafted metaphors, and the very first lines of the book grabbed me in two ways : as a writer and as a woodcarver” (Martherne, *Reader’s Journal 2*).

In contrast, severe criticism of *The Writing Life* came from critics who focused on its fragmented structure, unnecessarily difficult metaphors, overtly short anecdotes, and sudden changes of setting.² They did not like any of the stories that Dillard included in *The Writing Life*, arguing that readers could not grasp the essence of any one of her stories unless they read the whole book.

The fact is that reviewers who saw Dillard’s *The Writing Life* as a writing textbook failed to see it in the continuum of her other nonfiction works. On a superficial reading, one might overlook the significance of the metaphors and the grotesqueness of the anecdotes. Clearly, Dillard wanted to explore the nature of the human condition as an extension of the forms she used in her earlier works. Those who criticized her work as disjointed also failed to see it in the light of her earlier works. Dillard never wrote stories which were truly complete in themselves but relied on the development of her themes through her stories to add our understanding of each of her stories.

One of the most striking anecdotes in *The Writing Life* is Dillard’s story about Dave Rahm, the stunt pilot. Through this anecdote, Dillard explains her vision of the world. Dave Rahm was a mountain climber who became “an expert on mountains” and explored mountains “from every point of view”(610). In a desire to investigate mountains from every perspective, he studied geography and became a geology professor. Yet, both geography and geology seem “too pedestrian” for Rahm, so he took up piloting. Dave Rahm explained how he came to fly in these words : “I used to climb mountains. But you know, you can get a better feel for a mountain’s power flying around it, flying all around it, than you can from climbing it tied to its side like a flea” (611).

The narrator draws a parallel between the life of a writer and the life of the stunt pilot. She parallels the sensation of writing to that of spinning, which shows how seriously Dillard takes the challenge of writing a book, and how self-absorbed she was in the process of achieving her goals as a writer.

The sensation of writing a book is the sensation of spinning, blinded by love and daring.

It is the sensation of rearing and peering from the bent tip of a grass blade, looking for a route. (594)

While the narrator passionately watches Dave Rahm’s stunt pilot show, she ponders her own craft. It is clear in the language she uses to describe her sensations as a writer that she considers it very much like the show that Dave Rahm puts on in his airplane.

How similar is the work of the stunt pilot to that of the artist? The first similarity the narrator points out is that neither sees themselves while they are actually performing. In other words, neither is aware of the development of their work—their art—while they are in the process of carrying out the task at hand.

He could not see it himself. If he never saw it on film, he never saw it at all—as if Beethoven could not hear his final symphonies not because he was deaf, but because he was inside the paper on which he wrote. (617)

Although his flights are based on accurate and careful planning, it is nonetheless impossible for the pilot to see his own art, the stunt flight while he is flying. This is an inevitability in being a pilot. Moreover, it is the same for writers who also do not have the luxury of being able to see their work before it is complete.

The second similarity is that both stunt pilots and writers care about how the audience responds to their work. The narrator whole-heartedly approves of Dave Rahm as can be seen in the following :

Like any fine artist, he controlled the tension of the audience's longing. You desired, unwittingly, a certain kind of roll or climb, or return to a certain portion of the air, and he fulfilled your hope slantingly, like a poet, or evaded it until you thought you would burst, and then fulfilled it surprisingly, so you gasped and cried out. (606)

The third similarity is, of course, the issue of sacrifice. Rahm loses his life while pursuing his artistic work under the watchful eye of the public :

Rahm died performing a Lomcevak combined with a tail slide and hammerhead. In a Lomcevak, the pilot brings the plane up on a slant and pirouettes. I had seen Rahm do this : the falling plane twirled slowly like a leaf. Like a ballerina, the plane seemed to hold its head back stiff in concentration at the music's slow, painful beauty. It was one of Rahm's favorite routines. Next the pilot flies straight up, stalls the plane, and slides down the air on his tail. He brings the nose down—the hammerhead—kicks the engine, and finishes with a low loop. (614)

Dillard clearly sees that Rahm was under pressure to perform and that this is what killed him in the end. Yet, she clearly respects him for making the ultimate artistic sacrifice : death in pursuit of excellence in art. From this the reader can assume that Dillard believes she too has made very difficult sacrifices in her pursuit

of excellence in her chosen art form.

By comparing the pilot to a poet, the narrator deepens the image of the pilot as the ultimate representative of artists. She commends Rahm for his ability to control his aberrance and to maintain tension, at the same time delivering his audience enough action to satisfy it. These are skills that all good writers must have. She then tells the reader, “His [plane] was pure energy and naked spirit” (594). By her usage of sexual imagery, the reader can see that Dillard is quite enraptured by the skill of the pilot as artist.

The short life of the stunt pilot represents the life of a writer. Thanks to flying acrobatics and the dangerous nature of the maneuvers, stunt pilots are well aware of the risks they take and that their average life span is significantly shorter than others. She quotes a crop-duster pilot in Wyoming : “ [He] told me the life expectancy of a crop-duster pilot is five years. They fly too low. They hit buildings and power lines” (613). Obviously, stunt pilots have a similarly short life expectancy and Dave Rahm no doubt knew that :

I suppose Rahm knew the fact, too. I do not know how he felt about it. “It’s worth it,” said the early French aviator Mermoz. He was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s friend. “It’s worth the final smashup.” (613)

To the narrator, stunt pilots are artists of the ultimate form of art, especially in that they risk their lives as they perform for their audience. She reveres them even though they are glaringly aware of the possibility of death at the height of their popularity and fame, they continue to work at the risk of having to sacrifice their lives to complete their work to satisfaction.

The Writing Life features the art of the stunt pilots as art at its best, and the pilots themselves become the embodiment of art. The narrator explains that by “turning into a figure,” the self of the artist is lost in the execution of their art :

Rahm deliberately turned himself into a figure. Sitting invisible at the controls of a distant airplane, he became the agent and instrument of art and invention. (616)

After painstakingly perfecting his art, Rahm transcends mere human existence and becomes an “agent of art and invention.” This has obvious references to the myth of Daedalus. In fact, the climax of Rahm’s career has parallels to the climax of Daedalus³ flight. In *The Writing Life*, Rahm had reached a peak in his career. Rahm, who was working in the University of Jordan as a visiting geology professor, was asked by King Hussein to train the Royal Jordanian Falcons, an acrobatics team. He was flying a Pitt Special, a plane he knew very well, in Amman on that fatal day. King Hussein and Rahm’s wife Katy Rahm were there when he

was performing a Lomcevak combined with a tail slide and hammerhead. The narrator describes the scene :

It is a dangerous maneuver at any altitude, and Rahm was doing it low. He hit the ground on the loop ; the tail slide had left him no height. When Rahm went down, King Hussein dashed to the burning plane to pull him out, but he was already dead. (615)

In Greek mythology, Daedalus made wings to fly for himself and his son Icarus but Icarus went too near the sun, so his waxen wings melted and he fell to his death from the highest point he reached.

In contrast to Icarus, who died because he flew too close to the sun, Rahm died because he flew too low. Yet, both Rahm with his skill and Daedalus with his invention achieved more than ever in terms of their art and ultimately transcended themselves into metaphors of art and invention. In this way, the anecdote of Dave Rahm is analogous to the Daedalus myth.

In essence, Dave Rahm's story exemplifies Dillard's writing and shows what she supposes her writing at its peak might be. The narrator tells it as though she was climbing a ladder and was hit by the same sun that killed Icarus :

When you reach the end, there is nothing more to climb. The sun hits you. The bright wideness surprises you ; you had forgotten there was an end. You look back at the ladder's two feet on the distant grass, astonished. (561)

The narrator implies that, like Icarus, the narrator climbs higher and higher until she is struck by the sun, to a point where there is nothing but an awareness of the sun. In this way, Dillard tells the reader she has reached a point beyond which she cannot imagine any more growth as an artist. The climax of Dillard's work is likened to Daedalus and his work, but unlike him, she is only defeated in that she recognizes the limits of her ability as an artist.

The similarity between Icarus and Rahm points out more important elements of life : it warns us about not seeking out too much risk in the attempt to escape from the heaviness of earthly life. Icarus did not listen to his father's warnings and flew too close to the sun which melted the wax on his wings and he fell into the sea. Rahm overestimated his ability and was not sufficiently careful.

Similarly, the narrator alerts the reader to how thrilling it is to write at her peak, as though she is acknowledging the risk of failure in the production of her art :

The line of words fingers your own heart. It invades arteries, and enters the heart on a

flood of breath ; it presses the moving rims of thick valves ; it palpates the dark muscle strong as horses, feeling for something, it knows not what. (561)

This quotation shows not only that she finds beauty in the minute detail of simple bodily functions that others may well be uncomfortable with, but also that she finds suffering an experience worthy of exaltation. These themes are central to all of Dillard's works and essential parts of Dave Rahm's story and myth of Daedalus and Icarus.

What can we see from Dave Rahm's performance? In the end, he represents artists who perfect their art form, whatever that may be. The narrator describes Rahm's role using a quote from Teilhard de Chardin : ⁴

“Purity does not lie in separation from but in deeper penetration into the universe,” Teilhard de Chardin wrote. It is hard to imagine a deeper penetration into the universe than Rahm's last dive in his plane, or than his inexpressible wordless selfless line's inscribing the air and dissolving. (617)

The narrator completely glorifies the figure of Dave Rahm, as the penultimate artist who sacrifices everything, including his life for his art. According to the narrator, Rahm's penetration into the universe in that last dive he made was divine in itself. Therefore, along with this line of purity, the narrator describes Dave Rahm as if he were a priest having completely given himself up to his calling : “Robed in his airplane, he was as featureless as a priest. He was lost in his figural aspect like an actor or a king” (616)

It is worth noting that at the end of *The Writing Life*, the narrator identifies herself with Rahm and sees the world through his eyes, which allows her to perceive all art forms—including the act of writing—as a vocation, an honorable life worthy of even the ultimate sacrifice.

Dillard uses Daedalus and Icarus to exemplify her understanding of art and invention, which sometimes demands total sacrifice. Dillard has great respect for those who give themselves up completely to their art and risk everything in order to achieve perfection, as both Icarus did and the stunt pilot did in *The Writing Life*. She clearly believes that she, too, has given up everything in pursuit of perfection in her chosen art form, and believes that she should be esteemed at least by herself for the sacrifices she has made. However, Dillard also shows the danger of “not seeing,” and of flying too close to the limit or too low. Here to “transcend” means to pass beyond the limit of something “by not seeing,” Dillard critically examines herself as a transcendentalist who so much concentrates on “seeing” that her eyes are sometimes dimmed because of their own self-importance. She seems, in this respect, to have get over the limits set by artists before her.

In *The Writing Life*, Dillard chooses a number of mediums through which to see the world : the descriptions of other artists which actually tell the reader more about writing or more about herself than about these artists described ; the analogy of the stunt pilot which shows how seriously she takes her work ; the myth of Daedalus and Icarus which shows the reader how important ambition, achievement, and sacrifice are to her as a writer. Through these mediums, Dillard raises the basic question : how do we see the world? It is a question about interpretation, about who has the right to interpret and how it best be accomplished.

Then, what is the meaning behind her pursuit of art in this book? Self-sacrifice in her chosen art form is her frame of work and can be understood as her ethics for life. Without understanding her way of looking at art, we can never understand her way of understanding nature. In other words, because she respects self-sacrifice in life and art, she seeks worldly sacrifice and beauty in grotesqueness in the natural world. Before examining her way of looking at nature, it is crucial to recognize her way of looking at the world.

If we define "art" and "nature" in a broad sense, as Dillard does in *The Writing Life*, then we can see that she is asking fundamental questions about how we "see" and "interpret" not only printed art forms, such as writing, but also how a deeper understanding of these art forms leads to a deeper understanding of life.

Notes

¹ See Jacqueline and Magness.

² See Bourjaily and Howes.

³ Daedalus is a legendary Athenian craftsman and inventor, thought of as living in the age of Minos, in whom the Greeks personified the development of sculpture and architecture through mechanical inventions. Daedalus made wings for himself and his son Icarus out of wax and feathers, and they flew away. However, Icarus flew too near the sun ; the wax of his wings melted and he fell into the sea and was drowned. Daedalus landed on the island in the Sporades now called Ikaria and buried his son's body.

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin(1881 - 1955)was born in Auvergne, France. As an ordained member of the Society of Jesus, Teilhard de Chardin held positions as professor of Geology at the Catholic Institute in Pairs, director of the National Geology Survey of China and director of the National Research Center of France.

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