The Annie Dillard Workshop: Writing via Reading

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THE ANNIE DILLAD WORKSHOP: WRITING VIA READING

by

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B.A., Nyack College, 2002

M.F.A., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2008

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract

Erickson, Bryan (M.A., English)

The Annie Dillard Workshop: Writing via Reading

Thesis directed by Professor Martin Bickman

Annie Dillard reconstructs her own learning process in her students, and this can only be successful through a singular act of dedication on the part of each student. The students do by instruction what Dillard figured out on her own. They analyze texts on the macro and micro levels—they outline books, chapters, paragraphs, and sentences in order to study their structures; they study the ways different authors handle character or setting or transitional sentences. Word by word, they learn the DNA of literature in order to understand what makes it work. It is only after this immersion in literature and research that the writer, through painstaking effort and dozens of drafts, can produce something an educated and well-read audience will take an interest in.
Acknowledgment

The English Department generously provided a travel grant that assisted my first trip to the Beinecke Library.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Can the ability to write be taught? In particular, can you train an aspiring writer to write well? To be the next Dickinson or Emerson? This is a perennial question in and out of the academy, especially in relation to the creative writing workshop. To the question, “Who will teach me to write?” Annie Dillard, the acclaimed author and creative writing teacher, answers in *The Writing Life*, “The page, the page . . . that page will teach you to write” (58-59). The page referred to is the blank page. It is what Dillard calls “that eternal blankness, the blankness of eternity which you cover slowly, affirming time’s scrawl as a right and your daring as necessity” (58). But according to Dillard’s pedagogy, there is also another page that teaches the writer—the one already covered with words written by a master of the craft. To say that the page teaches the student is, in a sense, a major caveat on the part of a creative writing teacher, as it implies that the student must teach herself. However, it also exemplifies a pedagogical method: the student—in this case, the student writer—learns by doing, yet the teacher still plays a role. The teacher has learned, both by personal experience and through observation of students over the years, which experiments are likely to dead-end and which will lead to a better ability to write. By comparing Dillard’s experiences learning to write with those of her students while in her classes, it will become clear that her pedagogical method is to reconstructs her own learning process in her students and force them to teach themselves how to write. More specifically, this involves having her students engage with previously published literature so that they can, as she says, “Learn
from the masters” (qtd. in Richardson 87). Whereas most creative writing workshops focus on discussing new writing by students, Dillard’s method is distinctive in that she has her students engage primarily with prior literature.

Dillard’s practices are presented here not as an ideal or a proscription to be imitated whole cloth, but as a workable model from which other teachers can learn. There is no one way to run a workshop, as seen by the fact that students learn to hone their craft in courses which take radically different approaches. Neither do I present Dillard’s methods as wholly unique. In fact, the three things she says her teaching is founded on are typical of workshops in general: She lectures, gives writing and reading assignments, and lectures (“Teaching Writing”). My hope is that these familiar factors will build a larger vision that is less familiar, if only by virtue of its contours or intensity, and that teachers of creative writing can adopt practices from it as they see fit. That being said, I would not have continued with this study if the results had shown that Dillard was not worthy of being studied primarily as a teacher. As one student writes, “She is a better teacher than she is a writer, and she is a tremendous writer” (Block). The student may be comparing apples and oranges, but the comment does indicate that something happened in that classroom that is worth the attention of any writing teacher.

This project is analytical at base, but also a work of literary history. This is the first substantial treatment of Dillard’s work as a teacher. One goal is to discern her pedagogy. “A word I never heard her say,” writes her student Joanie Mackowski. Yet anyone with ideas about how to teach has a pedagogy, and Dillard thought a lot about her role in fostering good writers. Clues to her pedagogy can be found scattered among her interviews, uncollected publications, comments at public appearances, books, and other places. In the Annie Dillard Papers, housed in Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, there are dozens of journals
which include lesson plans and reflections on classroom experiences and interactions with students. The Papers also offer her letters of recommendation for students, correspondence with them, lists of recommended readings she gave her students, photocopies of readings she handed out, and more, including two abandoned attempts to write about her teaching formally.¹ These sources work together to give us Dillard’s own understanding of what she was up to—an approximation of those essays about teaching writing she never finished writing.

A teacher’s perspective offers only half the picture, though. It is the intent. What matters in the end (and proves the teacher’s efficacy) is the result, and for that the students must be consulted. Many of her students have commented on their experience with her in published interviews, online venues, and short essays. Their letters to Dillard are stored in the Beinecke. (She once said most of her personal mail comes from former students.) In order to give the students a chance to speak directly on the matter, I contacted 59 of them. In my initial e-mail, careful not to bias their responses, I explained that I was writing about Dillard as a teacher and asked if they would be willing to share anything they remembered. In particular, I requested concrete details—assignments, class structures, feedback on their writing, etc. Twenty-eight gave statements of some sort in the form of e-mail or (rarely) phone conversations. A few requested questions they could respond to, and I asked for clarification or elaboration from many after their initial reply. These statements, which add up to about 25,000 words, allowed me to test Dillard’s theories and see what effect her experiments had. I found that she was quite successful. Most of her students, many now successful published writers themselves, credit her for an intense and transformational experience that helped to make them the writers they are. When Virginia Pye writes that the course has had “a life-long influence on” her, or when Amy Nash recalls the course as “pivotal” and one “that in some ways most informed my future,” they express
sentiments common to the majority of students I contacted. As one student wrote in an evaluation, “She was more than a professor, she was a teacher.”

Of course, there is no one Annie Dillard workshop. She taught dozens of courses over about a quarter century. The genres varied. Some courses did not meet primarily in the classroom, but in private tutorials in her office. This thesis will highlight patterns over the course of her teaching career. That career began at Hollins College (Roanoke, Virginia), where she earned her B.A. in English and M.A. in Creative Writing, and where she started teaching in the spring of 1975, a year after the publication of her first two books, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Shortly after winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim*, she moved north of Puget Sound and taught at Western Washington College and Fairhaven College (Bellingham, Washington) from 1975 to 1979 and then again in 1981. Except for that brief return to Washington, she taught one or two courses a year at Wesleyan University (Middletown, Connecticut) from 1979 until around the turn of the century (with occasional years off). Each semester, well over a hundred students submitted writing samples to apply for her course, so she was in the unusual position of selecting the undergraduates in which she saw the most promise (although sometimes she took over a class after it was already filled with students who did not know who their professor would be). The students “arrived with a sense of having been chosen” (Sussman). Sometimes, those who did not make it into the course would gather outside and listen through the open window. Dillard obliged them by standing near the window and speaking up (Caldwell 40). Although she worked with some graduate students in Washington, most of her teaching career was devoted to undergraduates. She taught the three genres in which she wrote—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry—and it is worth noting that, although she is known primarily for her nonfiction, her students have published acclaimed poetry and fiction as well as nonfiction,
crediting Dillard’s early guidance. Dillard treated teaching as seriously as her writing, describing her twelve-week course in fiction writing—for a mere example—as “very well developed,” and going so far as to call it her “greatest work” (qtd. in Zaleski 8). If you and I cannot be literally inside the classroom, this thesis at least gives us a way to stand at the window, to overhear what happened there, and to learn from it.

By all accounts, Dillard was a vivid character in the classroom. Alexander Chee offers his first impression: “She walked with a cowgirl’s stride into the classroom, and from her bag withdrew her legal pad covered in notes, a thermos of coffee and a bag of Brach’s singly wrapped caramels” (63). Douglas R. Soderland writes, “Once we were in a building in which smoking was not allowed in the classrooms. Annie taught that class standing in the hall, talking through an open door to us. She would stub out her cigarettes and put the butts in the pocket of her jeans and then light the next one in one fluid motion.” Grella O’Connell remembers her “twirling the ash into an empty Grape Crush soda can.” Spencer Reece speaks of “this great nature writer who sat cross-legged on top of one of those chemistry tables that are built into the floor with the spigots and the Bunson burners. And she was pregnant.” These reports may not provide substance for Dillard’s pedagogy, but they do color our understanding of her praxis.

Despite the diversity and volume of sources listed, writing on Dillard’s pedagogy presents at least two obstacles:

1) Dillard’s most recent students took her classes over a decade ago, and her earliest students took her classes up to thirty-seven years ago. It is no secret that memory is malleable. Concrete details fade, leaving the impressions they created, which themselves shift as we fit them into subsequent knowledge and experience. However, this by no means discredits the students’ current impressions. What is important is not the veracity of any particular detail, but
the effect the experience had on the individual. As Irwin Edman writes in the foreword to Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, “Memory in action is not a dead deposit, it is a living and functional focusing of energies. . . . Living memory is the past felt in the actualities of realities, of change” (xiii-xiv). Furthermore, although memory changes, people change, and situations change, still, we can look for patterns. And, in any case, I also draw on documents that have an immediate connection to the courses: original lesson plans, notes taken by students in class, Dillard’s feedback on individual students’ writings, and anonymous course evaluations.

2) The best accounts of teachers are narratives that track, as Jane Tompkins puts it, “what the teacher learned” (*A Life in School*, subtitle). Teachers adjust their approach not only year to year, but even day to day. They study their own methods and the students’ progress and recalibrate their approach. Although I draw on statements made by 32 students, along with Dillard’s own comments, there is not enough information to follow the trajectory of many changes. The present account necessarily flattens time; however, where possible I point to changes in method Dillard adopted to better teach her students.

The volume of research I draw on could easily yield a book. Perhaps I will write one. For the present thesis, I have narrowed my focus in order to better handle my materials in a shorter space. Here I will concentrate on the various ways Dillard used reading to teach writing. Every writing teacher knows that reading can be used to teach writing. But I hope to show that this can be pushed to a degree and in ways not often adopted by those who teach creative writing.
CHAPTER II

NO SUCH THING AS TALENT

All of Dillard’s pedagogical methods are founded on her understanding of human intelligence and talent. “Everybody is smart,” she says, by which she means that everyone has some intelligence, some strength of mind (Saranac “Interview” 108). However, while she believes that everyone has some intelligence, resting on that intelligence alone gets the writer nowhere. The mind, no matter how smart, cannot run on fumes. It needs something to work with. As she says, “The only difference between people’s abilities is in the raw materials they have in their minds. That’s how educated they are” (108). An educated mind learns information and discovers what to do with it. As it turns out, this is what the writer does as well.

The necessity of education is an especially important point when studying the pedagogy of creative writing in America. One of the national myths, according to Dillard, is that “the writer just pops out of nowhere and spontaneously utters all these things freely on the page” (Saranac “Interview” 108). Great writers are often treated as if they were simply born great or as if the side hobbies they cultivated made them great writers. Beginning writers are often tempted to engage what Dillard calls the “masters” in a way that is irrelevant to writing: rather than study Hemingway’s writing, for instance, they “do what he did in his leisure time” (109). (They hunt game, not sentences.) They seem to believe that it is not what a writer studies or the work he put into shaping his knowledge that elevates his writing, but something innate that sets him apart, that makes him and other writers “natural wonders” (109). It is as if Melville walked off the
whaling ship and wrote *Moby-Dick* without cracking a book, though in fact the novel is chock full of allusions to literature and references to scientific knowledge. To demonstrate the fallaciousness of this myth, Dillard names the writers to whom this notion attaches itself most forcefully. Thoreau, she says, “was a Harvard Man” “whose reading was almost entirely in the Greek classics”; Whitman rarely left his room, but “wrote emotional journals about how he could make it seem to other people that he was always outside”; Hemingway is known for hunting and fishing, but, when not writing, spent most of his time studying Turgenev, Sherwood Anderson, and Chekhov (108-09). Writers can become educated through schooling or “the hard way, studying all the difficult works of their fields at home on their own” (“Fairhaven” 9). Writers can usefully study literature without the benefit of a formal education. In fact, neither Whitman nor Hemingway attended college; each of them acquired the education they needed as writers through solitary study. Dillard calls this method the hard way because a teacher has already struggled with many of the problems a student will face, and can therefore be a useful guide. But formal education or not, she says, “You won’t find a writer who hasn’t studied the details of the works of other writers” (“Fairhaven” 9). What qualifies as a writer’s education is the deliberate, mindful study of prior literature. The anti-intellectual line of thinking that says otherwise is merely an excuse for those writers who would like to accomplish great things without a great deal of work.

Dillard levels the playing field and implies that anyone can be a great writer when she expresses her notion that those people who “made something of their lives . . . were neither more talented, nor more disciplined, nor more energetic, nor more driven than the rest of us. They were simply better educated” (*Saranac* “Interview” 108). Although she does allow for the possibility of “inborn, God-given gifts” in fields that produce child prodigies (such as music and
mathematics), literary talent is irrelevant to successful writing (“Fairhaven” 8). It is education and putting in the work that make a great writer. In a letter to the 1993 graduates of the University of Hartford, she offers ample evidence that there is no such thing as talent by pointing out that the early poems of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop were “terrible” (17). When they started out, “their peers were doing better. But they loved poetry, and they kept at it.” Dillard believes in the American notion of the infinite perfectibility of each individual. Greatness is attainable. Whether this notion is true is debatable. But regardless of its validity as a truth claim, the idea that greatness is attainable for those who work for it and devote themselves to the craft is still a pragmatically useful pedagogical tenet, if one’s aim is to make great writers. Dillard once told her students at Wesleyan, “I started with people much more talented than me . . . and they’re dead or in jail or not writing. The difference between myself and them is that I’m writing” (qtd. in Chee 68). As these statements indicate, talent is not what makes the ultimate difference. Effort makes the ultimate difference. The novelist Alexander Chee summarizes this basic idea, which he learned in her class: “Without work, talent is only talent, promise, not product” (68). And Dillard says that “anyone can learn to” work on writing (qtd. in Chee 68). But it is not just any hard work that will do. One cannot become a great writer simply by putting in the hours writing. She believes that anyone can write well if they work hard, but for her this hard work entails a dedication to reading extensively, learning how to do that reading analytically, and learning how to scrutinize one’s own writing in light of that reading. The writer acquires abilities through hard work, abilities frequently viewed by others as talent. This belief that anyone can eventually write well is the starting point for her engagement with students, and this is why even though it is the page that teaches the writer, a teacher is also helpful so one knows how best to do the work one needs to put in. What the student needs to develop and what
the teacher is there to encourage are “habits of mind and habits of work”—these form a dedicated approach to literature that finds expression through writing (qtd. in Chee 68).

Contemporary science bares Dillard out in part. Recent studies indicate that everyone has the potential to be creative. We often lose it when we receive or anticipate criticism during childhood. On the other hand, everyone also has limitations; not everyone has the potential to be Shakespeare. According to David Shenk, “It would be folly to suggest that anyone can literally do or be anything. . . . But the new science tells us that it’s equally foolish to think that mediocrity is built into most of us, or that any of us can know our true limits before we’ve applied enormous resources and invested vast amounts of time” (10). Shakespeare or not, everyone has the raw material they can harness to write creatively.
For Dillard, masters of writing are born exactly where their books end up—in the library, which is where these habits of mind and work lead and are developed. The fuel and writerly sensibilities necessary for composition do not come from seeking out new personal experiences; rather, a writer discovers them through research and much analytical study of literature. On this, she is adamant. Her student Elaine Tietjen recounts how Dillard asked her class, if they had a choice “of going to Afghanistan or reading in the library, which should [they] do?” (104). Thinking of the many personal experiences Dillard includes in her books, the students might say Afghanistan. But the library is the place to be. “I’m convinced we’re set here on earth to read,” Dillard says. “I tell my kids [students], ‘Don’t live. Don’t travel. Go to the library’ ” (qtd. in Kissel 6). Dillard quotes her professor Louis Rubin as saying, “by the time we were five years old, we had all the experience necessary to write the greatest literature. The writer doesn’t need more experience—the writer needs to know what to do with it” (qtd. in Parrish 136). She dismisses the notion that a writer must seek out life experience as a media-fabricated “romantic misunderstanding” (qtd. in Schneeman 1). What a writer needs instead are mental experiences—experiences of language and structures on the page. Trying to write without such study is like trying to fly an airplane without having studied its controls and its relation to the atmosphere. A beginning pilot’s experience as a passenger will not get the plane off the ground. Although it may be supposed that someone who writes a nature book does so while sitting on a rock or
dangling from a tree or, as the popular early perception of Dillard had it, “sit[ting] on a tree stump and tak[ing] dictation from some little chipmunk,” the truth is that this particular author actually holes up in her study for months on end while writing a book (qtd. in Major 363). When she wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, this study was a carrel in the library. One day when the window in the carrel became too much of a distraction, she closed the Venetian blinds “for good” and taped over it her own drawing of the view the window held (*Writing Life* 29). “If I wanted a sense of the world,” she writes, “I could look at the stylized outline drawing. If I had possessed the skill, I would have painted . . . a *trompe l’oeil* mural view of all that the blinds hid. Instead, I wrote it” (29). Even though, for Dillard, the world is the ultimate subject, she regards direct contact with that world as a distraction when writing. “One wants a room with no view,” she writes, “so imagination can meet memory in the dark” (26). She refers to E. M. Forster’s novel *A Room with a View*; the room of Forster’s title is intended for someone who wants to experience the world by looking out the window, and is thus not, according to Dillard, a writer’s room. In literature, the represented world is inevitably filtered through human perception and imagination; rather than fighting this subjectivity, Dillard embraces it as fundamental to the literary text. A writer deals with imagination through language. A real window on a dynamic world can distract the mind from its concentration on language; a static, stylized drawing is less of a distraction and has the benefit of already being filtered through the imagination.

The personal experience Dillard thinks *is* most necessary is not based on gaining an understanding of life or gathering material, but on building a sense of bravery. When teaching her first writing course, she said she would tell a young person who wanted to write to first conquer his physical fears because a “blank piece of paper is frightening. Your own self-consciousness is frightening. But if you have the confidence, then everything is okay” (Annie
Dillard: A Personal Side” 15). Dillard calls herself “physically brave,” and found herself on the front page of the newspaper at seventeen when her illegal drag racing landed her in the hospital (qtd. in Grauerholz H2). That sense of fearlesslessness can be applied to the page in order to dare to do what might end in disaster. On the last page of Pilgrim, Dillard offers an image of this bravery: “And then you walk fearlessly . . . like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men” (my italics, 275-76). This is not daring for its own sake. This is daring, more fully aware of danger than others, but done in order to fully “carr[y]” the writer’s “vision” (276).

Dillard’s practice is somewhat more complicated than the get thee to a library dictum, though it ends up supporting the basic idea. Most of her books draw extensively from her personal experience even they also draw extensively from the library. Dillard has both visited and written about Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands, China, North Yemen, Israel, and Antarctica. However, she does not travel to gain material for her art. She was sent to the Galapagos for her first and only travel assignment as a contributing editor for Harper’s, and found that the trip was lovely but finishing the writing assignment was one of her most excruciating writing experiences. After finishing it, she concluded, “it wasn’t art, finally,” though she had hoped it would be (Hammond 33). After this, she did take two writing jobs that paid her to travel—to Yemen and Antarctica—though it seems she had no plans to make art of them. She wrote a couple straightforward travel pieces about Yemen after her return and reported back daily on Antarctica during the trip itself (“Yemen: The Land Nobody Knows,” “A Sojourner In North Yemen,” “Antarctica”). It was not until sixteen years after her trip to Yemen that a short incident, which did not appear in the travel articles, found its way into one of her books, For the Time Being. Citing Wordsworth’s dictum about “emotions recollected in tranquility,” she incorporates
personal experiences into her writing long after the events passed so that the original emotion does not cloud her vision of the work (Friends of the Library). As it turns out, there is a dialectic between her experience and writing. She had these experiences in Yemen, China, and Israel that became the basis for some of the writing of that book, but she could not have written about them without first going to the library and reading extensively about the history of countries she visited. She needed that to clarify her understanding of those experiences and for her imagination to explore them. However, she did not seek out new experiences to write about while she traveled. She made use of what she had. If she had stayed home and not visited these countries, she still might have written a book as critically applauded as For the Time Being, but it would be a different sort of book using different material.

One might think that to say something new, it would be imperative to gain experiences that no one else has had. But the newness of a thing has to do with combining old things in an original way. It is the treatment that counts. This is why Dillard writes that “the flimsiest narrative occasion will serve” when selecting material to write about (“How I Wrote” 19). The most riveting and moving events in her personal narratives often revolve around the seemingly mundane—e.g. a moth flies into a candle, eye contact is made with a weasel, a child engages in dinner conversation. And so Dillard did not forbid her students from mining their own lives for material. In fact, in some classes, “the assignments she gave ran toward memoir” (Gershon). But personal experience is mere grist for the mill. Like anything else, it needs to be processed by the imagination. It needs to be shaped into metaphor. When one class was assigned to write about a person, they “were not just writing a sketch of a person”; rather, that person “embodied a theme or characteristic” (Soderland). The simple fact that a person exists or that an event happened is not in itself significant. The writer creates significance in the reader’s mind. In her master’s
thesis, Dillard notes the process by which the fact of a relatively normal pond attains significance for a reader: “When he finishes Walden, Thoreau’s reader has seen the pond so often, in so many varying contexts, that it assumes in his mind the proportions of mythic grandeur quite beyond what it actually warranted by its simple physical presence” (“Walden Pond” 3). Through the writer’s imaginative treatment, the object becomes transformed. In fact, he is so successful at recreating the pond in his book that visitors to the actual pond, hoping to capture a slice of the elevated experience they find in the book, are often disappointed.

Dillard says she learned to write not by recording personal experiences, but by studying literature (Caldwell 32). In particular, she “learned how to write by taking lyrical poems apart and understanding how a text was put together” (qtd. in O’Grady Fox 10). She learned this skill in literature courses, and says that “you learn better how to take a text apart and put it back together from a literature course” than from traditional creative writing workshops (“Tete a Tete”). This getting inside of literature is how writers learn what is involved in generating new works, and many of the activities in her courses center on gaining this intimate knowledge of literature. In fact, this engagement with literature was a crucial pedagogical discovery for Dillard.

In her early years teaching at Western Washington University, she followed a common model for writing workshops. Her student Nick Gattuccio writes, “Each week a handful of students would have work ready and would have mimeographed copies for the entire class. The student read the work and then discussion and commentary followed.” After a few years of conducting this standard workshop in which everyone reads everyone else’s writing and shares thoughts on what makes the pieces good or bad, work or not work, she realized that this format can make students nauseated and lead them to see psychiatrists. That was her own experience with workshops as a student (Fairhaven “Interview” 93). The standard workshop often backfires because the students
comment on what they would do with another student’s writing without understanding what their peer is attempting to do. To address this problem, Dillard altered her writing workshops so that they look more like the literature courses from which she learned so much about the way a text works. Rather than focusing on the students’ writing in class, they read published authors. Gattuccio writes “that for the duration of the workshop one considered oneself an acolyte in the seminary of Order of the Literary Masters. (Only a little bit of the tongue in the cheek.)” By the end of the semester, the students acquired “extensive critical facilities” they could use both to better understand how the literature they read works and how they could apply that understanding to their own writing (Frankfurter).
CHAPTER IV

OLD THEORY FOR A NEW GENERATION

To be a great writer, one must be a great analytical reader, and for Dillard that means aligning with the reading practices of New Criticism. Although she is aware of the critiques of New Criticism and identifies herself as part of “the generation of postmodernists,” she was trained as a New Critical reader at Hollins, and finds that this approach to texts “is good for writers” (qtd. in Hunter 242, in Parrish 134). As such, the skills required by New Criticism are those she believes a writer must have to be a good reader. Dillard, whose Living by Fiction demonstrates her familiarity with contemporary theory, believes the sociological emphasis of theory in recent decades—which “sees writers as mere unconscious spokespeople for their races, classes, and genders”—has nothing to offer the writer (qtd. in Hunter 242). It does not train its adherents to scrutinize what actually appears in the text. Dillard encountered this firsthand when the critic David Lavery wrote about her as a feminist without using any textual support. In an unpublished letter to the editor of that journal, she called him out for his “methodological and interpretive error,” which she described as “irresponsible prejudgment of matters outside the texts” (1). I do not mean to imply that sociological criticism always misreads texts, but merely that it does not prioritize close reading as New Criticism does. The result is that the critics are often not as attentive to the text, including its linguistic and structural dimensions (the things that make it art). By contrast, “New Criticism focused on close readings of texts, and as such gave writers heart” (qtd. in Hunter 242). She attributes her own skills as a reader and writer to the
New Critical approach, and this set of ideas about what it means to be a good reader shapes what she tells her students about how to fashion a text. The close reading emphasized by this theory empowers writers by fostering an attentiveness to language. What Nancy C. Parrish calls the “discipline required by close study of language” and structure fosters an attentiveness to these elements that results in better writing (135). Dillard writes that New Criticism “eschews . . . extra-textual readings of texts. As such, it [is] the best possible critical training for writers” (qtd. in Parrish 135). New Criticism offers a text-first approach that focuses the writer on his job: the page. Because the reader is trained to keep the critical focus on the page and look for literary technique and effects—such as symbolism, imagery, allusion, and alliteration—this focus naturally leads the reader to think of the text as something crafted. The emphasis on understanding how a text works from the inside through the study of techniques and effects prepares the writer to fashion texts using these techniques and effects as tools of the craft.

In the fashioning of that text, the writer trained in New Criticism is led to think about its eventual reader. Dillard writes that this theory “implie[s] that someone [will] read the text and discover its structures and internal relationships” (134-35). Knowing that someone will read the text closely, the writer tries to anticipate how each element of her text will affect that engagement. Knowing that it will be read closely, the writer makes every word count. As Dillard says, New Criticism “prized concision” (qtd. in Parrish 134). Furthermore, this expectation of a careful reader leads Dillard to consider that reader as a “guest” to whom she must “appeal” rather than as someone she must “impress” (“How I Wrote” 19, “Tete a Tete”). Therefore, she writes, “I try not to hang on the reader’s arm and bore him with my life story, my fancy self-indulgent writing, or my opinions” (“How I Wrote” 19). She urges her students to do likewise, to constantly think of “what the reader needs and what the reader doesn’t” and “how every sentence
and every line will strike the reader” (MacKenzie, “Notes” 67). That, she taught, is the writer’s “highest responsibility” (Laidlaw).

Dillard’s New Critical training as a close reader shaped the way she engaged with her students’ work. Every week during a course, she painstakingly commented on a stack of student manuscripts, going “through their writing inch by inch” (“Annie Dillard Talks” 427). The students often printed or typed their work triple-spaced so that Dillard had room to write comments on what made everything work or not in the writing. “I think some teachers think that if the students have a good heart that is enough,” she says. “But it isn’t. Students want both positive and negative reinforcement. So what I do is mark them black and blue and then say, ‘Very good!’ Instead of confusing them, somehow it works.” A reporter noted that one student called her at home to say that “[n]o one had ever taken such care with his prose” (Caldwell 36). One of the prime virtues of her critiques are their specificity. The poet Spencer Reece says that when “comment[ing] assiduously and in great detail,” “she would look at every word, question definitions.” David Block writes, “The best part of her critiques were that they . . . pointed out exactly what worked and what didn’t: what was overwritten, and when I showed a ‘good ear.’” And the novelist Elizabeth Graver notes that “[s]ometimes she could be almost unbearably honest. ‘This is ruinously sentimental; I couldn’t finish it,’ she wrote on the first piece I handed into her, a poem about an aging dog” (128). Not only did this careful reading teach the students to be careful writers (Reece), but the respect she showed for them as writers made (at least many of) them realize they could go somewhere with their craft. “Annie took me (and all her students) utterly seriously as a writer, and so conveyed to me that I should take myself seriously, too” (Graver 127-28). It gave poet Amy Nash “confidence to trust my own sense as a writer and to participate in a dialogue about poetry.” Knowing that someone would read their work carefully,
her students strove harder to produce texts worthy of that reading and build the self-assurance necessary to do so.

The values of New Criticism also shape the texts of those writers trained to read according to its precepts. Foremost among its values, for Dillard, is the notion of structural coherence or unity. She writes, “[New Criticism] implied that the writer’s job was to produce coherent texts” (qtd. in Parrish 134). This implication molds part of her rules for what makes something literature: texts are “literary insofar as the parts of their structures cohere internally, insofar as the things are in them for the sake of the work itself” (“To Fashion a Text” 73). This is foundational for Dillard, as it provides her definition of art itself: “In this structural unity lies integrity, and it is integrity which separates art from nonart” (Living by Fiction 28). She describes literature as being structurally similar to “the Rutherford model of the atom,” where the “electrons . . . are spinning like crazy around the center, but the center exists only for them and they exist only for the center and the whole thing is a little object d’art, it’s a little piece of art for art’s sake or mind for mind’s” (Fairhaven “Interview” 88). For her, the internal relationships of a text’s structure produce its meaning through a reflexive process in which each part of a text “shed[s] light” on the others (qtd. in Zaranka 1). She came to understand this process and how to use literary structures in her own writing by “devot[ing] fifteen years to the study of how the structures of poems carry meaning” (“To Fashion a Text” 74). That study leads her to tell students that “The work’s unity is more important than anything else about it” (“Notes” 67). Although those who do not hold to New Criticism tenets may not agree that “Art works in terms of structures,” this belief is effective pragmatically in that it disciplines the writer to pay close attention to the whole of his text and to ask how it functions as a unit (Fairhaven “Interview” 89).
While such a view of art might at first seem limiting, it does not necessarily lead to an old-fashioned text. Under the guiding principal of coherence, Dillard has pushed aesthetic boundaries throughout her career by exploring potentials of meaning in structure and symbol (“Nonfiction Statement”). From her first to her most recent book of nonfiction, she has defied expectations about the possibilities of the genre. In his review of Dillard’s last nonfiction book, *For the Time Being*, writer Steve Szilagyi called it “a dazzling and unclassifiable work of nonfiction” (111). In her author’s note, Dillard warns the reader that the book’s “narratives keep breaking. Its form is unusual” (ix). The book is fragmented and intentionally disorienting and confusing. But despite its apparent randomness of juxtaposition, there is an underlying structure, a pattern of relationships. The reader can come to see the book’s coherence through its interconnected meanings, so that by the middle of the book, “the disparate scenes, true stories, facts, and ideas will be growing familiar” (*For the Time Being* x). If the subjects that make up that book—sand, clouds, history, birth, etc.—were “yoke[d] . . . together without just cause,” “It would be mere comedy” or simply “precious” (*Living by Fiction* 33).

This emphasis on self-coherence explains, in part, Dillard’s insistence on isolation from the world while writing. The danger of relying overmuch on the world is that the writer will draw on conventional cultural ideas or feelings about a subject to substitute for the work the language should be doing. Dillard labels this reliance *sentimental*, her word for anything in a piece of writing that “attempts to borrow from the world” “preexistent emotions” that “come on tap” (*Living by Fiction* 26). The actions, objects, and language in a text should work together to generate the text’s own power. A work of art, Dillard writes, “is the creation of coherent contexts” (32). These are contexts in which new feelings and meanings can be attached to (perhaps familiar) objects. The writer’s task is to make this possible through specific arrangements of her
material, not to ask the reader to reproduce conventional meanings and feelings. As she says, “Melville did not discover the meaning of whales, nor Thoreau the meaning of ponds” (qtd. in Schneeman 4). Instead, they used their knowledge of literary structure and the facts from their reading to generate new meanings in their texts. The goal for her students is specifically to create a coherent work that does not rely primarily on a previous set of associations.

Although Dillard advocates a New Critical approach for writers, it should be pointed out that other theories do have their place in understanding a writer’s objectives and position. Poststructuralism is a useful temper to New Criticism in its observation that no text, despite a writer’s aims, ever achieves complete unity. Freudianism is useful in pointing out that no writer ever understands all the implications of her text. These ideas are now commonplace, but they give the reader a necessary humility, since she realizes she does not have complete control over her work and how it is read. This should not, however, prevent her from striving for unity or for mastery over her text. These are more directional movements than ultimate goals. The idea, for instance, behind the high jump is to get as high as possible; the ultimate goal, an infinite vertical leap, is impossible. Yet we cheer as success those athletes who come closer to the goal than others—it is the progress in a particular direction that matters.

Dillard acknowledges that the New Critical approach to reading also has its drawbacks for writers. She cites two dangers, one that affects the writer’s self-perception and one that directly affects the writing: 1) New Criticism idolizes the writer, and this elevation can warp the writer’s understanding of himself. Dillard writes, “[New Criticism] prized ‘the artist’—‘the poet’—rather too highly . . . setting him up in the place of a priest who transmitted society’s highest values” (qtd. in Parrish 135). This “snobbery appalled” her so much that she wrote a critical thesis for her creative writing master’s and perhaps “didn’t take creative writing at all”
during the year she studied for the degree (135). 2) New Criticism can also negatively influence writers in its tendency to make readers think of the meaning of a text as something that is hidden “like Easter eggs” (138). Block writes that when Dillard was a student she believed that reading a good text should be like flying above clouds in a plane where “every now and then the peak of a mountain . . . jut[s] up through the clouds,” and between these jolts of clarity, we the reader must “picture in our mind’s eye what we cannot see.” This attitude is particularly dangerous in beginning writers, as the students can easily learn the technique of hiding things, think that is what literature does, and then plant things to which they attach no significance but which sound significant. Dillard recounts an example of this being done in a graduate student’s long poem. The poem alternated between making “oblique reference” to the New Testament and to NASA (“The Purification of Poetry” 298). Dillard writes that

After many careful readings I was unable to discern any connection between anything and something else. / The next day I asked the poet what the Christian and NASA subplots were about. He congratulated me on having noticed them. They were the hidden meaning. They provided the poem’s texture and structure, and constituted both the significance and importance of the whole. They made the text (to use a term overheard at a writers’ conference) “lit critable.” . . . When I protested that the parts of the poem must really cohere and signify, the poet shrugged. Everyone else liked it. . . . It has since won a major prize. (298-99)

This poet missed the New Critical message that a work must have both form and substance, and Dillard answered the poet with a very New Critical statement: “Art can borrow neither significance, power, nor beauty from the world. Art must make its own.” (Another way of saying it must not be sentimental.) Yet it is true that New Criticism, like most literary theories, does not emphasize clarity. There is nothing inherently wrong with obscurity, but it does alienate most readers and discourage them from reading to the end. She calculates that it would take “three weeks at eight hours a day to comprehend the surfaces and structures of [David Jones’s]
Anathemata—in other words, to read it as it requires to be read,” and asks, “Who will make this effort?” (“The Purification of Poetry” 298).

Before writing Pilgrim, “Dillard had always considered, as New Criticism seemed to argue, that strong writing had meanings that were well hidden” (Parrish 138). But her former professor John Moore encouraged her “to make clear, and to state boldly, what it was [she] was up to” in the first chapter of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (qtd. in Parrish 138). She “disagreed, but did it anyway. It was good advice.” Eventually, writes Block, “She came to realize . . . that writing is first and foremost communication, and it is the responsibility of the writer to elucidate the valley beneath the clouds, to explain it clearly so that the reader can understand.” She made a paradigm shift in her understanding of writing’s purpose, which led to a strong focus on the reader, which she passed on to her students. This is perhaps why, according to Dillard’s student David Frankfurter, “She insisted we think of our works as for performance, for public reading.” Thinking of a live audience, which needs to be engaged without the advantage of re-reading a poem or lingering over certain lines, surely introduces an element of clarity to the writing. Since then, she writes, “I try to say what I mean and not ‘hide the hidden meaning’ ” and likes to quote J. Henri Fabre, who wrote, “Clarity is the sovereign courtesy of the writer. . . . I do my best to achieve it” (“How I Wrote” 19). She demands that her students do their best to achieve it, too (Block).

By instructing her students in this model of how to read and regard texts, Dillard implicitly passes on a modified New Critical training. If creative writing teachers today cannot embrace New Criticism—who is bold enough to go backwards?—they might instead incorporate the principles of reader-response theory into their workshops. Although it is not one of the ruling theoretical approaches of the day, reader-response emphasizes many of the things that made New
Criticism good training for writers. Foremost among its virtues: it acknowledges the reader as a vital participant, a co-producer of meaning.

As the name implies, reader-response forces students to think of the reader. And the focus on the reader’s experience encourages close reading. In order to understand the way a reader navigates a text and constructs its meaning, it is crucial to gain an intimate knowledge of the landscape being navigated. By studying the way readers navigate a text, students become aware of the way techniques do not merely work with other techniques in a piece, but control and are controlled by the reader. In a traditional workshop, the teacher can easily make this point merely by having the students vocalize their experience hearing fifteen different takes on one thing they wrote. This also tempers the primary flaw in the reader-response approach, which posits that “the reader” will inevitably have a given response, as if there were laws governing a reader the way the laws of science govern the universe. Traditional workshops make sophisticated theorists—these students know that every reading will be somewhat different, sometimes wildly so.

If the writer understands the role that the reader plays, she can stop trying to do the things that must be done in the reader’s mind. She can consciously leave room for the reader’s imagination and thinking. This writer realizes that regardless of genre, her writing bears resemblance to a play script in that it is never complete on the page. The better she understands how readers construct meaning, the more she can manipulate the language to take advantage of that fact. Pedagogical theorist Martin Bickman cites David Walker, who writes that a Stevens poem tends to have a “rhetoric [that] establishes its own incompleteness; it is presented not as completed discourse but as a structure that invites the reader to project himself or herself into its world, and thus to verify it as contiguous with reality.” Like Wallace Stevens, the writer can “challeng[e]” and consciously “involve[e] the reader as a participant in the making of meaning”
(Bickman 158). We may keep the principle of coherence, but it cannot be satisfied without the reader.

Dillard has not commented on reader-response theory, but I predict that she might be open to it. It does not fall under the category of sociology, which she finds to be “a dead end” in dealing with literary texts (American Literary History 243). And Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Dillard calls “our great essayist” and whose work, she writes, “suits me to the bone,” thought of language in a way that prefigures many reader-response ideas. Here he captures the theory precisely:

> Every word we speak is million-faced or convertible to an indefinite number of applications. If it were not so, we could read no book. Your remark would fit only your own case not mine. And Dante who descried his circumstance would be unintelligible now. But a thousand readers in a thousand different years shall read his story and find it a picture of their story by making of course a new application of every word. (Journals 8 157)

Intentionally or not, Emerson’s rapport with reader-response is especially evident in First We Read, Then We Write, a recent book by Emerson biographer (and Dillard’s husband) Robert D. Richardson. He writes that for Emerson, “Coherence . . . is something that happens in the reader’s mind” (36). Emerson was aware of the need to leave space for readers, and offered advice that would shock most of them: “The most interesting writing” does “not quite satisfy the reader” (qtd. in Talks with Emerson 22). If the writing completely satisfies readers on its own, there is no room for their own thinking. Emerson’s writing encourages the passive reader to become an active one: “Try and leave a little thinking for” the reader, he advises writers. “A little guessing does no harm, so I would assist him with no connections. If you can see how the harness fits, he can. But make sure that you see it.” Emerson trusts the reader’s intelligence, and asks him to make use of it. And notice that he specifies “a little guessing,” rather than guessing at the whole valley. Reading is already a more participatory medium than, say, film, in that the
reader must use her imagination to construct in her mind the picture a writer sketches. Emerson not only recognizes this, but adopts a prose style that takes advantage of the reader’s participation: “If you desire to arrest attention, to surprise,” he advises, “do not give me the facts in the order of cause and effect, but drop one or two links in the chain, and give me a cause and an effect two or three times removed” (Journals 7 90). The writer can make the reader think certain thoughts rather than merely receive them. The difference is between the writer who trumpets the importance of the number five, and the writer who creates the shock of thought in a reader by throwing the numbers two and three together. As an additional benefit, the reader becomes more invested in a text that causes her to have her own ideas.

Dillard adopts this strategy to a greater and greater degree throughout her career. Even in her first prose book, where she utilizes an elaborate structure of paired chapters that build up a via positiva vision of the world only to wipe it out and follow the via negativa, she does not burden the reader with this information and only explained it in a single interview. By the time of For the Time Being, the writing is mostly juxtaposition with little exposition. As Hal Crowther writes, “Dillard works in collage, patching and layering with things that seem scarcely related to each other” (145). In his review, Sam Pickering notes that this juxtaposition of unlike things “provoke[s] thought” in the reader, especially as “Dillard rarely presses juxtaposition into conclusion” (cxxii). Like Emerson, Dillard applies the strategy to thoughts; she also applies it to feelings: “I’ve found that if I take pains to be precise about things, feelings will take care of themselves. If you try to force a reader’s feelings through dramatic writing (‘writhe,’ ‘ecstasy,’ ‘scream’), you make a fool of yourself, like someone at a party trying too hard to be liked” (“How I Wrote” 20). Concrete description evokes the emotion the writer specifically leaves out, just as leaving out connections elicits thoughts. Dillard’s “someone at a party trying too hard to
be liked” is a good description of a writer who does not understand what the reader brings to the table and therefore overcompensates—which applies both to evoking feelings and thinking. It also indicates that although Dillard is right to credit New Criticism’s influence on her writing, she might also recognize the overlapping benefits of reader-response theory.
The writer needs materials with which to fashion a text and to form a structure. The writer lives in the library to fill the mind with factual information in order to have something to write about and work with. Because, as Dillard writes to the creative writing program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, “the more research you do, the more materials you will have to play with” (“Notes” 68). To this end, she alternated her weekly assignments for her nonfiction classes: “ ‘Bring in forty pages of notes, typed,’ and then, ‘Bring me ten pages of publishable prose’ ” (Silver-Isenstadt, “Annie Dillard the teacher”). She had worked out a ratio: “You need forty pages of factual notes for ten pages of publishable prose.” There are at least three reasons to gather this much material before beginning to write:

1) All creative writing is dependent on a material base. It engages the world, and must pay close attention to what we know about it. “To start a narrative,” Dillard writes, “you need a batch of things. Not feelings, not opinions, not sentiments, not judgments, not arguments, but specific objects and events” (“How I Wrote” 19). One expects a teacher to advocate the searching for and use of facts in nonfiction; however, it is not as common to find a writing teacher who instructs students learning to write poetry and fiction to do this. It is possible to write a novel or book of poetry without doing any research. It is unlikely, though, and Dillard advocates for making it a more deliberate part of the process. The same year she published *Pilgrim*, she published an almost forgotten poem called “The Poetry of the Fact,” and mentioned
in an interview that she might use that as the title for her next book of poetry (McPherson 4). “I work with the given, created, natural world,” she said, “and treat it as metaphor. But I also treat it as fact because the more you learn about it the more rich the metaphor becomes, the more incredible.” This is evident in her first book of poetry, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*, filled with scientific and historical facts. When asked whether “the process of writing a novel [is] different from writing nonfiction,” she said, “The process is very much the same” (“A Lesson” 28). And in fact, her two novels are filled with the results of her research. But her experience provides a cautionary note. She researched for sixteen months before writing her first novel, *The Living* (1992), and said the “book practically wrote itself because the research was so suggestive” (Cantwell 40). While research is meant to be suggestive, perhaps the feeling that the book wrote itself should have been a warning sign. Four years after it was published, she told an audience at a literary conference that her use of the research resulted in a book that was “so badly over-realized that the idea [of the book] was completely lost, and everybody says, ‘Well, here’s a history of Watcom County, 1892 to 1895’ ” (“John Hersey”). After it was published, Blackstone Audio told her that the unabridged audio book would take up eight tapes, and they were going to cut that down to two. She protested, and they settled on four. When they sent her the manuscript of what they were going to tape, she says, “it was so much a better book than the book I’d written. I really learned a lot from that” (“Annie Dillard’s Tale”). Her next novel, *The Maytrees*, published fifteen years after the first, used historical details in a more spare and evocative manner. She “had 300 pages of files of historical data on the time and the place,” but chose not to say all she knew in the book. She realized that “the story wouldn’t bear it; it’s a simple little story. You can’t pile all this stuff on the back of a frail couple” (“A Lesson” 28). Instead of
letting the research put her at its service, she put it at hers by asking herself what the book was about and striking anything unrelated.

2) Another reason to do extensive research is that the material lends the writer structure: “It turns out,” Dillard says, “that when you have a lot of material, you just automatically sort of organize it” (“Annie Dillard Talks” 425). With a lot of material to deal with, one notices similarities, and categories suggest themselves that would not be readily apparent before gathering the material. This is most notable with Pilgrim, where she started with 1,003 four-by-six index cards filled with information, quotations, and writing from her journals. As she read through them, she realized that they naturally split into different groups. She stacked those cards together, and each stack became the basis of a different chapter.

3) Extensive research gives rise to new ideas. Dillard likes to quote the “great French naturalist of the eighteenth century, [the Comte de] Buffon, [who] said, ‘Let us gather facts in order to have ideas.’ . . . when you gather enough facts, you will start to have ideas about those facts” (“Annie Dillard Talks” 425). Facts are used both to devise theories and to test them against reality. Conversely, if the writer begins a piece with the intention of making a particular point, “that will just lead [her] to reiterating clichés” (“How I Wrote” 19-20). Complex and compelling ideas arise from particular assortments and arrangements of facts. In Dillard’s own work, her journal is essential for recording quotations, information, thoughts, and occasional personal experiences—in other words, it is essential for recording facts (understood broadly) for her writing. Over the years, she has filled dozens of journals, mostly with quotations from her reading and her thoughts on the material. She writes, “It’s terrific having all these materials handy. It saves and makes available all those years of reading. Otherwise, I’d forget everything, and life wouldn’t accumulate, but merely pass” (20). These journals provide the material for
nearly everything she writes. Aside from providing subject matter, the journals represent what
she calls “a lifetime of thinking.” A writer’s reading is not passive; a collection of her own
thoughts and those that excite her from other writers constitute a journey of the mind that
ultimately finds expression in her books. The use of reading journals in writing is something
Dillard discovered by learning to take notes in school, though she likely observed the practice in
her study of Thoreau and Emerson as well (Fairhaven “Interview” 91). By passing the technique
on to her students, she helps them “save” their years of reading and makes the transition from
blank page to finished book somewhat easier.

Part of research is throwing one’s mind against the unknown. It brings together materials
the writer previously did not know were available to juxtapose. Dillard chastises those who
“know precisely which books [they] want” to reference when writing: “How can you do real
work if you already know everything? Where is the chaos, the clash and grate of disparate
materials, that makes sparks? Where’s the parade?” (“Why I Live” 92). As Emerson says, even
“bare lists of words are found suggestive to an imaginative and excited mind” (“The Poet” 455).
Dillard takes this idea and runs with it. To think of new ideas, she would sometimes “read part of
any poetry anthology’s index of first lines. The parallels sounded strong and suggestive. They
could set me off, perhaps” (Writing Life 50). (She even composed a poem culled entirely from an
index of first lines.) She gave the students a way to think of ideas by asking them to find
“interesting” and “unusual items” and “Make a list,” after which they were to “Juggle” the items
on that list and create “transitions and then repetitions” with them (qtd. in Shainin). This is a
version of an exercise used in the poetry workshops Dillard took as an undergraduate in which
each student contributes a word to a list and the following week they each turn in a poem using
most of these unrelated words suggested by the class. Inevitably, the students write their best
poems of the year that way. She later stated that crucial thing about the exercise was that students learned to generate connections between things previously unconnected, which is what art does (Friends of the Library). The clash of materials, like the clash of words, reveal new connections to be fostered between old things.

But what materials should the writer select? How should he decide on a subject? Dillard writes that the subject should not be merely what interests the writer; the writer needs a subject that he alone finds fascinating. “Why do you never find anything written about that idiosyncratic thought you advert to, about your fascination with something no one else understands?” Dillard asks (The Writing Life 67). “Because it is up to you. . . . You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.” Whatever idiosyncratic subject the writer chooses is what will give a voice to the writer and offer new information or a new perspective to the reader.
CHAPTER VI

THE INTERPENETRATION OF ART AND ARTIST

Great writers and the beginning writers in Dillard’s workshops read for more than gathering materials. They read widely and analytically in order to get inside literature and see how it works. Whereas most writing workshops primarily use class time to focus on student writing, class time in Dillard’s workshops focus primarily on published literature. Gattuccio writes that, as far as he can discern, Dillard’s pedagogical philosophy is “the utter subjugation to the church of literature.” Anything less may interfere with the learning process. When one of her students was set to travel abroad after graduation, Dillard warned her not to “let Europe distract [her] permanently” (qtd. in Graver 128). In her own education at Hollins, Dillard had to make this decision between life experience and literary study. Her parents urged her to study abroad for a semester, but she writes that she declined to go because “Rubin advised against it, if I was serious about the English major; he said I’d lose the thread of my thinking and fail to learn the field in depth. He was right” (qtd. in Parrish 136). Rubin was not advising that she stay at Hollins to take more creative writing classes, but rather that she take more literature classes (and for Rubin, as for Dillard, literature courses are studies in New Criticism).

In her journal, Dillard cites a Psychology Today interview with Ulric Neisser, who coined the term cognitive psychology, where he says that experts are expert not because they are more intelligent than others (a concept he rejects), but because of their knowledge of their field, particularly its “possibilities” and the “limits of the medium” (62). Neisser points out that an
artist like Picasso not only knows his medium and what has been done in it, but also “sees possibilities that others have not seen, but that objectively exist. Picasso showed us possibilities that no one else had even considered.” Dillard compares this to the players of court games, an idea she later expanded in *The Writing Life*, where she says that the writer, like the “expert” tennis player, “plays the edges.” Dillard writes, “The writer knows his field—what has been done, what could be done, the limits—the way a tennis player knows the court” (*Writing Life* 69). Hitting the ball in the middle of the court is often safe, and therefore boring. To play the edges means to press up against the limits of what literature can do, without crossing the boundary past which language and art fail. Just so, the student needs to know his field so he knows what has been done and how literature works and knows the possibilities of what he can do in it. Dillard advocates adopting the library as a second home because “You know life. You’ve been in life. You need to know literature. And know it inside-out. . . . You need to know what’s been done! Steep yourself in it. Like a teabag!” (qtd. in Lee). The intimate knowledge of literature needed to write well cannot be acquired by mere passive reading. In her own case, Dillard says she

went back to the good nature books that I had read. And I analyzed them. I wrote outlines of whole books—outlines of chapters—so that I could see their structure. And I copied down their transitional sentences or their main sentences or their closing sentences or their lead sentences. I especially paid attention to how these writers made transitions between paragraphs and scenes. (“Annie Dillard Talks” 425)

This process taught her not only the structures good writers had used, but also how the reader engages with those structures. She learned, for instance, that the “reader is sophisticated enough” that “you do not have to lead the reader by the hand” (425). Through careful study of literature, the writer learns structural information and stylistic information. She holds these in her mind not only so that she can better understand what she reads, but also so that she can apply it to her own
writing. When this information is needed, it will be ready and close at hand.

In order that her students will learn what she learned from her experiments, Dillard has them re-enact her experiments. So that the students will analyze the inner workings of a text, she has them dissect published writing just as she dissected books when she learned this tactic on her own. Douglas MacKenzie says that in the class he took from Dillard, the students broke down Loren Eiseley’s essay “The Star Thrower” “sentence by sentence,” an essay Dillard describes as “so symbolic you need a cranberry rake to wade through it” and an excellent model of how a “whole array of facts can function narratively” (qtd. in Zaranka 3). Among the array of facts are scientific facts, biographical events, personal feelings, allegorical facts, anecdotal facts, and so on. MacKenzie says the process of breaking the essay down to see how it was constructed “was sort of brutal. There was no stone left unturned.” But by doing so, he learned from the inside how this simultaneously factual and symbolic essay worked—how the various parts work together and work on the reader. And unlike a biology student who, after dissecting a frog to understand its inner workings, cannot then put together a new frog, the writing student who dissects a work of literature develops both a conscious and an instinctual knowledge of how to put together a new creative text. Seeing the text from the inside, the writer learns what the various pieces are doing, how they work, and what possibilities and limitations this knowledge presents to new writing.

Although Dillard equipped the students to learn from literature on their own, she also offered personalized reading recommendations based on their writing output during the semester. She would explain what they needed to know to get to the next level—what they needed to pay attention to in their reading so they could apply it to their writing: “You could do this very well (you already do)—but you will need to focus it first, and then push it” (qtd. in Shainin). For
instance, she encouraged them to deepen their focus. She told her student Norma Shainin that “there is a little wee shred of womanish trivializing in your fiction. It worries me, its concerns are sometimes so small. Have you read *Moby-Dick* lately?” (qtd. in Shainin). Shainin writes, “Her ideas were always very large.” The recommendation might help the student see a way out of a problem and strengthen a weakness. She also wrote on Shainin’s story, “There’s very good wit in this—sharpen your taste for literary wit by reading Robert Benchley, & Thurber, and Faulkner.” In such a comment, Dillard shows the student what she is already doing well so the student can use that awareness to grab hold of her strengths and apply them to greater ends. By pushing the students to develop their strengths even further, Dillard impels them to take what they are already good at and become a master of it. In this way, students developed their voices as writers.

A familiarity with literature becomes a toolbox from which the writer can draw when facing problems in his own work. He can draw on Thurber for techniques of wit, for instance. In her own case, Dillard used this toolbox when she wrote one of her best-regarded essays, “Total Eclipse,” and encountered what seemed like an intractable problem. She had dozens of pages of things she wanted to say about her experience witnessing a total eclipse, all of them happening at different levels, but didn’t know how to tell it narratively when the event described happened in less than half a minute. At first, it seemed like the only solution was to say, “Then this happened, and then also simultaneously I want you to remember this,” through the whole piece (92nd Street Y). Then she thought of the work of Faulkner, who often retold the same event from multiple perspectives, and she decided to tell the story four times, each time at a different level of consciousness. As she explained to an audience,

the reader has to log a certain amount of time with that experience, and you can make the time infinitely slow, which is what many fine writers do, or you can do it and then do it again
and then do it again, in the way Faulkner keeps coming back to [the] little girl up the pear tree—muddy bottom of her drawers. . . . You just keep coming back and coming back and coming back to those things with renewed insight every time.

This is essentially what rhyme is—repetition with difference—only here it is done with images or scenes. It is effective, further, because it allows the “reader . . . to log a certain amount of time with that experience.” Having not merely read Faulkner, but also studied what it was that made his techniques successful, Dillard was able to draw on those studies and solve her problem. This is one reason why, according to her student Brett Laidlaw, her course “was about learning to read as a writer reads.”

Another reason the writer must enter into literature is to cast off false conceptions of what literature is, or to throw away the bad tools. Every junior higher with a crush thinks he can write poetry, even if he never reads it. There is a popular misconception that poetry is, in addition to other misconceptions, simply frilly language. This poeticizing impulse has remarkable staying power, and must be stripped from the student’s poetic impulses. Mark Schafer writes that Dillard “pushed us . . . to discard all words and phrases that poeticized, rather than made poetry out of, whatever we were trying to say.” When Laidlaw “had, despite her admonitions, gone all la-di-da, and missed by a mile,” Dillard wrote on his story, “Art is artier than that.” It is not that the impulse to elevate language is off base, but that there is a difference between what merely appears to be art and what functions as art. Entering literature allows students to tell the difference not only in their reading, but also in their own writing.xiv

In order to gain this instinctual knowledge, the writer must enter into literature, but literature must also enter the writer. Dillard writes, “Only after the writer lets literature shape her can she perhaps shape literature” (Writing Life 69). In order for the writer to be shaped by literature, “The art must enter the body.” The rhythms of literature sync with the muscles of the
body in an activity where Dillard has all the students in her class “stamp with [their] feet to mark the iambs in ‘God’s Grandeur’ by Gerard Manley Hopkins” (Lindholdt). With this exercise, the student learns to recognize and respond to meter, just as a student of dance learns how to respond to the rhythms of a waltz or a tango. (She also returns the students to the origin of the term foot, which comes from the Greeks who danced out the meters of their drama.) Similarly, Dillard has her students repeatedly speak poetry aloud so that the ear adjusts to the sounds of literature and learns to hear its music. Poet Scott Cairns writes that during one weekly tutorial, “Annie insisted I read ‘Kubla Khan’ aloud to her, and on the spot. She had me read it a second time, and then a third. She told me, ‘listen to it as you say it.’ And she told me that from then on, I needed to say poems aloud as I read them. I still do.” The repetition is important because the meanings of the words can easily overshadow the sounds on a first listen. The repetition draws out the emphatic music as the recurring sounds etch themselves into the writer’s memory. Dillard learned the benefits of speaking literature aloud during the writing of her second book of prose, *Holy the Firm*, when she began to “read Conrad Aiken’s poetry aloud for its insistent music” (qtd. in Jenks 124). She tried not to let the poems “bother [her] mind with what they meant” so that she could live more fully in their sounds and “induce the peculiar rhythmical state in which [she] could write” her book (*Fairhaven* “Interview” 96; Myers D10).

Dillard uses repetition to forge a greater link between literature and her poetry students’ bodies (here, their brains) by requiring them to memorize a few poems—for instance, “any Yeats poem over six lines”—and “recite [them] to the class” (“Fairhaven” 4; Lindholdt). Not only does memorization forge an intimacy with rhythm, structure, syntax, and sound, but it also keeps the language of great writing floating in the brain. “I still remember the ones I memorized in her class,” says novelist Elizabeth Graver (qtd. in “Words of Wisdom” 207). “She steeped us in
language.” Through this process, the writer develops an innate sense of the sound-range of literary language and can recognize when it does not work, like a musician recognizes a wrong note that other listeners may pass over obliviously. This is literary judgment or taste. When you read a lot, Dillard says, “you have an internal sense of how things go melodically, and you write, and you write, and you write, and you [can] see [if] something doesn’t work” (Fairhaven “Interview” 94). But no amount of passive reading will build this skill. One must read carefully and pay attention to the sounds of literary language so that when one encounters it, one recognizes it and, when one writes, it is both in the writer’s consciousness and built into her instincts. It is helpful to have a teacher who will point the student to the various elements of sound in language so she will know what to pay attention to; however, only the student can do the work of reading and paying attention. This work is the only thing that causes the art to enter the body. As Dillard notes, “part of the brain changes physical shape to accommodate and fit” one’s art (Writing Life 69). The brain changes shape with every learned skill, but the writer must choose to adopt the skill. This accommodation is what happens when the reader-cum-writer develops an ear for the sounds of literary language: the brain adapts in order to process language in a different way. It becomes attuned to the qualities of literature through careful reading and is then able to play with those qualities in order to shape new literature..xx

The need to internalize literature as a writer adds an important caveat to all the advice Dillard (or anyone else) offers to students: “You need to know these things somewhere in the back of your mind, and you need to forget them and write whatever you’re going to write” (“Notes” 68). She is not dismissing the legitimacy of her advice. Rather, she is emphasizing the need for the lessons the student learns to become instinctual. The student’s engagement with literature should become such a deep part of her that she does not need to think consciously
about all the lessons she has learned. Trying to remember all that advice and write something new at the same time could easily paralyze the writer. Neuroscientist David Eagleman notes that the best way to defeat an opponent in tennis is to “simply ask your opponent how she serves the ball so well. Once she contemplates the mechanics of her serve and tries to explain it, she’s sunk” (74). If the “conscious mind has” too much control over performance, the mind “gets bogged down solving problems in a slow, clunky, energy-inefficient manner” (73). He writes that the key “is to invest thousands of hours training so that in the heat of the battle the right maneuvers will come automatically.” This does not mean that an athlete does not strategize during the game; the player clearly makes conscious choices during the game. Similarly, the writer has conscious goals in mind, but it is the years of concentrated practice and reflection on that practice and on others’ work that build the unconscious reflexes that allow the writer to execute her goals in the moment. When the lessons of good writing become part of the writer’s instincts, she can take advantage of them while thinking about the subject at hand, and perhaps of a new lesson (or strategy) that will make the work even better.
CHAPTER VII

A MASTER CLASS

All of the above engagement with literature is best done with texts written by the masters of literature. As Dillard says, “Learn from the masters” (qtd. in Richardson 87). They represent the best that has been written. Writers learn their craft through a dialectic of studying masterful writing and producing new work. For each element of craft her classes studied, she selected readings that exemplified it. Readings were always directed. For instance, “When we were talking about point of view, we read Absalom! Absalom! by Faulkner and noted every instance of a change in point of view (of which there were very many)” (Saba). A casual reading of Faulkner might be enjoyable, but “There is no way to” learn from literature how to write “without getting up to our clavicles in a given text” (“Nonfiction Speech”). When studying sense of place on the first day of a fiction class, her students read Herman Melville and Lawrence Durrell (Fairhaven “Interview” 93). The class then discussed the possibilities the published texts present and what makes them effective. By using readings from more than one author, she emphasized the possibilities of writing. Rather than telling the students, This is the way you do it, she showed them some of “what has been done, what could be done, the limits” so that they could know the field and “nudge the bounds” of literature (Writing Life 69). Then, with these examples of place in fiction and the discussion of them still lingering in the forefront of the students’ minds, she had the students choose and describe three objects. Rather than asking them to simply write about a place, she builds the skill by starting small and having them focus on individual
components. After this activity, they describe their entire bedroom, and then “an extended
description of a place” (Fairhaven “Interview” 94). When studying character, they read Joseph
Conrad, Jorge Luis Borges, and Willa Cather, and she asked how these authors approach
cracter description and how each author’s handling of character compares to the others. The
dialectical approach is continued when she then asked the students to write “a short description
of a character, a longer description of a character, [and then] characters in social settings.” By
saying, Here is the way Borges handles character and here is the way Cather does, she is not
merely giving examples, but demonstrating the way the authors are using their tools, how they
are solving problems, how there is no one way to approach an aspect of writing, and one author’s
technique might help the student where another did not. Through such study, students build their
own toolkits for approaching the techniques of craft.

After studying established authors, the class looked at the student writing from that week
she deemed to have “particular strengths” (Reece). She chose the student writing they looked at
in class for the same reason she chose readings from the masters—to see what works and why it
works, to learn from the strengths of another writer. She would read a piece by a student,
“point[ing] out successful details as she read,” using the student writing “to highlight something
[she wanted] to teach us,” something based on the things she had learned: “How to give
emphasis to something, how to pace something, how to watch your verbs” (Saba, Block,
Fairhaven “Interview” 93). These student writings, Dillard’s student Mark Saba points out, were
used “as successful illustrations of the lessons we were learning.” She also talked about things to
avoid: monotonous sentence structures and rhythms, adjectives and clichés (94). She also urged
them to “keep it visual” rather than indulging in “emotional outpourings.” By singling out
common new-writer weaknesses before the students had written anything for the class, and by
demonstrating how other texts avoid these weaknesses, she broke the students away from the typical weak writing of a beginner, so that they start writing significantly better right at the beginning of the semester. The students learned to see how prior literature works from multiple levels, ultimately generating a feedback loop between reading great literature and writing it. The more a writer reads analytically, the more she sees in the text and the better she knows the possibilities for her own writing.

One of Dillard’s first tasks during the semester is to begin “leading students to a mastery of form” (Grella O’Connell). Her formal writing assignments often similarly engage with published literature. Dillard gives her students other dialectical exercises that allow them near-freedom of content while forcing them to fill a given structure used by another writer. In one poetry class, Block says that the “first assignment she gave . . . was to read the poem ‘Trees in the Garden’ by D. H. Lawrence, and to write a poem with that structure.” Again, the student learns how a poem works from the inside, using the writing of an acknowledged master as a model. Dillard also has her students directly engage with an established author while writing new work by giving them “evocative titles” of published poems to which they are “asked to supply [new] poems,” says writer Michael Collins. “These titles had the effect of giving those of us who were still wet behind the ears a temporary subject.” In Collins’s case, writing a sestina using the David St. John title “On a Patient by Patient B” resulted in his “first accomplished poem,” which was “later included in an American Academy of Poets’ New Voices anthology.” The dialectic between published writing and new writing not only teaches the student, but also carries him past the often paralyzing blank page so he can get on with the business of writing.

Dillard advocates learning from the masters, and that includes encouraging students to choose their own masters. The writer, not the teacher, ultimately decides what is the best that
has been written (though of course Dillard encourages applying a New Critical evaluation to the author’s texts). Dillard writes, “Ralph Ellison studied Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. . . . Faulkner described his debt to Sherwood Anderson and Joyce; E. M. Forster, his debt to Jane Austen and Proust” (Writing Life 70). These authors did not devise their distinctive approaches by sheer, unique inventiveness, but used others as models. A writer needs a starting point, and can to some extent determine what that is in the act of selecting authors to study. Parrish demonstrates how the discoveries Dillard made in writing her senior and master’s theses on Dickinson and Thoreau, respectively—essays Parrish calls “models of the New Critical approach”—underpin the ideas, structures, and techniques of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (135). Just as Dillard chose to learn from Dickinson and Thoreau, the student chooses writers in which she sees the possibilities of literature broadened and realized. This once again points to the necessity of reading in order to write well. Furthermore, the books a writer chooses to read shape the books the writer writes. As Dillard writes to the creative writing program at Chapel Hill, “The better stuff you read, the better stuff you will write” (67). “Push it a little, but don’t read something totally alien to your nature and then say, ‘I’ll never be able to write like that.’ Of course you won’t. Read books you’d like to write. If you want to write literature, read literature” (65-66). After choosing a reading path of their own, the students can then break down the sentences and book structures of their masters for clues to style and structure, and they will have the skills necessary to do so from the exercises in Dillard’s workshop.

Because great writing does not depend on talent, Dillard expects her students to challenge themselves to write as well as the masters from whom they are learning. According to her logic, “writing sentences is difficult whatever their subject. It is no less difficult to write sentences in a recipe than sentences in Moby-Dick. So you might as well write Moby-Dick” (Writing Life 71).
She does not expect that her students will write passages that rival *Moby-Dick* during the course of the semester; that is not the goal of the workshop. They will need to devote themselves to writing for years in order to achieve that level of artistic success. But she does expect them to give full measure in everything they write, to raise the bar for themselves. On the last day of one class, she told the students,

> If I’ve done my job . . . you won’t be happy with anything you write for the next 10 years. It’s not because you won’t be writing well, but because I’ve raised your standards for yourself. Don’t compare yourselves to each other. Compare yourself to Colette, or Henry James, or Edith Wharton. Compare yourselves to the classics. Shoot there. (qtd. in Chee 68)

If a writer regards the masters as her peers, she is more apt to join their league. The idea is, as Gattuccio puts it, that “students [are not] evaluated on such-and-such scale, while the ‘masters’ (Melville, Thoreau, etc.) had another, higher scale. It [is] all the same scale.” Again, Dillard leveled the playing field by insisting that in her class the students “strive to hit” her high quality bar; they didn’t “have to hit the bar,” but if “the work did not strive” for it, “she was vocal in her critique” (Gattuccio).

Often in workshops, the student seen to be doing the best work sets the bar for the rest of the class. Describing a talk she gave in class, Dillard wrote in her journal that students think they can compete with each other because they are at the same level (March 1978 journal). But she wanted to raise that bar, and added that they should start seeing Shakespeare as a rival. To the extent that she encouraged the students to see each other as literary peers, it was only the best of the students’ work—the successful work that, like the readings from the masters, was worthy of emulation. Dillard hoped feeling created by reading these various student pieces was that of praise (“Teaching Writing”). Silver-Isenstadt says that despite the fact that the students rarely saw each other’s work, the class felt like a group working together to climb Mount Everest (“Collaborative Learning”).
By considering themselves peers with the masters, Dillard’s students start to find their voices through another of her techniques. She asks them to bring to class an essay they have rewritten, along with scissors and tape. At her instruction, they physically cut out the best sentences in the piece and tape them to a blank page. All the work described throughout this thesis prepares the students to engage their own work in the same way they engage the masters. Essentially, they cut any hint of weakness or blandness. On that page is the student at her best. It reveals a voice; the student can study these sentences as those of an imitable master and learn what makes her sentences tick. She also learns that she is capable of writing well. In the blank spaces between the sentences, the students are asked to write new sentences to connect those on the page, and to strive to write at the same level as the pasted sentences (Chee 66-67). Writing from mountaintop to mountaintop is more manageable when one can see the peaks. Through engaging their own writing as that of a pre-existing master—they are peers, after all—the students’ previously “trapped, nervous, lazy,” and amnesiac voices are “cut free” (Chee 67).

Dillard used a similar technique in 1973 when she began writing her first book of prose, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She had finished writing her first book of poetry, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*, the year before, though it would not be published until two months before *Pilgrim* in 1974. While searching for a publisher for *Tickets*, she decided that no one was going to read her poetry, and, she says, “took whole sections of my poems and just spread them across the page” (qtd. in Furgurson A13). As such, scattered throughout *Pilgrim* are sentences from *Tickets*. In between, she wrote sentences that maintained the intensity of the poetry, leading to a book of prose that has often been described as poetic. This process helped her discover her voice as a prose writer. For her, “Poetry was a flute, and prose was the whole orchestra. I’m still spending the energy from that shift” (qtd. in Weber 68). Before engaging in this exercise, she had not
realized how limited her writing had been when she wrote poetry. The handful of short stories she had published prior to those poems indicates that her prose sensibilities had not yet been awakened. By taking the best of her poetry and lifting her nonfiction to that bar, she was able to see prose writing in a new and aesthetically empowering way. But it wasn’t only sentences from the poems that created a space for her to write between. She also copied from her journals onto the 1,003 index cards all the ideas, quotations, and information she thought would be relevant. After dividing the cards into chapters, she transferred the notes on the cards to outlines of her chapters, and the sentences and information on the index cards now make up “about a quarter of the material of [each] chapter” (“Annie Dillard Talks” 426). Then she filled in the blank spaces with linking language that matched what was already on the page (or outline). She says, “the cards anchored me, gave me something to start with, a direction to go in.” Not only can this exercise tune a writer to her own voice, but it can also carry the writer past the sometimes-paralyzing blank page of a new draft. It shapes form, surface, and content.
CHAPTER VIII

GOOD REWRITING IS WRITING

Finally, a writer revises, which is yet another skill developed from the ability to read analytically. Dillard writes, “If you are used to analyzing texts, you will be able to formulate a clear statement of what your draft turned out to be about. Then you make a list of what you’ve already written, paragraph by paragraph, and see what doesn’t fit and cut it out. (All this requires is nerves of steel and lots of coffee)” (“How I Wrote” 17). Having studied texts, she knows what makes for strong, literary writing and, by looking at the “text coldly, analytically, manipulatively,” she is able to cut, shape, and rewrite the material until it lives up to the literary standards she has set for herself (19). For Dillard, the cutting is often extensive. A journalist mentions that Dillard “cit[es] the ‘delete’ button on her word processor as her most helpful editorial aid” (Weber 68). She compares this to making a reduction sauce. The technique is to boil down a large volume of liquid to a very small amount. What the cook starts with is not very flavorful, but what he ends up with is (28 April 1984 journal). She identifies a problem in her students’ writing: They do not start with a large enough volume of material, and they don’t put it through the reduction technique. This is perhaps why, when a student wrote the simple sentence, “Most ducklings die,” Dillard praised it emphatically (Hush). Such a sentence cuts any sentimental detail, leaving only the force of brutal fact.

Dillard’s typescripts bear out her reduction technique. She cut the typescript of The Writing Life from a height of 300 pages to a final 128 pages. Her second novel, The Maytrees,
was published in 2007 as a 216-page book, although the typescript had reached a height of 1400 pages. Dillard finds these slender books somewhere in those voluminous drafts through a combination of holding herself to the standards of the masters and using her intimate knowledge of the way a text works. If her students follow her directions for engaging with masters of literature, they should eventually arrive at a place where they can do the same. According to Dillard’s student Jeff Hush, “She taught us how to edit our own work—the most valuable thing you can learn as a writer.”

What gets cut? Anything that makes the writer wince or move past a section (27 January 2005 journal). Anything that does not compel the writer to read it is not going to interest a reader who has no prior attachment to the material. Cut anything about how the writer feels for the sake of the work (“Rogue Narrative Structures”). Under this principle, Dillard threw out the last third or fourth of her memoir, An American Childhood. She recommends that the writer weigh present sensation against the final result for the reader (20 September 2006 journal). Again, writing comes back to a consideration of the reader.

In addition to cutting material, the work is transformed by an evolving vision of what it is doing, which often comes late in the writing process. As she told her class, the writer usually does not know what he is doing with the piece until “everything comes together,” and he thinks he has “reached the end”; that, writes Schafer, is “the beginning, not the end, of the poem.” The next step is to “Throw out all that you wrote to get there, and now write the poem.” She writes in her journal that a good example of revision for students to study is the first and final drafts of Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” (May 1990 journal). The poem started as a letter to a woman he loved. Dillard quotes a Coleridge biography that describes this first version as “a passionate declaration of love and renunciation, of almost hysterical intensity,” whereas “the final version is
a cool, beautifully shaped, philosophical Ode on the loss of hope and creative power, ‘the shaping spirit of Imagination.’ Coleridge moved from one to the other by a process of supreme artistic discipline, cutting, editing, and self-censoring” (Holmes 318). The final product is, as Dillard points out, half as long and even bears a different theme. It is useful to know that even the masters struggled to find a vision for a piece and excised a large volume of writing to arrive at a lasting work of literature (20 September 2006 journal).
CHAPTER IX

AFTERWORD

There are two basic approaches Annie Dillard takes to make better writers through reading: 1) Learning what this thing literature is so that you can add to it. 2) Using experience as a reader to judge what the reader of one’s own writing needs. The two go together. A writer’s own experience as a reader becomes trustworthy only to the extent that she has been a careful and steady reader. And she cannot understand what literature is apart from the fundamentally subjective experience of reading it. She must imagine what she reads, invoking the same faculty in reading that she will use in writing. It is a reflexive muscle, which must be doubly exercised.

Many, if not most, creative writing workshops incorporate some analysis of and engagement with existing literature. In fact, it was “the analysis of the poem ‘Maiden with Orbs and Planets’ (Nemerov)” in Dillard’s first creative writing course as a freshman “that lifted off the top of [her] skull” and made her think, “look what humans can do!” (qtd. in Parrish 136). The analysis of this poem “changed [her] life” by demonstrating “How grand it would be to write complex, powerful poetry” (136)). What distinguishes Dillard’s workshop from what could be called the traditional workshop is the priority Dillard gives to published literature—and, in particular, to the masters—over the new work produced by the students. This is a rare approach. A workshop is intended, after all, for students to write; and literature courses already exist in which students are trained to analyze texts. But by flipping the emphasis, Dillard turns her students into apprentices not just to her, the teacher, but to any author whose greatness a student
chooses to follow. By taking the focus off of themselves, the students are able to look at literature more fully and say, “Look at the possibilities!” If they discipline themselves to studying this phenomenon in a deliberate, mindful way, they can more fully realize those possibilities.
Endnotes

1 Although the Beincke is my primary archival source, I have also made use of materials found in archives at Harvard University, the New York Public Library, the 92nd Street Y, the Concord Free Public Library, the Thoreau Society, and Denver University.

2 Although the majority of Dillard’s students were enthusiastic about their time with her, it would be dishonest to present her as univerally beloved. (Is any teacher?) Just as with readers of texts, different students can react quite differently to the same class. For example, a single Dillard course was described by different students (in anonymous evaluations), as “fairly unfocused in its organization”; “wonderfully disorganized, which was perfectly appropriate”; and “well organized.” However, her students did speak highly enough of her class in general that she would save her student evaluations to read after she received some bad reviews of a book.

3 In the early part of her career, she looked for sheer intelligence when choosing her students. By the end of her teaching career, she “look[ed] for someone who [could] put two words together that have never been side-by-side before” (Kelleher 26).

4 In addition to her eight books of nonfiction, she published two books of poetry and two novels; in fact, her career is bookended by a volume of poems and a novel.

5 Or perhaps they do contribute to her pedagogy. Personality plays a great role in the classroom. That is not the focus of this thesis, though.

6 Although Dillard does not speculate as to why this myth attaches specifically to American writers, she does point to some American writers who have deliberately perpetuated it, perhaps for their own gain: “occasionally you find an American writer like Hemingway or Whitman who deliberately pretended to be spontaneous and unstudied—probably in order to mislead the competition” (“Fairhaven” 9). (For an overview of Hemingway’s self-conscious fashioning of his public image, see Hemingway and the Mechanism of Fame: Statements, Public Letters, Introductions, Forewords, Prefaces, Blurbs, Reviews, and Endorsements. In the introduction, Matthew Joseph Bruccoli writes, “Ernest Hemingway’s best invented fictional character was Ernest Hemingway” (xviii-xix).) Dillard also points to a curious, willful blindness in many readers toward the evidence of some American writers’ educations: “occasionally you find a writer like Thoreau, a very well-educated Harvard man whose reading was in Greek classics, in whose work most readers overlook the evidences of scholarship and effort simply because they don’t want to see them” (“Fairhaven” 9).

7 Dillard herself does not have the level of formal education she originally planned to seek. “I was all set to go get a Ph.D.,” she says, “but I was married and couldn’t go on with my education at that point” (Southernmost Art 153). Jean Silver-Israelstad remembers Dillard saying once in the classroom, “I’m the only one in the faculty room without a PhD,” and writes that Dillard was “clearly ambivalent, beating her chest in pride and feeling sheepish all at once” (“Annie Dillard the teacher”).
For a similar idea from a psychologist, see Anders Ericsson’s “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance” on the necessity of completing 10,000 hours of deliberate training in order to become an expert performer.

For an excellent description and analysis of Dillard’s own college and graduate education, see Nancy C. Parrish’s *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers*.

Dillard pokes fun at the extremity of her position in this chapter by describing how she became so annoyed at a June bug bouncing against the window outside that she finally opened the blinds and discovered that the sound came not from an insect but from fireworks. She had become so involved in her writing that she forgot about the Fourth of July. Her response: “oh, yes, the world” (*Writing Life* 31). Yet she believes this extremity is necessary while writing.

Hush said Dillard preached that students should experience life, and since this is the only recorded instance of her saying that, perhaps this is what she meant.

The students I contacted who took Dillard’s classes before this shift toward studying mostly the masters still found her workshop constructive. Even before the shift, she emphasized the importance of reading great writing. In fact, Gattuccio was one of her early students.

These comments were made in 1999. Author interviewer Michael Silverblatt testifies that today many writers, even younger ones, still feel that literary criticism has nothing to offer them as writers. He says that “most of the people in the writing workshops—from Cornell, Iowa—will tell me that they feel that there’s no place for a writer in an English department. That they [the literature students and faculty] are all speaking a codified language that is incomprehensible for them.”

Despite her attachment to New Criticism, Dillard identifies herself as part of “the generation of postmodernists” (qtd. in Hunter 242) and Parrish discerns the influence of “a destabilized literary tradition” in her writing (125).

It is difficult to judge the accuracy of workshop comments when the heat of composition has not yet cooled. But with thirty years’ distance on the poems, Block looked “back at the relatively few poems I had saved from that class . . . [and] her comments were spot on.”

All of the Emerson quotations in this paragraph can be found in that book.

A few years before Silver-Isenstadt took the class, Dillard would “give the students assignments in which [she] identified the material they [would] use in their writing” (“Annie Dillard Talks” 426). Under these circumstances, the students wrote every week rather than every other week.
Dillard writes that she strove to show the students the natural strengths of their writing ("Teaching Writing").

On a similar note, she emphasizes that storytelling and humor written in literary language differ from the spoken word: “You can tell, as a reader, when an author is writing something, or telling on paper a given story in the same words he’s used successfully with friends. The latter doesn’t work” (qtd. in Shainin). The only way to recognize the difference between successful written and spoken language is to be shaped by literature.

Neuroplasticity, the concept invoked here, is a catch-all term for various structural or functional changes in the brain, which can be slight or dramatic. Unfortunately, Dillard does not provide more specific information or indicate her source for this.

Eagleman claims that “a professional athlete’s goal is *not* to think,” and that consciousness can only interfere with performance. If this were true, the best coaches would say nothing to a player during the game. But, while Eagleman oversimplifies, his insight is useful so far as it goes.

Revision is a much more analytical process, where the writer consciously considers what she did, and how she can use her knowledgebank and skills to manipulate the original performance (the first draft).

This self-direction in reading is important. When Dillard started teaching, she tried to force students to love poetry. At some point in her first decade of teaching, she realized, “It’s more of a service if I give them the opportunity to love literature themselves” (Korngold 1). Otherwise, “As soon as I go away they are going to look at literature in horror and say: ‘Ah, what are you doing in my bed?’ ” She learned what studies have shown—that if students are going to develop a genuine and lasting interest in something, an environment must be structured in which they can explore it based on their own motivation and curiosity. One anonymous student, writing a course evaluation, shows she was successful in this approach: “I can’t think of how it could possibly have been more effective at teaching students to write and to love poetry.”

It is also significant that, although the students have received feedback from the teacher, they are choosing what they consider their own best sentences—discerning their voices for themselves.

In one book, *Mornings Like This: Found Poems*, Dillard cuts out the middleman (her own sentences) completely. The entire book consists of poems created by rearranging other people’s sentences.

I have, for years, thought of writing through a similar metaphor. Caramel is made from a single ingredient: sugar. Heating it turns a lot of sugar into a lot less caramel. These metaphors work both for revision and for using a lot of research to produce a little writing.
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