

Annie Dillard on Generosity and Art by Maria Popovs

“The most demanding part of living a lifetime as an artist,” Anne Truitt observed in her ceaselessly insightful diaries, “is the strict discipline of forcing oneself to work steadfastly along the nerve of one’s own most intimate sensitivity.” But if locating that nerve weren’t hard enough, contacting it can be terrifying and staying with the excruciating vulnerability of that contact for a lifetime can feel next to impossible. And yet great artists have managed to make the seemingly unimaginable the raw material of their art.

What it takes to master that vulnerable-making discipline is what Annie Dillard — one of the finest writers and most radiant spirits of our time — explores in an essay titled “A Writer in the World,” originally published in her classic 1989 field guide to the writing life and now included in the terrific monograph *The Abundance: Narrative Essays Old and New* (public library).

Echoing Aldous Huxley’s ideas on the centrality of sincerity in art, Dillard writes:

People love pretty much the same things best. A writer, though, looking for subjects asks not after what he loves best, but what he alone loves at all... Why do you never find anything written about that idiosyncratic thought you advert to, about your fascination with something no one else understands? Because it is up to you. There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain because you have never read it on any page; there you begin. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.

And yet this singular voice is refined not by the stubborn flight from all that has been said before but by a deliberate immersion in the very best of it. Like Hemingway, who insisted that aspiring writers should metabolize a certain set of essential books, Dillard counsels:

The writer studies literature, not the world. He lives in the world; he cannot miss it. If he has ever bought a hamburger, or taken a commercial airplane flight, he spares his readers a report of his experience. He is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know.

The writer as a consequence reads outside his time and place.

Only when fertilized by time can our uniqueness blossom. Echoing Jane Kenyon — “Read

good books, have good sentences in your ears,” the poet counseled in her beautiful advice on writing — Dillard asserts:

The body of literature, with its limits and edges, exists outside some people and inside others. Only after the writer lets literature shape her can she perhaps shape literature.

[...]

You adapt yourself, Paul Klee said, to the contents of the paintbox. Adapting yourself to the contents of the paintbox, he said, is more important than nature and its study. The painter, in other words, does not fit the paints to the world. He most certainly does not fit the world to himself. He fits himself to the paint. The self is the servant who bears the paintbox and its inherited contents.

Illustration by Isabelle Arsenault from *Mr. Gauguin's Heart* by Marie-Danielle Croteau

In a contrast to the seductive external metrics of success, Dillard considers the internal fittings that animated great creators:

Rembrandt and Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Gauguin, possessed, I believe, powerful hearts, not powerful wills. They loved the range of material they used, the work's possibilities excited them; the field's complexities fired their imaginations. The caring suggested the tasks; the tasks suggested the schedules. They learned their fields and then loved them. They worked, respectfully, out of their love and knowledge, and they produced complex bodies of work that endure. Then, and only then, the world maybe flapped at them some sort of hat, which, if they were still living, they ignored as well as they could, to keep at their tasks.

But out of the artist's deeply personal investment arises the abiding and universal appeal of great art. In a sentiment that calls to mind Rebecca Solnit's beautiful meditation on why writers write and readers read, Dillard reflects:

Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened, and its deepest mystery probed? ... Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaning, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power?

But the most significant animating force of great art, Dillard argues, is the artist's willingness to hold nothing back and to create, always, with an unflappable generosity of spirit:

One of the few things I know about writing is this: Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Don't hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The very impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later,

something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful; it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.

The Abundance is a tremendous trove of Dillard's luminous wisdom. Complement this particular portion with more timeless advice on writing from beloved authors, including Ursula K. Le Guin on how you make something good, Joseph Conrad on what makes a great writer, and Willa Cather on the life-changing advice that made her a writer, then revisit Dillard on presence over productivity, the two ways of seeing, and how to reclaim our capacity for joy and wonder.