

Living Like Wiesel

EMIL STERN

*History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage need not be lived again.*

—*Maya Angelou*

Annie Dillard’s blithe and lively little essay, “Living Like Weasels,” is at heart actually quite corrosive—insidious, in fact, in its undermining of the need for a sense of history and human empathy, both of which are rooted in the intellect she finds so deplorable. Dillard chooses not to face history at all, let alone with courage: “I suspect the way for me is like the weasel’s; open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a free and pointed will” (213). Her obsession with a kind of wild, smug freedom betrays the fact that she knows little of real dignity. She determinedly carries on the highly ignoble tradition of celebrating the predator and, by implication, blaming the victim.

Dillard expresses her essay’s central idea baldly—“I would like to learn, or remember, how to live. . . . I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should,” and with this begins her increasingly devotional, faux-Zen paean to “the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive” (213). “Living Like Weasels” gains momentum from Dillard’s deft sophistry and violent, visceral imagery: “the world dismantled and tumbled into that black hole of eyes. If you and I looked at each other that way, our skulls would split and drop to our shoulders. But we don’t. We keep our skulls. So” (212). After the unnatural stillness of the encounter, there is more frantically-paced writing: the author describes the “yank of separation, the careening splashdown into real life” (213). This dazzling of the reader’s senses, intensified by direct appeals—“Please don’t tell me about ‘approach-avoidance techniques’” (213)—and rhetorical questions, all bound up in playful rhythm, is reminiscent of the old preacher’s trick of getting a nodding motion going in the audience so that they will find it impossible to disagree.

Wild-eyed and awe-struck, Dillard near-beatifies the weasel, as she describes it in a breathless half whisper (and her best cheap Hemingway): “Once . . . a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to its throat” (211). Her admiration for this creature’s lunge for the jugular, its sheer ferocity, is hardly intended to raise a smile or to be intellectually provocative. No, Dillard proffers her weasel anecdotes quite seriously as moral examples, couching them in mythic terms, and whipping herself into a frenzy over them in the hysterical, mock-prayerful exhortation that concludes the essay. Her style tends to betray the fact that she is teaching a lesson, and her qualifications are not entirely convincing. It’s gratifying that Dillard will not “suck warm blood, hold my tail high, walk with my footprints precisely over the prints of my hands,” but this is an ugly exaggeration, and it deliberately misleads the reader into thinking that Dillard’s argument is sound—*No, that’s not what she’s proposing*, you think, until a few lines later, when she comes out with, “I could very calmly go wild. . . . Down is a good place to go” (213). When Dillard discusses the need to “grasp your one necessity and not let it go,” and sermonizes, “Then even death . . . cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter” (214), she may as well be standing in a tent, waving her arms and hectoring the crowd. Just when the reader thinks, “Nothing can top the apocryphal weasel,” Dillard’s conclusion boggles the mind—it forces the realization that Dillard is very serious indeed about her awakening; she believes that she has discovered, in her weasel-induced state, a novel and worthwhile philosophy.

The emotional rhythms of Dillard’s essay *are* impressive. The reader does begin nodding, and the essay manages to “locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse,” just as the author suggests people should do (214). When she veers off into her “regret” at not having gone for the jugular, she has created such a trance-like state that the reader is almost swept away in the frenzy as well. It is in the moments of reflection after reading, though, that a sense of unease begins to taint the adrenaline rush. The soaring feeling induced by the sheer, feral craziness of Dillard’s last paragraphs is countered by a rapidly sinking one: her essay is all surfaces, effects; at its core is nothing—an idea whose profundity is questionable and whose practical applications are limited, to say the least. If you follow her advice and don’t think too much or too deeply, her moral may seem perfectly reasonable.

If you pause for a few seconds, you may come to realize that Dillard does not mention, or that she chooses not to mention, that there *have* been peri-

ods in our history when men and women have behaved like animals—weasels, or different creatures—the horrors and ill-effects of which are almost impossible to catalogue. Of his first encounter with the Nazi death machine, Elie Wiesel writes, “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke” (*Night* 44). The implied meaning is clear: as Wiesel cannot forget, we should not forget. The obligation to bear witness to the victims, the murdered—onerous as it may be—is not so horrendous (when faced with the alternative) that we should try to escape it, “under the wild rose as weasels, mute and uncomprehending” (Dillard 213). “Mute and uncomprehending”—to make the po-faced suggestion in the latter stages of the twentieth century that people should desensitize themselves to their surroundings is irresponsible, irrational, immoral.

Indeed, the effects of choosing to live blindly and willfully are at present more potent and destructive than ever; they include, but are not limited to, our effective betrayal of those survivors and witnesses who are still alive. Dillard’s perceived need to live in the moment, in the physical senses, should be weighed against the need for humankind to understand—to try to understand—the patterns and the discontinuities of its history. Her notion of maintaining an existence on pure adrenaline is excessively romantic, verging on hedonism. An elaborate pose, pouty and preachy, it does not allow for the development of community or society; when Dillard advances the notion that “two may live that way,” I am not entirely sure what she proposes to do with the rest of the population (211). She mentions, somewhat fatuously, the various vows that people take upon themselves (“poverty, chastity, and obedience—even silence” (213)), ignoring the fact that these vows are taken with a view to self-refinement, not self-gratification.

Recent history has seen so great and so many a struggle against succumbing to the debased, the patently immoral, that we should feel compelled to learn from the experiences of those who have fought—those like Zalman Gradowski, a Jew who died in Auschwitz for the sole reason that he was a Jew. Gradowski kept a diary overflowing with pleas to future generations:

I wish I could think that somewhere someone will shed a tear for me and my family. For I can no longer cry. I drown in a sea of blood. Waves follow one another. Impossible to be alone and cry. Cry over our common tragedy. But I am unable to shed tears and yet at times I feel my soul so wounded, so wounded. (in Wiesel, “Holocaust”)

How would Dillard react, reading these words that stick like knives? Would she blush, faced with the question, “How could any person deliberately aim to be anything other than a human, with all of the moral responsibilities that follow?” Or would she smugly maintain that “it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you” (214)? While her aim is untainted enough—“to learn, to remember how to live”—her methods, all products of the therapy generation, are wrong-headed at best. Let her study humans. Her chosen course of action, fueled by her desire to be Something Else, actually takes her a step further away from life, and while she may find this sensation titillating, her claim that it has lasting, universal moral significance simply places too much weight on the poor weasel’s back. While I acknowledge the importance of learning from every object or being one may encounter (Reb Zusia, a great Chassidic sage, once enumerated ten lessons taught by a thief), the fact remains that Ms. Dillard’s weasel-derived epiphany, as a basis for an ethical system, is deeply flawed.

Dillard’s style is impressively energetic and direct, but the rhetoric of her essay seems callow and inescapably self-centered when placed next to the writings of Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel, both of whom construct complex moral and philosophical arguments in light of their experiences during the Holocaust. Admittedly, most authors placed next to these two would seem callow, but since Dillard is trying to sway us to a certain *Weltanschauung*, she should be made to stand next to those who have preceded her. *If the victims are my problem the killers are not*, Wiesel has insisted (“Holocaust” 17). Contrary to Dillard’s suggestion, our culture would be better served, in the final analysis, by lending a voice to the victim, rather than celebrating the aggressor: better to live as a Wiesel than a weasel. The ideal of maintaining values antithetical to the weasel’s remains too noble, and the conditions under which humans have had to “throttle all dignity and kill all conscience” (Levi 92) too overwhelming to be shunted aside in favor of the vaguely fascistic proposition that we adopt the weasel’s ferocious qualities as reasonable tools for the business of everyday life. In the death camps, Levi writes, “one has to fight against the current; to battle every day and every hour against exhaustion, hunger, cold and the resulting inertia; to resist enemies and have no pity for rivals; to sharpen one’s wits . . . strengthen one’s will-power” (92). Note the regret and sadness that linger over these sentences: there is nothing “pure” at all about “living mindlessly in the senses”—quite the opposite. Levi writes that it is “by no means a small sum of aberrations and compromises” (92). He does not

preach or pose. He offers no grand, flourishing exhortation, simply his measured and affecting observations, his own quiet tenacity.

Power lies in the pauses and silences of Levi's writing, the questions that reverberate in the reader's mind long after he has finished reading—and the principal question, of course, is "Why?" A tentative answer may be, "Because people were urged (or merely allowed) to behave like weasels"—because they unburdened themselves of the fact that "we live in choice," the fact that we have the capacity to do what is right—they were able to unburden themselves of moral culpability (Dillard 213). We should never attempt to forget, or to somehow simplify, the fact that we live in choice—no matter how heavy this burden may seem. The disquiet, the candor and truth of Levi's words refuse to be smoothed over by Dillard's facile energy and her essay's mildly fascistic tang. Dillard writes of a "clearing blow to the gut" (210); what she has not measured this ephemeral sensation up against is the knowing, aggrieved wisdom of a Wiesel or a Levi—the kind that simply and elegantly devastates the reader's imagination.

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