ANNIE DILLARD AND THE CHALLENGE OF ECOCRITICISM

Lector univ. dr. Iustin SFÂRIAC
Universitatea „Petru Maior", Târgu-Mureş

Abstract

The paper deals with Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—considered as a typical piece of ecocritical literature—examining the ways in which it tries to answer the most urgent need of postmodern readers: creating/making sense. The latter is borrowed from Viktor Frankl's existential analysis, enriched and expanded by Alfried Längle.

According to Viktor Frankl, survivor of Nazi concentration camps and father of logotherapy or existential analysis, every human life is, basically, a "quest for meaning." Frankl believes that our actions and attitudes cannot be satisfactorily explained through physical and emotional drives, our ultimate motivation is spiritual: finding meaning.

From this perspective, the ecocritical effort can be seen as one more last ditch attempt of disenchanted postmodernists to find an elusive meaning. Indeed, in traditional societies individuals perceive themselves as participants in a meaningful social organism that functioned in harmony with the greatest possible order: God. In such societies, meaning was "inherited", was conferred at birth. As a result, individuals knew who they were, what they were, what societal needs they could fill and, in most cases, they lived up to the expectations. With the death of God and the advent of modern—and especially postmodern—societies, however, the situation changed dramatically. Because of the modern taste for personal freedom and the tormenting suspicion of the legitimacy of any authority whatsoever, the modern spirit has operated a shift of focus, from society and its needs to the needs and autonomy of the individual. In order to protect the dignity and open choice of the individual, any larger order has been abandoned (God included) and bonds and obligations have been largely dissolved. This is actually the source of postmodern disillusionment, solitude and alienation.

It is safe to say that no final solution has been found to this problem. Disenchanted with society's incapacity of addressing such major issues, ecocritics have turned to nature as an alternative source of meaning. If integration in society is problematic—they seem to suggest—then integration in nature might be a plausible alternative since nature must have a superior kind of order, a "natural" one vs. the "artificial" order of society.

This preoccupation with nature, nonetheless, raises a number of questions that we need

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to address. To do so, we'll briefly sketch the main tenets of existential analysis.

Frankl's anthropology added a third dimension to the two dimensions used by Freud and Adler. According to him, the three dimensions of human life are a person's body, psyche and mind or spirit (Frankl 1985, 134ff).

The first dimension accounts for human needs, i.e. the bodily functions. Disease, hunger, thirst, cold, heat, sexual deprivation and all kinds of physical privation can impair one's life and vitality deeply and make all other emotions or problems seem unimportant in comparison.

The second dimension is that of the psyche, which, according to the old concept, included everything not physical, thus also everything metaphysical. But Frankl limited the content of the psychological dimension to the forces that express themselves in drives and emotions. These are not subject to free will, but follow their own rules and regularities. All information from the physical and from the spiritual dimension about the world and about their own states enter the psychic dimension, where it is screened and evaluated according to its significance for survival. The psychodynamics process this information close to the physical dimension in the form of affects, moods and emotions and thus serve as a guardian for existence.

Frankl added a third dimension, which he termed "spiritual" in the beginning and later referred to as "noetic", the Greek "nous" signifying "spirit" or "mind" (Frankl 1985, 79). Today, the "personal" dimension is the preferred term. This dimension concerns itself with the processes commonly attributed to the conscience by deciding between true and false, valuable and worthless, free and not free, just and unjust, and responsible and irresponsible. In all of these questions our sensibility and conscience are called forth, and we reveal ourselves as the persons we are. This dimension touches the innermost core of the person, of the individual. This inner person is what makes us truly human and distinguishes us from animals.

It is characteristic of existential analysis to take the person as a whole into account. The person is seen as being intimately connected with his/her values. The experience of fulfillment is not necessarily generated by good physical health and drive satisfaction. Instead, human beings strive for more, sense the need to transcend themselves and to devote themselves to something bigger than their individual lives. This may include service to people or to self-defined aims, because it is only in doing so that one finds existential fulfillment. Frankl said:

> I thereby understand the primordial anthropological fact that being human is being always directed at and pointing to something or someone other than

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> oneself: to a challenge to meet or another human being to encounter, a cause to serve or a person to love. Only to the extent that someone is living out this self-transcendence of human existence, is he truly human or has he become his true self. He becomes so, not by concerning himself with his self's actualization, but by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward. (Frankl 1979, 35)

As far as motivation is concerned, one experiences needs on the physical level, the search for pleasure on the psychological level and meaning and values on the existential level. These are the dynamics of forces that move human beings.

Coming back to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, one can easily see its major failure: the author is utterly unable to transcend her own self "by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward" as Frankl said. On the contrary. She seems totally lost in the contemplation of what Wendell Berry calls "the most exalted of all the modern sacred cows"—the self. Self-absorption, on the one hand, and the exclusion of any other human being, on the other hand, represent some of the most serious problems of nature writing. Indeed, Dillard constantly philosophizes about our place in the universe, recalling the words of Einstein, Ruskin, Kepler, Moses, Pliny, John Cowper Powys, Martin Buber, Arthur Koestler, Heisenberg—to name just a few—but in doing so she merely gives the reader a glimpse of her extensive reading—there is little one learns about nature itself. Even when nature is the subject of direct, unmediated examination, the result is confusing: "I reel in confusion; I don't understand what I see." (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 25) The next step takes the author to the library to find a clue to what she has seen. Two aspects become obvious here: on the one hand, access to nature's secrets is as much a matter of scientific study as it is of contemplation; on the other hand, our perception of nature, of "reality" in general, is clearly shaped and informed by our reading, education, culture, therefore the myth of direct access to nature's secrets appears difficult to hold.

In order to know nature better, Dillard suggests we "must somehow take a wider view, look at the landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here." (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 9) How should we "take a wider view"? And "really" see it? By becoming "a tissue of senses." This implies heightening all our senses as much as possible. Now it is obvious that we could profit by intensifying our perception in the case of stimuli seen as pleasant. Nonetheless, the same intensity would become unbearable in all other instances, bombarding the nervous system with useless information. Which takes us to one more dead end, for again "we don't know what's going on here". (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 9)

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One may ask whether Annie Dillard—as opposed to a John C. van Dyke, for instance—, though failing in terms of her incapacity of transcending her fascination with the self, of her incapacity of "pointing to something or someone other than oneself," might still be successful in terms of Frankl's second dimension, that of the psyche, of affects, moods and emotions. Indeed, upon the whole, the emotions experienced by Dillard, her state of mind in general, are positive, with optimistic—even timidly enthusiastic—overtones, occasionally. Is Dillard, in her exploration of both self and nature, able to build a bridge or, to borrow Theodore Roszak's words, "to find a graceful way to connect the mind and the world"? For, as Roszak continues, "[h]ow clearly we understand the world depends on the emotional tone with which we confront the world. Care, trust, and love determine that tone, as they do our relationship to another person ."(p. 41)

The answer to the above question needs to address the basic ambiguity of Dillard's feelings towards nature. The end of Chapter 13 best summarizes this attitude:

I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my sharing of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not *in* its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them [...] "Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love." (p. 248)

The author describes herself as a mere survivor who is getting along. Far from being seized by any feelings of love, she feels dirty and ugly—signs of inadaptability and reserve, if not rejection--, wandering awed about what suggests to her a splintered wreck. True, she confesses she has come to care for it and that its scarred and bloodied creatures are her dearest companions but this "caring" and "awe" associated with the "scarred and bloodied" bodies of Dillard's dearest, non-human companions are rather witnesses of a difficult, tense relationship than proof of a satisfactory, mutually beneficial relationship. They suggest to me more of a stoical acceptance of the unavoidable than a hearty embrace of a natural world that, we should not forget, "offers resistance to love."

More insight into the matter can be offered by the perspectives opened by Alfried Längle and the Gesellschaft für Logotherapie und Existenzanalyze (Society for Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, GLE) in Vienna who have conceptualized Frankl's anthropology more systematically and have rendered it more dynamic in order to transform it into a solid

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basis for psychotherapy. This new concept and theory of existential analysis is referred to as "general existential analysis."

Since 1986, Alfried Längle has been working to place Frankl's three-dimensional anthropology into an existential perspective. As a result of these developments, even more stress has been laid on the human capacity for decision-making and on the sense of duty, which accompanies the awareness of being human. Längle's elaboration is not only concerned with the nature of the three dimensions, their relations with each other and the differences in their functioning, but also with the tension they may create when in potential conflict with each other. In such cases the human capacity for decision-making is challenged, and one is faced with possible failure and suffering. These questions create dynamics, and to exist means to respond to these questions and to find the right balance at each of these three levels. The tensions exist between:

- Health vs. disease on the physical level,
- Pleasure vs. aversion on the psychological level,
- Fulfillment vs. void or faith vs. despair on the spiritual level

An important factor for the further elaboration of existential analysis was the theoretical assertion that personal fulfillment and meaningfulness are predicated upon additional, existential conditions. Fulfillment can only be achieved if the underlying existential foundation is solid. Therefore, Alfried Längle developed a model between 1982 and 1992 describing the four fundamental conditions required for a successful and satisfying existence (Längle 2000). This model now forms, in addition to Frankl's three-dimensional concept of human nature, a part of the general existential analysis.

The requisites for a fulfilled existence are called the four existential fundamental motivations (Längle 1995). All four are concerned with existential questions and are located in Frankl's noetic dimension. The quest for meaning is situated within the fourth motivation, but builds on three underlying, preceding, existential motivations. The preceding motivations concern our need for a sense of sufficient support and safety, the search for the value of life and the assertion of our individuality and autonomy. The four fundamental motivations form the cornerstones of human existence in its full sense and may be described in short as follows.

By the simple fact of being in the world one is confronted with the following questions:

1. Can I accept my place in this world and the conditions of life that I am subjected to? Do I experience protection and support in the world? Whatever the conditions may be,

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a decision is asked for, a decision to accept one's reality as it is. This acceptance, in turn, leads to a basic sense of ability.

2. Do I like the fact of my existence and do I sense that my life has sufficient quality? This requires feeling close to people, animals, things, and taking time for establishing and nurturing relationships. All of this is experienced as well as decided upon. It takes the decision to devote time to whatever one feels is precious, to build relationships and to permit closeness. This leads to a sense of liking, to a consent to life.
3. Do I experience myself and my inner world as unique? Do I sense that I have the permission to be myself and to be authentic? These feelings arise from the experiences of having received attention, of having been justified in one's personhood and of having been respected. But one also has to experience these emotions towards oneself. This leads to a sense of one's worth, of authorization, of consent to one's own person.
4. Do I sense my own calling and purpose in the world as an orientation for the meaning of my life? Basically, human beings want to transcend themselves and want their lives to serve a purpose. An openness is required here and an active and decisive engagement in the pursuit of this calling. This leads to a consent to the challenges and opportunities encountered, which, in turn, provides a sense of existential meaning in one's life.

A brief look at the above premises makes Dillard's predicament more obvious.

1. In terms of the first motivation, the author stoically accepts a reality that lacks the needed support and protection.
2. Moving to the second motivations we can see the full extent of Dillard's problems: etsblishing and nurturing relationships is totally absent from her Tinker Creek adventure. Granted, she is able to devote much time to what she perceives as important, i.e. various aspects of nature, of animal life, but these "relationships" are one-sided: they totally lack any input from the observed, any two-directional communication specific to fruitful relationships. As Längle suggests, "we experience the value of our lives where we are in relationship. If our lives are deprived of interaction, we do not experience the fundamental value of life and tend to retreat inwardly and to suffer from the void and cold of an uninhabited life."
3. As regards the third motivation, Dillard may indeed feel herself as unique and authentic so we will not expand on that.

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4. The fourth motivation gives us the final picture of Dillard's predicament. What is absolutely needed—by any human being—is a meaningful way of leading one's life, of becoming active and engaged and being committed to people, aims or values. Now, it would be very difficult to imagine a way in which the author would commit to people, judging from the book. Her values are also difficult to ascertain, and their usefulness to society unclear. Under the circumstances, it appears that Dillard derives meaning not from an active engagement with "people, aims or values" but rather from a passive acceptance and contemplation of a natural environment whose beauty exists despite its horrors. It is the meaning of the "survivor," of the one who is "aging and eaten and ha[s] done [her] sharing of eating too."

Considering the above, one can easily notice the major problem of an ecocritical text as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: the lack of relevance for the 21st century reader due to the inability to answer the most urgent need of human beings: the need to create meaning in their lives. The lack of true communication, of fruitful relationships, the passive "caring"--not effortlessly reached—of an indifferent nature, all paints a desolate picture that can hardly be a model or an inspiration for the 21st century reader.

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