

The Futility of Writing

Richard Wilbur's poem "The Writer" is primarily focused on the speaker's observations of his/her daughter attempting to write a poem. The speaker is constantly wishing the daughter well, but many of the daughter's attempts seem to come in bursts and end in frustration. This is something that the speaker readily acknowledges, and he/she actively encourages the daughter to pick herself up and try again. While this is portrayed rather optimistically in the grand scheme of things, there is a certain brutality within the poem that inadvertently turns the speaker's intentions on their head. The parent's insistence on stubbornness in the face of constant failure may not be a message of hope, but a show of futility in attempting to write exactly what one wants to write.

Beginning with the first stanzas of the poem, the speaker talks about how his/her daughter is hard at work typing a story through her typewriter, and that the subjects on her mind are rather weighty as well. He/she compares the act of writing to that of sailing a big ship, using ideas as cargo and words being put to paper as lifting anchor (Wilbur 6-8). Given how large scale a cargo ship usually is, this gives the act of writing a very weighty and powerful feel, greatly emphasizing how important this is for the daughter.

The most interesting part of this metaphor, however, is in the final verse of the third stanza: "I wish her a lucky passage" (Wilbur 9). The adjective used here, "lucky", is not related to skill in any way; instead, it is relegated to chance and forces outside the daughter's control. In other words, the speaker is implying that no matter how well the daughter might type, or how much effort she puts into her writing, the end result is still heavily dictated by possibilities rather than skill. This is a frightening proposition that has the potential to completely topple any

amount of work and passion put to paper, no matter how great, and this is certainly not an entertaining thought.

This idea also fits in too well inside the terms of the speaker's boat metaphor. Even with a pristine ship containing the richest cargo, anything can happen outside of the harbor. The ship could get lost, it might hit a brutal storm, or it might even be raided by pirates and abandoned to die. Similarly, the hypothetically perfect story could still fail to reach its intended audience, it could be damaged and/or unable to complete for some reason, and it even runs the risk of being plagiarized and misattributed to someone else. Again, luck is the ultimate judge in what might happen to a writer's work, which has the potential to completely destroy copious amounts of effort through probability.

After the speaker discusses the idea of sailing as a metaphor for writing, he/she notices that the daughter has temporarily stopped typing. In Wilbur's words, she pauses "As if to reject my thought and its easy figure," essentially as a rebuttal to the speaker's own depiction (11). The swiftness at which the speaker has the chance at being proven wrong comes back to that idea of luck being a primary motivator once more – the speaker has a very eloquent and developed depiction of what he/she understands, but it still may not even matter if it's off-base. That same praise and hope that the speaker was heaping upon his/her daughter has the potential to completely backfire upon him/her, essentially undermining the argument that he/she had created.

What's more, the speaker's own idea is not one that is particularly direct or specific either. The speaker describes his/her own idea as having an "easy figure," designating his/her description as a blanket term (Wilbur 11). Theoretically, it's something that should encompass a great deal of different ideas, the daughter's included. But despite how much that easy figured thought should cover, it's still not safe from being lost in translation. Though good-natured and

caring in spirit, it stands just as much of a chance of being discarded or miscarried as anything else does.

From this possibility of being wrong, however, the speaker discreetly provides a defense for why he/she can justify his/her actions. The speaker remembers an event from his/her past, in which a bird was trapped inside of a room with only one escape. The bird throws itself wildly at the window to no avail, becoming bruised and bloodied in the process. Eventually, it manages to catapult itself into the sill, where it escapes into the outside and becomes free from the confines of the room (Wilbur 16-30). The speaker uses this as a metaphor for writing – the bird is the author, the closed windows are the numerous different blocks encountered in writing, and the open window is the epiphany of finally discovering what one wants to write. In other words, though it takes a long time of throwing everything you have at what seems like an immovable object, one can still achieve true freedom in writing and accomplish even more than what they originally set out to do.

This initially seems like a good reason to throw interpretations at the wall and see what sticks, as if it justifies the speaker's personal labels for his/her daughter. Even if he/she may not be completely correct, there is still progress being made to some capacity, as the author can pick him/herself up and learn from those mistakes. Being wrong is not necessarily a detriment in this case; rather, it is a lesson along the way towards shaping one's writing into its proper form. The bird clashes with a variety of surfaces, but each attempt provides it with a new idea of where freedom may lie, and it uses those same mistakes in order to breach the artificial prison that holds it. In other words, it's a variation on the old adage, "If at first you don't succeed, try and try again."

However, this same line of thinking also opens up a host of other pressing issues as well. One of the most glaring observations is the state of the bird that is chucking its whole body at a glass wall, "...humped and bloody" (Wilbur 25). In this process, the bird mangles itself rather grievously, certainly to the point of exhaustion and likely even close to death. There is no guarantee that the bird will live through its attempts to leave. In the figurative sense, it indicates the intensity that encompasses the author as they write and rewrite the same sentences, attempting to distill their thoughts into a cohesive and ideal format. A great number of mistakes are made as the author continually strives to get their point across, and though he/she may learn from them, it comes at quite a cost to themselves. Just like the bird attempting to flee, it isn't assured that the author will even be able to write exactly what he/she is trying to communicate to the intended audience, something that can be frustrating enough to completely deter writers from finishing their works.

Coming back to the daughter, she is figuratively throwing herself at her typewriter, according to the speaker. She begins to document her thoughts, then stops, only to begin again later. She is still searching for just the right words to express herself properly, but can only gather a few of them at a time. There is progress being made for certain, as she breaks through a little more each time, but given the bird metaphor, it's likely taking its toll on her as well. The speaker alludes to this where he/she says, "It is always a matter, my darling, of life and death, as I had forgotten..." (Wilbur 31-32). There's only so much that one person can do at a time, and if she presses herself too hard, she may end up destroying herself spiritually. In this respect, the daughter is already wounded, and it's questionable as to if she will be able to complete her work in the end.

What's more, the daughter is not writing via pencil or using a computer, both of which allow the deletion of words and phrases. According to the speaker, his/her daughter is hard at work punching in "...a commotion of typewriter-keys" (Wilbur 5). Backspacing on the typewriter is notoriously difficult, as there's a lot of shuffling of paper, ink, and white-out to get through. The daughter has to take a much slower and measured approach, lest she wastes precious time and thoughts. In this respect, this typewriter may represent a thicker or harder wall than that of the window inhibiting the bird, a brick wall versus a glass one. On top of that, the subject matter that the daughter is tackling is implied to be quite heavy in tone. It requires a much more conscious effort to disclose something personal than it does for anything considered more menial. As a result, the daughter has much to throw at this more stubborn wall before her. It may be significantly more painful to throw oneself upon this, placing the daughter in even more emotional peril than normal and endangering her writing spirit.

In the end, the bird does end up finally escaping, but the state that it leaves in is not necessarily desirable. By the time it flees, its feathers are coated in blood and its body is bruised all over, giving the image that the bird is in a great amount of pain. It may be free, but the toll that the quest for freedom has taken on the bird is immense. It's entirely possible that the bird might not even live much longer if its injuries are severe enough, effectively rendering its entire journey pointless. Even once the story is finished, it might not be in the form that the writer desires, where even small mistakes and issues are

If that bird barely limped through the open window and has a questionable near future, it then begs the question: is the end result really worth it? Wouldn't it be much safer to admit defeat and go for a half-measure rather than suicidally assaulting whatever's in your way? Even if one finally breaks through that restrictive barrier, it doesn't necessarily ensure a happy ending,

only that there's a new obstacle to get past. The daughter may give her heart and soul and finally lay it bare within a set amount of pages, but it's only the primer to what may lay outside of that stiff wall.

The kicker to all of this is the very same issue that started the conversation in the first place – what happens once one reaches that outside area is essentially up to luck. Despite all of the skill and all of the determination that went into reaching this point, that unknown factor can still do in even the hardest of writers and stories. The sheer difficulty of everything beforehand, combined with the potential for outside forces ruining anything that might come out from behind that wall, can make that end goal of writing ultimately seem pointless. It's an intense and difficult process with a nebulous outcome that may or not pay off.

Though optimistic and hopeful at first, "The Writer" takes on a much darker and more pessimistic tone through the liberal use of deconstructing the speaker's different arguments. What was once meant to be encouraging thoughts and a bright outlook on the struggles of writing instead becomes a stern warning for those that wish to express themselves so passionately. No matter how the poem is interpreted though, one message within remains abundantly clear: writing will always be an imperfect form of expression. Whether there's beauty or futility in this eternal battle lies with the eye of the beholder.

Works Cited

Wilbur, Richard. "The Writer." N.d., n.p. BlackBoard.