
'FLYING' IN THE NOVELS OF RICHARD BACH

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Whatever may be the reason for the birth of a literary piece, the desire to appeal to its audience is the foremost in the writer. For this the writer chooses a narrative technique that gives his work certain artistic and emotional effect. Nearly every storyteller, regardless of genre or style employs a few foundational techniques. Just as an artist uses different paints and brushes to create, writers employ numerous narrative techniques to make interesting stories. Tools like dialogue, scene structure and description, all play a role in making the story coherent and unified. Narrative techniques serve a variety of functions, including aiding in character development, building up plot and bringing the story's world to life for readers. Many techniques work upon specific uses of phrases, punctuation or exaggerations of description, but nearly every storyteller, regardless of genre or style employs a few foundational techniques. Not until a writer chooses how to present that story in language does it become a "narrative." Many key narrative techniques fall into four categories: plot, character, point of view, and style. The style a writer uses is seen in the diction, or the language used. Figurative language is a common element in narrative writing - metaphors, similes, imagery, personification, hyperbole and alliteration are some of them. Metaphor is used to help the reader understand what the writer is attempting to convey. It can be a comparison of one person or thing with another by saying that the first is the second. At times it is the use of an object or an action to represent another. Now as we survey through the works of Richard Bach we find that he makes extensive use of metaphor in his stories. To be precise 'flying' is a repeated metaphor in many of his works. The present paper is an attempt to understand the use of this metaphor and bring out the underlying meaning.

Spiritualism is beyond any dogmas and is not confined to any particular religion. It is also not based on a relationship with a particular savior. Rather, it is based upon the idea that we are all to form our own relationship with the Truth, and to obtain guidance and accept responsibility for our actions based on our interaction with that personal guide. As one keeps walking the path, one learns from one's own experiences and errors. Thus, faltering, blundering and learning, man reaches his own Truth. This is what we find in the novels of Richard Bach, an American writer who apparently seems to be writing about flying airplanes. But a spiritual seeker cannot miss the underlying messages of spirituality that his works are steeped with.

Richard Bach was born on June 23, 1936. He has authored many books including *Nothing by Chance* (1969), *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1970), *Illusion – The Adventure of a Reluctant Messiah* (1977), *One* (1988), and *Running from Safety* (1994) to name a few. He was earlier an Air Force pilot and later became a barnstormer. Nearly all his books are semi-autobiographical and they involve flight in some way or the other. Ray Bradbury, a science fiction writer commented, "Richard Bach with his book does two things: He gives me flight. He makes me young." However, his earlier works are straightforwardly about flying aircraft, whereas in his later works 'flight' is a philosophical metaphor.

A pilot by profession, he mostly takes recourse in technical and scientific aspects of 'flight' to put forth his philosophy of life. He begins with physical description of his 'flights' and soon the reader starts having the glimpses of the deeper insights. That is, though his novels seem to be talking about flights, they are in fact drenched with spiritual philosophy, and 'flight' is just used as a metaphor to put forth his point. One is wonderstruck to see how amazingly the spiritual world enters his works which apparently seem to be describing aircrafts, their technical faults and his physical airplane flights. The beauty lies in the manner in which he has dealt with the subject of spirituality. He has brought about the diametrically opposed technical and spiritual worlds – half revealed and half concealed in his novels. According to a review in Salt Lake Tribune, "Biography?, Metaphysics?, Fiction?, Non Fiction?, Philosophy?, Spirituality?, with Bach possibilities are infinite."

In his novel *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, the author presents his philosophy of life through the flying adventures of the seagull, Jonathan. The parable that he has dedicated to the present work is, "To the real Jonathan Seagull, who lives within us all." As we all know that the seagulls generally glide over the sandy shores and soar over crests of waves and that they are happy flying low. Here, in this book, he introduces us to Jonathan, one of the many gulls from Breakfast Flock, a particular gull colony. Every day the flock tends to fight over food as they fly over the sea, fishing boats and dive for scraps of food. But Jonathan seems to be different from the rest. For him, it was not eating that mattered, but flight. He doesn't understand the practicality of such monotonous daily routine. He had a passion, a passion to fly high, to soar high. So instead of fighting and screeching and living like the rest, he spends his time perfecting his flying skills. Even though his flock members detest him for being different, he does not deter from his ambition. Finally one day he gets his breakthrough and becomes the first gull to reach the terminal velocity at 214 m.ph. and later flies the first acrobatics. In his excitement, he runs to tell his flock that, "... there's a reason to live! We can lift ourselves out of ignorance, we can find ourselves as creatures of excellence and intelligence and skill. We can be free! We can learn to fly!" (*Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, 5, hereafter quoted as *JL*) However, his flock thinks differently and instead of celebrating his success are so upset with him that they outcast him - "... for his reckless irresponsibility ... violating the dignity and tradition of the gull family."

As a result, Jonathan finds himself all alone but like a true spiritual seeker he does not give up. Instead he uses his spare time and freedom to improve upon and develop his flying skills and his constant perseverance bears him fruit. He reaches higher realms where he meets two radiant sea gulls. These two radiant gulls again symbolize spiritually uplifted souls or prophets. In his interaction with them they tell him that, "We've come to take you higher, to take you home." Home, of course, stands for enlightenment. His interaction with them also makes Jonathan glad for at last he feels that they thought like he did. Unlike his own flock who never acknowledged him, these radiant souls understood him real well. On meeting them, Jonathan realizes that he had some more learning to do. Gradually, learning and staying in their association, one day, he finds his own body was growing and had

become radiant like them. He, too, had now grown spiritually and had gained enlightenment.

Thus, we see that the lessons that Jonathan learns during his 'flying' practice in fact reflect his freedom to be himself and eventually his flight to enlightenment. Here, instead of making direct statement to express his philosophy, Bach uses 'flight' of a bird as a metaphor. Through this metaphor he lays stress on the fact that our aim in life should be to be true to the real Jonathan who lives within all of us and in doing so we should follow our own instincts. It does not matter if we choose a road less travelled. What matters is that we believe in ourselves, no matter what others think of us. And, also, we are never given a wish without having given the ability to fulfill it. Of course! We have to work hard for it!

In *Illusions –The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, the unforgettable follow up to his phenomenal best seller *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Richard once again takes to air to discover ageless truth that makes our souls fly, showing that people don't need airplanes to soar and that even the darkest clouds have meaning once we lift ourselves above them and that messiahs can be found in the unlikeliest places – the hay fields or on traffic lights and most of all deep within ourselves.

So in this novel, in the cloud-washed airspace between the cornfield of Illinois and the blue sky, a man puts his faith in the propeller of his biplane. Soon he meets Donald Shimoda – former mechanic and self described messiah who can make wrenches fly and Richard's imagination soar high.

Bach very interestingly describes how Donald came to be a Messiah, all he had to do was 'let go' but even more surprisingly masses did not understand it and turned him into a saviour-

11. . . . "Once there lived a village of creatures along the bottom of a crystal river.

12. The current of the river swept silently over them all – young and old, rich and poor, good and evil, the current going its own way, knowing only its own crystal self.

13. Each creature in its own manner clung tightly to the twigs and rocks at the river bottom, for clinging was their way of life, and resisting the current what each had learned from birth.

14. But one creature said at last, 'I am tired of clinging. Though I cannot see it with my eyes, I trust that the current knows where it is going. I shall let go, and let it take me where it will. Clinging I shall die of boredom.'

15. The other creatures laughed and said, 'Fool! Let go, and that current you worship will throw you tumbled and smashed across the rocks, and you shall die quicker than boredom!'

16. But the one heeded them not, and taking a breath did let go, and at once was tumbled and smashed by the current across the rocks.

17. Yet in time, as the creature refused to cling again, the current lifted him free from the bottom, and he was bruised and hurt no more.

18. And the creatures downstream, to whom he was a stranger, cried, 'See a miracle! A creature like ourselves, yet he flies! See the Messiah, come to save us all!'

19. And the one cried in the current and said, 'I am no more Messiah than you. The river delights to lift us free, if we only dare let go. Our true work is this voyage, this adventure.'

20. But they cried the more, 'Saviour!' all the while clinging to the rocks, and when they looked again he was gone, and they were left alone making legends of a savior." (*Illusions – The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* Chapter 1, point 11-20. Hereafter quoted as *ILL*)

So, tired of people who did not care for the message but were only interested in miracles, Donald had decided to leave them alone. He took up the profession of a barnstormer where he met Richard. Both fly passengers in their airplanes in the countryside for their living. A relationship of learning and insight to life develops between them. They fly together giving

rides in their airplanes to local people and along the way Donald imparts wisdom to Richard as a messiah-in-training. His wisdom is in the form of maxims and the book is full of them. It is magical – open the book to any page and you will find a pithy maxim which will show light in your day. The maxims are scattered all over the book and are rift with meaning. Here are two such maxims –

“There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. You seek problems because you need their gifts.” (*ILL 71*)

“What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.” (*ILL 177*)

As they both spend time together, Richard observes that Donald can defy the laws of nature. He can walk on water! and what not! – all of which was characteristics of a Messiah. This surprises him all the more, for it came from an ordinary looking man. But Donald teaches him that our physical reality is an illusion, a mere dream, and that we can manipulate to our liking if we will just wake up to the illusory nature of our situation. He asks Richard to fully believe in himself and to remove all the traces of doubt before performing the so called ‘miracle’. Here he gives him the example of Christ who never had an iota of doubt and hence could perform any miracle. Gradually Richard too graduates as a messiah.

Thus, we see that the easy companionship of the two pilots flying in the air is a comfortable setting in which Bach sets his spiritual beliefs. Flying with Donald, Richard learns lessons that this world is an illusion and that they are all born messiahs but they have forgotten that fact. Thus, their spiritual challenge is to transcend the illusion of their present physical situation and reclaim the true spiritual identities. They definitely have to work hard towards it: “You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it true. You may have to work for it, however.” (*ILL 120*)

Bach’s novel *One* takes the reader to a realm beyond time and space, a setting of infinite worlds and lifetimes where he talks about choices. Life is a gift from God and a continuous process of creating, we create life –what we make of it depends on the choices we make. Bach puts forth a question which is enough to trigger deep insights, “I gave up my life to become the person I am right now – Was it worth it?”

Here too Richard uses 'flight' to dive into the past and then to the present and to the future. He and his wife, Leslie, are flying their aircraft. There is a sudden jolt and the city they are flying over suddenly disappears. They are not able to make a contact with earth: "The navigator readouts were blank lines and off flags. The Loran panel lit up a display we had never seen: NO POSITION" (*One* 13). They wonder if they were dead! Then with a flash of golden light they reach their past – they see the 'younger Richard' and 'younger Leslie' – sixteen years ago. They are wonderstruck but not wanting to waste their time they try to help the younger pair by suggesting them to make different choices from what they had made sixteen years back so that they don't make the same mistakes as them, They are backfired with a question from the younger couple, "Are you the only future we have?" (*One* 39). To this Leslie counter questions, "Are you our only past?" Soon they feel a great trembling and find themselves back in their aircraft, thus leaving the readers with a thought provoking question – Do we have only one alternate self?

Back in their aircraft they find a new guest who introduces herself as Pye who claims to be their alternate future and hence their guide. She tells the couple that Guides visit people on earth when they are in need and especially when they seek guidance from higher realms.

Later, while flying their aircraft with Pye, they lose their way and the compass stops working too. As a result, they are not able to make out which way to fly. Pye guides them and tells them that "Intuition is your guide here. One level of you knows everything there is to know. Find that level, ask for guidance, and trust you'll be led wherever you most need to go. Try it" (*One* 58). Leslie finds it strange for she feels that psychics reaching to remember other lives use their power in a similar manner. However, she decides to turn the same power loose to fly the aircraft so that it may find their alternate selves for she now understands that this power within all humans is, infact, our 'inner guides'. She steers the aircraft in a manner that it takes her to her alternate self in past where she was a small girl. This small girl, at that time, was trying to pursue her interest in piano while her mother was trying to persuade her to take modeling as her career. The girl was confused and was not able to make her choice. Music was her passion but modeling meant that she could financially help her family. The little girl sees Leslie and asks her, "You are! Aren't you? . . .

But you are grown up!" (*One* 65). Leslie nods and tells her that she is one of her alternate self and when in the past she was given the same choice, at that point of time in life she had chosen to help her family which meant that she had to put off her passion for music for a long time. She also added that whatever that little girl chose depended entirely on her. She could spend years living her life helping her family and be upset or decide right now to go in the direction of her love. It might just take a while for our choices to materialize but it doesn't keep it from being true this minute.

Hence, in the novel *One*, soaring and diving in their aircraft through space, the passengers on the flight touchdown in different times and places, where they commune with some of their alternate selves. The words and terms Bach uses here to describe his journey are also technical – belonging to his flights in the aircrafts. The elements of great science fiction novel are also present referring to the theme that time is vertical and not horizontal. It is like layers of paper wrapped around a spindle. We through our psychic power can pass through these layers – moving back in time or visit our future. There are many alternate lives possible for each soul. Every time we make a choice we become parents to all our alternate selves who follow. There is free will which we are given – the will to choose which becomes our destiny in future lives and that the past, present and future all co-exist and hence all is 'one'.

Thus, we see that in all the novels of Richard Bach 'flying' is used to put across his spiritual philosophy. But an important aspect of Bach's spiritual philosophy is that it does not derive sustenance from old religions or dogmas but from experience which can be termed as a personal religion or a religion in making that we experience and make it as we journey through this life. German word *Weltanschauung*, translated as worldwide view or world outlook, seems to be most appropriate. This word is connected closely to the works of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1811) and it stands for the religion beyond dogmas, ritual and institutional loyalties. It is a religion which we have formed ourselves through emotional maturity acquired in vicissitudes of life, in moral struggle and failure, in suffering and despair and in our occasional encounter with nothingness, in situations in which we seem to have lost everything which we thought make our life worthwhile ...and yet something was gained through heart-breaking personal quest.

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