

The Dialectical Vision of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

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When *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* appeared in 1974, reviewers agreed that it was a highly unusual treatise on nature. The work obviously exerted a peculiar power, for reviewers were either rhapsodic in their praise or passionate in their indignation. Neither side, however, was quite sure in what tradition or genre the book belonged, or in what context to evaluate the author's rather disconcerting conclusions about the natural world. That is where the matter has stayed. A bibliographical search some five years later turned up no articles on the book besides the initial reviews. Although the book has gone through twelve printings in two editions, the critics have been silent.

Why? Perhaps the book falls between several categories or disciplines—the scientists relegate the work to the religious; the religious view the book as an aberration of scientific investigation. Indeed, the subtitle, "A mystical excursion into the natural world," hints at the paradox and incongruity which characterize the book. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* appears to be a scientific study overlaid with spiritual contemplation, an examination of natural phenomena which leads the author to an encounter with the Divine. This fervent observer is an unusual empiricist and a still more unusual mystic.

In this book, Annie Dillard sets forth her dialectical vision of the world. The first level of that dialectic is the tension between the material and the spiritual, the natural and the transcendent, but another dialectic is at work within this framework: the prevailing contradiction between the beauty and the horror within the natural world. These two extremes define existence as Dillard observes it and form the focus of her work. In the first paragraph of the book, the author lays out the basic dialectic:

And some mornings I'd wake in daylight to find my body covered with
paw prints in blood; I looked as though I'd been painted with roses. . . .

We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence.¹

Since Dillard pursues her investigation of the beauty and the horror primarily in religious terms—within the language and framework of religion, both Christian and non-Christian, we shall here set her vision against traditional, orthodox religious categories (in the broadest sense of those terms) in order to analyze it.

Among Dillard's influences, both religious and literary, are certain American writers who have developed their visions of the world within the American Puritan heritage. One of the writers who was most adept at drawing metaphysical conclusions from the natural world was Herman Melville. He was able, as one introduction to his writings states, "to set the metaphysical thunderbolt side by side with factual discussion or commonplace realism."² Melville's eyes saw mainly the darkness and the horror, a legacy, perhaps, of the darker side of New England Puritanism. Annie Dillard's vision of the world includes the sinister side although her conclusions stem more from a horror at the seeming mindlessness of nature's design than from a deeply pervasive sense of evil.

It is the fixed that horrifies us, the fixed that assails us with the tremendous force of its mindlessness. . . . The fixed is the world without fire—dead flint, dead tinder, and nowhere a spark. It is motion without direction, force without power, the aimless procession of caterpillars round the rim of a vase, and I hate it because at any moment I myself might step to that charmed and glistening thread. (69)

In Dillard's vision, *Moby Dick* is reduced to a mindless insect.

Most reviewers of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* see Dillard as having some kind of link with American transcendentalism. One states it most unequivocally when he says: "In essence her view is plain old-fashioned optimistic American transcendentalism, ornamented though it may be with examples from quantum physics and bio-chemistry."³ Another also places her in the tradition of Henry Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson but goes on to make a distinction. Dillard, he says, turns things back on themselves to ask what kind of world this really is, and what kind of minds we must have that they (the world and our minds) respond the way they do to each other.⁴ Even another reviewer calls the book a "kind of gutsy Walden."⁵

Other critics are uncomfortable with identifying Dillard's work too closely with the transcendentalists. Most reviewers have not quite known what to make of her strange views. One calls Dillard's writing an "exuberant mingling" of all the different ways of writing about nature, using nature as the "source of an intoxicating personal dream grown to rhapsodic proportion."⁶ Another thinks the book is quite contemporary because it is interested in pure sensation, in simple perception divorced from preconcep-

tions and categories.⁷ These imprecise observations are not very helpful in placing Dillard within a literary-religious tradition. Significantly, she rarely quotes from any of her predecessors, focusing her attention almost completely on the observations of scientists and biblical writers. In her attitude to nature, however, Dillard seems to echo some of the views of her transcendentalist forebears. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Dillard watches the details of her natural environment with a sense of amazement and is overwhelmed with the lessons which nature can teach. One has only to "see," to observe natural phenomena in order to learn the wisdom which they offer.

"I've been thinking about seeing," says Dillard (16). In her discussion about seeing she observes: "But there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied" (33). This statement is an echo of Emerson who states in his essay "Nature": "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me."⁸ Dillard, in her chapter on seeing, goes on to qualify her exuberance and the tone changes: "If we are blinded by darkness, we are also blinded by light. When too much light falls on everything, a special terror results" (23). There can be too much seeing. "I reel in confusion; I don't understand what I see" (25). At this point all meaning flees and the writer faces the opposite of seeing: "I turn from the window. I'm blind as a bat, sensing only from every direction the echo of my own thin cries" (26). The vision of the transcendentalists is only a fond remembrance at this point of a world which seemed to promise more clarity than Dillard can find.

Emerson's philosophy rests on the orderliness, the unity, and the progress of the natural world and man within it—whatever horror may exist is horror because of man's limited understanding of it: "We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy."⁹ Dillard cannot long sustain that vision; her delight and wonder quickly change into horror and disgust and then back again to delight. Her experiences lead her to see both the unity and the diversity, the order and the chaos, the uplifting and the destructive.

Dillard does share with transcendentalism a notion that "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact."¹⁰ She, too, is compelled to see the hand of the Creator behind every living thing, to recall the religious wisdom of the ages as she observes a tree, but her concentration focuses on the minute, the tiniest particle of creation and moves to the universal. She is more the scientist contemplating the atom than the idealist beginning with a conviction about the unity of all things.

Idealism . . . beholds the whole circle of persons and things . . . as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul. Therefore the soul holds itself off from a too trivial and

microscopic study of the universal tablet. It respects the end too much to immerse itself in the means.¹¹

Dillard also differs from Emerson in her suspicion that "God absconded" with the sense of his creation and left a gulf between creator and creation (7). That God's spirit moves through every living thing and sustains the universe within a divine plan is not obvious to her. She can never state with Emerson's certainty that "In the woods, we return to reason and faith."¹² She may be closer in this respect to the Deists who affirmed an inscrutable deity who had left a great gulf between himself and his creation.

Although Dillard shares certain attitudes about the natural world with the transcendentalists, she draws more tentative and contradictory conclusions. Her preoccupation is more personal, less inclined to make final statements about the human and social order. Her conclusions are highly personal—in a sense, she is the only person in her world, and her judgments are based entirely on her observations, except for the substantiation she seeks from other writers.

What, then, are the specifics of this "private" vision which Dillard outlines in her book? Her view of the world centers on two contrasting images: one is the image of "the tree with lights in it"; the other is the frog sucked out by the waterbug.

Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. . . . The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam. (35)

He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped . . . it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog; then the shadow glided away. The frog skin bag started to sink. (6)

Around these two central visions are clustered all the other phenomena which Dillard observes. Her experience of the natural world ranges from the wildly beautiful experiences which lead to ecstasy to the repulsive, terrifying sights which result in nightmares. Observation of the natural world can yield two opposite conclusions, says Dillard. These two opposites she holds in constant tension throughout the book.

The two sides of her vision are best illustrated in the chapters "Intricacy" and "Fecundity." "Intricacy" celebrates the "extravagance of minutiae" (131).

This is the truth of the pervading intricacy of the world's detail: the creation is not a study, a roughed-in sketch; it is supremely, meticulously created, created abundantly, extravagantly, and in fine. (137)

Anything is dared in this mass of forms—"the creator loves pizzaz" (140). What this means for Dillard is that "there is the possibility for beauty here, a beauty inexhaustible in its complexity, which opens to my knock, . . . which trains me to the wild and extravagant nature of the spirit I seek" (142).

Amidst such celebration of the excessive profusion comes a note of misgiving: "The wonder is—given the errant nature of freedom and the burgeoning of texture in time—the wonder is that all the forms are not monsters, that there is beauty at all" (149). Really, she concludes, anything can happen in such a world.

In "Fecundity" Dillard expands her misgivings into a portrait of intricacy gone awry. The world has become a nightmare: "I don't know what it is about fecundity that so appalls. I suppose it is the teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives" (163–64). Endless repetition and mindless procreation reduce life to "a universal chomp" (171). In this world mothers eat their offspring; children devour their parents, and insects gobble up their mates. "What kind of world is this, anyway?" she asks in amazement. "Are we dealing in life, or in death?" (178).

In this chapter Dillard becomes explicit about her two-edged vision.

The picture of fecundity and its excesses and of the pressures of growth and its accidents is of course no different from the picture I painted before of the world as an intricate texture of a bizarre variety of forms. Only now the shadows are deeper. Extravagance takes on a sinister, wasted air, and exuberance blithers. . . . I saw how freedom grew the beauties and the horrors from the same live branch. (183)

Dillard's style of writing itself constantly reflects this dialectical vision. In winter, she says, "I come in to come out" as she reads about and analyzes her experiences (39). As she walks in the snow, "the dark is overhead and the light at my feet" in opposition to the natural order of things (44). About knowledge she says, "We know now for sure that there is no knowing" (207). This sudden shift in perspective is also reflected in the sudden change of mood. As Eudora Welty wryly observes, Dillard's shifts of mood are rather disconcerting—one time we feel like we are reading letters from camp when the moment before we were deep in the Book of Leviticus.¹³ The sudden injections of humor are also examples of the sudden juxtapositions of mood and thought: "My fingers were stiff and red with cold, and my nose

ran. I had forgotten the law of the Wild, which is, 'Carry Kleenex' " (60).

Dillard describes herself as a "pilgrim" on a "mystical excursion." Her house is an anchorhold; she is the anchorite (2). In the first three pages she uses the word "mystery" five times. Her goal is expressed as the desire to "lose herself" in her contemplation of the world, to empty herself in order to experience the present and regain her innocence (Chapter 6). Dillard's journey in this book is the journey of the religious mystic, and the work is full of religious references. Dillard constantly makes the leap from observation of natural phenomena to religious interpretation of the phenomena. Her exegesis of the fish as the symbol of spirit and holiness is an obvious illustration (188-89). Besides the many straightforward religious allusions, however, Dillard weaves some subtler shades into the overall scheme. Why a chapter, all of a sudden, about the flood during the summer solstice? Is it merely an interesting aside or is she hearkening back to the great flood which once swept the world? She does not say. She envisions herself as "a sacrifice bound with cords to the horns of the world's rock altar" (248) and ends the book at the winter solstice with "the waters of separation." At the end, the mystic has been purified; she has been "into the gaps" and has seen the works of God, both glorious and terrifying. She has been baptized both into the world—united with it—and separated from it by achieving a certain transcendence over it. She has eaten the world (278).

Dillard's theology, always dialectical, contains both the conventional language of religious mysticism as well as more macabre elements of religious experience. A critic has put a finger on this latter aspect of Dillard's thought by comparing the book to a celebration of the eucharist and says the eucharist is unusual because the author both ordains the ritual and receives the sacrament—she is both priest and supplicant, going further to note that the scars left by the tomcat become the author's stigmata.¹⁴

In a description of her role, Dillard says: "I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood" (13). At these points the ecstasy and solitary anguish of the mystical experience converge. One receives overtones of primitive religious rites and the suffering of the tortured anchorite who is seeking the ultimate: "Sometimes I ride a bucking faith while one hand grips and the other flails the air, and like any daredevil I gouge with my heels for blood, for a wilder ride, for more" (277). In her frenzy for experience, Dillard tempts the snake and imagines being attacked by a swarm of locusts. Such fervor probably also explains her fascination with Eskimos who keep reappearing in the book as people of her highest esteem. To her, the Eskimo represents the edge of civilization, the people who encounter life at its most primitive level. Only the Eskimo might survive the suffocating "prayer tunnel" which brings an excruciating death (263-64), and Dillard likens this experience to the religious hermit sitting in his cell (264). The

yearning for the edge of experience, almost a wish for death, characterizes the dark side of Dillard's mysticism, but this same passion, this same intensity, allows her to experience the light.

Throughout the book, Dillard affirms the existence of a creator, but what kind of a creator does she imagine? She wonders if the world was created in jest (7) or whether it is "the brainchild of a deranged manic-depressive with limitless capital" (67). Later on she says, "For if God is in one sense the igniter, a fireball that spins over the ground of continents, God is also in another sense the destroyer, lightning, blind power, impartial as the atmosphere" (91). Again, her vision includes both sides of possibility. In one of the most chilling passages in the book, she speculates:

Could it be that if I climbed the dome of heaven and scabbled and clutched at the beautiful cloth till I loaded my fists with a wrinkle to pull, that the mask would rip away to reveal a toothless old ugly, eyes glazed with delight? (273)

Her conclusion is, finally, that there is no knowing. God is hidden from us. We see, but we cannot understand. The creator "loves pizzaz" on the one hand and creates in "solemn incomprehensible earnest" on the other. His creation can be seen through one eye as "supremely, meticulously created" (137), and through the other eye as "a mindless stutter" (164). The author can only accept what she observes and continue to make her way. Even as she is bound as a sacrifice on the world's altar, "waiting for worms," the moment of understanding, of reality, reappears, and she can go on again (248). Life can only be accepted as a mystery: "The Lord God of gods, he knoweth" (148).

Looking more closely at Dillard's religious vision, one is struck by an unusual quality. In some ways her attitude is an inversion of conventional religious and philosophical truths. She seems to turn certain beliefs on their heads, so to speak, and views them from a perspective entirely opposite to the accustomed one. The mystic, for example, desires to move from the material world to the spiritual, from the particular to the universal, from the self to God. The mystic strives to leave self, to become "empty" in order to experience the divine. Dillard, who casts herself in the role of the mystic, also strives to become "transfixed and empty" (33), but her attention is focused always on the most minute detail, the most particular of objects—"I never ask why of a vulture or shark, but I ask why of almost every insect I see." Almost as though she desires to become lost in the particular instead of the universal, she explicitly asserts her conviction about the value of "particularity":

That Christ's incarnation occurred improbably, ridiculously, at such-and-such a time, into such-and-such a place, is referred to—with great sincerity even among believers—as "the scandal of particularity." Well,

the "scandal of particularity" is the only world that I, in particular, know. What use has eternity for light? We're all up to our necks in this particular scandal. (81)

In the contemplation of the particular, then, Dillard experiences the divine, but in doing so, she seems almost to become lost in the "lower world" instead of the "higher." Her gaze is concentrated on Tinker Creek, and there she searches for God. She laments the legacy from evolution which separates human beings not only from the creator, but from fellow creatures. By "fellow creatures" she means the animal world and appears to lament that separation more than her separation from fellow human beings: "Adam seems sometimes an afterthought in Eden" (219); in an inversion of the old philosophical question she asks, "What if I fell in a forest: would a tree hear?" (94). Convinced that Dillard yearns for the purity of animal existence, one critic states that Dillard finds human self-consciousness the "curse of mankind" because it "prevents us from attaining to the purity of animal existence, absorbed in greater reality."¹⁵ The book, from this view, is dangerous and subversive because of its atavistic and essentially passive views.

Although the critic overstates the case, Dillard realizes the danger of her intense involvement but feels that she saves herself by bringing her own humanity to that world (182). She also saves herself by interpreting her experiences in human, religious terms, thus bringing the particular and the universal, if not together, at least a bit closer to each other. In her attempt to define the nature of her mysticism, Dillard again demonstrates the paradoxical nature of her thinking. Although she desires to transcend her present self-consciousness and recover her innocence, she wants, at the same time, to remain fully conscious and observant.

What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration. One needn't be, shouldn't be, reduced to a puppy. (83)

She sees and interprets her world in a highly conscious fashion: "Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it" (32). Later she says the opposite: "And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy" (80).

What lies at the heart of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a basic theological problem: How do we explain evil in the world? Dillard tackles this question in theological terms based on her empirical observations of nature. "Creation itself was the fall," she states, implying again the distance between God and the creation (221). In seeing evil in this fallen world, Dillard stands in a very orthodox Christian tradition, but her conclusions (or lack of them) are far from the traditional Christian answers. Christian theology, broadly

speaking, looks at the horror, the chaos, and concludes that hope can be sought only outside the created order—redemption comes from outside and gives hope for a better world, a transformed world. Dillard makes no such claim. Even though she feels the need to affirm a creator, she sees no hope of redemption—she can only “wait and stalk” and continue to wonder (209).

Another critic puts it rather well: “Here is not only a habitat of cruelty and ‘the waste of pain’ but the savage and magnificent world of the Old Testament, presided over by a passionate Jehovah, with no Messiah in sight.”¹⁶ The creator is there but has not yet been revealed. “Our God shall come,” she quotes from an Advent Psalm, “and shall not keep silence; there shall go before him a consuming fire, and a mighty tempest shall be stirred up round about him” (265). The only moments of revelation thus far, for Dillard, have come from the natural world. Nature, or more specifically, the creek, is the mediator in her world. “The creek is the one great giver,” she says. “It is, by definition, Christmas, the incarnation” (103–04). Salvation must come from the natural order, but Dillard is not quite sure how.

On the first page of her book, Dillard introduces her religious questions:

And some mornings I'd wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I'd been painted with roses. . . . What blood was this, and what roses? It could have been the rose of union, the blood of murder, or the rose of beauty bare and the blood of some unspeakable sacrifice or birth. The sign on my body could have been an emblem or a stain, the keys to the kingdom or the mark of Cain. I never knew. I never knew as I washed, and the blood streaked, faded, and finally disappeared, whether I'd purified myself or ruined the blood sign of the passover. We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence. (1–2)

At the end of the book Annie Dillard still has not found the answers to those questions. The purpose of creation and the workings of the creator are still shrouded in mystery.

The final chapter of the book sums up in marvellously inspired prose the lessons which Dillard has learned from her “mystical excursion.” She has experienced a deep encounter with the beautiful and the evil and, like Job, has hurled her questions and misgivings at the creator. Although no answers come, it is enough for her that she has been touched and purified by her encounter. She has seen the sign (275). Given the gift of acute sight, she has dared to look at both sides and to accept them both at the same time.

The power of Dillard's vision arises from her strength to maintain the contradictions within a single vision. The dialectic remains and is accepted without flinching. This book is a profound realization of the author's ability to articulate that vision and, in the face of uncertainty, to move out on a wave of ecstasy.

NOTES

1. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York and Toronto: Bantam Books, 1978), pp. 1-2. Subsequent references are to this edition.
2. Sculley Bradley, et al., eds., *The American Tradition in Literature*, Shorter 3rd Edition, (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 474.
3. Hayden Carruth, "Attractions and Dangers of Nostalgia," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 50, No. 4 (Autumn 1974), 637.
4. Charles Nicol, "Looking Spring in the Eye," *National Review*, 26, No. 17 (26 April 1974), 489.
5. J. C. Peirce, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," *The Dalhousie Review*, 54, No. 3 (Autumn 1974), 568.
6. Muriel Haynes, "We are all Nibblers. . .," *Ms.*, 3, No. 2 (August 1974), 38.
7. Russell Hunt, "What You Get is What You See," *The Fiddlehead*, No. 102 (Summer 1974), 113.
8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in Bradley, p. 575.
9. Emerson, p. 572.
10. Emerson, p. 577.
11. Emerson, p. 588.
12. Emerson, p. 574.
13. Eudora Welty, "Meditation on Seeing," *New York Times Book Review*, 24 March 1974, p. 4.
14. Haynes, p. 39.
15. Carruth, p. 638.
16. Melvin Maddocks, "Terror and Celebration," *Time*, 18 March 1974, p. 78.

