

Lorianne DiSabato (formerly Schaub)
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**Tricks of Eye and Spirit:
 Invisibility and Illusion in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek***

A fog that won't burn away drifts and flows across my field of vision. When you see fog move against a backdrop of deep pines, you don't see the fog itself, but streaks of clearness floating across the air in dark shreds. So I see only tatters of clearness through a pervading obscurity. I can't distinguish the fog from the overcast sky; I can't be sure if the light is direct or reflected. Everywhere darkness and the presence of the unseen appalls. We estimate now that only one atom dances alone in every cubic meter of intergalactic space. I blink and squint. What planet or power yanks Halley's Comet out of orbit? We haven't seen that force yet; it's a question of distance, density, and the pallor of reflected light. We rock, cradled in the swaddling band of darkness. Even the simple darkness of night whispers suggestions to the mind.

(Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 19)

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is, as Eudora Welty noted in the *New York Times Book Review*, a "form of meditation, written with headlong urgency, about *seeing*" (4, emphasis in original). Filled with elaborate visual descriptions of the natural phenomena Dillard sees near her Virginia home, *Pilgrim* features an entire chapter dedicated to the topic of seeing, with Dillard writing of "vision" in both the physical and spiritual senses. Throughout *Pilgrim*, however, Dillard seems to be as fascinated by the unseen as she is by the seen: in many passages, Dillard's observations lead her to write of things she can't quite see, or things that she only seems to have seen. This fascination with the invisible stems in part from Dillard's realization that in nature, the unseen often defines the seen; it also stems from a spiritual vision that posits the hidden character of both God and nature.

The passage quoted above is a case in point. In this paragraph from her "Seeing" chapter, Dillard notes that fog is itself invisible against a dark background; instead, Dillard "sees" the fog in terms of its absence: she knows fog is there because she can see "streaks of clearness" where it isn't. Here, the "clearness" of visibility is anomaly; the norm is the "pervading obscurity" that covers a world where Dillard "can't distinguish the fog from the overcast sky." In this passage, absence is a

presence: Dillard describes herself as “appall[ed]” by “darkness and the presence of the unseen”—the world, it seems, is threatening not because of what Dillard can see but because of what she *can't*. This absence as presence is, it seems, the way the universe works: Dillard notes that intergalactic existence, “we estimate,” is literally defined in terms of *space*, with isolated atoms drifting in seas of emptiness. What captivates Dillard here and elsewhere is the intimation of an unseen force that bears mysterious influence upon the seen: here, this unseen force is the unknown “planet or power” that governs the orbit of Halley’s Comet; elsewhere, this unseen force is God or whoever else is responsible for the seen and unseen creatures that populate the area around Tinker Creek.

“Even the simple darkness of night,” Dillard suggests above, “whispers suggestions to the mind.” What is problematic about *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is the way that this work of “nature writing”—a classification that usually implies authorial objectivity in observing and describing the natural world—so often fills spaces of visual emptiness (“simple darkness”) with imagined figures of what might be there (the “suggestions” that darkness “whispers...to the mind”). In her “attempt,” to paraphrase Peter A. Fritzell, “to settle [her]self in America” (225), Dillard is thwarted by things that are *unsettling* because they cannot be seen or known; in many cases, Dillard responds by trying to fill this uncertainty with speculation about what might exist while nevertheless maintaining the “wild, unfathomable, frontired quality” of her neighborhood (Fritzell 225). In writing about *seeing*, then, both in terms of invisibility—what one *can't* see—and in terms of illusion—what one might only *seem* to see—Dillard raises questions about the reliability of sight, the trustworthiness of the creator responsible for both sight and the seen, and the creditability of authorial voice who describes what it has seen.

Many critics have noted their difficulty in determining the genre of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Sandra Humble Johnson, for example, notes that the book is “mysterious,” a work that “crosses boundaries” between “prose and poetry, literary art and ecological treatise, religion and philosophy,

science and art” (3). Such boundary crossing aside, many critics and readers have categorized *Pilgrim* as a work of nature writing while others have found fault with this classification: Judy Schaaf Anhorn, for example, notes that while American nature writing normally strives for unity by “putting diversity into perspective, tracing pattern[s], determining purpose, [and] naming, Linnaeus-like, the world,” Dillard’s prose is Whitmanian in its “ecstatic recognition of complexity, even of contradiction” (148).

Dillard herself is uncomfortable with the nature writing label: in an 1981 interview, Dillard noted, “There’s usually a bit of nature in what I write, but I don’t consider myself a nature writer....Weirdly, I would consider myself a fiction writer who’s dealt mostly with non-fiction” (Hammond 35). Indeed, the significance of “nature writing” is that it is supposed to be a non-fiction genre, and Dillard does appear, at heart, to be a writer of fictions: in the same interview, Dillard responded to a comment quoting her as admitting to making up details for her poetry, “Well, you understand that art is lies” (Hammond 35). Dillard is, in short, willing to bend literal truth to create an artistic, aesthetic effect; as Linda Smith notes, “Dillard views nature in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as the means, and art as the end, of her work” (43).

In her essay “Annie Dillard: The Woman in Nature and the Subject of Nonfiction,” Suzanne Clark discusses the problem of reading *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as unadulterated truth rather than as crafted artifice. Referring to the photo of Dillard on the cover of early editions of *Pilgrim*, Clark notes readers’ tendency to read the book as genuine autobiography:

It is a photograph. Therefore, though its play of light and dark seems almost symbolic, an appeal to imagination, we take the image as “real.” Annie Dillard represents herself, the image of her proper person, as, presumably, she does in the voice of the text. The conventions of “real perception,” not verisimilitude, will govern our reading of both photograph and text: this will seem to be a book about the experience of a real person, looking by herself, speaking for herself. As “natural” readers, we are not expected to think critically about the narrator; we will not read her as a character, a fictive creation who constructs her own subjectivity by the point of view she takes as she speaks. Rather, we will try to read her world as if it were a photograph. We will read according to the conventions of realism. (112)

Despite a strong tendency to read Dillard's prose as "real," Clark notes, insightful readers will find that *Pilgrim* also markets itself as something other than simply, mundanely factual: the words under the title of early editions read, "A mystical excursion into the natural world" while the back cover reads, "Mystery, Death, Beauty, Violence" (qtd. in Clark 112). *Pilgrim*, it seems, offers some elements of realism—mainly, its "excursion into the natural world"—while admitting at the same time that this journey will be "mystical" rather than purely objective or scientific. What distinguishes *Pilgrim* from some other works of nature writing, then, is this pervasive reference to the mystical—with an Emersonian idealism, Dillard paints natural objects and phenomena that serve in part to point to spiritual truths. One of the ways that Dillard turns her readers' gaze from the physical objects and phenomena she describes to spiritual truths is through her insistence that physical looks can be deceiving.

Dillard introduces the idea that looks can be deceiving in her aptly-named opening chapter, "Heaven and Earth in Jest." After noting that one of the themes of her book is "the *uncertainty* of vision" (3, emphasis added), Dillard suggests that earthly existence may not be as "real" as it seems by emphasizing the surreality of the landscapes she sees. After noting, for example, that if she stares for a long time at the creek's flow, when she stands up "the opposite bank seems to stretch before my eyes and flow grassily upstream" (9), Dillard describes the unreal quality of what she calls the "most beautiful day of the year" (10).

That the scene Dillard describes is real is evident in its particularity; here—as Peter Fritzell notes she commonly does (229)—Dillard begins by asserting the concrete facts she can be sure of: that this is a winter day, "one of those excellent January partly cloudies" (3), and that the time is around four o'clock in the afternoon. Dillard describes the physical quality of the sky and light, noting that the sky is "a dead stratus black flecked with low white clouds" (10). Immediately after this physical description, though, Dillard notes the unreal aspects of the scene: because of the way

the sun falls on the ground and trees, the “silver trees” and “black sky” look like “a photographer’s negative of a landscape” (10).¹ What Dillard describes seems more a man-made than a natural scene: as light comes and goes with the passing of clouds and the setting of the sun, Dillard says that “the mountains are going on and off like neon signs” (10).

Dillard then moves to the metaphor of a light or magic show to describe the scene she sees: clouds move across the sky “as if pulled from the horizon, like a tablecloth whipped off a table” until finally Tinker Mountain, hitherto invisible in the twilight, “comes on like a streetlight, ping, *ex nibilo*” (10). This spectacle is a drama—the setting sun spotlights first one character and then another—and is played out, appropriately enough, as if on film: “The pale network of sycamore arms, which a second ago was transparent as a screen, is suddenly opaque, glowing with light. Now the sycamore arms snuff out, the mountains come on, and there are the cliffs again” (10).

The question, then, is who is creating this illusion—who is snapping tablecloths, flipping light switches, or running the projectors? Dillard suspects a divine illusionist:

I walk home. By five-thirty the show has pulled out. Nothing is left but an unreal blue and a few banked clouds low in the north. Some sort of carnival magician has been here, some fast-talking worker of wonders who has the act backwards. “Something in this hand,” he says, “something in this hand, something up my sleeve, something behind my back...” and abracadabra, he snaps his fingers, and it’s all gone. Only the bland, blank-faced magician remains, in his unruffled coat, barehanded, acknowledging a smattering of baffled applause. When you look again the whole show has pulled up stakes and moved on down the road. It never stops. New shows roll in from over the mountains and the magician reappears unannounced from a fold in the curtain you never dreamed was an opening. Scarves of clouds, rabbits in plain view, disappear into the black hat forever. Presto chango. The audience, if there is an audience at all, is dizzy from head-turning, dazed.

(11)

If it is God who created this world, Dillard suggests, then he is a magician, a “fast-talking worker of wonders” who performs his show whether there is an audience there to see it or not. And while this metaphor of the carnival magician highlights the wondrous, marvelous aspects of the natural world, it also suggests that this natural world might be an illusion: are the landscapes around us merely tricks of the eye, the products of divine sleight of hand? The title of this chapter, Dillard explains,

comes from a passage in the Koran where God asks mankind, “The heaven and the earth and all in between, thinkest thou I made them *in jest?*” (7, emphasis in original); although Dillard never definitively answers this question, her use of the magician metaphor suggests that the creation is indeed something of a divine joke.

Another way that Dillard shifts attention from the physical to the spiritual is through her elaborately described visions of illusory landscapes. These visions typically occur in some kind of liminal state—between land and water, for example, or light and shade; as William J. Scheick has noted, within *Pilgrim’s* liminal spaces, Dillard typically fluctuates between “verbalizing the seen (revealed surfaces) and seeing beyond what can be verbalized (concealed depths)” (52). Dillard is fascinated with liminal states and spaces because she believes they bridge the chasm between heaven and earth: as Dillard says of Puget Sound shorelines in *Holy the Firm*, “the fringe edge” is “where elements meet and realms mingle, where time and eternity spatter each other with foam” (21).² One way that Dillard in *Pilgrim* positions herself on the liminal fringe is by trying to capture in narrative the precise moment when day turns to night: as Dillard notes elsewhere, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is “a nature book full of sunsets” (*The Writing Life* 34). Thus one of the most striking passages in *Pilgrim* describes an illusory landscape Dillard views in semi-darkness one night when she claims she “stayed at the creek too late” (19).

Dillard writes of this experience in her chapter on “Seeing,” immediately after the passage where she writes of the invisible fog. The passage begins with straight-forward description of the physical scene: Dillard describes the stretch of Tinker Creek where the current flows under the sycamore log bridge near the tear-shaped island; here the shoreline, according to Dillard, is fringed with cattails and packed with insects, animals, and birds. As she does in her description of the most beautiful day of the year, Dillard describes the sudden way that light comes and goes: she remarks, for example, that a “cloud in the sky suddenly lighted as if turned on by a switch” (20). This twilight

state between day and night is also a liminal state between the seen and the unseen: in her description, Dillard notes that in the twilight spider webs are “made invisible by the gathering dark” (20).

It soon becomes apparent, though, that Dillard is describing something more than merely physical here. Dillard notes, for example, the “great suggestion of lurking beings” in the scene she describes (20); in noting that she cannot tell exactly what she sees and hears in the edges where land meets water, Dillard fills this unknown void with imagined creatures: what she sees and hears might be “a distant rattlesnake, slit-eyed, or a nearby sparrow kicking in the dry flood debris slung at the foot of a willow” (20). In other words, Dillard fills in what she can’t see with imagined surmises of what *might* be seen: what readers *see* in this passage is Dillard’s *speculation* of what may lie unseen in the darkness.

Not only are readers unsure of what Dillard does *not* see in this passage, they become increasingly unclear about what Dillard *does* see: in this passage as in others, Dillard describes in painstaking visual detail sights that aren’t easily identifiable:

At last I stared upstream where only the deepest violet remained of the cloud, a cloud so high its underbelly still glowed feeble color reflected from a hidden sky lighted in turn by a sun halfway to China. And out of that violet a sudden enormous black body arced over the water. I saw only a cylindrical sleekness. Head and tail, if there was a head and tail, were both submerged in cloud. I saw only one ebony fling, a headlong dive to darkness; then the waters closed, and the lights went out. (20)

This passage is a subtle interplay of the seen and the unseen, the present and the absent—it is a prime example of what Lawrence Buell calls Dillard’s “aesthetics of the not-there” (73). Dillard is able to see the glowing cloud because it reflects light from a sun no longer visibly present; out of the violet darkness of this cloud, Dillard sees a nameless black shape, a “cylindrical sleekness” race across the sky. What is this shape Dillard sees? It may or not be a creature—it may or may not

have a head and tail. It is difficult to tell exactly what this unidentified object is because it is hidden by a cloud that is itself barely seen.

What is this shape Dillard sees? Is it like the nameless, terrifying oblong creature that raced across the bedroom walls of Dillard's youth, a shape she eventually realized was only the reflection of a car's headlights passing her house and turning a corner (*An American Childhood* 20-23)? If so, then this mysterious, seemingly scary "creature" is actually something (a strangely lit cloud, perhaps, or a shadow of some sort) that is quite mundane—something that is nothing to be afraid of and that Dillard's readers have probably seen themselves. On the other hand, however, this twilight shape might be something much less ordinary—it could be, for example, the vision that Rabbi Mendel saw of "the angel who rolls away the light before the darkness" (30); if this be the case, the "cylindrical sleekness" is something potentially frightful, a sight that most of Dillard's readers have probably *not* seen. The dark shape is explainable either as a "natural" phenomenon with a simple physical explanation or a "supernatural" phenomenon with a less-than-simple spiritual explanation: which explanation a reader should subscribe to, however, isn't clear from the text itself.

Rather than moving on to explain herself, Dillard continues describing things in a way that confuses rather than reveals. Dillard describes herself as being disoriented from the experience: she walks home in "a shivering daze" (21). At home in her bed, Dillard continues to "see" strange and glorious sights: "I open my eyes and I see dark, muscled forms curl out of water, with flapping gills and flattened eyes" (21). What exactly is it that Dillard sees (and doesn't see) in this passage? Are the "dark, muscled forms" real, remembered fish from Tinker Creek? Is so, why doesn't Dillard identify them as such? Are they something that Dillard imagines, supposed sights that fill in areas of invisibility like the snake or sparrow that she imagines in the creek-side darkness? Or, are these forms something that Dillard "really" sees—are they some kind of vision, and if so, exactly what kind of vision is this? In this passage, Dillard seems to move once again from science (objective

description of what is “really” there) to poetry (subjective description of what “seems” to be—but may not “actually” be—there): even when she closes her eyes, Dillard says she sees “stars, deep stars giving way to deeper stars, deeper stars bowing to deepest stars at the crown of an infinite cone” (21). Are these stars in Dillard’s dreaming eyes memories of the actual stars she just saw in the nighttime sky, or are they metaphorical stars, visions of the “deepest” depths of heaven’s “infinite cone”? As in the passage about the “cylindrical sleekness,” readers can’t be sure whether Dillard is talking art or science.

Later in this same chapter on “Seeing,” Dillard describes another indeterminate sight. Writing of “another kind of seeing,” a kind of mystical vision that “involves a letting go” enabling “the moment’s light” to print on the viewer’s camera-like “silver gut” (31), Dillard describes a sunny summer evening she spends watching silver-sided shiners flashing to and fro in Tinker Creek:

Then I noticed white specks, some sort of pale petals, small, floating from under my feet on the creek’s surface, very slow and steady. So I blurred my eyes and gazed towards the brim of my hat and saw a new world. I saw the pale white circles roll up, roll up, like the world’s turning, mute and perfect, and I saw the linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time. Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone. (32)

On the one hand, this passage is more straight-forward than the passage about the “cylindrical sleekness” or the one about the fish-like “dark, muscled forms”: here Dillard identifies the nameless “white specks” as “some sort of pale petals” floating on the creek’s surface. However, the way that Dillard describes these petals is odd: normally, ordinary petals don’t “roll up, roll up, like the world’s turning, mute and perfect”; normally, ordinary petals don’t shine “like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time.” Instead of underscoring the actual physicality of “real” petals, Dillard describes something more (or less) than physical: these rolling, shining petals are other-worldly, reminiscent of John’s apocalyptic vision in the book of Revelation of falling stars and a sky rolling up like a scroll (6:12-14). That Dillard is here describing a heavenly or even an

apocalyptic vision—a vision like John’s of a new heaven and a new earth—seems apparent in her comment that when she “blurred” her vision to look peripherally at the petals, she saw a “new world.”

In this passage, Dillard seems to be describing something more than the simple act of watching petals float by: by paragraph’s end it is clear that she is describing a mystical experience whereby she becomes one with the silver-sided fish and silver-gleaming petals that flash with photographic precision on her own silver-lined gut. What Dillard describes here isn’t so much a scene that is seen but a seer who is transformed through seeing: Dillard describes a kind of synesthesia whereby her perceptions of air, light, and water blur into a sensation of mystical oneness; self-emptied through the practice of close observation, Dillard describes herself as “filled up” by the creek’s grace and transformed into a delicate natural object—“flesh-flake, feather, bone.”³ The experience that Dillard documents here is more a spiritual or supernatural phenomenon than an incident of natural history—here, as in John’s Revelation, the effacement or passing away of a symbolic physical world allows the advent of a renewed spiritual one.

Thus, although Dillard spends much of her “Seeing” chapter talking about the biology of sight—she writes with fascination of Marius von Senden’s *Space and Sight*, a book that records the experiences of patients born blind who gained their sight through cataract surgery—by chapter’s end it becomes clear that she is more intrigued by spiritual vision than by physical sight—as Scott Slovic argues, Dillard is more preoccupied by the phenomenon of “awareness” than with nature per se (3). For Dillard, close observation is a type of spiritual practice—James I. McClintock uses the term “ritual” (94f)—whereby the individual ego is emptied and thus readied for mystical union—as Dillard says of her experience watching muskrats, “I was focused for depth. I had long since lost myself, lost the creek, the day, lost everything but still amber depth” (190). Although Dillard’s mystical encounters typically begin with detailed observations of the natural world, often they end

with actual natural objects—the creek, the day—being “lost” in the height of Dillard’s spiritual ecstasy.

A vivid example of such a visionary mystical encounter occurs at the beginning of the chapter entitled “The Present.” While stopping for coffee at a gas station in Nowhere, Virginia, Dillard sits outside, her back toward the setting sun, and pets the clerk’s beagle puppy while looking at an “enormous mountain ridge, forested, alive and awesome with brilliant blown lights”:

Shadows lope along the mountain’s rumpled flanks; they elongate like root tips, like lobes of spilling water, faster and faster. A warm purple pigment pools in each ruck and tuck of the rock; it deepens and spreads, boring crevasses, canyons. As the purple vaults and slides, it tricks out the unleafed forest and rumpled rock in gilt, in shape-shifting patches of glow. These gold lights veer and retract, shatter and glide in a series of dazzling splashes, shrinking, leaking, exploding. The ridge’s bosses and hummocks sprout bulging from its side; the whole mountain looms miles closer, the light warms and reddens; the bare forest folds and pleats itself like living protoplasm before my eyes, like a running chart, a wildly scrawling oscillograph on the present moment. The air cools; the puppy’s skin is hot. I am more alive than all the world. (78)

Dillard describes a surrealistic *living* landscape that swells and stretches before her eyes like an enormous sentient creature; the Virginia mountain landscape here is oceanic, gushing and billowing. The language of this passage is lushly poetic not only in its imagery but also in its alliterative diction and flowing rhythms; the scene in this passage is very much like the opening of *Holy the Firm* where Dillard describes the “god” of Puget Sound “lift[ing] from the water”: “His head fills the bay....his breast rises from the pastures; his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders” (12). In both of these passages, Dillard describes a mystical landscape that effaces the physical landscape—instead of describing a conglomeration of actual natural objects (rocks, cliffs, trees), Dillard describes a scene that is, to borrow a phrase from David L. Lavery, “almost hallucinogenic” (258).

The simple act of seeing this transfigured mountain is significant to Dillard because it was at the time the most simple manifestation of the present moment: “This is it, I think, this is it, right

now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain” (*Pilgrim* 78-79). Dillard is able to “see” the mountain, she explains, because she has lost her self-consciousness; the moment she regains self-awareness and “verbalize[s] this awareness in my brain,” she “cease[s] to see the mountain” (79). Herein lies the double-bind of seeing: although Dillard notes earlier that “[s]eeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization” and that “[u]nless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won’t see it” (30), she also realizes that in order to see in an mystical sense, she as seeing and describing subject has to pass away—as Scott Slovic says of another of Dillard’s visionary encounters (her vision of Christ being baptized on the beach in *Holy the Firm*), “Not only does the external world shift and vanish when the narrator attempts to study it, but the character herself becomes less and less substantial as she undergoes the experience of awareness” (68). The mystical act of seeing the mountain causes Dillard as seer to pass away while the very act of describing the mountain in physical terms prevents Dillard from seeing it as it really is spiritually.

However, Dillard’s observation-inspired mystical experiences are not only a matter of seeing: often, they are also a matter of being seen by an invisible power—the same “unseen presence,” perhaps, that “appalls” Dillard in the passage about the invisible fog. In describing her epiphanic moment when she sees the “tree with the lights in it,” for example, Dillard says of the encounter, “It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance” (33). Here, the “unseen presence” of the earlier passage isn’t appalling; instead, this invisible watcher is figured in positive, even intimate terms: being “knocked breathless” by a glance is typically an exhilarating experience, something a person would feel when encountering one’s own or a prospective lover.

And yet, being seen by an unseen power is, for Dillard, both thrilling and threatening. In describing her vocation of observing the valley around Tinker Creek—her work, in short, as a “nature writer”—Dillard describes looking as a game played against an invisible opponent:

So I think about the valley. It is my leisure as well as my work, a game. It is a fierce game I have joined because it is being played anyway, a game of both skill and chance, played against an unseen adversary—the conditions of time—in which the payoffs, which may suddenly arrive in a blast of light at any moment, might as well come to me as anyone else. I stake the time I’m grateful to have, the energies I’m glad to direct. I risk getting stuck on the board, so to speak, unable to move in any direction, which happens enough, God knows; and I risk the searing, exhausting nightmares that plunder rest and force me face down all night long in some muddy ditch seething with hatching insects and crustaceans.

But if I can bear the nights, the days are a pleasure. I walk out; I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell. (12)

The prize for winning the game is the chance to see “some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost”; the challenge of the game, however, is playing against an “unseen adversary”—time and chance, the mysteries of “some enormous power.” Whether been seen by an invisible observer is threat or thrill for Dillard depends, it seems, upon what she herself sees in the encounter: nights are terrorsome because they are filled not with actual sights but instead with nightmarish visions of nature run amok; days, on the other hand, “are a pleasure” because they bring the opportunity of seeing while being seen.⁴

Dillard becomes increasingly fascinated with the threatening potential of God’s invisibility; as she has explained in various interviews, the first half of *Pilgrim* expresses the *Via positiva*—the practice of knowing God through his positive attributes and works—while the second half expresses the *Via negativa*—the practice of approaching God by denying all conceptions of the divine (Hammond 32, Yancey 18). In becoming more and more fascinated with God’s inscrutable mystery, Dillard becomes less interested in “real” natural landscapes and instead focuses more on

abstractions drawn from invisibility and illusion. Dillard's move toward talking about God's frightful side is apparent in a passage from her chapter on "The Present."

Dillard begins by marveling that "so many mystics of all creeds experience the presence of God on mountaintops"; Dillard wonders, "Aren't they afraid of being blown away?" (89) In writing of "*the fear*" (emphasis in original) that "the Lord may break out against them," Dillard notes that humanity's best defense might be attempted invisibility: "It often feels best to lay low, inconspicuous, instead of waving your spirit around from high places like a lightning rod." What is troublesome to Dillard—and, she suggests, to the Old Testament prophets and the mystics of Judaism's Hasidic tradition—is that God is "in one sense the igniter" but "is also in another sense the destroyer" (89). Dillard continues:

In the open, anything might happen. Dorothy Dunnett, the great medievalist, states categorically: "There is no reply, in clear terrain, to an archer in cover." Any copperhead anywhere is an archer in cover; how much more so is God! Invisibility is the all-time great "cover"; and that the one infinite power deals so extravagantly and unfathomably in death—death morning, noon, and night, all manner of death—makes that power an archer, there is no getting around it. And we the people are so vulnerable. Our bodies are shot with mortality. (89-90)

Here God's unseen gaze becomes an unseen aim: not only might God be watching us, but he might be watching us down the shaft of an arrow.⁵

Dillard's suggestions that nature is visually deceiving and God willfully deceptive are most pervasive in the latter parts of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Continuing her metaphor of God as carnival magician, Dillard describes the way that the fish of Tinker Creek dissolve into and out of visibility as "sleight of fish" and remarks that, given that fish are abundant yet elusive, it is appropriate that the Greeks associated the word for fish, *ichthys*, with the name of Christ (185). Later in the book, Dillard describes God as another kind of carnival performer—not a magician, but a juggler: "If you watch carefully the hands of a juggler, you see they are almost motionless, held at precise angles, so that the balls seem to be of their own volition describing a perfect circle in the air....And it all happens so

dizzily fast” (221). Whether magician or juggler, the creator of Tinker Creek and its inhabitants deals in audience-awing skill, dexterity, and (perhaps) trickery.

Dillard’s fascination with tales of trickery surfaces throughout *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In considering the intricacy of the created world, for example, Dillard alludes to the Biblical story of Jacob’s acquisition of Laban’s speckled and spotted livestock:

...as I have stressed, the place where we so incontrovertibly find ourselves, whether thought or machine, is at least not in any way simple.

Instead, the landscape of the world is “ring-streaked, speckled, and spotted,” like Jacob’s cattle culled from Laban’s herd. Laban had been hard, making Jacob serve seven years in his fields for Rachel, and then giving him instead Rachel’s sister, Leah, withholding Rachel until he had served another seven years. When Laban finally sent Jacob on his way, he agreed that Jacob could have all those cattle, sheep, and goats from the herd that were ring-streaked, speckled, and spotted. Jacob pulled some tricks of his own, and soon the strongest and hardiest of Laban’s fecund flocks were born ringstreaked, speckled, and spotted. Jacob set out for Canaan with his wives and twelve sons, the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, and with these cattle that are Israel’s heritage, into Egypt and out of Egypt, just as the intricate speckled and spotted world is ours.

(145)

Through this allusion, Dillard once again suggests that the natural world with its variegation of forms is a kind of trick: just the speckled and spotted flocks were the outcome of Jacob’s trickery against his wily father-in-law (Jacob being a Hebraic trickster figure whose literal name, “he grasps the heel,” is a Hebrew idiom for “he deceives”), the material world with all its forms is the outcome of trickery, the ill-gotten if fecund spoils pried from God’s cunning hand.

Dillard also alludes to an Eskimo tale to suggest that the beauty of creation is a cruel trick. Recounting a tale in which an old woman masks herself in her daughter’s skin in order to seduce her son-in-law, Dillard asks, “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?” (266). Dillard wonders whether we can indeed trust our senses—is beauty real, or is it merely a mask hiding something gruesome?⁶

Dillard's fascination with divine trickery extends to her own role as writer/creator: if we can't believe our own eyes and if we can't believe God, why should we believe what Dillard tells us she sees? Not content with mere mimesis, Dillard seems to strive for more: referring to Picasso's comments about late Cubist art, Dillard admits that she too would prefer a *trompe-l'esprit* over mere *trompe-l'oeil* (83). What Dillard is trying to do in *Pilgrim*, it seems, is trick readers' eyes and spirits: after a certain point, thoughtful readers begin to ask whether Dillard has "really" seen what she writes of—or whether any of this is "real" after all. The following passage is a case in point:

The road to Grundy, Virginia, is, as you might expect, a narrow scrawl scribbled all over the most improbably peaked and hunched mountains you ever saw. The few people who live along the road also seem peaked and hunched. But what on earth--? It was hot, sunny summer. The road was just bending off sharply to the right. I hadn't seen a house in miles, and none was in sight. At the apogee of the road's curve grew an enormous oak, a massive bur oak two hundred years old, one hundred and fifty feet high, an oak whose lowest limb was beyond the span of the highest ladder. I looked up: there were clothes spread all over the tree. Red shirts, blue trousers, black pants, little baby smocks—they weren't hung from branches. They were outside, carefully spread, splayed as if to dry, on the outer leaves of the great oak's crown. Were there pillowcases, blankets? I can't remember. There was a gay assortment of cotton underwear, yellow dresses, children's green sweaters, plaid skirts....You know roads. A bend comes and you take it, thoughtlessly, moving on. I looked behind me for another split second, astonished; both sides of the tree's canopy, clear to the top, bore clothes. Trompe!

(84)

Like the passage about the most beautiful day of the year, this paragraph begins with a realistic specificity: Dillard is describing a particular segment of road on the way to a specific Virginia town on a hot summer day. The oak tree she describes is realistically specific: it is a burr oak "two hundred years old, one hundred and fifty feet high." This kind of specificity is exactly what readers normally look for in nature writing—such particulars prove that the writer knows what he or she is talking about in a way that "I saw a big tree" does not. What Dillard then describes, however, is not what readers would expect from most nature writing: instead of describing a red-tailed hawk, say, or some other kind of "real" natural creature in a huge old burr oak, Dillard describes in painstaking detail the clothes she sees hanging from this literal clothes-tree, a scene

utterly unnatural and, in fact, utterly impossible—Dillard herself notes that the “lowest limb” of the oak “was beyond the span of the highest ladder.”

What are readers to do with this? Are they to believe that Dillard indeed saw this—are they to imagine that one or more of the “peaked and hunched” people living along the road to Grundy, Virginia took the time to decorate (somehow) a tree with colorful clothes, or are readers to imagine that some natural event—a tornado, perhaps, or windstorm—did this by chance? Or are readers supposed to smile and nod with knowing satisfaction, recognizing this passage as a kind of joke—a seemingly realistic, painstakingly detailed passage about an utterly nonsensical event similar to the passage in *Holy the Firm* where Dillard’s cat drags in a “god,” a “perfect, very small man” (27) or the passage in *The Writing Life* where Dillard’s portable green Smith-Corona typewriter erupts like a volcano (63-64)? That this passage is indeed a kind of joke seems apparent by paragraph’s end when Dillard cries “Trompe!”; what isn’t apparent, however, is who is being tricked by whom: has Dillard been tricked by who- or whatever created the clothes-tree, or have readers been tricked by believing that Dillard actually saw it?

That Dillard intended *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to be a *trompe l’esprit* like Picasso described—that she intended the book not merely to describe natural phenomena but to exist as a realistic if artificial phenomenon in its own right—is apparent in her comments about Cubism and narrative style in her work of literary theory, *Living by Fiction*. In describing what she calls “narrative collage”—modernist fiction’s “shattering of narrative line” through the use of “narrative leaps and fast cuttings...clenched juxtapositions, interpenetrations, and temporal enjambments” (20, 21)—Dillard compares the effect of such writing to that of Cubist painting: “Just as Cubism can take a roomful of furniture and iron it onto nine square feet of canvas, so fiction can take fifty years of human life, chop it to bits, and piece those bits together so...we can consider them all at once” (20-21). Although *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is not technically fiction, its style fits Dillard’s description of

“narrative collage” with its quirky juxtaposing of real and unreal events—what Dillard attempts isn’t so much to imitate reality faithfully but to express reality’s quintessence through whatever literal distortions may be necessary.

Thus, one can argue that many of the disorienting juxtapositions in *Pilgrim*—the very juxtapositions that make the book’s status as a work of “nature writing” problematic—are part of Dillard’s attempt to create a Cubist-influenced literary *trompe l’oeil*. For example, at various places in *Pilgrim* Dillard writes elaborate visual descriptions of fantastical dreams—a waking dream of the texture of time, stretched out in space “like a woman’s tweed scarf” (140); a nightmare about mating luna moths that breed a bedful of fish (159-60). What makes these dreams problematic is the fact that they seem as “real” to Dillard as the actual natural phenomena she observes:

I was watching two huge luna moths mate. Luna moths are those fragile ghost moths, fairy moths, whose five-inch wings are swallow-tailed, a pastel green bordered in silken lavender. From the hairy head of the male sprouted two enormous, furry antennae that trailed down past his ethereal wings. He was on top of the female, hunching repeatedly with a horrible animal vigor. (159)

It emerged at last, a sodden crumple. It was a male; his long antennae were thickly plumed, as wide as his fat abdomen. His body was very thick, over an inch long, and deeply furred. A gray, furlike plush covered his head; a long, tan furlike hair hung from his wide thorax over his brown-furred, segmented abdomen. His multijointed legs, pale and powerful, were shaggy as a bear’s. He stood still, but he breathed. (61)

The first quoted paragraph is from Dillard’s description of her nightmare about the luna moths; the second is from her childhood memory of a Polyphemus moth that hatched in a Mason jar. That Dillard’s description of the dreamed moth she imagined is as realistically detailed as her description of the remembered moth she saw is significant: it seems that in Dillard’s imagined, surrealist universe, “real” and “unreal” are not mutually exclusive categories—as Peter Fritzell notes, no one “comes closer to conventional madness, to crossing and confusing the customary categories and discriminations of traditional Western thought” than Dillard does (219).⁷

That Dillard intended *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as both *trompe l'oeil* and *trompe l'esprit* is also apparent in her comments about how she wrote the book. Many critics have noted, for example, that the book in large part was written not outdoors or at Tinker Creek but in a library study carrel where Dillard purposefully shut out evidence of the natural world: as Dillard explained in an interview with Mike Major, writing *Pilgrim* wasn't a matter of "sit[ting] on a tree stump...tak[ing] dictation from some little chipmunk"; instead, she explained, "You're writing consciously, off of hundreds of index cards, often distorting the literal truth to achieve an artistic one" (363). Dillard says more about the composition of *Pilgrim* in her 1989 book, *The Writing Life*, describing the hours she spent writing in her library carrel:

One afternoon I made a pen drawing of the window and the landscape it framed. I drew the window's aluminum frame and steel hardware; I laid in the clouds, and the far hilltop with its ruined foundation and wandering cows. I outlined the parking lot and its tall row of mercury-vapor lights; I drew the cars, and the graveled rooftop foreground. (28)

I shut the blinds one day for good. I lowered the venetian blinds and flattened the slats. Then, by lamplight, I taped my drawing to the closed blind. There, on the drawing, was the window's view: cows parking lot, hilltop, and sky. If I wanted a sense of the world, I could look at the stylized outline drawing. If I had possessed the skill, I would have painted, directly on the slats of the lowered blind, in meticulous colors, a *trompe l'oeil* of the mural view of all that the blinds hid. Instead, I wrote it. (29)

That Dillard found it necessary to shut out the outside, "natural" world to focus on her writing shouldn't be surprising: most writers, "nature writers" included, probably find that while writing their focus includes nothing but the page in front of them. What is surprising, however, is Dillard's suggestion that her stylized drawing—and writing—can potentially replace the natural world it masks; as long as she has her drawing taped to her window blind, she implies, she needn't raise the blind at all. In saying, then, that her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is an even more convincing *trompe l'oeil* than her stylized sketch, Dillard suggests that writing or reading about nature

can take the place of actually experiencing nature firsthand, a stance which takes her beyond even Emerson, who in *The American Scholar* admitted that “Books are for the scholar’s idle times” (58).

Indeed, it is this “stylized” quality of Dillard’s writing that makes many readers of nature writing uncomfortable: in passages like those quoted above, Dillard reveals her desire to create art with such visual and spiritual verisimilitude as not only to approximate but to replace natural reality. In looking at Dillard’s comments to Major, for example, one has to wonder how much Dillard distorts the literal truth: in the case of nature writing, at what point should artistic license bow to scientific veracity? The problem, it seems, is that Dillard sees her writing as “art,” which justifies as much artistic liberty as she cares to take, while many of her readers see her writing, as Clark’s reading of the photograph on the cover of *Pilgrim* reveals, as “realistic,” whether as autobiography or as natural science.

Thus Eudora Welty complains in her review of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that Dillard’s is “a voice that is trying to speak to me out of a cloud” (5) while another reviewer notes that for all of Dillard’s realistic descriptions of things she’s seen by Tinker Creek, she never writes of seeing something as mundane as a bulldozer (Carruth 639). In stylizing her narratives—in “distorting the literal truth to achieve an artistic one”—Dillard not only changes, adds, or leaves out details of what she’s seen, she creates a whole new reality, a fictive world, as it were, that at times seems other-worldly and idealistic. This other-worldliness has important environmental ramifications if one reads Dillard’s prose as nature writing: if the mystical world that Dillard creates in her texts supersedes and effaces the actual natural world, why is it necessary to save the environment? Thus, while Dillard has been compared to nature writers such as Thoreau and John Muir, Sandra Humble Johnson rightfully notes that “Dillard’s cause is not environment, at least not in the ecological sense; it is art” (55); indeed, in remarking about her writing’s silence about ethical issues, Dillard once

noted, “The kind of art I write is shockingly uncommitted—appallingly isolated from political, social, and economic affairs” (Yancey 16).

In a 1978 review of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*, Patricia Ward called Annie Dillard “a *voyant*—a seer whose imaginary eye transforms prosaic details of this world into visions of another universe” (30). Although such seeing can redeem earthly creation, it also can minimize it: as David Kinsley notes, Christianity’s focus on another universe can cause “[t]he world, the earth, nonhuman forms of life, and nature” to become “subsidiary concerns, at the least, and...[to be] denigrated at worst” (106). To paraphrase Thoreau, “[t]alk[ing] of heaven” often leads people to “disgrace earth” (482); in the case of Annie Dillard, thinking and writing of heaven can lead a writer to see the earth in unusual ways: as an illusion, as a mask of God, as a work of divine artifice that can be replaced by human imitations. As John E. Becker notes, Dillard is more an artist or “text-maker” than a naturalist, for “her visions of nature are as elaborately constructed as her text” (408); the question for readers of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, then, is whether they can trust these visions of nature, this text, and the creators of each.

Notes

¹ Dillard's fondness for this metaphor of an oddly lit natural landscape as photographic artifice is apparent in her essay describing her experience observing a total solar eclipse in 1979:

I turned back to the sun. It was going. The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were platinum. Their every detail of stem, head, and blade shone lightless and artificially distinct as an art photographer's platinum print. This color has never been seen on earth. The hues were metallic; their finish was matte. The hillside was a nineteenth-century tinted photograph from which the tints had faded. All the people you see in the photograph, distinct and detailed as their faces look, are now dead. The sky was navy blue. My hands were silver. All the distant hills' grasses were finespun metal which the wind laid down. I was watching a faded color print of a movie filmed in the Middle Ages; I was standing in it, by some mistake. I was standing in a movie of hillside grasses filmed in the Middle Ages. I missed my own century, the people I knew, and the real light of day. ("Total Eclipse," in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* 16)

This description echoes the descriptions of surreal landscapes of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in its extended metaphor of natural landscape as photographer's landscape, its attention to the phenomena of light and color, and in its insistence on the metallic nature of light, similar to Dillard's comment in *Pilgrim*, "The light is diffuse and hueless, like the light on paper inside a pewter bowl" (43). For a discussion of how this passage from "Total Eclipse" represents a visionary epiphany whereby Dillard transcends time and space, see Johnson, pages 69-70.

² Significantly, Scheick describes Dillard's writing style as a "narrative fringe"; for another discussion of Dillard's fascination with the "fringed" nature of time and eternity, see Johnson, pages 75-79.

One of Dillard's favorite images of the intricately fringed edges of physical objects is that of the shape of air around objects; in *Pilgrim*, she writes,

You are a sculptor. You climb a great ladder; you pour grease all over a growing longleaf pine. Next, you build a hollow cylinder like a cofferdam around the entire pine, and grease its inside walls. You climb your ladder and spend the next week pouring wet plaster into the cofferdam, over and inside the pine. You wait; the plaster hardens. Now open the walls of the dam, split the plaster, saw down the tree, remove it, discard, and your intricate sculpture is ready: this is the shape of part of the air. (130)

This image of sculpted air is significant to Dillard because it requires that her readers "[m]entally reverse positive and negative space" and "imagine emptiness as a sort of person" (131); like the invisible fog that is discernible only in terms of the clearness that marks its absence, here absence (the invisible) defines presence (the visible).

It is interesting to note that this passage from *Pilgrim* is a re-working of the poem "The Shape of Air," which appears in Dillard's *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*; in this poem, Dillard writes that "The shape of the air / over the mountain / is fringed as a fin" (55).

³ Dillard uses similar imagery to describe her experiences while stalking muskrats:

Can I stay still? How still? It is astonishing how many people cannot, or will not, hold still. I could not, or would not, hold still for thirty minutes inside, but at the creek I

slow down, center down, empty. I am not excited; my breathing is slow and regular. In my brain I am not saying, Muskrat! Muskrat! There! I am saying nothing. If I must hold a position, I do not “freeze.” If I freeze, locking my muscles, I will tire and break. Instead of going rigid, I go calm. I center down wherever I am; I find a balance and repose. I retreat—not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance. I am the skin of water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone. (201)

Here, Dillard’s method of stalking muskrats is utterly passive—this is the *Via negativa* she talks about earlier in her “Stalking” chapter, explaining that it is generally more “fruitful” to “stand on a bridge and wait, emptied” (184). Instead of pursuing the muskrat she wants to see, Dillard waits, motionless and silent, not even thinking about the muskrat. Achieving a passively meditative poise, Dillard is like water played over by the wind, as still and silent as a petal, feather, or stone.

⁴ Significantly, the imagery Dillard uses here to describe the sensation of being seen by “some enormous power”—that of “resound[ing] like a beaten bell”—matches her description of “being for the first time seen” when she encountered the “tree with the lights in it”: “I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck” (34). For Dillard, this mystical kind of seeing (and being seen) is a deeply resonate experience.

⁵ Dillard again uses this image of an invisible God’s pain-inflicting gaze in her essay “God in the Doorway,” published in her collection of essays *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Writing of her childhood fears, Dillard recounts how she feared Santa Claus, “thinking he was God,” because Santa Claus, like God, was “an old man whom you never saw, but who nevertheless saw you; he knew when you’d been bad or good” (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 138). In describing her childhood fear of Santa Claus, God, and Miss White, an elderly neighbor who once accidentally burnt Dillard’s hand while showing her how to focus sunlight through a magnifying glass, Dillard writes, “Even now I wonder: if I meet God, will he take and hold my bare hand in his, and focus his eye on my palm, and kindle that spot and let me burn?” (139)

⁶ That some readers were disturbed by Dillard’s reference to this Eskimo tale is apparent in the comments of one reviewer: “Can Annie Dillard possibly think that God is like that old woman? That he sits laughing at our distresses, drunk with lust? That he is crazy?” (Forbes 29).

⁷ Dillard’s tendency to blur the real and the unreal is even more apparent in *Holy the Firm*, where she describes the aforementioned flame-haired “god” her cat catches not long after recounting how she saw a moth catch fire and burn in a candle flame. Did Dillard “really” see the god? Did she “really” see the moth? The question of whether Dillard is writing realistic natural description or mystical poetry comes up again near the end of the book when she writes of a transfigured landscape (“The world is changing. The landscape begins to respond as a current upswells....Above me the mountains are raw nerves, sensible and exultant”) and describes a vision of Christ being baptized on the beach: “The two men are bare to the waist. The one walks him into the water, and holds him under. His hand is on his neck. Christ is coiled and white under the water, standing on stones” (66). Dillard’s blurring of physical and spiritual realities is apparent in the way that she describes an “ordinary” landscape in “extraordinary” terms and a spiritual event (Christ’s baptism) in physical terms.

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