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In the Market for Present Tense:
Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Annie Dillard's nonfiction book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is often compared to classics of nature writing such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, but the fact that the book has no real plot or stable transcendental meaning also makes it an ideal text for postmodernist interpretations. The language of *Pilgrim* demonstrates the idea that the universe lacks any inherent design, and as such can be discussed in light of the postmodernist work *Anti-Oedipus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Particularly, the latter works provides a perspective on how a common source for linguistic artifice and the workings of nature can arise from the individual consciousness.

Annie Dillard's nonfiction book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* has a received a fair amount of attention since its 1974 publication, but most critics have focused on the book as a continuation of the longstanding American literary tradition of a strong narrator musing over his or her adventures in the wilderness. However, the very fact that the book has no real plot and no stable transcendental meaning makes it an ideal text for a postmodernist reading. I hope to show that the very structure of *Pilgrim*, exhibiting by verbal artifice that the universe lacks any inherent design, is illuminated by the postmodernist work *Anti-Oedipus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in that the latter text provides a perspective on how a common source for linguistic artifice and the workings of nature can arise

from the individual consciousness.

Pilgrim is a 300-page recounting of the year Dillard spent in the outback of rural Virginia observing insects, plants, and virtually any other physical entity apprehensible to the senses. In addition to the lack of a conventional narrative plot, the book makes no references whatsoever to 1970s American culture or contemporary events, nor practically any reference to the few other human beings in her midst at the time of her sojourn. Instead, Dillard's *Pilgrim* is a close observation of the natural world by an individual who suspends her regular life among human companions in order to seek spiritual and verbal renewal. The book joins the company of such venerated American classics of nature writing as William Bartram's *Travels* (1791), Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and arguably even earlier works such as Captain John Smith's *A Description of New England* (1616) and Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan* (1637).

If the aforementioned writers over the last four centuries have had anything in common, it is their willingness to go to the woods for the dual purpose of gaining insight into the human situation and achieving the verbal fluency to articulate those insights, and critics have covered this theme nicely in the past. David Miller writes that the common denominator in nature writing, as exemplified by Dillard and others, is «a serious, even devout, attempt to find the right angle of vision from which to see the world anew»¹. But I would add that nature writing is also the quest to find the proper point of reference from which to throw one's voice in articulating the call of nature. In particular, Dillard joins her forerunners in searching and discovering an appropriate idiom that establishes a link between living in the world and living in the world of

¹ David Miller, Review of *In the Company of the Universe*, in "The Sewanee Review", vol. 103, No. 4(1995), pp. 613-20, p. 615.

language. «In the market for present tense» is Dillard’s way of saying that one’s becoming familiar with nature is a way of living in the present—and by extension, a Deleuzian “productive mechanism” that bridges the gap between the language of nature and the language of the individual consciousness. A means of rectifying the apparent dichotomies between «the seemingly separate natural, social, and psychological realms»², the Deleuzian concept of desire-production effectively fuses the natural tendencies of humans with a closeness to nature that is free of – or perhaps prior to – the social impositions that tend to alienate us from the natural world. For Dillard, the result is the amalgamation of language with an authentic mode of being that is closer to the natural world of the birds, plants, and insects of Tinker Creek.

Defining what is meant by “authentic,” however, is the crux that can lead to a new interpretation of *Pilgrim* that departs from previously published readings. To return to existing critical work on *Pilgrim*, B. Jill Carroll writes in her 1993 essay that the *via positiva* is played against the *via negativa* throughout *Pilgrim*, arguing that this is the bipolar opposition that «aid Dillard in presenting a stark and challenging notion of God and the nature of the spiritual life»³. Further defining the *via positiva* as «an approach to the doctrine of God that assumes the presence of God in nature»⁴, and the *via negativa* as “the hiddenness of God” and the fact that the supreme deity «must be sought, stalked, waited out, patiently and tirelessly»⁵, Carroll implies that the promise of the former and the

² Daniel Smith, and John Protevi, "Gilles Deleuze", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/deleuze/>.

³ B. J. Carroll, *An Invitation from Silence: Annie Dillard’s Use of the Mystical Concepts of the Via Positiva and Via Negativa*, in “Mystics Quarterly”, vol. 19 No. 1 (1993), pp. 26-33, p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 28.

challenge of the latter defines the very drama of the book. *Pilgrim*, for Carroll, is an autobiographical quest to apprehend «God and the experience of God. And, for this, she is willing to risk anything»⁶. One possible problem with this reading is that it implies a manifestly theological content for *Pilgrim* that might have made sense at one time in America, but has little resonance in today's world. For one thing, such an interpretation seemingly posits a transcendental center for the book that requires some sort of intelligent entity in charge. By contrast, if nature is no more and no less than the physical conditions in which we apprehend the material world at a given moment, then there is not necessarily a “design” at the heart of external reality. Moreover, if there is a design of any type at all, then perhaps it is only within the confines of our own ability to write our reality into existence by constructing a book such as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

In other words, an alternate interpretation to Carroll's interesting essay is that perhaps the bipolar opposition between *via positiva* and *via negativa* is a false choice in that it ignores the third possibility of no way at all. Perhaps the reality we perceive in our instantaneous snapshots of nature is not a derivative of some grand design – sort of like the line derivative of a curve in calculus – but rather a mere derivative of the moment itself, or merely a given moment that in no way implies a future design on the part of some greater power when all the derived moments are integrated. If one takes into consideration that Darwinian evolution comprises two assumptions – that spontaneous mutations occur and that these mutations will tend to favor an organism depending on its environment – then it is possible to argue that the very randomness of mutations implies an inherent lack of design in the universe.

Carroll is not the only commentator on Dillard who seemingly suggests

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 33.

a design at the heart of the *Pilgrim* author's philosophical musings. In her 1984 essay published in the journal *Environmental Review*, Vera Norwood notes the traditional differentiation between the attitude of the men who pushed westward in the American wilderness and the women who accompanied them as the difference between the former who needed the howling wilderness «as a place for defining virility», and the latter, who «were thought to be more comfortable in rural, cultivated nature—in civilized gardens»⁷. Naturally, the civilized garden and the cultivated nature within it implies a design on someone's part, and this point alone would be an excellent departure for an examination of how Dillard cultivates her own world of words in a universe in which grand design is an inherently metaphysical point on which no one can make any real empirical progress. However, Norwood also focuses on Dillard's suggested religiosity, stating that the question of «uncertainty about the American landscape» can be reduced to the question of whether we are «in Eden or the desert»⁸. Eden is a manifestly religious image, of course, but Norwood apparently has the deserts of the Bible in mind, for she then quotes a line from page 111 of Dillard's book that will be reproduced below from the Norwood essay rather than from the original text of *Pilgrim* in order to demonstrate Norwood's emphasis:

The book opens with a story of Dillard's "old fighting tom" cat, who would jump "through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest...And some mornings I'd wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood...the sign on my body could have been an emblem or a stain, the keys to the kingdom or the work of Cain. I never knew"⁹.

⁷ V. L. Norwood, *Heroines of Nature: Four Women Respond to the American Landscape*, in "Environmental Review", vol. 8 no. 1 (1984), pp. 34-56, p. 35.

⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 47-8.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 48.

If Dillard were writing that the paw prints were definitely either the paradisiacal extension of Heaven that God placed on Earth, or else the ruinous falling away from perfection as exemplified by mankind's first homicide, then the dichotomy would hold. In other words, the reader could definitely take the passage as one textual example that Americans are either "in Eden or the desert." But the cited lines underplay this interpretation with the use of the word "could." Thus, the cat's bloody paw prints could (1) be a Heavenly emblem, or (2) the bloody mark of Cain, or (3) nothing of any religious significance whatsoever.

Later in the essay, Norwood provides yet another instance in which Dillard's observations can be attributed a religious significance that may or may not survive closer scrutiny. Describing at one point the circulatory plumbing of a goldfish, Dillard observes the following (again quoting Norwood's essay for emphasis):

Beginning with a general description of her goldfish Ellery, stressing how ordinary he is (p.126), she moves into a description of Ellery's circulatory system, explaining how she learned about it by looking at an etherized goldfish tail under a microscope: "The red blood cells in the goldfish's tail streamed and coursed through narrow channels. ...They never wavered or slowed or ceased flowing, like the creek itself; they streamed readily around, up and on, one by one, more, and more, without end" (p. 127)¹⁰.

Norwood then makes the valid point that «[Dillard] connects the small world of Ellery's circulation with the larger universe»¹¹. Another way of looking at the Dillard passage, however, is by emphasizing her choice on talking about a fish named Ellery and her arbitrary decision as a writer to anthropomorphize the creature. If the entire point was to

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

ruminate on the scalability of channeling as it applies both to tiny capillaries in a fish and the larger branchings of a much larger flowing creek, then the anthropomorphizing of Ellery is quite superfluous. If, on the other hand, Dillard is employing one more instance of dampening the bipolar oppositions with a third possibility, then one must take into consideration that, once again, Dillard is actually offering the reader multiple choices: (1) there is a God actively providing wonderful design that makes a goldfish tail resemble the branchings of a creek, (2) the workings of God are quite muted, but we may be able to infer a few of those workings if we look closely and patiently enough, and (3) such metaphysical musings will get us nowhere, and any superficial resemblance of the writer's artifice to the transcendence of design is just that—textual artifice.

What the aforementioned points to is the possibility that *Pilgrim* is a postmodern text because it does not presuppose some sort of divine or spiritual essence. One way in which Dillard's book departs substantially from its most obvious ancestor, *Walden*, is in its thoroughly postmodern attitude toward the significance of nature to human consciousness and human language. Whereas Thoreau insists that a close encounter with nature is merely a means to the admirable end of reducing human error and waste, Dillard seemingly avoids making any such conjectural claims about a metaphysical overview that subsumes all physical experience. There is no "simplify" in Dillard's book because she does not privilege the act of simplification over complexity. Every seemingly insignificant gormandizing of a dying butterfly's body by another insect or infestation of a barely-known species of wasp by another barely-known parasite is given the same rhetorical stance as the cataclysmic death and birth of stars. For Dillard, «the knot had no beginning» to provide the pilgrim with a view of the Kingdom, nor as much as a comforting notion that the

Kingdom even has a central point of origin. All minor details of nature are essentially the same if one is able to step outside his or her human consciousness and take part in the game of nature as it is actually played in all places and at all scales. To return to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, the result is that the loss of individual self-consciousness is more a liberation from social constraint than it is a pathological state of human lack:

It is clear that the narrator sees nothing, hears nothing, and that he is a body without organs, or like a spider poised on its web, observing nothing, but responding to the slightest sign, to the slightest vibration by springing on its prey¹².

Although Deleuze and Guattari are actually writing about Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* in this passage, the words are even more evocative of Dillard in that they could refer to virtually any of the 300 pages of *Pilgrim*. For Dillard, even the seasons have no sharp beginning or end upon which one can place any certitude:

It occurred to me that I could no more catch spring by the tip of the tail than I could untie the apparent knot in the snakeskin; there are no edges to grasp. Both are continuous loops¹³.

Dillard's definition of innocence is the ability to dampen the self-consciousness that normally defines human civilization and most modes of individual human existence. The end result is a presence that may do little to help one navigate the complexities of life in the modern world, but

¹² G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Penguin Books, New York, 2009, p. 68.

¹³ A. Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York, 2007, p. 75.

nonetheless provides a kinship with nature that reduces the gulf dividing us from other species and even other physical entities. Gary McIlroy writes that Dillard is the precise inversion of the well-known “machine in the garden” theme made famous by Leo Marx, in that Dillard’s most startling images tend to be «the unexpected onslaught of the natural world into the civilized one – the monster in the Mason jar»¹⁴.

On the other hand, such a simplification, to borrow Thoreau’s famous term, is complicated when one takes language into consideration. Dillard writes that she thought as a child that a word had some universal meaning that was merely translated by other people in the world who used some other word for the same object. “Hat”, for example, was the true name for the object that rests on top of one’s head, and any other word such as “chapeau” was merely a “different code” for the true word – which of course was the English expression with its universal applicability. Innocence, then, embodies a wrongheaded idea about language. One’s ability to recognize the pluralistic world is a good thing, Dillard implies, but such a recognition requires knowledge that at least partially invokes the benefits of culture and civilization. To complicate matters even further, the world is indeed pluralistic, even though its knowledge of its plurality is not a dimension that is apprehensible by those humans and other entities (both living and inanimate) that eschew self-consciousness.

As a unique work of literature, this is point at which *Pilgrim* makes an interesting contribution. Because of the aforementioned aporia, Dillard concludes that «we need a new Rosetta stone», alluding to the artifact turned up during Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt that led to the decipherment of ancient hieroglyphics¹⁵. The conclusion the narrator

¹⁴ G. McIlroy, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and the Burden of Science*, in “American Literature”, vol. 59 No. 1 (1987) pp. 71-84, p. 71.

¹⁵ A. Dillard, *Pilgrim...*, cit., p. 107.

reaches is that perhaps the foreign word may never make sense except in its own language if one eschews cultured study and lives only in the realm of non-self-consciousness¹⁶. Extending one step further, the world may have no real center, just as there is no central word for any concept that has universal application. Words are arbitrary, and so are all discrete entities in the universe.

Therefore, individual details are not important in the grand scheme of things. «Creation in the first place, being itself, is the only necessity»¹⁷. Here, however, is where the argument become rather complex – and some who are fluent in the techniques of deconstruction might have issues. If evolution is indeed «the vehicle of intricacy» and «the stability of simple forms is the sturdy base from which more complex stable forms might arise»¹⁸, then is this not another way of saying that there is a metaphysics one can arrive at that provides an overview of all things? Is the very simplification of an individual entity that has no privilege in the grand scheme of things not itself a unique center?

Nonetheless, Dillard makes a good case for spreading the word that non-centrality of individual entities and the glories of eschewing self-consciousness are worthy of elucidation – and of composing a book that recounts those observations. Just as the ancient mariner in Coleridge’s poem is obligated to spread his knowledge of love for humanity that he has learned from the albatross, Dillard must also impart her newfound wisdom about the seeming simplicity of nature:

I have often noticed that these things, which obsess me, neither bother nor impress other people even slightly. I am horribly apt to approach some innocent at a gathering and, like the ancient mariner, fix him with a wild, glittering eye and say “Do you know

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 108.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 130.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 137.

that in the head of the caterpillar of the ordinary goat moth there are two hundred twenty-eight separate muscles?” The poor wretch flees. I am not making chatter; I mean to change his life. I seem to possess an organ that others lack, a sort of trivia machine¹⁹.

Creation in its individual details may be trivial, and the grand sum may be an astronomically large accumulation of individual bits of minor information, but the ability to impart this insight hovers above the trivia and results in a metaphysical view can best be elucidated in the language of an extended prose essay. Dillard’s non-self-consciousness apprehension of nature may be lacking in metaphysical decentralization, but her chosen vehicle requires the privilege of a well-published book of very traditional design.

But the aforementioned is a minor carping with a book that is of significant interest to those who follow the emerging discipline of ecocriticism, as well as specialists in Transcendentalism and 19th-century American literature. Despite the difficulty of reconciling the insight that the universe and all individual entities of creation are merely «a sort of trivia machine» with the seeming necessity of preaching a metaphysics to impart this insight, Dillard’s observations become more profound as the book progresses. Moreover, this emerging profundity goes beyond the Thoreauvian sense of making better use of one’s time in asserting that the tremendous investiture of human observation in apprehending the small details of nature is indeed worthwhile. In essence, the “trivia machine” is best reconciled by a “desiring-machine” of Deleuzian vintage. One never ceases wondering whether Thoreau was indeed wasting his time in indulging his later passions for taking routine temperature readings and such, but Dillard goes to great lengths in attempting to persuade the

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 134.

reader that trivial pursuits are indeed a viable outlet for the human spirit. “It might be years” of constant observation before she sees another incident when a seemingly insignificant insect known as a water strider pursues a small fly that has landed on the surface of a pond²⁰. As with Thoreau, Dillard’s pace of discovery is still constrained by nature’s own pace rather than the human motivation to gain transcendental vision as quickly as possible. The difference is that she persuades the reader that the fruits of nature study go well beyond the benefits of reducing meaningless human activity. Thoreau informs the reader that he will build a mansion as soon as he figures out how to build one he likes as well as his shack on Walden Pond, and for the same price. Dillard, on the other hand, describes the trivia of small-scale nature as the inherent order of things. For Dillard, the small shack is ultimate reality.

Her status as a “pilgrim,” in fact, is her quasi-religious vision of a world of language in which nature is perfectly in tune with the expectations involving human culture and tradition. Again, is this not a transcendental metaphysics? Probably, but the best moments in *Pilgrim* are when Dillard almost, but not quite, loses herself and gets swept up in the details of nature going about its regular business. Of course, if she were to totally lose herself, she would not be available for the writing of a book that is, after all, necessarily a culture artifact.

This point is also relevant to *Anti-Oedipus*, especially in its subtitle, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, although I must clarify myself in saying that Deleuzian desiring-production by no means implies that a singular devotion to attuning to the consciousness of nature is by no means schizophrenic, either on the part of Dillard or Thoreau. Instead, I offer the Deleuzian analogy to suggest that the natural language of nature and the human language of articulating its mysteries can be reconciled in a

²⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 191-2.

manner that sidesteps the common-sensical conclusion that no such reconciliation can rationally exist. In other words, the very enigma of nature writing can be viewed in light of the fact that the articulator of human insights is not purposely being enigmatic, but rather is reconciled to the fact that the production of nature is linked at a deeply intuitive and perhaps nonverbal level with the desire to put those insights into words.

«What a prize it is simply to open my eyes and behold»²¹ is a worthy goal for the pilgrim in nature, but it is also a well-wrought and well-honed reflection of a writer agonizing over the best choice of words to convey this loss of self-consciousness. In sum, Dillard's struggle is to invoke a human tradition in which one intelligently choose words to convey that which is beyond intelligence and language, regardless of whether such a task perhaps is inherently unachievable.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 197.

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