To Unwrap and Lift These Particular Shreds of Holiness: Spiritual Incarnation in the Writings of Annie Dillard

by

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary American author Annie Dillard impressively launched her literary career by winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). I argue that, in this and following works, Dillard develops her ideas of literary embodiment, or "incarnational" spirituality, on the basis of religious ideas that have phenomenological counterpart. Focusing on her developing portrayal of spiritual incarnation, a sacred particularity, helps explain Dillard's varied, specific interests that critics find intriguing and frustrating. Cued by the author herself, I suggest that an incarnational approach to literature, and life, is the driving force and inspiration behind all Dillard's creative and critical efforts, and this approach may have contemporary social value.

My chapters survey and analyze the author's critical reception; Dillard's own critical ideas about art and literary criticism; her vivid, creative images of spiritual incarnation in select first-person prose narratives; and, finally, the religious precedents and phenomenological relevance of her incarnational ideas.

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ANNOTATED CHRONOLOGY FOR ANNIE DILLARD'S WORKS
(including citation abbreviations used in text)

1974 TPW *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* is a book of poetry clearly on religious themes and has several poems referencing prayer, Christmas, and nature. It is narrated in first-person with a consistent thematic focus.

1974 PTC *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* chronicles a complete year of the narrator's experience living in rural Virginia. This work focuses on the natural world as a place for spiritual experience. It is a first-person prose narrative.

1977 HF *Holy the Firm*, which is set on an island in Puget Sound, chronicles three days of the narrator's life to question the relationship of the divine to human suffering. It is a first-person prose narrative.

1982 TST *Teaching a Stone to Talk* is a collection of essays related by their exploration of the nature of the life experience. Two of the most notable are "Total Eclipse" and "An Expedition to the Pole," describing, respectively, the narrator's surreal experience of a solar eclipse and her experience from a religious service interwoven with the exploits of early European polar expeditions. Essays are written in the first-person.

1982 LBF *Living by Fiction* is Dillard's lone work of literary criticism that considers both "contemporary modernist" writing and the meaning of life.

1984 ECW *Encounters with Chinese Writers* provides anecdotes from the author's experience as a cultural exchange delegate to China, recording her revelations about human nature in a first-person prose narrative.

1987 AC *An American Childhood* is Dillard's memoir of her own Pittsburgh childhood that concludes just prior to her years at Hollins College, Virginia.

1989 WL *The Writing Life* depicts the author's own experience of writing as a vocation.

1992 TL *The Living*, Dillard's only novel, is set in western Washington during pioneer settlement. Portraying the life and death of generations of families, the work emphasizes struggle, pain, and the daily preciousness of life.

1995 MLT *Mornings Like This* is the author's collection of found poetry that illumines metaphysical concerns in unexpected places.

1999 FTB *For the Time Being* is Dillard's return to first-person prose narrative. In this work, she interweaves distinct narratives to illustrate the grand scale of time and eternity as it intersects with individual life experience.

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FOR LUKE

Bone of bone, flesh of flesh, heart of heart, mind of mind—

and yet so different—

and yet so loved—

INTRODUCTION

Burning at the Stake: Heresy, Authority, and Spiritual Incarnation

The word "heresy" may inspire fascination in modern society because the idea of dramatic, public inquisitional tactics coupled with gruesome, systematic torture and execution shocks us, and we generally regard the physical persecution of religious individuals as something belonging to the past. It is a hallmark of modern, liberal society that individuals may hold any religious belief and not be persecuted for it. This type of religious freedom is, in part, available to moderns because the political mantle of authority has been transferred from Church to State, which, being secular, is supposedly neutral, fair, and just. That this authoritative mantle has shifted makes for interesting and sometimes contentious discussion of the validity of ideas, and what today is recognized as "orthodox" or "heretical" may depend on whose expertise is sought. The final arbiter of right and wrong, of legality, though, is regarded as the State.

In becoming the guarantor of religious freedom, the liberal, secular State is, as Gauri Viswanathan indicates, caught in the paradox of protecting ideas that have lost their authority and thus, for many, their import. Effectively, by negating the authority of religious beliefs, the modern state to some extent invalidates them. Further, I suggest that this transfer of authority contributes to the sundering of mind and body. Ideas are associated with the mind that is somehow, strangely, disassociated from the brain and body. Because beliefs or ideas should not affect one's physical well-being in society, our perception easily becomes such that these ideas also do not affect our individual bodies. And, vice versa, our bodies do not affect our ideas, religious or otherwise. This notion has its benefits because exclusionary public practices are often notably oppressive, and few in modern society desire to repeat inquisitional persecution of beliefs and ideas. Likewise, few condone contemporary religious and political violence in the Middle East, in Ireland, in the Balkans, and between Indians and Pakistanis. But the separation and divorce of ideas from the body also has detriments that may ultimately outweigh its benefits.

In practice, though maybe not consciously recognized or advocated, the mind and body are intimately bound together, and the continuation of religious violence and social oppression exemplify that body and mind continue to be recognized, for whatever results,

as inescapably united. So while much more could, and should, be said on these topics, I refrain from the discussion in this work and simply suggest that there must be alternative means for cooperation, camaraderie, and collegiality. Further, apart from being impractical, it may also be undesirable to eliminate the inescapable bond of mind and body. Phenomenologically, the sundering of mind and body is deadening, and such an intellectual move ought to be carefully considered. Models of thoughtful, vital embodiment provide alternatives to bodied and bloodied ideologies. Models are further beneficial because they exemplify themselves: embodiment is embodied.

Literature, particularly narrative with its characters, plot, and storied telling of a world, offers one very natural place where vital models of embodiment can be created. While the reading and writing of literature, the listening to and telling of stories, do not necessarily make society increasingly humane, narrative examples of conscious, vital embodiment are crucial to living an embodied ethic because they suggest the possibility that these might exist, *and* be imitated, *and* proliferate in reality. But the best of these types of consciously embodied narratives are often not recognized as such because they stay embodied: meaning and message cannot be easily extrapolated from story and characters, though narrative may influence readers. Sometimes, because of its importance, the temptation to dis-embody the idea of narrative embodiment can overwhelm an author, and the "spirit" escapes from the narrative "body" while simultaneously exposing the bones of a literary theory.

This seems to be the predicament, occasionally, of contemporary American author Annie Dillard, but it is beneficial to this analysis that she has occasionally laid open the skin of her narrative to expose its theoretical bones—before quickly re-stitching. Dillard (1945-) impressively launched her prose writing career, at age 29, by winning the Pulitzer Prize for her first prose work, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). Since then, the author has continued writing and now has over ten books to her name in a variety of genres, though first-person, non-fiction narrative typifies her best-known works. Here, though, without being exhaustive, I consider Dillard's writings holistically to discern the "what" and "why" of her literary efforts, assuming coherence in her diverse efforts on the basis on internal clues.

Specifically, Dillard consistently advocates and practices literary embodiment from the basis of her religious ideas. Her reintroduction of religious ideas into public discourse by way of cultural creation might be considered subversive by some, anachronistic to others, and even a type of modern "heresy" if secular liberality is authoritative for cultural discourse. But the alternative religious perspective she presents is worth exploring because Dillard's literary efforts offer an ethical model for thoughtful, vital embodiment, and I intend to trace the history and development of these "incarnational" ideas in her writings. Particularly, it is necessary to construct and deconstruct Dillard's incarnational ideas by identifying and analyzing these images of spiritual incarnation as she develops them throughout her career. In literary terminology, "incarnational" ideas are indicated by Dillard's embrace of artistic images to portray what is, in theological discourse, the Doctrine of the Incarnation that, in Dillard's portrayal, shares some comparable philosophical insights with phenomenology. By embracing insights from these dialog communities, I hope to encourage an increasing appreciation and critical consciousness for Dillard's literary efforts. This same issue of conscious embodiment continually engages Dillard, and throughout her 25-year writing career she develops her literary portrayal and response in religious language. Ultimately, I argue that Dillard's works offer a developing portrayal of spiritual incarnation, and focusing on this aspect of her writing helps explain many of her varied and particular interests that critics have often found intriguing and frustrating. Throughout this work the definition of spiritual incarnation will become increasingly clear, and to discourage foreclosure of discussion I refrain from providing a rigid or complete definition at the outset. Suffice to say at this point, however, that etymologically the idea of incarnation necessarily involves embodiment, a being "in the flesh" that implies a mortal, specifically temporal, existence. Further, coupling "spiritual" with "incarnation" suggests, paradoxically, that a mortal being embodies some transcendent, non-physical, eternal, even divine, aspects. Hereafter, my references to Dillard's incarnational approach will assume the spirituality her perspective implies, this implication being commensurate with theological references to incarnation that assume the spirituality of hypostatic union.

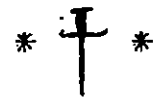
To unravel Dillard from this one thread, her developing portrayal of incarnation, is, like all critical analyses, limiting. But having been cued by the author herself, I

suggest that an incarnational approach to literature, and life, is the driving force and inspiration behind all Dillard's creative and critical efforts, and this approach may have practical social value. Though there is risk in dis-embodying Dillard's incarnational approach, a risk the author has ceased taking or advocating, the effort here is only made to encourage creative and ethical re-incarnation: hopefully this is sufficient justification.

In the following chapter, I survey the author's critical reception to establish a clear place for the present analysis by noting important critical approaches and ideological emphases previously expressed. Next, in chapter two, I present Dillard as her own critic by exploring her ideas on art and literary criticism that create a space and explanation for her creative endeavors. In chapter three, by recognizing the internal clues in Dillard's first-person prose narratives, I identify and analyze the significant images of spiritual incarnation to evaluate change and development in the author's approach. Finally, in chapter four, Dillard's conception of spiritual incarnation is contextualized by examining the religious precedents and phenomenological relevance of her incarnational ideas to encourage a re-visioning of the significance of her developing literary corpus by recognizing these as examples of vital embodiment.

Certainly, because of the detailed complexity of Dillard's literary images, the structural integrity of her works, and the stylistic skill and dexterity of the author, there are other fruitful ways to read and understand the writings of Annie Dillard. The critical survey helps indicate the variety of interesting criticism, and I do not intend to tread these well-worn, though worthwhile, paths. Neither do I intend to extend their efforts, though this too would be valuable. Rather, this critical reading of Dillard's works helps explain the very ground on which critics walk their different directions, foregrounding other discussions. The specificity of my analysis, considering the images of spiritual incarnation in Annie Dillard's writings, is in this case both a benefit and justifiable limitation because understanding this idea is a key to all Dillard's efforts. As such, this project initiates rather than concludes a discussion of Annie Dillard's writings, and I take some comfort offering these humble beginnings of discussion from Dillard's own assertion that the "universal / loves the particular" (*TPW* 33). Here and now, I offer a very particular analysis of a small, but important, aspect of Dillard's writings to suggest some universal importance for her images of spiritual incarnation. These images may

serve as narrative models for vital embodiment today, re-introducing an alternative to *both* bodied and bloodied ideologies, religious or otherwise, *and* to dis-embodied ideas that have been unnecessarily encouraged by modern, liberal society. There is more than one way to commit heresy, and Dillard's images of spiritual incarnation offer an alternative perspective on modern life experience by staking her spirituality to the body as a ground of being. Burning at the stake, in this case, might be an experience of hope and joy because the ignition is an internal enlightening and enlivening of the whole life experience. This, then, is a work of hope, but it is only a beginning, not an end.



CHAPTER ONE
Critical Reception of Annie Dillard's Writings

Generally, critics of Dillard's writing seem sensitive to the complex ideas expressed by the author and appreciate her efforts, regardless of their final evaluation of her work's success. "Dillard's writing has consistently received strong positive reviews by her critics. Scholars praise Dillard's unique voice, and her use of poetic language to merge philosophy with her observations of the natural world" ("Annie Dillard, 1945-"). Particularly, most critics notice Dillard's skill with language, though some find her writing overwrought.[1] In her bibliographic survey of Dillard, Dawn Evans Radford notes that reviews of Dillard's work often focus on styles or themes in the texts and approach these from religious, philosophical, gender, and environmental viewpoints. Radford concludes that "whatever approach they choose, critics invariably disagree on the merits of her style and on the classification of her genre and philosophy" (181).

Other reference works also emphasize the difficulty of classifying the genre and philosophy of Dillard's writings. Carol Loranger notes, "Few extensive bibliographic or critical studies of Dillard's work exist, partly because the work defies categories, but also, perhaps, because Dillard's philosophy demonstrates the inadequacy of categorization" (250). As recently as 1999, journal editor and theological critic Gregory Wolfe issued his plea that someone examine "the towering Christian writers of the modern era—from T.S. Eliot to Flannery O'Connor to Annie Dillard—and suggest ways that their visions might help to reinvigorate the literary sensibilities of contemporary theologians." To date, only two critical books that focus solely on Dillard's writings exist, though there are several important journal articles and specific book chapters relevant to the author's work. Additionally, excerpts of Dillard's writings are regularly included, and their technique briefly analyzed, in contemporary writing textbooks.[2] The idea that Dillard's "philosophy" usurps critical categorization will be discussed later in this essay. But, significantly, critics often begin, and sometimes end, with the attempt to categorize Dillard's writings, even while admitting that there are other interesting issues suggested by her writing that remain unexplored (McFadden-Gerber 5). To survey important concepts in existing critical approaches to Dillard's writings provides perspective for the present analysis; recognizing areas of previous research suggests specific areas for further

critical study. The following overview is representative rather than comprehensive, though it deliberately includes some analyses that are especially bold in either praise or condemnation.

Among the critical approaches to Annie Dillard's writings, the most common focuses on the author's continual and diligent attention to the natural world. This approach includes ecological criticism, ecotheological criticism, and various attempts to place Dillard within the American nature writing tradition along with Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Loren Eisely, Wendell Berry, and others. Presently, many theses on the author—and there are many considering the relative paucity of critical articles or books—gravitate toward this position.[3] Admittedly in her earliest works such as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Dillard seems entranced with observable phenomena in the natural world. She is as attentive to the minutiae squirming in a square foot of soil (*PTC* 94-95) as she is to the theory of relativity (*PTC* 202-04), and Dillard is as famous for her sucked frog (*PTC* 5-7) as for stalking the weasel (*TST* 65-70) and regularly citing various naturalists such as Thoreau, Donald E. Carr, and J. Henri Fabre (*PTC*).

For these reasons, and others, Dillard, has been labeled a "nature girl" or an "American Naturalist"—a label she rejects (Bowman; Breitenbach; Gross). Those who thoughtfully embrace Dillard as their "nature girl," though, are forced to qualify the assertion and reevaluate not only Dillard's "nature" but also their own conceptions of nature writing. If Dillard's writings belong in the categories of nature writing or ecology, they escape, expand, or alter those categories by virtue of her unconventional ideas and stylistic presentation.

Pamela Smith, in her article, "The Ecotheology of Annie Dillard: A Study in Ambivalence," ultimately finds Dillard unsatisfying. Smith, having assessed both Dillard's views of God and humanity as "ambivalent," asserts that the author cannot develop an "ethic of responsibility or an ethic of care on behalf of the environment" from this basis. Further, she believes Dillard "makes no prescription for rethinking Western religion, economics, or the heritage of Cartesian thought," and she is similarly negative in her assessment of the author's ability to move from "observation to ethic." Smith's

negative attitude toward Dillard is largely because she demands that Dillard construct an ethic that she has predetermined as appropriate, but carefully reading Dillard's texts need not result in an assessment of ambivalence or, as Smith would have it, irresponsibility. Dillard's environmental or humanitarian ethic may not be transparent in her earliest works, but, as other reviewers indicate, neither is it undeveloped, half-baked, or absent.

James McClintock and Peter Fritzell, in their books evaluating Dillard within the tradition of American nature writing, arrive at positive assessments of the author. McClintock is quick to acknowledge Dillard's exceptionality among the nature writers by her obvious identification of God as the Judeo-Christian God while her "counterparts" tend to be pantheistic or embrace a variety of non-Christian religions. Specifically, he mentions that "conservationists, environmentalists, and students of American responses to nature have consistently held the Judeo-Christian tradition responsible for land abuse" (89). Yet McClintock does not view Dillard in opposition to her naturalist counterparts and affirms that her unique and unashamed religious statements set her apart "only to a matter of degree" (107). McClintock indirectly repudiates blaming the Judeo-Christian tradition, as embraced by Dillard, for all ecological troubles. The reviewer instead illustrates Dillard's use of religious rituals of "stalking, seeing, and dancing" to resolve contradictory appearances of beauty and corruption in the natural world. Finally, he says, Dillard's rituals allow the narrator not only to stalk but also to recognize oneself as stalked, not only to see but to recognize oneself as seen, not only to dance but to hear a high, sweet song being played. Combining activity with perceived passivity, he allows, ultimately enables the narrator to praise and worship in the natural world (88-108).

Fritzell, in his *Nature Writing and America*, surpasses McClintock's positive assessment of Dillard by saying that "no book of recent vintage comes closer than *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to capturing (and, hence, clarifying) the underlying heritage of American nature writing." This "underlying heritage" he views as inspired by Thoreau and involving the "enlivening experience of trying to land oneself in America," a task that necessitates devotion to "impersonal science, spiritual autobiography, epistemology, and metaphysics." Fritzell says *Pilgrim* even surpasses *Walden* in "exposing the affinities between the self-conscious effort to settle nature's nation, even at its most scientific, and the fears, tremblings, and occasional tranquilities of classical Western metaphysics"

(219). His very positive evaluation of Dillard is based almost entirely on the author's Pulitzer Prize winning first book, though he does recognize the importance of the self-discovery for both narrator and reader that Dillard's texts consistently engender (217-83).

These critics offer representative approaches towards evaluating Dillard as a nature writer, and while their assessments are often strongly influenced by predefined conceptions of nature writing and its function, they also show some willingness to expand or alter these conceptions. Smith says she sought a practical ethic such as Thoreau's "Simplify, simplify" to inspire reassessment of her contemporary evils: Western Christianity, capitalism, and hierarchical dualism that "set the stage for environmental degradation." But Dillard's "ecotheology" offers no such bold platitudes or ideological naming, as would seem to appeal to Smith. Alternatively, Fritzell boldly declares that Dillard epitomizes the nature writing tradition, and he does this on the basis of a comparison with other writers who embrace nature, in large part, to redefine and rediscover the self. These two assessments are clearly antithetical, the one desiring that Dillard use nature as a window and the other desiring that she use it as a mirror. McClintock seems better able than these others to simply acknowledge the importance of nature to Dillard, recognizing the specific religious values Dillard brings to her writing. His nuanced comparison of select nature writers who, by their absorption in seeing and understanding the natural world, offer both "a critique of modernity and a positive world vision" (xvi) enables him to readily reconcile Dillard with the tradition while understanding her "critique" as implied by the alternative viewpoint of praise. McClintock's portrayal of Dillard begins addressing Dillard's ideas as such rather than focusing so strongly on whether or not Dillard violates or epitomizes a tradition or ideology.

In all of these critiques, though, and others like them, the habit of assessing Dillard's writings solely within the "nature writing" tradition unnecessarily limits the discussion of the author's works. Dillard's related and lengthy works on literary criticism, the writing life, and art and writing are often neglected, simply because they are very difficult to include in an ecological assessment. One of Dillard's former students, Elaine Tietjen, warns readers against the desire to classify the author as an American environmentalist. Tietjen's essay relays her own initial misreading of Dillard as purely in

the American nature writing tradition before participating in one of Dillard's classes in which the author insisted on the value of reading, craftsmanship, and the artistic enterprise. "Her classroom directive for a strict intellectualism," says Tietjen, "did not fit the sense-based 'experiential' image I had of her from the book." Her final assessment of the author was that "she was no environmentalist [. . . and] showed no allegiance to any political causes that I could detect" (177). Tietjen's rejection of Dillard's nature misses the author's point that artistic intellectualism is not in opposition to nature, but it also serves as a reminder that such an approach to the author has its limits. So, while employing an ecological, ecotheological, or nature-writing critique to analyzing Dillard is valuable and allows for interesting and legitimate comparisons,[4] it is difficult to offer a comprehensive critique of Dillard's works from this perspective. Some reviewers such as Judy Schaaf Anhorn have taken, as their task, the responsibility of distinguishing Dillard from optimistic Thoreauvian transcendentalism and, instead, compare Dillard to Melville or even regard the author as preeminently an existentialist rather than a nature writer or neo-transcendentalist (141-49).

Dillard may have begun with nature but not necessarily with the same intent or perspective of other "nature writers," and she does not finish with nature. There are reasons for her particular interest in the natural world and observable phenomena, directly related to her views on art and theology, which tend to be overlooked when one compares her to other American nature writers or ecologists. Her artistic and theological views may explain why her biographer in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* asserts that Dillard is "considered one of the most influential and *unorthodox* American environmental writers" ("Annie Dillard, 1945-," emphasis added).

Another critical approach towards Annie Dillard has considered gender in her writings. Whether or not the gendered critique is bold, Annie Dillard is readily understood to be an American *woman* writer and is often classified, if not compared, with other contemporary women writers. Dillard herself, though, is especially resistant to any gender simplifications and even considered publishing *Pilgrim* under the pseudonym "A. Dillard" to forestall any critiques that might be levied against a book of "theology" by a woman (Nathan 22). Dillard did not do so, of course, and while gendered readings of her

texts exist and offer some interesting supplementary ideas, such readings are not among the most favored.

Of the gendered readings, Suzanne Clark's "Annie Dillard: The Woman in Nature and the Subject of Nonfiction" is the most insightful. Clark evaluates the speaking subject in several of Dillard's early works to question whether Dillard is recognized as a woman writer by her content or simply by her name, and she acknowledges Dillard's narrators as a "silence in the place where there might be an image of the social self—of personality, character, or ego" (107). Clark reads this absent ego in Dillard as a gendered dilemma for a woman writer in the nature tradition, a questioning of the speaking subject, which allows the author to make even the speaker an object and question knowledge itself. Disavowing any notion that Dillard is a feminist or women's advocate, Clark instead asserts that

> what subverts the coherent character presented as a speaker, what undoes the convention [of nature writing] and makes the nonfiction literary, is the unspoken 'she,' a recurring strangeness, or estrangement, which acts as a counterpoint to the traditional and literal authority of the (male) observer—the naturalists, adventurers, and other writers whom Dillard cites. (111)

But the critic pushes the analysis even further by rebalancing the scales. If Dillard's nonfiction becomes literary by virtue of its gendered dilemmas, it never becomes merely literary by unraveling the narrative subject. Dillard's "I" continues speaking, and speaking about the "real" not a figurative world; this makes the narrator continually "dangerous" and "interesting." "Dillard carries wildness out in a work that works to violate the very boundaries of the literary; her nonfiction carries fiction into living, poetics into the wild, invention into natural history, female subjectivity into language." Ultimately, Clark values Dillard for creating a "poetics which shapes not the seen but the seer" (122). This "seer" may refer not only to the narrator but also to the author and the reader who visually perceive the created world.

In a different gendered analysis, David Lavery suggests not only that Dillard can transform nature writing but that it is the best place for her, as a woman, to portray "visionary art." Lavery emphasizes that because Dillard is a woman she has a special need and affinity to communicate her religious and philosophical ideas through nature

writing. Dillard, he says, "senses that her art must be in keeping with natural processes and earthly rhythms" and that her vision will not be fulfilled by "the Faustian pursuits which usually characterize the intellectual quests of western man." Also, because Dillard is a woman, Lavery says her approach to nature is more instinctual and immediate than that of her male counterparts: she is able to " 'reflect' her world instead of reflecting upon it" and realize there is "no fall of man. [. . .] Only the male mind's Platonizing disposition could have ever produced such an illusion; there is no perfect realm of forms. There is only the incarnation."

Lavery, by simplistically pitting woman against man and equating the former with nature and vision and the latter with Faustian intellectual pursuit and illusion, is probably pushing the gendered critique too far. His polarities and gendered associations are not necessary for a thoughtful reading of the author's works, and, as Dillard's later "intellectual" texts demonstrate, they are not necessarily valid. Still, in mentioning the importance of "incarnation" in Dillard's works, Lavery introduces an interesting suggestion for reading Dillard. This suggestion of religious influence, though, moves away from his primarily gendered critique into a phenomenological or theological discussion that he does not pursue. Lavery and Clark both suggest some ideas to consider when analyzing Dillard's works, but the author may have been prudent in rejecting the influence of gendered bias in her writing. Even Clark's suggestive and interesting literary conclusions may possibly be derived apart from a gendered analysis of the author.

Other fruitful critical approaches that have been employed in reading Annie Dillard's writings include religious and philosophical critiques, and those that specifically consider the meaning of the author's style and techniques to her ideas. These approaches do not necessarily focus on the "natural" aspects of Dillard's work, but they do not ignore them either. As in Dillard's own texts, these critiques tend to emphasize the compatibility of religious or philosophical questions and the natural world as well as the implications of addressing such in narrative form.

The only two books on Dillard so far, Linda Smith's *Annie Dillard* and Sandra Humble Johnson's *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard,* may be considered in the category of religious and philosophical critique. Smith's book is a valuable survey of the author's development and writings through 1989; the survey is

loosely chronological. Starting from Dillard's texts to provide specific explanations of allusions and images while comparing and connecting narrative threads, Smith arrives in each chapter at a summary statement on the author's meaning and message in her works. Smith is particularly sensitive to the author's religious "vision," though this is not the focus of her critique. She does, however, suggest that Dillard's natural vision is not pantheistic but "panentheistic," viewing God as both immanent in *and* transcendent from nature, and concludes the book by identifying three key themes in Dillard's works: questioning the nature of human consciousness, exploring the nature of suffering and death, and determining how life should be lived in the face of certain suffering and death (18, 125-26). About the author, she writes, "This, then, is Annie Dillard, both saint and sinner, person and persona, sage and joker. Like a true master of spiritual matters, she always deflects attention from herself" (15). Similarly, Smith introduces her own text by stating that it would be "an error to mistake this book's analysis of [Dillard's] work for the vision that only the originals can bestow. Let it suffice to say that she deserves a reading" (x). Smith is careful not to over-analyze Dillard's works, finding many interpretive clues in the author's own writing and interviews, and her book is a helpful introductory companion volume for understanding Dillard's writings.

Johnson's book, on the other hand, offers a very specific critique of Dillard as in the neo-romantic tradition,[5] especially by what Johnson views as Dillard's use of literary epiphany. On this basis, Johnson makes efforts to compare Dillard to Blake, Wordsworth, Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot. The analysis, though, after initially offering a very specific definition of "epiphany" as one of the five experiences of the "illuminated moment"—which also includes the experience of the "sublime," the mystical experience, the conversion, and the vision—proceeds to elevate the epiphany because it is not specifically religious allegory. But Johnson then, throughout the book, seems to conflate "epiphany" with her broader "illuminated moment" and reinterpret nearly all Dillard's vivid images as, therefore, epiphanic. While appreciating the elevation and isolation of many of Dillard's "illuminated moments" in Johnson's book, the reader need not be persuaded these are all trans-religious epiphanies that narrowly demarcate Dillard as essentially "neo-romantic."

Several article-length critiques provide specific alternative viewpoints for evaluating Dillard's religious and philosophical ideas. Margaret Loewen Reimer's essay, "The Dialectical Vision of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*," seeks to debunk linking Dillard with the Transcendentalists and contrasts Dillard with Melville and Emersonion philosophy. She concludes that Dillard offers an "inversion of conventional religious and philosophical truths": she is a naturalist who sees religious pain and a mystic who will not reject the physical world. Though Reimer views Dillard as standing "in a very orthodox Christian tradition, her conclusions (or lack of them) [on the problems of evil in a fallen world] are far from traditional Christian answers." Dillard will not leave this world alone or seek answers outside of it. Despite her "universal" questions, Dillard continually returns to "particulars" for answers and presents them as incarnations. "The power of Dillard's vision," she resolves, "arises from her strength to maintain the contradictions within a single vision" (164-65).

Another critic, William J. Scheik in his essay, "Annie Dillard: Narrative Fringe," explores Dillard's contradictions by discussing the narrative structure of her early texts *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Holy the Firm*, and *Living by Fiction*. Scheik views Dillard's very language and structure, intrinsically artful, as expressing "the mysterious matrix between seeing and not seeing that constitutes verbalization." Because of this, Scheik emphasizes that Dillard's meaning often occurs at the "liminal edge" or "*hemline* between eternity (spirit) and time (matter) in nature" (53). The narrator's sensations and imagery are pushed to the edge as she expresses phenomenological surfaces that, paradoxically, suggest spiritual depth: "Dillard creates a narrative fringe where specific concrete, ordinary particulars of life become translucent signifiers of continuity and design, depths of meaning below phenomenological surfaces" (58).

Besides the importance of the fringe or sensory edge where borders blur and deeper meaning exists, Scheik also mentions the ideological significance of arching imagery to Dillard's structure and meanings. Citing references to arches, arching, or arcing in Dillard's works, Scheik sees these as her reaffirmation that a Christ-like "spanning the gap, from here to eternity" is not only evident in nature, but also the responsibility of the artist and reader. Finally, Scheik sees Dillard's arcs as connection:

there is the upward arc of hope and the downward arc of doubt, making together a complete circle that curves like not only time but space:

> For Dillard, this circular continuum combining time (the seen) and eternity (the unseen) is the origin of art—'any work of art symbolizes juncture itself, the socketing of eternity into time and energy into form' (*LBF* 164); this circular continuum is also the foundation of hope, for our consideration of the 'world as a text . . . as a work of art. . . . absolutely requires that we posit an author for it' (*LBF* 144). (62)

Scheik reconciles the apparent contradictions in Dillard's writing by discussing her language and narrative technique, seeing in her presentation of dualities not, ultimately, contradiction but continuum. His discussion is illustrated throughout by references to Dillard's texts, though the analysis is peppered with religious terminology appropriate to the discussion: Dillard creates a "mystical" union of opposition when phenomenological surfaces "transubstantiate" spiritual depth. Notably, to Scheik, "phenomenological" always implies a surface that contrasts with "spiritual" depth.

Dillard's texts lend themselves, by their language and form, to combined religious and technical analysis such as Scheik's, and Susan M. Felch's essay, "Annie Dillard: Modern Physics in a Contemporary Mystic," supplements a religious and technical analysis of Dillard's writing with relevant contemporary scientific ideas. Particularly, Felch sees Dillard's "mysticism" as harmonious with some contemporary scientific thinking regarding space-time questions. Felch sees Dillard's resolution to her artistic questions as a positive statement that because of God, the world and art depicting the world can be meaningful. "For Dillard's God," she says, "is not merely tacked on, a kind of god-in-the-gaps-notion. Rather she agrees with Simone Weil that 'if there is a God, it is not an insignificant fact, but something that requires a radical rethinking of *every little thing*. [. . .] The 'fact of God' which particularly bears on Dillard's esthetics are the complementary notions of his transcendence and immanence" (188). Felch never reconciles exactly why these notions are complementary, but she accurately indicates their significance to Dillard.

Dillard regularly founds her texts and questions on religious and philosophical ideas. In her early works, the references to these ideas are often implicit rather than explicit, which has inspired critics such as Stan Goldman and Robert Paul Dunn to

explicate and footnote Dillard's textual allusions. Goldman's critique considers *Pilgrim* and emphasizes the primacy of the Hebrew Bible, particularly Leviticus, for understanding Dillard's views of God and creation. "Pilgrim," says Goldman, "specifically foregrounds Leviticus as the language-code that constitutes her response to the paradoxical relationship of nature and God. Indeed, Leviticus, the primary book of ritual sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, is the central context for and key to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*" (196). Again, Dillard's view of God and creation is portrayed as involving both immanence and transcendence, though Goldman views Dillard as priestly-poet-artist, the sacrifice bridging the chasms and contradictions (204).

Robert Paul Dunn applies a similar analysis to Dillard's work. In "The Artist as Nun: Theme, Tone and Vision in the Writings of Annie Dillard," he emphasizes that, by her focus on the value of art and this world, Dillard is not squarely in the tradition of Christian mysticism. Yet, he says, her focus on art and perceptual reality does allow her to address agnostic readers and, by her texts, bridge the gap between sacred and secular as she compares artist and nun. By uniting artist and nun in the person of her narrator, Dillard "makes mystical experience fresh and credible to ordinary people" (18). He sees the nature of consciousness as an important question to Dillard and her "tone" as "synonymous with the writer's vision," overcoming the "censor" in her readers (24-25). In his final section, Dunn relates how Dillard's literary techniques ultimately work to "stalk" the reader to "help to show the possibility of recovering a mystical vision in an age that does not prize the cloister. Dillard both helps to show the nature of such a vision and to involve her reader in the realization of it for themselves" (30).

Turning the Page: About Face

Here the survey has come full circle returning to the issue of Dillard's vision: while the first critic cauterizes Dillard for lacking an ethical position, the last argues that her rhetorical strategy itself is very much a persuasive social statement. Dillard does not present didactic directives, but her work may provide persuasive examples. Most critical assessments of Annie Dillard's writings focus on *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*; where other texts are mentioned, they are usually mentioned in conjunction with these first two. The majority of criticism is related to categorizing Dillard's work in

nature writing, ecological, or ecotheological writing, though there are also very keen assessments of religious and philosophical issues addressed by Dillard's creative works.[6] Some who are not professional literary critics, but devotional writers or theologians, appreciate the message they perceive in Annie Dillard's writings;[7] also, Dillard herself has made special efforts to encourage literary excellence by offering advice, critique, and examples in writing textbooks and by her classroom teaching. Nancy Parrish's 1999 book, *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group*, is an interesting sketch of Dillard's alma mater and the influence, enthusiasm, and opportunities Hollins' professors offered their students; Dillard's own passion for encouraging young writers may, in part, be a response to her early experience.

CHAPTER TWO
Something Else: Annie Dillard on Literary Art

> To judge among interpretations and methods, we must resort either to the authority of the author's stated intentions, if any, or to common sense, or to a consensus among educated people of goodwill. None of these satisfies anyone, but there is nothing else.
>
> Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* 130-31

Because Annie Dillard's writings have been variously categorized by critics, some problematizing her message by their interpretations, it is difficult to attempt an adequate "consensus among educated people of goodwill," as Dillard suggests. Even those who agree on Dillard's significance and have identified some of her main themes have trouble with comprehensive assessment of Dillard's writing. The difficulty of comprehensive assessment is probably due, in part, to the fact that Dillard is a living author whose ideas are continually developing and who is, herself, not keen to simplify them. Few authors are eager to simplify their ideas, but, particularly in Dillard's case, simplification would betray her artistic integrity. Dillard's message is visionary, in a religious sense, and complex. The effort to critique her work is worthwhile because she is creating meaningful art, but judgment, in this case, demands insight as well as enjoyment of the work. The author herself provides some interpretative suggestions.

Dillard, without simplification, offers clues to the meaning of her work by her literary criticism. In addition to the author's creative pieces, she has also published writings on writing. And while continually privileging art over criticism, Dillard has herself dabbled in criticism in an early work, *Living by Fiction* (1982), and followed this critical work with a book elucidating her writing process called *The Writing Life* (1989). Dillard's critical approach to literary art is further supplemented both by articles in which the author discusses various creative pieces she has written, explaining her techniques, images, and purpose, and by interviews in which she responds to direct questions about her writing. Interpreting Dillard's creative work demands an understanding of the author's own approach to literary art. Simply masking standard, or even inventive, critical methods over Dillard's work, while interesting, does not provide an adequate reading of the author's unique artistic vision. Such masking obscures the most appropriate and basic reading of Dillard's texts. But by examining Dillard's own critical

evaluation of literature, the reader can begin to understand her literary vision. The author combines her literary acuity with exploratory religious sensibilities to create the theoretical amalgam that inspires her work. So to judge between critical interpretations of Annie Dillard's writings, it is helpful to draw on the stated intentions of the author, where they clearly exist, and combine these with appropriate literary and religious sophistication and, as Dillard herself suggests, common sense. While Dillard's own critical views need not necessarily be privileged when interpreting her creative work, neither should they be neglected. At least, it is interesting to consider Dillard's work in light of her theoretical statements, and, at best, these provide a key to unlocking Dillard's vision. Dillard's explanations of her critical approach are frequently negative: they often employ denials and denunciations to state what she is not, or does not want to be, doing; at other times she apologizes for what she is doing and jokingly deprecates her work. These negative statements are telling of the author's theoretical approach to literature and are supplemented by a few bold and positive assertions about her critical approach to literary art, often couched in religious terminology. Backing into answers, by moving from the author's negative statements on her critical approach to literary art to her positive ones, should preserve, in the present work of criticism, the integrity of Dillard's vision: to reveal rather than expose, to discover rather than argue.

Saying "Boo"

Annie Dillard's creative works are often seen as exploring the problem of suffering and evil—whether it be the natural cannibalism of a mating female praying mantis eating her male (*PTC* 57-58), or the human suffering of a child whose face is burned off by fire (*HF* 36), or the divine impotence of allowing genetic birth deformity (*FTB* 53). Dillard's frequent use of the first-person in her creative works positions the author herself as suffering from the shock, gravity, and pervasiveness of these experiences while continually displaying them to lament and question. There is an intentionally dark side to Dillard's creative works; there is also a streak of negativity in her critical works and public statements. This negative emphasis is deliberate and meaningful, though it remains complex and is sometimes difficult to assess. Dillard often rejects not only critical assessments of her writing as inaccurate but also rejects her own

works and ability as being insufficient; these rejections will be discussed throughout the chapter. Further, the author denies individual significance and dislikes showcasing her life and personality. It is almost ironic that Dillard, a re-creator of the personal essay, seems to shy away from being personable. There are reasons for this negativity that can be positively explained by the author's critical approach to literary art.

Dillard's negativity may stem from her dislike of facile judgment and her early experience with literary success. Winning the Pulitzer Prize for her first prose work, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard endured the accompanying critical acclaim. The author even "admitted that she was frightened and confused by her rapid rise to celebrity status and the loss of privacy that accompanied it" (L. Smith 10-11). After this success, the author was besieged with requests for all types of public appearances and opportunities for various professional projects. Many people made judgments on her work and character: some considered her a naturalist, others a mystic, and some simply thought Dillard must be crazy. The author rejected these assessments and the fame they brought and moved, alone, to a remote island in the Pacific Northwest to reassess her artistic vision and work.

Early acclaim has had an impact on the author and her work. Dillard herself still says, "I'm trying to get rid of the idle reader who thinks of me as this little mystic nature writer. That's why I make the beginnings of my books tougher and tougher: if you can't stand this, would you please put this book down? Don't buy it, don't write me a letter, don't complain" (Gross). The dark beginnings of her books, though, are not intended to overwhelm her whole literary vision. In a 1999 interview, Dillard refuses the implication that her works are overly dark or negative, saying, "I certainly hope, as any artist hopes, that the art will help the reader see the world anew. But it's by no means all negative. There's a bunch of positive ways to see the world anew in my books. I bring up the bad news first, because then when you give the good news it's a lot more convincing" (Abood 30). In Dillard's estimation, deliberate negativity helps ensure that her works appear realistic to readers. But while early success influenced Dillard's future interactions with literary audiences and critics, her continual rejection of critical assessment may also be due to other factors.

Dillard considers criticism less interesting than art and explanation less valuable than images. Even in her various writings on writing, Dillard approaches her subject as a writer rather than a critic, and she does not claim to be a scholar; she claims only to be a writer. These claims are consistent with her assertions that artistic creation is her primary focus as a writer. This focus on art inspires, and is inspired by, her respect for the vocation of writing. Finishing an expository piece on one of her essays, Dillard laments, "Note how remarkably less interesting all this is than the anecdotal essay itself. This is why no one reads literary criticism. This is also why writers are well advised to keep mum about what they've written. If they can please us with vivid little bits of story, who cares what weird ideas drove them to their typewriters in the first place?" ("Writing 'God in the Doorway' " 282). So, while not opposed to critical effort, Dillard often shies away from the probing of critics, even when she is her own critic, and tries hard to stay out of the limelight. The author limits her public appearances to two or three readings a year and believes she is much better expressed in her creative writings than personal appearances (L. Smith 14).

Yet in Dillard's own assessment, her creative writings sometimes fail her. The author, in reflection, frequently rejects her work. Dismissively citing some of her early works, Dillard labels them "little, little, little books" (Cantwell) and says, referring to *Pilgrim*: "I didn't have any standards; I was just writing a book. [. . .] the success of the book of prose, for which the Pulitzer was a mere symbol, made me have to examine 'what kind of writer was I? What do I want to do next?" (Lawrence). Rejecting these first works, Dillard complains that the books are short and showy, while later she dismisses *Living by Fiction* as a "horrible dull book she never should have published." These "little, little, little books," including the "horrible dull" one in which the young Dillard "show[ed] off" are, of course, some of the author's best-known and most acclaimed titles. Dillard's evaluations may originate in others' critiques that these works were brief but intense and reckless yet brave and daring. The author, in hindsight, portrays her early efforts as the products of inexperience and inhibition. Prior to beginning her novel, *The Living*, Dillard had confessed to an interviewer, "I'm just not as much of a showoff as I used to be. When I wrote 'Pilgrim' . . . well, I was just a kid then. [. . .] I want to be more transparent, to let the story carry the reader. [. . .] You don't want my big thumb prints all

over [the work]." Here Dillard emphasizes narrative above author and desires that her works take on a life and power of their own. Having experimented with various writing techniques, she was challenged to write a novel to see if she "could handle characters [. . .] and tell stories [. . .] by [abandoning] the daggone increasingly empty narrative eyeball, the 'I' person whose voice I was getting truly sick of." The effort, though, was costly and Dillard, because of her perceived responsibility to art, diminishes her work, saying, "You know, I've never liked writing. I've hated it" (Cantwell). It is not that Dillard does not like writings, she does: she likes books and reading is her life. What she does not like is the effort of writing and the responsibility she perceives as part of the vocation. So Dillard tries to emphasize writings above writing. And when she rejects her early writings, it is, in part, to emphasize development in her later writings. In Dillard's early works, the author may have been uninhibited but hopes, in later efforts, that the works themselves assume an uninhibited liveliness.

Dillard's disparaging remarks and negativity set up a contrast between her task and abilities and also suggest the author believes she has matured. In her estimation, an author is an individual who ought to take on universal themes. If Dillard began as a flamboyant young award winner, she is becoming a mature artist. Contrasts emphasize her successful development in her chosen vocation. These emphases are also interesting because Dillard continues to address the same themes in her writings, and her style remains recognizably striking. At one lecture Dillard confessed her lack of unique ideas and offered the audience "25 cents a piece for ideas; 50 if yours is chosen" (Suh). Elsewhere she has said that "I don't have a bunch of ideas. A lot of my friends who are writers say, 'Once I do this I have five or six other things I'd like to do.' I don't know how to think that way [. . .] I can rewrite all right, but I can't write" (Cantwell).

This "rewriting" is craft, the art and skill of writing. Dillard has always had the highest respect for literature as art, and her denunciations of her work emphasize the very honorable place she allows literature in contrast to both her disdain of the business of writing and her seeming unworthiness as an author. Dillard began teaching writing courses at Western Washington University after 1976 and says, "I was convinced by my own rhetoric that a life dedicated to high holy art was the great thing. I try to get my students to understand that we're all in this wretched business together" (Lawrence).

Dillard's statement demonstrates her perception of a dichotomy between art and business, the vocation as opposed to the fame. Linda Smith similarly notes that, following the success of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard was "repelled by the materialism of the New York literary world" and was "resentful that certain publications that had earlier rejected her poetry wrote to her after she became famous, asking for something of hers to print. With more than a little bitterness she told [an] interviewer that she often sent [these publications] the same work they had previously rejected" (11). Smith further says these experiences help illustrate Dillard's perspective on literature and the literary scene following her early success. Yet these negative experiences have not deterred Dillard from her own writing.

Particularly, Dillard's high estimation of literary art is opposed to her sense of personal significance and artistic ability. The divide emphasizes the importance of literary art and, therefore, the value and significance of choosing writing as one's life work. The individual responsibility, in such an assessment, is thus enormous and humbling but also subsumed by the task. If art is both high and holy, or a type of universal, Dillard the working artist is a particular. Universal and particular are only reconciled, in this case, by a successful text that embodies both. Successful incarnation further means that the text takes on a life of its own—becomes "word made flesh"—inspiring readers. When questioned by an interviewer, Dillard describes her writing as squarely within the "Christian mystical tradition dating from Plotinus" (Abood 32), so it does not seem inappropriate to couch her theory of literary art in religious terms: Dillard herself does so. Yet she is also humbled by the responsibility of the vocation and wants to be known simply as a writer, without any qualifying adjectives. Religious claims and terminology are not a license for labeling, branding, or pigeonholing because, above all else, Dillard asserts, "I'm a writer of books and I don't want to be branded a religious writer. Graham Greene said to be branded as a Catholic writer was living hell. He said that's the end of you" (Gross).

Additionally, Dillard's purpose is not so much to express herself as her few, though significant, ideas in writing. Live appearance tends to emphasize the individual personality, and Dillard's emphasis is elsewhere. Dillard has continually rejected her individual significance in light of the responsibility of her art. Once an interviewer

described Dillard as "noticeably disturbed" and decided this was "[. . .] possibly because she hates being interviewed. 'Would Christ have gone on television?' [Dillard] muses at one point. As always, she was wrestling with the notion of a truly moral life. In such a life, one gathers, there is no room for self-promotion" (Cantwell). Dillard also problematizes her personal beliefs by saying that, having converted to Catholicism from a Protestant background—having joined the "dirty old lady"—she still has "Protestant tendencies" that allow for self-expression and personal rebellion while participating in the "anonymity" of Catholic Christianity. Dillard's rejection of personal significance coupled with her sincere desires to live well explain her personal reticence to talk about herself or her background even when these things are directly related to her writing. Awarded the first living "EarthSaint" title by *Earthlight Magazine* online, Dillard claimed to be "very honored" but refused to offer biographical information reflecting her ideas about nature and spirituality and instead substituted the comment, "I just write books" (Lander). And, once, Dillard asserted that: "I want enough sanity to keep on writing because it's literature that I love—and that means not being too famous" (L. Smith 14). Another journalist noted that "Annie Dillard, doyenne of the personal essay, wants the details of her personal life to remain private" and regularly removes "personal" aspects of her journals so these do not become prey for future biographers and injure people "living—or dead, for that matter" (Gross).

Dillard's reluctance to display or define her personal life, in addition to emphasizing her literary ideas rather than charismatic personality, harmonizes well with the message in her books. Gross describes her reticence as

> an ethical expression of the metaphysic described in *For the Time Being*—the balance of humility and dignity that affirms both the momentary momentousness and the historical inconsequence of the details of an individual life. Often, Dillard's work suggests that individual identity is most fully realized in moments when the self is emptied out and filled with the presence of the spirit of whatever it observes. (Gross)

Gross ultimately finds Dillard's approach "refreshing" and concludes that refusal to build a public image has allowed Dillard to craft a "writing life of uncommon integrity. [. . .] There are no discursive lessons here: the reward is simpler, and tougher. The only thing it teaches is self-transcendence, the fundamental skill of love." Dillard herself, at a Yale

University lecture, states that "people are always trying to convince themselves that their times are really important. But if you really, truly understood that you are going to die, and how many people there are now and how many people there have ever been, just beads in this never-ending string, how, then, do we live? How can you take yourself seriously?" (Suh).

So Annie Dillard follows her own advice. While disparaging explanations of her ideas, she also dismisses her works and personal significance. This negativity stems from the respect she gives literary art as well as her presentation of the insignificance of the individual in the grand stream of history. There is a disparity between the universal and the particular that can only be bridged by an incarnation, and ignoring this reconciliation is a critical betrayal. I suggest that Dillard says "boo" to her critics—and herself—as an expression of both the author's intent to surprise readers for effect and to willingly address difficult and distressing issues in her writing. Dillard is disturbed when she perceives her critics offer an imbalanced approach or mistaken analysis, and by her rejections and negativity, she critiques the adequacy of theory to communicate her ideas while simultaneously admitting that her creative efforts may themselves not yet succeed as she would like. She knows the responsibility of artistic integrity as well as her own ability and inability. As an author, she plays dangerous games by tackling metaphysical ideas to envision the nature of life, realizing all the while she may be blind and laughing. It is important that the task be done, but it is not important to her to give the definitive answer. Glimpses into eternity and, if possible, revelations about life and death, love and survival, color Dillard's efforts, but even these should not, in her evaluation, cause anyone to take himself too seriously.

Humble Apologies and Explanations

In Dillard's own works, she often prefaces a text with humble apologies or joking deprecations as she introduces its purpose or meaning. Dillard, a careful editor and censor of herself, intentionally employs these techniques. By these, she warns readers not to mistake her meaning or assume to have grasped it too quickly: they may miss her point and are advised, by all available methods, including understatement, apology, and humor, against hasty judgment. Dillard does not promise readers anything, but she is hinting

from the beginning about her intentions, and these preliminary remarks serve as a type of thesis for the works. While she warns her readers not to mistake her meaning, she is also advising them not to miss the meaning. These introductory theses, continually present, are the bow taken before the show, so the work must live up to the introduction, explaining and elaborating the bare, and therefore humble, ideas initially presented.

Among Dillard's preliminary remarks, certain themes repeat themselves. Her remarks indicate an emphasis on mental or spiritual ideas, as well as questions about the phenomena of time and the nature of language and imagery. If Dillard's work succeeds, the early apologies and explanations may eventually, by the end of the book, seem ironic and emphasize the significance of her message and skills. Also, if the author is to offer any direct indication about the meaning of a work, she must do so at the beginning of a text because she does not summarize it at the end. The introduction is, precisely, introductory.

For all the similarities that exist among these various humble and humorous introductions, they also provide examples of discernable development in Dillard's approach to literary art. These introductory statements circumscribe and limit the texts in order to give them boundaries and definition. Each work is given a unique shape and characteristic personality; each text becomes an entity and is born with a life of its own. The preemptory techniques that Dillard continually employs become increasingly bold as her career develops, as if the author is trying to incarnate her message more plainly in each successive text.

For example, Dillard's explanation of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, given at the end of the book's first chapter, playfully suggests its tentative claims, while Dillard's most recent book, *For the Time Being*, provides a preliminary "Author's Note" that plainly informs readers of the strangeness and significance of the text. Both books are written in the first-person, but whereas the earlier work emphasizes the singular and unique personality of the narrator, characterizing her not as a scientist but a newborn infant gazing wide-eyed at the world, in the later book, Dillard claims the work is not personal and not intimate and offers no descriptions of herself. Instead, in *For the Time Being* intentions are emphasized and stated plainly to be bold, unusual, and austere. Also, the *Pilgrim* narrator describes herself as passively experiencing what she describes as a

"game" played against time. Though the narrator claims to be an explorer or stalker, she also claims to be the passive instrument of the hunt itself (12). "I am the arrow shaft," she says, "carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood" (12). The narrator says that she will only describe sights and tell tales in order to absolve herself from answering *why* we are here and simply say *where*. But there is no such dramatic personal narrator or metaphor introducing *For the Time Being*. Instead the author says the narratives are not whole, but broken, and the author actively offers philosophical questions. By the end of the introduction to *For the Time Being*, Dillard begs readers to ask, "why?" in order to determine how to live. Also, "God" is clearly questioned in *For the Time Being* while *Pilgrim*, also a spiritual narrative, simply indicates a breath or wind as the active force of the book, causing one to sail "headlong and breathless under the gale force of the spirit" (13). The intentions for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, while linguistically bold and brilliant, are portrayed as ordinary and common when the narrator compares herself to the bear who walked over a mountain to discover only more of the same (11). In the earlier text, the narrator introduces her sights and tales; in the later text, the author introduces her methods and questions.

The dramatic differences between the preemptory statements of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *For the Time Being* indicate both development and similarity in Dillard's approach to literary art throughout her twenty-five year career. Consistently Dillard engages herself in the work of writing. Writing remains an effective means of communication for the author, and many of her most important issues have not changed. Dillard continues to value language, especially crafted language and images; she also respects mental and spiritual challenges to literary art and continually addresses the subject of time and the nature of suffering. But something is different; something has changed. In response to questions in a recent interview, Dillard herself asserted that throughout her career her religious beliefs have been clarified (Abood 30). In Dillard's case, this is sure to affect her writing; the clarification of her religious beliefs may even be a result of development in her approach to literary art. The evident differences in Dillard's preliminary statements to her texts reflect essential changes in the author's descriptions and purposes for her texts. Select other introductory statements to Dillard's

texts help one understand how these humble and humorous introductions might signal development in Dillard's career, indicating how the narrator of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* becomes the author of *For the Time Being*.

Following the success of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard sought to redefine her artistic theory and creative work. The author's next book, the visionary *Holy the Firm*, is evidence of this redefinition and demonstrates creative continuity with, but also a break from, the earlier work. Her assessment at this time had an impact on her literary career, not because she since discarded narrative and description, but because her work assumed an intentional artistic responsibility that she later recombined with narrative and description.

Immediately following *Holy the Firm*, though, Dillard continued to focus on the nature of literary art and her role as an artist. Books written during this time are *Living by Fiction*, a literary evaluation of contemporary fiction and meaning in the world; *The Writing Life*, which describes Dillard's own writing and creative process; and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, an edited collection of Dillard's creative essays written at various times. Specifically, these three works are comparable because, besides being published at about the same time, Dillard begins to move introductory explanations from within the main body of the text to preliminary pages, and these works also illustrate the author's developing concern not only for the value of art and its capacity to mean, but also her personal responsibility as an artist. In these works that are, in part, reflective, Dillard addresses topics not as a critic or scholar, but as an artist who is simply working at her craft. In *Living by Fiction*, the author employs humor to soften the ambition of her stated purposes. While she claims to inquire about the world's meaning, she also calls the text "unlicensed metaphysics in a teacup" (11). She balances her "absurdly large questions" with self-deprecating statements about her methods. She flings a "sensible approach aside [. . .] in favor of enthusiasm, free speculation, blind assertion, dumb joking, and diatribe." Her humble methods seem fitting if her only claim to the topic is, as she asserts, as a "reader, and a writer, and a lover" (14-15). As with other preliminary remarks, the contrast is significant, interesting, and indicative of the author's approach to literary art. Considering that she is arguing life may be meaningfully apprehended by literary art and criticism, humility seems appropriate.

Likewise, introducing *The Writing Life*, the author shies away from metaphysics and personal aggrandizement. On *The Writing Life*, she says, "This is not a meditation—God save us from meditations—but a dispatch from the desk. It is about work" (inner flap). Though Dillard's interest in the writing process stemmed from her personal reflections upon the nature of literary art and artistic responsibility, her tone in this book is not solemn. She believes she has a responsibility: writing is her work. But she is not trying to romanticize the vocation. The contrast is between a meditation and a dispatch, indicating by the assertion of the latter that the responsibility of the vocation is important, urgent, and tangible—even worldly.

Humor characterizes Dillard's note preceding her collection of essays, *Teaching a Stone to Talk.* In this brief statement, the author self-consciously borders on apology, and offers a defense of the genre, saying, "At any rate, this is not a collection of occasional pieces, such as a writer brings out to supplement his real work; instead this is my real work, such as it is" (8). As with the previously mentioned text, this one also seems to indicate Dillard's emphasis on the writing as her work, her responsibility, which is actual or "real work." Considering the author's recent theoretical work, it is not surprising that she would self-consciously defend and introduce this collection of essays. Typically, Dillard offers the humble and humorous, "such as it is," to indicate she is aware that her defense is somewhat unconventional and may require softening. In these three works, *Living by Fiction*, *The Writing Life*, and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, the author, by continuing her humble and humorous preliminary explanations, demonstrates continuity with her earlier work. Dillard, the writer, in these books again engages significant topics with intelligence and humor. The first two of these three books stray from Dillard's earlier creative narrative and, in its place, provide creative analysis. *Teaching a Stone to Talk* as an edited collection of various creative essays also seems consistent with the reworking of Dillard's approach to literary art: Dillard was intensely interested at this time in artistic theory and responsibility. The influence of these books on Dillard's developing critical approach to literary art is related to her developing conception of writing as work, a vocation with a practical dimension common to that of any other responsibility. What began, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, as a "straying trail of blood" has now become the author's "real work, such as it is." This is not to lessen the quality of the

texts, but to illustrate that, as Dillard deliberately and publicly embraced a personal theory of literary art as meaningful communication, she discovered it to be her work, a human responsibility that could, nonetheless, address metaphysical questions about life. Yet asserting significant intentions in introductory statements, Dillard realized, demands continual humility and humor. The humility and humor required of the stated intentions also apply to her eventual characterization of human relationships.

In addition to Dillard's several intermediate works, which demonstrate the author abandoning self analysis, *For the Time Being* plainly and unapologetically aims at difficult targets. This book is not simply a tale with characters; it is a commentary on the generations of the human race and, if the title is indicative, may serve as a type of authorial credo, much like W.H. Auden's work by the same title. Dillard, whose career began with the enormously successful *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and who refused to answer metaphysical questions of *why*, is now demanding her audience begin asking such large questions in order to address "*how shall one individual live.*" In between *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *For the Time Being*, the author has bravely, and brazenly, considered her theory of literary art, including what this means to her as a human being. Formerly she emphasized her passivity, while later she boldly asserts spiritual questions and humanitarian concerns. Dillard's introductory remarks that preface nearly all her works provide some indication as to the development of the author's approach to literary art.

Dillard, keenly sensitive to public response and critical evaluation, has always tried to account for perceived weaknesses in her works, preempting criticism in the earliest pages of a text and making denials and denunciations as necessary. Often her self-deprecation is inspired as much by her sense of humor as by her humility, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two because they may, in places, be the same thing. The disparity between the grand, universal ideas and the individual particularity of the author is bridged by Dillard's denials, apologies and explanations. Particularly, these limit and circumscribe the text, thereby creating an entity, an incarnation, bridging the gap between universal and particular. Dillard's apologies serve to deflect some criticism, and, if the work succeeds in stated intentions, the self-conscious explanations may finally emphasize the significance of the message and its skillful presentation. As Dillard's career progresses, she highlights her prefaces, drawing

attention to the explanations while, simultaneously, becoming increasingly bold about her stated intentions. The apologies increasingly take on the full range of the term, becoming colorful defenses and explanations of her passions that the works themselves incarnate. But the ends of the works do not recapitulate Dillard's original intentions; rather, they open up onto the world. The meaning of the works should have become apparent and, rather than being self-referential, the work ought to stimulate the reader to walk away from it into his or her life and reengage, in a new way, with the world at large. The introductory remarks, both humorous and humble, are simply an introduction not only to individual texts but also to Dillard's developing approach to literary art.

Bold Statements and Declarations

Annie Dillard's humble and humorous negativity does not comprise the whole of her statements regarding art and literary theory. Her creative works themselves serve as evidence of the author's continued positive appreciation for the significance of literature, yet these creative works interpret the author's views without necessarily explaining them. Explanations exist elsewhere, and the author does offer some clear and direct statements on her personal approach to literary art. Though various individuals have evaluated and categorized Annie Dillard's work, none has established the author's critical approach to literary art by compiling and developing her disparate assertions on the topic. This evaluation of Dillard's approach by first establishing it from various sources is unprecedented but crucial to understanding the intent of the author's creative works.

Many of Dillard's clear and direct statements regarding her approach to literary art are found in her early writings on writing. Particularly, Dillard's *Living by Fiction* explains the value the author places on literary art to communicate meaningful ideas in contemporary society. While Dillard does not frame her work of literary criticism as a personal exposition, and though she eventually claims to reject the book (Cantwell), it is still not inappropriate to establish the foundations of her personal approach from this early work of applied criticism. Also, Dillard followed this early work with *The Writing Life*, a reflection on the author's own work. Taken together, these two texts form the bulk of Dillard's direct and positive statements on her critical approach to literary art. Having established her basic approach by these books, the author ceased writing on the topic, and

it is because Dillard applied her theory that she was forced to reject her theoretical statements. The relationship between her creative works and literary theories makes Dillard's theoretical statements more, not less, interesting to her understanding of the author's literary vision. Also, because of the value the author places on literature, she continually encourages and advises young writers, typically in the form of articles in writing textbooks, and these articles supplement her theory. So Annie Dillard's critical approach to literary art remains central to the author's own work, even if not explicitly or positively emphasized in her creative writings. While it may or may not be helpful when assessing other writers' works, Dillard's literary theory is crucial for understanding her own. As a writer, Dillard perceives that her own approach to literature must be sufficiently distinctive and thoughtfully developed. Her creative works demonstrate the success or failure of her approach.

Dillard's approach to literary art, as expressed by the vision in her writings, is based on appreciation of the literary image and is indistinguishable from the religious sense of incarnation. Conceiving literary art as an incarnation is an idea born of Dillard's long and enduring appreciation for the image in combination with her explorative religious sensibilities. When she was young, the future author flirted with the idea of being a graphic artist; she also has long admired the images of the French symbolist and early Modernist poets; additionally, Dillard's M.A. thesis focused on an image—that of Walden Pond in Thoreau's *Walden*; and her Christian religious background emphasizes the preeminence of the Word made flesh—God become human in the person of Christ—as one of the most crucial aspect of the religious tradition. Combined, these influences shape Dillard's elevation of the image in literature. Dillard's images surpass the common understanding of symbols to become themselves incarnations. Whereas a symbol may be overwhelmed by that which it symbolizes, a type of Gnostic pitfall, and may itself be arbitrary and contextual, an incarnation has specific meaning, intrinsic value, and yet remains suggestive of more than itself.

Explaining "How I Wrote the Moth Essay—And Why," Dillard describes her incarnational approach to the image of the moth. As the author constructs a narrative she says she always starts with a "batch of things. Not feelings, not opinions, not sentiments, not judgments, not arguments, but specific objects and events." These specific objects

and events form the basis of Dillard's narrative because, the author says, "If I take pains to be precise about things, feelings will take care of themselves." As Dillard evaluates the essay's development, she realizes that the "actual, historical moth," which she describes as the sizzling second wick of a burning candle, began to assume a whole range of suggestive symbolic meanings while she struggled to maintain the real creature as "physically present." If the author could ensure that the image of the moth would be an incarnation, that which remains intrinsically meaningful as well as suggestive, rather than simply a symbol that could "vanish," as she says "into an idea," Dillard knew that the work would retain its integrity and power, that the reader "wouldn't feel he'd been had."

Elsewhere, Dillard admits to succumbing to symbolization by allowing an idea to overcome an image and letting her tone become "preachy and pious." As in the earlier example, Dillard's analysis piece entitled "Writing 'God in the Doorway' " evaluates her creative writing in a short article for a writing textbook. At the end of her essay "God in the Doorway" the author laments that her portrayal of Santa Claus, who is her neighbor Mrs. White and representative of God, failed to remain meaningful as an image. The author allowed a religious message to overcome the image by making plain and obvious comparisons between Mrs. White-Santa Claus in the doorway with the incarnation of Christ—both "stand between two worlds." Dillard says she thought the holiday season might have justified, as she calls it, "intellectual Christianity" and so the reader would forgive the tone of the essay. But, Dillard says, "Ten years later, I don't really think it's forgivable" (281-82). Ironically, writing directly about incarnation, Dillard fails to make an incarnation, a literary image not overwhelmed by, but embodying, an idea. The author herself explains the success or failure of her images as incarnations, and one begins to sense her approach to literary art centers on the ability to communicate images to the reader that are more than symbols and not less than incarnations. It should be noted that in both articles cited, the crux of the author's evaluation of the essays is whether her images embody meaningful ideas or not.

Dillard develops her incarnational approach to literary art even more fully in her book, *Living by Fiction*. Because the author's approach is fundamentally incarnational, it requires that literature be privileged above criticism. Literature is art based on images and images are incarnational: they embody ideas (*LBF* 156). Critical theory is provisional,

necessary, but not sufficient for the purpose of the author. Yet this is not to make Dillard's theoretical approach an "anti-theory." If Dillard privileges images, it is because images embody ideas, not because they deny or negate ideas. The author is not pitting the one against the other: both are necessary to meaningful art. "An image," Dillard says, "sticks in the imagination. And if they are good symbolic images, they carry ideas with them; they embody and vivify ideas" ("Writing 'God in the Doorway'" 281). Dillard's "good images" are always incarnational images because she demands that images not lose physical reality while carrying, embodying, and vivifying ideas.

In Dillard's critical work, *Living by Fiction*, she makes large claims for the literary arts. Foundational to the author's approach is, in her own words, "a religious, even creationist, reading of the universe." Dillard's reading of the universe judges the world as meaningful and, therefore, judges art as meaningful. This "religious" or "creationist reading" differs, Dillard says, from pantheism. Just because an artifact, an art object, is meaningful and, in some sense, an incarnation of the author does not imply that there need not be, or never was, an author or original. In fact, nearly the opposite is closer to Dillard's views. "Our interpreting the universe as an artifact absolutely requires that we posit an author for it, or a celestial filmmaker, dramatist, painter, sculptor, composer, architect, or choreographer" (*LBF* 144). Viewing the world as an artifact and literature as an artifact interpreting the world requires, in each case, there is an original author or artist creating meaningful work.

From these views, from this source, flows Dillard's entire theory of literary art, breaking into streams, or pooling up, or cascading down a cliff face in its creative applications. From this source, Dillard asserts the value of the literary artist and literary art. Writers, she says, are "thoughtful interpreters of the world. But instead of producing interpretations—instead of doing research or criticism—they doodle on the walls of the cave. They make art objects which must themselves be interpreted. How convolute, how endlessly interesting is this complexity!" (*LBF* 13). The value of these art objects is that they are incarnations, necessarily complex and, therefore, able to express the complexity of life by engaging author and reader in interpretation and reincarnation. The literary arts, Dillard says, are in a "better position to interpret the world in all its breadth than are the other arts" (147) precisely because literature lends itself, in Dillard's view, toward being

incarnational, because it can "deal with all the world's objects and ideas together, with the breadth of human experience in time and space; [narrative] can deal with things the limited disciplines of thought either ignore completely or destroy by methodological caution, our most pressing concerns: personality, family, death, love, time, spirit, goodness, evil, destiny, beauty, will" (23).

Further, Dillard's incarnational approach to literary art, besides being necessarily complex, conceives of itself as having an "insubstantial center" that is "mental or spiritual" (106) and can only be penetrated by fine writing, a style of "elaborated imagery and powerful rhythm [. . .] complexity and grandeur." Dillard's evaluation of fine writing is descriptive of her own style and helps elucidate her theory. Fine writing, says the author,

> Can penetrate precisely because, and only because, it lays no claims to precision. It is an energy. It sacrifices perfect control to the ambition to mean. It can penetrate very deep, piling object upon object to build a tower from which to breach the sky;[8] it can enter with courage or bravura those fearsome realms where the end products of art meet the end products of thought, and where perfect clarity is not possible. Fine writing is not a mirror, not a window, not a document, not a surgical tool. It is an artifact and an achievement; it is at once an exploratory craft and the planet attained; it is a testimony to the possibility of the beauty and penetration of written language. (105-06)

The author's own fine writing corresponds to her incarnational approach to literary art, the necessarily complex "whole truth," and this creates a type of paradox for the writer. The artist is creating an artifact but cannot, must not, allow the process of creation to be exposed. Of the writer interested in interpretation, Dillard says his role is "like that of scout whose job it is to blaze a new trail, all traces of which he must carefully obliterate" (156). In *The Writing Life*, Dillard advises writers: "Process is nothing; erase your tracks. The path is not the work" (549).

Therefore, returning to Dillard's bold statements on her approach to literary art, the reader finds them nearly erased and the author's approach all but vanished. Because of the centrality of incarnational ideas to Dillard's imagery, the author must certainly, to remain true to herself, "carefully obliterate" her trail. And one believes that Dillard has, by her negativity and denunciations, tried. Erasing her tracks, Dillard leaves the reader to judge the literature on its own merits. Dillard's statements, however humble or

apologetic, on her intentions for her works indicate that while she does not want readers to make hasty judgments on her works, she also does not want them to completely miss her meaning. If her positive assertions regarding literary art do not seem to balance her negativity and apologies, this is because Dillard's theory is not intended to stand naked and alone. Dillard's creative works themselves are sufficient examples of the author's incarnational approach to literature, and her images are more true to her theory than any raw explanation of her ideas. Dillard claims to be a writer, not a critic, not a scholar, and as such she creates literary art. Dillard is aiming at a type of direct, unmediated insight—an ecstatic experience rather than discourse. So the author keeps erasing the tracks of her theory, though every step forward leaves another footprint to erase behind, and it seems she would like to leave enough of a trail so that other writers can appreciate, and even follow, her example. Nevertheless, if Dillard has her way, she will be remembered for her images rather than her ideas. People will recall her frog or moth or bird-headed dwarf and maybe, in reflection, realize they have somehow begun to incarnate her ideas in their own life and work, hardly recalling either "her" or the "ideas" but living and reliving them anyway.

In the quote introducing this chapter, Dillard expresses her own dissatisfaction with critical assessment. But, by the development of her creative writings, Dillard remedies this dissatisfaction by making the "judgment among interpretations and methods" a provisional aspect of, an initial effort towards understanding, literary art: there is something else. Her goal is not criticism, and her highest praise does not go to critics; Annie Dillard's desire is to create literary art, and she claims be a writer. Annie Dillard's approach to literary art unites universal and particular in an incarnation, a literary image that embodies and recreates ideas. To borrow a phrase from the epigraph, it is only "common sense" to assume Dillard's approach to literature informs her own creative works and examine them accordingly.

CHAPTER THREE
Incarnational Development in Dillard's First-Person Prose Narratives

Throughout the discussion thus far, I have deliberately withheld specific definitions of "incarnation," though Annie Dillard's theological basis for literary creation is inventive and invites explanation. To further mitigate the risks of foreclosing discussion of Dillard's literary images, the abeyance will continue a while longer. Christian theologian James G. D. Dunn employs a similar methodological approach when discussing New Testament origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation, saying,

> There is considerable risk that any such definition would pre-set the terms and categories of the investigation and prevent the NT authors speaking to us in their own terms. He who defines too closely what he is looking for [. . .] in most cases will find it soon enough, but usually in his wake will be left elements which were ignored because they were not quite what he was looking for, and material and meaning will often have been squeezed out of shape in order to fit the categories prescribed at the outset. (9)

Recognizing Dillard's incarnational approach to literature, this chapter gathers and displays Dillard's most vivid and meaningful creative images in select texts to analyze and evaluate them as incarnations. The question here is not *whether* Dillard embraces an incarnational approach to literature, but *how* she portrays and develops this approach by her creative images and *what* these indicate about her incarnational vision.

Dillard's literary images dynamically embody her religious vision, and she asserts in a 1999 interview that relentless examination of existential questions clarifies her spiritual beliefs:

> [My spiritual beliefs] get much clearer—especially in this last book, *For the Time Being*. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, I didn't provide any theological answers. I raised a bunch of questions and then provided the kind of answers that Job provides: That God is unfathomable but definitely there—and there's nothing we can do about it but see, and by our seeing, partake of creation.
>
> In *Holy the Firm* (HarperCollins, 1999), the same question is raised in three parts: paganism, rationalism, and revelation. These correspond to creation, fall, and redemption. In that book, redemption comes in terms of the mystical experience. It concludes that the purpose of the mystical experience is to let the person who prays know precisely the kind of power he's addressing. (Abood 30-31)

In this quote, Dillard tidily cites the development of her spiritual beliefs in three of her narrative texts, and this same development ought to be evident in the literary images of these three. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Holy the Firm,* and *For the Time Being* invite comparative study because each is a first-person prose narrative, together they span Dillard's literary career, and they are among the most acclaimed titles of the Dillardian corpus. Also, the three texts strikingly portray existential reality and, as will become evident, employ incarnational images to reconcile central narrative conflicts.

In these texts, the author clues readers to important incarnational images by repetition, reiteration, layering, and associative meaning. These techniques allow images to become increasingly suggestive while accruing significance. These perceived images embody the dual natures of the material and the spiritual without confusion or compromise, and the physical body becomes both subject and object. Though simply one way into a discussion of the complexity of Dillard's texts, evaluating her images is particularly important for this argument. Besides being the crux and core of Dillard's literary strength, her incarnational images are theological and philosophical statements. Embodied ideas provide Dillard with continual material for reflection on the nature and experience of life.

Nature of Incarnation in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

The most significant incarnational images in Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* include the narrator, Tinker Creek itself, and about thirteen images from nature—mostly animals—which she describes individually and then lists repeatedly throughout the text. The reason for the emphasis on "nature" as an incarnation in *Tinker Creek* becomes evident by understanding the goal of the narrator's "pilgrimage." The title itself suggests that the implied pilgrimage has a goal that is not spatially located: the pilgrim is not *going to* but *at* Tinker Creek. Instead, there is a spiritual and psychological "pilgrimage" that maps the present by "seeing" it (11). Rather than coming or going, the pilgrim must be existentially present and aware. The development of the pilgrim's consciousness is the pilgrimage at Tinker Creek, and this development demands a particular way of seeing that unites the metaphysical and the phenomenological.

"Catch it if you can. The present is an invisible electron; its lightning path traced faintly on a blackened screen is fleet, and fleeing, and gone," says the narrator, reflecting on her visionary experience of being "more alive than all the world" while watching a mountain sunset flame and cool as she petted a puppy (78). In her evaluation of the experience, she lists three progressive stages of consciousness: consciousness, or experiencing the present purely through the senses that is possible even for "infants and puppies"; self-consciousness, or having awareness of conscious experience that "hinders the experience of the present" and is the "curse of the city and all that sophistication implies"; and innocence, or experiencing the "spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration" (81-82). The narrator must be innocent in her devotion to see the present. To lose one's innocence, or never fully attain it, is to "take leave of the senses" because "objects," particular existential phenomena, are spiritual incarnations: spirituality is not realized apart from but in the sensory world (90). In the culminating assessment of her visionary experience, the narrator realizes that her visionary experiences open a door not only "from eternity" but also "on time: what else?" (80). Devotion to objects affords visionary insight into the unity, or at least complementarity, of time and eternity, and the Incarnation of Christ is comparative validation of her insight:

> 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. Why, we might as well ask, not a plane tree, instead of a bo? I never saw a tree that was no tree in particular; I never met a man, not the greatest theologian, who filled infinity, or even whose hand, say, was undifferentiated, fingerless, like a griddlecake, and not lobed and split just so with the incursions of time. (80)

Thus, the pilgrim at Tinker Creek explains her devotion to existential creatures throughout the text. These are the present and the real, presaged by Christ himself. Further, these objects of devotion are explained as expressions of the Jewish Kabalistic idea that divine sparks "hide" themselves in creation; therefore, spirituality is found in matter for those seeking it. "Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow; you catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall" (81). In this emptying and

hollowing, the narrator is hallowed and the pilgrim herself becomes an incarnation seeking incarnational objects.

Throughout the text, the narrator assumes active and passive roles while "seeing" the present, and the reconciliation of these roles parallels incarnational synthesis. She need not be active or passive, physical or metaphysical; she can be both simultaneously. She describes herself as an explorer or stalker and "instrument of the hunt itself" (12). She is both the one "choiring" praise and the instrument, bell or pipe, being used for worship (12-13, 271). She is see-r and seen, unable to escape the responsive gaze of her natural prey (15, 198). She is the offending mariner, the lone sailor (132), fugitive, vagabond, and sojourner (267), and she is the offended innocent, railing against God (238-39). She is both sacrifice and worshiper (242), anchorite and pilgrim (2). And through everything, she continues to seek the vision that "comes and goes, mostly goes, but [she] lives for it" (34). The vision she seeks is the vision of eternity opening up on, and within, time by illuminating particular objects. Having circumscribed herself as an incarnation and exemplified the conscious unity provided by embodiment, the narrator focuses on the objects of her devotion throughout the text.

Tinker Creek is the narrator's favored sight and most prominent object for her reflections. Tinker Creek is both a place and a thing, a microcosm exhibiting universal truths and macrocosm completely embodying and sustaining a world. The creek is where she begins looking and, then, looking around. In the narrator's devotion to objects, she exults:

> My God, I look at the creek. It is the answer to Merton's prayer, "Give us time!" It never stops. If I seek the senses and skill of children, the information of a thousand books, the innocence of puppies, even the insights of my own city past, I do so only, solely, and entirely that I might look well at the creek. You don't run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled. You'll have fish left over. The creek is the one great giver. It is, by definition, Christmas, the incarnation. This old rock planet gets the present on its birthday every day. (102)

This exclamation about the creek, presented in Scriptural idiom, emphasizes the creek as an embodiment of the material and spiritual. The divine address "My God" is categorized by Elizabeth Tan as Dillard's use of colloquial "religious" terminology (46),

but it should certainly not be read as profanity. While being colloquial, the narrator is using God's name in earnest rather than in vain. The creek, an object she can "look at," is the divine answer to Merton's metaphysical petition. Tinker Creek, by its ceaseless movement, is "time," "the present" (punned, "a gift"). Looking "well" at the creek, or the present, is the narrator's ultimate reward for combining all her sense, skill, knowledge, innocence, and savvy insight, and this looking is espoused in language reminiscent of the Apostle Paul's injunction to love.[9] But the narrator admits effort does not guarantee success. As a gift, the present must be received, not taken, and the creek is divine, "the one great giver." The narrator extends her pun on the meaning of "present" by anthropomorphically giving "this old rock planet" a birthday "present" everyday: the creek never stops running. Her second-person advice, alluding to Christ's beatitudes and miracles, prepares readers for the conclusion that the creek is "Christmas, the incarnation" because the creek not only may contain fish, it is fish, just as the name of Christ is symbolically associated with fish.[10] The creek is time, the present, and life. "Living is moving," says the narrator. "Time is a live creek bearing changing lights" (82). As an incarnation, the creek reconciles and embodies the physical and spiritual worlds, becoming an object for the narrator's reflection. She looks on Tinker Creek, it responds, and she responds. This dialogic interaction is itself a further reconciliation of the human and material world, and the incarnational nature of the creek becomes an exemplary force in the narrative.

The narrator continually elaborates her description of Tinker Creek. The first instance of introduction to the creek is in her description of her home as an anchor-hold "clamped to the side of Tinker Creek" much like an anchorite's hermitage is "clamped to the side of a church like a barnacle to a rock" (2). By implication, the creek is a church and a rock. The contradiction that the creek is a rock is resolved by the ideas associated with these natural elements: the Church as an entity, likewise, embodies dual aspects as a divinely-inspired human community, and its divine aspect suggests rock-like stability while its human aspect suggests creek-like temporal fluctuation and development.[11] That the narrator chooses the creek as a parallel to the Church emphasizes the dynamism of the Church in a way that Christ's declaration to Peter, that the Church will be founded on the Rock, does not.[12] Because the creek is an incarnation as the Church is the "Body of

Christ,"[13] the narrator is comforted and challenged. Physically, Tinker Creek curves, "surrounding" the narrator's home on three sides by making a "sharp loop" and, together with her home, makes a complete circle (4). In William Scheick's analysis of Dillard's writing, curving or arcing is consistently shown to indicate the eternal and is frequently a construction of two partial arcs (62). Tinker Creek is the narrator's starting point, her home base, and hub, and in the text she even compares it to the white silken mass that a spider continually revisits after each outward foray (51).

Yet the creek is not safe or predictable, but live and changing. It destroys as well as creates, and this also ensures its correspondence to life. While, on the one hand, she views the continual movement and action of the creek as indicative of an unflagging grace (it is a closed book that "continues to whisper to itself its own inexhaustible tale" 68), on the other hand, the same unceasing movement and action harbors vicious predatorial creatures and, when flooded, wipes out all life in its path (68, 149). The sinister aspect of Tinker Creek is Shadow Creek, and the pilgrim recognizes in the dark, night-running of the water that its "dumb dead drop over rocks was a hideous parody of real natural life, warm and willful. It was senseless and horrifying; I turned away. The damned thing was flowing because it was *pushed*" (69). But like a partial arc of a completed circle, Shadow Creek is a counterpart to Tinker Creek, and "shadow itself may resolve into beauty" (69). Together, the "light" and "dark" aspects of the creek make it a place of union and reconciliation: the creek is not "good" or "evil"; it is a living mystery, an incarnation, always fresh, always surprising. Even in flood, the creek is appreciated by the narrator, and, looking on the swollen creek, she reports: "I expect to see anything at all. In this one way, the creek is more like itself when it floods than at any other time: mediating, bringing things down" (152). Flux and beauty, the living mystery of life, are embodied for the narrator by Tinker Creek. Either "all things live by a generous power and dance to a mighty tune" or "all things are scattered and hurled, that our every arabesque and grand jeté is a frantic variation on our one free fall" (68). These readings of the phenomenal world come to be seen not as alternatives, but complements, a right and left hand of embodied life. One reading is not more correct than the other; both may be accurate; and neither demands a value judgment. The narrator is not saying what ought to be, but what she perceives is. Tinker Creek is the place grounding her quest for vision

and a significant incarnational image. By watching the creek, the narrator begins to see natural phenomena in and around the creek as incarnations, which furthers her narrative quest to "see" the present.

Throughout the narrative, several images from nature—mostly animals—develop incarnational status, and the narrator provides lists of images that are a "ticking-off" of the meaningful experiences she has had with these creatures. Some of these experiences are more complex than others, and while she often observes and discerns the meaning of nature, sometimes nature responds and challenges the narrator's own identity. The latter experiences are visionary while the former are simply instructive. Both exemplify incarnational images in the text. The first images to be presented here will be those that the narrator simply interprets, and these will be followed by those that reinterpret the narrator herself.

Among images that the narrator interprets are those images of creatures she muses may have died or wonders where they now live (98-99). Remembering what these creatures meant to her in the past, she wonders where they are now, and introducing questions of time and change increases the poignancy and suggestiveness of these creatures. Her tomcat, who memorably opens and closes the narrative, is now dead, the giant waterbug who "sucked" the frog may be dead, and the mockingbird is quite possibly dead also (98). The irony in naming these as dead is that, in her initial introductions to these creatures, each served to "awaken" the consciousness of the narrator. An embodiment of mystery, her tomcat would wake her from sleep by jumping through the bedroom window onto her chest. Smelling of blood and urine, he would knead her chest and stamp her in bloodied "rose" paw prints. "We wake," she comments, "if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence [. . .]" (2).

An embodiment of horror, the waterbug was initially perceived as simply an encounter with a frog. While "scaring" frogs into the water, the narrator found a particular frog who refused to play her game. While she watches, the frog "slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. [. . .] it was a monstrous and terrifying thing" (5-6). The narrator then sees the shadow of a waterbug, a predatorial insect, skirting away and realizes the frog had been "sucked."

This leads to her further realization that all life is rough and "chancy," and if God has not simply abandoned creation, God has, at least, spread so thin as to be hidden. This world is a "brute game" and an "inrush of power and light" (7).

An embodiment of grace contrasting the waterbug, the mockingbird is also an awakening encounter. By chance, the narrator rounds a corner to glimpse the heart-stopping free-fall of a mockingbird: he simply leans off fourth-story guttering, flattens his wings and slick-dives towards earth. At the last moment, his wings spread and he lightly touches down. This performance is described by the narrator as one of "beauty and grace," "careless and spontaneous" (8). That she sees it amazes her, and she vows always to look for "wholly gratuitous" graces: "The least we can do is try to be there" (8). Also, hearing the song of the mockingbird, the narrator describes this as a language to which humans have no key; unbeckoned and often unheard, it continues and changes. "The mockingbird's invention," she says, "is limitless; he strews newness about as casually as a god. He is tireless, too [. . .]" (105). The mockingbird's dive and song are both experiences of grace for the narrator and suggest the divinity of the creature.

Following these, the narrator lists significant creatures who may still be living. The poignancy in emphasizing these as alive is that she seems almost to wish them the peace of death, and her memories of them are colored by terrible, ceaseless struggle. Together these creatures embody struggle, though this is not unappreciated or disdained by the pilgrim. The narrator's encounter with sharks is described as a sight of "power and beauty, grace tangled in a rapture with violence" (8). While visiting the coast of Florida, she had once seen "a hundred big sharks," twisting in a "translucent wave, shot with lights," writhing in a "feeding frenzy." The sharks must eat something to survive, and the tidal rhythm of fast and feast advances towards the narrator.

Similarly, the mantis egg cases, which she prizes because the hatched mantis will naturally rid gardens of "gruesome numbers of fellow insects all nice and organically," also intimate their future keen and self-destructive attempts to survive: if the young hatch in close, captive proximity they will devour one another to the last pair, and even these may die wounded (55). Witnessing such carnage as a child, the narrator had wished she could "swallow the corpses, shutting [her] eyes and washing them down like jagged pills, so all that life won't be lost" (56). Survival for a mantis never becomes easier, and the

narrator tells how adult mantises eat not only other insects but also their own mates (57-58).

The final creature listed in the narrator's group of struggling survivors is a particular snake. In fact, this is not a snake the author has seen, but she imagines him from a snakeskin she has found (72). The snakeskin is an indication of rebirth to the narrator, the rush of "freedom and beauty," and because of its configuration, the skin also challenges the narrator to consider it as "circumstantial evidence" for the reality of perpetual continuity or closed circularity: it is a loop without beginning or end (73). The narrator equates this continuously looped snakeskin with her experience of both time and spirit because these do not seem to have an edge to grasp either. These, like the snakeskin, are real, though unfathomable, and she imagines the snake who shed its skin is readying itself to repeat the struggle and release, creating more vexing evidence for the struggle of existence.

Complementing and contrasting the narrator's interpretation of creatures is the reflective interpretation nature sometimes offers the narrator. Sandra Humble Johnson argues in her book on Dillard, *The Space Between*, that frequently these visionary experiences seem beyond the bounds of sensory reality, transcending or rupturing time to become epiphanies. This observation on the interaction of time and experience is astute, but these experiences are always tied to sensory experience and are physically grounded. In Dillard's visionary experiences, where her narrator sees and is seen, the physical and spiritual realms fuse, but neither obscures or eclipses the other. As much as the experiences are beyond time, they are also within time and indissolubly part of time, bound to the present and its temporal creatures who live and die.

The narrator's image of a particular Polyphemus moth hatching in her childhood classroom embodies struggle and embeds the notion that unintentional human cruelty continuously afflicts creation. The moth from the narrator's childhood developed crushed and crumpled wings because he could not stretch them to air-dry in the young class's "ubiquitous Mason jar," and the narrator remembers the "thing's struggle to be a moth or die trying" (60). His "try" is rewarded by release, but she recalls that as a cripple he "heaved himself down the asphalt driveway by infinite degrees, unwavering." As an image, the moth remains perpetually present to the narrator. "The Polyphemus moth is

still crawling down the driveway, crawling down the driveway hunched, crawling down the driveway on six furred feet, forever" (61). Likewise, the narrator realizes humans, like the Moth, are trapped together in this "Mason jar" world, eating, being eaten, damaged and dying, damaged and living, struggling to live (239).

The narrator's attention to "Ellery Channing," her goldfish in the bowl, further validates her vision quest and challenges perceptions of her own life. Years prior to her owning this 25-cent fish, the narrator had viewed in a dissecting microscope "red blood cells whip, one by one, through the capillaries in a goldfish's transparent tail" (124). The profound presence, order, and movement of these tiny life-giving cell reminds the narrator of the ceaseless flow and motion of the creek itself, as well as the pulsating life in her own body, and now that of her goldfish Ellery. "I've never forgotten the sight of those cells," she says. "I think of it when I see the fish in his bowl; I think of it lying in bed at night, imagining that if I concentrate enough I might be able to feel in my fingers' capillaries the small knockings and flow of those circular dots, like a string of beads drawn through my hand" (125). She is amazed that she can "buy" and "own" the life of Ellery; she is amazed that his bowl also contains an elodea plant "streaming of chloroplasts" that are themselves filled with elemental atoms. The "small world" of the goldfish bowl is also a "very large one," and the narrator confesses: "I am sitting here looking at a goldfish bowl and busting my brain [. . .] a consciousness snaps back and forth. What we know, at least for starters, is: here we—so incontrovertibly—are. This is our life, these are our lighted seasons, and then we die" (127-28).

In a similar revelation, having spent time mastering the art of stalking the elusive muskrat, the narrator relates that one evening the "light" came suddenly on and she had her "consciousness" returned all at once "bearing an inverted muskrat." She was so astounded by this sighting, the closeness of the creature, and its unperturbed back float in the creek, that ever after she looked for other muskrats, all the while sulking, "It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and you've had your once" (191). Amazingly, though, she has another sighting or, rather, is sighted by a muskrat and relays she feels such a "rush of pure energy" that she "will not need to breathe for days" (192). Her appetite once, twice, satisfied is forever whetted, and she continually seeks new visions of the creature. These

stalkings, further, are her attempt to locate and fix the divine. "Surely," she quotes, "the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not" (205).[14]

The intricacy of creation and the difficulty of the narrator's personal apprehension of this truth are further embodied by her experience of seeing the tree with the lights in it. Being one of the early images introduced by the narrator, the tree with the lights in it becomes emblematic of visionary experience: it is meaningfully referenced throughout as *the* tree with *the* lights in it. The tree with the lights in it is first seen by a young girl, newly sighted, who had recently undergone cataract surgery. In a garden, she stands amazed before a tree, trying to get her "new" eyes around its shape, size, and color, and she must physically "take hold of the tree" to name it "the tree with the lights in it" (28). The narrator herself tries to imagine seeing light, color, and depth again, for the first time. She is unable to sustain such strangeness and vision but is gifted by her own experience of "the tree with the lights in it." It is an experience reminiscent in language and event to viewing the transfiguration of Christ, as recorded in the three synoptic Gospels.[15] Of her own experience, the narrator writes:

> I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. (33)

Especially, this experience of the tree with the lights in it reveals to the narrator that she has always, unknowingly, been an instrument of worship, "a bell," but only now realizes it because she has been "lifted up and struck" by the visionary experience (34). As the cedar is transfigured, the narrator is lifted up and rung, and both are revealed as filled and filling with glory and praise, recognizing and incarnating holiness. She extends this hallowing to the entire created world and all humanity by associating herself and her "ringing" praise with that of others: they are all like "maple keys" falling, at least they "can twirl" (267-68). Both twirling like a maple key and ringing like a bell signify praise actively performed, passively initiated. Wind moves the bell. Wind blows the twirling maple key. Something lights the tree, and she sees it. Even later in the text, when the narrator proposes and admits that her vision of the cedar tree "lighted" is probably the

natural occurrence of cedar apples swelling the tree, she is not discomfited. Knowledge does not vanquish mystery, she says, and neither does mystery vanquish knowledge. Her concluding assessment is to agree with Simone Weil: "Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love" (241-42).

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard offers image after image, layering and juxtaposing these to emphasize the astounding detail of natural creation. If, as the author says, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* only provides "the kind of answers that Job provides: That God is unfathomable but definitely there—and there's nothing we can do about it but see, and by our seeing, partake of creation" (Abood 30), this is fair justification for her elevation of nature in the narrative. But as these myriad, existential phenomena become objects of the narrator's devotion and "scandals of particularity," or incarnations like Christ, God is not "there" but "here" and "now." Dillard portrays a natural world that is simultaneously a spiritual world, and nature is self-referential much as God reveals to Moses that the divine name is self-referential: "I am who I am."[16] The creatures in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are not similes for the divine, nor are they metaphors or symbols. These images embody ideas, but they are never merely ideas: they remain real, valuable beings signifying and significant without losing their intrinsic worth or existential meaning as creatures. Likewise, ideas of grace, beauty, violence, and power are inseparable from their embodied forms. Ideas may be repeated and represented but never disembodied to be appreciated and meaningful. Nature is embodied as a spiritual incarnation in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.*

Art of Incarnation in *Holy the Firm*

Dillard continues developing her incarnational approach in *Holy the Firm* by applying her incarnational ideas about the natural world to human culture itself. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard's narrator, inspired by the reality of her neighbor girl's painful burns from an airplane crash, tests the relationship of creation to creator. Because of the reality of suffering, the narrator cannot assent to ideas that the relationship of the creator to creation is one of immanence or emanance. If there is another option, the narrator, viewing herself as an artist, must creatively discover or identify it, and, particularly,

because she evaluates her role as an artist to be incarnational or Christ-like, paralleling the creator, this offers her special insight into the dilemma and its resolution.

Again in this text, Dillard's layering of images adds depth to the discussion, emphasizing the development of her incarnational ideas and how these inspire a workable synthesis of opposites. In *Holy the Firm*, the images add depth not so much by their juxtapositioning as by their associative similarities. Once an image is established as an embodiment of a certain idea, when another image is said to correspond to it, both are recognized as embodying the same idea, and images begin joining together to create a hierarchy, pyramid, or stairway to heaven. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the narrator could never declare the tomcat to be a waterbug, or the mockingbird to be a shark, though these may have embodied similar ideas, but in *Holy the Firm*, the flaming moth can be a nun, which can be a cat, the burned girl Julie Norwich, the narrator, a Christ-figure, and a seraph. The possibility for identificational relationships between images in *Holy the Firm* is a primary difference between this work and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The natural world of creation remains significant in *Holy the Firm*, but, as in medieval hierarchies of being, the natural world is only one level of being. In the text, images appropriately belonging to one level can directly correspond to images belonging to another level, both embodying the same idea or divine nature. Dillard, also, makes no rigid progression up or down levels of being as she creates identifications. This makes for an increasingly complex, associative array of incarnational images in *Holy the Firm*, and these images are recognizable by their linkages to one another.

The narrator's cat, Small, is described as the one companion in her Puget Sound home. Small exists as a spiritual incarnation and is associated with the other characters in the narrative by virtue of her physical description, physical pursuit of spirituality, and clear portrayal as a nun and reluctantly crucified figure. Small is a "gold" cat and seems on intimate terms with the narrator, being the silent dialog partner subjected to musings and jokes. "In the morning," the narrator says, "I joke to [Small's] blank face, Do you remember last night? Do you remember? I throw her out before breakfast, so I can eat" (13). That Small is gold-toned, her face blank, her tail burned, her very name "Small" and that she is female foreshadows her linkage with other "gold," yellow, or burning female characters whose faces or heads have been disfigured or obliterated, and who, like Small

are delicate and fragile (19). Pyrotechnic imagery is an associative link between characters, and the cat's experiences with fire, her coloring and personality establish her direct relationship with other characters and events. Dillard herself admits such efforts by saying she "fiddled" with some of her facts to make correspondence. She writes: "I foully slandered my black cat, Small, by saying she was 'gold'—to match the book's moth and little blond burnt girl. I actually had a cat at that time, named Kindling. I figured no one would believe it. It was too much" ("How I Wrote the Moth Essay—and Why").

Further, Small the cat is linked to main ideas of the narrative because she physically stalks the divine. Having first dragged into the house a dead wren, Small next drags in a "god, scorched" (27). When the narrator glances up from her coffee and sees this, she says: "I cannot breathe. I run at the cat to scare her; she drops him, casting at me an evil look, and runs from the porch" (27). Small's "god" is said to have a skull the "size of a hazelnut" which is an allusion to Julian of Norwich's revelation that "everything created" is represented by a hazelnut, its diminutive precariousness meant to remind that "everything beneath God is not sufficient for us" (Gaskins 156) . Small, like Julian, succeeds in locating and, fleetingly, capturing the divine. As such Small is a sign and inspiration, though she retains her devious personality throughout the narrator's descriptions: for all her comparative grandeur, Small never ceases being a physical animal. The narrator's admiration of her pet is characterized not only by camaraderie, but also humor and disillusionment because this conversation partner is not an equal or comfort. "Here comes Small, old sparrow-mouth, wanting my lap. Done. Do you have any earthly idea how young I am? Where's your dress, kitty? I suppose I'll outlive this wretched cat. Get another. Leave it my silver spoons, like old ladies you hear about. I prefer dogs" (44-45).

In the last statement, the narrator's reference to the cat's "dress" recalls an incident in which Small is most directly associated with Christ and clearly an incarnational image. The incident was the narrator's initial meeting with Julie Norwich at a cider-making party. Young Julie dressed and undressed Small all day, "sticking it into a black dress, a black dress long and full as a nun's" (40). The narrator is interested in this small, authentic garb, which she presumes to be doll's clothes, and identifying with Julie, says: "Julie scooped up the cat and rammed her into the cloth. I know how she felt,

exasperated, breaking her heart on a finger curl's width of skinny cat arm. I knew the many feelings she had sticking those furry arms through the sleeves. Small is not large: her limbs feel like bird bones strung in a sock" (40). At one point in the drama, Small bolts from Julie's arms, but Julie dashes after the cat, seizes it, hits its face, and drags it back to the tree, "carrying it caught fast by either forepaw, so its body hung straight from its arms" (41). Carrying the cat this way, Julie effectively "crucifies" Small who is dressed in a habit, struggling away from "the tree" (41). Small is an introduction to the associative incarnational imagery in the text.

In *Holy the Firm*, the image of a moth becomes a central incarnational image sustaining the narrative discussion, and the moth is more unambiguously holy than Small the cat. Particularly, "empty" bodied moths suggest purity and kenotic receptivity to the divine. Readers' initial introduction to moths is the narrator's description of moth "corpses" on her bathroom floor. She says these are "empty moths, stagger[ing] against each other, headless, in a confusion of arcing strips of chitin like peeling varnish, like a jumble of buttresses for cathedral domes, like nothing resembling moths, so that I should hesitate to call them moths, except that I have had some experience with the figure Moth reduced to a nub" (14). Mentioning the "figure Moth," the narrator immediately launches into her memory of the significant, capitalized Moth, which is so spectacular and revelatory that the narrator, eventually, identifies herself as a moth (65).

Her memorable encounter is as follows: while camping in the wilderness to reclaim her artistic inspiration, the narrator reads every day and night by candlelight with "pale moths massed round [her] head in the clearing, where [her] light made a ring" (15). In the hallowed aureole, many moths singe their wings and fall, sticking "triangles of shiny dust here and there on the aluminum" of the narrator's utensils and supplies (15). One particular moth, the "figure Moth," catches in the candle wax, and the narrator observes, awed:

> I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one, with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the fire, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of a pine. At once the light contracted again and the moth's wings vanished in a fine, foul smoke. At

> the same time her six legs clawed, curled, blackened, and ceased, disappearing utterly. And her head jerked in spasms, making a splattering noise; her antennae crisped and burned away and her heaving mouth parts crackled like pistol fire. When it was all over, her head was, so far as I could determine, gone, gone the long way of her wings and legs. Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her eggs, had she done her work? All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax—a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle's round pool.
>
> And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. (16-17)

The narrator's amazement at this unexpected progression of events is profound, and the "moth-essence" burns for two hours "without changing, without bending or leaning—only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God" (17). The immediate comparisons made between this headless, burning moth to spiritual mysteries parallel and prefigure other dramatic personages of the narrative. Particularly, the moth, like the cat, is gold-colored, female, faceless, and burning, and language and imagery of the moth-figure will later be spiritually applied to the actions of angelic seraphs and Christ himself. But here the actual Moth is itself an image of spiritual incarnation: its hollowness is indicative of kenotic emptying, its headlessness is representative of the mystical rejection of rational intellectualism, and its mediation and burning exemplify effectual connection and glorification. All the while, the "real moth" continues, horrifically, burning, and by layering and associating this moth with other figures, these *and* the moth image gain depth, dimension, and reference.

The narrator introduces the character Julie Norwich by noting the plane in which she crashes, her father's plane, is ostensibly from another world: "Into this world falls a plane" (35). The plane, like the moths, loses its wing and "flutter[s] in a tiny arc, and struggle[s] down." With the plane as a synecdoche for the girl herself, the narrator suggests that Julie is, in this way, both otherworldly, even divine, and comparable to moth, symbolically one of the most fragile and earthy, *dusty*, creatures possible. "Julie Norwich" is an appropriation by the author of the name of the medieval English mystic, Julian of Norwich, and in the context of the narrative, the saintly association immediately

links the tragic figure of the young girl with an idea of visionary, even mystical, spiritual significance (Gaskins).

In the plane accident, Julie "seven years old burnt off her face" (36). Shaken by the tragedy, the narrator imagines her rushed to a hospital. "Little Julie," she says, "mute in some room at St. Joe's now, drugs dissolving into the sheets. Little Julie with her eyes naked and spherical, baffled. Can you scream without lips? Yes. But do children in long pain scream?" (36). Julie, faceless and dissolving, immediately recalls the figure Moth and every spiritual association suggested by Moth including the "hollow saint" and "flame-faced virgin gone to God" (17). The narrator, however, is unprepared to accept the tragedy as either a divine sign or evidence of God's kindness or mercy. Instead, Julie's suffering persuades her of God's absence, impotence, or simple cruelty: "It is November 19 and no wind, and no hope of heaven, and no wish for heaven, since the meanest of people show more mercy than hounding and terrorist gods" (36). Reconciling this tragedy with the character of the divine becomes a central problem of the narrative. Associative imagery encourages this reconciliation of creator and creation by presenting incarnational images that are complementary and cumulative.

Julie Norwich is associated not only with the moth by her burning and the nun, Julian of Norwich, by her name, but with the narrator herself, for multiple, various reasons that include her suffering. Throughout the narrative, the narrator begins to hold extended dialogs with the absent, hospitalized Julie, much as she had initially done with her cat. These dialogues constitute a form of meditative prayer, and resolution is eventually achieved through them. These dialogs are so successful because of the close identification the narrator feels with Julie Norwich. She even volunteers to fulfill the proper role of sanctified suffering and celibacy she envisions for the burned child, saying she is already doing so, closing the narrative by telling the absent Julie, "So live. I'll be the nun for you. I am now" (76).

One reason for the close association with Julie is the fact that the two females are physically and psychologically similar. Prior to the plane crash, the narrator describes them as generational images of one another: Julie, and also by implication the narrator,[17] is "thin" with a "pointy" chin and "yellow" hair (39, 41). They also seem to have a

psychological bond, recognizing one another's motivations and jokes. Recalling the cider-making party, the narrator says:

> She [Julie] saw me watching her and we exchanged a look, a very conscious and self-conscious look—because we look a bit alike and we both knew it; because she was still short and I grown; because I was stuck kneeling before the cider pail, looking at her sidewise over my shoulder; because she was carrying the cat so oddly, so that she had to walk with her legs parted; because it was my cat, and she'd dressed it, and it looked like a nun; and because she knew I'd been watching her, and how fondly, all along. We were laughing.
>
> We *looked* a bit alike. Her face is slaughtered now, and I don't remember mine. (41)[18]

Further, the narrator is associated with Julie, the moth, and her cat by her stated religious vocation as a nun. Though the narrator gives no indication that she is, or intends to be, a member of a convent or wear a habit, she portrays herself as an literary artist, and purposefully conflates roles of nun, thinker, and artist by first distinguishing them, saying: "A nun lives in the fires of the spirit, a thinker lives in the bright wick of the mind, an artist lives jammed in the pool of materials" (22). But she reconsiders her distinctions in parentheses, thoroughly re-mixing and re-visioning titles and associated activities.

> (Or, a nun lives, thoughtful and tough, in the mind, a nun lives, with that special poignancy peculiar to religious, in the exile of materials; and a thinker, who would think of something, lives in the clash of materials, and in the world of spirit where all long thoughts must lead; and an artist lives in the mind, that warehouse of forms, and an artist lives, of course, in the spirit. So.) (22)

Throughout the text, the narrator indirectly clues readers to her vocation, and her vocation is one of the important reasons she comes to terms with the paradox and problems of human suffering. Though she is wont to claim or assert her vocation, musing she may someday just go fishing, the narrator is, clearly, a writer (20). In her camping memory, she is rereading the book that had made her "want to be a writer ... hoping it would do it again" (15). She also alludes to her responsibilities teaching a class of writers, comparing her students to "moths, in any state" and recollecting her challenge to them: "How many of you, I asked the people in my class, which of you want to give your

lives and be writers? I was trembling from coffee, or cigarettes, or the closeness of faces all around me" (18). Her elevation of writing as a vocation is implied by her questions, but personally she claims only to read (24), to be drawing a map to the islands (25), observing her place and neighbors, and "sitting always at the window spoiling little blowy slips of paper and me in the process" (44).

Her reconciliation to her role as an artist is to view it as that of the figure Moth, a hollow, burning wick plunged in materials, perpetually lit, seraph-like, by the divine (45). Particularly, the artist is "Christ-like," bridging gaps and reconciling contradictions in her own body for the world. The artist, who is a wick, is only important for the divine light she throws on the world. The narrator questions and claims:

> How can people think that artists seek a name? A name, like a face, is something you have when you're not alone.[19] There is no such thing as an artist: there is only the world, lit or unlit as the light allows. When the candle is burning, who looks at the wick? When the candle is out, who needs it? But the world without light is wasteland and chaos, and a life without sacrifice is abomination.
>
> What can any artist set on fire but his world? What can any people bring to the altar but all it has ever owned in the thin towns or over the desolate plains? What can an artist use but materials, such as they are? What can he light but the short string of his gut, and when that's burnt out, any muck ready to hand?
>
> His face is flame like a seraph's, lighting the kingdom of God for the people to see; his life goes up in the works; his feet are waxen and salt. He is holy and he is firm, spanning the long gap with the length of his love, in flawed imitation of Christ on the cross stretched both ways unbroken and thorned. So must the work be also, in touch with, in touch with, in touch with; spanning the gap, from here to eternity, home. (71-72)

Having made this declaration positing the artist as an incarnation, the narrator rejoices ("Hoopla!") and begins claiming her vocation. She cites the Hebrew prophet Isaiah's response to God's call, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" by, first, offering Julie Norwich as a volunteer in Isaiah's stead before calmly offering herself in Julie's place (73-76). Especially, she dedicates herself as a representative of God, a prophet and an incarnation, able to light the world by being both "holy and firm" and indicating "Holy the Firm."

The introduction of the concept "Holy the Firm" occurs immediately following the narrator's revelatory, mystical vision of Christ's baptism that occurs while she is returning from the grocery store, carrying a bottle of communion wine (the "backload of God," the "Christ with a cork") in her backpack (64). The transubstantiation of the wine occurs en route and extends to the narrator and very landscape. She says: "I bear holiness splintered into a vessel, very God of very God, the sempiternal silence personal and brooding, bright on the back of my ribs. I start up the hill" (64). Then, while walking, she feels the wine shed "light in slats through her rib cage, and [fill] the buttressed vaults of her ribs with light pooled and buoyant" (65). She emphatically claims: "I am moth; I am light. I am prayer and I can hardly see" (65).

This revelatory transubstantiation, in which the Host fuses with all creation, begets her vision of Christ's baptism by John, and she sees that the very beads of water on Christ's back contain "worlds" and "everything" and especially "faces, faces like the cells of everything, faces pouring past me talking, and going, and gone" (67). Following this mystical vision, the narrator explains her unitive experience by a phrase from Esoteric Christianity: Holy the Firm (68-69).

Holy the Firm, she explains, is thought to be a created substance, lower than all physical materials on any planet. This humble substance, though, is "in touch with the Absolute, at base" (69) and infuses creation itself with the Absolute. The regenerative effect is remarkable and pervasive. "Does something," the narrator rhetorically queries, "that touched something that touched Holy the Firm in touch with the Absolute at base seep into ground water, into grain; are islands rooted in it, and trees? Of course" (69). Holy the Firm, as an idea *and* object, satisfies the narrator's questions regarding the relationship of creator to creation when ideas such as immanence and eminence do not. God has not abandoned the phenomenal world to "gods" or to itself; rather, God is intimately related to creation but not utterly bound or trapped within the world. The substance Holy the Firm links creation and creator, infuses creation with the Absolute. Furthermore, the artist claims a position as "holy and firm," and thereby indicates the idea of "Holy the Firm" in the text by the same name. Readers "in touch" with Dillard's text may be touching "Holy the Firm in touch with the Absolute at base" and recognizing creation linked and infused with the divine may themselves be touched and transformed.

Dillard's incarnational images in *Holy the Firm* include a golden cat named Small, the figure Moth burning without diminishment, defaced Julie Norwich suggesting the medieval mystic, the narrator wrestling with the meaning of art and life, and the text itself that is *Holy the Firm*. These images allow her to discuss questions about the relationship of creator to creation while considering human suffering. At one point, the narrator chides, "Who are we to demand explanations of God," but she immediately, and parenthetically, admits, "(And what monsters of perfection should we be if we did not?)" (62). In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard suggests by visionary transubstantiation that the *unio mystico* provides resolution and a type of explanation. Specifically, the idea that best expresses mystical union for her in this text is the phrase employed by Esoteric Christianity, "Holy the Firm," which is a *substance* in touch with the "Absolute" acting as both a link and conduit for all creation. By associating the artist with the "holy and firm," Dillard creates an art of incarnation in *Holy the Firm*. Her significant incarnational images in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* included existential creatures, and her incarnational images in *Holy the Firm* further extend incarnational possibilities to art and the artist: both nature and human culture may embody the divine. Dillard claims an art of incarnation in the text *Holy the Firm*. The models for this incarnational embodiment, in each text, include the Christ-event as a "scandal of particularity" and Hebrew ideas of God's presence or "splintering" in creation also inspire the incarnational presentation. Like Christ and the presence of God in creation, Dillard's incarnational images link creation and creator, giving the one divinity and the other "flesh."

Ethic of Incarnation in *For the Time Being*

Dillard's *For the Time Being* continues the development of the author's incarnational images by focusing, more than either of the other two texts, on the humanitarian dimension of existence. If nature has spiritual dimension, if life and art have spiritual dimensions, what should be done about it? All things considered, how shall human beings live in response to spiritual realities? This becomes a central question in *For the Time Being*. Answering it requires Dillard, more than ever before, to develop an incarnational ethic that suggests practical implications for life. The natural world and human culture are fully incarnational, and a fully incarnational God is demanded by

Dillard's ethic in *For the Time Being*. Images and objects in the earlier texts fully embodied and illustrated Dillard's incarnational vision, but can God become wholly incarnational in Dillard's text and still be God?

At the beginning of this chapter, Annie Dillard was quoted as saying that, throughout her writing career, her spiritual beliefs "get much clearer—especially in this last book, *For the Time Being*" (Abood 30). Assuming her assessment is accurate and recognizing her incarnational approach to literature, Dillard's stated clarification should be evident in the incarnational images—mostly human—of *For the Time Being*. In this text, the author employs images and specific examples to embody humanitarian discussion, and more than any of Dillard's other texts, this work considers human situations and human perception. Therefore, assessing the Divine and the Absolute, she suggests that the Incarnation may be the only God that is—*or at least this is the only God that can be experientially validated.* Her suggestion is based not so much on orthodox theology as on experience or perceptual reality, and she loads the text with incarnational images to demonstrate this idea, though only those given primary consideration will be included in this analysis. By virtue of the clear ethical statements in the text, Dillard seeks to fully incarnate God: to live ethically is to incarnate the Absolute in *For the Time Being*, and the author radically focuses her entire theological presentation in this world. Quoting spiritual thinkers, sometimes to agree, sometimes to disagree, Dillard provides suggestions for living an incarnational spirituality. She seems to advocate not that humans strive towards being divine but that they strive towards being human, doing that which promotes life while cognizant of the inevitability of death.

Her ethical statements, if the title is indicative, are provisional, relevant, *and* personal. *For the Time Being*, as a phrase, can be read emphasizing "time" and thus the provisional and relevant nature of the text, but the phrase can also be read emphasizing "being" with "time" as a modifying adjective, indicating the text has a humanitarian dedication: to the mortal. Probably both readings of the title complement one another, and they are consistent with the ethic of incarnation in *For the Time Being* that is justified near the end of the text. Dillard writes: "God's being immanent, said Abraham Joshua Heschel, depends on us. Our hearts, minds, and souls impel our spines to lift or dig, our arms to take or give, our lips to speak good words or bad ones. God needs man;

kenotically or not, he places himself in our hands. [. . .] The only body he's got is us: a fine piece of modern theology" (200).

On this basis—that if there is a divine, it is us—Dillard states, in engaging second-person language, her ethic by saying what cannot—and what can and should—be done:

> You cannot mend the chromosome, quell the earthquake, or stanch the flood. You cannot atone for dead tyrants' murders, and you alone cannot stop living tyrants.
>
> As Martin Buber saw it—writing at his best near the turn of the last century—the world of ordinary days "affords" us that precise association with God that redeems both us and our speck of the world. God entrusts and allots to everyone an area to redeem: this creased and feeble life, "the world in which you live, just as it is and not otherwise." A farmer can unfetter souls and free divine sparks in "his beasts and his houses, his garden and his meadow, his tools and his food." Here and now, presumably, an ordinary person would approach with a holy and compassionate intention the bank and post office, the car pool, the God-help-us-television, the retirement account, the car, desk, phone, and keys. "Insofar as he cultivates and enjoys them in holiness, he frees their souls. ... He who prays and sings in holiness, eats and speaks in holiness, in holiness performs the appointed ablutions, and in holiness reflects upon his business, through him the sparks which have fallen will be uplifted, and the worlds which have fallen will be delivered and renewed."
>
> "It is given to men to lift up the fallen and to free the imprisoned. Not merely to wait, not merely to look on! Man is able to work for the redemption of the world."
>
> The work is not yours to finish, Rabbi Tarfon said, but neither are you free to take no part in it. (201-02)

The ethic of incarnation, clearly expressed in this text, is embodied and illustrated throughout the text. Evident above, Dillard often uses the thoughts and voices of others throughout *For the Time Being* to provide suggestive ideas and inspiration for her own response and commentary. By providing this internal dialog, she can model ethical discussion and engagement with other thinkers while internalizing their ideas. The narrator, in this way, is an embodiment of ideas. Also, the narrative presents other images and personalities who embody theological discussion. One place in the text, when questioning the significance of the individual, the narrator presents a list of important

images, and she helps identify other important incarnational images by signposting them with Talmudic blessings or repeatedly naming them (74). The images presented here, which are mainly personalities (human or human-like), should be recognized as representative and exemplary of Dillard's incarnational approach, rather than unique or exceptional in the text.

The first "embodiments" of the many "variations in our human array" are two "bird-headed dwarfs" (3-5). These two are brother and sister, respectively ages six and three in their picture. Dillard provides her observations of their picture, saying the girl's expression looks "supercilious," showing "haughty awareness," while her "thoughtful big brother [. . .] gazes off to the side as if wishing he were somewhere else, or reflecting that this camera session will be over soon" (4). But, reading the textual commentary, the author realizes how mistaken her assessment of their attitudes is: both have "moderate to severe mental deficiency" which likely renders intelligence similar "to a chimpanzee" and makes them "friendly and pleasant, but easily distracted" (4-5). Likewise, though their bodies are roughly proportional, they have physical oddities: only eleven pairs of ribs, inability to straighten their legs, and miniature size or "severe short stature" which means the larger of the two is only now the size of an "eleven-month-old infant."

Having begun with the "bird-headed dwarfs," Dillard briefly mentions other children with genetic malformations pictured in *Smith's Manual*, giving vivid descriptions and contrasting textual commentary of a girl with a polka-dot collar whose face does not meet normally, a girl with long hair on her cheeks and no chin, a boy with three-fingers whose lower eyelids "look as if he is pulling them down to scare someone," a girl with webbed neck and elbows, and boys with enormous bulging foreheads and no brows, lashes, and chins (6-7). Dillard does not stop with these who have "normal intelligence," and she deigns to mention other particular types of genetic deformity such as being one-footed ("like a mermaid"), being without eyelids, gape-mouthed, and scaled ("like frogs"), and being born with "pathologically short legs" which means that if the smiling, pig-tailed girl whose hair is tied in bows by someone would lower her arms, "her hands would extend well below her knees" (64-65). Of these, the pig-tailed girl "most terrifies" the author, especially as she compares her happiness to the obvious sorrow of an older boy with the same deformity. But in all these cases, Dillard says, "Our sins have

nothing to do with our physical fates. When you shell peas, you notice that defective germ plasm shrivels one pea in almost every pod. I ain't so pretty myself' (66). This discomforting solace, though, need not absolutely mar the life experience, and the author offers a vision of life with the bird-headed dwarfs as an example:

> If your child were a bird-headed dwarf, mentally deficient, you could carry him everywhere. The bird-headed dwarfs and all the babies in Smith's manual have souls, and they all can—and do—receive love and give love. If you gave birth to two bird-headed dwarfs, as these children's mother did—a boy and a girl—you could carry them both everywhere, all their lives, in your arms or in a basket, and they would never leave you, not even to go to college. (5)

Being alive is the ultimate solace Dillard offers for genetic deformity. Though the life experience is not without pain or poignancy, the experiential difference between those with genetic deformity and those without may be a matter of degree rather than kind. Everyone dies, sooner or later, with greater or lesser degrees of mental and physical ability. The mystery of any life is its very existence, and, from Dillard's portrayal, this mystery begins at conception itself. "Our lives come free," she writes. "They're on the house to all comers, like the shopkeeper's wine. God decants the universe of time in a stream, and our best hope is, by our own awareness, to step into the stream and serve, empty as flumes, to keep it moving" (175).

Other significant images in the narrative include the narrator's vivid accounts of newborns which make the "normal" experience of birth seem no less amazing than that of "exceptional" children. Her description of an obstetrical ward emphasizes the very strangeness of the place where birth happens. She muses,

> There might well be a rough angel guarding this ward, or a dragon, or an upwelling current that dashes boats on rocks. There might be an old stone cairn in the hall by the elevators, or a well, or a ruined shrine wall where people still hear bells. Should we not remove our shoes, drink potions, take baths? For this is surely the wildest deep-sea vent on earth: This is where the people come out. (36)

The first amazing newborn is termed the "red baby," and he is only a few minutes old when Dillard first sees him. He is being washed "like dishes" in the sterile washing room, and here newborns are given knit hats "the size of teacups." Comparisons serve to enliven his description, and he becomes an object of contemplation even while he himself

"gazes up attentively from the nurse's arms." This newborn has a "tadpole belly" that is "red," a scrotum "the size of a plum" that is "fiercely red, and looks as if it might explode," a "conehead [. . .] looks like a "duncecap," his "blue-umbilical cord" is clamped "upward on his belly ... like a jumper cable," and he is held by "one wormy arm and one wormy leg" (37). After his washing and blanket-wrapping the red baby is "tidy and compact, the size of a one-quart Thermos," and he "looks up and studies his surroundings, alert, seemingly pleased, and preternaturally calm, as if enchanted" (38). The nurse, with Dillard following, delivers the living thing, this clean child, to his "wan" mother and "skinny father" who keeps track of his new son's age in minutes, and the child retains his mystique. "The baby," says the author, "closes his mouth, opens his eyes, and peers about like a sibyl. He looks at our faces. When he meets our eyes in turn, his father and I each say, 'Hi,' involuntarily" (40).

The second vivid depiction of the mystique of newborns is the author's encounter with the "oracular newborn" (92). Once again the objectification of the child increases that narrator's awe. When the nurse "unwraps another package" for bathing, the author sees an infant born three-weeks premature. She says the newborn girl "pinks up" while being washed and is "alert and silent. She looks about with apparent concentration; she pays great attention, and seems to have a raw drive to think." The child is further described as "purely looking" though the narrator asserts the baby "has a self, and she knows it; the red baby knew it too."

These children exemplify, embody, and incarnate the mystery of being alive, and the narrator claims them as divine objects of contemplation, even worship. They are humanity's origin, and appreciation of their incarnation is the author's prerogative. Comparing the precocious young girl to religious sites and relics, the narrator says:

> I want to walk around this aware baby in circles, as if she were the silver star's hole on the cave floor, or the Kaaba stone in Mecca, the wellspring of mystery itself, the black mute stone that requires men to ask, Why is there something here, instead of nothing? And why are we aware of this question—we people, particles going around and around this black stone? Why are we aware of it? (93)

The narrator's reflections on the oracular newborns, the red baby and the aware baby, inspire her awe, and her ultimate response to the children with genetic deformity, yelling

to God: "What's up with the bird-headed dwarfs?" is itself a type of theological reflection (53). In all cases, these embodiments of "human array" are individuals whose very particularity is Dillard's challenge and pause for religious reflection. These children are not symbols of divine reality; they are divine realities, and it is their particular statement on human life that most interests the author.

Having begun the imaging of birth with the bird-headed dwarfs, Dillard concludes the imaging of birth by recounting her experience of watching "birds mating all over Galilee [. . .] in midair" (175). The mating sites round out the mystery of birth: the offspring that results is no less amazing than the manner in which he or she was created. "An infant is a pucker of the earth's thin skin; so are we. [. . .] Buddhism notes that it is always a mistake to think your soul can go it alone" (8). Observing, then, the mating of Galilean birds, she is amazed by their efforts to rise, meet, mate and "spiral down; breaks your heart" (176). Swifts, hoopoes, doves, tiger swallowtails, and, beyond birds, snails, mate in full view of the author "on fences and roads, on limbs of trees [. . .] on a wet stone under leaves" (176-77). To these sightings, Dillard offers the Talmudic blessing given upon seeing landscapes, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, THE MAKER OF ALL CREATION" (177). And, after the whole day of these coital sightings is over, she offers the Talmudic blessing: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, creator of the Universe, who brings on evening; whose power and might fill the world; who did a miracle for me in this place; WHO HAS KEPT US IN LIFE AND BROUGHT US TO THIS TIME" (178). Together, Dillard's incarnations of birth—the genetically deformed, the newborn, and the mating experience—challenge the author's thoughts about life and the human experience, particularly because these inspire awe and demand justice. Further analysis of the most vivid images in *For the Time Being* provides an increasingly full explanation of Dillard's incarnational ethic.

In *For the Time Being*, two thinkers regularly dominate portions of the text, and both inspire Dillard's incarnational ethic by their lives and legends. The first of these is the twentieth-century French Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who worked as a paleontologist in China throughout much of his adult life. The second of these is the eighteenth-century Hasidic Rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, who reformulated Kabalistic

mysticism throughout his teaching career. Both thinkers embraced the world of material reality as a fulfilling spiritual experience.

Dillard takes pains to describe the Jesuit Teilhard's humanity and emphasize his writings that inspire her reflections on the material world. Many of the portions of the text involving Teilhard are dated to correspond with his own journal entries. Dillard also provides a developing description of Teilhard's physical appearance and his work. When she first introduces him, he is "forty-two years old, tall and narrow, fine-featured," wearing a "big felt hat, like a cowboy, and heavy boots. Rough weather had cut lines on his face" (9). She ages her description of him as she recounts that "squinting and laughing furrowed his face. His temples dipped as his narrow skull bones emerged" (147). Having relayed his honorable efforts in World War I, his tramping and digging in the Ordos desert of China, his revolutionary paleontologic discovery of Peking Man, *homo erectus*, in 1928, Dillard also describes his loving and chaste friendship with an American woman, Lucile Swan. All this context makes Teilhard's theological statements provided in the text seem an expression of, and inspiration for, his own life and work. Teilhard provides more than ideas for Dillard, though his ideas are inseparable from his life and work, and she acknowledges both in her narrative. Portraying his love for the material world to be exemplified by his work as a paleontologist, the author also provides Teilhard's statements such as his morning prayer that God, "Be pleased yet once again to come down and breathe a soul into the newly formed, fragile film of matter with which this day the world is to be freshly clothed" (43). Dillard also provides Teilhard's words of consecration that he daily offers God, saying, "I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I shall rise beyond symbols to the pure majesty of the real, and I shall offer you, I your priest, on the altar of the whole earth, the toil and sorrow of the world" (128). Teilhard becomes for the narrator a theologian who "loved" matter and exemplifies incarnational spirituality by his life (43).

The second figure who dominates Dillard's incarnational statements by his life and legends is the Baal Shem Tov. As with Teilhard, Dillard makes efforts to specifically date and place the Baal Shem Tov, giving his birth as 1737 and his life as spent teaching "all over the Ukraine, in Yiddish" (112). Also, by paying close attention to his work and naming the various odd peasant jobs he worked, Dillard tries to emphasize the reality and

activity of the religious teacher. She even gives such personal details as "his yellow hair hung long, and like a farmer he wore no cap. His regular dress was a belted sheepskin coat and topboots. He smoked a clay pipe" (113).[20] These details are intended to "ground" the man who, as legends portray, also worked miracles and "could read the history of any man's soul, and all his secrets, from the man's forehead, they said. He was clairvoyant to animals, too, and birds and trees" (114). From the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, Dillard specifically gleans the idea that divinity permeates creation. His idea is a reinterpretation of the classic Kabalistic idea inspired by Isaac Luria, that "dense shells imprison the divine" in creation; therefore, God is hidden and "God's presence languishes everywhere lost. The Baal Shem Tov, who often startled people by turning cartwheels, flipped this dark idea on its shining head: If shells imprison the divine, then all we see holds holiness" (137). The exuberance of the Baal Shem Tov, his "joy in performing the commandments," and willing embrace of the physical world, his "Do not deny your flesh, God forbid," Dillard finds as wholly inspirational to her incarnational ethic (137). Together, the Catholic Teilhard de Chardin and Hasidic Baal Shem Tov provide much of the religious inspiration for Dillard's ethical embrace of human life, and the details of their own persons and work demonstrate the incarnational spirituality of their lives. Against the background of these two men, the narrator offers other particular examples of incarnational images. These images suggest that an embrace of material, physical reality will demonstrate the mystery and divinity of life: the "shells," as the Baal Shem Tov celebrates, "imprison the divine" and what is seen holds holiness (137).

The narrator's section called "Encounters" provides samplings of her experiences with people that surprise and mystify her, causing reflection and celebration. Among the individuals encountered are an Elvis impersonator and former boxer who jokes with the narrator at an airport (25); a man she sees splitting firewood who appears to be "clobbering the sky" not the wood (53); a stranger's baby who tries to hand Dillard keys to the motorcycle on which it was sitting (136); a girl with Down's Syndrome who suddenly grasps and holds the author's hand while they descend stairs together at an Israeli lookout point (190). In these and other encounters with strangers, the narrator indicates, by their very particularity, that "every human being sucks the living strength of God from a different place, said Rabbi Pinhas, and together they make up Man" (191).

Her reflections on her encounters with strangers help resolve some of the "mind-numbing" statistics regarding birth, death, calamities, astronomy, and history she presents in sections called "Numbers." At several places, she indicates that these statistics are meant to challenge the value of the individual. "How," she says, "can an individual count? Do individuals count only to us other suckers, who love and grieve like elephants, bless their hearts" (75). By her "Encounters," the narrator answers her question as, yes, individuals do count to us "other suckers," but this does not diminish their value. Whether individuals matter to God is another question and one that must certainly be answered by considering the "scandal of particularity" that is the Incarnation.

To answer that God cares about the individual it is helpful, even necessary, to assert God is an individual or at least personal, and the narrator does this by focusing on the Incarnation of Christ and incarnations like Christ throughout the narrative. "God," she says, "is oddly personal; this God knows. [. . .] Nature works out its complexities. God suffers the world's necessities along with us, and suffers our turning away, and joins us in exile. Christians might add that Christ hangs, as it were, on the cross forever, always incarnate, and always nailed" (167, 69). Observing the "paradox and scandal of any incarnation's occurring," Dillard visits the stable shrine at Bethlehem where Christ was supposedly born (81). While initially repulsed by the gaudy ornamentation of the place, the author eventually embraces the "particularity" of this "scandalous" shrine and rushes back in for one more look at the "spot: Here, just here, the infant got born" (79). Further, the poignancy of the dual natures of Christ is emphasized in the North American Osage Indian's embrace of Christ. "They have adopted the Man on the Cross, because they understand him. He is both Chaso [sky person] and Hunkah [earth person]. His footprints are on the Peyote altars, and they are deep like the footprints of one who has jumped" (105).

To be human is to experience pathos and sweetness and to want to know why, and Dillard suggests that the Incarnation, which inspires an incarnational ethic, is an answer to this quest for meaning. It is possible to extend the discussion of the images of incarnation in *For the Time Being* to many other particular characters and creatures in the story. The clay soldiers of Emperor Quin being excavated from the burial tomb are incarnational images. The bones of the "man of the yellow earths" or Peking Man, "the

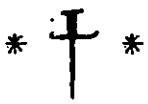
man of the red earths" whom Teilhard discovers in his paleontological expeditions can certainly be developed as incarnational images. Dillard also provides brief, but detailed stories of Rabbi Akiva, who was flayed by the Romans, and Suri Feldman, a schoolgirl who was lost in New York woods overnight, whose stories and selves embody the divine mystery of life. Even sand and clouds are presented as having a life span and mortality; these become incarnations by their comparisons to humanity. In *For the Time Being*, more than in any of Dillard's earlier texts, she clearly states her incarnational approach and the ethic it ought to inspire, an ethic that is simple, practical, and accessible to the beings now extant on earth for the time being.

Developing Spiritual Images

Having surveyed the most significant images in three of Annie Dillard's narrative texts, I offer an assessment of the author's working definition of "incarnation" to test her claim that writing has clarified her spiritual beliefs. Definitions of "incarnation" in Dillard's creative works seem to imply a literary image or embodiment, and to provide definitions apart from examples is only partial explanation. Incarnational images are the primary vehicle for communicating message in Dillard's creative works, and the "vehicle" is as important as the "message." A spiritual incarnation is a being who is "in the flesh" or sensual and mortal that is simultaneously mental and spiritual. Spiritual incarnations appropriately embody dual natures of physical/metaphysical, material/spiritual, human/divine without either aspect being confused or diminished. In Dillard's portrayal, spiritual incarnation is not limited to human embodiment, and "flesh" can indicate any bodied being in the phenomenological world, whether human, animal, plant, or even product. The entire world is wholly animate, and being looked at, it looks back. Dillard's incarnational images are created beings who exist by divine embodiment. Her inspiration for incarnational images is her understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the Kabalistic concept of divine sparks "splintered" and hidden in creation, and her own perceptual experience.

Dillard's statement of progressive clarification of her spiritual beliefs is justified if one clearly recognizes that clarification is not transformation or conversion. The author repeats images and ideas throughout her career, but changes indicate clarification if

spiritual beliefs are, in Dillard's case, not only ideas but action. In Dillard's images, she initially concentrated on incarnating nature, then art, then divinity itself. These evolving incarnations construct a literary focus that emphasizes observation and, later, ethics; vision and then action; objects and now humanity; local description and now sweeping portrayals. The developing portrayal of spiritual incarnation in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Holy the Firm*, and *For the Time Being* indicates a clarification of Annie Dillard's spiritual beliefs if the idea of "incarnation" itself demands an incarnation in not only literature but also life and action.



Chapter Four
Spiritual Incarnation: Orthodoxy and Contemporary Relevance

Spiritual incarnation recognizes physical embodiment, and, as such, images of spiritual incarnation are subject to change, both development and decay. Dillard, in *For the Time Being*, vividly suggests the evanescence and continuity of living beings, saying, "An infant is a pucker of the earth's thin skin; so are we. We arise like budding yeasts and break off; we forget our beginnings. A mammal swells and circles and lays him down. You and I have finished swelling; our circling periods are playing out, but we can still leave footprints in a trail whose end we do not know" (8). Dillard's ideas of spiritual incarnation will be contextualized in this chapter by considering possible "beginnings" and future implications for the author's ideas.

Dillard's narrative embrace of incarnational spirituality relies on ideas with historical, religious precedence and contemporary, philosophical relevance, while her appropriation of dialogue from diverse intellectual communities is ingenious. The first part of the chapter discusses the religious background for Dillard's incarnational ideas, taking clues from the author's own works for terminology, emphases, and her transformation of religious orthodoxy. Religiously, Dillard's cooperative embrace of Jewish and Christian incarnational ideas challenges the unique conceptions each holds of incarnation. In the second part of the chapter, Dillard's depiction of spiritual incarnation is compared and contrasted with relevant philosophical ideas. These comparisons help explain and augment the author's creative religious conceptions; likewise, understanding her religious conceptions allows for fruitful reinterpretation of contemporary philosophical ideas such as those expressed by phenomenology. In both parts, discussing the background and future of Dillard's incarnational spirituality circumscribes the boundaries of religious and philosophical discussion in this chapter.

Spiritual Incarnation as a Religious Conception

Throughout her writing career, Dillard has mingled Jewish and Christian conceptions of incarnation to address the artistic questions she finds most interesting. By her own admission, she prefers questions about the relationship "between" apparent opposites (Yancey 961). Ideological pairs such as time and eternity, particular and

universal, immanence and transcendence, human and divine, and creation and creator indicate apparent opposites that Dillard continually tries to reconcile. The creative complexity of Dillard's reconciliations is often maintained, as discussed in chapter three, by presenting incarnational images that demand that the embodiment of "opposites" be achieved without confusion or diminishment. Her resolutions are not "either/or," but they also are not synthetic. Resolution and reconciliation in Dillard's works are only achieved by spiritual incarnations who embody "both/and" solutions.

In religious discourse, the idea of incarnation is compatible with both Jewish and Christian beliefs on the basis of their shared creation narrative, Genesis 1.27, which concludes: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Contemporary Jewish theologian Jacob Neusner and Christian theologian Bruce Chilton, in their book *God in the World*, claim to speak on behalf of their respective religious communities when the say that "Judaism and Christianity concur, moreover, that, since we are made in God's image, in the face of one another we see God. The conception of incarnation is as Judaic as it is Christian" (1). However, these two theologians acknowledge that the realization of incarnation in the two religious communities differs. While Neusner claims that the emphasis in Judaism is God incarnate in the everyday world, Chilton's concluding chapter notes that the Christian emphasis focuses on Jesus, "Son of God," as the Incarnation. The difference between incarnation as a concept and Incarnation as a proper noun seems to be one that Dillard sees as practically inconsequential, and she freely borrows from and combines traditions for the benefit of her narrative and ethic, recognizing distinctions only in passing (*FTB* 27).

Dillard's embrace of Jewish incarnational ideas is demonstrated as early as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, though she increasingly seems to rely on and reference Jewish concepts throughout her career. In *For the Time Being*, Dillard confesses she has been studying Jewish thinkers such as Rabbi Luria and the Baal Shem Tov "for twenty-five years, with increasing admiration" (22). Notably, the twenty-five years she indicates span, and directly correspond to, the entirety of her professional writing career. Two main Jewish religious conceptions can be discerned in Dillard's literary art that relate to her portrayal of spiritual incarnation.

Particularly, Dillard often cites in her creative works the Kabalistic legend of the "Mystery of the Splintering of the Vessels" as an explanation for God's relationship to creation. This legend helps Dillard locate God within creation and justifies her attention to nature: the world is full of the divine vessels "splintered" exceedingly fine and contained in the "various husk-covered forms of emanation or time" (*PTC* 129). Alluding to the legend in *Pilgrim*, she says, "Hasidism has a tradition that one of man's purposes is to assist God in the work of redemption by 'hallowing' the things of creation [. . .] the devout man frees the divine sparks trapped in the mute things of time" (94). In *For the Time Being*, Dillard continues to reference this religious legend and cites relevant Talmudic blessings for all aspects of creation. Citing Jewish tradition, Dillard asserts that nothing is beyond the blessing of God because everything either cries God, and is therefore blessed, or cries for God, and is likewise blessed. "Jewish life," Dillard emphasizes, embracingly, "takes place in the thick of, and sanctifies, the multiple world of created things" (52). But sometimes her Talmudic blessings appear ironic, and the Kabalistic legend remains appropriately titled a "Mystery."

From this legend, though, Dillard derives her other important Jewish religious concept that, because God can be in creation, there is a proper response that, while realistic, is both joyful and ethical. In this conception, she allies herself with the Baal Shem Tov's radically positive reinterpretation of the legend that asserts that "all we see holds holiness" rather than Rabbi's Luria lament that God is bound, hidden, and lost in creation (137). To recognize God's presence this way is also to recognize, as Dillard does by quoting Martin Buber quoting an "old Hasid master" in the "specialized Kabalistic vocabulary of Hasidism" that: "When you walk across the fields with your mind pure and holy, then from all the stones, and all growing things, and all animals, the sparks of their soul come out and cling to you, and then they are purified and become a holy fire in you" (*PTC* 198).[21] Because the divine is present, though hidden, in creation, an ethical response is not only necessary but also possible for those aware of the "Mystery of the Splintering of the Vessels." The Jewish conception of incarnation as God's presence in the world, or the divine essence splintered into creation, is a religious tradition Dillard embraces and combines with the Christian traditions she has been familiar with since childhood.

In her memoir, *An American Childhood*, Dillard cites her childhood experiences with Christianity. At Presbyterian summer camp she was introduced to a Christianity full of "faith-filled theology ... only half a step out of a tent" (133). And, throughout her growing-up years, the future author regularly attended Shadyside Presbyterian Church, detouring from her religious beliefs only briefly in adolescence. This religious background rooted the author in Scriptural ideas, and she confesses, "Fragments of Biblical language played in my head like a record on which the needle has stuck, played at the back of my mind and moved at the root of my tongue and sounded deep in my ears without surcease" (132). Dillard further claims that she always had a "head for religious ideas. They were the first ideas I ever encountered. They made other ideas seem mean" (133). While denying herself the title of "theologian," the author nevertheless has called *Pilgrim* "a work of theology" (Nathan 22). Even recently, in a 1999 interview, the author says that, by her writings, she intends to address the "agnostic intellectual. [. . .] to get him to consider once again that it's not only stupid people who are Christians. There is something there if he will reexamine religion, which he probably threw out when he was a teenager and never looked back. He doesn't know anything but what they taught him as a little child, including a child's view of God" (Abood 32).

From her familiarity with Christianity and her personal appreciation for theological ideas, Dillard consistently appropriates ideas concerning the Doctrine of the Incarnation as inspiration for her literary career. Particularly, in *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and *For the Time Being* she often associates Christ's incarnation with his birth celebrated at Christmas, viewing this as the beginning of the "new creation" or re-creation of all creation.[22] In an early poem, "Christmas," Dillard portrays whole animate and inanimate realms as alive by virtue of the holiday:

> Trees that have loved
> in silence, kiss,
> crashing; the Douglas firs lean
> low to the brittle embrace
> of a lodgepole pine.
>
> In the cities at night
> tin canisters eat
> their cookies; the bed,
> asleep, tossing,

brushes its curtain of bead.

My wristwatch grows
obscurely, sun-
flower big. Across
America, cameras gaze,
astonished, into the glass.

This is the hour
God loosens and empties.
Rushing, consciousness comes
unbidden, grasping,
and memory, wisdom, grace.

Birds come running;
the curtains moan.
Dolls in the hospital
with brains of coral
jerk, breathe and are born.
(*TPW* 33-34)

Particularly notable in Dillard's poem is her recognition that Christmas is the time, or "hour," that God "loosens and empties." This "emptying," as relates to Incarnation, is the same idea expressed in the NT Philippian hymn describing Christ: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but *made himself nothing*, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (2.6-7, emphasis added). This "emptying" of God, Christ's making "himself nothing," is described doctrinally by the Greek word *kenosis*, a term and idea Dillard also uses throughout her creative texts. Speaking of the land of Israel in *For the Time Being*, Dillard writes: "Two thousand years of Christianity began here, where God emptied himself into man" (79). Later, in the same work, Dillard presses the ethical implications of incarnational ideas, saying, "God needs man: kenotically or not, he places himself in our hands. [. . .] 'The only body he's got is us' " (200-02).

In addition to "*kenosis*," another theological term Dillard employs in association with her incarnational portrayals is "the scandal of particularity," an expression that refers to the irony and scandal that God might become a human being. In *Holy the Firm*, the narrator states, "I know only enough of God to want to worship him, by any means ready to hand. There is an *anomalous specificity* to all our experience in space, a *scandal*

of particularity, by which God burgeons up or showers down into the shabbiest of occasions [. . .]" (55, emphasis added).

While Dillard's incarnational approach to literature does not limit her to discussing birth, beginnings, or creation and the author considers both pain and death in her writing, her incarnational focus forces her to refuse any religious answers that might appear escapist or otherworldly. In Dillard's vision, to recognize death is not to reject life but embrace it more fully. Likewise, the brevity and hardship of physical existence do not force the author to reject the material world: it only become more precious. Dillard says, "This world merited the Incarnation. If everything is a symbol of spiritual reality, then earth's beauty means something. [. . .] I believe, often, that nature participates in the essence of God himself and if he removed his loving attention from it for a fraction of a second life would cease" (Yancey 962).

Dillard's emphasis on incarnational ideas is a keen acknowledgement of the importance of these ideas within Christianity. Throughout the millennium following the introduction of Christianity, the first seven Ecumenical Councils specifically concerned themselves with correctly portraying the nature of Christ's incarnation. Was Jesus divine? Did this negate his humanity or affect it? How can a person be both divine and human? These were early issues troubling the Church that the Councils discussed. From these Councils, formulations such as the Nicene Creed and the hypostatic Doctrine of the Incarnation were established, and heresies such as Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and Monothelitism were identified and declared anathema. In 787, the Great Schism that split the Church into East and West is portrayed by contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy as essentially a debate over the effects of Christ's incarnation, whether iconic images were appropriate for Christian worship because, in Colossians 1.15, Christ himself is said to be the "image of the invisible God." Theologian James D. G. Dunn assesses the early basis for disagreement in the Church by writing that: "In a real sense the history of christological controversy is the history of the church's attempt to come to terms with John's christology—first to accept it and then to understand and re-express it. The latter task will never end" (Dunn 250).

"John's christology" to which Dunn refers is the presentation in the Fourth Gospel of the radical *Logos* poem or hymn in the first chapter, verses one through eighteen. "In

the beginning," one reads, "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." The hymn continues in verse fourteen, saying, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Tracing the origins of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, Dunn cites this passage as an "explicit statement of *incarnation*, the first, and indeed only such statement made in the NT," and he provides background to the ideas expressed in the passage (241). Particularly, he emphasizes that the "*Logos* poem," which existed prior to the writing of John's gospel, celebrates a pre-existent, or uncreated, Logos that actually became "flesh."

Dunn remarks that, prior to the statement that the Word became flesh, the rest of the ideas expressed in the Logos poem would not have been exceptional to Hellenistic Jews familiar with both the Wisdom tradition and metaphorical vivacity of Jewish scripture: wisdom was frequently personified as a creative being, often female, who enacted the will of God. Yet, this personification was not, in orthodox Jewish tradition, a personalization but a metaphor for the will and action of God. God was not divided or multiplied by creative action because the Jews were strictly monotheistic. In the *Logos* poem, the

> revolutionary significance of verse 14 may well be that it marks *not only the transition in the thought of the poem from pre-existence to incarnation, but also the transition from impersonal personification to actual person.* [. . .] It is the fact that the Logos poet has taken language which any thoughtful Jew would recognize to be the language of personification and has *identified* it with a particular person, *as* a particular person, that would be so astonishing: the manifestation of God become a man! God's utterance not merely come through a particular individual, but actually become that one person, Jesus of Nazareth! [. . . 'the Word became flesh'] has no real parallel in pre-Christian Jewish thought. (Dunn 243)

Further, the Fourth Gospel also reconciles disparate first-century Christian views on the nature of Christ. One view saw Christ as the personal embodiment of the Wisdom-Logos tradition but did not view Christ as in any way pre-existent or personally identified with the pre-existent Wisdom-Logos. The other view attached importance to Christ as the Son of God, also without personally identifying Christ's pre-existence. In a radical

reconciliation, the writer of the Fourth Gospel combines these views of Christ with the Jewish pre-existent Wisdom-Logos tradition to create a revolutionary combination:

> This union of Logos christology and Son of God christology, with its possibility of combining the metaphors and imagery appropriate to the personified Wisdom and the idea Logos of pre-Christian Judaism with the more intimate personal language appropriate to the talk of Father and Son, became the matrix from which developed the christologies of subsequent centuries—a dynamic combination, but one always in danger of slackening the tension of personal-impersonal and of falling back into either a less personal monotheism or a polytheism of two or more Gods. (Dunn 245)

Dillard is one dynamic practitioner of the continual "re-expression" of incarnational spirituality, though it would be appropriately uncharacteristic of her to make such a direct statement about her embrace of Jewish and Christian incarnational ideas. Incarnational spirituality challenges and enables the possibility of real, spiritual existence because existential phenomena—the physical and material world here and now—paradoxically, significantly, matter: it is thus the phenomenological world that Dillard depicts and embraces in her writing.

Claiming traditional Hasidic ideas expressed in Kabalistic terminology, Dillard extends Christian incarnational ideas backwards in time, from Christ to creation itself, and forwards in time, from Christ to immediate personal experience in the present. Christ becomes a prime example of spiritual incarnation, though not the first, last, or only phenomenological incarnation. By combining Jewish and Christian incarnational ideas, Dillard extends the scope of the holy to include the mundane and the particular; not only Christ is an incarnation but also stones, growing things, all animals, and individual human beings. Her extension of the incarnational scope places her well beyond the bounds of traditional Christian concepts expressing the Incarnation,[23] but in relating this Doctrine to ideas about creation, Dillard emphasizes a possibility intrinsic rather than extrinsic to the Christian tradition. Though "hypostasis" or the harmonious incarnation of divine and human natures traditionally is reserved, in Christian doctrine, for "a complete rational individual," medieval Scholastics also discussed whether the hypostasis may be possible for anything more of reality than human nature. For example: could animal nature experience hypostasis just as human nature does? In such a discussion, Dillard

would emphatically assert the legitimacy of the extended possibilities of incarnational spirituality by citing Jewish theology. She might also suggest the Incarnation of Christ as the prominent incarnational example for Jewish theology. While respective theologians from the Jewish and Christian traditions may see Dillard's extensions as inventive, they would probably not declare the possibility of her ideas heretical. Dillard herself categorically rejects being classified as a pantheist, but instead she describes her beliefs, which are she says are harmonious with Jewish thinkers and "Christian intellectuals today," as "pan-entheist." "Not only is God immanent in everything, as plain pantheists hold, but more profoundly everything is simultaneously in God, within God the transcendent. There is a divine, not just bushes" (*FTB* 116-17).[24] Additionally, Dillard has a justification for her radical extension of incarnational scope in contemporary philosophical ideas; particularly in the way phenomenology discusses human perception Dillard finds support beyond religion for ethical extension of incarnational ideas.

Incarnational Ideas and Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as a science of perception, seriously considers and analyzes human perception as a basis for all science and knowledge. Important phenomenological analyses began early in the 1900s with Edmund Husserl, continued mid-century with French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reconception and reinvigoration of Husserl's ideas, and is currently an important area of study for those interested in the ramifications of human embodiment, environmental interaction, and cultural creation. Throughout her writing career, Dillard herself supports efforts to grapple with human consciousness and perception, hinting that she is aware of phenomenological concepts and concerns. Even in a 1989 interview she describes her entire interest in the subject of writing as an interest in consciousness (Weber 67), and this same interest permeates her creative works. Especially in *For the Time Being*, she directly alludes to such philosophic questions of perception and consciousness by citing Teilhard for her recognition that among the concentric layers of phenomena forming the earth, science has severely neglected only one: "the layer of human thought" (93). Dillard asserts the neglect is unnecessary, saying,

> Science could, I say, if it possessed all the data, describe the physical workings that have enabled our species to build and fly jets, write poems, encode data on silicon, and photograph Jupiter. But science has other fish to fry. Science (like philosophy) has bypassed this vast and abyssal fish of consciousness and culture. The data are tighter in other areas. (94-95)

She acknowledges recent "bottom up" analysis of human consciousness as trying to scrutinize human consciousness from phenomenal perceptions but argues this cannot address "what interests us most: What are we doing here?" (95). In contrast, she presents "unpopular thinkers" like Teilhard and the Hasids whose analysis moves "top down, and therefore lacks all respectability: No one can account for spirit by matter (hence science's reasonable stance), but one can indeed account for matter by spirit. Have started from spirit, from God, these [unpopular thinkers] have no real difficulty pinning down, or spinning out, or at least addressing, our role and raison d'être" (95). These types of opposite positions, the "top downs" and "bottom ups," are exactly those that Dillard often wrestles with and reconciles. In both phenomenological and incarnational ideas, embodiment is crucial for intellectual reconciliation of contradictions, and whether or not Dillard actively seeks to employ a phenomenological approach in her literary ethic, her incarnational ideas are perfectly compatible with key phenomenological concepts.

Without enlarging the present discussion well beyond the bounds of Dillard's literary art, I here offer select important concepts from phenomenology that directly correspond to Dillard's incarnational ideas. Readers can derive key phenomenological concepts from Annie Dillard's writing. For while Dillard is not a phenomenologist, even early critics recognize in Dillard's attention to natural detail a compatibility with existentialism rather than transcendentalist ideas (Wymard). Likewise, the myriad critics who appreciate Dillard as an ecologist or ecotheologist acknowledge the author's persistent and diligent attention to the present and particular beings. Especially her incarnational approach to literature encourages Dillard's attention to existential phenomena and conscious interaction. Here I simply offer some comparison between Dillard's ideas and phenomenology to suggest the possibility of fruitful dialogue between religious and philosophical thinkers, comparing and contrasting incarnational and phenomenological ideas. Further, this comparison recognizes the important contemporary

relevance of Dillard's religious incarnational ideas by citing their philosophic counterparts.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's extension of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology is the best place to find comparisons with Dillard's incarnational spirituality. In two general areas Merleau-Ponty's ideas are compatible with Dillard's. The first area of compatibility is Merleau-Ponty's revolutionary philosophic assertion that all life, and all sensation, is necessarily embodied, and he acknowledges no incorporeal thought. Explaining Merleau-Ponty's view of embodiment, David Abrams writes: "The common notion of experiencing self, or mind, as an immaterial phantom ultimately independent of the body can only be a mirage: Merleau-Ponty invites us to recognize, at the heart of even our most abstract cogitations, the sensuous and sentient life of the body itself" (45). The implications Abrams recognizes from this radical embodiment are the human re-embrace of sensory experience and new camaraderie with the "more-than-human" world (47). Also, he predicts a rejection of the "Western philosophical tradition" that he says envisions "an incorporeal intellect, a 'rational soul' or mind that, by virtue of its affinity with an eternal or divine dimension outside the bodily world, sets us radically apart from, or above, all other forms of life" (47). By re-embracing an embodied life, Abrams suggests one will experience an increasingly humane and spiritual life that has both cultural and ecological implications. He especially indicates this spiritual life to be inherently animistic in the sense that it will not elevate incorporeal identity but a corporeal life infused with meaning and connected with other living beings and place.

Dillard's incarnational ideas are compatible with many of Abram's notions of spirituality as well as Merleau-Ponty's presentation that all life, all sensation, is necessarily embodied. The very basis for her literary art is the radical religious conception of incarnational embodiment. Because of Dillard's incarnational approach to life and literature that embraces both relevant Jewish and Christian ideas, she is able to depict in her writings entire worlds of animals, natural forms such as creeks, mountains, and plant life, human beings and human culture, and ultimately even the divine as necessarily embodied and in continual dialogue with each other.

Abram's very interesting analysis and application of Merleau-Ponty's ideas present phenomenology as "philosophy on the way to ecology" and asserts that practical

application of phenomenological ideas and "recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded" (31, 65). But Abram's recuperation further entails a degradation of Western philosophical tradition, excepting Phenomenology, as well as a thoughtful rejection of Judaic, Greek, and Christian ideas that have throughout time served, he argues, to alienate humanity from experiential, interactive sentient life by privileging the human species and distinguishing it above and over the rest of nature and living beings, effectively removing humanity from corporeal existence to its detriment. While there is much to appreciate in Abram's argument for a recuperation of sentient corporeality, he rejects much of "Western" philosophy and religion without recognizing the importance of incarnational ideas to Judaism and Christianity.

Dillard reveals an alternative to Abram's rejection of Western philosophy and religion by her religious approach to life and literature, which by her embrace and reinterpretation of Judaism and Christianity encourages a re-embrace of sentient, incarnate life. Dillard finds her incarnational ethic within rather than apart from the religious traditions she is most familiar and, from this incarnational approach, discovers other friendly ideas in Native American and Taoist thought, as well as in natural science and philosophy. In recognizing and celebrating religious incarnational ideas as a basis for life and literature, Dillard does not reject Western tradition; rather, she reinvigorates its sensibilities and expands its compatibility with other traditions and philosophy, even suggesting the possibility that religious incarnational ideas may inspire other realms of thought and dialog.

Further demonstration of the compatibility of Dillard's incarnational ideas with phenomenology includes her willing denial of harsh subject-object distinctions and the ability she provides her narrators to be reinterpreted by interactive dialogue with animate and inanimate "beings." Throughout this analysis of Dillard's creative works, both narrator and perceived world have been shown as incarnational beings in reciprocal relationship. There is a necessary intimacy between all created beings, partly on the basis that they share a created nature and partly on the basis that they share and incarnate the divine. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is keen to emphasize that not only are subject and object reciprocally implicated in perception but that "subject and object are

analytically inseparable" (Magliola 13). Abrams quotes Merleau-Ponty on the "profound intimacy of the body's preconceptual relation to the *sensible things* or *powers* that surround it" by providing the following statement:

> The relations of the sentient to sensible are comparable with those of the sleeper to his slumber: sleep suddenly comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at [. . .], suddenly becomes my situation. In the same way I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red . . . . (55)

In this example from Merleau-Ponty, there is, as in Dillard's creative texts, a recognition that the experience of life is infused with meaning and relationship. The air is not only outside the body in the atmosphere, it is also inside the body, flowing in and out of its pores and orifices. The human being and the air dialog as beings involved in relationship. To understand embodiment is to understand perception that leads beyond materiality to mortality and all the experiences of life, death, and communication. Relationships with other beings—human, animal or otherwise—are altered by consciousness of the body and its multiple, complex, personal relationships. As in Dillard's texts, one not only stalks a muskrat but is, reciprocally, fixed and framed by the animal. One not only sees the tree with the lights in it, but the lighted tree is revealed and the self struck like a bell. One not only watches the "oracular" baby but responds, almost involuntarily, to its gaze. Examples of reciprocal intersubjectivity in Dillard's works might be proliferated, but the point here is that the author's images of spiritual incarnation evoke the same type of dynamic interaction that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and Abram's ecology, recognizes is intrinsic to the human experience of perception.

These two central tenets of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, that the life-experience is inherently embodied and that this embodiment involves continual dialogue and interaction with all "flesh" or the sensible/sentient world, are perfectly compatible with Annie Dillard's incarnational approach to life and her literary portrayals that have a

religious basis. Though Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, derives ecological implications from phenomenology and presents the "Western" philosophical and religious traditions as responsible for many types of ecological damage and human destruction, Dillard is able to derive her incarnational ethic from Judaism and Christianity itself. While Dillard does not directly address the blame, or blamelessness, of these religious traditions, she does offer the alternative of praise as a response to the experience of life when she closes *Tinker Creek*, saying, "The giant water bug ate the world. And like Billy Bray I go my way, and my left foot says 'Glory,' and my right foot says 'Amen': in and out of Shadow Creek, upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise" (271). Dillard closes *Holy the Firm* by advocating action, claiming the role of nun on behalf of Julie Norwich, telling her, "So live. I'll be the nun for you. I am now" (76). Dillard's final recognition of the mystery and glory of life in *For the Time Being* is her closing anecdote that she leaves uninterpreted:

> In Highland New Guinea, now Papua New Guinea, a British district officer named James Taylor contacted a mountain village, above three thousand feet, whose tribe had never seen any trace of the outside world. It was the 1930s. He described the courage of one villager. One day, on the airstrip hacked from the mountains near his village, this man cut vines and lashed himself to the fuselage of Taylor's airplane shortly before it took off. He explained calmly to his loved ones that, no matter what happened to him, he had to see where it came from. (204)

This anecdote might be taken as Dillard's acknowledgment that human attempts to discern purpose and meaning in life, including her own as she provides them in her literary works, often involve some risk and foolishness. To push the analogy a bit, Dillard may be saying that finding "ultimate answers" to human questions of existence and experience requires not only desire and courage but also the knowledge and wisdom to get inside the plane and experience the journey from within rather than without. In *For the Time Being*, incarnational ethic demands participation as well as observation.

Conclusion

Because Dillard invents and embraces an incarnational literary theory, she elevates the status of literary art as one of the best methods to practice embodiment, but throughout her career she has developed her incarnational approach to such an extent that her incarnational ethic now supersedes her self-reflective statements about art. This ethic is, in many ways, compatible with contemporary phenomenological ideas, and readers will find in Dillard's works many places where human perception and interaction are important to the literary narrative. Dillard's incarnational approach to perception has always made her a keen observer and participant in the world, and this is portrayed by the incarnational images that load her texts. Drawing on religious ideas, Dillard is able to re-invigorate the possibility of contemporary consciousness based on observation, experience, and interaction. To acknowledge the religious precedents for Dillard's ideas along with their contemporary philosophical relevance is to understand that an incarnational life is, simultaneously, physical and spiritual, and as far as human experience is concerned, the two must be inseparable.

Having unraveled Dillard's literary art by looking at her incarnational approach, how she embodies this in her literary images, and where she might be inspired and inspiring, the reality is that this work may have performed a type of disembodiment, and the best response may be a re-embodiment, a recreation, or at least re-appreciation for the experiencing of being incarnate. In a sense, being bodied, one cannot *not* respond: the question is "how?" Dillard's own ethic seems to conclude with her final visionary experience in *For the Time Being*, and in it, what one can *do* is not nearly as obvious as what one can *be*, indeed *is*. Here she records the sight of two farmers plowing the earth. "Then," she says, "before me in the near distance I saw the earth itself walking, the earth walking dark and aerated as it always does in every season, peeling the light back: The earth was plowing the men under, and the spade, and the plow. No one sees us go under. No one sees generations churn, or civilizations. The green fields grow up forgetting. [. . .] While we breathe, we open time like a path in the grass. We open time as a boat's stem slits the crest of the present" (203). Incarnate beings are, above all, mortal, but before

being dead, they are alive, and the recognition of the present may be a response girding all others.

Throughout the writing of this paper, because of its incarnational emphasis, I have spent my summertime reflections considering Christmas, so often regarded as a children's holiday where Santa Claus with his red velvet sac of presents spreads good cheer in, of all things, stockings. But I have come to understand Dillard's incarnational presentation as a challenge and mature celebration of the holiness of each and every day, especially today, especially now, as the day assumes a personality and the living beings recognize both their camaraderie and uniqueness. For now, we are staked to this world together.

The weakness to Dillard's incarnational presentation, in my final analysis, is suggested by theological discussion of spiritual incarnation that continually yokes together incarnation and atonement: that God became human, that we somehow share in the divine nature, must mean something and theological discussion of atonement provides possible answers (White). But, other than her ethical statements in *For the Time Being*, which are never ethical directives, Dillard does not discuss specific implications of her incarnational ideas or elaborate interpersonal relationships in her literary narratives. Especially, she does not tie incarnational ideas to ideas of atonement. This is just as well, in my view, because literature can only do so much, but what it does can be done well. Incarnational ideas are appropriately expressed as narrative embodiment, and narrative embodiment is a powerful and humble model for actual life experience. As such, narrative embodiment of incarnational ideas offers hope and inspiration for the modern world, providing an alternative to physically violent ideologies as well as those that are deadeningly disembodied. So narrative embodiment is a beginning and not an end, and I do not find Dillard's lack of direct applications, social or political directives, in her literary works to be very negative or detrimental. Certainly, incarnational ideas can and should impact life, but Dillard may not have the final say on how or what way. There is a time to put down the book. There are other things to do and be.

There is also a time to cease writing. Where a better work might begin, mine ends. But I am satisfied with this as a beginning and, here, conclude to begin again somewhere else.

Notes

[1] Among Dillard's harsher early critics are Charles Deemer, who dislikes Dillard's style (18-20), and Hayden Carruth, who considers Dillard's view of nature irresponsible and "plain old-fashioned optimistic American transcendentalism" (177). Others, such as Eleanor Wymard, explain these strongly negative critiques as misreadings of Dillard's "existentialism" (495-96).

[2] Even in 1989, Weber had noted that portions of Dillard's *Pilgrim* had been anthologized in over forty publications. Also, extensive discussions and sampling occur in the 1985 *Norton Sampler*, which includes Dillard's self-evaluation, "How I Wrote the Moth Essay—And Why," and in *Writing from Start to Finish* (also 1985), which profiles Dillard's analysis of "Writing 'God in the Doorway'." Dillard's challenge and encouragement to young writers, "Is There Really Such a Thing as Talent?", appears in *The Elements of Writing* (1983).

[3] Roughly 50% (26/49) of the theses and dissertations which consider Annie Dillard's writings classify and compare her work in and with the American Nature writers and also draw on ecological, transcendental, or spiritual traditions. Estimates for other critical emphases of theses and dissertations place traditional philosophical or strongly emphasized spiritual/theological ideas as the next most popular approach (30%, 14/49), with consideration of Dillard's autobiographical and consciousness questions at 10% (4/49) along with considerations which emphasize Dillard's language and form (5/49). This breakdown is based on available abstracts through the online versions of Dissertations and Abstracts International and Worldcat (2001). Categories are loosely defined.

[4] See, for example, articles by McConahay and Chenetier. Two book length texts not mentioned in the above survey which also consider Dillard in the American nature writing tradition are John Elder's *Imagining the Earth* (1985) and Scott Slovic's *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992).

[5] Bruce A. Ronda in "Annie Dillard's Fictions to Live By" also sees romantic elements in Dillard's writing and says she combines these with her Christian beliefs, while Cheryl Forbes answers this assessment in her "With a Shake of the Fist" by asserting the illegitimacy of such a combination in her own vision of orthodox Christianity.

[6] See Albin, Carroll, and Keller.

[7] Dillard's ideas and technique are thoughtfully embraced by Eugene H. Peterson in *Theology Today*, Virginia Stem Owens in the *Reformed Journal*, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, in *The Journal of Religion*.

[8] "Tower" alludes to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

[9] I Corinthians 13.1-3.

[10] Matthew 5.6; Matthew 14.13-21; Luke 6.38.

[11] Also John 4.10-14 is Christ's statement that he is the source of living water.

[12] Matthew 16.18.

[13] I Corinthians 12.27-28.

[14] Genesis 28.16.

[15] Matthew 17.1-8; Mark 9.2-8; Luke 9.28-36. Also the tree may correspond to Moses's encounter with the burning bush in Exodus 3.

[16] Exodus 3.14.

[17] Several of Dillard's interviewers, among them Michael Gross, note the author's own "platinum-blond hair."

[18] That she cannot recall her own face is an allusion to James 1.22-24.

[19] Evaluating "How I Wrote the Moth Essay—and Why," Dillard claims celibacy as a "side issue" of *Holy the Firm* because she "hadn't yet met [her] husband," particularly her second of three husbands, at that time.

[20] Dillard often mentions the smoking habits of characters in *For the Time Being*, a quirk of her own predilections. Interviewer Maria Cantwell once observed that "all that remains of Annie Dillard's wild [adolescent] period is cigarettes" and described her as chain-smoking throughout their visit.

[21] Dillard provides the same quote, verbatim, in *For the Time Being* (137).

[22] See II Corinthians 5.17 and Romans 8.19-21.

[23] In Catholic theology, the *communicatio idiomatum* 'communication of idioms' provides guidelines for appropriately discussing the Incarnation, though it limits discussion to Christ as both human and divine. Dillard extends incarnational status to all creation.

[24] "Bushes" alludes to Moses's experience in Exodus 3 of the Divine as a burning bush.

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Erin Ann Ronsse
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