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ECOLOGICAL WONDER IN ANNIE DILLARD'S *PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK*

By

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Thesis

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Ecological Wonder in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

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Through a close reading of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, this thesis presents an argument for the ecological value of a sense of wonder in our engagements with the more-than-human world. The first chapter explores Dillard's desire to see truly, like the Romantics, and follows her journey of attention into the natural world, analyzing her epiphanic, enchanting, and enlivening experiences of deeply intimate engagement with things both minute and massive. The second chapter considers how Dillard's practice of close attention opens her perception in a way that allows her to see the full reality of the more-than-human world, including not just the beautiful and awe-inspiring encounters described in Chapter One, but also its dark, disturbing, unsettling parts. In her desire to see the world truly and with fidelity, Dillard wrestles with difficult questions about our place as human animals, the nature of the world we share with other beings, and how to respond to the overflowing beauty and horror of experience. This project is largely concerned with understanding how Dillard responds to feelings of dislocation in her experience of the more-than-human world, particularly as questions of human exceptionalism, the amorality of nature, and the vulnerability of embodiment threaten her sense of belonging within and relationship to what is not human. I argue that Dillard's sense of wonder, and her willingness to accept vulnerability as an embodied being, offer hope for a profoundly ecological way of being in the world. As we attempt to understand and navigate the Anthropocene, the sense of wonder Dillard shares offers a potentially invaluable framework for reorienting ourselves to and reimagining our relationship with the more-than-human world.

Ecological Wonder in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Introduction

In her Pulitzer Prize winning book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard goes on a journey of “seeing” in the Romantic sense, pursuing what she calls “unself-consciousness” in her encounters with the more-than-human world (83). Thus, the text takes on a sort of narrative arc as Dillard moves through what begins as a metaphysical, visionary journey of discovery.

Dillard’s pilgrimage is an intellectual-spiritual one with the aim of better understanding—and being wholly present within—the startling and stunning more-than-human world. But through this practice of attention, Dillard awakens not only to the beauty and intricacies of the world around her, but also to the horrors, the grotesque, the fecund. Such awareness overwhelms; Dillard finds herself reeling at the chaotic nature of it all. Mortality lurks insidiously behind even the most abundant images of life, and the cycle of nature takes on an insidiously dark air. When Dillard cannot reconcile her human morality with nature’s seeming indifference to life and death, the writer questions her relationship to, and sense of wonder about, the more-than-human world she has so devotedly explored.

That nature refuses to cover over and hide death like we seem to do in the human world proves unsettling for Dillard. Yet by resisting a desire to turn away from the discomfort and dislocation she experiences, to repress the reality of what she discovers, Dillard is able to incorporate *both* the beauties and the horrors she sees into an even greater and more genuine sense of wonder at the more-than-human world. She reimagines her relationship to nature through a deepened awareness and acceptance of her own embodiment as a human animal. In doing so, Dillard comes to face the difficult fact of mortality underlying her feelings of

discomfort and alienation in the nonhuman world. By the end of the text, Dillard returns to the place of exultation and gratitude where she began. But this return comes via a determined grappling with the darker parts of existence that trouble her, leading ultimately to a more fruitful, genuine capacity to praise the “gift” of being alive not in perceived perfection but in this living, breathing, broken, and beautiful world.

Dillard’s work has generated an eclectic assortment of criticism, from a variety of perspectives and in multiple fields of interest: Julia A. Ireland, a professor of environmental philosophy, writes of Dillard’s “ecstatic phenomenology”; Scott Slovic considers Dillard’s journey in *Pilgrim* as a psychological one, calling her a “devoted student of the human mind” (9); Dana Wilde writes of Dillard’s mysticism; countless others consider Dillard’s work (and its consequences) within the contemporary American nature-writing canon, coming out of Romanticism or Transcendentalism and following the likes of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau; and from an almost entirely different perspective, numerous writers, such as John McAteer, Cole William Hartin, and Stan Goldman, consider Dillard’s work theologically. While the theological implications are not my concern here, McAteer offers an interesting jumping-off point. He suggests that, in *Pilgrim*, Dillard employs a “post-Darwinian teleological argument” with the aim of affirming God’s existence (792). Looking to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, McAteer frames Dillard’s goal in *Pilgrim* as “theodical reorientation” to the world that allows her to affirm both God’s existence and his goodness, as theodicies do. My interest is not in how Dillard works to affirm God, but rather, how she works to affirm *existence* itself—how Dillard maintains a sense of wonder not just at being itself, but at the experience of existing within the more-than-human world.

In an afterword written for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Pilgrim*, Dillard reflects on the desire and process behind what has become her most popular book. Noting how enthusiasm tends to fade with age, Dillard asks herself, “Why not write some sort of nature book—say, a theodicy?” (279). Following the tradition of theodicy, albeit rather loosely, *Pilgrim* attempts to understand the nature of “God” and affirm the goodness of existence—the beauty, awe, and wonder inherent in moving through the world—despite equally powerful experiences of evil, pain, and death. Dillard explains the book’s two underlying structures: one, which follows the seasons of a year in some sense (with chapters titled “Winter” and “Spring,” and more subtle mentions of summer and autumn in later places), and the other, which splits the text in half. This second, two-part structure is the more important, as well as the one that provides the grounding for the structure of this project itself.

Dillard explains that “Neoplatonic Christianity described two routes to God: the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*” (279). The first half of *Pilgrim* is an exploration of the *via positiva*, or the light, the beautiful, the positive—that is, those parts of the lived experience which lead one to affirm the goodness of God, or, for my purposes, of life itself. Accordingly, the second half of the text considers the *via negativa*, which Dillard says she found “more congenial” to her views (279). Traditionally, Dillard writes, thinkers of the *via negativa* “stressed God’s unknowability. Anything we may say of God is untrue, as we know only creaturely attributes,” and so a *via negativa* approach to understanding was accomplished by renouncing anything that was “not God” (270). In the case of *Pilgrim*, Dillard writes, this meant the “dark side of intricacy” (280). Thus, *Pilgrim* becomes a project of affirming what is positive in the face of the negative, the dark. Ironically, Dillard’s tendency toward dualisms, as evidenced by the very structure of *Pilgrim*, is complicated and in many ways defeated from the start. Her attempt

to reconcile the light and the dark she encounters relies on an assumption that they are inherently antithetical. Similar assumptions abound, such as Dillard's suggestion that her humanity must necessarily be out of place in nonhuman nature. Yet, Dillard comes to recognize many of these dualisms she troubles herself with are not as clear-cut as she might have supposed. Indeed, *Pilgrim* concludes with Dillard's recognition and praise for the fact that these "twin branches" which she has been attempting to analyze against each other all along are in fact inseparable parts of the world she loves.

While Dillard's genealogy within the Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions is clear and has been given considerable attention, there has been little explicit focus given to the role that wonder plays in her work despite its prominence in these greater literary traditions. This thesis explores Dillard's sense of wonder, and the role that wonder plays in her relationship with the more-than-human world. In *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*, Louise Economides offers a much-needed comprehensive account of the tradition of wonder, including its role in Romantic literature, its relationship to the sublime, and its value as an ecologically constructive aesthetic. Wonder's relationship to the more well-established and widely written about sublime tradition is particularly significant, especially for Economides, who argues that wonder has been neglected in large part because of its similarity to the sublime; the two are distinct aesthetic experiences, but many scholars either focus on the sublime, or simply treat experiences of wonder as subordinate aspects of the sublime. Many scholars have considered what they call sublime aspects of Dillard's work, such as John McAteer, who has written that "Dillard is awed by the sublime 'extravagance' of nature" (792). Others have considered the ever-popular deflated frog as evoking the sublime. Certainly many aspects of Dillard's work could be considered generally sublime, but I think that wonder offers a better

framework for understanding Dillard's engagements with—and responses *to*—the natural world around her. Most importantly, where experiences of the sublime lead the subject to desires to overcome to subvert that which inspires terror and awe, wonder resists such dominating urges.

Wonder, according to Economides, is “an aesthetic response that celebrates difference, welcomes the unforeseen, and opens up a space for enquiry rather than valorized already established meaning” (23). The experience of wonder includes not only those qualities one might immediately associate with wonder—beauty, awe, enchantment, etc.—but also those inherent in experiences of true *otherness*: dislocation, unsettlement, discomfort, shock, and even horror. It is wonder's anti-dualistic nature that makes it such a potentially powerful ecological aesthetic: it undercuts long-standing assumptions of inherent difference between humans and nonhumans, between humans and nature, between the self and the other. Wonder, Economides writes, “resists such reductions” and “honors the excess and mystery of ontological difference” (24). It is unsurprising, then, that those dark elements that comprise the second half of *Pilgrim*, and which threaten to break down Dillard's sense of wonder at the natural world, are overcome *by* and become incorporated *into* her sense of wonder as it expands to allow space for both light and dark. As such, wonder functions in ways that accept otherness wholly and thus avoid the problematic ideologies of dominance, assimilation, and rejection of the other which have led to the extinction and loss we experience now. So as we attempt to understand and navigate the Anthropocene, wonder offers a potentially invaluable framework for reorienting ourselves to and reimagining our relationship with the more-than-human world.

Economides' text will serve as a foundational framework in this thesis for understanding the tradition of wonder and its implications for ecological thinking in. In addition to Economides' work, I look to the ethical potential of enchantment, an experience synonymous

with wonder, as outlined by Jane Bennett in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. I also look to Timothy Morton's philosophy of dark ecology, outlined largely in his book *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, as well as in various articles by Morton. Indeed, dark ecology proves particularly important for understanding the darker elements Dillard addresses, as well as critiquing her response to them. That Economides opens her book on wonder with a discussion of dislocation, uncertainty, and even disturbance as elements of wonder in John Clare's poetry highlights the importance of the "dark" in this tradition. Morton explores the "darkness" of ecological awareness, particularly insofar as an understanding of our implication in the current destruction of the earth is both difficult to comprehend and also depressing. More important, however, are Morton's ideas of the ecological importance of dark feelings and experiences with nonhuman others, including disgust, shame, or shock at the more-than-human world. Engaging these unappealing aspects of relationship with the more-than-human undoes problematic tendencies to attempt to "fit" nature into an appealing, ready-to-consume box, or to deny aspects of its reality which are discomfiting to us as humans. Dark ecology, for Morton, "defeats trite ecological sentimentality" and "helps us stay right here, in the poisoned mud," rather than turning away or attempting to escape the reality of the world in which we are embedded ("John Clare's Dark Ecology" 192-193). It is this attempt to stick ourselves into the mud, so to speak, to engage directly and openly *all* elements of the more-than-human world and not just those aesthetically pleasing ones, that makes dark ecology such a useful framework for reading Dillard in the tradition of wonder.

My aim in this project is to advocate for the potential for Dillard's own sense of wonder as expressed in *Pilgrim* to inspire in her *reader* a sense of wonder at the more-than-human world and, in turn, foster more ecologically constructive attitudes and actions toward it. Bennett's text

becomes helpful here, as it advocates the ethical potential inherent in experiences of enchantment, or wonder. If nothing else, Dillard certainly offers a convincing argument for opening our eyes to the world in front of us; as Economides and Bennett admit, how we choose to respond is up to us. This thesis will follow Dillard's practice of attention and consider how she reacts to—and recovers from—the darker elements of experience that threaten her sense of wonder at the nonhuman world around her. Chapter one will explore Dillard's desire to see, as well as what it means to “see truly” (34), and then consider the implications of Dillard's intimate perception of the world around her. The fruits of this practice of seeing are what Dillard has suggested are the *via positiva*, the beautiful, the intricate, the awe-inspiring. These are the light side of wonder. Chapter two, then, explores the *via negativa*—the dark. As Dillard cultivates an engaged and open relationship with the more-than-human world, in her searching for moments of elation, epiphany, and awe, she realizes also nature's capacity for utter otherness—its dark, disturbing, shocking qualities. My concern regards Dillard's ability to overcome the shock and dislocation she feels at the dark experiences, and to understand how she might maintain a sense of wonder despite these challenging parts of being embodied. To conclude, I look to Bennett's argument in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* that enchantment, synonymous with wonder, in our perception of the world is a prerequisite to positive ethical action both socially and environmentally.

In *Everybody's Autonomy*, Juliana Spahr writes that “literary criticism's central question” is “what sort of selves literary works create” (4). The inspiration for this project is the same: what sort of self might *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* create? What does Dillard's way of being in the world convey to her reader, and how might her reader's way of being change as a result? As we live through the Anthropocene, questions about the way we perceive the world around us, how

we engage with it, and how we *ought* to act grow ever more pressing. When scientific evidence of impending catastrophe abounds, yet much of our world seems increasingly unconcerned and unmoved by the threat of global climate change and the end of the world as we know it, we must look elsewhere for sufficient inspiration to act and act swiftly. Ecocriticism's aim, and the aim of this project, is thus to understand how works of literature both result from *and* influence our thoughts, attitudes, and actions toward the more-than-human world. My hope is that in considering the role wonder plays in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, as well as how Dillard navigates with fidelity both the light and the dark, I may advocate the ecological potential of Dillard's ecstatic and energetic devotion to attention.

Ch. 1, “A Beauty Inexhaustible”: The Wonder of Seeing

In *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*, Louise Economides argues for the ecological value of an aesthetic of wonder in the Anthropocene. Wonder, she writes, entails “a celebratory welcoming of more-than-human otherness” and “affords new perspectives on natural phenomena which might otherwise be perceived as ‘mundane’” (6, 10-11). To experience wonder is to see the world in a new light, to suddenly find what might seem ordinary, extraordinary, and to engage with those phenomena in ways that might afford new understandings of our human relationship to the more-than-human. Annie Dillard seeks the extraordinary. Throughout *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she devotes herself relentlessly to a practice of attention that reveals what has become cast aside as the mundane, the ordinary, the everyday. Dillard’s attention to the minutiae of fish scales, to the habits of insects, and to the movements of microscopic organisms in teacups of pond water reveal a sense of wonder in the way the writer engages the world.

This chapter explores the role wonder plays in Dillard’s desire to “see” the world purely, in the Romantic sense, and to engage with it in ways which open her up to phenomenological

experience dulled or inhibited by modernity. I begin by considering Dillard's intent in writing *Pilgrim*, as she tells us in the opening pages of the book. I then explore the modes of perception she explicates in her chapter titled "Seeing," which leads into a discussion of the role of consciousness and mediation in experiencing the world around us in a section on "The Present." Finally, I look at how Dillard's practice of attention leads her to notice the minutiae of the intricate world around her, moving in closely to see everyday phenomena enlivened through a sense of wonder. But in paying close attention, Dillard finds herself not only enthralled by the beauty and intricacy of the more-than-human world, but also shocked, unsettled, and horrified by the dark reality of the world she's learned to see so truly; I will turn to that in chapter two. This chapter will explore the "light" side of Dillard's wonder at and engagement with more-than-human world—the enchanting encounters that offer energy and buoyancy for engaging a world of beauty and awe at every turn.

A Pilgrim of Close Attention

In the opening lines of *Pilgrim*, Dillard calls herself an anchoress, telling us she likes to "think of this house clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold" like those clamped to churches (4). This "anchorite's hermitage" is an allusion to the medieval anchoress Julian of Norwich, who appears again briefly later in *Pilgrim*. If Dillard's home on the creek is her anchor-hold, then Tinker Creek is her church: she tells us "it keeps me steadied in the current...facing the stream of light pouring down...there's a lot to think about here" (4). There is an interesting tension, then, in Dillard's choice of title and her introduction here as an anchoress in a hermitage, since a pilgrim and an anchoress are in many ways inherently antithetical. Dillard does go walking often, but she by no means makes long or purposeful journeys to some sacred

destination as we expect of religious pilgrims—unless, of course, we consider the creek both her anchor-hold and her sacred destination. Otherwise, then, Dillard’s pilgrimage is an interior one, psychological and spiritual. Dillard is an anchoress of Tinker Creek and a pilgrim of conscious attention, devoting all her energy to exploring the “active mystery, fresh every minute,” of the land to which she anchors herself (4). By dubbing herself our modern day Julian of Norwich, Dillard suggests something about her reasons and goals in *Pilgrim*: just as Julian spent her isolated life pondering and writing about the meaning of visions of the Christ she experienced in near-fatal illness, so too does Dillard work through *Pilgrim* to relay and understand her own experiences of epiphany, vision, and total immersion in the object of *her* devotion: the world around the creek. Here again, Dillard shows her Romantic roots: despite an admission years later that the book is a theodicy, Dillard eschews true religious exploration for an immersion in the natural world. Yet I would challenge criticism that argues Dillard, following the Romantics and Transcendentalists, merely aestheticizes nature or sees it as the vehicle for transcendent experiences. Dillard’s engagement with the more-than-human world, as this thesis explores, is more complicated than such simplistic analyses suggest.

It is also in the opening chapter that Dillard’s famous image—the one of the frog sucked empty by a giant water bug—appears. Plenty has been written about this scene already, as a sort of sublime image or in a discussion of natural horrors. What I find important is not so much those already analyzed aspects of the frog scene, but rather what it suggests about and sets up in *Pilgrim*. Dillard spends much time later in the text describing her horror at what she sees in nature (such as in the chapter “Fecundity,” which forms the center of chapter two), and this experience with the frog could well appear in that section of the book. Yet, I think Dillard places it here, in the very opening pages, because it metaphorizes the challenges she faces and works to

overcome throughout the book. In her lighthearted desire to go out and “see what I could see in the water, and mainly to scare frogs,” Dillard prides herself on her success at seeing this frog, only to be horrified at the much darker reality before her eyes: “it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped bewildered, appalled” (8). So it goes throughout *Pilgrim*: Dillard’s practice of attention leads her to epiphanic moments of deepened awareness, and thus also, consequently, to repulsion, isolation, and despair at a recognition of the dark aspects of the natural world.

Dillard has a scientist’s eye for the world; she knows that, “Of course, many carnivorous animals devour their prey alive... That it’s rough out there and chancy is no surprise. Every live thing is a survivor on a kind of extended emergency bivouac” (8-9). Yet, she writes,

we are also created. In the Koran, Allah asks, ‘The heaven and earth and all in between, thinkest thou I made them *in jest*?’ It’s a good question. What do we think of the created universe, spanning an unthinkable void with an unthinkable protrusion of forms? Or what do we think of nothingness, those sickening reaches of time in either direction? If the giant water bug was not made in jest, was it then made in earnest? (9)

Hence, the title of the first chapter of *Pilgrim*, “Heaven and Earth in Jest,” alludes to the question that drives Dillard and which finds central importance as her explorations venture into the dark:

What are we to make of this world that contains both excessive beauty and excessive horror and pain? But it isn’t just horrific insects and matters of survival: “Cruelty is a mystery, and the waste of pain. But if we describe a world to compass these things...then we bump against another mystery: the inrush of power and light, the canary that sings on the skull” (9). Unless we are all delusional, Dillard suggests, “there seems to be such a thing as beauty, a grace wholly gratuitous” (9). Indeed, it is this tension—the overwhelming abundance of both horror and beauty, darkness and light—that confounds and drives Dillard’s journey. Now, in the beginning

of *Pilgrim*, however, Dillard's energies are fresh, and her sense of hope at the potential for beauty overwhelms.

Dillard is also driven by her emotions, the affective response she feels to what she witnesses and experiences in the world. "If these tremendous events are random combinations of matter run amok, the yield of millions of monkeys at typewriters," she asks, "then what is it in us, hammered out of those same typewriters, that they ignite?" (11). Dillard's intense affect for the world, whatever is ignited in her in these experiences, is part of the mystery. This affect, I argue, is what Economides calls wonder. Dillard is driven to understand the world in which she lives, this one full of extravagance in all directions, and try to make sense of "what's going on here" (10). As to what it is in us that these events ignite, "We don't know. Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery... We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise" (11). This, then, is the theodicean aim of *Pilgrim*: to take a bigger look, to learn to truly see the world around us, so that we might know how to respond. And Dillard certainly finds herself reeling for the proper response to what she finds. This is "our original intent," Dillard says: "to discover at least *where* it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can't learn why" (14). As evidenced by the frog and the giant water bug, it's not all fun and games. To truly look, Dillard warns, "I risk the searing, exhausting nightmares that plunder rest and force me face down all night long." Yet, the prize of looking is worth the risk: "if I can bear the nights, the days are a pleasure" (14).

In a similar fashion to her opening allusion to Julian of Norwich, Dillard makes herself a tool for our use: "I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt

itself' (14). As a pilgrim, Dillard explores the world around her and stalks after moments of vision and elevated experience. Yet, as she tells us here, in her seeking she becomes an instrument for our own pilgrimage of experience. Dillard describes the hunting practices of certain Native Americans, who carved "grooves along the wooden shafts of their arrows" to help track lost animals:

if the arrow fails to kill the game, blood from a deep wound will channel along the lightning mark, streak down the arrow shaft, and spatter to the ground, laying a trail...that the barefoot and trembling archer can follow into whatever deep or rare wilderness it leads. I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood. (15)

Dillard wants to be clear about her intentions, her hopes, her self-given task in writing: she writes to explore both for herself and to guide us through her journey. Dillard is the arrow, marked and made useful by "unexpected lights"—those epiphanic moments of pure presence, the fleeting moments of ecstasy—and we are the hunters; she is a self-sacrificing anchoress, seeking wisdom, and we take her counsel. Whizzing and whirling along her course of exploration in *Pilgrim*, Dillard leaves behind a trail blood from the aim of her hunt. "Barefoot and trembling," we might, if we wish, follow the drops on the ground—the pages of *Pilgrim*—into that "deep or rare wilderness," where we might find an understanding of the mystery of existence. But it is not just a way of seeing that Dillard seeks to cultivate; rather, and more importantly, it is the way of *being in the world* which follows from this mode of seeing. And, as I have briefly suggested already, the journey is not without its risks. Dillard's attention to the self-sacrifice and spilled blood inherent in this fervent way of being speaks to the challenges she faces later in *Pilgrim*, both figuratively and literally. But for now, we will remain in the light side of it all.

“Seeing”: Unencumbered Awareness

In her second chapter, aptly titled “Seeing,” Dillard focuses explicitly on the seeing she likes to do. She recalls a childhood game she played with herself: hiding pennies, then drawing maps and directions on the sidewalks for strangers to follow to their prize. Though Dillard has grown, her sense of possibility has not changed. She tells us, “There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand” (17). The problem, Dillard suggests, is not a lack of things to see; it is our *willingness* to see, or lack thereof—it’s our expectations and our openness. We must ask ourselves not only whether or not we seek, but *what* we seek — What are we looking for? What do we think is *worth* seeking? As Dillard asks, “But—and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny?” If pennies are the awe-some happenings right under our noses, do we overlook them as worthless, or do we count them treasures? “If you crouch motionless on a bank to watch a tremulous ripple thrill on the water and are rewarded by the sight of a muskrat kid paddling from its den, will you count that sight a chip of copper only and go rueful on your way?” (17). What Dillard implies here, and what I think is significant, is the notion that the gift—the muskrat sighting—is not what we are seeking in the first place. It is the ripple of the water that catches our eye, and, if we let it, brings our attention closer and sustains it so that we, by chance only, see the muskrat also. We are rewarded for our attention; perhaps not always, but if we look, chances are we’ll see a kit leave its den or the sheen of a penny on the ground. A sense of wonder opens one up to such experiences, particularly insofar as they are the result of an openness to the potential for surprise and enchantment. Accordingly, Dillard speaks to the humility, the openness one must have to move through the world with such a sense of possibility:

“It is dire poverty indeed when a man is so malnourished and fatigued that he won’t stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days” (17). Of course it is not pennies we are talking about, but the abundant wonder of the world around, “studded and strewn” with things to see if we are willing—impoverished, hungry—enough to look.

If the first chapter sets out the ontological question at the heart of *Pilgrim*, the second chapter is Dillard’s account of what it means to see and what kind of life this practiced seeing might allow. Dillard’s desire to see follows from her desire, as noted before, to get a “wider view” of the world she inhabits so as to understand it better and respond to it appropriately. The attentiveness and sense of connection inherent in seeing also yields happiness and positive affirmation of the world. Lamenting the loss of her childhood ability to “see insects flying in the air,” Dillard writes, “I would like to know the grasses and sedges—and care. Then at my least journey into the world would be a field trip, a series of happy recognitions” (17). Playfully noting Thoreau’s excitement over buds and sprouts, Dillard says, “I don’t see what the specialist sees, and so I cut myself off, not only from the total picture, but from the various forms of happiness” (18). For Dillard, it seems, the ability to recognize the less-than-obvious opens the door to more meaningful experiences, not dissimilar to moments of wonder; but to see these things requires knowledge of them. Seeing also, as Dillard teaches us, can take a variety of forms, some better than others. Describing two types of seeing, Dillard writes that one makes her “analyze and pry,” and another “that involves a letting go” (33). It is this second type of seeing that Dillard cherishes, writing that “When I see this way I see truly...I return to my senses” (34). Before exploring at length what Dillard calls seeing “truly,” I want to consider both modes of

seeing in depth, because the contrast between the two, as well as the unique experiences of both, are an integral part of Dillard's way of being in the world.

This first kind of seeing that Dillard introduces us to is one bound up in constant action and conscious effort. This seeing, she writes, "is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it...I have to maintain in my head a running description of the present" (33). This mode allows Dillard to see, perhaps, some of the overlooked minutiae she previously described, the "lesser cataclysms of valley life," but it is also one of anxiety and aggression. It requires "probing and tilting my head," and "Some days when a mist covers the mountains, when the muskrats won't show and the microscope's mirror shatters, I want to climb up the blank blue dome...and with a steel knife claw a rent in the top" to see (33). This way of seeing (or searching, seeking) seems more like collecting, hunting down, taking moments for oneself; it is fervent and goal-oriented. Dillard likens this way of seeing to walking with a camera in hand: "I walk from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter" (33). Thus, the focus shifts away from the action of walking and the very experience of moving through the world and instead toward the purpose of collecting shots, or seeing what Dillard hopes to see. And as Dillard suggests, when she cannot see what she hopes to – muskrats, perhaps, or the mountains' peaks – there seems to be a sense of failure and frustration. The other way of seeing (or being), however, leaves Dillard "sway[ing] transfixed and emptied" (33).

This second kind of seeing is like walking without a camera: "my own shutter opens, and the moment's light prints on my own silver gut" (33). No longer does Dillard actively search for the right shot, or for moments of vision; rather, her way of experiencing the world changes fundamentally. She is not collecting experiences anymore—now, she *becomes* the experience,

immersed in and imprinted upon by the world around her. If the first mode of seeing requires action and verbalization, this second mode is essentially the opposite. Dillard describes an evening at Tinker Creek trying to watch fish under the surface of the water: she cannot see quickly enough the small fish darting in and out before her but notices – without trying – “white specks...under my feet...So I blurred my eyes and gazed toward the brim of my hat and saw a new world” (34). This shift in perception is important: Dillard moves from actively searching and seeking specific fish, to passively waiting, letting her eyes “glaze” and become receptive to anything before her. It seems to be a shift from result-driven search to a state of receptiveness, of subjecting oneself to the world and being affected by it—I imagine this as a flow of energy: initially, from Dillard directed fervently at the pond, but then from the pond, floating back toward and encompassing Dillard. When Dillard is able to stop outwardly directing her energies and her desires, she opens herself up to *receive* what the world around her offers.

When the first mode of seeing requires the “running description of the present” in her head, the experience is akin to being “[l]ike a blind man at the ball game,” Dillard says, where “I need a radio” (33). In this way of experiencing the world, Dillard does not actually see it for what it is but rather sees (or imagines) an image of it through her own perception, her own construction, her own commentary. The second mode of seeing, however, is an embedded, almost-unmediated experience of the world around her: “I am the man who watches the baseball game in silence in an empty stadium. I see the game purely; I’m abstracted and dazed” (34). I want to suggest that Dillard’s use of the word “abstracted” here does not imply a sense of being removed from the world she is experiencing as much as it does an abstraction from *herself*. Dillard seeks abstraction from her own perception of her experience and thus the “running commentary” that separates her experience from the world in which it is (or should be)

embedded. It is a desire to remove, as I will address shortly, Dillard's awareness of her own mind and its power in shaping what she sees. This way of experiencing the world is akin to what Bill McKibben describes in *The End of Nature* as "being able to forget everything but yourself, and even yourself except for the muscles and skin" (42). This desire for the self to disappear in order for perception to occur could be likened to Emerson's experience of becoming a "transparent eyeball" (which is not without its Romantic baggage, as Christopher Hitt notes in *Toward an Ecological Sublime*) or to *śūnyatā*, the Buddhist state of "emptiness-of-self." Dillard alludes to a desire for such a state of emptiness, or preparedness for reception, at various places throughout the book, particularly in her discussions of Eskimos. When asked why she writes so often of Eskimos, Dillard's response was that "the spare arctic landscape suggested the soul's emptying itself in readiness for incursions of the divine" ("Afterword" 281). This readiness is of course difficult to achieve and lasts only briefly.

Dillard accepts the difficulty of such a state of experience, writing, "I can't go out and try to see this way. I'll fail, I'll go mad. All I can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing" (34). Thus, this commentary that Dillard earlier said *helped* her see things, or rather notice things, now prevents her from an unencumbered, true seeing of the world. And I want to suggest this commentary—Dillard's own voice in her head, the radio commentator narrating the game—is a manifestation of self-consciousness which, as I will discuss later, Dillard finds to be the greatest challenge to true seeing. Thus, to see truly is less about seeing literally, and more about achieving an experience of the world as purely as possible, without the narrowing influence of self-consciousness or knowledge imputing meaning onto what one sees. It is the difference between experiencing a baseball game through the radio announcer's narrative, or between watching a concert on your

television or in real life, between reading about something or seeing it yourself—it is the difference between an interpreted version of the world, in which you are necessarily removed from what you experience, and an experience of the world smashing up against your very body, with no distance between.

Dillard wants to “gag the commentator,” to slow the “mind’s muddy river, this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash” (34-35). Seeing truly, then, is the result of a “lifetime of dedicated struggle,” for Dillard recognizes that the river “cannot be dammed, and that trying to dam it is a waste of effort that might lead to madness” (35). “Instead,” she recalls, “you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded...acknowledging its presence without interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance” (35). Indeed, when Dillard stops searching for the small white fish and instead learns to see them through “blurred” eyes, her immediate and visceral response suggests a sensory shift that mirrors her stripping away of human commentary: “I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone” (34). In learning to overcome her initial instinct to search frantically for the fish and instead enter a meditative state of seeing by *feeling*, Dillard feels herself become part of the immediate landscape around her. Such a shift suggests that to truly see requires not only a quieting of the running commentary but also an opening of oneself toward what is not human. As Dillard says later on, her humanity and her language are essentially one and the same, thus to escape the language, knowledge, and prior experience that limit her perception is to shed off, in some ways, her humanity itself (181). I discuss this at length in chapter two, but here I want to keep focus on the sense of wonder that drives Dillard’s desire to see the world with fresh eyes.

The sort of unmediated perception Dillard seeks is like the idea of the purely phenomenological experience, originating with Edmund Husserl, that David Abram describes in *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Ironically, Dillard's desire to "see" the world without mediation requires a belief in total objectivity, or the ability to quiet the subjectivity of perception—essentially the same misguided idea of total determinacy espoused by modern science, which Dillard critiques. As Abram writes, "whatever we perceive is necessarily entwined with our own subjectivity, already blended with the dynamism of life and sentience," and this subjectivity of perception "cannot finally be stripped from the things that we study...without the things themselves losing all existence for us" (34). But perhaps Dillard's concern is less with ridding herself entirely of the subjectivity of her own perception, and more with expanding the culturally-constructed narrow scope through which she regularly sees the world. Economides speaks to such a mode of perception via wonder, writing that wonder is "a form of defamiliarization that parallels phenomenology's bracketing of *received cultural frameworks* to look anew at how we experience nature at the moment of perception" (153, emphasis mine). Thus, Dillard's desire to experience the world independently of her own *received cultural frameworks* can be understood as seeking experiences of wonder, of perceiving anew those things that might have previously become dulled or disenchanted by routine.

It is unsurprising that Dillard looks to the experiences of some of the very first cataract surgery patients in the West, as collected in the 1932 book *Space and Sight*, as exemplary of the type of unfettered, awe-inspiring perception she desires. Blind since birth up until their surgeries, these people had "no idea of space whatsoever." Before gaining sight, they could identify cubes or spheres by touch, but afterward, when allowed only visual observation, were lost as to what the shape was. As if synesthetic, "[o]ne patient called lemonade 'square' because it pricked on

his tongue as a square shape pricked on the touch of his hands” (28). The lack of spatial awareness and depth perception in this case is not so much a limitation as it is a freeing, or a lack of constraints learned through experience: “For the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning” (28). Dillard describes patients who did not understand what shadows were and explained to those around them that “Everything looks flat with dark patches” (29). One patient, whose experience comes to stand as a metaphor for the unencumbered seeing Dillard seeks, visits a garden and describes what is presumably a fruit tree as “the tree with the lights in it” (31). Another, after finally opening her eyes, showed “an expression of gratification and astonishment” at her recognition of beauty in the world. What seems to impact Dillard most in these stories is the freedom and purity with which they see—nothing has predetermined meaning, so everything so commonplace to the naturally sighted is extraordinary to them—as well as the joy that comes from such vivid and overwhelming experience.

The way in which these newly sighted people perceive the world, freely and without predetermined meanings, can be viewed as a type of wonder or enchantment. If disenchantment involves seeing the world as a place stripped of the possibility of magic, the unknown, or the unexpected, then an enchanted world is one in which shadows become dark patches and fruit becomes lights. Indeed, Dillard’s slight envy of the experience of these patients seems rooted in their ability to see the world in a way she cannot, precisely, with a sense of wonder and awe at what for them is wholly new but to Dillard has become mundane. Economides speaks to this early in her book, writing that wonder entails an “openness to what may be extraordinary in phenomena which we are conditioned to see as habitual,” or everyday (190). That Dillard offers the stories of these patients as an example of the kind of perception she seeks illustrates her desire to experience the world through an aesthetic of wonder, perhaps to retrain herself to see

the everyday as the extraordinary. There is an interesting paradox inherent in Dillard's sense of wonder insofar as knowledge provides the basis for her wonder and curiosity at the world, but in some places it also seems to snuff out the potential to find the world enchanting. Earlier, Dillard laments the fact that she can't "see what the specialist sees" *because* she doesn't know what to look for. In that case, knowledge of the sedges and grasses becomes a catalyst for awe-inspiring engagement with her environment.

Yet with the eye patients, it is their *lack* of knowledge of, or prior experience with, color and shadow and texture that makes their experiences of sight so wonderful and enchanting to Dillard. Economides speaks to the relationship between wonder and knowledge, noting a history of associating wonder with a lack of knowledge, as argued by figures like Aristotle and Bacon, or the more recent Phillip Fisher, who considers wonder an inherently nostalgic aesthetic, longing for the childhood potential for wonder which is lost as one acquires knowledge (27-28). Yet wonder and knowledge, Economides suggests, need not be antithetical. Indeed, Economides turns to Coleridge's poetry to illustrate how "wonder and knowledge function in tandem, propelling one another in ongoing explorations of the unknown" (28). Dillard's sense of wonder, complemented by her lifelong fervor for biological and natural sciences, seems akin to that of Coleridge. Perhaps a distinction should be made between knowledge that leads to a heightened awareness of or curiosity about one's surroundings (as in recognizing various species of flora and fauna that might be invisible to the untrained eye), and the more insidious, blinding sense of *familiarity*, or experience, that dulls our ability to be moved by the world around us. While there are certainly complex ideas at work as Dillard negotiates levels of consciousness, the impact of knowledge and language on perception, and a desire to see "truly" with as little mediation as possible, *Pilgrim* offers no evidence that knowledge and wonder must be mutually exclusive.

Rather, it seems that Dillard recognizes the power of different types of knowledge or experience to both expand and limit what one sees and perceives.

Dillard writes: “I saw color-patches for weeks after I read this wonderful book...But I couldn’t sustain the illusion of flatness. I’ve been around too long. Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning: I couldn’t unpeach the peaches” (31-32). Dillard cannot permanently shake off the commentary, the ingrained meaning attached to what she sees, and so she cannot see the world like the newly sighted. Thus, in some ways, the seeing Dillard seeks is not so much learning *how* to see but rather *unlearning* to see, stripping away the various prescribed meanings overlaid on things, the “running commentary” in her head, the intrusion of a mediating lens in her encounter and experience with the world around. Indeed, in those moments when Dillard does manage to “see truly,” like a newly sighted person, even her own *acknowledgement* of that moment is enough to shatter the moment. It forces a wedge between Dillard and the world she inhabits, breaking the illusion that she is not separate from but one with what she sees. As Dillard tells us, “The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it” (36). In fact, the fragility of such moments seems, for Dillard, to be what so elevates them above her norm. I consider these experiences in the next section.

The Precariousness of “The Present”

Dillard’s mode of seeing truly, like that of those newly sighted patients seeing the world for the first time, seems synonymous with her sense of being “present” to the world. In chapter six, appropriately titled “The Present,” Dillard describes an encounter at a roadside gas station during which she experiences “the present purely” and feels “more alive than all the world” (79). This sense of enchantment Dillard experiences is a direct result of the kind of self-emptying or

preparing for “incursions” of heightened experience, the divine, or wonder, which Dillard describes earlier in the book. “[D]azed from a long day of interstate driving,” Dillard suggests a state of quietness like that during meditation, in which the “muddy river” of overwhelming stimuli and narration running through her head is quieted and “unheeded” (35). She writes that “the cheerful human conversation” with the young boy working the counter “wakes me, recalls me, not to a normal consciousness, but to a kind of energetic readiness” (79). This state of “readiness,” coupled with a slightly lesser-consciousness, suggests to me an alternative state of energy where Dillard is not *seeking* but rather is prepared to *receive*—it is the same difference I described earlier between the two modes of seeing.

Thus, when she moves outside and notices the sun setting, the moment’s every detail impresses upon her: “I smell loam on the wind; I pat the puppy; I watch the mountain...the whole mountain looms miles closer...the bare forest folds and pleats itself like a living protoplasm before my eyes, like a running chart, a wildly scrawling oscillograph on the present moment. I am more alive than all the world” (79). Dillard’s initial dazed state seems to function like a sort of cleansing or purification; it has muted her perception and mental action so that she is not, in the way that seems to be her everyday mode of being, actively looking *at* the world but rather simply being *in* it, and being receptive to it. Thus, as she witnesses the sun setting over the mountains, Dillard realizes: “This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present” (80). Yet, her unencumbered experience, like her attempt to see color-patches, is unsustainable. “The second I verbalize this awareness in my brain,” Dillard writes, “I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque” (80). Self-consciousness intrudes, drawing a barrier between Dillard and the present: “I ended this experience prematurely for myself...I drew scales over my eyes between me and the mountain and gloved my hand between me and the puppy” (80). Dillard

describes her own awareness of this experience of the present, of feeling fully alive, as the barrier that reenters to shatter the moment, like a curtain drawn over a scene. Dillard treads a fine line between awareness or a lack thereof in her experiences of the natural world.

“Consciousness itself,” Dillard writes, “does not hinder living in the present...*Self*-consciousness, however, does...It is the one instrument that unplugs all the rest” (82). If Dillard’s description of “self-consciousness” as a hindrance to presence or seeing is sufficiently clear here, the kind of consciousness that is *not* problematic remains somewhat murky. The important part is recognizing the impact of a self-reflective, or self-conscious, awareness of the experience as it is happening. Dillard equates “unself-consciousness” to innocence, and vice versa: “What I call innocence is the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and a total concentration” (83). This innocence, Dillard advises, can be pursued “as hounds pursue hares: singlemindedly, driven by a kind of love...all unawares to the deepest, most incomprehensible longing” (83). So it is in this way that Dillard doggedly pursues a state of being that allows her these unexpected and fleeting moments of pure, conscious presence in the world. Dillard’s use of the word “innocence” in this context seems a nod to Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and to the Romantic notion of innocence versus experience in one’s perception of and relationship to the natural world. If the kind of seeing Dillard seeks is like that of the newly sighted, who see as infants without prescribed meaning imposed on the world, then Dillard seeks also an un-learned and childlike ability to perceive. If the unity-shattering self-consciousness is a product of society, then we might also say it is akin to “experience” in the Romantic sense. Of course, as Dillard admits, and as the Romantics know, one cannot linger or remain permanently in a state of innocence; it is impossible. There is a powerful kind of wonder inherent in such realizations, and certainly one

that Dillard finds herself craving. Though fleeting, when Dillard has these fleeting experiences of unself-consciousness perception, or awareness of her existence in the living world, Dillard prizes them for what they reveal about life at large, even in the dimmer, less elated moments.

Dillard does not lament for very long the shattering of her experience of the present. Instead, she recognizes, “it would have ended anyway. I’ve never seen a sunset or felt a wind that didn’t” (80). What matters, she writes, “is that not only does time fly and do we die, but that in these reckless conditions we live at all, and are vouchsafed, for the duration of certain inexplicable moments, to know it” (81). For Dillard, it seems that these brief moments of deeper, almost visionary experience highlight the ephemerality of life and thus somehow lend it more meaning. That Dillard says we are “vouchsafed” to recognize our living at all suggests the importance of such a recognition. These rare moments of elevated awareness, though “inexplicable,” confer on Dillard some valuable if elusive awareness of the importance of recognizing wholly our being-alive. Dillard considers this awareness a gift, again drawing a parallel between experiences of the present and “seeing truly.” Each present moment is like “an electron; its lightning path...fleeting, and gone,” so to experience it wholly and unencumbered, as Dillard seems to have done, requires a certain kind of attention, and seemingly one that cannot be forced (80): “although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought. The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practice and adept, a gift, a total surprise” (35). In attempting to define the consciousness which allows for these moments, it is interesting to note Dillard’s isolation in most of these occurrences.

That almost all of Dillard’s moments of elevated experience occur when Dillard is alone, not around other humans, perhaps suggests that to be unself-conscious is more difficult within a

human context. At the roadside gas station with the puppy, Dillard does not experience the “present” until *after* she moves away from her conversation with the check-out counter boy and outside. She writes: “I step outside, followed by the puppy. I am absolutely alone. There are no other customers. The road is vacant, the interstate is out of sight and earshot” (79). So while her conversation with the young boy woke her up and readied her attention, her experience of the present begins when she finds herself entirely alone—at least from other humans, that is.

Similarly, in *For the Time Being*, Dillard recounts an experience at the excavation site of the famous terracotta army during which she feels a heightened awareness of the fact of her life much as she did when watching the sunset. Looking out over the expansive site, filled with clay bodies and surrounded by Chinese farmlands, Dillard writes, “Who would not weep from shock? I seemed to see our lives from the aspect of eternity. I seemed long dead and looking down” (15). And shortly after, Dillard recalls, “No one was near. No one was working anywhere on the site” (17). Perhaps proximity to other humans has the same effect as, or induces, the moment-shattering self-consciousness Dillard works to avoid?

Again, McKibben’s experience in *The End of Nature* parallels the kind of “pure” experience Dillard seeks; describing his frustration at the presence of boaters at the once-quiet lake he and his wife frequent, McKibben writes that instead of being able to “forget everything” as he wishes to do, “you must be alert...the motorboat gets in your mind. You’re forced to think, not feel—to think of human society and of people” (1122). That the presence of humanity announced by the roar of motorboats prevents McKibben from achieving the unconscious/self-emptied state he desires (forgetting everything except “the muscles and the skin” of his body) suggests the same paradox Dillard writes about. Indeed, Dillard herself seems to equate self-consciousness with the human condition specifically, writing that “It is ironic that the one thing

that all religions recognize as separating us from our creator—our very self-consciousness—is also the thing that divides us from our fellow creatures. It was a bitter birthday present from evolution, cutting us off at both ends” (80). In order to feel truly present, without distraction, both writers feel the need to be removed from any awareness of human society—including their own minds. Dillard’s longing after this way of experiencing the world, this sort of solitary awakening to perception, is characteristic of the American Transcendental or Romantic traditions from which Dillard draws much inspiration. Such a perspective carries interesting, and potentially problematic, social and ecological implications, which I want to discuss later on. At the moment, however, I am interested in this precarious line between the acceptable consciousness and the problematic self-consciousness, as well as what Dillard sees as the stake in these moments of pure experience, presence, sight.

Of course, the importance of “the tree with the lights in it” is not the tree or vision itself but rather what the moment implies: Dillard is not seeking a particular moment but rather a level of experience, one which has the capacity to restructure her perception at large, that she had not yet reached. Even in these isolated moments, where she sees truly or experiences “the present purely through my senses,” Dillard recognizes the value of *some* level of consciousness. She writes: “Even a certain amount of interior verbalization is helpful to enforce the memory of whatever it is that is taking place. The gas station beagle puppy, after all, may have experienced those same moments more purely than I did, but he brought fewer instruments to bear on the same material, he had no data for comparison, and he profited only in the grossest of ways” (82). Dillard suggests that the unself-conscious experience of the present is valuable in and of itself, such as in the puppy’s case, but it requires a certain (albeit very precise) level of consciousness to manifest. As I suggested earlier, these moments seem to give Dillard some deeper awareness

of—and gratefulness for—the fact of life itself. Thus, even when the experience ends, Dillard’s perception of “normal” reality is altered; she retains an awareness of what’s behind the curtain, so to say. To be able to see “the tree with the lights in it” is both a cultivated development of attention as well as a return, a regression, to a state of innocence unencumbered and unlimited by the meaning and influence prescribed by society and experience. It is to see the world through the lens of wonder, where possibility is not predetermined and magic may happen.

While these experiences of pure presence and “seeing truly” may be elusive and fleeting, Dillard’s awareness of the potential for such experiences and her desire to experience them again remain steadfast. Indeed, Dillard’s desire for such experiences leads her to cultivate a way of being in the world that results in a lasting and more heightened attention than she would otherwise have. It is this potential for experiences of wonder that sparks in Dillard an attention to the minute details of her surroundings and, ultimately, as chapter two will illustrate, the horrors therein.

“Intricacy”: Wonder at the Minutiae of Things

One significant source of wonder for Dillard in *Pilgrim* is the inexplicable intricacy of the world. Both the intricacies of creation and the variety of forms that abound enchant Dillard: “I see red blood stream in shimmering dots inside a goldfish’s tail; I see the stout, extensible lip of a dragonfly nymph that can pierce and clasp a goldfish; and I see the clotted snarls of bright algae that snare and starve the nymph” (147). It is not only the intricacy of the world that moves Dillard, but also the fact that it all seems to be for nothing, just for the fun of it: “creation carries on with an intricacy unfathomable and apparently uncalled for” (133). Thus, Dillard focuses her

attention on the minutiae in hopes of understanding more deeply the world she inhabits. Dillard reminds us why noticing these intricacies is important:

This is our life, these are our lighted seasons, and then we die...In the meantime, in between time, we can see. The scales are fallen from our eyes, the cataracts are cut away, and we can work at making sense of the color-patches we see in an effort to discover *where* we so incontrovertibly are. It's common sense: when you move in, you try to learn the neighborhood. (129)

Thus, she learns the neighborhood; and here particularly the overlap between knowledge and wonder, this self-propelling symbiosis between the two, is clear. Dillard spills out facts about the composition of the earth, the average size of all animals, a coal bed in the Appalachians, ultraviolet rays, and more. And, what seems the most stunning is the incomprehensible inexhaustibility of detail: there are “six million leaves on a big elm,” and each of these is “toothed, and the teeth themselves are toothed. How many notched barbs is that to a world?” (133-134). An awareness of these intricacies seems, to Dillard, lifechanging: “I am horribly apt to approach some innocent at a gathering and...say, ‘Do you know that in the head of the caterpillar of the ordinary goat moth there are two hundred twenty-eight separate muscles?’ The poor wretch flees. I am not making chatter; I mean to change his life” (134). This is, I think, the greatest sentiment behind *Pilgrim*; there is much to see, and to wonder at, about the world we live in. And for Dillard, these facts are not just facts—rather, they are the fruits of careful attention and the beginning of a deeper and more intimate relationship with the world around. They are the wonder of existence itself. In her admiration of Thoreau’s enthusiastic appreciation of sedges and grasses, Dillard reminds us of the joy that is possible if we are willing to look

deeper, more closely, and consider the infinite complexities and minutiae of the natural world an unending gift.

As her attention brings her ever closer to the minutiae of the natural world, Dillard expresses a sense of awe at the inherent possibility evidenced by such an intricate, complex world. She writes: “The texture of the world, its filigree and scrollwork, means that there is the possibility for beauty here, a beauty inexhaustible in its complexity, which opens to my knock, which answers in me a call I do not remember calling, and which trains me to the wild and extravagant nature of the spirit I seek” (141). Thus, the mere possibility for beauty, and its resultant existence, is a wonder to Dillard. More importantly, even, is the impact this beauty has on Dillard and the relationship with the nonhuman that it nurtures. Dillard’s writing that this beauty answers “a call I do not remember calling” suggests to me a sort of reciprocity in her relationship with the natural world. As opposed to Dillard looking *at* the world (as she does in the beginning of *Pilgrim*) in hopes of finding something to “see,” the world itself calls to Dillard unprompted, implying a reciprocal connection, or perhaps offering a response of justification to Dillard’s seeking. Further, that this call “trains me to...the nature of the spirit I seek,” suggests not only the natural world’s capacity to influence and direct Dillard’s actions but also, I would argue, what Dillard might feel as an inherent *belonging* to the natural world and desire to relate to it fully and unencumbered—a relationship not without its challenges. As Dillard becomes more attuned to the world around her, and continues to devote herself to genuine perception of its wonders and beauty, she simultaneously opens herself to its dark as well. Like intimacy between lovers, Dillard’s relationship with the more-than-human moves beyond the sense of comfort maintained by distance.

It's not all beauty and pizzazz—as Dillard forewarns early in *Pilgrim*, “this looking business is risky” (25). The same attention that opens Dillard’s eyes to the beauty inherent in the intricacy of the world also reveals to her its complement: the grotesque, the horrible, the shocking. Earlier suggesting the evolutionary power of intricacy, Dillard writes, “in intricacy is the hardiness of complexity that ensures against the failure of all life” (147). Yet, the flipside of intricacy is extravagance, and extravagance in the animal world spells waste. If Dillard’s focused attention first revealed to her the intricacies—and the beauties inherent therein—of the natural world, she now becomes aware also of the less-than-pleasant: “I have been thinking that the landscape of the intricate world that I have painted is inaccurate and lopsided. It is too optimistic” (163). And so Dillard’s attention shifts from an awareness of and appreciation for the wonders of her environment, to unsettling feelings of meaninglessness, of being overwhelmed at mortality’s shadow, and total dislocation in her experience as a human in the more-than-human world. It is this shift in perspective, this awareness vis-à-vis a practiced habit of heightened attention, that I want to focus on in the next chapter. Most importantly, I wish to explore the ways in which Dillard works through these feelings of dislocation and confusion she experiences upon witnessing the grotesque and unsettling in the more-than-human world. Her ability to recover her sense of wonder and relationship with the more-than-human is of central import in this thesis.

Ch. 2, “The Shadows Are Deeper”: The Dark Side of Wonder

Chapter one explored Dillard’s desire to “see” in the Romantic sense and ended where the darker aspects of the more-than-human world—overwhelming fecundity, carnivorous insects, the evolutionary imperative of death—take on a sinister role not only in Dillard’s perception of the environment but also her experience as a human being. If Dillard’s cultivated practice of seeing opens her up to moments of elation and exaltation at being alive, it also piques her awareness of these darker, grotesque aspects of experience. But these apparently opposing facets of the more-than-human world need not be mutually exclusive, nor do the darker elements pose insurmountable challenges to a sense of wonder at the natural world. As Economides notes in *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*, wonder is comprised not only those feelings of elation, awe, and beauty which Dillard prizes, but also the unsettling, the disturbing, the dark. Indeed, any ecological attitude worthy of attention is one which acknowledges both the light and the dark in the natural world and makes space for them. If the

purpose of this thesis is to explicate the ecological value of Dillard's sense of wonder, then it is critical that we consider how Dillard's experience of the dark within nature threatens her relationship with and sense of wonder at the more-than-human world. Therefore, I want to now consider the dark side of wonder in *Pilgrim*.

As "dark ecology" pioneer Timothy Morton has asked, "Why did we think that the deepest ecological experience would be full of love and light?" ("John Clare's Dark Ecology" 190). As our understanding of the Anthropocene—including its causes and its consequences, both current and impending—deepens, so too does an increasingly popular attention to the dark and disturbing side of the more-than-human world and our place in it. It is this same awakening to the dark side of the ecological experience, albeit an earlier and perhaps less explicitly ecologically-motivated one, that drives Dillard throughout *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Not only in *Pilgrim* but throughout her canon as a whole, Dillard wrestles in attempt to reconcile the more positive aspects of wonder at the natural world with the overwhelming dark she discovers through her practice of heightened perception. The ecological stake, I argue, is in Dillard's ability to perceive the more-than-human world with fidelity, not editing out or ignoring that which makes her uncomfortable, and in doing so maintain a genuine sense of wonder. Dillard's acknowledgement of the darker elements of the natural world lead her to question her place and belonging as a human animal, which includes her looking to problematic ideologies of human exceptionalism and/or separation from the rest of nature as solutions to her discomfort. It is in avoiding or overcoming such responses that Dillard might offer an example of constructive ecological attitudes toward, and thus engagement with, the nonhuman.

Thus, this chapter begins with a close look at the passage which initiates Dillard's venture into the "dark"—exploring notions of fecundity, abundant death, grotesque images of

reproduction and birth, and the disturbing habits of the animal kingdom. This leads to an exploration of the vulnerabilities of embodiment and their relationship to the dark within nature, most importantly mortality. I then consider the implications of Dillard's response(s) to these shocking and unsettling elements of the more-than-human world, particularly insofar as these encounters cause her to question her relationship to the more-than-human in ecologically problematic ways. Finally, I offer evidence of what I see as Dillard's recovery and reacquaintance with the more-than-human, allowing her to accept both the light and the dark as equally critical components of the natural world and, accordingly, the sense of wonder this world illuminates in her. My aim in this chapter is not only to explore Dillard's encounters with the dark aspects of nature—the counterpart to her epiphanic, constructive experiences outlined in chapter one—but more importantly to illustrate the ecological significance of Dillard's response to these troubling and challenging elements of the world she inhabits. Dillard's initial reactions to the shock she feels are undoubtedly troubling, as I will explore; but this struggle only renders even more valuable the reconciliation and acceptance she finds by the end of her pilgrimage into the more-than-human.

I want to preemptively clarify what becomes a muddled space in Dillard's exploration, and my analysis, of the dark side of the more-than-human. As I have noted, Dillard's openness to the world around her that allows her to perceive all the epiphanic, "light" wonders of nature also makes her vulnerable to its darker sides. Her encounter with the dark elements of the more-than-human functions as a vehicle for meditation on not just on mortality, but on the emotional and existential elements—the grief, suffering, and questioning of meaning—attached to death. I want to draw a distinction between sources of "dark wonder," such as curious aesthetic experiences of the grotesque or fecund, and these deeper, more troubling existential concerns. As I trace

Dillard's attention to the darker elements of wonder from mere aesthetic engagements to questions of emotion surrounding mortality and loss, I want to highlight the difference in gravity between the two. While aspects of "dark wonder" are undoubtedly compelling because of their resonance with ideas of our own morality, I think it is important not to conflate Dillard's experiences of the grotesque or unsettling with experiences of grief or mourning; the former certainly points to the latter, but they are not equal aspects of a sense of wonder, even in its darker form. I argue that Dillard comes to terms with the *fact of* her mortality and thus comes to acknowledge and accept those aspects of the natural world which initially repulse her, because of their inherent relationship to mortality, but she falls short of truly grappling with the difficult emotional responses to the human experience of loss and grief. Yet, Dillard's ability to accept—to some degree—the fact of her mortality as a requisite part of embodied existence is critical to maintaining her sense of wonder. It is not until later works, such as *Holy the Firm* and *For the Time Being*, that Dillard gives extended attention to suffering, loss, and grief experienced by humans.

Confronting the Dark

The anecdote Dillard offers to open *Pilgrim*, the well-known story about her old tom cat, reveals much about the book's underlying questions. The cat, which would come through her open window at night and "stick his skull under my nose and purr, stinking of urine and blood," kneads Dillard's chest with his paws and leaves her "body covered in paw prints in blood," as if she had been "painted with roses" (3). This very first image in the text conveys the sense of tension between the beautiful and the disturbing, as well as Dillard's inability at times to distinguish between the two. She writes, "It could have been the rose of union, the blood of

murder, or the rose of beauty bare and the blood of some unspeakable sacrifice or birth...I never knew as I washed...whether I'd purified myself or ruined the blood sign of the passover" (3-4). Such uncertainty underlies the whole text, as Dillard questions how beauty and horror can co-exist and how one can survive seeing the world as it really is, in all its wonders and terrors. Thus, as Dillard pursues this journey of seeing truly, which we explored in Chapter One, she opens herself up to the dark as well as the light. Witnessing not only epiphanic moments of heightened consciousness, such as "the tree with the lights in it," but also extreme fecundity and death, carnivorous insects and the carelessness of evolution, Dillard finds herself reeling, not in awe but in terror and confusion, her sense of wonder threatened and her place in the world in question.

If the first half of *Pilgrim* explores the epiphanies of seeing, the second half explores the shock, horror, and unsettling which are equally significant parts of an engagement with the more-than-human. A chapter appropriately titled "Flood" ends what can be called the first half, or the positive half, of *Pilgrim* and "washes all that away," leaving Dillard in a new nature, struggling for breath and horrified at each turn ("Afterword to the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition" 280). What follows is *Pilgrim's* second half, "the dark side of intricacy" (280). Dillard introduces this darker side of the natural world which she has hitherto explored by recounting of a "dream of fecundity that woke me up" (181):

I was watching two huge luna moths mate....He was on top of the female, hunching repeatedly with a horrible animal vigor. It was the perfect picture of utter spirituality and utter degradation. I was fascinated and could not turn away my eyes. By watching them I in effect permitted their mating to take place and so committed myself to accepting the consequences—all because I wanted to see what would happen. I wanted in on a secret. And then the eggs hatched and the bed was full of fish...a thousand chunky fish swarmed

there in a viscid slime...I watched in horror as they squirmed three feet deep, swimming and oozing about in the glistening, transparent slime...I woke. My ears still rang with the foreign cry that had been my own voice. (161-162)

Upon waking, Dillard reflects on the dream. Wild carrot, she recalls, can help ease nightmares. But in this case, “it was too late for prevention, and there is no cure” (162). The scene she’s conjured in her head cannot be erased. “Fool, I thought: child, you child, ignorant, innocent fool. What did you expect to see—angels? For it was understood in the dream that the bed full of fish was my own fault, that if I had turned away from the mating moths the hatching of their eggs wouldn’t have happened, or at least would have happened in secret, elsewhere” (162). Dillard might have been writing *Pilgrim* decades before Timothy Morton coined the term “dark ecology,” but her question to herself (“What did you expect to see—angels?”) implies a frustration at her own naivete in relation to the more-than-human, anticipating Morton’s philosophy of dark ecology and his questioning of our naïve assumptions about nature. Dark ecology, as Morton outlines in his book *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* and other writings, provides a helpful framework for analyzing Dillard’s writings about the more-than-human, particularly as they address the “dark” elements of nature. By dark, I mean: the grotesque, the hideous, the disgusting, the horrifying, the terrifying, the uncanny, the unsettling, the uncomfortable. I will return to Morton throughout this chapter but want to now focus on Dillard’s response to this dream of mating moths.

Dillard implies first that her *witnessing* of the mating allowed it to happen—that if she had looked away or denied what she saw in her dream, the hideous hatching might have been prevented. Of course, insofar as this happens in a dream in Dillard’s own head, Dillard is right in that if she could manage to wake herself by choice, or to “look away” from the dream she’s

having, then the mating and hatching would be stopped in the same way a writer can “stop” a scene as they are writing it. But what Dillard works toward with this opening image is a sort of cautionary tale for the rest of the book. And this is the stake: Dillard next suggests not that she could prevent the hatching, but that if, in looking away, she had refused to acknowledge the disturbing in front of her, “at least it would have happened in secret, elsewhere.” We can read this as Dillard’s assumption that by refusing to acknowledge what horrifies or discomforts her, she can cast it out of the realm of *her* reality. Such repressive responses seem in line with the same sort of denial we see today with regards to climate change, the turning-away-from devastating global capitalistic practices that, when faced head-on, become much more difficult to ignore. We might readily admit it is not good to level rainforests in the southern hemisphere, but until so long as deforestation happens outside our immediate and visible reality, and we are not forced to reckon with it, we will likely continue buying chocolate bars and coffee beans that encourage such practices. This desire to ignore or repress such realities, or in Dillard’s case those aspects of the natural world that horrify or shock us, raises numerous ontological-ecological issues, which I will discuss at length later. Dillard’s reaction to this nightmarish experience is to say that “I brought it upon myself” with her choice to continue watching, which is born of her often insatiable curiosity about the world around her. In offering this dream of fecundity, Dillard reveals to us the tension that drives and carries her searching throughout *Pilgrim*.

It is her curiosity here, the same deep urge that drives her to “see truly” in the first half of *Pilgrim*, that compels her here to not turn away, to witness openly and soberly and image of fecund, horrifying birth. Indeed, Dillard’s simultaneous desire to both turn away from and overpowering curiosity about it makes the “dream of fecundity” a sort of taboo. And though what Dillard sees here is only a dream, and certainly an uncanny and unnatural one at that—

while equally hideous things appear in the everyday world, moth eggs tend not to hatch into fish—it is her reaction to it that I find important, particularly insofar as we may consider this Dillard’s way of laying the groundwork for what’s to come. If Dillard’s aim in *Pilgrim* is to see the world truly and unmediated (as much as possible, given the inherent limitations of perception which I discussed in chapter one), then the fecund, the grotesque, the unsettling, and the hideous threaten to thwart her attempts. If, when confronted with the hideous, discomfiting, horrifying, etc., Dillard’s response is to look away and thus ignore its existence and banish it to the realm of “elsewhere,” i.e., out of her awareness, then she fails to acknowledge the full reality of the material, more-than-human world. We can reasonably assume that such horrors are not surprising to Dillard, particularly as she sarcastically asks herself, “What did you expect to see—angels?” (163). Dillard knows it is a deep naivete that assumes the natural world is all pleasantries and beauty, yet to witness its horrifying and disturbing side shocks her nonetheless. Further, Dillard’s admission that “I brought it upon myself” implies a belief that such experiences may be avoided altogether if one simply refuses to acknowledge them. But despite Dillard’s self-chastising response to the curiosity that propelled her dream, she does not wake up and choose to turn away from the nature that horrifies her. Rather she dives in, devoting the rest of the chapter to explorations of the “fecundity that so appalls” (162).

Dillard goes on to consider what it is that makes fecundity so appalling—why what might seem merely a “weird” or surreal dream to others led Dillard to wake herself screaming. Fecundity, for Dillard, is not just excessive birth and growth but also death. Fecundity offers “teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives” (162). It seems that

fecundity appalls not merely because more birth means more death, but, and more importantly, because Dillard recognizes that we (humans) are inextricably caught up in the whole mess. But Dillard seems to think most of us don't see things that way. Dillard notes that "[a]fter a natural disaster such as a flood, nature 'stages a comeback'" (162-163). (It is not surprising, then, that Dillard's "Fecundity" chapter immediately follows "Flood" in the text.) Such a phrase is too optimistic, Dillard declares, and people use it "without any real idea of the pressures and waste the comeback involves...I can like it and call it birth and regeneration, or I can play the devil's advocate and call it rank fecundity...This is what I plan to do" (163). Thus for Dillard, nature's way of generating life is not the joyful birds-and-the-bees of springtime, but rather is a wasteful and inefficient process, tossing aside infinite casualties in its wake.

If Dillard praised the detail and extravagance of the natural world, exulting evolution's endless creativity earlier in "Intricacy," she now questions the reality of such a perspective. "It is too optimistic," she writes, "For the notion of the infinite variety of detail and the multiplicity of forms is a pleasing one...But all this leaves something vital out of the picture. It is not one pine I see, but a thousand. I myself am not one, but legion. And we are all going to die" (163). Behind the intricacy and multiplicity of the natural world, Dillard realizes, is the driving pressure of fecundity, producing countless individuals that blend into senselessness. "In this repetition of individuals," Dillard writes, "is a mindless stutter, an imbecilic fixedness that must be taken into account. The driving force behind all this fecundity is a terrible pressure I also must consider" (163). Dillard looks beyond the thousands of pines or hundreds of butterflies that earlier left her in awe at the diversity and intricacy of the world and now sees the sinister behind the show: "the pressure of birth and regrowth, the pressure that splits the bark of trees and shoots out seeds, that squeezes out the egg and bursts the pupa, that hungers and lusts and drives the creature

relentlessly toward its own death” (163). Thus, in the expanse of life before her, Dillard sees death: whether in what seems an abysmal survival ratio for hatching eggs, or in the act of a mother eating her own offspring, it seems that the creation of new life entails unfathomable amounts of death.

Matters of Life and Death

Not only is death symbolically present in life, in that each life inevitably leads to death, but in the animal world death is quite *literally* present in the creation of new life. It is a “terrible hunger” that drives fecundity, Dillard writes: “These billions must eat in order to fuel their surge to sexual maturity so that they may pump out more billions of eggs.” And what are they going to eat, she asks, “but each other?” (170). And that’s just what happens, as Dillard illustrates with numerous stories of cannibalistic animals. Emerging dragonfly nymphs are known to find a leaf, escape their nymph casings, and immediately eat their fellow nymphs attempting to emerge around them. If that’s not shocking enough, Dillard seems to say, take the female lacewing who, if hungry while laying eggs, sometimes “turns around, and eats her eggs one by one, then lays some more, and eats them, too.” But it’s not just insects who have the capacity to so disturbingly cannibalize their siblings or children. “Even such sophisticated mammals as the great predator cats occasionally eat their cubs,” Dillard writes, explaining how a mother begins by licking the umbilical cord, and then “licks until something snaps in her brain, and she begins eating, starting there, at the vulnerable belly” (170-171). Dillard seems to find such behavior less shocking among insects and simpler creatures, but when “sophisticated mammals” eat their young, there seems to be a slight difference. Indeed, for Dillard, the atrocity of such acts rests on the consciousness of the animals involved.

Dillard looks to the ichneumon fly, whose young hatch and eat whatever is closest. If the female cannot find a caterpillar in which to lay her eggs, she must push them out mid-flight, scattering them across the landscape to starve to death in an effort to save herself. The fly's "dilemma"—that is, her choice to abandon her eggs and save herself, only to die shortly after—would be tragic if she were "making any conscious choice" about the matter, but Dillard dismisses such notions (172). But Dillard doesn't suggest that consciousness is an exclusively human trait. Indeed, she acknowledges that "some higher animals have emotions that we think are similar to ours: dogs, elephants, otters, and the sea mammals mourn their dead" (180). Such capacities for grief and negative emotion are "cruel," she says: "Why do that to an otter?" (180). Dillard suggests here that acts of cannibalism or parents abandoning their young are not inherently problematic; rather, they are troubling to those animals who have the capacity to mourn for such seemingly unnecessary loss. I want to address this emotional aspect later on, but for now, I will focus on the idea that Dillard's discomfort with the more-than-human's fecundity rests on, as Dillard starts the chapter with, the lingering presence of death behind images of life and rebirth.

As I noted earlier, Dillard's discomfort—originating in her dream and continuing throughout her exploration of rebirth in the animal world—is rooted in her awareness that death lurks behind birth. Thus for Dillard, what might commonly be positive images of growth and renewal take on an uncanny, disturbing, perhaps even horrifying air. Dillard recalls: "I have seen the mantis's abdomen dribbling out eggs in wet bubbles like tapioca pudding glued to a thorn. I have seen a film of a termite queen as big as my face, dead white and featureless, glistening with slime, throbbing and pulsing out rivers of globular eggs" (169). These images of birth are dominated by the grotesque and imply death, as Dillard chooses to describe the queen's face as

“dead white,” despite her being alive while laying. For Dillard, “[t]he whole world is an incubator for incalculable numbers of eggs,” and each “glistening egg is a memento mori” (169, 162). It is significant to note that, aside from the image of a large cat eating her cub, Dillard looks mostly to species which reproduce by the hundreds, thousands, or even millions, offering low offspring survival rates.

Perhaps it is not the “wastefulness” of fecundity itself that so troubles Dillard as much as it is a creeping suspicion that our lives are not as important as we think they are. “Consider the ordinary barnacle,” Dillard writes. “Inside every one of those millions of hard white cones on the rocks...is of course a creature as alive as you or I” (168). These barnacles are so abundant, she tells us, that “the barnacles encrusting a single half mile of shore can leak into the water a million million larvae” (168). The problem is not with the barnacles themselves but rather what their surprising abundance suggests about human life; as Dillard asks, “Can I fancy that a million million human infants are more real?...I don’t know if each barnacle larva is of itself unique and special, or if we the people are essentially as interchangeable as bricks” (168-169). Dillard’s attention to the phenomena around her provides perspective on human life, challenging the notion that the individual matters. It also challenges the idea that we humans might be somehow exceptional, or perhaps more valuable, than barnacles (or aphid eggs or fly eggs or dragonfly nymphs). Such is the nature of evolution, she admits: “The faster death goes, the faster evolution goes” (177). Dillard is enrapt by the far greater death required to generate some meager amount of new life. Millions and millions of barnacle larvae go out into the ocean and “drift and perish, or, by some freak accident...they latch and flourish” (176). Such a picture prompts Dillard to ask, almost lamentingly, “What kind of a world is this, anyway? Why not make fewer barnacle larvae and give them a decent chance? Are we dealing in life, or in death?” (176).

Dillard speaks to the paradoxicality of life and death's codependence, writing, "I have to look at the landscape of the blue-green world again. Just think: in all the clean beautiful reaches of the solar system, our planet alone is a blot; our planet alone has death" (177). If fecundity is the flip-side of intricacy, then abundant death is the flip-side of abundant life. This is not what shocks Dillard, as she readily admits ("I am not kidding anyone if I pretend that these awesome pressures to eat and breed are wholly mystifying" (173)); rather, the issue for Dillard is the glaring reminder, inherent in all this fecundity and death, of her *own* mortality. But perhaps more important, Dillard seems to imply, is the question of the meaningfulness of life (Dillard's life, my life, your life, *all* life), which becomes ever more troubling when considered in light of the chaos and carelessness of evolution. Coupled with this question of meaningfulness is Dillard's awareness of her emotional capacity to grieve and mourn loss as a human being (in company among other blamelessly emotional animals, she laments). Thus, her encounters with the darker elements of the more-than-human world are not just morbidly intriguing, or aesthetically unsettling; they become signifiers for not only the biological fact of death itself but also for questions of meaning in the face of life's suffering, loss, and pain. While Dillard seems to resolve her issues with the former, she leaves the latter largely unanswered.

Between Two Worlds

Dillard recognizes that the processes of the natural world, in all their extravagance and waste, are simply the way things are. Yet, that "Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me" is "easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe" (178). "How could I?" Dillard asks, "Are my values then so diametrically opposed to those that nature preserves?" (178). What Dillard values which nature does not, it seems, is the life of the individual: "We value the individual

supremely, and nature values him not a whit” (178). The problem, then, is that the fecundity and cheapness of death inherent in the natural world’s cycle of rebirth cannot be reconciled with Dillard’s humanity. Indeed, Dillard’s attempt to understand the discrepancy between her values and those of nature is inherently problematic, as she approaches nature from an anthropomorphic perspective. Suggesting that “Evolution loves death” is to try to frame the biological processes of the more-than-human world within the context of human emotions, which is precisely what Dillard realizes shortly thereafter is her problem.

Animals, she laments, “may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin’s—or even the barnacles” (178). Death in the natural world is value-neutral, Dillard seems to say: the lacewing does not mourn even briefly for the loss of the eggs she’s eaten, nor does the few surviving barnacle larvae feel grief for the millions that died at sea. Thus, Dillard finds herself at a crossroads: “Must I then part ways with the only world I know?...It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down” (178). If the constructive, positive affective experiences with the more-than-human which Dillard describes in the first half of *Pilgrim* are those that buoy her up, then these encounters with the darker elements of nature drag her down. In an effort to protect herself, Dillard decides “I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized. Is human culture with its values my only real home after all?...should I move my anchor-hold to the side of a library?” (178-179). Dillard’s shock at the unobscured reality of the world in front of her, and her subsequent desire to withdraw from that world, recalls the cataract patients’ temptation to hide their eyes and return to blindness noted in chapter one. Anticipated by her dream in the opening of the chapter, Dillard’s response to the overwhelming fecundity

and death of the natural world is to turn away, to refuse to acknowledge the reality in front of her, to retreat. More importantly, Dillard's retreat would remove her from the more-than-human and place her within the *purely human*, the library. Such a response is problematic in two significant ways.

First, if Dillard were to "reject" her relationship with the creek (symbolic of the more-than-human world at large), she would also necessarily abandon her practice of attention and thus risk losing the sense of wonder she cultivates through engagement with the more-than-human, as evidenced in chapter one. This thesis argues that the sense of wonder which Dillard exhibits in response to the more-than-human is critical to a positive ecological attitude. But true wonder cannot selectively acknowledge parts of the more-than-human; rather, it must make space for the entirety of it. Economides writes of the openness to difference inherent in a sense of wonder, arguing that "Such a welcoming of otherness requires a suspension of prejudice, a willingness to risk open encounters with the unknown and unpredictable" (22). It is wonder's ability to accept and celebrate difference and even discomfort that makes it such an ecologically valuable mode of being in the world. Thus any sense of wonder which attempts to engage with the readily acceptable (beautiful, pleasing, pleasant) aspects of the more-than-human but denies or rejects the unacceptable (unsettling, grotesque, disgusting, uncomfortable) is operating disingenuously and poses ideological and ecological problems. Thus, it is my concern to understand how Dillard might work to maintain her relationship with the more-than-human, and thus sense of wonder, without rejecting or refusing to acknowledge these aspects of it which trouble her. To abandon her "creek life" is to remove herself from the locus of this wonder and thus abandon the affective capacity of the more-than-human, but also to assume (quite misguidedly) that in turning away from the more-than-human and toward the purely human

Dillard might successfully avoid the hideous, grotesque, or uncanny elements of nature which trouble her in *Pilgrim*. It is this underlying assumption—that one might abandon the dark by abandoning the nonhuman—that I want to consider briefly now and return to again later on.

The second issue with Dillard's response is her desire to take refuge from the more-than-human within a purely human space. Such a response reinforces problematic (and fallacious) notions of a separation between humans and nonhuman nature. In the opening pages of *Pilgrim*, Dillard called herself an anchoress and, in calling the creek her anchor-hold, implied she was devoting herself to cultivating an intimate and knowledgeable relationship with the more-than-human world. As an anchoress in a church devotes her life to study of and relationship with God, so Dillard devotes herself to the creek. Thus, when she finds herself horrified at the fruits of her devoted attention, Dillard's response is to ask: "Can it possibly be that I should move my anchor-hold to the side of a library?" (179). Dillard's use of "library" is interesting; she is not merely suggesting she spend less time in her backyard and more time in town, but rather that she shift her attention from the more-than-human world to the purely human—indeed, as thinkers like Abram might say, to what is *definingly* and exceptionally human. Given Dillard's awareness of the complexities and capabilities of language¹ we may assume she is aware of the (ironic) implications of retreating to "the library" (32). If the creek offers the absence of "babble," then the library is the opposite: it is the symbolic worshipping place of human language—particularly written, textual language. As such, it stands not merely as an alternative to the "creek," but as a symbol of total opposition. As David Abram notes in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, language is commonly accepted as an exclusively human trait (78). But more importantly, he argues that

¹ As I noted in Chapter One, Dillard writes, "Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it" *(33). She then expresses her desire for unmediated perception of the world, and to "gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing" (34).

written language, beginning with the advent of the alphabet, initiated a gap between the human and the more-than-human because it allowed for the exchange of ideas not tied directly to material reality (100). Arguably, pre-literate indigenous cultures posited the existence of spiritual realms beyond or not wholly synonymous with the material world, but Abram's issue here seems to be with the way literature often functions to turn human focus inward rather than outward. If we accept Abram's position that written language, if not always then certainly in theory, might serve to separate us from the more-than-human world, then it is difficult not to read Dillard's potential retreat to the "library" as a complete abandonment of all things nonhuman. Further, to withdraw from the more-than-human world in order to escape its brutalities implies an assumed *lack* of these brutalities in the human realm. Not only is such an assumption incorrect but it again reinforces the idea that humans are inherently different and/or separate from the more-than-human. And, as Dillard certainly recognizes if not in *Pilgrim* then later in her career, the human world has plenty of brutality to go around.

In feeling torn between her creek and the library, Dillard again sees resolution in the form of dualistic options, a "fork in the road"—"Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am I freak" (179). Such a response again relies upon the human–nature division which, for the sake of this thesis, I hope to avoid. If the world is a monster and it created us, by what logic are we humans not necessarily monstrous, at least in part, also? But Dillard herself seems to realize this too, as she notes tongue-in-cheek: "We little blobs of soft tissue crawling around on this one planet's skin are right, and the whole universe is wrong" (179). No, Dillard recognizes that is not adequate. But that so much seems to be wrong leads Dillard to consider "the second fork in the road...that it is only human feeling that is freakishly amiss" (180). Dillard recounts the horrors that led her to question her belonging in the more-than-human

world, admitting that her emotions may be to blame for the confusion she feels: “the frog that the giant water bug sucked had, presumably, a rush of pure feeling for about a second...I, however, have been sapped by various strong feelings about the incident almost daily for several years” (180). The lacewing, the larvae, the frog—they do not seem to have the same emotional response to their seemingly horrifying or wasteful deaths, so perhaps it is our human nature and not the world that is amiss. Dillard writes: “It would seem that emotions are the curse, not death—emotions that appear to have devolved upon a few freaks as a special curse from Malevolence” (180). Thus, Dillard accepts that her human emotional response to what she sees may put her at a disadvantage. And yet, despite a jocular suggestion that we “all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state” (180), neither does Dillard want to abandon this mistake of evolution, the emotional capacity that so isolates her from the world that birthed her. Instead, Dillard works toward a reconciliation of her human nature and the rest of the world. She accepts that “it is true that we are moral creatures in an amoral world,” but “the world’s amorality does not make it a monster...Rather, I am the freak” (181). Dillard acknowledges that her emotionality makes it difficult at times to feel at home in the more-than-human world, yet she attempts to reconcile her relationship with nature regardless. She immerses herself *further* into the more-than-human world in order to recover from the shock her emotions cause: “Perhaps I don’t need a lobotomy, but I could use some calming down...I must go down to the creek again. It is where I belong” (181). Tinker Creek, the center of Dillard’s practice of seeing, is both what shocks her into momentary withdrawal and isolation *and* what provides grounding enough to return to her full senses.

Upon returning to the creek for comfort, however, Dillard again suggests a human-nature divide even as she finds herself at peace again in the creek. She seems to relate more closely to

the creek than to her humanity; “as I become closer to it [the creek], my fellows appear more and more freakish, and my home in the library more and more limited...I shy away from the arts, from the human emotional stew” (181). Dillard says a lot in a few words here: by saying she “becomes” closer to the creek, she implies not only increased physical proximity but also a spiritual-ontological alignment. This suggests a shift in her from human to nonhuman, as implied by her feeling that her “fellows,” i.e. human counterparts, and the library, i.e. human culture, grow more alien and unsatisfying. Furthermore, this shift was imperceptible at first, but Dillard “now consciously” pulls away from her human culture: “I drive myself deeper and deeper into exile from my own kind” (181). This attempt at reconciliation is, disappointingly, still problematic: Dillard has simply swapped sides—she is not abandoning the creek for the library, but it seems Dillard feels she must abandon her *humanity* to return to the creek.

While Dillard’s ability to overcome her feelings of horror and her desire to abandon the more-than-human is indeed a step in the right direction, her relationship with nature will remain superficial until she is able to shake off this desire to see “the creek” and “the library” as irreconcilable. She seems to work toward this, writing: “I cannot avoid the library altogether...I bring my human values to the creek, and so save myself from being brutalized” (181). This moment offers hope that Dillard may maintain her relationship with the more-than-human, and her sense of wonder within it, and avoid separating her humanity from the creek in order to accept its goings on, no matter how dark. How Dillard’s “human values” save her from the perceived brutality of the natural world however is not entirely clear. Nonetheless, Dillard accepts—for the time being—the paradoxical nature of her relationship with the world around her.

Dillard seems to find peace in accepting the world as it is, without justification: “What I have been after all along is not an explanation but a picture. This is the way the world is” (181). But it is a limited sort of acceptance, a resignation by Dillard in avoidance of more challenging questions. Indeed, Dillard admits that what really challenges her relationship with the more-than-human world is more than she’s let on:

My rage and shock at the pain and death of individuals of my kind is the old, old mystery, as old as man, but forever fresh, and completely unanswerable. My reservations about the fecundity and waste of life among other creatures is, however, mere squeamishness... I cannot really get very excited over the hideous appearance and habits of some deep-sea jellies and fishes, and I exercise easy. But about the topic of my own death I am decidedly touchy. (181-182)

Perhaps, from the very start, Dillard’s feelings of disgust and repulsion toward fecundity are not because she finds evolution’s practices in the nonhuman realm offensive or lament-worthy, but because she recognizes within them her own vulnerability as an embodied being, she sees her own mortality. Such reservations are, as Dillard evidences, difficult to address head-on.

However, it is in acknowledging these darker elements that we are able to both accept the reality of our own embodiment *and* cultivate positive ecological relationships with other embodied beings, as opposed to turning to problematic historical responses such as Cartesian dualism or the more contemporary transhumanist movement.

Dillard seems to catch herself starting down a(nother) problematic path and writes, “I don’t want to cut this too short. Let me pull the camera back and look at that fork in the road from a distance, in the larger context of the speckled and twining world” (181). With this widened scope, Dillard sees that both “the fecundity and waste of life among other creatures”

and her own death “are two branches of the same creek, the creek that waters the world. The mockingbird that falls drinks there and sips in the same drop a beauty that waters its eyes and a death that fledges and flies” (182). Thus death, Dillard accepts, is a requirement of life: “The terms are clear: if you want to live, you have to die” (183). She finds the ability to acknowledge that the heady combination of fecundity, extravagance, and waste that abounds in the natural world is merely part and parcel of the world she so loves and explores throughout *Pilgrim*. Indeed, throughout the rest of *Pilgrim*, Dillard seems to truly see herself as one among many, embedded and belonging in the more-than-human land/lifescape. Yet, this resolution feels slightly unfinished. While Dillard may be able to understand her own mortality as a natural part of being an embodied being, she nonetheless fails to grapple with the very real, if alienating, emotional responses to death and dying. I want to turn now to an exploration of how Dillard comes to accept the *fact* of her mortality as an embodied being, and later I will consider Dillard’s treatment of the emotional and existential aspects of acknowledging death and loss as a human animal.

Wonder and the Vulnerability of Embodiment

Dillard seems to find interconnection with nonhuman beings through acknowledging a shared experience of the vulnerability of embodiment. This recognition of herself as part of the larger earth community offers the sense of belonging that was threatened in “Fecundity” through her engagement with the dark elements of the more-than-human, and allows Dillard to recover her sense of wonder at the natural world. From considering her relationship with parasites, to realizing the respect she feels for her fellow scarred and beaten beings, Dillard reconsiders the brutalities of the natural world in a new light. Such a perspective anticipates contemporary

environmental perspectives as expressed by writers such as William Cronon, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, and SueEllen Campbell. Dillard also, I will argue, shifts her attention/perception from the transcendental/spiritual to the material, desiring physical/sensual experiences, and embracing a phenomenology of embodiment.

Dillard's consideration of parasites reveals a shift in her perception of those elements of nature that are less than pleasant. "[T]en percent of all the world's species are parasitic insects," Dillard tells us (232), relaying various facts about parasitic insects but highlighting that "The usual story is that the larva of the parasite eats the other insect alive in any of several stages and degrees of consciousness" (233). Such brutality recalls the insects from "Fecundity" whose cannibalism or apathy for their young sent Dillard fleeing. Yet, in a later chapter titled "The Horns of the Altar," Dillard writes, "these parasites are our companions at life, wending their dim, unfathomable ways into the tender tissues of their living hosts, searching as we are simply for food, for energy to grow and breed, or to fly or creep on the planet, adding more shapes to the texture of intricacy and more life to the universal dance" (237). Her perspective toward these animals is not one of utter disgust or horror but rather empathy.

Even more than empathy, Dillard seems almost to *appreciate* their contribution to the "texture of intricacy" of the world. Dillard even goes so far as to suggest the itch or sting we experience from these billions of little creatures might be considered "a sort of rent, paid by all creatures who live in the real world with us now... Wouldn't you pay it?" (237). Some pay more than others (those whose insides are turned to liquid and sucked out, or those among us humans who, rather than finding a mere bothersome bump contract malaria and die), but even this, Dillard decides, is fine. It is "another sign, if any be needed, that the world is actual and fringed, pierced here and there, and through and through, with the toothed conditions of time and the

mysterious, coiled spring of death” (237). These creatures that suck life, in varying amounts, from each of us are reminders of life itself, and that life is a continuous process of consumption and production. Here even death takes on a curious, rather than downright morbid or appalling (as Dillard writes earlier), image, like that of the copperhead Dillard watches so intimately outside her house. Indeed, she notes that once when watching the copperhead, she saw a mosquito land boldly on the top of the snake’s head and begin drawing blood. In a moment of utter suspense, Dillard watches as the snake she’s so long considered a predator becomes prey. Thus, when Dillard describes death as still “coiled” like the copperhead, there seems to be a sense of playfulness or acceptance in Dillard’s description of death, and an underlying sense that death itself is not the ultimate predator we might think it to be. Thus the parasites—despite their similarity to those insects which previously struck Dillard as unbearable, and their insidious capacity to kill—become a critical and welcomed part of Dillard’s more-than-human world.

Later, Dillard notes her affection for what is broken and tainted. “[W]e the living are nibbled and nibbling—not held aloft on a cloud in the air but stumbling pitted and scarred and broken through a frayed and beautiful land” (230). Indeed, it is the frayed nature of existence that Dillard latches on to in these later parts of *Pilgrim*, finding solace in the lack of perfection which she seems to seek early on. “I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits,” she declares, “but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I’ve come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions” (245). In their shared experience of existence, with all its dangers and pains, Dillard seems to realize a connection or belonging with the nonhuman beings around her. It is almost as if these marks of danger or close-encounter, engraved permanently on the body, are reminders *of* her embodiment (and thus her interconnectedness

with other embodied beings), and so also of life itself. Dillard, despite her love of religious language, offers no evidence of a belief in afterlife or immaterial existence. Validating the precariousness of life, Dillard says, “Here may not be the cleanest, newest place, but that clean timeless place that vaults on either side of this one is no place at all” (243). Thus, for Dillard, the recognition of death and loss inherent in marred creatures and landscapes can be understood as another source of wonder, because it grounds her in the reality of the embodied experience and highlights the ephemerality of life.

Yet, I would posit that this is only true insofar as Dillard’s acknowledgement of death here is as biological fact, not necessarily an acceptance of death on an existential and emotional level. If before Dillard wanted to turn away from the dark aspects of nature that reminded her of death and embodied mortality, she is now able to accept them because she has come to terms, to some degree, with the fact of her embodiment and inherent mortality from a biological perspective. This does not mean, however, that she has truly explored the emotions attached to the fact of death that bother her on a deeper level. I will return to this later. Nevertheless, such a perspective is valuable in that it refuses to problematically idolize fallacious notions of “perfect” or untainted nature.

Discussing Jan Zita Grover’s *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear Cuts*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands highlights the ecological significance of Grover’s attitude toward the same sort of “broken” nature with which Dillard sympathizes. Mortimer-Sandilands writes: “far from naivete,” Grover’s ability “to be able to find the beauty in, for example, landfills and clear-cuts...is grounded in a commitment to recognizing the simultaneity of death and life in these landscapes, the glut of aspen-loving birds in the clear-cut, the swallows, turkey vultures, and bald eagles near the landfill” (348). This sentiment in Grover’s work, Mortimer-Sandilands asserts,

comes out of her insistence on “a dialectics of loss that recognizes dying, and also beginning that is born, unpredictable and fragilely, from death” (349). Dillard’s treatment of her broken and scarred fellow creatures is not dissimilar to Grover’s relationship with AIDS patients in the late 20th century, and both exhibit an attention to the sort of wonder that inhabits those broken spaces where life and death meet, and where “Nature” becomes “nature,” as it is rather than as it *ought* to be, in the anthropocentric sense. In her acceptance and valorization of this imperfect nature, Dillard resists the tendency to fetishize problematic notions of an untainted or Edenic nature that William Cronon cautions against twenty years later. Cronon criticizes the concept of wilderness because of the way it allows us to “gaze into the mirror it holds up for us...[and] easily imagine that what we behold is Nature,” when in reality it is “our own unexamined longings and desires” (“The Trouble with Wilderness” 69-70). Far from perceiving the more-than-human world as “a pristine sanctuary” (Cronon 69), Dillard engages it as it truly is—darkness and all. Her metaphorizing of this broken world as the result of the Biblical “fall” is evidence of Dillard’s refusal to impose Edenic notions on the more-than-human world. Yet, she does not seek out a return to Eden before the fall, or an idealized nature. Rather, Dillard exalts in the wonder inherent in an imperfect, real, material world. In accepting the world this way, Dillard’s perception of and relationship with the nonhuman avoids anthropocentric or transcendental pitfalls and instead finds grounding in the phenomenological, sensuous experience of embodiment.

Indeed, Dillard’s focus shifts in this section of the text in a way that I believe has profound implications from an ecocritical point of view. In the early parts of *Pilgrim*, Dillard’s concern is of transcendental or spiritual sort: the “seeing” she’s after is all about achieving a particular level of consciousness (or unself-consciousness) in her perception of the world. Here,

however, Dillard seems to become more concerned with physical, sensuous experience. Such a shift is evident particularly in the chapter “Nightwatch,” where Dillard recalls an experience walking through a meadow flushing grasshoppers. “I cannot ask for more,” Dillard writes, “than to be so wholly acted upon, flown at, and lighted in throngs, probed, knocked, even bitten. A little blood from the wrists and throat is the price I would willingly pay for that pressure of clacking weights on my shoulders, for the scent of deserts, groundfire in my ears—for being so in the clustering thick of things, rapt and enwrapped in the rising and falling real world” (224). This encounter with the grasshoppers offers hope of a more grounded, reciprocal relationship with the more-than-human that engages the full reality of nature with fidelity.

That Dillard wishes to be “acted upon,” writing that they “demanded my attention, and became an event in themselves” suggests an extending of agency and subjectivity to the insects. As Economides writes early in her book, it is an ecological imperative that we “conceive of an ethics that not only honors humanity’s interconnectedness with the earth’s bio-systems, but also resists a colonizing identification that effaces nonhuman otherness” (21). The value Dillard takes from the experience is not reliant on any sort of utility, domination, or forced assimilation of the nonhuman into the human, but rather from the sense of power and effect the insects have over Dillard—the opposite of this “colonizing identification.” In fact, Dillard’s willingness to give of her own body and blood as part of the experience suggests the reciprocal nature of the encounter. From feeling the weight of the insects on her shoulders, to the smell of the desert, to their clicking in her ears, Dillard’s attention here is wholly grounded in the physical, sensuous, immediate world around her. While she does not say so explicitly, this attention to the immersive, embodied experience seems to contrast quite starkly with her focus in early chapters of *Pilgrim* on consciousness, seeing, and epiphany. Even the profound experience of the “tree

with the lights in it,” while undoubtedly impactful, now seems oddly *disconnected* from what Dillard praises here as “the real world.” And it is through this grounding in the sensuous that Dillard finds herself “enwrapped” in the “real world,” suggesting she privileges these experiences over those which ignore sensuous, phenomenological perception.

This attention to the phenomenology of embodiment, particularly insofar as it revolves around, or at least includes, dark ecological thoughts (death, mortality, etc.), reaches its climax when Dillard considers the materiality of her own death. That this happens in “The Horns of the Altar,” the chapter immediately following the aforementioned experiences in “Nightwatch,” is not surprising. In what seems to be a total reversal of attitude toward her own mortality, Dillard finds peace in the thought of her body returning to the earth: “I am a sacrifice bound with cords to the horns of the world’s rock altar, waiting for worms. I take a deep breath, I open my eyes. Looking, I see there are worms in the horns of the altar like live maggots in amber, there are shells of worms in the rock and moths flapping at my eyes...A sense of the real exults me; the cords loose; I walk on my way” (246). Dillard seems to find a sort of freedom through an acceptance of her fate as an embodied being; this acceptance, symbolized by what seems almost like *eagerness* to become food for worms, is what loosens the cords and allows Dillard to walk away freely. Dillard’s choice to explicitly tell us she is “Looking” recalls her early endeavors into “seeing,” as well as her dream about the mating luna moths. It seems she has come full circle now: this dream of fecundity caused Dillard to suggest that “if I had turned away,” the eggs might not have hatched and the horror could be avoided. (We should recall Dillard’s admission that she finds fecundity appalling not so much in itself, because it is so intimately linked with death, revealing the cheapness of life.) Now, even despite “moths flapping” at her eyes, Dillard looks directly at an epitomic image of mortality, and a particularly unsettling (even

disgusting) one at that—live maggots writhing, waiting to devour a corpse, surrounded by fossils of dead worms, suggesting this dying and dissolving has happened and will continue to happen infinitely in both directions of time. Further, the religious nature of this sacrificial image recalls the confusion Dillard feels about whether she ought to be an anchoress of “the creek” or of “the library.” Here envisioning herself bound to “the world’s rock altar,” there is little doubt left as to where Dillard’s devotion—spiritual, intellectual, material—lies. The altar upon which she offers her own life is not that of a church (or a library or human culture) but of the more-than-human Earth. Dillard seems to have accepted the idea of her own mortality that she previously resisted in earlier parts of the book, accomplished in no small part through her ability to face head-on the reality of embodiment and her fate within the more-than-human world.

I want to return to the idea that Dillard’s early experiences of epiphany, of “seeing truly,” become different—perhaps even subordinate—in light of her attention to sensuous experience of the physical world around her. Dillard’s vision of “the tree with the lights in it” comes to represent the epiphanic, quasi-transcendental kind of seeing—albeit in brief moments, like Wordsworth’s “spots of time”—Dillard tries to cultivate early in *Pilgrim*. Thus, when she thinks back on the tree toward the end of the book, it is not surprising that Dillard sees the “tree with the lights” in a whole new light. “I am thinking now of the tree with the lights in it,” she muses, “And it suddenly occurs to me to wonder: were the twigs of the cedar I saw really bloated with galls? They probably were; they almost surely were. I have seen those ‘cedar apples’ swell from that cedar’s green before and since: reddish-gray, rank, malignant. All right then” (244). The epiphanic, vision-like nature of this experience seems to deflate for Dillard, just as the frog does in her early chapter “Seeing.” (We should have taken the amphibian’s shocking death as a warning that not all we see is as it seems.) If it didn’t occur to Dillard “to wonder” before

whether the tree was truly alight, like the burning bush, it does now; indeed, Dillard is able to recognize that what she experienced was almost certainly not a supernatural vision but rather, and quite poignantly, a parasitic infection growing from the tree's branches. What she for so long considered light, mystical, awe-inspiring, wonder-full, she realizes now is "rank, malignant," quite literally an infection killing the tree. Now that's dark. Yet, and most importantly, even with this sobering knowledge Dillard does not dismiss the sense of wonder she felt at seeing the tree "with the lights."

Rather, she proclaims, "knowledge does not vanquish mystery, or obscure its distant lights." Dillard does not try hard to hide her enthusiasm at the indeterminacy of things; earlier in the book she notes with subtle smugness the common human assumption that "as the results of various experiments keep coming in, we gradually roll back the cloud of unknowing" (204). Her allusion to the anonymous work of Christian mysticism, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and her affection for Heisenbergian physics, suggests a hope that despite our beliefs in the power of science and technology to reveal, the mystery of things remains. Indeed, Economides recognizes wonder as "a state of indeterminacy" like that which Dillard espouses (21). Further, we might even assume that for Dillard, the vulnerability of the tree to disease—in fact, to a parasite not unlike those she welcomes just pages earlier—makes it an even greater source of wonder and awe. It is not the perfect, unblemished tree of knowledge in Eden, but rather a living, broken, diseased, and beautiful tree in the fallen world.

Thus, the tree with the lights in it takes on new meaning. While Dillard accepts the "real" source of the lights in the tree, she proclaims "I still now and will tomorrow steer by what happened that day, when some undeniably new spirit roared down the air, bowled me over, and turned on the lights. I stood on grass like air, air like lightning coursed in my blood, floated my

bones, swam in my teeth...I know what happened to the cedar tree, I saw the cells in the cedar tree pulse charged like wings beating praise” (244-245). For Dillard, it seems that what matters about the tree with the lights in it is not so much the unquestionable nature of her experience with it but rather the *feeling* of the experience, which, she claims, is as real as anything. The sensuously surreal experience she recounts here (standing on air, floating bones, swimming in teeth) suggests a change from the initial transcendental/out-of-body experience of the tree with the lights in it; now, in her recollection and reliving of this moment, Dillard adds an attention to the sensuous, creating a sort of hybrid epiphanic moment that straddles both the spiritual and embodied worlds she explores. This newfound awareness leads Dillard to return again, finally, to the question that has driven her throughout the text: *What are we to make of the fact that both beauty and pain, light and dark, coexist in this intricate world?*

Dillard writes that when Algonquian Indians died of famine, a physician described the rash found on their bodies as “the roses of starvation...those who starved died covered with roses” recalling the bloodied paw prints of her cat in the opening pages of *Pilgrim*. About the roses, Dillard asks “Is this beauty, these gratuitous roses, or a mere display of force? Or is beauty itself an intricately fashioned lure?” (270). It’s not, she knows, for “I’ve been through this a million times, beauty is not a hoax,” rather, “waste and extravagance go together up and down the banks” (271). These twin branches, of beauty and horror, of light and dark, of life and death, are inseparable currents flowing through the world of things. Indeed, it is the coexistence of these things—and Dillard’s capacity to recognize and hold them both together comfortably—which constitutes a genuine sense of wonder. As Economides writes early in her book, uncertainty (and discomfort, disgust, etc.) is a vital component of wonder in that it “reflects an ability to engage with non-human otherness in all of its strangeness” and refuses to “reduce such

phenomena” to that which is comfortable or acceptable to us as humans (3). Not only does Dillard find the ability to maintain her sense of wonder at the more-than-human world *despite* its dark and unsettling aspects, but her relationship to the nonhuman (and to her own vulnerable embodiment as a human animal) is made better *because* she is able to incorporate the dark into her perception of the world as an inherently wonder-full place.

Such an affirmative response carries through to the end of the text, even as Dillard recognizes and accepts her own mortality as part of these shadows on her painting of the world: “There is not a guarantee in the world. Oh your *needs* are guaranteed,” but “Did you think...that you needed, say, life?...You see the creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life. Obviously. And then you’re gone” (275). Dillard seems to say here what she’s been suggesting, more or less explicitly, all along: life *itself* is a gift of copper, the extraordinary result of an overflowing world continuously created and the fortuity that we happen to be here and realize it. Thus, even the challenge of her own death, this most mysterious of shadows which previously gave Dillard hesitation, is now absorbed by her perception of life and all it offers as gratuitous and praiseworthy. And as Dillard reminds us, the “shadows define the real”; the dark side of embodiment—death itself—plays a critical role in the show of life (63). Thus, Dillard comes to terms with the fact of her mortality as an embodied, living being.

Life, she concedes, is a gratuitous gift, and with it comes the less-than-pleasing parts, including death. Such a response is clear in Dillard’s suggestion that “I think that the dying pray at the last not ‘please,’ but ‘thank you’” (275). Dillard’s acceptance that mortality is part and parcel of nature’s cycle proves hopeful insofar as it allows her to overcome her objections to those darker elements of the natural world—those *memento moris*—which she initially rejected.

This is good for engaging with the more-than-human genuinely. Yet, such a conclusion seems premature: Dillard herself admitted, as I have noted, that what *really* concerns her is the pain and suffering of her “own kind.” These matters she seems to push aside in favor of a more palatable, if superficial, sense of belonging within the amoral more-than-human. Nonetheless, Dillard rejoices, for the experience of a world unmerited and unnecessary, in its wonders both light and dark, and ends *Pilgrim* quite literally with praise: “The giant water bug ate the world. And like Billy Bray I go on 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” (277).

Conclusion

Dillard’s “pilgrimage” of attention leads her to moments of both exultation and lament at what she sees in the world around her. Yet, despite experiences of dislocation, shock, and horror at the shadows that abound, Dillard ends in praise, recovering her ability to maintain her engagement with the more-than-human world not in spite of the dark, but in full recognition and acceptance of it. As I have argued throughout, a sense of wonder underlies Dillard’s encounters with the more-than-human, and there are significant ecological implications tied to this wonder-driven way of being. I want to turn to Jane Bennett’s philosophy of enchantment in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* to explicate the ethical significance of enchantment, synonymous with wonder, particularly as a source of energy and passion. I will then return to Economides and Morton to consider how the tradition of wonder, in addition to the energy supplied by enchanting

or wonder-filled encounters, offers a way of engaging more-than-human otherness in a way that refuses ecologically problematic responses to fear of the unknown.

In a text exploring the consequences of modernity's "narrative of disenchantment," Bennett argues that maintaining a sense of enchantment is a critical prerequisite to ethical action: "One must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others" (4). Enchantment opens the door to ethical action, Bennett argues, because of its energy-giving capabilities and the constructive affect it fosters. A "mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness," enchantment promises to elevate one above their day-to-day dullness. Bennett defends her proposition by arguing that a disenchanted world, the world of post-Enlightenment modernity, is one incapable of inspiring affect and thus unlikely to inspire ethical action. Bennett supports this claim by noting that both those who celebrate and those who lament disenchantment see the shift as a loss of *meaning* (7). Such a shift—from a world previously imbued with divine purpose to a world of inert matter—is likely to inspire cynicism and a loss of affect for life (77). Following Bennett's logic, such a despairing state of existence offers little energy for taking ethical action. Yet Bennett does not propose a return to a teleological or divinely-organized world; rather, she seeks new modes of enchantment in a world that is neither organized by God nor merely a "dead planet" (4). Rather, Bennett advocates for new stories, new cosmologies, new frameworks for understanding and then engaging the world we inhabit. Is *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* not a story that advocates a mode of enchantment, of seeking the unexpected, of opening oneself to the unknown?

Here it may be interesting or useful to note that, while Bennett's call for an entirely secularized mode of enchantment may initially seem at odds with Dillard's penchant for the

language of religion, the two may not be so different as they appear. In fact, I would suggest that Dillard's use of religious language may be considered a *metaphor*, or a vehicle for communicating her sense of what Bennett calls enchantment—the sense that the world is not inert, inactive, and incapable of affective impact. Such a perspective, as Bennett is well aware, is increasingly difficult to communicate through the ultra-secularized language of modernity. Yet, as Dillard seems to realize, religion offers a framework for exploring the depth of affect associated with wonder and enchantment. Economides speaks to the value of metaphor, looking to Scott Knickerbocker's *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*. Figurative language, “especially metaphor,” Economides writes, is “a means of thematizing our embodied interactions with nature” and should be valued rather than written off, particularly insofar as the artifice of language allows for greater interpretation—and thus greater possibility for wonder—than logical, rational, disenchanted modes of communication. Of course, as Dillard well proves, there is plenty potential for wonder even in “rational” languages like that of the natural sciences; the value of figurative language lies in its ability to make space for experiences that lie outside the confines of direct, logical representation. Or, as Bennett argues in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, our modern assumption that all true reality can be conveyed in calculable, rational language has the unfortunate effect of snuffing out the potential for enchantment in the space of the unknown or the inarticulable. Knickerbocker writes that figurative language allows us to experience “the invisible layer of reality linking the perceiver and the perceived, the sentient and the sensible” (6). This experience of sensation, the affective quality of a phenomenological encounter, is difficult to access or recount in the disenchanted language of modernity which has been continually shaped by and edited to reflect the empirical, measurable, and visible world of inert matter prized by Enlightenment framework. Similarly,

David Abram writes of the importance of recognizing language, even (or particularly) written/textual language, as animistic and capable of moving us as the more-than-human world moves us. Perhaps for Dillard, biblical and religious metaphor are the most readily accessible form of language with room enough to convey the affective power of the wonder she experiences in the natural world. While the Romantics and Transcendentalists worked to establish a secularized framework for engaging the enchanting, the wonder-full, the mystical, outside of the well-criticized religious traditions, such ways of perceiving and representing the world remain difficult. And, in some ways, these established traditions no longer feel sufficient for reasons which ecocritics and philosophers have discussed extensively. It is out of this difficulty that Bennett writes—to make space for enchantment in a non-Divine, non-dualistic, material world. Bennett herself speaks to the relationship between enchantment and religion, writing that “Enchantment is the somatic correlate of a view of nature as somehow linked to divinity; it is the mood that follows in the wake of belief that the world is a cosmological whole” (49). Perhaps there is evidence that the mood of enchantment and what Dillard recognizes as the power of the divine need not be enemies. Interpretations aside, certainly Bennett and, I would argue, Dillard are aware of the power of perspective, and both, in their own ways, challenge the nihilism lurking behind the language of a disenchanted world.

Returning to my earlier point, if apathy is one result of disenchantment, then the effect of enchantment, on the other hand, is a “mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged -- a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life” (5). Dillard exemplifies such liveliness and concentration often; consider her trancelike experience watching the setting sun traverse a mountain in “The Present”; or her response to seeing the small white fish, in which she feels an

enlivening transformation into “flesh-flake, feather, bone” (34). Following both these experiences, as well as numerous similar ones that abound in her work, Dillard expresses a renewed energy and increased hunger for experience, for connection with the world around her, for life itself. Such feelings, as Bennett argues, are capable of providing the energy necessary to take positive action; of course, that enchantment provides the *potential* for ethical action does not mean positive action always and necessarily follows. What Bennett does offer, however, is a convincing account of the value of enchantment not as a solution but as a crucial *starting place*: one from which our attitudes to the world – and our resulting behavior toward it – are reoriented in a way capable of fostering ethical action both societally and environmentally.

But enchantment is more than mere fascination, intrigue, or pleasure at one’s experiences; it is an altogether more overwhelming, stunning, ecstatic, even occasionally shocking and disturbing feeling. To practice a perspective of enchantment seems, to me, to allow oneself to be *affected* by the outside world. In a world of increasing machination and organization, in which the tendency to control or overpower runs rampant, enchantment challenges such domination and instead seeks reciprocal interaction and humble engagement with what is not the self. Such a way of being opens one up to both positive encounters and negative, disconcerting ones, as Dillard illustrates. Accordingly, Bennett writes that “To be enchanted is to be both charmed and disturbed: charmed by a fascinating repetition of sounds or images, disturbed to find that, although your sense-perception has become intensified, your background sense of order has flown out the door” (34). Such a feeling certainly fits with many of Dillard’s experiences, particularly among the seemingly ordinary or “everyday.”

Take, for example, Dillard’s enthusiasm at the minutiae of plants and animals in “Intricacy,” only to be followed by a horror at the fecundity that accompanies such excess. Even

Dillard's encounter with the frog, which some critics describe as sublime, is in fact more akin to enchantment. While Dillard reels in horror for, supposedly, years after witnessing the giant water bug's feast, the experience is not one of sublimity, and certainly not in the Burkean sense; Dillard might feel a sense of horror (albeit, a somewhat feigned one, as she later admits when she calls her reaction "mere squeamishness"), but at no point does she attempt to overcome her negative feelings by subverting or overpowering the giant water bug, the creek, or the fecund world that created them. Rather, Dillard finds herself increasingly interested in understanding the nature of the world and a response to her place *within* it. Dillard's initial reaction to her dream which opens the chapter on fecundity, to look away and relegate the horrifying to the realm of "elsewhere" (i.e., out of her perception) threatens to undermine any attempt at genuine engagement with the more-than-human. Yet, her curiosity—her desire for engagement—leads her to continue looking, opening herself to the world. Perhaps this is driven by an understanding in Dillard that to look away is to give up the potential for enchantment. As she notes early in the text, "If I can bear the nights, the days are a pleasure" (14). Indeed, as Bennett points out, wonder can be similar to fear, but "fear cannot dominate if enchantment is to be...overwhelming fear will not be calm and intensify perception but only shut it down" (5). I want to consider now the ecological value of accepting these darker experiences as part of an experience of wonder.

Similarly considering the relationship between wonder and fear (and thus wonder's relationship to the sublime), Economides addresses responses to the grotesque or disturbing in her book *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*. Analyzing John Clare's poem "November," Economides argues for the ecological value of unpleasant or dislocating encounters as part of a sense of wonder: "Uncertainty *connects* the poet to such things because it reflects an ability to engage with non-human otherness in all of its strangeness,

a refusal to reduce such phenomena to the comforting familiarity of place with all of its potentially sentimental trappings” (3). Such a perspective speaks to Dillard’s work in *Pilgrim*, where both beautiful and “potentially sentimental” encounters with the more-than-human are met in balance with equally shocking, horrifying, uncertain experiences. Indeed, many easily-sentimentalized images of nature in *Pilgrim* reveal themselves to be far from what one might expect, from the deflated frog on the pond to aquatic insects rising to a river’s surface only to cannibalize each other. Yet, rather than using these unexpected sources of horror and disgust as reason to abandon the natural world, Dillard ultimately brings herself to face them directly and, in doing so, generates an even more grounded and ecologically-relevant relationship with the more-than-human than she was able to in the start of *Pilgrim*. More importantly, the dislocation and uncertainty Dillard expresses in response to these dark phenomena play a critical role in wonder’s ability to overcome ideologies of domination and thus in its ecological value.

Again, this is where Morton’s ideas of dark ecology become relevant. In “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” Morton addresses the same experience of uncertainty and doubt in the face of the grotesque or disturbing. Looking to John Clare’s poem “Mouse’s Nest,” which describes a mother mouse that “looked so odd and so grotesque to me,” Morton writes that Clare’s poem effects “the existential quality of doubt” (192). The significance of this doubt, like the uncertainty Economides points out in other works of Clare’s, is the opportunity for transformation and reimagination of our human relationship to the earth. Morton writes that “Doubt—the effect of things ceasing to be what you expect—is here mingled with a heavy sadness, a lingering quality, even of dread...an intense sense of environment from which there is no escape” (192). This recognition of the disturbing and dislocating *other* leads not to a desire to overcome or subvert, as with the sublime, but to a state of suspension of belief and existential

certainty. And the cesspools Clare mentions at the end of the poem, Morton argues, are “surely an environmental analogue for the anti-aesthetic grotesqueness of the close up view of the mouse and her young, which surprises the narrator and defeats trite ecological sentimentality” (192). Just as Dillard’s “close up” views of birth become disturbing and grotesque, Morton recognizes Clare’s depiction of a mother mouse and her young—a potentially sentimental image—as one which refuses such appealing perceptions of nature. In doing so, this wonder, doubt, and uncertainty at the more-than-human world effects “a sinking down into [the environment] further than any wishful thinking, any naïve concept of interconnectedness could push us” (193). It mandates head-on grappling with the reality of a world beyond our control or ability to smooth over. This experience, Morton exclaims, is “incredibly good news for ecocriticism” (192). Indeed, Economides notes the same of such states of uncertainty.

Economides writes that wonder, as “a state of radical indeterminacy,” offers the experience of uncertainty necessary for reimagining one’s orientation to what one perceives as different, *other*, or discomforting. Wonder, Economides writes, “requires a *suspension of prejudice*, a willingness to *risk open encounters* with the unknown and unpredictable” (Economides 22, *emphases mine*). This response can be contrasted with traditional responses to experiences of the sublime, which traditionally lead to “reassertions of human power over environmental phenomena perceived of as threatening,” achieved through models of domination of that which threatens our vulnerability. Wonder resists such urges by welcoming and acknowledging the other as it is (Economides 159). In the introduction I noted the significance in distinguishing between the sublime and wonder, suggesting that Dillard’s responses to what she experiences are perhaps the most ecologically valuable part of her work. Indeed, I argue that wonder is a more appropriate framework for Dillard’s experiences than the sublime precisely

because Dillard refuses the problematic ideologies involved with the tradition of the sublime. Dillard's openness to and willingness to engage the other as it is offer an example of how we might engage the more-than-human in ways that avoid the pitfalls of historical anthropocentric models of domination.

It is through these open encounters and risk-taking that Dillard overcomes the fear of mortality she admits in "Fecundity" and comes to not just accept but revel in the vulnerability of her embodiment as a human animal and thus work to close the gap she perceives between her own humanity and the more-than-human world. Dillard's initial reaction to her horror at the fecundity of the natural world is to question her belonging within it ("Must I then part ways with the only world I know?" (178)). Of course, as noted in chapter two, such a reaction relies on problematic (and fallacious) assumptions of inherent difference between humans and the rest of nature. Dillard's shock and horror at fecundity—emblematic of all the dark, unsettling aspects of the natural world—is rooted in her fear of her own mortality, a fact she eventually accepts as a requisite price of the embodied life of wonder she loves. But as I noted toward the end of chapter two, Dillard's apparent acceptance of her mortality (evidenced by her vision of her own body on the "altar of the world") might be superficial.

As Dillard admits, fecundity appalls her because of its inherent relationship to death—most notably, its ability to call to mind her own mortality. I suggested in chapter two that Dillard accepts the *fact* of her mortality, but perhaps not the emotional weight of such an awareness. Mortality, she suggests, is just another part of nature: "Do the barnacle larvae care? Does the lacewing who eats her eggs care? If they do not care, when why am I making all this fuss?" (180). Dillard acknowledges that some "higher animals have emotions we think are similar to ours: dogs, elephants, otters, and the sea mammals mourn their dead," but most, she suggests,

aren't very bothered by the loss that astounds her (180). Ethology had not yet been researched as it has been today at the time Dillard wrote *Pilgrim*, but the writer seems aware that the capacity to mourn falls on a spectrum rather than as an exclusively human trait. Dillard admits that her "rage and shock at the pain and death" of human individuals is a mystery, "completely unanswerable" (181). And so, she seems to abandon her difficult but brief attempt to reconcile her human, emotional response to death with her acceptance of death as fact of nature.

Considering the cycles of nature from a distance, Dillard concedes that "the picture of fecundity and its excesses and of the pressures of growth and its accidents" is no different from the world of intricate wonder she witnessed earlier, "Only now the shadows are deeper" (182). While such a response is certainly constructive in that it allows Dillard to remain enchanted with the world around her despite encounters that challenge her relationship with nature's otherness, it fails to recognize the reality of the suffering and pain experienced through loss, particularly in the human realm. She also ignores questions of meaning and meaninglessness, which she glosses over in the text but leaves behind altogether. Dillard seems to be aware of these weaknesses in *Pilgrim*, as she returns to ideas of human suffering, pain, and loss, as well as questions of what meaning there might be in life, in later works.

In *Holy the Firm*, published just one year after *Pilgrim*, Dillard writes about nine-year-old Julie Norwich (another allusion to the medieval Christian mystic and anchoress I mentioned in chapter one) who suffers terrible burns after crashing in an airplane with her father, who came out unharmed. The short book seeks answers to questions of blameless suffering and the pain people feel, and what meaning life could possibly have. Echoing the sentiments of abandonment and brokenness she first shared in *Pilgrim*, Dillard writes: "we are sojourners in a land we did not make, a land with no meaning of itself and no meaning we can make for it alone" (61-62).

The extreme pain suffered by an innocent child moves Dillard to question, with more gravity and attention than she offered in *Pilgrim*, what sort of meaning life could have when it is capable of offering such pain. And over 20 years after *Pilgrim*, Dillard's *For the Time Being* continues probing for meaning and understanding in light of not just blameless suffering, but of the utter brutality and evil present in the human world.

What seems to give Dillard peace in response to the appalling (or disturbing or altogether unbearable) parts of the more-than-human world is an assumption that we find the natural world troubling because it does not adhere to human morality. As Dillard admits, "The world's amorality does not make it a monster," but still we have trouble accepting those aspects of it which go against our beliefs and values, such as cannibalistic insects, or the wastefulness of reproduction *en masse*. She decides that while "we value the individual supremely...nature values him not a whit"; this does not make nature *bad*, only different. Thus, Dillard blames her momentary discomfort in the more-than-human world on her human morality, which both makes it difficult to accept the way nature functions and also entices her to reject nature in favor of the human realm when nature's "amorality" becomes too much to bear. Thus, it is ironic that Dillard's later work considers at length the moral shortcomings of humanity. We might read Dillard's attention to acts of human evil in *For the Time Being* as undercutting her assumptions in *Pilgrim* that human morality somehow functions to separate us from, or elevate us over, the rest of nature.

Indeed, if the atrocities of the animal world outlined in *Pilgrim* are enough to make Dillard feel out of place or uncomfortable, then surely those committed by humans in *For the Time Being* are infinitely worse. Significantly, Dillard makes a point to say multiple times throughout *Pilgrim* that she believes these animals are not conscious in their behavior, thus

relieving them of any responsibility or call for remorse (181). Humans, however, according to Dillard, are not only fully conscious of their choices and actions but also live within a moral framework which (supposedly) guides them. Thus, when Dillard describes emperors burying thousands of living soldiers, or ancient religious scholars flaying people alive with oyster shells, despite a lack of forthright condemnation from the writer, we can readily assume that Dillard finds these actions appalling. One can make many inferences about Dillard's ontological development over the course of her career, but what seems clear is a recognition that humans are capable of monstrosities arguably far worse than the natural world.

Such an awareness evidenced by Dillard would certainly challenge the sense of wonder she attempts to maintain throughout *Pilgrim*. In fact, this capacity to affirm the world as good is threatened on a far deeper level than Dillard initially acknowledges—not only by intentional acts of evil, but also the blameless suffering of people like Julie Norwich or the masses of babies born with crippling birth defects Dillard considers throughout *For the Time Being*. I draw attention to Dillard's failure to address these issues in *Pilgrim* because there is the potential for serious ecological consequences in our responses to such suffering and pain as embodied beings.

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler writes of the difficulty of embodied vulnerability and the potential for violent responses to the acknowledgement of one's vulnerability. Mindfulness of our vulnerability, she argues, can lead to non-military or non-violent solutions to being made vulnerable (she is speaking particularly in response to the events of 9/11), while “denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery...can fuel the instruments of war” (29). We cannot “will away this vulnerability,” she cautions; rather, “We must attend to it,” and this includes being willing to grieve. Butler writes of grieving as a dislocating and transformative process, one in which one's identity and direction becomes uncertain (30). While the grieving and mourning

of which Butler writes is certainly of greater weight than the unsettling or dislocating aspects of dark wonder I have discussed previously, both have a similar effect: to resist the urge to overcome or dominate and instead create the space for one to reorient oneself to the world and reimagine relationship to it. If fear of our vulnerability leads to projects of domination, like our military presence in Afghanistan following 9/11 or transhumanist aspirations of mind-uploading in an effort to overcome bodily limitations, then recognizing our vulnerability is crucial if we wish to engage healthily and openly with the living, breathing more-than-human world and maintain our natural place within it.

This is what Dillard seems to work toward in *Pilgrim*. While she may fail to sufficiently acknowledge the full reality of emotional responses to death and loss, she exhibits a desire to grapple with and accept at least the fact of her vulnerability and mortality as an embodied being. This conditional acceptance is evidenced, as I have argued, in Dillard's vision of herself on the altar of the world. It is by not only recognizing and accepting those elements of nature that so shock her that Dillard comes to terms with her own embodiment and thus reconstructs her relationship with the more-than-human, but also by learning to see the very stuff of her fears as *necessarily* interrelated with her own being. As Morton writes in "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," encounters with the dark force "us towards identification with the disgusting" and break down the "aestheticization that reinforces the dualism of subject and object" (264). Yet, Morton cautions against a desire to too quickly overcome this dissonance, this recognition of distance, between self and other. Shelley's *Alastor*, Morton suggests, is radically ecological poem that "offers the possibility of a *noir* ecology" in the way that it refuses to "abolish the difference between subject and object too quickly" (268). Morton argues that any truly deep ecology "would linger with this difference for as long as possible" (268). Dark ecology seems to operate

in the space between attempted assimilation of the utterly “other” into the self, and the desire to dominate and control the other into digestible sameness.

Dillard’s inability to reconcile her human emotions (i.e., her mind) with her vulnerability as an embodied animal may not be so problematic after all, at least not ecologically—that the existential tension inherent in her struggle remains is evidenced by her later work. Dillard seems to accept this irreconcilability and, rather than withdrawing from nature as she initially seeks to do, immerses herself *even further* into the more-than-human world, despite the difficulty of lingering there. As if speaking directly to Dillard’s struggle in *Pilgrim*, Morton argues for an acknowledgement of the “the relentless pulsation of life and death, and death-in-life,” and an ability to be truly close with such a discomfoting awareness (266). “[A]ccepting the fact of our own death,” Morton argues, is “echoed in the choice to maintain the painful awareness of being alive—of having a mind that differs from our body and from itself” (267). Indeed, as Dillard evidences, to be truly alive is to recognize one’s own death. As she continuously seeks heightened awareness of her own aliveness, Dillard becomes aware not just of the phenomenological wonders of life, but also of the precarity of embodiment and the reality of death inherent therein. Thus Dillard’s acceptance of the fact of her death as an *embodied* being, despite her inability to accept her own mortality as an *emotional* being who values individual life, might offer a truly dark ecological example of engaging the more-than-human in its full reality. To borrow Morton’s language, this is good news for ecology indeed.

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