

1-1-1976

Book Review: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Marianna Valeo
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvsc_review

Recommended Citation

Valeo, Marianna (1976) "Book Review: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*," *The GVSC Review*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvsc_review/vol3/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The GVSC Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

BOOK REVIEW *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, by Annie Dillard (Harper Magazine Press, 1974)

Marianna Valeo

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a 15th century humanist, restates the fable of creation in order to emphasize the proper use of the world and to underline the self-redemptive capabilities of man:

Now the Highest Father, God the Architect, according to the laws of His secret wisdom, built this world which we see, the most sacred temple of His divinity. He adorned the region beyond the Heavens with Intelligences, He animated the celestial spheres with eternal souls, and He filled the excrementary and filthy parts of the lower world with a multitude of animals of all kinds. But an Artisan longed for someone to reflect on the plan of so great a creation, to love its beauty and to admire its magnitude. (*The Dignity of Man*)

Published by ShadowWorks@GWSU, 1976 1

Back to the divine drawing board went the Great Designer, according to Pico, and made man, who no doubt has much of the filthy and excrementary but who also has something of celestial intelligence, through the exercise of which he may save himself; as he cultivates his passion to understand, as he aspires to see things whole, to learn how the details of the Mighty Plan work in harmony, man finds fulfillment and grace here on earth, at once the site and the occasion of his redemption. Though Pico in his cheerfulness does not linger over unpleasant alternatives, he knows that the earth may be the site and the occasion of man's damnation. If man joins with the lower world he was designed to admire, if, instead of contemplating that world, he seeks to eat it, then man abuses God's creation; he becomes a brute.

Pico's view is a happy one, accommodating as it does a variety of responses to the question "How should man live?" The many answers may be seen, by way of a savage reductio, as sophistications of three simple responses: man should live according to the dictates of God, or of Nature, or of Reason. Pico brings these three together, and in the process brings together all men who have reasoned deeply about nature or sought a creator in creation. All seekers become fellows.

Annie Dillard's utterly beautiful book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, is a saving or redemptive work, in Pico's sense, if we make haste to add that salvation is not for man in his monstrous collectivity but for certain individuals. Surely the race of man is about to eat the world, to consume

creation in a sustained, highly organized, and industrialized orgy, an unholy feast ungraced by even a perfunctory libation to the creator; surely, to the question "How should man live?" most men answer, "Any way he wants." Annie Dillard never alludes to such mass obscenities; but with informed charm and profound humor she calls us away, irresistibly, to reflect on the sublimity of the natural world.

Annie Dillard is a young woman who lives in the Virginia mountains. She reads. She walks the nearby woods and pastures. She thinks. She makes it her whole labor and her "fierce game" to see the world around her as it is and to penetrate the thingness of that world to the Idea beyond. She is man in the temple of divinity and her book is an attempt to understand man and the temple, each by reference to the other. She walks, looks, reads, and writes — she lives — in order to discover "where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can't learn why."

As far as Annie Dillard is concerned, the ideas of salvation and quest and admiration imply neither a priori piety nor solemnity. From the Koran she quotes Allah: "The heaven and the earth and all in between, thinkest thou I made them in jest?" Says Annie Dillard, with her characteristic intellectual pertness, "It's a good question." That the universe may be in fact an expansive practical joke teases her imagination. That the sublime may be scary, that the awesome may be awful, that what we admire even to the point of ecstasy may be the means of our reduction, that the seeker for meaning may be headed for a tragic recognition — such possibilities challenge her self-possession. Like Job, she rejects all assumptions about the modes and motives of God's earthly operation. Unlike Job — possibly because she lacks the boils and attendant misfortunes — she never loses her sense of humor and her fascination with the marvellous, ambiguous revelation all around her, in Tinker Creek, in Tinker Valley, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, in God's world.

This book, distinctive though it is, does not constitute a class unto itself. Indeed, it takes its place among a large company of fellows. T. S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," offers a vision of literary works engaged in a sort of eternal symposium. Each new work — by which Eliot means an important or worthy work — *happens* to all preceding works: "The existing monuments form an ideal order . . . which is modified by the introduction of a new work." Annie Dillard's book must cause a great jostling and shifting and relocation among such recent contemporaries as Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* and Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Twelve Seasons* and *The Voice of the Desert* and Loren

Eiseley's *The Immense Journey*. Such older contemporaries as Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* and the still older works of John Muir may henceforth speak in a somewhat different voice. The jostling wave may reach back to Thoreau's *Walden*.

To associate *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* with these works is in part to describe it; all aim to cultivate awe for the natural world — particularly for living nature as it impinges on our senses — by bringing to bear our knowledge of facts and relationships. The natural world, especially when pretty or picturesque or curious, may disarm the intellect. But all of these works put scientific information, of various sorts and levels, in the service of the human spirit marvelling, questioning, in some way worshipping the scene of the drama of Man and of the lower world. All seek repose, or ecstasy, or justification in knowledge — or, more specifically, in the informed contemplation of the meaning, the intellectual use, of nature's cunning ways. 3

Scientific information, then, is essential to this book; it is the growing medium of Annie Dillard's imagination. But the imagination, or the questing spirit, the animus to understand the way of the world in its high and comprehensive workings, figures more largely and more grandly than the hard data themselves. Hence, this book assumes its place in a still larger and more ancient company, among all works of ultimate concern. And Annie Dillard is conscious that her quest is universal. Her most intimate fellow seekers are those giants who with their ineffable wisdom have shaped the human sensibility rather than those geniuses who have funded humanity's data banks. True, she cites often such writers as Howard Ensign Evans and Edwin Way Teale and Henri Fabre, entomologists; like them, she is fascinated by facts in themselves. But Annie Dillard is not a retailer of amazing facts; and those scientists, those curators of fascinating facts, are only a means. Annie Dillard uses them in order to perceive in the lower world the speculative constructs of the great visionaries. In Buddha and Jesus and Mohammed, in Heraclitus and Aeschylus and Pascal and Goethe, in William Blake and Van Gogh and Picasso she finds her true fellow pilgrims.

Here is a brief example of the way Annie Dillard's mind moves: She begins by discovering a surprising number of caddisfly cases in the mud at her feet. Then her perspective broadens and her apprehension of the mud becomes intellectual, bookish. She quotes an unnamed biologist who has counted the living creatures in one square foot of topsoil one inch deep: ". . . 868 mites, 265 springtails, 22 millipedes, 19 adult beetles . . . and

many millions of fungi, protozoa, and algae – in a mere teaspoonful of soil.” Then she soars beyond the facts:

My ignoring them won't strip them of their reality, and admitting them, one by one, into my consciousness might heighten mine, might add their dim awareness to my human consciousness, such as it is, and set up a buzz, a vibration . . . Hasidism has a tradition that one of man's purposes is to assist God in the work of redemption "by hallowing" the things of creation. By a tremendous heave of his spirit, the devout man frees the divine sparks trapped in the mute things of time; he uplifts the forms and moments of creation, bearing them aloft into that rare air and hallowing fire in which all clays must shatter and burst. Keeping the subsoil world under trees in mind, in intelligence, is the *least* I can do.

It is characteristic that Annie Dillard can see her spiritual afflatus with slightly self-reductive humor.

Annie Dillard refers to her house on the banks of Tinker Creek as an anchor hold, explaining that "an anchorite's hermitage is called an anchor hold." She is, of course, the anchorite, a sort of non-travelling pilgrim seeking ecstasy in a sort of wilderness. But her "mystical excursion into the natural world" (as the cover to the Bantam paperback edition terms it) is of a peculiar sort. After all, for the ordinary anchorite, the wilderness is but an escape from distraction, not something interesting and compelling in itself. The vacancy of the desert, or, for T. S. Eliot, a modern urban eremite, the vacancy of the city, serves by bringing

Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Dessication of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy.

This in "Burnt Norton." In "Little Gidding," Eliot excludes all that is intellectual:

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

The hermitage is not usually identified with the study or the laboratory; it is an unprejudiced place where the eremite may receive, directly from God, the ecstatic evidence. Annie Dillard's hermitage, on the other hand, is equipped not only with microscope but with books, with an enormous

fardel of ideas. This eremite's ecstasies are formed and informed by what we call Learning.

The equipment of her anchorhold — especially the books, the accumulated experiences of others — suggests how imagination serves her. For indeed nature impinges on her senses only in order to register itself on her imagination. She seems not to need actual physical contact with nature.

Nature has its unsubtle ways of reminding man that his existence on earth is on sufferance. Let the temperature harden to Arctic brittleness, or let the wind show its teeth, and we sense the precariousness of life. It is informative and humbling to freeze and to endure tempests; to do so even in sport, as in mountain climbing, can be for the individual an intense form of worship, an acknowledgment of nature's omnipotence. It *can* be, that is, unless the sport becomes more contest than ritual; yet even for those fools who would contend with nature, for those who boast of "conquering" a mountain which has indulged them, for those who, like the incumbent Secretary of Agriculture, believe we have a disaster-proof agriculture, nature has its unsporting and implacable admonishments, its floods and droughts and blights and plagues.

5

Annie Dillard needs neither the sport nor a clear and present danger. The physical seems incidental to her. Her fingers may go numb with cold as she cuts praying mantis egg cases, but her numb fingers in Virginia never assume the immediacy and suggestiveness of her evocations of life in the Arctic, with its epic migrations of Caribou, moved by weather, and its appalling concentrations of mosquitos — the latter the most appreciable consequence of winter's relenting. Moreover, Annie Dillard follows nature into dimensions that must be apprehended by the imagination rather than the senses. The entire chapter titled "Intricacy" deals with the small: Henle loops (there are a million in a human kidney), the "two hundred and twenty-eight separate and distinct muscles in the head of the ordinary caterpillar," and the red blood cells "[whipping,] one by one, through the capillaries in a goldfish's transparent tail."

She finds, both in the large and remote and in the infinitesimal and remote, the same ecstasy. What we learn from her is that for some, the letter giveth life, that for some, learning profits the soul. That intensity of being and that comprehensiveness of outlook which obliterates the distinction between subject and object, which merges the detached observer and the unconscious thing observed — just the sort of visions that we are wont to dissociate from the labors of the study and of the laboratory —

Annie Dillard finds in books and through the microscope.

Her enchantment is quite unlike that of the romantics. They too go into nature to observe and love, but their observations, finally, are of the self, that other creation where God reveals himself to a private audience. To Wordsworth, for example, nature is a stimulant, a half-creator of impressions. The poet's eye, sharpened by the glory of the outward scene, turns inward, toward the truth of the internal landscape. And to Keats, the scene, the nightingale, the season, are metaphors; they have scant reality independent of the poet's impositions.

Like the common run of anchorites, the romantics are not special and gifted observers so much as special and chosen media; through them, the universal becomes manifest. But for most romantics, the medium is inseparable from the message, which is to say they have personality. We see the young Wordsworth's patched clothes, which are irrelevant to the experience he is describing. He relates his encounters with nature and we learn something about his political excitements, his relationships with sister and wife, his attitude toward the peasantry – and a thousand other details that link spiritual autobiography with the details of a particular life.

Annie Dillard, on the other hand, maintains a close and steady focus on the matter at hand, which is to realize what is "unfathomably secret and holy and fleet," what is devastatingly beautiful, to realize the miracle down to its mites and millipedes so that at the end, she hopes, she will go out not with a whimper but a "Thank you." Annie Dillard's clothes or politics, her friends, her background, her means of livelihood – these are beside the point, hence outside the book. Those things without which most of us would be unable to identify ourselves – our jobs, our upbringing, our marital status, our family connections, our possessions – are of no consequence to Annie Dillard, who lives, on these pages, under the auspices of the eternal as expressed in the eternal becoming of nature.

It is not possible in a brief review to suggest the wonderful variety that she achieves not in spite of this concentration but because of it. She writes, for example, many prose poems whose lyric intensity would not be possible except that all the prosaic work of words has already been done:

Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen,

knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power.

Out of context, this seems a rather frothy bit of impressionism; in its place in a long, imaginative, and researched chapter on the many ways of seeing, this passage assumes hard content.

Among other works, she has considered at length Marius von Senden's *Space and Sight*. This is an account of the experiences of people who, having been blind from birth, are suddenly given sight through surgical removal of cataracts. To establish space relationships, to associate color patches with meaning, to connect a certain shape and color with a peach, they must perform prodigies of reasoning. For the rest of us, that reasoning process has become a habit. It's not a bad habit, for it keeps us from walking into trees. But we don't see the trees either. To get rid of the habitual looking which reduces a miracle to a bore merely because it is familiar, we must perform prodigies of "separation," heroic efforts to ignore "the mind's muddy river — this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash." Annie Dillard, like the rest of us, does not find this easy: "I've been around too long. Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning; I couldn't unpeach the peaches." But at moments she manages to cut in upon that danse macabre, as in that moment when flame and tree and grass are one. This moment then, one of several climactic peaks in the chapter, radiates its suggestions. It says something about the flaming visions of Van Gogh (whom she has mentioned earlier). It says something about the non-representative in modern art, that attempt to bring us form and color in themselves, untrammled by meaning, that art misnamed "abstract." It may say something about the existential character of miracle, as, for example, Moses' experience of the burning bush.

Another casual example: Annie Dillard imagines, at some length and in ludicrous detail, the mad operation of a railroad. Rationally and efficiently operated, this line would need and could accommodate only three engines. But this railroad is run by a madman. There are no switches, no schedules. So 9000 engines are built and set running. They "clash, collide, derail, jump, burn." But three get through, by sheer, wasteful, wanton chance:

You go to your board of directors and show them what you've done. And what are they going to say? You know what they're going to say. They're going to say: It's a hell of a way to run a railroad.

Is it a better way to run a universe?

In itself, this anecdote at the expense of the universe is only slightly funny. But in her chapter titled "Fecundity," the joke works like the comic "relief" of the porter scene in *Macbeth*. There the porter, recovering from drunken sleep and drunken lust, far from distracting us from Macbeth's nightmare of sober reality where sleep and love are now impossible, heightens the anguish, perhaps leads us to ask whether the sensibility and ambition that exalt Macbeth over the porter were not better traded for the innocent brutishness of that clown.

For the chapter on fecundity is frightening. Even a glance at nature's wanton treatment of life is unnerving, and Annie Dillard rubs our noses in it, rehearsing at length the differences between what looks like human sentimentality and the reality of the universe:

We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit . . . Is human culture with its values my only real home after all? Can it possibly be that I should move my anchor-hold to the side of a library? This direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness.

Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak.

Either we live in the library or we have lobotomies, she pursues. Either we live solely among the orderly and artificial forms created by man in defiance of nature, or we stop thinking altogether. It is a cruel dilemma and the railroad anecdote, like the porter scene, keeps things in cruel perspective.

Yet Annie Dillard's concentration and focus carry a certain loss. The earth, for her in her capacity as pilgrim, is the site and occasion of salvation. But the earth for all of us, saved and damned, is the scene and means of our survival. And our relationships are not only with the temple in which we live but with our fellow humans, on whom we feed and who feed us. Annie Dillard knows this, and for a moment it bothers her:

What happened to manna? Why doesn't everything eat manna . . . ?

An Eskimo shaman said, "Life's greatest danger lies in the fact that men's food consists entirely of souls." Did he say it to the harmless man who gave him tuberculosis, or to the one who gave him tar paper and sugar for wolfskin and seal? I wonder how many bites I have taken, parasite and predator, from family and friends; I wonder how long I will be permitted the luxury of relative solitude.

But her knowledge that humans eat each other does not detain her for long.

Thoreau's *Walden* may very well be rougher, more diffuse, less informed than *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It is marred by autobiographical irrelevancies and self-advertisements. But the very title of its opening chapter shows it to be a book of wider scope: "Economy." For Thoreau, as for the mass of mankind, the question "How should man live?" has two cutting edges. It is at once speculative and practical, at once private and social.

Thoreau, in relating the contemplative to the active life, places himself in a living literary and religious tradition whose antiquity argues its essential character. The oneness of work and worship, of mystery as the unknowable and mystery as craft or skill, lies at the root of myth, or at least of myth as a celebration of the life-sustaining miracles of nature, particularly of fertilization and germination, of *fecundity*. Holy and fearful and immediately present are the gods presiding over the change of seasons and the coupling of humans and the coupling of beasts. These are not mysteries teasing the refined imagination but mysteries capable of giving meaning to brute labors and brute desires. Contemplative man and active man become one, defined at once by his attitudes and by his work, by the interior landscape and by the field he plows. 9

This profound theme arises out of the mists of pre-history and continues into the present, a living stream, intermittent but never quite dry. Hesiod, in the 8th century BC, sings of the virtues and rewards of independent, self-sufficient agriculture. He provides perhaps our earliest literary artifact. From him the stream descends through the Greek pastoral poets, to Virgil, to the Renaissance pastoral poets, to the 17th and 18th century elegists of the decline of the agricultural and village economy, with its attendant moral by-products, to Hardy and his close-up view of agriculture as a way of life, and finally to such moderns as Frost and even T. S. Eliot. In the same anchorite's rule book quoted above — *Four Quartets* — Eliot has a vision of the ancient dead dancing in a field, celebrating the sacredness of labor and sex to the music of the spheres, celebrating the harmony of brute needs and cosmic motion:

In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
A dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two and two, necessarye coniunction
Holding eache other by the hand or the arm
. . . Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations

The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

(“East Coker”)

This strain is not always mythic or religious; vital labor and vital sex are not always explicitly sanctified. The transcendent music may be muted in favor of sensual melodies heard here, upon this bank and shoal of time. The strain is sometimes literal, as with Hardy, sometimes so literary as to be mere conventional metaphor, as with the poems of Spenser or the romances of Sidney. Virgil’s *Georgics*, written on order from Augustus, are intended to be the Roman equivalent of Agriculture Extension Bulletins — if we could imagine these had they been written by a poet of deep sensibility. The strain also includes Frost’s restrained reflections, little poems in which he moves from the immediate physical pleasure of labor to a conclusion rich in metaphysical undertones but wary of extravagant statement. Thus he makes much of his pleasure at splitting wood, a labor that is at once vocation and avocation, need and love:

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in life is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and future’s sakes.

(“Two Tramps in Mudtime”)

Annie Dillard does not write in this tradition. She ignores it. It would be simpleminded to fault her for not doing what she has no intention of doing. It would be unreasonable to complain because she does not relate her highly intellectual vision to our work and our moral problems. It would be unfair. It would be bad critical practice. It would be inexcusable. And yet . . .

The imagination, however informed, however carefully controlled and directed by the intellect, by objective facts, is yet an enclosed space, isolated, capable over the long stretch of causing claustrophobia. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a long stretch. And while its humor and its self-

consciousness preclude stuffiness, let alone claustrophobia, one does long for some communication with physical life. Can't all this salvation spill over into our daily lives, onto the works and days of hands?

It is a commonplace that a reflective or metaphysical despair, say like that evoked in the audience by Samuel Beckett's characters, is pure luxury. The hungry and the sick — those who actually live in garbage cans — are just desperate, which is a different matter, perhaps a matter of morbidity rather than of intensity of feeling. So too, metaphysical peace of mind is a luxury; theodicies are drawing room affairs. Pangloss can explain away his misfortunes because he is a caricature.

True, some art and its illusions are unchallengeable, even when unrelated to practical matters. Whatever is expressed by the purely decorative carving of the Eskimos, for example, must be true, for it is carved freely, without promise of material reward, even in the teeth of the most obdurate, demanding, unforgiving environment in which man can survive. This art, surely, must be authentic. 11

One should not demand this sort of proof from any artist. But sometimes, perhaps perversely, one thinks of proofs. Annie Dillard concludes, after her book-length inquiry into the possibility that creation is a cruel joke, that it is not. Whatever life's pains and uncertainties, life is worth living, not out of mere habit but out of conviction. It is something to be grateful for. "I think that the dying pray at the last not 'please,' but 'thank you,' as a guest thanks his host at the door." It's a fine thought. Who does not wish he could manage such an exit? But Annie Dillard lives in "tranquillity and trembling" that seem untested. Job without the boils railing at god in despite of his comforts would be mere malcontent. But his piety in the midst of his comforts is a rather easy virtue, as the Adversary knows.

This is a small complaint against a true work of art. This book, so full of statements, is finally not a statement but a poetic realization. It is the mirror held up to nature, an art object, hence an object of eternal contemplation. The book says so, yes; but — vastly more persuasive — *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* imitates the world it talks about. It is a matter of analogy; the book is beautiful, a joy forever, and a provocation to "tranquillity and trembling" in its own terms, as the world is in its terms. The terms are not the same. And Annie Dillard knows this too:

It does not matter a hoot what the mockingbird on the chimney is singing. If the

mockingbird were chirping to give us the long-sought formulae for a unified field theory, the point would be only slightly less irrelevant. The real and proper question is: Why is it beautiful? I hesitate to use the word so baldly, but the question is there . . . Beauty itself is the language to which we have no keys; it is the mute cipher, the cryptogram, the uncracked, unbroken code. And it could be that for beauty, as it turned out to be for French, that there is no key, that "oui" will never make sense in our language but only in its own.