

ANNIE DILLARD: THE MODERN MYSTIC

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ABSTRACT

Annie Dillard, born in 1945, is one of the leading American environmentalist writers. She is best known for her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* which she published in 1974, winning the 1975 Pulitzer Prize. The present article studies Annie Dillard mysticism which seems to a great extent non-traditional one. Dillard's mystic vision is investigated in two of her major works, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Teaching a stone to talk* (1982). Dillard exposes the possibility of using the scientific method as a legitimate path along with the mystic way. Annie Dillard seems to provide us hope of connecting with the divine in this material age.

Keywords: mysticism, vision, transcendental, meditation

In her book titled *Annie Dillard*, Linda L Smith's writes that *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* "appears to be a book about the natural world" but "in reality it is about God and his relationship to man" (Smith, 1991, p.16). In my view, what characterizes Annie Dillard's writing about her surroundings in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is the continuous vacillation between her detailed, fresh depiction of the natural world and her speculative and mystical inclinations. This vacillation between material and spiritual vision is what establishes a close affinity between her works and nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism.

Dillard's mystical vision can be shown in chapter two of her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a meditation on "seeing. Seeing is a matter of verbalization to a great extent", says Dillard. Verbalization can call the seen object into attention which, therefore, can be seen. Otherwise, it would remain unseen, "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" (Dillard, 2009, p. 40). Dillard thinks that the secret of seeing is "a pearl of great price" (Dillard, 2009, p. 43) and feels she is ready if only she could find someone to teach her the art of doing so, to go through deserts in a quest for knowing. Dillard looks for a mystical, spiritual vision through which she can see the light. She speaks of two kinds of "seeing," literal and figurative. I focus on 'figurative seeing' which is more complicated than the literal. This 'seeing' requires us to look with inner eyes and go beyond outward appearances to see what is hidden. This kind of seeing requires us to be mystics. It is the kind of seeing which "involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied" (Dillard, 2009, p. 41). This is a state of mind that allows the mind's "muddy river" to "flow unheeded" and to stare at "the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance" (Dillard, 2009, p. 43) that is not tainted by cultural distortion inherent in language. These are moments of "truly" seeing and are described by Dillard as an experience of transcendence: "Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled for ever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone" (Dillard, 2009, p. 41). Dillard says, "The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam" (Dillard, 2009, p. 43).

Dillard's experience seems very similar to that of Emerson's when his egotism disappears and he feels that he becomes a "transparent eye-ball" (Emerson, 1983, p. 10). In her book *Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie: The Space Between*, Sandra Johnson discusses those illuminating moments. She says that modern poets work at creating such illuminated moments for the reader while earlier poets intended only to convey that the vision happened. A literary epiphany allows the reader to share the experienced moment while a vision is just described by the writer and recognized by the reader as the reader is unable to experience the vision physically (Johnson, 1992, P.8). Dillard, thus adopts this nineteenth-century transcendental tradition but adds a modern sense to it by seeking to create illuminated moments in the reader and going beyond mere description. W.T. Stace notes that what creates a mystical experience is the feeling of union with the environment and this union may happen in two ways. The first way which Stace calls "extrovertive" vision or the vision of nature is achieved when the mystic undergoes a unifying vision of reality and feels unified with the surroundings but keeps personal awareness. The second type of mystical experience happens when the person feels a "unitary consciousness and awareness." The person's consciousness is unified with God or universal consciousness. This is labeled by Stace as an "introvertive" vision. Stace's definition of "mystical experience" is different from Johnson's since it is not just a mere, sudden and powerful moment that brings a new consciousness as unitary consciousness but a different experience from transient types of illumination (Stace, 1960, p. 85-86).

A question that may arise is what kind of vision does Dillard show? It may be unitary consciousness or a unifying vision of reality as her vision involves different kinds of illumination. Dillard seems to have written about both illuminative and unitive experiences. She has unmistakable connections with Thoreau and Emerson but she is truly a modern mystic. Her experiences, undoubtedly, are induced from conventional mystic concepts but her experience of illumination and unification is different from that of her ancestors. Dillard seems modern not only in her literary techniques but even in her mysticism.

Let me discuss Dillard's mystical experience in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. The whole book looks to be about meeting the divine, its silence and mystic visions more than nature or human beings. Her voice in these meditations seems to be that of a visionary poet. One of her meditations is called "Lenses" in which she describes a childhood love for examining pond water via microscope. This process leads to a meditation on the rest of the world so the lens becomes a metaphor for transcendent experience, a vision in which the self, time and space are unified. The opening page of the essay speaks about the difficulty of looking through microscopes and binoculars. The instruments of modern science are used in a mystical way and at the same time presented as instruments of science and visions.

In the essay "Teaching a Stone to Talk," Dillard says that she was "reading comparative cosmology" and this particular scientific approach to the world suggests that her investigation assumes a certain understanding of God and the spiritual world that can be attained through the physical. In other words, Dillard's approach presumes that there is

an agreement between physical objects and reality in the spiritual world. A study of the world, therefore, may bring to light evidence of God in keeping with observations like Emerson's that "a fact is an Epiphany of God" and Thoreau's appeal "Let us not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in truth" (Thoreau,1980, p. 71). The speaker speaks of the difficulty she had, in looking through the microscope while she was a child due to its complexity. "You are supposed to keep both eyes open as you look through its single eyepiece" (Dillard,1982, p.94). She looks through the lens with one eye and has to move the slide to the right in order to see what is happening on the left. However, the speaker could overcome these contradictions. This story of childhood "ignorance" can symbolize the effects of modern science on the universe. While scientists are fascinated with nature, their technology disturbs and destroys it. The speaker's eyeball echoes Emerson's "transparent eyeball" through which he sees himself as "a pan or parcel of God." The speaker implies that science effects the environment and inevitably, the self. The damage that might occur to the environment will affect the self. The issue is finally related to mystical feelings as human beings are unified with nature. She says excitedly, "How I loved that deep, wet world where the coloured algae waved in the water and the rotifers swam!" (Dillard,1982, P. 97).

The next section begins unexpectedly with the story of the swan, "this is a story about swans. It is not even a story; It is a description of swans" (Dillard,1982, P.97). Readers are made aware that they have left the microscope and the speaker's childhood world for the world of adulthood and binoculars. This transition is made known when the speaker says, "I used to haunt the place [Daleville Pond] because I loved it; I still do" (Dillard,1982, p. 97). The speaker then moves from the small world to a vast one. Instead of examining a tiny drop of water, she now looks through her binoculars at the sky. The speaker sees a pair of swans and follows them as they fly above the pond in harmony and in clockwise ellipses, "I watched them change from white swans in front of the mountain to black swans in front of the sky. In clockwise ellipses they flew. . . ." Immediately after she mentions "ellipses," the speaker says, "As I rotated on my heels to keep the black frame of the lenses around them, I lost all sense of space" (Dillard,1982, p. 97). The familiar world is scattered before her eyes, "If I lowered the binoculars I was always amazed to learn in which direction I faced—dazed, the way you emerge from a movie and try to reconstruct it, bit by bit" (Dillard,1982, p. 98). At this point, the speaker seems to go beyond the familiar world in order to present her spiritual vision which unfolds in the last paragraph of the essay. The sky over Daleville pond and the drop of water are the same, unseparated, just like the speaker's childhood and adulthood. This is the unifying vision of time and space that the speaker experiences. When the speaker talks of the "Lenses," she feels lost; the implication is multifaceted because it does not only refer to her loss of "all sense of place" but also to the recurring view that one must lose oneself in order to reach heaven. Intrinsic in the unifying vision is that the sense of separation disappears. She is lost in the sense that her observations of the natural world enabled her to go beyond it and be unified with it. In the last paragraph, Dillard displays her full vision and, as Sandra Johnson remarks, the moment is created not told:

I was lost. The reeds in front of me, swaying and out of focus in the binoculars' circular fields, were translucent. The reeds were strands of color passing light like cells in water. They were those yellow and green and brown strands of pond algae I had watched so long in a light-soaked field. My eyes burned; I was watching algae wave in a shrinking drop; they crossed each other and parted wetly. And suddenly into the field swam two whistling swans. Two tiny whistling swans, infinitesimal, beating their tiny wet wings, perfectly formed. (Dillard,1982, p.98)

In keeping with Emerson and Thoreau's vision that all facts are equal in their importance, "Lenses" reveals the possibility of using the scientific method as a legitimate path along with the mystic way. Annie Dillard seems to provide us hope of connecting with the divine in this material age. Dillard makes the mystical experience accessible in its modern complexity. It is not just a sense of a presence but an experience of the whole.

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