

Where the Twin Oceans of Beauty and Horror Meet: An Aesthetic Analysis of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

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Abstract

Although Annie Dillard's masterpiece *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) has conventionally been analyzed as a piece of nature writing embedded in the Thoreauvian tradition and it has extensively been studied, little attention has been paid to the *aesthetic* concepts that underlie the text and that may serve to better comprehend Dillard's take on nature. Therefore, this research applies the concepts of Baumgarten's "science of sensible knowledge" to the narrator's perceptions in order to demonstrate that Dillard's ultimate message is the acceptance of the whole nature, even in its seemingly inhuman places. The study begins with the analysis of the structure of the book, which outlines two types of experience of nature related to mystical paths that lead to God in Neoplatonic theology. The *via positiva* is associated to the aesthetic concept of beauty and to the subject's active participation in the experience of seeing, which is defined as a verbalization. On the other hand, the *via negativa* is linked to the concept of the sublime and the experience of seeing as a letting go. Furthermore, the analysis employs and develops Linda Smith's valid conclusions (1991) to show how these two paths join in a third mystical and aesthetic path, the *via creativa*. By leaving the interpretation of natural signs open-ended, Dillard's modern vision enables the author's total acceptance of nature's freedom, which fosters its beautiful intricacy as well as its horrible fecundity. Thus, nature's creativity becomes the basis for an aesthetics of the totality of nature, which can be defined as nature's wholeness and which leads human beings to accept and respect nature for what it truly is, freed from any prejudices.

Keywords: Annie Dillard; *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; aesthetic experience; beauty and sublime; *via creativa*; nature's wholeness

Resumen

A pesar de que *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), obra maestra de Annie Dillard, ha sido analizada convencionalmente como una pieza de literatura y medio ambiente incrustada en la corriente Thoreauviana y ha sido estudiada extensivamente, poca atención se le ha prestado a los conceptos *estéticos* que subyacen la obra y que pueden servir para comprender mejor la opinión de Dillard sobre la naturaleza. Por lo tanto, esta investigación aplica los conceptos de "ciencia del conocimiento sensible" de Baumgarten a la percepción del narrador con el fin de demostrar que el mensaje final de Dillard es la aceptación de la naturaleza, incluso en sus lugares aparentemente inhumanos. El estudio comienza con el análisis de la estructura del libro, que describe dos tipos de experiencia de la naturaleza relacionados con caminos místicos que llevan a Dios, dentro de la teología Neoplatónica. La *via positiva* está asociada al concepto estético de la belleza y a la participación activa del sujeto en la experiencia estética de ver, la cual es definida como una verbalización. Por otra parte, la *via negativa* está vinculada con el concepto de lo sublime y la experiencia de ver como un dejar ir. Además, el análisis emplea y desarrolla las válidas conclusiones de Linda Smith (1991) para mostrar cómo estos dos caminos se unen en un tercer camino místico y estético, la *via creativa*. Al dejar la interpretación de signos naturales abierta, la visión moderna de Dillard permite al autor la total aceptación de la libertad de la naturaleza, lo que fomenta su hermosa intrincación, así como su horrible fecundidad. Así, la creatividad de la naturaleza se convierte en la base

para la estética de la naturaleza en su totalidad, lo que lleva a los seres humanos a aceptar y respetar la verdadera esencia de la naturaleza, libre de cualquier prejuicio.

Palabras clave: Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, experiencia estética, belleza y sublime, *vía creativa*, integridad de la naturaleza.

Annie Dillard (Pittsburgh, 1945) has been defined as a mystic, a scientist and an artist. However, her name is conventionally linked to the genre of nature writing because her masterpiece *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), winner of the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, draws direct inspiration from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), one of the founding works of nature writing. In Dillard's multi-layered book, which includes spiritual, scientific, and mystical elements, the prose is triggered by the nature of Tinker Creek, in the Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains. The writer's purpose is to write "what Thoreau called 'a meteorological journal of the mind'" (Dillard 13), analyzing both the natural environment and one's inner ecstatic experience in nature. While Dillard acknowledges the distinction between a spiritualized Nature and scientific nature, as nature is both the physical environment and the spirit that enlivens every natural element (Phillips 189), her scientific references demonstrate the intrinsic harmony of both (McClintock 78). However, the environment becomes the means to discover God's traces in the world and to solve the scandalous question about God's possible evil disposition and his sheer creation *in jest* of the world.

Despite the centrality of Dillard's quest for God, her experience in nature, as Thoreau's, is not only *ecstatic* but also *aesthetic*, because of the ways in which the narrator conceives and engages with the natural environment. The term aesthetic, in spite of its frequent use, poses a number of questions because of its blurred boundaries. Aesthetics has been defined a branch of philosophy, a science, a critique of the arts, and even a word now empty of meaning. Although any definition may not capture its true meaning, in the present analysis aesthetics will be considered the science of sensible knowledge, which is the definition introduced by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. According to Baumgarten, aesthetics enables human beings to draw near to a symbolic and unfathomable dimension that concerns the "totality of representations that remain below the threshold of distinctness" (Baumgarten 21) and cannot be explained by reason. Therefore, aesthetics allows gaining and examining those confused and yet clear perceptions that the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646 – 1716) identified as the source for sensible knowledge. This type of knowledge is not distinct, because the properties that distinguish one thing from others cannot be enumerated, but it can develop clarity in ways not explored by logic, making it possible "to recognize the thing represented" (Leibniz 291). These confused perceptions are the objects of aesthetics, which provides the experiencer with perceptual knowledge, thus becoming an analogue of rational cognition (Baumgarten 3). Rather than logical articulation, aesthetic knowledge aims at perceiving perfectly by means of the senses.

As Dillard's book focuses on her sensual experience of and first-hand relationship with nature, aesthetics represents a suitable interpretative path that may offer innovative contributions to the study of nature writing. By applying the most fertile concepts of aesthetics—such as beauty and sublime—to the analysis of the narrator's perceptions of the surroundings and to the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, the two mystical paths outlined by

Dillard to reach God, the study will highlight the narrator's various aesthetic attitudes toward the environment at Tinker Creek. The primary aim is not knowing the ultimate meaning of nature, which may be identified with the Kantian *noumena*, the things in themselves that cannot be investigated through experience (*Pure Reason* 338-9); however, Dillard manages to read the book of nature with understanding, gaining some knowledge of it (Lavery 261). Therefore, her sensible representations, as Baumgarten's, lead to a form of knowledge that is not as distinct as that of logical reasoning, but whose teaching is the acceptance of God and nature, even in its most obscure places. The convoluted contrasts that characterize Tinker Creek are interpreted by the narrator as tangible proofs of God's existence. However, diverging from her master Thoreau, whose description of *Walden's* environment was multifaceted yet always positive, Dillard underlines the unsolved and unsolvable contrasts in nature while she reunites beauty and horror in a dialectical vision identified with the *ultima Thule*, the pole of relative inaccessibility where "the twin oceans of beauty and horror meet" (Dillard 70). The last knowable land may philosophically be thought of as the Kantian *noumena* and Leibniz's "something, I know not what" (291), which refers to the apprehension of qualities that cannot be adequately expressed by means of concept and that are the object of aesthetics.

After a brief analysis of the structure of the book, the study takes into consideration the narrator's ways of relating with the environment. By applying the concepts of aesthetics to the two opposite paths that comprise *Pilgrim*, two types of experience are outlined; both will be linked to aesthetics, since the *via positiva* represents the experience of beauty that is related to nature's intricacy (Dillard 16), while the *via negativa* represents the sublime that is related to nature's apparent appalling fecundity (Dillard 16). However, it will be demonstrated that Dillard's dialectical vision manages to interweave intricacy and fecundity, both of which result from nature's creativity. By further advancing Smith's analysis (1991), a third mystical and aesthetic path will be analyzed, the *via creativa*. Creativity becomes the basis for an aesthetics of nature's wholeness, which is thought of as integrity, harmony, and beauty.

The Structure of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Pilgrim's narrator is interested in the environment and in the artistic shaping of the prose because it allows God's revelation in nature to be described as the highest form of beauty. By carefully translating her moments of vision into words, Dillard's prose induces epiphanic moments in the reader, shaping "illuminated moments" (Johnson 7), which are intense, fleeting and irrational mystical experiences that bring an intuitive insight into the divine and the self. As Reimer notices (183), Dillard is overwhelmed by natural details, thus partially embodying the model of the inspired bard in the wake of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalists. Nonetheless, Dillard also remarks on the utter importance of facts; thus, exploring the neighborhoods becomes a prominent means of knowing nature, involving focusing not only on transcendental meanings but also on factual nature (Brøgger 31). Douglass further underlines (256) that the basic unity of the book is given by epiphany that organically molds the prose not imposing order on disorder, but making the given world intelligible. Therefore, the complex structure of the book is conceived as a pathway toward epiphany; it draws inspiration from different sources, from the Bible to the Jewish cabala, from Heraclitus to scientific treaties on ethology. These variegated approaches bestow new meanings on natural facts, which are constantly interpreted from different perspectives.

As Thoreau did in *Walden*, Dillard organizes her narration of the nine years she spent in the Roanoke Valley by following the cycle of the solar year. However, instead of starting with

summer and ending with spring, Dillard's narration begins in January and concludes with the winter solstice, which becomes the symbol of nature's regenerative power. The basic structure of the book is provided by the division into organized essay-like chapters according to the dualism between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, the mystical paths that lead to God in Neoplatonic theology. For the philosophers of the *via positiva*, God is omniscient and his qualities are always positive, while for the seasonal travelers of the *via negativa* God is described by what he is not, hoping that what is left is "the divine dark" (Dillard, "Afterword" 160). The opening chapter, "Heaven and Earth in Jest," presents this division and the themes further discussed: "the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection" (Dillard 16). These mysteries are shaped by nature's perpetual creation, symbolized by the constant flowing of Tinker Creek and Carvin's Creek. The book's first half, developing the *via positiva*, deals with the world's and God's goodness and it culminates in "Intricacy;" the chapter "Flood" marks a change in tone and clears the path for the *via negativa* of "Fecundity," the dark side of intricacy. The concluding chapter, "The Waters of Separation," keeps the book's bilateral symmetry by conjoining nature's contrasts in the last mystical experience: the narrator's transformation into a maple key.

Despite this structural division, Buell notices (240) that the same images are reiterated, so that they can be interpreted either following the *via positiva*, the symbol of God's presence, or the perilous *via negativa*, where evil in the world is perceived. Both ways of seeing are strictly necessary for a better comprehension of nature and God. Yet, this peregrination toward knowledge, as the journey toward the *ultima Thule*, is a *sub-limen* journey to the border between the perceivable and the super-sensible world. Furthermore, Smith reveals the presence of a third way, the *via creativa*, another mystical path that ideally reunites the cycles of "rising and falling, filling and emptying, living and dying" (Smith 48). This is not a synthesis of thesis and antithesis, but it invites us to give space to exuberance, plunging into Tinker Creek, the mediator of the dualisms that are constantly active throughout the narration. Nonetheless, the imagery of the *via negativa* acquires an intrinsically positive meaning in the *via creativa*, because every natural fact is accepted as an unexpected surprise from God, who is in the world, yet always transcendent to it. This analysis will further demonstrate that the *via creativa* is not only as an ecstatic but also an aesthetic journey, since it provides the experiencer with sensible knowledge acquired through the senses. Moreover, it enables humans to gain new insights into nature by endorsing a more intuitive interpretation of the world.

The Aesthetic Experience as Seeing

Since Dillard's journey into nature is both mystical and aesthetic, the narrator's main purpose is not to achieve a pure aesthetic experience, but to look for the spirit hidden beyond natural facts. Thus, the aesthetic experience of nature is not totally disinterested, as hoped by Kant, because beautiful nature is immediately related to a good Creator; on the other hand, horrific and immoral facts cast doubt on the Creator's morality and existence. However, Papa observes (71) that in *Pilgrim* natural facts are not a symbol of deeper universal truths, as in *Walden*, but they are regarded as valuable in themselves. Therefore, Dillard gives primary importance to a non-mediated experience of nature, as in Kant's pure aesthetic experience (*Judgment* 160). The narrator's aesthetic attitudes are influenced by the passing of the seasons and their effects on the landscape; her perceptions, reasonings, and conclusions are triggered by natural phenomena and apparitions of the spirit. Analysis of Dillard's responses to nature

demonstrates how sensual experience is the starting point for her mystical experience, because the spirit reveals itself in the environment that is known through the senses and studied by aesthetics, the science of what is sensed.

Aesthetic experience and mystical vision are primarily linked by the possibility of seeing. Sight is part of Dillard's empirical methodology and it is the first sense involved in her experiences of nature. However, it is also used as a universal metaphor for the vision of the spirit. Actively seeing is the first means of approaching and experiencing nature. Awakening and readiness are necessary to catch the spirit and beauty of nature that reveal themselves, "whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there" (Dillard 21). The first step to take is diving into nature and exploring the neighborhoods, trying to see as much as possible, despite the difficulties entailed in seeing. Therefore, training sight is essential to see new and known things in a refreshed way. The narrator's advice is to try to change perspective, and take a wider view at the whole landscape, a process that prompts "seeing as a verbalization," the first type of seeing: "Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it [...] I have to say the words, describe what I'm seeing" (Dillard 39-40). This active seeing demands the observer's utmost attention, to grasp the tiniest details that can alter one's perception of the environment. The observer must actively *stalk* the vision, as if it were a moving prey, as the narrator does during hot summer evenings, when she wants to see muskrats or fish in the creek. Stalking is conceived as a discipline, because "[...] the muskrat comes, or stays, or goes, depending on my skill" (Dillard 178). The disappearing muskrat is clearly a living symbol of the spirit, vanishing under water. Since stalking is a skill, it is linked to the *via positiva*, because the observer actively searches God's traces in the world.

Although nature tends to hide, it is often the observer's fault if he is not able to seize the vision, because sight is influenced by prejudices. Nonetheless, beauty is in nature, which suddenly offers free gifts to those willing to pay attention, as in the exemplary vision of blackbirds coming out of an Osage orange:

I walked up to a tree, an Osage orange, and a hundred birds flew away. They simply materialized out of the tree. I saw a tree, then a whisk of color, then a tree again. I walked closer and another hundred blackbirds took flight. Not a branch, not a twig budged: the birds were apparently weightless as well as invisible. Or, it was as if the leaves of the Osage orange had been freed from a spell in the form of red-winged blackbirds; they flew from the tree, caught my eye in the sky, and vanished. When I looked again at the tree the leaves had reassembled as if nothing had happened. Finally I walked directly to the trunk of the tree and a final hundred, the real diehards, appeared, spread, and vanished. (27-28)

The blackbird vision represents the gift hidden in nature, which is seen only by the lover and the knowledgeable (Dillard 29), because they develop an enthusiastic and unbiased approach to nature. Lovers do not see in a conventional way—the "naturally obvious" defined by Stewart Edward White¹ (123)—but they build their own "artificial obvious" (Dillard 17), which is what challenges human preconceived expectations acquired through scientific knowledge. Like Thoreau's "Sympathy with Intelligence" (Walking 283), the artificial obvious is a way of seeing freed from preconceptions that does not aim at obtaining naturalistic knowledge, but at a holy communion with other intelligences, looking for the unexpected in contact with nature.

¹ Stewart Edward White (1873 – 1946) was an American writer, conservationist and spiritualist. He wrote fiction and non-fiction about outdoor living. His fictional book *The Mountains* (1904) is based upon his mountain experiences in the Sierra Nevada. Here White devotes a chapter to the subject of observing deer and distinguishes the naturally obvious from the artificial obvious.

The Aesthetic Experience as a Letting Go

Despite the need for an alert consciousness, the continuous awareness caused by seeing as a verbalization can hinder vision, because it produces a buzz inside the brain. After having tried to show muskrats to other people, Dillard admits that “Maybe they sense the tense hum of consciousness, the buzz from two human beings who in the silence cannot help but be aware of each other, and so of themselves” (176). Therefore, Dillard develops a second approach to the world that resembles the attitude of Arthur Schopenhauer's pure subject of knowledge. According to Schopenhauer (19), the subject needs to acquire a perception of the world in which things are seen in their most intimate essence. In this perception the subject's consciousness is filled with contemplation of the object, until absorption in it is complete. Freed from his individuality, the pure subject turns into the perfect mirror of the object and gets a glimpse of the eternal Platonic idea, the objective condition of the aesthetic experience. Abandoning any self-centered interests, the experiencer becomes the pure subject of cognition. Any clear-cut boundaries between the self and the world disappear, allowing the subject to merge with the object.

This second way of seeing is defined as “a letting go” (Dillard 40), because it is necessary to let go one's individuality and sway, emptied and transfixed by vision. Dillard likens seeing as a verbalization to walking with a camera, while seeing as a letting go is likened to walking without a camera, when one's shutter opens and “the moment's light prints on my own silver gut” (40). Through this simile, the narrator physically expresses the opening up of the self, which makes the observer an integrated part of the surroundings. The simile is used again in the chapter “Stalking,” where the narrator compares her mind to a photographic plate, and emphasizes: “I received impressions, but I did not print out captions. My own self-awareness had disappeared; it seems now almost as though, had I been wired with electrodes, my EEG would have been flat” (176). The observer becomes totally unconscious, receiving impressions from the outer world. This passive attitude marks the stalking of the *via negativa*, since “I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam” (Dillard 41). Instead of chasing light (or muskrats), the observer must be in its path, patiently waiting. Furthermore, through the camera simile, the author proposes the theme of the Emersonian transparent eye-ball (Emerson 6), interpreted as the self-forgetfulness necessary to address energies toward the outer world. Instead of wasting energy by talking to oneself, the experiencer should lose their self-awareness, emptying and filling their conscience with nature, a movement further symbolized by Tinker Creek's ebbing and flowing. This type of seeing requires a life devoted to self-discipline, recalling Schopenhauer's theory (407), which links aesthetics to mystical asceticism, as both can suppress the will. In *Pilgrim* this ascetic status is represented by the “mind's muddy river” (Dillard 41), the river full of trivia and trash that the experiencer should let flow freely through the channels of consciousness.

Seeing as a letting go allows the individual to see nature as a “presence without interest” (Dillard 41), a phrase that echoes the Kantian experience of beauty (*Judgment* 75-76). In fact, the subject experiences a pure pleasure aimed at simple apprehension of the object, neither at its possession nor at its conceptual knowledge. This attitude can be accomplished through innocence, considered as unself-conscious devotion of the subject, which is at once receptiveness and total concentration. In perfect communion subject and object merge, but the presence of the Other is always indispensable to experience nature. Therefore, the subject is an active stalker as well as a passive tool in the hunt for the vision. Moving between seeing and being seen, chasing and being chased, the subject of vision becomes its object, and vice-versa.

This experience leads to mystical vision, when the shape of the object is apprehended as completely untied from its concept, although "Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning" (Dillard 38). To demonstrate the practicability of this experience, in the chapter "Seeing" the author quotes the book *Space and Sight* (1932) by Marius von Senden, who dealt with 66 cases of cataract surgery in blind patients. After acquiring sight, these patients did not have any sense of height, distance and measure; they felt blinded by light, seeing just "a dazzle of color-patches" (Dillard 36). Therefore, what is seen is essentially influenced by how the observer sees. In an extreme act of identification, Dillard has tried to see in a non-conceptualized way, but the color-patches swelled, irremediably filled by meaning, thus losing the illusion of the absence of depth. However, final vision in nature is prompted by the letting go of self-consciousness. Despite being a total negation of the self, it sharpens the senses and enables a sensual experience of the environment: "I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. 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" (Dillard 40-41). Through the synesthesia, the narrator returns to her senses, to quote Thoreau ("Walking" 264). By simultaneously losing oneself and renewing one's acquaintance with the body, the experiencer focuses on the here-and-now that is being experienced through the senses.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to continuously hush one's awareness without going mad. Vision is always temporary and the main revelation of the book, the tree with the lights, is presented as a glowing instant that vanishes in a second. The narrator had been searching for that tree for ages, through the orchards of summer, in the forests of fall, down winter and spring. Suddenly, the vision arrived, when she was thinking of nothing at all:

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. [...] Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. (42)

The mystical vision can spring from a sense of communion with nature and from a disinterest in one's existence as a single and particular individual. The vision of the vibrating cedar allows the observer to penetrate the surface of things, blending matter and energy. Belief that nature can freely grant a mystical-aesthetical experience makes the barriers between subjective human consciousness and the objective world fall (Elder 172), because perception is no longer mediated by concepts. Not only can the observer see the world as it really is for the first time: she is simultaneously seen by the entire cosmos and by the spirit.

Beauty and Intricacy

The *via positiva* allows the experiencer to actively engage with the world and to embrace its intrinsic beauty. Like Schopenhauer's experience of beauty (227-28), this attitude leads to *unio mystica*, communion with God in nature. As there is not a clear-cut line between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, the experiencer has to pay attention to all natural forms to grasp beauty. For instance, the first images depicted in "Heaven and Earth in Jest" are the old tom cat that covers the woman with blood stains and the vision of a giant water bug that swallows up a frog and haunts the narrator like a nagging nightmare. Despite these hyperbolic and disturbing

events, Dillard momentarily bypasses the presence of pain in the world by showing aesthetically beautiful images that are linked to the apprehension of nature's harmony and beauty, "a grace wholly gratuitous" (Dillard 20). Instances of beauty, such as the tree with the lights in it and the gift of the Osage orange tree, are marks of God's revelation in the world. Furthermore, the narration starts and ends in winter when the senses, sharpened by cold, enable the observer to perceive beauty and goodness in a season that has traditionally been associated with death, but that is actually nature's rest before spring's awakening.

Birds are another instance of beauty, because their melodious chirping poses a question not about its meaning, but about why it is so beautiful. The answer is Dillard's definition of beauty, something which is "objectively performed—the tree that falls in the forest—[...] as real and present as both sides of the moon." "Beauty itself is the language to which we have no key; it is the mute cipher, the cryptogram, the uncracked, unbroken code" (Dillard 101). While Kant (*Judgment* 167) asserts beauty's subjectiveness because it needs the perceiver's presence to be grasped, Dillard's beauty is objective because it is caused by God's objective presence in the world of the *via positiva*. In addition, Dillard makes a reference to a pressing metaphysical question that was paraphrased by Mann and Twiss: "When a tree falls in a lonely forest, and no animal is nearby to hear it, does it make a sound?" (235). It inquires whether phenomena exist independently from the presence of a perceiver. Dillard declares that beauty exists as part of the world and it does not need any subject to be validated. Comparing an interior feeling aroused in the subject to the emission of a sound—a physical phenomenon caused by air compression—may seem a controversial issue in the author's aesthetics. However, the idea of objective beauty in nature makes beauty truly universal because it is universally appreciated without a concept (Kant, *Judgment* 99). It presupposes a common sense that makes human beings perceive beauty, despite not being able to decipher it. This innate sense is identified with the unawareness aroused by seeing as a letting go, which allows the perceiver to catch a glimpse of God.

God's other visible aspect is the world's intricacy, which is the symbol of a Creator who creates increasingly complex shapes that cannot be attached to any concept. As in Kant's aesthetics, the beautiful is prompted by the apprehension of the shape of an object as purposiveness without purpose (*Judgment* 105). Intricacy is evolution's driving force and includes behaviors and designs, such as the 228 muscles in the caterpillar's head, the six million leaves on a big elm, and the two million Henle's loops in the human nephron. Following Dillard's scientific examination of nature, even air and light are intricate because the world's weft is tangled and interconnected. With its unifying force, complexity allows humans to perceive how everything in nature is deeply interrelated with everything else. For instance, observing the tiny capillaries in the caudal fin of her goldfish Ellery Channing, Dillard comprehends the intrinsic complexity of the world because the blood flow inside the fish is the same mechanism at work in the human body and in plants. In fact, by changing the atom of iron in the hemoglobin molecule to an atom of magnesium, green chlorophyll is obtained. Therefore, as in Carlson's aesthetic theory (85), aesthetic appreciation of nature is heightened by scientific knowledge, because understanding biological and chemical processes intensifies the feeling of the beautiful caused by intricacy. Science shows how the whole landscape "consists in the multiple, overlapping intricacies and forms that exist in a given space at a moment in time. Landscape is the texture of intricacy [...] Wherever there is life, there is twist and mess" (Dillard 126). This intricate beauty is a complex texture with imperfections and indented edges that resembles the concept of the sublime, thought of as exuberance without shapes. It is the mark of nature's fringed mystery, which could demonstrate the existence of a mysterious divine design that underlies the world. Intricacy is then the answer given by the *via positiva* to the sense of the actual world.

The Sublime and Fecundity

The second part of *Pilgrim* develops the *via negativa*, or apophatic theology, according to which it is impossible to truly know God, since he transcends the limits of human comprehension. What apparently goes against morality and is characterized as pain, loss, and death, outlines a Creator who is totally other than human and who does not provide solace but terror. Even light, a conventional sign of God's presence, may blind the observer: "Darkness appalls and light dazzles; the scrap of visible light that doesn't hurt my eyes hurts my brain" (Dillard 33). Difficulties in seeing, caused by an excess or a lack of light, make the narrator perceive an invisible, unseen, and appalling presence. Another symbol of darkness is Shadow Creek, the cold subterranean stream that flows under Tinker Creek. By hindering a perfect vision, the reign of shadows becomes the reign of the sublime, which is a feeling higher than reason that represents the mystery of the Creator's presence (or absence). Instead of the sublime, Dillard resorts to the term 'horror' to qualify the grotesque and irrational side of nature. What is most terrifying in the environment is its fixity, its fecundity, and its violence, whose most significant exponents are insects. They constitute an unlimited, terrifying world of shapes and behaviors, as the author points out: "Fish gotta swim and bird gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another. I never ask why of a vulture or shark, but I ask why of almost every insect I see" (Dillard 65). The entire scheme of creation is apparently based on death, blind instinct, and parasitic nibbling. The most disturbing fact is that no veil covers these horrors. Therefore, training sight can carry negative implications as it enables the observer to notice previously ignored details. From the chapter "The Fixed" onward, the narrator becomes increasingly aware of the enormous number of insects that live at Tinker Creek, noticing oothecae (egg mass surrounded by froth) everywhere.

Nature's fixity is conceived as a terrifying stage between life and death that "assails us with the tremendous force of its mindlessness" (Dillard 69). It is represented by the enormous quantity of eggs and pulsing cocoons produced by insects' salivary glands. This unchanged and unchanging situation is even amplified by the irrational reproduction of individuals. During the regeneration of spores and the hatching of eggs in June, a living hell spreads out, because the fertile reproduction of insects is felt as an assault on human values. It is seen as a death anthem composed by a Creator who does not care for their own creatures' fate, allowing their endless multiplication and struggle for survival just for the sheer amusement of watching them die. The whole world is felt as an egg incubator, whose driving force is "the pressure of birth and growth [...] that hungers and lusts and drives the creature relentlessly toward its own death" (Dillard 146). Death too is a symbol of the sublime, because it is a limit human knowledge cannot objectively overreach. Moreover, this conception of the world triggers the Kantian mathematical sublime (*Judgment* 131-34) because the intellect is incapable of conceiving an almost infinite number of creatures; even the narrator perceives herself as multi-layered and composed of legions of individuals. In front of this multitude of beings the experiencer comprehends both the infinite smallness of each individual and the common fate that links all creatures. Death casts doubt on human beings' supposed privileged status in creation, as Dillard rhetorically asks: "What if God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles?" (156). In a world ruled by chaos there is no difference between humans and barnacles, because everyone is going to die.

The reproductive pressure is also performed through the act of eating. Parasites are particularly feared because they carry out an attack on human health by silently devouring people from the inside. The chapter "The Horns of the Altar" presents a world nibbled by the

universal chomp of parasites, the devil's *summa theologica* (Dillard 201): black leeches, flat worms infesting four hosts, cockroaches living on human skin, parasitic insects carrying parasites inside themselves, up to a parasitism of the fifth order. What is even more appalling is that ten percent of animal species are parasitic insects. This fact calls into question God's nature, as the narrator wonders: "What if you were an inventor, and you made ten percent of your inventions in such a way that they could only work by harassing, disfiguring, or totally destroying the other ninety percent?" (202). Fecundity and parasitism make God appear like a sadistic inventor of creatures destined to kill each other, in a world led by violence, terror, and hunger.

While the deadly threat involved in fecundity resembles the Kantian dynamic sublime (*Judgment* 143-48) because it expresses nature's power of destroying creatures, the overall sense of the sublime expressed in *Pilgrim* puts humans and nature in contact. Firstly, death links humans to all other creatures, as no one can escape from it: "We are escapees. We wake in terror, eat in hunger, sleep with a mouthful of blood" (Dillard 156). Furthermore, the feeling of being constituted by an infinity of organisms recalls the negation of one's individuality in the concept of the sublime outlined by Schopenhauer (226). Through the sublime, human beings remember themselves not as individuals but as a whole species, because they, now reduced to nothingness, merge with the environment. Thus, the sublime does not instill fear for one's destruction but it makes one lose individuality in nature. According to Hitt (611), a feeling of sublimity that does not elevate human reason over nature but that makes the experiencer an integrated part of the environment prepares the ground for an ecological sublime that raises awareness of nature's otherness. Thanks to the ecological sublime, nature is no longer considered *immoral*, but *moral-less* because the human concepts of right and wrong cannot be applied to it: "Although it is true that we are moral creatures in an amoral world, the world's amorality does not make it a monster," underlines Dillard (158). Nature is neither a mother nor a step-mother, as human moral concepts cannot be applied to nature, which is totally other from morality. Nature finally appears aesthetically beautiful, sublime, fascinating, and even grotesque, without contradicting human ethics.

The *Via Creativa* in Nature

Given the seemingly irreconcilable contrasts presented in the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, Dillard proposes a third mystical and aesthetic path, which she implicitly takes, although she does not outline it explicitly. In "Nightwatch" she chooses neither the stony path nor the field, but she walks down a third route that leads to a new world. Smith (31) defines the meeting point of the apparent contradictions of the book the *via creativa*. As a spiritual and artistic journey, this was outlined by the theologian Matthew Fox (1983), taking his cue from Judeo-Christian tradition, Buddhism, Taoism, Native American religions and Wiccan movements. According to Fox, human beings can experience God through creative acts that enable them to be more receptive toward the outer world and discover their intrinsic connections with Mother Nature. Since God, nature, and the artist are linked by the same creative act, the third *via* can be found through the creation of new relationships with nature and the reiteration of its creative and organic processes by rearranging raw material under the operation of unknown powers (Edwards 4). Therefore, the final result cannot be predicted, as natural signs cannot be interpreted in an univocal way.

The images of the *via positiva*, such as nature's intricacy and beauty, and of the *via negativa*, such as the fixed and fecundity, are interpreted by the narrator as two sides of the

same coin, both being part of nature's wholeness. The most negative aspects have positive effects because "shadows define the real [...] They give the light distance; they put it in its place" (64). Even the dark night, so disturbing in the *via negativa*, is understood as an awakening in "Northing." The dualisms outlined in *Pilgrim* are eventually perceived as the product of nature's creative activity. Thus, fecundity and pressure toward growth are just the dark side of intricacy; they compose the same picture, only with deeper shadows. Nature's freedom fosters beauty as well as horror; thus, the seemingly incompatible opposites are now engaged in a dialectical dialogue. A significant symbol of union is the green grasshopper from "Nightwatch," because this insect turns into the notorious locust—the symbol of the Biblical plague—during its migratory phase, unifying two dispositions in one body. Furthermore, several symbolical associations used in nature writing are subverted: spring, no longer the season of renewal, causes irritation after winter's stillness, while winter, no longer the season of death, represents the sacred beginning and end of Dillard's journey.

The conventional dualism between life and death acquires new tones. A single death must not be mourned because it is necessary for the perpetration of life. In fact, every creature has signed "a covenant to which every thing, even every hydrogen atom, is bound. The terms are clear: if you want to live, you have to die" (Dillard 161). Despite the bluntness of this statement, accepting death as part of nature's regeneration is the price to pay to enter the circle of life. Therefore, death, "the monster evolution loves" (Dillard 157), becomes the tool of creation, and fecundity is the tangible proof that nature's free creation cannot be stopped. Furthermore, the theme of eating and being eaten acquires a completely different meaning in the *via creativa*; it turns into an act of union with nature. Quoting an entry in Emerson's *Journal* about his dream of eating an apple-like world, Dillard declares that "The giant water bug ate the world" (237). No longer a nagging nightmare, the bug is now a metaphor for inclusiveness and acceptance. Beauty is no longer marked by perfection, but rather speckled and mutilated.

Because of nature's freedom, its interpretations are always multi-layered. Meanings become open-ended and even the primary symbol of mystical vision—the tree with the lights in it—must be called into question: "were the twigs of the cedar I saw really bloated with galls?" (Dillard 212), wonders the narrator, hypothesizing that the lights may just have been parasitic malformations. Freed from any conceptual constraint, nature changes and flows wild like Tinker Creek. Nature's freedom is then regarded as "the world's water and weather, the world's nourishment freely given, its soil and sap" (Dillard 125); it is the basis of evolution because everything can actually be created. Like its creation, the Creator is a free artist who never stops creating shapes and individuals. Therefore, the world is felt as "the fruit of the creator's exuberance that grew such a tangle, and the grotesques and horrors bloom from that same free growth" (Dillard 133). As beauty and horror sprout from the same creative act, they are equally necessary to the world and ever-changing.

Because of nature's intricate fecundity, *Pilgrim's* nature is ruled by a "spendthrift economy; though nothing is lost, all is spent" (Dillard 67). Such fertile prodigality expresses nature's extravagant economy, the same economy that characterizes Thoreau's conception of nature (Grusin 45). Dillard too celebrates nature's exuberance, where no form is too grim and no behavior too grotesque; every organic compound is used to create new forms. Although in "Fecundity" the haunting shadow of death makes this system irrational, in the *via creativa* nature is again the free giver of gifts, aiming at spending all its energy. Hers is an extravagant fecundity, based on the intricacy of shapes. What was considered *too much* in "Fecundity" becomes *just right* in the *via creativa*. Therefore, beauty is wild, organic and unpredictable. Dillard's version of the *via creativa* represents a perfect instance of ecological aesthetics;

therefore, the authentic and tangible beauty of the world is comprehended and experienced in nature, where "Waste and extravagance go together up and down the banks, all along the intricate fringe of spirit's free incursions into time" (Dillard 233). As a consequence, Dillard's aesthetic experience becomes her organic modality to shape a contact with nature and with its Creator. Discovering beauty and the sublime in the world, getting rid of human prejudices and morality, and giving up every individual drive enable human beings to experience mystical union with nature. At the end of the book the narrator turns into a maple key, gently pushed by the wind, totally included in the process of natural regeneration. The final union with the surrounding environment is allowed by the narrator's acquired ability to grasp nature's unity as well as its multiplicity. The horror of fecundity, the grotesque transformations of insects, shadows, and death become essential elements of the world's beauty. Thus, the human observer can understand the necessity of embracing nature's wholeness, although its multiplicity must always be acknowledged. By widening one's gaze and opening one's arms, it is possible to grasp the essence of nature, which is the place of differences, as well as the unified, beautiful, and whole place where all creatures, including human beings, live.

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