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ABSTRACT: In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard uses nature to talk about philosophical and spiritual topics. She exercises the habit of seeing, which is both passive observation and active creation, and uses it to explore questions of God's goodness, or theodicy. Dillard's creation – *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* – does not deny that both cruel things and beautiful things exist in God's creation. Dillard instead proposes that "[t]he answer must be ... that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there" (10). The result of Dillard's decision to "sense them" and "be there" is *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which invites the reader to explore along with her, both in its content—stories of outdoor explorations—and in its overt position as a book, or something created in order to be sensed. Dillard champions the act of creation as the counterpart to the horrors found within creation; creative action is her theodicy.



In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard exhibits a focused use of imagery and a free use of interpretation, pairing specific, lively descriptions of nature with imaginative, earnest analysis. These images are organized into chapters divided evenly into two categories, as Dillard has noted in various interviews and the book's Afterward (279-80). The first seven chapters align with the *via positiva*, the eighth chapter is a transition, and the final seven chapters explore the *via negativa*. The *via positiva* and the *via negativa* are "two ancient mystical concepts ... used to define an approach to the doctrine of God" (Carroll 26). Christian mystics have used these methods for centuries to investigate the presence or absence of the divine in nature (Smith 17). The *via positiva* is "a religious path devoted to naming and affirming God's presence in creation" (Kelleher 47). One example of this is when Dillard explores the excessive presence of details in nature (*Pilgrim* 134-39). The *via negativa* "maintain[s] that knowledge of God is impossible, since he transcends the limits of human knowledge and language" (Smith 28). Dillard writes according to the *via negativa* when she describes horrific destruction she observes in nature. Certain of Dillard's critics call the act of writing the *via creativa*, or "by the creative way" (Smith 33). This term recognizes Dillard's authorship as a participation in creative action. Dillard's work participates in the spiritual literary tradition; she also joins the tradition of nature writing.

Henry David Thoreau began the movement which is recognized today as the nature writing genre with his book *Walden*. His work "combined diary format with acute observation" (Jolly, n. pag.). The titles of each chapter – "Winter Animals," "Sounds," "The Bean-Field" – illustrate his intent to document his surroundings. He describes facts of nature, and then he writes his thoughts on these facts. Thoreau's works demonstrate how nature writers use nature to think about important aspects

of life. Like Thoreau, Dillard uses her writing to interpret as well as describe her experiences.¹ However, she addresses the presence of good and evil with greater negativity than Thoreau. As a result, Linda L. Smith describes her work as “posttranscendental” (43-4). Dillard departs from the blind optimism of the transcendental writers and creates a tradition that, rather than explaining away the horrors of nature, describes them in detail and discusses their ramifications. The willingness to engage with all aspects of nature is a feature of Dillard’s writing that calls to mind the mystic tradition.

Dillard describes facts of nature and imaginatively attaches spiritual interpretations to them. She observes the beauty and horror of nature and records her reflections on these observations, a dual set of actions that I term *seeing*. As Dillard translates her observations into philosophical and spiritual musings, her analysis activates nature, moving beyond observation into creation. The text exhibits a tension between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. This tension brings up the issue of theodicy, which is the attempt to justify God’s goodness in a world replete with pain and horror (Jones, n.pag.). Although Dillard does not specify a specific religion or deity, her work is highly spiritual and assumes the presence of a creative God. Dillard’s vindication of God’s goodness is aesthetic and exploratory rather than logical. This essay argues that the *via creativa* is Dillard’s theodicy; she allows the tension between beauty and horror to result in a creative product that unifies the two through its exploration of them.

Blend: Interpreting Facts to Imagine

Dillard speaks about nature with imagination and inventiveness. David Shields sanctions the

¹ In this way, Dillard’s writing is similar to that of Thoreau. In *Walden*, Thoreau lives for a year in nature by a body of water and writes about things he learns (Thoreau), much like Dillard’s experience in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Dillard wrote her master’s thesis on Thoreau, discussing “Walden Pond as ... the focal point for Thoreau’s narrative moment between heaven and earth” (Smith 7). Similarly to this aspect of *Walden*, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard uses Tinker Creek as the center for symbolism and reflection throughout the book.

use of innovation within a nonfiction text: “The essay consists of double translation: memory translates experience; essay translates memory” (Shields 61). Dillard translates her memories into an essay not in order to report stiff facts but to explore ideas of divine revelation in nature. Dillard’s shift from fact to faith is the fulcrum where I set my argument: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* successfully discusses serious issues because it uses dying frogs and pond microorganisms and backyard cedars. Dillard’s text illustrates that nonfiction writing blends factual, nature-based observations with imaginative and philosophical musings.

Shields’ book *Reality Hunger* studies genres, specifically fiction and nonfiction, and Shields embraces the notion that modern culture often blends fact and fiction (115, 110). Cathy Alter notes in an article in *The Atlantic* that the book “is a literary battle cry for the creation of a new genre, one that doesn’t draw distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, originality and plagiarism, memoir and fabrication, scripted and unscripted” (n. pag.). Shields’s ideas relate to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* because Dillard’s work is shelved with nonfiction, yet aspects of the work itself call to mind many different genres. To quote Shields, it blends “memoir and fabrication” to an effective end. Shields writes, “‘fiction’/‘nonfiction’ is an utterly useless distinction” (63). Although I find this melodramatic, Shields’ sentiment remains: there is overlap between genres. Dillard comments in *The Writing Life* that “even with the most literal intentions, the work twined into the infinite again and dissolved, or the infinite assaulted the page again and required me to represent it” (*Writing* 90). Dillard’s work is situated in the overlap between fiction and nonfiction that Shields spends so much time describing, and specifically moves between the investigation of the natural and the eternal.

Dillard imaginatively interprets factual observations of nature with philosophical musings. One classic example occurs when Dillard describes the experiences of people who were able to see for the first time in their life after having cataracts removed: “When her doctor took her bandages off ... the girl who was no

longer blind saw ‘the tree with the lights in it.’ It was for this tree that I searched” (*Pilgrim* 35-6). Dillard follows this, concluding the chapter, with her own mystic experience:

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. . . . Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, and cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that very moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it... (*Pilgrim* 36)

In this passage, Dillard exhibits her comfort with translating a fact into a narration of a mystic experience. Smith describes this tendency, writing that critics “praised the ‘special beauty of surprise’ that results from [Dillard’s] rapid-fire shifts from the ‘colloquial and the everyday to the reverential and the celebratory’” (48). In the story of the cedar, one colloquial aspect of the setting is Dillard’s mention of the creek and the cedar. Both of these natural features empirically exist; this existence could be proven by a second opinion, a photograph, or a short trip to Virginia. The “rapid-fire shift” comes when Dillard claims that she saw lights in the tree. This is a vision unique to Dillard herself, one that Susan Elizabeth Yore describes in this aspect of Dillard’s work: “[It] abounds with attention to the details of nature while at the same time displaying a disregard for literal truth. ...the reader never really knows what Dillard sees with her eyes or where temporal reality ends and the eternal breaks through.” (155) Yore purports in the previous quotation to accept Dillard’s flaming sycamore, as does Shields: “a nonfiction reader is asked to behave more deeply [than a fiction reader]—to imagine, and also to believe. ...Fiction gives us a rhetorical question: ‘What if this happened?’ (The best) nonfiction gives us a statement, something more complex: ‘This may have happened’” (60). Yore writes that “Many

in our age have forgotten how to use their imaginations to transcend the limits of rational and empirical knowledge ... there is a pressing need to reactivate the imaginative faculties once more” (103). Dillard steps into an analytical, sometimes prescriptive role as she describes her experiences in nature.

Dillard uses a literal encounter with a giant water bug to investigate ideas of cruelty. Once, walking along an island of Tinker Creek, she notices a frog who, unlike all the other frogs, does not jump, or even twitch. She crouches down to look at him, writing “just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed” (*Pilgrim* 7). She searches for the cause of its death: “An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog ... I had read about the giant water bug, but never seen one” (8). In telling this story, she moves from relating an experience to creating an expression: “That it’s rough and chancey out there is no surprise. Every live thing is a survivor on a kind of extended emergency bivouac ... Cruelty is a mystery, and the waste of pain” (9). Unlike the despondent paragraph preceding this one, this paragraph moves from providing the facts to exploring both sides of the idea of cruelty and destruction in creation. In the next phrase, the narrator remarks, “But at the same time we are also created” (9). She then writes about a moment in the Koran where Allah asks, “think you I made heaven and earth in jest?” (9). Throughout the book, as in this instance, Dillard shares an image of nature or an interesting experience and uses that story as a departure point for serious consideration, in this instance using the experience to consider the purpose of cruelty. The book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* creates leverage from stories like these, stories that explain nature in terms of life and life in terms of nature. Dillard’s explanation of cruelty is grounded in her narrative about the nature encounter.

One instance where Dillard uses an encounter in nature to discuss philosophy is her discovery of a snakeskin in chapter five. Dillard tells the story of finding a snakeskin that was both tied in a knot and partially turned inside out. She turns it over and over in her hand before

realizing that she's already looked at the whole loop more than once and has still not found the starting or ending point of the snake. On its own, this discovery is interesting. But Dillard does not leave it as an interesting story; she follows it by saying "Time is a continuous loop. ... or Time is an ascending spiral if you will, like a child's toy Slinky. Of course we have no idea ... down whose lofty flight of stairs the Slinky so uncannily walks" (*Pilgrim* 77). She switches from the original analogy – the snakeskin – to the new analogy of the Slinky. She then goes back to the original analogy: "...the spirit seems to roll along like the mythical hoop snake with its tail in its mouth. There are no ... edges to untie. ... this is the arsonist of the sunny woods: catch it if you can" (77). That section of quotations seems unfocused because Dillard talks about the snakeskin discovery, time as a Slinky, and the spirit as the hoop of snake skin. Yet the focus comes when she develops a theme by gathering the different images. Through writing about the snakeskin, she thinks about time and realizes that it is fleeting. It is here that Dillard introduces the phrase "catch it if you can," which is a motif throughout the book.

Throughout the work, Dillard discusses the fleeting nature of all life on earth. At one point, she says she wants to be there the moment the grass turns green. This mention is characterized by the hopeful connotation of spring, but the fleetingness of life is also mentioned when Dillard is exploring destruction in nature. After mentioning that more men have died in the action of fishing than in any other human activity apart from war, she mentions that despite how much people chase fish, they may not get them: "catch it if you can" (188). In this new iteration, the phrase is ironic. Dillard uses the snakeskin to introduce a theme she carries throughout the text. She mentions it in relation to the magnificent beauty of nature and in relation to horrific destruction, like that of fishing.

Dillard also uses nature to discuss philosophical and spiritual ideas when, after sharing the giant water bug episode, she looks up exactly when a mockingbird dives from the corner of her roof to the ground (*Pilgrim* 9-10). The sudden, unexpected beauty of this simple bird

flight surprises her. Dillard juxtaposes this story with that of the giant water bug in the text, which allows her to explore ideas of beauty and cruelty in the world. She brings up both of these situations again multiple times throughout the book. Shields points out the potent ability of nonfiction to take "the subjectivity of the personal essay and the objectivity of the public essay and [conflate] them into a literary form that relies on both art and fact, on imagination and observation, rumination and argumentation..." (38). This quotation fits Dillard's style of writing throughout *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. As the giant water bug and mockingbird stories show, she pairs fact – the bug ate the frog, the bird flew – with art – the bug inspires her to explore horrors in nature, the bird reminds her of its beauty. These disparate features of nature push her to examine the *via positiva* and *via negativa*. Dillard writes, blending experiences with spiritual musings, in order to see.

See: Watching and Writing

I define *seeing*, in the context of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, as a process that includes two actions: watching and writing. *Watching* is Dillard's choice to engage with the nature that surrounds her. *Writing* refers to Dillard's practice of recording her experiences and what she learned from them. Dillard herself says that seeing is a conscious choice (*Pilgrim* 122). The whole of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* exhibits a persistence in seeing, in what Yore terms an "engagement with the here and now through the cultivation of 'amazement'" (141). Through watching and writing, Dillard creates a discipline of seeing. As she watches, she discovers destruction in nature. As she writes, she reflects on nature's lessons. Writing, an act of creation, and thus the opposite of destruction, is Dillard's theodicy.

Dillard shares a story of studying pond water that features watching and writing, and from partaking in these two actions she reflects on divinity in creation. In chapter seven, Dillard explains her method for studying pond water. She sorts the water samples in glass bowls on her kitchen table and *watches* them under the microscope, pointing out "the little rotifer called monostyla" that "zooms around excitedly,

crashing into strands of spirogyra alga or zipping around the frayed edge of a clump of debris” (*Pilgrim* 121). She describes with great knowledge the different creatures she sees, which exemplifies *writing*. Although she studies pond water regularly, she admits that she does not enjoy it (122). Dillard persists in engaging with these creatures; she writes, “as a moral exercise; the microscope at my forehead is a kind of phylactery, a constant reminder of the facts of creation that I would just as soon forget. . . .” (*Pilgrim* 122-3). When using the microscope, Dillard watches and writes and realizes that she finds herself responsible for remembering the existence of microorganisms. Dillard compares the microscope to a phylactery, which is a box worn on the forehead as a reminder of devotion (“Amulet”). The microscope reminds Dillard of her devotion to the microscopic organisms. She compares herself to the creatures, then follows the comparison with philosophical questions: “The monostyla goes to the dark spot on the bowl: To which circle am I heading?” and “I can move around right smartly in a calm, but in a real wind . . . am I really moving, or am I ‘milling around?’” (*Pilgrim* 123). Her understanding of the microscope as a symbol of devotion inspires her to consider her lifestyle and mental habits. Dillard does not answer the questions she poses—to which circle does she head, is she moving or milling? Her writing only develops the questions. This passage is a creation, and the very act of creation is Dillard’s theodicy.

Dillard participates in watching, or observation, in her chapter titled “Stalking.” She describes her method for stalking muskrats, perfected over the course of three years (*Pilgrim* 192-203). After writing about three different muskrat sightings, Dillard mentions the revitalization that comes from watching nature: “I have often noticed that even a few minutes of this self-forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating. I wonder if we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves” (200). Dillard expands her experience observing the muskrats to promote momentarily forgetting oneself. She also voices the opinion that between birth and death, humans seek “to discover where we so

incontrovertibly are. It’s common sense: when you move in, you try to learn the neighborhood” (129). She compares it to a sailor in open sea: “I am as passionately interested in where I am as a lone sailor. . . . What else is he supposed to be thinking about? Fortunately, like the sailor, I have at the moment a situation which allows me to devote considerable hunks of time to seeing what I can see, and trying to piece it together” (129). Whether Dillard discusses the specific activity of watching, such as walking to the creek to look for muskrats, or the general attitude of watching, such as in her sailor analogy, she champions the importance of looking around.

In order to animate and share her observations, Dillard moves beyond just watching—she crafts her observations into writing. She translates her observations from interior thoughts into sentences and paragraphs. Shields writes that “Good nonfiction has to be as carefully shaped as good fiction, and I’m not bothered at all by this artifice” (67). During the year that she lived by Tinker Creek, Dillard filled journals with her experiences. She later copied the information onto note cards and shuffled them into coherent chapters (*Pilgrim* 280). Dillard herself espouses the importance of incorporating creation into observation, writing that “Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization” (33). By mentioning the importance of verbalizing, or recording, what one sees, Dillard endorses my dual definition of seeing, a definition that requires both watching and writing. Yore expresses that Dillard “understands that learning who she is, and what kind of God there is, is partly the story of determining what is occurring in the nature close at hand. Intimate knowledge . . . brings her the disorienting moments of feeling ‘lost’ . . . followed by mystical affirmations of being found” (21). Dillard chooses to see; she pursues those moments of being lost and being found. As she interacts with the “nature close at hand,” noticing that “beauty is both concealed and revealed,” Dillard engages with questions of theodicy.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek embraces the conscious choice to see, based on the understanding that seeing carries creative power. Vision is important, John McAteer claims, because “To

lose faith in God would be to lose enthusiasm for creation due to a failure of vision” (793). He continues, speaking of losing faith, “But since this is an aesthetic and emotional issue, we need an aesthetic experience capable of reorienting our vision” (793). Dillard continually uses nature to inform and orient her vision. She sees the giant water bug as cruelty, the floating mockingbird as beauty. She studies pond water and stalks muskrats. And she concludes every story about nature with questioning, exploratory thoughts. The creation and expression of these thoughts eventually lead her to develop her theodicy.

Write: Addressing Theodicy through Creation

Dillard structures *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* according to the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* (*Pilgrim* 279-80). Despite the tension created by these disparate approaches – one claims God is discoverable through nature, the other that claims that he is obscured by nature’s darkness – Dillard unifies the two by using the *via creativa*. Creativity is one of the defining characteristics of God, and as Dillard creates, she assigns divine value and purpose to the topics of her discussion (Smith 40), redeeming them from the darkness in which she finds them. Dillard’s creation, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, unifies the duality of the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. The *via creativa* is Dillard’s theodicy, her vindication of divine goodness despite pain.

Dillard uses light as a metaphor for divine power to illustrate her experience of God through nature, which is an example of her utilization of the *via positiva*. She writes about the sun: “We have really only that one light, one source for all power, and yet we must turn away from it by universal decree” (*Pilgrim* 25). Dillard describes light as representing divine power. Here, Dillard’s comment on the physical “source for all power” corresponds to the spiritual “source for all power,” a God whose control of nature is encompassing and potent. Dillard writes about light and discovers characteristics of God. McClintock writes that

An important theme of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is that nature’s beauty is both concealed and revealed, just as God is both hidden and

glimpsed. But the hiddenness does not keep her from perceiving, accepting, and loving a nature that includes her and ‘whose beauty ... shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them’ [qtd. from Dillard] (19).

This quotation characterizes the Dillard of the *via positiva*: a writer who points out that the sun is powerful and unapproachable, but does not allow this difficulty to preclude her access to divine experience. Dillard also uses light to indicate revelation; in one instance Dillard emerges from the woods into “a yellow light” that enables her to see “intricacies in the mountains’ sides I never knew were there” (*Pilgrim* 50-1). While the light reveals to Dillard things she did not previously understand or see, Dillard experiences the divine power in nature. Smith writes that throughout the work, Dillard “uses light to represent the appearance of God in the world, the moment of revelation for which she waits” (22). In reference to Dillard and the *via positiva*, Carroll writes that Dillard “has gone to nature to derive her theology” (Carroll 26). When Dillard finds beauty in nature, such as the continual presence of light, she learns through her experiences theological characteristics of God.

Halfway through the book, Dillard “turns from the beauty and intricacy of nature to its horrors” (28), beginning to explore the difficulty of understanding God who allows nature’s destruction and darkness. The chapter entitled “Fecundity” exemplifies Dillard’s participation with the *via negativa*. *Fecund* is defined in the New Oxford American Dictionary as “producing or capable of producing an abundance of offspring or new growth; fertile” (Stevenson). Rather than seeing this fertility as beneficial, Dillard points out how many fertile things are never fertilized; she views nature’s extreme fecundity as waste. Dillard mentions barnacles as one example of excessive fecundity: the whole ocean, Dillard explains, is full of dying barnacles. So extremely few barnacles successfully attach to a piece of driftwood in the middle of the ocean, and without a host object, they die (*Pilgrim* 176). Dillard frets over this extreme waste and wonders whether she should let her hand dredge through the water so that some barnacles could

survive by latching on to her fingers (176). She rebels against the uncontrolled death of these creatures; she deplores God's complicity in the death of so many of his creatures. Dillard also details other instances of the fecundity of nature, such as lemmings, parasite wasps, and flatworms, all of whom reproduce rapidly with almost no chance of survival (168, 169, 171). These examples fit within the *via negativa* because Dillard uses them to point out how darkness and destruction obscure – or perhaps override – the beauty of nature that calls to mind the divine presence. She writes, “What kind of a world is this, anyway? Why not make fewer barnacle larvae and give them a decent chance?” (176). Dillard deplores the number of creatures that are destroyed before they are even given life. Smith notes that, unlike the *via positiva*, where Dillard looked for beauty, in the *via negativa* she instead looks for signs of death (31). Dillard's discovery of the illogical presence of both beauty and death in nature situates her in a unique tension that requires theodicy.

The tension between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* illustrates Dillard's comfort with creating an aesthetic, rather than rational, theodicy. Dillard's description of both the understandability of God in nature and the obscuring of God by nature inhibit a logical solution to theodicy. Most of Dillard's critics accept and endorse this nonlinear feature of her work; for example, Paul Eggers says that “For the postmodern mystic ... the question of evil is not something that can be rationally addressed ... rather, evil, death, and waste are a great mystery that can only be addressed, not explained” (334). The contradictory use of both the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* does not indicate a mistake or laziness on Dillard's part. Rather, Dillard embraces the tension as an opportunity for creation within: “What I have been after all along is not an explanation, but a picture. This is the way the world is” (*Pilgrim* 181). This sentiment is indicative of Dillard's comfort with the tension throughout the work, a comfort she developed through recognizing that she cannot change the beauty or the horror in nature. John McAteer supports this idea with his argument that “since this is an aesthetic and emotional

issue what we need is not a philosophical and theological explanation of evil and suffering; rather we need [an] ... aesthetic experience ... a mystical vision that silences any question of theodicy without answering it” (793). Dillard offers this aesthetic experience on each page of her work. Although McAteer argues that Dillard does not answer theodicy, when stalking coots or watching clouds or climbing fences, Dillard's theodicy comes from her creation of a text that describes both beautiful and destructive aspects of nature. Her treatment of the tension between understanding God through nature and being unable to see God because of nature is not a logical syllogism: it is a nature exploration, a walk along the *via creativa*. As she explores, she creates, and this is her theodicy.

Dillard's use of the *via creativa* is her theodicy, her vindication of divine goodness in a world of destruction. Smith claims that the *via creativa* is a “third path” that joins “nature's beauty and intricacy on the *via positiva* and nature's horror and death on the *via negativa*” (34). This is illustrated by the fact that the final chapter moves away from the allegiance of the previous six chapters to the *via negativa* and steps into what Smith calls a “profound unity beneath the appearance of irreconcilable opposites” (33). Dillard effectively exemplifies this by characterizing water two ways: She describes “waters of beauty and mystery” and “waters of separation” that “purify” and “cut me off” (*Pilgrim* 272). These descriptions read like a microcosm of the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. Dillard then follows her creation of tension by describing a moment when she watched falling, twirling maple seed. This juxtaposition is Dillard's method for unifying the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* throughout her book: she describes something beautiful (*via positiva*), then she describes something destructive (*via negativa*), and finally she discovers a natural occurrence that creates within her a new attitude. The maple seed is, in this example, that final occurrence, the *via creativa*. She finishes her description by writing, “If I am a maple key falling, at least I can twirl” (273). Smith points out not only that she can twirl, but also that even a falling maple seed will rise again when it grows into a

new tree (41). Dillard's positive opinion towards the maple seed and the lesson she learns from it step away from a focus on the destruction of nature and step toward the presence of beauty despite nature. This is an attitude Dillard must work to create, it does not follow seamlessly after the horrific images she finds in the *via negativa*. Hillary Kelleher's description of the *via negativa* allows the *via negativa* to coexist with harmony: "In negative theology ... cosmic harmony takes place within an overall dialectic at once positive and negative, light and dark" (47). This interpretation of the *via negativa* keeps that approach from overriding Dillard's argument. Images of darkness do not overcome images of light; Kelleher points out that harmony exists in places where both light and dark are found. The power of the *via creativa* is the dual experience of the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*.

Conclusion: Habit and Choice

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard uses nature to talk about philosophical and spiritual topics. She exercises the habit of seeing, which is both passive observation and active creation, and uses it to explore questions of God's goodness, or theodicy. Dillard's creation – *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* – does not deny that cruel things and beautiful things both exist in God's creation. Dillard writes, "The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there" (*Pilgrim* 10). Her book invites humanity to look at the world together. Shields supports this use of nonfiction, stating, "There isn't any story. It's not the story. It's just this breathtaking world—that's the point. The story's not important, what's important is the way the world looks" (49). *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* proposes that creation is the counterpart to theodicy.

Although the explorations in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are limited to a small area by a small creek in Virginia, Dillard's writing invites readers to engage with the beauty and horror around them. Writing is an act of creation. The problem with the world is destruction; creation is the opposite of destruction. Dillard's creation of the text is an act of rebuilding. Through

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Dillard shows that the important thing is not justifying the presence of destruction in nature but rather engaging in creation, which acts against the destructive horror endemic in the natural world. Deborah C. Bowen recognizes the motivational quality of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, writing that "Dillard's journey to wisdom answers the question of how observation becomes ethic, how doing what appears to be nothing can in fact be doing something profound, how the *via creativa* unites time and eternity ... that is . . . a willing complicity in a discourse of suffering on behalf of another" (324). By the final chapter, Dillard's work both vindicates God's goodness through the *via creativa* and encourages its readers to walk along the *via creativa* in their own lives.

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