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“Westward I Go Free”: Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

by Paul Lindholdt



Abstract

In 1974 Annie Dillard published *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction in 1975. Dillard was Presbyterian, a world view that taints her transcriptions of natural history. Both her father and her husband made contemporary horror films that shaped the aesthetics of her nominally nonfiction book. Internal evidence and secondary scholarship call into question the veracity of key aspects of the book. Some alleged observations of nature are augmented or falsified. In interviews conducted after the book was published, the author expressed an opinion that nonfiction would benefit from fictional inflections. Six weeks after the book’s having won the Pulitzer Prize was announced, the author separated from her professor-husband and moved some 2,800 miles from Roanoke, Virginia, to Bellingham, Washington. Language in the final chapters of the book foretells that move.

Keywords: horror, apophasis, puritanism, denial



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“Westward I Go Free”: Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Paul Lindholdt

Within seven weeks of receiving the news that she had won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize in Nonfiction for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard relocated from Roanoke, Virginia to Bellingham, Washington.¹ What conditioned her migration so far away? Why did she choose the job at Western Washington State College (WWSC, now WWU) on the northwesternmost corner of the 48 states? How did her newfound acclaim influence her decision to relocate? These questions are tied to her marriage and her antipathy to media exposure. More importantly, the dark ecology of the book which launches her move has been neglected, or otherwise read uncritically as an accurate nonfictional natural history.

Dark ecology, coined by ecological philosopher Timothy Morton, proposes a shift in how we approach and understand ecology (Morton 2015; Morton 2016). Morton challenges the traditional view of nature as pristine, separate from humans, and deserving of our protection and preservation through technological progress. They reinterpret Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution to emphasize the interconnectedness of all life forms. Recognizing the volatility of the world, dark ecology also emphasizes the uncertainty inherent in ecological relationships. By embracing melancholy and irony, it acknowledges the reality of loss and recognizes the tragic reality of place in ecology and the limitations of our knowledge. Akin to what Dillard called the *via negativa*, it urges a departure from provisional explanations. Opposed to seeking singular solutions or fixing the environment, dark ecology recommends that humans embrace the inherent messiness of ecological positions and the uncertainty that goes with them. Dillard’s innovations within dark ecology integrated her Christianity and presaged Morton. A summary of key parts of Dillard’s biography will complement the present interpretation of her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

1.

Even before *Pilgrim* appeared, media hype was compounding her need to flee the East. The reasons for her aversion are complex. In 2019 Robert Richardson, her third husband, tried to give an account of it. “By the time *Pilgrim* appeared in 1974,” he wrote on her website, “New York’s publicity machine had already raised as enormous and loud a fuss as is possible with a writer who declines televised appearances” (2019). He aimed to explain her evasion of the limelight and the abiding silence since her novel, *The Maytrees*, in 2007—a silence likely traceable to the callous review of the book by Julia Reed in the *New York Times*. Richardson enlarged upon Dillard’s antipathy for the media: “*Harper’s Magazine* had printed two of *Pilgrim*’s chapters as articles and named her a contributing editor; *Atlantic Monthly* printed another chapter, and *Sports Illustrated* another” (2019). That hubbub all took place before the book came out. In their shared drama, the “publicity machine” became an antagonist. Her later statements make plain that she did not like attention to her inherited wealth during interviews. She wanted her writing to stand alone.

Annie Dillard (*née* Doak) descended from Pittsburgh millionaires. Their neighborhoods harbored estates by financier Andrew Mellon, ketchup magnate Henry J. Heinz, oil executive John Worthington, and electricity baron George Westinghouse (“Historic Pittsburgh”). A paternal ancestor of Dillard’s cofounded the American Standard Corporation, a plumbing company. The environs where she came of age were the domain of heavy industry and old money that generated philanthropies and noblesse oblige. She attended the college-preparatory Ellis School for girls in the Shadyside district. She spoke derisively about the fine breeding and social niceties those environs bred. When NPR interviewer Terry Gross asked her about her family money, she grew angry (1992). She snapped and shut down. Dillard said to Geoffrey Melada, interviewing her for *Pittsburgh Magazine*, that in her neighborhood “the idea was to look good, stay thin and live on any one of 80 acceptable streets” (2010).

If her family background caused her to be media-averse, her education honed her literary skills. One of her chief influences was poetry. As a student at Hollins College in Virginia, she wrote about Emily Dickinson for the Hollins College *Symposium* in a paper titled “The Merchant of the Picturesque.” That research paper concludes: “The natural world is a beautiful and cruel peep-show, a burlesque directed by a half-malicious God who turns out the lights just as the fans are about to part” (Dillard 1967, 42). That sentence bears on *Pilgrim*. Dillard’s conclusion about Dickinson’s “half-malicious God” foresees the god in *Pilgrim*, whom she positions somewhat more agreeably as a “carnival magician” (Dillard 1974, 13). In that same first chapter of her book, she celebrates

January’s “long slant of light that means good walking,” an image likely owing to Dickinson’s “certain Slant of Light / Winter Afternoons” (Dickinson 1951, 118). Other poetic echoes embellish *Pilgrim*. Nancy Parrish, in her history of Hollins College and the female prodigies it produced, examines Dillard’s life both before and after she married her professor, Richard Henry Wilde Dillard (Parrish 1998, 133). Meta Ann Doak was then 20, a sophomore. Her husband’s first three books of poetry were all published during their marriage. Seven years after she moved to Bellingham, she told a WWSC student reporter: “I love to teach poets because I like them as people. They’re sort of fringy and irresponsible: half nuts” (Lawrence 1982).

Richard Dillard died on April 4, 2023, a date that means she has outlived three husbands. Since 2007, she has not published a new book. In multiple interviews she confesses that she has quit writing.² If her latter-day silence is regrettable for her followers, it is fitting to take stock of her accomplishments on this semicentenary of her Pulitzer Prize. Owing to my relationship as her former student, and my correspondence with her in the intervening years, I refer to her as Annie here. When I asked her for a key to help unlock *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she suggested that I research the *via negativa* and referred me to Brian Copenhaver, a philosopher who then was Dean of Humanities at WWSC. I arranged a visit with him. The Latin *via negativa* signifies “to go where God is not [apparent]” (Kenney 2024). It is an aspect of apophasis, a Greek word deriving from denial. Apophasis in rhetoric is a trope that denies intentions to address a subject, often paradoxically while naming that same subject. Apophasis in theology surveys what may not be said—studied, discovered, written, or uttered—about the ultimate perfection that is God.

A scholarly consensus is that *Pilgrim* is a theodicy, tinged in spots by visions and dreams. *Theo* is God, and *dike* stems from *dikao*, meaning justice. The portmanteau stems from Gottfried Leibniz, who wrote a 1710 treatise on evil and took a hopeful view of it (1985). Theodicies forgive, redeem, and vindicate divine providence in the face of doubt. They justify or reclaim faith while freeing their disciples from despair. They assuage the ancient question or complaint: how can a caring God countenance suffering? Annie’s original variation on that theme, that complaint, is to address the question by specifying the excesses of the more-than-human world. Theodicies vary widely and range along a continuum. Evil scaled on that continuum may be categorized as an illusion, as pragmatic design, as morally merited, or as deriving from the somber laws of nature.

Pilgrim best fits in the latter category. Terror is the just province of apophatic theology, terror and at times horror, because evil need be identified by any available means. Annie is not alone in imbuing Christianity with gothic tones. Evangelism often is

performative, and *Pilgrim* bends evangelical. As the calmer, cooler Catholic or agnostic of her later decades, Annie would diminish the hyperbole and elevate the rationality. But as an unreconstructed Presbyterian in her middle twenties—supercharged by the visions of Dickinson and the spirit of rebellion that prompted Dickinson to leave the church at the age of 28 (“Emily Dickinson”)—Annie burned with the fire of an innovative evangelism that found sources in the natural world. Like Dickinson, she divorced the church in a letter to her minister as a teenager, but soon thereafter she returned to the fold when the minister loaned her books written by C.S. Lewis (Beha 2016).

Much of the serious attention to *Pilgrim* has come from people of faith. Beha, who likewise lapsed before returning to the Catholic Church and becoming executive editor of *Harper’s*, dubbed *Pilgrim* “her first foray” into “a theodicy trilogy” (2016). He noted, without lamenting it outright, that theologians have “stopped being listened to,” but he admitted that such secular neglect opens the intellectual space for Annie to perform her “unlicensed metaphysics,” as she characterized her project to him (2016). Several specialized theological studies have been written about her or included her. A consensus categorizes *Pilgrim* as a theodicy (Webb 1994, 438; Detweiler 1989, 130; Dillard 1999, 279; Richardson 2019).³ With the help of these scholars and Annie herself, I intend to line out the influences that led her to compose *Pilgrim* in the way she did.

Apophatic theology—a.k.a. negative theology that encompasses the *via negativa*—dances on the precipice of agnosticism. *Pilgrim* forever risks that cliff. Annie selected the ghastliest instances of natural evil science made available in the 1970s. Hers is a premeditated horror with an end in sight. If she claims to reconcile the gruesome and mechanical fecundity of nature with the beauty of creation and a benevolent creator, those reconciliations smack of artifice, which is not meant to abase the book. After all, the word *art* stems from *artifice*. “Like Hopkins, Dillard at times condenses her language almost to the point of unintelligibility, producing passages whose main tone is artifice” (Johnson 1992, 162). She could temper horror with flashes of mitigating beauty and rhapsody. By 2016 she could admit, “I’m not sure I believe in God” (Freeman 2016). That statement, however honest and commendable, is nonetheless suprising for someone who has created a reputation within belles lettres for religious insight and epiphany.

My interview with philosopher Brian Copenhaver, who would later become the Udvar-Hazy Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and History at UCLA, failed to persuade me the *via negativa* is the best tool to wedge open the wild cabinetry of *Pilgrim*. The *via negativa* instead seems to me to be a retcon, a retroactive continuity, she pasted on to soften the hard skepticism. *Retcon*, defined both as a verb and noun, entered English in

1973 vis-à-vis theology (“Short History”). The word for the present purposes here denotes a clarification or specification of the way a work was first created. Her retrospective claim for a *via negativa*, that is, amends her surface narrative. On that surface, a tender sensibility confronts nature’s enormities to stretch the limits of her faith.

At the same time, I understand *Pilgrim* generically to be a work of fiction as much as it is nonfiction. Interviewed by Karla Hammond, Annie asserted firmly that “art is lies” (1981, 35). Elaborating, she confessed: “Weirdly, I would consider myself a fiction writer who’s dealt mostly with non-fiction” (35). On this matter I take her at her word. Her claims about art appeared a mere six years after *Pilgrim* won the nation’s loftiest literary prize. They appeared one year before her nonfiction book appeared with the revelatory title *Living by Fiction* (1982). Many readers have learned to read her Pulitzer Prize-winning saga set on the shores of Tinker Creek not only as a memoir, not only as a theodicy, but also as a genre-bending nonfiction novel. While traditional nonfiction such as biographies and histories focus on factual reporting, nonfiction novels prioritize storytelling to create an immersive experience. They weave together true events and real people with narrative elements commonly found in fiction. They deploy literary devices such as vivid descriptions, character development, dialogue, and thematic exploration to make the stories more engaging and immersive. Eight years before *Pilgrim*, Truman Capote published *In Cold Blood*, which is considered the quintessential nonfiction novel (1966). Capote meticulously reconstructed the 1959 murder of the Cutter family in Kansas and the subsequent investigation of those murders. He used deep research, like Dillard, in addition to interviews, while employing a novelistic style that included characterizations and narrative tension.

To square my claim that *Pilgrim* is as much a work of fiction as of nonfiction, I revisit Annie’s 1996 disclosure at a conference in Florida. Multiple reports have been verified “from participants at the 14th Annual Key West Literary Seminar in 1996, where, during a session, Annie Dillard casually remarked that she never actually owned a tomcat, let alone a tomcat with bloody paws, as she describes in the opening scene Several sources confirmed that after the audience let out a synchronized gasp, you could almost hear the hearts breaking,” or so *Poets & Writers* reported (Redfield 1999, 40). The key scene that opens *Pilgrim* with such sensation was used with permission from “a poor graduate student” at Hollins College (Saverin 2015). In *Pilgrim*, the cat, “a fighting tom,” slips in her window like an incubus and kneads her chest with bloody paws, leaving toeprints “that looked as though I’d been painted with roses” (Dillard 1974, 3). Those toeprints function as love-emblems that unite beauty and violence within a common ground.

One of several false starts on *Pilgrim* positioned it as a novel. “After all,” Annie had written in a 1972 journal entry while composing the book, “we’ve had the nonfiction novel—it’s time for the novelized book of nonfiction,” or so Saverin (2015) found when she dipped into Annie’s journals (which are housed with her other papers in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University). Many purists would disagree with that unorthodox literary claim made in her journal. Lee Gutkind, who founded and still edits the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, for example, requires contributors to vow their work is true. Guilt about the borrowed “fighting tom” festered and prompted her to come clean about the seizure of the image, as Redfield tells it (1999, 40). Guilt can do strange things. When asked about the effects of the Pulitzer Prize, she responded, it “did interfere. I spent the rest of my life fleeing it. If I had any sense, I would have given back the Pulitzer Prize, but you don’t know what will come of it. You feel guilty. You feel you need to be punished” (Melada 2010).

Punished? Because the prize brought unwanted publicity to her quiet life? Because the book was unworthy of the award? Or punished because *Pilgrim* is a novel sold as nonfiction?

The generic “purity” of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* has been the focus of multiple analyses in the intervening half-century. According to one analysis, Annie wrote “in a literary form that obscured the traditional distinctions between fiction and autobiography, between the temporal and the eternal” (Parrish 1988, 126). Another scholar applied the term “fictional autobiography” to *Pilgrim*, a genre that conflates the lives of narrators and authors (Hardack 2008, 76). The same article dubbed Annie “a postmodern confidence woman,” and her *Pilgrim* an instance of “trickster fiction” (76). A confidence woman, or con woman, is one who uses deceit and trickery to gain the confidence and trust of others, typically for financial gain. Charismatic and persuasive, deceptive and manipulative, the con man or woman is closely allied with the trickster in folklore: one that is prone to deception and mischief. Another scholar appropriated Hardack’s nonce phrase “fictional autobiography” and criticized *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* for its lack of human community and for “an obsession with the self’s immolation” (Ronda 2017, 192). Parrish foretold Hardack’s “fictional autobiographies” by two decades when she observed that “The persona ‘Annie Dillard’ experiences and describes thoughts and events that the real Annie Dillard had only heard about or studied or imagined: the persona gave her thoughts and actions fuller room to range than she found in her daily life” (Parrish 1988, 126). Parrish, without saying so outright, observed that Annie Dillard’s nonfiction integrates telltale fictional elements. One prong of the present argument here is that Annie in *Pilgrim*

had only heard about, studied, or imagined key incidents in natural history. Her invented self, then, is more properly a “narrator.”

2.

Horror genres were familiar for her as a daughter and a wife. Her father (“Frank Doak”) performed in the classic horror film *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero 1968). He was also an executive for the Pittsburgh-based production company that released the film. The plot of the film follows seven people trapped in a farmhouse in western Pennsylvania. They are under siege by a growing group of undead souls, aka zombies, that eat the flesh of their human victims. Annie was twenty-three when the film premiered. Her father played the scientist Dr. Grimes. George A. Romero’s film is recognized today as a classic of the horror genre and a seminal lurch in the many media franchises that are akin to the TV show *The Walking Dead* (Darabont 2010). Romero’s film “invented and perfected the modern zombie movie,” the *Village Voice* newspaper asserted (“Night” 2022).

By the time the film came out, Annie’s husband Richard Dillard was building his own authority in horror films. Born in 1937, eight years her senior, he was one of the screenwriters for *Frankenstein Meets the Space Monster* (“Hollins Professor” 2022). The year the pair married, 1965, his film premiered, and Richard completed his PhD with the University of Virginia. The plot of his film tracks a damaged android that engages in battle against alien invaders. That android, as in the 1818 novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, is assembled from parts of human bodies. By contrast to the film in which Annie’s father acted, and to which he contributed as a producer, Richard Dillard’s film ranks number seven in the documentary *The 50 Worst Movies Ever Made* (Christopher 2004). From 1973 onward, Richard Dillard served as vice-president of *Film Journal*. His monograph, titled *Horror Films*, appeared in 1976. Three years later he would write an article on *Night of the Living Dead*. If horror films did not saturate Annie, they constituted a substantial portion of the artistic media that collectively helped to cultivate her sensibility.

She left Richard shortly after the Pulitzer was announced, but she dedicated *Pilgrim* to him, just as she did her 1974 poetry collection *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*. Richard read both of those books in draft and offered commentary. She sounded like “a fruit,” he said of her attempt to narrate in a male voice in a draft of *Pilgrim* (Saverin 2015). One giveaway, he told her, was her mention of Kleenex, the facial tissue, for all men carry handkerchiefs. “I had no intention of getting married, let alone young,” she said in an interview near Cripple Creek, Virginia, at one of her homes decades later (Freeman 2016). “Richard Dillard, my poetry-writing professor, talked me into it. It was fine. That was a ten-year marriage, after which I headed west and met Gary Clevidence” (2016). Her statement

there, “It was fine,” both downplays the situation and parries awkward questions. It conceals the tension that contributed to their separation and divorce. Parrish noted she suffered “an edge of anxiety” about her apprenticeship to Richard. “I was married when I was 20—unformed—and I guess he licked me into shape” (1988, 157).

She repeated, in later interviews, the curious expression “he licked me into shape.” That esoteric figure squints in multiple directions. First is the obvious sexual connotation, of which she had to be aware. Second is the idiom for punishment; wrongdoers require periodic lickings or beatings to regulate them. Third and less vernacular, she borrowed the image from Ovid or more probably from Pliny the Elder, both of whom recorded it. She cites Pliny in *Pilgrim*, but she does not acknowledge the licking trope she lifted from him. Pliny wrote about bear cubs, “When first born, they are shapeless masses of white flesh, a little larger than mice, their claws alone being prominent. The mother then licks them gradually into proper shape” (Pliny the Elder 2015). A deeper structure of that esoteric metaphor intimates that her husband mentored her like any parent and likened her to a mass of flesh before he married her and groomed her. The metaphor is subtly ironic, insofar as she outstripped her fellow writer-husband to win a Pulitzer Prize.

In Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, he introduces the term “ephebe” to describe a young poet who grapples with the influence of predecessors (1973, 1). In Greek, the word ephebe (ἑφηβος, *ephēbos*) originally referred to a young man who had reached the age of puberty or early adulthood, typically between the ages of 18 and 20 (Chat GPT 2025).

Emerging poets engage in a creative struggle, an “agon,” with literary forebears to establish their own unique voice. This concept is central to Bloom’s theory of how poets contend with the legacies of those who came before them. Such contention is most often unconscious, just as it is in the Freudian psychology that Bloom adapted to originate his critical approach. The notion of artistic denial, in any event, recalls the apophasis. In theology, we recall, the apophasis is that paradoxical means by which one surveys what may not be said about the perfection that is God. Negative theology probes God’s participation in creation’s darker parts, often as a test of faith akin to the trials Job in the Bible undergoes. In keeping with Bloom’s analysis of the younger poet’s agon, Annie denied that her husband’s writing alienated her. “Richard liked a kind of intellectually sophisticated literature, an ironic, self-referential, playful literature that I soaked myself in perfectly happily” (Parrish 1988, 133). Her phrase “perfectly happily” smacks of insincerity, which is one hallmark of the denials identified by Bloom in his so-called antithetical criticism. Her book *Living by Fiction*, in fact, would make plain her distaste for

ironic, self-referential literature. *Living by Fiction* was “saying goodbye to new-fashioned fiction” of the sort that Richard Dillard favored (Cantwell 1992). “The marriage itself did not really survive the winning of the Pulitzer Prize” (Parrish 1998, 133), but the incompatibility had a deeper current.

For his part, Richard dedicated poems to Annie in his 1972 book, *After Borges*, but his first novel best displays the aesthetic mismatch between husband and wife. Published the same year that *Pilgrim* appeared, that novel is titled *The Book of Changes*. Its 1974 publication date would have put the spouses in mild rivalry. Each had published books of poetry and had moved on to their first books of prose. Richard’s novel, satirizing the detective fiction genre, relies upon familiarity with the conventions of that genre. The satire is thickly pasted. Embedded in the book are trappings of the horror genre aplenty. The first chapter and the cover image in the paperback reprint feature a wolf on hind legs that the narrator glimpses through a window. “Its eyes flashed red in the moonlight, and saliva beaded silver from its gleaming fangs to the glistening grass” (R. Dillard 1974, 18). The third chapter gives the inciting incident for the mystery that unspools the plot: “a great number of young women in the surrounding villages had been brutally murdered and partially devoured, always under a full moon” (25). Richard’s detail about meals of human flesh glances backward to Annie’s father and *The Night of the Living Dead*. It glances sideways to the competing natural grotesqueries of Annie’s more aesthetically compelling *Pilgrim*.

The violence of Richard’s novel mixes with a fixation on female anatomy. The narrator notes “the slim back of a young woman . . . leading down by way of an entrancing arch to a fine double round of pearly posterior,” and so forth (R. Dillard 1974, 26). A half-century after its publication, the novel comes off as smirking in its salaciousness and violence. Protagonist Pudd, for instance, is an executioner who has been assigned to behead an elderly woman. That grim task requires three whacks (60–61). In the neon light of “Schwartz Carl’s Hot Bar,” a young woman journalist comes forward to address Pudd following the execution (104). The woman sports “breasts like avocados under a red blouse, nylon and tight, no brassiere” (104). Five paragraphs later, Pudd is still contemplating “the green promise of her breasts” (104–105). That novel written by her husband might have discomfited Annie, as a Christian but also as an independent and thoughtful woman. For readers who appreciate her aesthetics and literary style, *The Book of Changes* is a difficult read.

In *Pilgrim*, Annie not only omits mention of Richard, to whom she dedicates it, but she also distorts her domestic situation. In the “Flood” chapter, for instance, she writes, “I’m in no danger; my house is high” (152), rather than saying “our house.” She studiously omitted her husband from her book, whose draft he had read for her, though he had referenced her lovingly in four poems from his book of poetry, *After Borges* (R. Dillard 1972;

3, 29, 44, 58). Richard might also have been surprised by her decision to liken their house to “an anchorite’s hermitage,” also called “an anchor-hold” (4), and by extension to position herself as a hermit or an anchoress. An anchoress is a religious recluse who voluntarily secludes herself from the world in a cell attached to a church or monastery. Contrary to these fictive tropes she developed to position herself, Richard had licked his wife into artistic shape and married her to solemnize their union.

3.

To trace the origins of her faith and how that faith helped build *Pilgrim*, I glance back to the seventeenth century, a period that is familiar from my study of early American literature. Annie, too, claimed it was familiar. In a 1987 essay titled “To Fashion a Text,” she disclosed some of her key religious influences. She timed that essay to promote her memoir *An American Childhood*, which began as a study of the settler-colonists of Pennsylvania. The essay explicates her aesthetic incentives and intellectual origins. She wrote about the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in her essay, “I grew up in this world—at the lunatic fringe of it—and it fascinates me” (Dillard 1988, 167). She went on: “They’re Calvinists, of course—just like the Massachusetts Puritans—and I think I can make a case that their influence was greater than the Puritans” (167). Her claims point toward a deeper affinity with those fundamentalist strains of faith than she admitted elsewhere. She had been more direct about her personal beliefs six years earlier: “I’m a Presbyterian. Pittsburgh specializes in Presbyterians. I was raised by ordinary secular atheist parents” (Hammond 1981, 35). Interviewed the year *Pilgrim* came out, Annie performed a deft apophatic move: she deflected or preempted questions, as if she could foresee them coming, that she had any significant puritanical bearing. “The main way I’m a Puritan,’ she says, is in the stuff I ignore. You have this one tiny mind and there is only so much room in it, I really believe that. I’m careful about what I put in it. But I’m a crummy Puritan,’ she smiles, ‘because I smoke cigarettes (Vantage) and play Ping-Pong and pinochle. But the difference is I feel bad” (Smyth 1974, G1). Those tongue-in-cheek disclaimers come off like judo moves to deflect uncomfortable questions and to disarm potential critics who might try to call her out.

Presbyterians descended from Scottish Calvinists. John Calvin was French, but his influence permeated western nations. He preached a doctrine that emphasized the depravity and predestination of humankind. Predestination embodies the cheerless notion of unconditional election: the belief that God foreordains those who will be saved. Members of “the elect” proved impossible to distinguish from the unregenerate. As a result, anxiety beset believers bent on detecting who was destined to be saved, often by displays of good works. The Protestant work ethic grew from such displays. Annie herself suffered—or flourished—under extreme displays of labor. “I had a great deal of physical energy when I wrote *Pilgrim*,”

she declared. “I was willing to lose twenty pounds and ruin myself on cigarettes and coffee” (Hammond 1981, 31). By the early nineteenth-century, most Protestants were ready to reject the severity of their Calvinist forebears and began to assert instead that humankind deserves to participate in its own salvation. That American belief generated the cheerful Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Annie praised in the classes she taught. Her husband Robert D. Richardson wrote a celebrated biography of Emerson (1995).

A retcon of redemptive piety does not relieve *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* from being a work of fiction imbued by hyperbolic horror at its dramatic core. The tomcat—“stinking of urine and blood” and creeping in the window like a demon—embodies a sexual violence (Dillard 1974, 3). “Some nights he kneaded my bare chest with his front paws, powerfully, arching his back, as if sharpening his claws, or pummeling a mother for milk” (3). (Among the vigilant Puritans of New England, Satan often took the form of a black cat or adopted a cat as an assistant or familiar.) Annie’s narrator, undergoing the cat’s affectionate assaults, would only “half-awaken” and afterward decided she needed to bathe. “I never knew as I washed, and the blood streaked, faded, and finally disappeared, whether I’d purified myself or ruined the blood sign of the passover” (4). *Passover* alludes to one of the more horrific events in the Bible. The Lord God in Exodus, to penalize the Pharaoh who enslaved the Jews, dispatches the angel of death to kill the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. God then sends Moses to order the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb and smear its blood above their doors. The avenging angel, upon seeing that sign, would know to pass over the houses of the Israelites. The word *blood*, repeated seven times in the first two paragraphs of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, pulses like a vein through the remainder of the book.

A drenching of Puritan sensibility would help to account for the extreme squeamishness, the repulsed regard, for the insect world that layers *Pilgrim*. The Puritans were squeamish about “the enmity shed on nature by human sin in Eden,” making *Pilgrim*’s narrator both witness and participant in the mayhem that stemmed from Adam and Eve (Lindholdt 2015, 11). Annie’s narrator creates scenes like a filmmaker. The giant water-bug narrative, for instance, unites predation and rape. The bug’s beaklike rostrum penetrates the frog from behind. It injects an enzyme that liquefies the frog, which “slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent” (Dillard 1974, 7–8). The nauseated narrator delineates the horror. “He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water; it was a monstrous and terrifying thing” (8). Using dark ecology as baroque artifice, the narration takes place at too great a rate to pass a qualitative assessment. The unnaturally rapid transformation

of the living amphibian into “bright scum,” that is, fails to hold up to scrutiny in temporal terms, enhancing the element of fiction. To her credit, the narrator resists reading that predatory act as a parable, which is what the Puritans generally, and Puritan preacher John Bunyan specifically, would have done. Bunyan wrote the similarly titled allegorical novel *The Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678 and 1684 installments. That novel follows a protagonist by the name of Christian, a sinner burdened by guilt, as he embarks on a perilous journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. He encounters various obstacles and temptations, including the Slough of Despond and the seductive allure of Vanity Fair. Through perseverance and faith, Christian overcomes these trials and ultimately arrives at his destination.

The death of the frog, like much of the signature prose in *Pilgrim*, pivots on extravagant rhetoric and an ornate style that recalls the baroque period in English literature. Similes, metaphors, and hyperbole flourish. Figures appear in compounds. Religious and moral themes abound. The narrator's worm's-eye view of the praying mantis egg-laying in *Pilgrim* is an instance. From a distance she sees “a mass of bubbles like spittle” and bends down to get a closer view (Dillard 1974, 58). She submits to the spectacle voluntarily, placing her face mere inches away. Though she claims she wants to avert her gaze, she apophatically denies herself that ready relief. The ovipositor of the mantis looked like both “an engorged leech” and “a smashed finger” (58), as she watched in horrified concentration. “It puffed like a concertina, it throbbled like a bellows; it roved, pumping, over the glistening, clabbered surface of the egg case testing and patting, thrusting and smoothing” (58). Later in the book, she recalls that the eggs were “like tapioca pudding glued to a thorn” (Dillard 1974, 169). The figures multiply.

She compares the ecological marvel to a film. She likens the mantis egg-laying to “a horrible nature movie,” a movie that she “had to sit through” (Dillard 1974, 57), like the films her husband and her father gained acclaim for making. Extending the film trope, she imagines “dimly lighted exit signs along the wall,” and she plays out a conceit “that behind the scenes some amateur moviemaker was congratulating himself on having stumbled across this little wonder, or even having contrived so natural a setting, as though the whole scene had been shot very carefully in a terrarium in someone's greenhouse” (Dillard 1974, 58). The greenhouse reference strikingly recalls the discovery of the seedpods in the 1956 horror film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel). Dr. Miles Bennell is baffled when his patients complain that emotionless impostors have supplanted their loved ones. In a climactic moment, Bennell notices strange egg cases hatching in a greenhouse.⁴ Their glistening, clabbered surfaces match the tapioca extruded by Annie's laboring female mantis. The filmic frame of that scene raises a crucial question about whether she indeed witnessed that act and if she was being true to nonfiction form.

A couple more instances of insect monstrosity must suffice. “It is between mothers and their offspring,” Annie wrote, “that these feedings have truly macabre overtones” (Dillard 1974, 170). *Macabre*, suggesting the allegorical dance of death, denotes gruesome, horrifying, ghastly, terrible. A term often applied to horror master Edgar Allan Poe, *macabre* applies here to an anthropomorphized lacewing insect. “Sometimes, when a female lays her fertile eggs on a green leaf atop a slender stalked thread, she is hungry. She pauses in her laying, turns around, and eats her eggs one by one, then lays some more, and eats them, too” (170). In that sequence, the ephemeral insect is taking sustenance from the excretions of its own body. A ghastly film portraying abortion, cannibalism, infanticide, like any film it deploys dialogue. “‘Well, Lord God,’ asks the delicate, dying lacewing whose mandibles are wet with the juice secreted by her own ovipositor, ‘what’s it all about?’” (171). Cannibalism by lacewing *larvae* is documented, but science offers scant support that *adult* lacewings eat their own eggs. Adult lacewings primarily feed on nectar, pollen, and honeydew (a sugary substance secreted by some insects). Adult cannibalism has been observed only under laboratory conditions where individuals are confined and/or deprived of food. Lacewing larvae, on the other hand, are voracious predators and feed on soft-bodied insects like aphids, mealybugs, and other small insects (Varenhorst 2023). Planarians—flatworms known for their remarkable regenerative capabilities—are reported to be “cannibals, devouring everything alive that comes their way, including their own previously discarded tails which were in the process of growing a new head” (Dillard 1974, 171). Such scenes, riffing on Darwin, throw shade on all creation and on the human capacity to tolerate the macabre. Much like Annie’s narrator, Charles Darwin himself underwent a crisis of faith when he witnessed a predatory ichneumon wasp laying eggs on its living hosts (Miller 2021). Animals for Annie’s narrator function as horrific human effigies. Those effigies, crafted for aesthetic purposes, acknowledge the ways our species has fallen prey to the perception of outsized evil inherent in nature.

Seen through compassionate Christian eyes, nature in *Pilgrim* is a series of stuttering mistakes God made. They lie outside the bounds of human comprehension. If religious extremists influenced the youthful Annie, as she reported to Cantwell in 1992, then those influences potentially swayed her to embrace a hyperbolic vision of creation. Such genres in the arts are often dubbed “shock horror” today, a vogue that might help explain the sustained admiration for *Pilgrim* a half-century on. Shock horror colors the nature narratives in *Pilgrim*. It is as if Satan were reported to be skulking among humankind and wielding a toxic rostrum. David Lavery acquitted her aesthetic this way: “She understands that it is man’s interfering consciousness which creates the grotesque and invents evil” (1980, 68). Such interfering consciousness results from the multiple curses levied on Adam and Eve by God in Genesis.

One of the chief tensions fueling *Pilgrim* is how to reconcile sacred beauty with a cursed world. The book bears witness to conflicting deities: the deity of the grotesque that opposes the holy, the deity of the interfering consciousness that quashes unself-conscious splendor. One phrase she borrows to try to reconcile the two of them is *Deus absconditus*. “Pascal uses a nice term to describe the notion of the creator’s, once having called forth the universe, turning his back to it: *Deus Absconditus*. Is this what we think happened? Was the sense of it there, and God absconded with it, ate it, like a wolf who disappears round the edge of the house with the Thanksgiving turkey?” (Dillard 1974, 9). The Latin phrase, contingent on syntax and context, translates as “hidden God” or “God is concealed” (Kenney 2024). Two centuries before the French mathematician Blaise Pascal used it (1961), *Vere tu es Deus absconditus* (“Truly, you are a God who hidest thyself”) had been the subject of an exegesis by Martin Luther (1961). The phrase originated, though, neither with Luther nor with Pascal but instead within Isaiah 45:15, here in the King James Version of the Bible: “Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.” Not only for Annie but also for theologians throughout the ages, the negligence of God has badgered. Religious scholars for centuries have interrogated conflicts between the grotesque and the holy on our planet Earth. The variation on that theme that fuels *Pilgrim* beautifully is its locus within the context of ecology.

4.

Was Annie Dillard influenced by the Puritans? If so, that influence has not been examined. Her family was not religious, while she was Presbyterian. She attended a summer church camp, which (she said in the interview with Cantwell) her parents “would have disapproved of” had they known its tone (1992). That camp comes in for lavish praise. It was infused with “low-church, Fundamentalist theology, and the first ideas I’d ever heard,” she said. “It was metaphysics for children. It’s the only metaphysics that people do teach children, and then you spend the rest of your life looking for something that good” (1992). The operative word is “fundamentalist”; the operative clause, “you spend the rest of your life looking for something that good.” It was the tang of Puritanism among the Scotch-Irish which she spent years looking for, the fresh clean smack of its unsophistication. Hollins College provided her further contact with the Puritans. Americanist Louis D. Rubin, Jr. arrived at Hollins in 1957 and founded its creative writing program, one of the earliest in the nation. Annie finished her B.A. the same year Rubin left. In an article for *Sewanee Review*, Rubin anonymized her. “Too personal,” she found a J.D. Salinger story he assigned her class to read. “The young lady who found Salinger’s story ‘too personal’ to talk about in public is now a distinguished writer and critic” (Rubin 1989, 261). That report from her professor helps explain why her work so often excludes

people. Her aversion to intimacy in literature rose to the surface amid interviews when she reddened, or teared up, or grew angry.

Parrish discloses that the student Rubin was referencing was Annie (Parrish 1998, 136). Embarrassment over a perceived excess of the intimate lines up with her refusal to satisfy the later editor who hinted, “perhaps we needed a little more of my adolescent love life” when she was drafting *An American Childhood* (Trueheart 1987, D1). She rejected that suggestion, “because I didn’t want to kiss and tell . . . It’s not ladylike. It’s not proper” (1987, D1). From what little is known about her young adulthood, she might have risked embarrassment or vulnerability had she disclosed much about her love life at that time. Discomfort with personal revelation also accounts for her aversion in her writing, or in some interviews, to be forthcoming about her marriages. Her reticence on that topic contrasts with Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and other contemporaneous confessional poets. Her marriage to Richard Dillard might bear comparison to Sylvia Plath’s marriage with Ted Hughes, however, since both husbands functioned as mentors of sorts to their talented younger brides.

Catherine Albanese astutely observed: “The Puritans are gone in our time, but something of their imposing Calvinist ethos yet remains. One good place to look for it is in the reflections of sometime nature writer Annie Dillard, author of numerous literary works and, among them, the now-classic *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*” (1990, 163). Annie would have found Calvinist ethos at Hollins when seventeenth-century scholar John Moore assigned her to study epic poems by Edmund Spenser and John Milton.⁵ Milton dubbed Spenser his “Original”—that is, the paragon who most influenced his own art. While Spenser leaned Puritan, Milton was Puritanism’s *enfant terrible*. Spenser’s Red Crosse Knight is held behind the scenes in sexual thrall to the allure of Duessa in Book I of *The Faerie Queen* (1882), much like the gallant male mantis in *Pilgrim* that continues copulating while the female is chewing its head away. For her mantis, Annie borrowed the archaism “swain”—a male admirer or lover. That word harks back to the early Renaissance. Her swain of an insect prolongs both his torment and his sexual thrall. Neither the prelapsarian world nor the *felix culpa*—the fortunate fall, the happy fall into the real world—is a site that her insects as human effigies in *Pilgrim* occupy. Savage compulsions to eat and breed drive them, compulsions familiar to biblical scholars from the ordeals narrated in the Old Testament. Such grotesque insect activities—comparable to the sexual captivities in Puritan allegories that Bunyan, Spenser, and Milton wrote—encourage interpretations of a fallen planet.

If beauty is the only redemption that *Pilgrim* offers, it is a mere afterthought, a retcon, an appliqué superimposed to deliver restoration to the dark ecology of her bitter vision of nature. Beauty alone, however, cannot alone alleviate the many instances of evil’s disproportion on planet Earth.

Paradise Lost by John Milton is a key Puritan text she would have been assigned to read. Many of her creatures mirror the unnatural relations between Sin and Death in Milton's vision. In the "Fecundity" chapter, the narrator "watched in horror" her own dream of fish in her bed (Dillard 1974, 162). She appears to have birthed those fish. "The eggs hatched before my eyes, on my bed, and a thousand chunky fish swarmed there in a viscid slime" (162). Those fish recall Satan's offspring Sin. Never woman-born, Sin instead springs from Satan's internal corruption, as a dark and grotesque contrast to divine creation and incarnation. Sin is "woman to the waist" (Milton 1674, ll. 650) but has the tail of a fish. Satan later rapes Sin, his daughter, who gives birth to Death. In and out of her womb their doglike offspring range. Sin complains, they "howle and gnaw / My Bowels, thir repast; then bursting forth / A fresh with conscious terrors vex me round, / That rest or intermission none I find" (ll. 799–802). Nor does *Pilgrim's* narrator find much rest or intermission during her ordeals. Unaccountably she rebukes herself at length about the fish dream: "Fool, I thought: child, you child, you ignorant, innocent fool. What did you expect to see—angels?" (Dillard 1974, 160). In Netherlandish pictures and old proverbs, fish often signify the phallus. Her dream leads to a meditation on evil that continues for two pages. "I can like it and call it birth and regeneration, or I can play the devil's advocate and call it rank fecundity—and say that it's hell that's a-poppin'" (161). Hell lies atop her mind. "I am not one," the narrator of *Pilgrim* continues in her lamentation and self-reproach, "but legion. And we are all going to die" (163).

By setting her narrative on the shores of Tinker Creek, Annie perhaps painted herself into a rhetorical corner. In the "Fecundity" chapter once again, she writes, "Must I then part ways with the only world I know? I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down" (Dillard 1974, 178). Tinker Creek at length grows noxious. Dragged down, she must draw a line against its oppressive forces. "It looks for the moment as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized" (178–179). That brutalization stems from nature's enormities. Its dark ecology afflicts her, its reflex eating and breeding with no deity to heed or intervene. "The sickness of souls, the war Satan wages against Christ, the providence God offers righteous men and women, these are placeless themes" (Lindholdt 2015, 33). And yet the project of *Pilgrim* is place-based, even arguably bioregional. The setting is a specific creek in Virginia. The narrator encodes her inmost emotions via observation of the natural world, causing her reproach to be more domestic than geographical in its origins. The only hint of her own reproduction is the nightmare about the fish in her bed. That nightmare unites the marital couch, lubricious slime, and the irrepressible forces of procreation. "Nature is accomplice to what we read as evil, malignant

itself. The home of demons and demonic force, the Puritans would have said” (Albanese 1990, 170).

Those tropes lie far submerged beneath *Pilgrim*—detected, if at all, as atmosphere rather than as key theme. As a sophomore she married her professor and engaged in an unequal power base. She strayed along the shores of Tinker Creek as if in a prelapsarian state—the innocent guise of an American Adam naming all creation before the fall.⁶ That guise positions her as one who anticipated she would find the balance of nature that had engaged romantic writers for two centuries. Failing to find that balance and solace, she discovers horrors and disparities instead. A dark ecology ensues. “There is cancer in the cosmos, and Dillard must come to terms with it” (Albanese 1990, 171); in a sacrificial image that underscores a demoted Earth, “She can see herself as ‘a sacrifice bound with cords to the horns of the world’s rock altar, waiting for worms’” (Dillard 1974, 146).

5.

The final chapters prepare readers for her withdrawal. Her need to leave is evident in those chapters. By withdrawing from husband and home, she might have emulated early Christian monks such as Anthony (ca. 251–356), who self-rusticated to the Egyptian desert to contemplate God in solitude.⁷ The final chapters of *Pilgrim* demonstrate a restless narrator preparing to stray away from husband and from creek. In the chapter titled “Spring,” she says, “I left the woods, spreading silence before me in a wave, as though I’d stepped not through the forest, but on it. I left the woods silent, but I myself was stirred and quickened. I’ll go to the Northwest Territories, I thought, Finland.” In the next paragraph, “I’ll go to Alaska, Greenland” (Dillard 1974, 114). Her literary avatar Henry David Thoreau, on whom she had written her M.A. thesis in 1968, held that his personal destiny lay in the West. Thoreau’s attempt to take himself in that direction did not work out; he grew sick and died too soon. He valued the westering movement, however, as an opportunity both for immigrants and native-born Americans to improve themselves and to enact the self-culture that Transcendentalists such as Emerson—and he himself—esteemed. Diana Saverin’s article, “The Thoreau of the Suburbs,” attests to his influence on Annie Dillard (2015).

Between its lines, *Pilgrim* alerts attentive readers to a desire to move to new environs before the Pulitzer offered opportunity. A pilgrim is a traveler or wanderer to a foreign place who journeys, especially at long distance, to some sacred site as an act of devotion. The desire reaches a lyrical fever pitch in the chapter “Northing.” There she writes, in irregular iambs, “This October restlessness was worse than any April’s or May’s” (Dillard 1974, 249). Seeing birds preparing to flock south, the narrator broods on making a migration to the north. “I could use some danger, I suddenly thought, so I abruptly

abandoned the creek to its banks and climbed the cliff" (249). Abrupt indeed was her desertion of Roanoke, Virginia. In the restless "Northing" chapter she observes once again, this time with embedded rhymes, "I could go. I could simply angle off my path, take one step after another, and be on my way. I could go to Point Barrow, Mount McKinley, Hudson's Bay. My summer jacket is put away; my winter jacket is warm" (252). Even if her language here were not cast in a signature hyperbole, those distant locales held no universities to accommodate a young scholar who would receive a Pulitzer Prize. She was planning to escape her origins and put down other roots. The interpretive mystery abides, then: why did the onset of cold weather in "Northing" prompt her impatient dream of roving north?

Malaise and impatience loom as the book nears its end. In the "Northing" chapter also, she recounts "one more confrontation with restless life bearing past me" (250). She wants to participate in the maturation process on her own terms and time. And, to explain the chapter title, "A kind of northing is what I wish to accomplish, a single-minded trek toward that place where any shutter left open to the zenith at night will record the wheeling of all the sky's stars as a pattern of perfect, concentric circles. I see a reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off" (251). What she was to shed were her conflicting roles as student, faculty wife, and subaltern writer. Like Thoreau when he was keen to head West, *Pilgrim's* narrator is intent on heading to the far North.

And she made it happen. "The dark night into which the year was plunging was not a sleep but an awakening," she wrote, "a new and necessary austerity, the sparer climate for which I longed" (256). She knows she cannot leave at that moment, which is why "The waiting is the thing" (256). Bellingham lies farther north than Roanoke, their respective latitudes -79.94 and -122.48. She could hardly have found a more northerly place to ensconce herself in the 48 United States. Then, too, she hailed from Pittsburgh and had adapted to the steamy clime of Virginia in part because her parents had indorsed the course correction an all-women's college would provide.

The final chapter, "The Waters of Separation," carries the greatest linguistic weight to foretell her sudden move after winning the Pulitzer Prize. She was ready for a separation. She had earned two degrees and gained a solid education at Hollins College. *Pilgrim* intimates that her life goals lay in another place. The promise of love's fulfillment might also have driven her to fresh opportunities. "A cast-iron bell hung from the arch of my rib cage; when I stirred it rang, or it tolled, a long syllable pulsing ripples up my lungs and down the gritty sap inside my bones, and I couldn't make it out; I felt the voiced vowel like a sigh or a note but I couldn't catch the consonant that shaped it into sense" (161). That bell, a credible metaphor for a hardened heart, rings like the bell she felt upon

seeing the tree with lights. There she writes, “I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck” (34). More than a century before, Emily Dickinson had written “I had been hungry all the Years,” a poem Annie likely read for her symposium paper (1951). Unlike Dickinson, who lived all her life beneath her father’s roof, Annie Dillard was on her toes and ready to exercise her newfound independence.

The mystical visions, for which she is so rightly known, infuse that final chapter of the book. Her narrator, like any mystic, delivers what seem like non sequiturs, interpretive paradoxes that bear weight only when placed on the scale of her resolve to step away if the opportunity were to arise. She ends a paragraph about Hebrew sacrifice by noting that “one who touched a bone” must be cleansed by sprinkling “a special water” (271). She equates touching a bone with death. “But I never signed up for this role. The bone touched me” (271). What bone? Whose? The narrator has been drafted into a strange marital arrangement. In this valedictory final chapter, she receives counsel from the iron bell that has replaced her heart. “Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, said the bell” (271). To read *Pilgrim* as a text loaded with such embodied hints is to understand that she was craving an opportunity to move to someplace far away. The Pulitzer Prize offered her the opportunity, and every shred of biographical evidence says she lost no time.

6.

Seven weeks after the national announcement that she had won the Pulitzer Prize, she was living in a rented house on Lummi Island in Washington state. She began soon thereafter to spend time on the more-remote Waldron Island, which is accessible only by private boat and mailboat. Back and forth between the two different islands and two college campuses—Western Washington State College and its satellite Fairhaven College—she emulated religious ascetics in her respite from the discomfort of her marriage and from intense media exposure after she won the Pulitzer Prize. She did find time to give an interview to *Christianity Today* and to write about a symbolic section of the WWSC student population. “Singing with the Fundamentalists” would not appear until 1985 in *Yale Review*, after she had relocated to Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

Her *Yale Review* essay is a narrative account of her adding her voice to a group of some eighty evangelical students. She confesses that she shares an affinity with them. “What are they singing? Whatever it is, I want to join them, for I like to sing; whatever it is, I want to stand with them, for I’m drawn to their very absurdity, their innocent indifference to what people think” (Dillard 1985, 312). The key phrase in those sentences, “innocent

indifference,” seems to mirror her own self-regard as a fundamentalist Christian. She defends those students with this questionable generalization: “Their common Christianity puts them, if anywhere, to the left of their classmates,” then admits, “But I may be wrong” (315). Her distaste for the media’s depiction of fundamentalists also comes through. In that essay, she criticizes the American media for inflating the number of followers of Virginia-based Baptist pastor, televangelist, and conservative activist Jerry Falwell. In short, she was willing in 1985 to engage in a political discussion of Christianity that is still playing out in American institutions today.

Her 1978 interview for *Christianity Today* further affirms her evangelicalism in her early career. “Fundamentalists have intense faith,” she declared there (Yancey 1978, 959). “Many educated people think them naïve. But fundamentalists know they have chosen the narrow way; they know the social scorn they face” (959). That statement implies that she herself had suffered scorn when she wrote a book that so transparently displays her puritanical foundations. Interviewer Philip Yancey critiques her for obscuring the Jesus Christ who famously preached the gospel “Love thy neighbor.” Yancey damns her with faint praise: “You describe the beauty of nature with such eloquence in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—but just as I’m exulting, you strike me with its terror and injustice” (961). His key word is “terror.” With that word, Yancey acknowledged her deity of the grotesque that is opposed to the holy, her deity of the interfering consciousness that quashes unself-conscious splendor. Those grotesque and meddlesome deities standardize the dark and cynical ecology in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

Annie’s Presbyterian background merges with an aesthetic of horror to shape *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The result is a variant of dark ecology that casts natural history in fictional forms. She had planned a novelized book of nonfiction, and her appropriation of the opening passage about the tomcat shows how she went about it from the start. Her drenching of Puritan sensibility creates a fallen world, within which ready evidence of a superintending deity has vanished. Her book likewise bares a subtext that declares she needed to leave Tinker Creek, her marriage, and the glare of celebrity that threatened to overwhelm her. All of it was at odds with her persona of innocence. To escape, she chose to rusticate herself to the North, as her instincts ordained, and to the West as Henry David Thoreau recommended.

Notes

¹ Part of a larger project, my essay here takes its title from a sentence in Thoreau’s “Walking” (1862): “Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free” (662). The word *westward* appears seven times in Thoreau’s essay. In 1968, Dillard completed her M.A. thesis that she titled “Walden

Pond and Thoreau.” My heartfelt thanks to Scott Cairns, Scott Slovic, and Cort Conley for critiquing this article in draft form and improving it.

² See her interview with National Public Radio’s Melissa Block in 2016. Block asked her three times about whether she is at work on another book, whereupon Dillard at last confessed, “I had good innings, as the British say. I wrote for 38 years at the top of my form, and I wanted to quit on a high note.” The occasion for the interview was the publication of Dillard’s collection titled *The Abundance* (2016), which is comprised of reprinted work.

³ For the 25th edition of *Pilgrim* in 1999, Annie wrote an Afterword in which she somewhat dismissively acknowledged the book as a theodicy: “How boldly committed to ideas we are in our twenties! Why not write some sort of nature book—say, a theodicy?” (279).

⁴ To compare the mantis, see *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* Pod Scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OouTay_7_hw.

⁵ See Annie’s encomium titled “John Moore: A Sense of Proportion, A Gracious Heart” (1985).

⁶ For the extended discussion of this trope in American literature, see R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955).

⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria wrote *The Life of Antony* ca. 360 CE (1892). The curve of Annie’s book *Holy the Firm* (1977), published three years after *Pilgrim*, lines up with such a withdrawal as Anthony undertook. Her anchoress of a narrator in that book, set on the coast of Washington state, not only contemplates God in solitude, the narrator also even claims to witness Christ being baptized on a beach.

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