

Unlicensed Metaphysics: Annie Dillard Revisited

A Review-Essay of

Living by Fiction

Harper and Row, 1982. 192 pages.

Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters

Harper and Row, 1982. 177 pages.

Encounters with Chinese Writers

Wesleyan University Press, 1984. 106 pages.

“We now think of nonfiction as sincere and artless,” Annie Dillard explains in *Living by Fiction*, but it might be otherwise. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, she notes, “writers . . . were more apt to write essays for the same reason that Wallace Stevens wrote poems.” Always sincere but anything but artless, Annie Dillard’s metaphysical nonfiction—“metaphysical” in the unique seventeenth century sense—might well be taken as a kind of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” as, that is, an attempt to forge a kind of imaginative alliance with what Stevens liked to call “the major weather” of “being-in-the-world, the fusion of the world’s givens with our endless power to recreate them in mind. What novelist, she asks in *Living by Fiction*, could ever again be a Theodore Dreiser after having read “The Comedian as the Letter C” or *Four Quartets*? And what essayist could ever be a Thoreau, an Emerson, and Eiseley after reading Borges, Robbe-Grillet, or Calvino and, as well, St. John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, and Martin Buber? Dillard’s earlier work, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (poems, 1974), and *Holy the Firm* (1977) had shown her to be essentially a spiritual autobiographer, and, despite the quite different subject mater of these three later books, she remains one, though her

subject be a total eclipse, modernist fiction, or her conversation with and observations of contemporary authors from the People's Republic of China.

Readers of her earlier books will recognize Dillard's signature on many of the pages of these works. The vivid imagery, the perhaps too studied pessimism, the metaphysical speculation, the colloquial style coupled engagingly with quotation from neo-Platonic, Hasidic, or mystical Christian sources, and most of all the distinctive, authentic voice—all are unmistakably Dillard's own. and, except in the more journalistic *Encounters with Chinese Writers*, can be found in abundance throughout.

"This is my real work," not "occasional pieces," Dillard informs us somewhat defensively in an "Author's Note" to *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, and surely she is right; these "Expeditions and Encounters," these personal essays and narratives remind us of nothing so much as the brilliant chapters of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Though at times the style suggests forced imitation of her earlier Pulitzer Prize winner, it makes use of new angles of vision in order to explore both new and old themes.

The many journeys which the book relates—trips to the poles in search of the "pole of great price," a pilgrimage to central Washington state to bear witness to a frightening total eclipse, a weekend retreat to the woods with a young female friend—are, in a sense, all one. All represent stages in a life's way, Dillard's learning of a route known to the mystics of the Via Negativa, what Plotinus called (as she notes) "the flight of the alone to the alone," a search for an discovery of "the lightless edge where the slopes of knowledge dwindle, and love for its own sake, lacking an object, begins."

"Wherever we go," Dillard concludes in "An Expedition of the Pole," one of the book's most innovative and profound pieces, "there sees to be only one business at hand—that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us." Such is the central business of *Teaching a Stone to Talk* and, as we shall see, the other two books as well. *Teaching a Stone to Talk* is a book much more concerned with human character and its foibles than *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* or *Holy the Firm*. Both fascinated and perplexed by the great miracle: "that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens," Dillard delights in detailing this "act" in all its manifestations. In "An Expedition to the Pole" her fellow parishioners' prideful behavior and obviousness to the mystery of the "unenccompassed light," the source of all true religion, are

compared to equally prideful polar explorers (herself included) who encounter the light made manifest in the strangely spaceless, timeless terrain of the earth's extremities. The paralyzed, vacuous motel lobby regulars, held captive by a TV set, she contrasts to those tourists (herself included) who trek off for a close inspection of a total eclipse and find themselves "clobbered" by an apocalyptic event, more awful than they had dreamed, a moment which "obliterated meaning itself."

While noting, in characteristic style, that God goes not demand the surrender of our pride, does not require that "we lose ourselves and turn from all that is not him," for he "needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing, like the stars" and thus does not, in short, "give a hoot," Dillard hastens to remind us that that a "life with God," the desire to know God, does require the humbling of the soul, acceptance of man's stupidity, and the "choosing [of] the given." But is not easy for either the mind or the "mind's sidekick," the body, to accept the given, to say yes to the world. For the world has been desecrated. "We have drained the light from the boughs in the sacred grove." "We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it." And God *in* the world has thus become "the show we drove from town." In "Sojourner," a fine essay in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, the ostensible subject of which is the mangrove tree, Dillard confesses that she still "alternate[s] between thinking of the planet as home—dear and familiar hearth and garden—and as a hard land of exile in which we are all soujourners." At the time of the essay's writing, she explains, the latter view seems more believable:

We don't know where we belong, but in times of sorrow it doesn't seem to be here, here with these silly pansies and witless mountains, here with sponges and hard-eyed birds. In times of sorrow the innocence of the other creatures—from whom and with whom we evolved—seems a mockery. Their ways are not our ways. We seem set among them as among lifelike props for a tragedy—or a broad lampoon—on a thrust rock stage.

It doesn't seem to be here that we belong, here where space is curved, the earth is round, we're all going to die, and it seems as wise to stay in bed as budge. It is strange here, not quite warm enough, or too warm, too leafy, or inedible, or windy, or dead. It is not, frankly, the sort of home for people one would have thought of—although I lack the fancy to imagine another.

But she does not always lack the fancy. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* had successfully imagined her to be at home in the world; at its conclusion she succeeded in finding the philosopher's stone in the same quotidian things she here finds absurd. And even in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* she manages at its close to face up to her own finiteness.

"Aces and Eights" (along with "Total Eclipse" the book's finest essay) is a moving meditation on aging and death cast in the form of a narrative of a summer trip with a young female friend to an Appalachian cottage frequented by Dillard in her youth. She recounts the story of a mysterious girl who once pledged never to change.:

When she changed [the girl questioned] where will that other person have gone? Could anyone keep her alive, this person here on the street, and her passions? Will the unthinkable adult that she would become remember her? Will she think she is stupid? Will she laugh at her?

She was a willful one, and she made a vow. The light changed; she crossed the street and set off up the sloping sidewalk by the school. I must be loyal, for no one else is. If this is the system, then I will buck it. I will until I die love Walter Milligan and hate my sister and read and walk in the woods. And I will never, not I, sit and drink and smoke and do nothing but talk. (164)

One vow surpassed in importance all the rest, as Dillard informs us: "Foremost in her vow was this, that she would remember the vow itself." The girl, of course, is Annie Dillard; we recognize her indefatigableness. And later in the same essay we understand her motives. It is death she really feared, aging which she hoped to circumvent by her vow not to live in a world of change—a vow which, if kept, would maintain her innocence but make spiritual autobiography an impossible vocation.

But in a passage inspired by watching her young friend and spiritual avatar speeding downhill on her bicycle, cards in its spokes, Dillard admits that aging and the prospect of death now control her life in middle age—against the better wisdom of her teenage self:

If there is such a place as "on top," if there is a sensation of riding a life span's crest, it does not last ten or twenty years. On the contrary, the crest is so small that I, for one, missed it altogether.

You are young, you are on your way up, when you cannot imagine how you will save yourself from death by boredom until dinner, until bed, until the next day arrives to be outwaited, and then, slow slap, the next. . . . Life by its mere appalling length is a feat of endurance for which you haven't the strength.

But momentum propels you over the crest. Imperceptibly, you start down. When do the days start to blur and then, breaking your heart, the seasons? The cards click faster in the spokes; you pitch forward. You roll headlong, out of control. The blur of the cards makes one long sound like a bomb's whine, the whine of many bombs, and you know your course is fatal. (166-67)

It is this new knowledge which distinguishes *Teaching a Stone to Talk* from Dillard's earlier exercises in spiritual autobiography. It is downhill autobiography, written not from the perspective of the illusory crest, but facing death. She has begun—as Barrett Mandell has noted in a fine essay on death and autobiography, every autobiographer must—to take her own life: to die imaginatively.

"Aces and Eights" ends with a poignant realization of death, which, in characteristic Dillard fashion, comes to her through the mediation of nature's emblemology. In the following lines—which are, as well, the book's last words—she describes her final moments at the cottage as she and her friend depart.

A ripple of wind comes down from the woods and across the clearing toward us. We see a wave of shadow and gloss where the short grass bends and the cottage eaves tremble. It hits us in the back. It is a single gust, a sport, a rogue breeze out of the north, as if some reckless, impatient wind has bumped the north door open on its hinges and let out this acre of sent familiar and forgotten, this cool scent of tundra, and of November. Fall! Who authorized this intrusion? Stop or I'll shoot. It is an entirely misplaced air—fall, that I have utterly forgotten, that could be here again, *another* fall, and here it is only July. I though I was younger and would have more time. The gust crosses the river and blackens the water where it passes, like a finger closing slats. (177)

She has not chosen this “given,” has not, in fact even remembered it until this epiphanal moment. And yet, as her own mythos demands, she must: how else may the “alone” return to the “Alone” in a fallen world? *Teaching a Stone to Talk*’s “sense of an ending” would thus seem to mark out for Dillard’s future reference and for our own the territory ahead into which the expeditions of her spiritual autobiography will lead. Dillard now seems about to proclaim, like the poet Wendell Berry in *A Part*, that “Life is your privilege, not your belonging. / It is the loss of it, now, that you will be singing.”

***Living by Fiction*, Dillard unabashedly admits**, is “unlicensed metaphysics in a teacup,” the particular teacup being contemporary “modernist” fiction (the work of, among others, Nabokov, Pynchon, Borges, Marquez, Calvino). But is also, as she cautions the reader to remember early on, “ultimately a book about the world.” The book’s epigraph—a quotation from Teodor de Wyzewa—announces its thesis: “Art must recreate, in full consciousness, and by means of signs, the total life of the universe, that is to say, the soul where the varied dream we call the universe is played.” Like *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, this work of literary criticism, at the same time an espousal of Dillard’s own poetics, takes as its central business the discover of “workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us.” “Does fiction illuminate the great world, or only the mind of its human creator?” she asks again and again. Are the ideas which have given shape and substance to modernist fiction sublime or absurd?

Dillard offers no final answers. After one hundred and eighty-five pages of wrestling with these questions, she concludes her investigation with yet more imponderables:

Do art’s complex and balanced relationships among all its parts, its purposes, significance, and harmony, exist in nature? Is nature whole, like a completed thought? Is history purposeful? Is the universe of matter significant? I am sorry: I do not know. (185)

Though often dubious about the modernist project (“If I actually believed that the progress of human understanding depended on our crop of contemporary novelists, I would shoot myself”), she adopts its standard “party line” on several occasions,

while endeavoring to infuse it with the earthly sense of wonder of a literary naturalist.

She tells, for example, of her secret fantasy: that “imaginative acts,” because they are anti-entropic, “carry real weight in the universe,” and thus the artist, “his thumb in the dike . . . is saving the universe.” Thus, a completed novel, say, “counteracts the decaying of systems, the breakdown of stars and cultures and molecules, the fraying of forms,” And she finds enough momentary certainty about the centrality of fiction to suggest, first, that “the world is the fabrication of a billion imaginations all inventing it at once”; and, second, that “humanity has but one product, and that is fiction.”

But fiction can never merely replace the world, for “it is after all the phenomenal world which is literature’s subject.” “The world is a warehouse of forms which the writer raids: this is a stickup.” Composed of language “weighted with referents,” fiction is not easily escapist, as Dillard tries to show in a strange and illuminating analogy:

[Language] is like a beam of light on Venus. There, on Venus, heavy atmospheric gravity bends light around the entire circumference of the planet, enabling a man, in theory, to see the back of his own head. Now, the object of every artist's vision is, in one sense, the back of his own head. But the writer, unlike the painter, the sculptor, or composer, cannot form his idea of order directly in his materials; for as soon as he writes the least noun, the whole world starts pouring back onto his page. So fiction, using language like a beam of Venusian light to see the back of its own head—to talk about its own art—makes a very wide tautological loop. It goes all around the world of language's referents before coming back to its own surface. (50)

Thus Robbe-Grillet’s contention, that fiction “exile[s] the world to the life of its own surface,” is only partly true. The whole world pours onto the writer’s page; though writing’s subject seems to be itself, though the self of the writer may seem to evaporate, or fall through the interstices of language, the Venusian light of language has nevertheless captured, circling the globe, both the things of the world and the back of the writer’s head.

In another unusual analogy, Dillard compares what modernist fiction has accomplished to training a dog to fetch: it is very difficult to train it not to look at

the hand with which one points and to look instead at that at which one points. Modernist fiction, Dillard suggests, has perversely trained us as readers to look at the hand, at the art in the language, at the pointer, while the language itself inescapably points us toward the world.

Dillard's speculations on fiction lead the reader naturally to consider their implications for her own art. Though a writer of non-fiction, her perpetual subject has been, as her epigraph proclaims, the recreation "in full consciousness . . . [of] the total life of the universe" though her own spiritual autobiography's record of a "soul where the varied dream we call the universe is played." In recording her soul's expeditions and encounters, her bravura language sometimes call our attention, in truly modernist fashion, to the pointing hand. but more often we are moved to see and understand that at which she points. Her art is nothing if not centrifugal. The back of *her* head, at least, is a mirror.

While the "boundaries of art" fell with the advent of modernism, Dillard confesses, she had hoped that "critics would be loosed upon the world; they would interpret the world itself." Of course this did not happen. Instead, the boundaries expanded to "include the possibility of everything," and critics came to see that anything could be art but must be discussed only as art. Dillard offers an alternative methods, one which reveals her own anti-modernist inclinations:

Can we not loose the methods of literary criticism upon the raw world? . . . We can and may—but only if we first consider the raw world as a text, as meaningful, purposefully fashioned creation, as a work of art. . . . Our interpreting the universe as an artifact absolutely requires that we posit an author for it, or a celestial filmmaker, dramatist, painter, sculptor, composer, architect, or choreographer. And no one has been willing openly to post such an artist for the universe since the American transcendentalists and before them the Medieval European philosophers. (144)

Even Dillard herself is unwilling to come out of the closet, and thus *Living by Fiction* remains a work of criticism instead of becoming the testament it might have been in the hands of another, less subtle, less doubting mind. But even so, it stands as an important chapter in her spiritual autobiography.

Primarily reportage. nearly devoid of her usual metaphysics or personal reflection, and written in a prose style flatter than that of *Pilgrim, Stone*, or *Holy the Firm*, *Encounters with Chinese Writers* is prefaced by no insistence that “this is my real work.” It is, instead, a kind of aside, a collection of character sketches drawn from Dillard’s meetings both here and abroad with various contemporary writers from the People’s Republic of China. It is a strangely placeless book. Aside from a few glimpses of some Chinese locales and of Disneyland, it a book without a landscape. And yet, even without the natural world which routinely serves as her inspiration, Dillard remains unfailingly interesting throughout the books 106 pages.

As one who has lived and taught in the PRC, I found Dillard’s renderings of the clash of literary cultures, and her portraits of both the peculiarities and the genius of the Chinese, absolutely authentic. Without pretension and with a considerable talent for delineating the ironies of relationships, she offers not only insights into the widely different personalities of individuals who, contrary to the presumed values of their system, remain unfailingly idiosyncratic, unique, human, but also wonderful glimpses of her own culture and its values as seen through their eyes. “What shall we sing, while the fire burns down?” Dillard asks in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. “We can sing only specifics, time’s rambling tune, the place we have seen, the faces we have known.” *Encounters with Chinese Writers* is clearly the singing of the last of these, a singing in a very low, yet very specific, key. Nonetheless, it is a full-blown exercise of her powers as an observer of the human world, a talent which earlier books had merely hinted at. Though not her real work, it is nevertheless a worthwhile one. Did Thoreau, Emerson, Eiseley ever show so much self-effacing compassion and understanding for real human beings?

“We are missing a whole class of investigators, those who interpret the raw universe in terms of meaning,” Dillard insists near the end of *Living by Fiction*. And she then goes on to explain what she means by “the raw universe”:

all that we experience, all things cultural and natural, all of the universe that is known, given, made, and changing; the world, and they that dwell therein. Experience is something human, even our experience of dumb nature. It is sane to seek to understand it all in one breath. (145)

When I read *Holy the Firm* soon after it was published in 1977, I never suspected that Annie Dillard would become such an investigator; I would have predicted then that, like so many other American authors, she would spend the rest of her life trying to create again the great book (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) she had already written. "There are," after all, "no second acts in American lives," as F. Scott Fitzgerald once lamented. But these three books demonstrate how wrong I was; for they exhibit Dillard's fascination with all that we experience; they establish her breadth.