

SACRAMENTAL VISION IN ANNIE DILLARD'S *HOLY THE FIRM*

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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MASTER OF ARTS (2015)  
(Religious Studies)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Sacramental Art in Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*

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SUPERVISOR: Dr. P. Travis Kroeker

NUMBER OF PAGES: vii, 105

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the central motif of vision in Annie Dillard’s poetic narrative, *Holy the Firm*. While much of her work is concerned with “seeing” I argue that in this, her most theological text, Dillard is concerned with ushering her reader toward a sacramental vision of the world. Centered on an airplane crash in which a little girl, Julie Norwich, is badly injured, the text grapples with the relationship between the divine and the world. The chapters in this thesis parallel the three days of Dillard’s narrative as she contemplates creation, the fall, and redemption, through the artist, the thinker, and the nun. I argue that the text moves through an aesthetic and sacramental vision of the natural world, to intellectual abstraction in the face of human suffering, and finally to a mystical vision of wholeness in Christ. Ultimately, the divisions between mind, matter, and spirit are transcended, engendering a whole vision of reality. In the climactic scene of the text in which Dillard experiences a vision of Christ being baptized in the bay below her, I argue that Dillard is suggesting the possibility for the continual practice of such a whole vision through the sacramental liturgy of the church.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of people to whom I am deeply indebted to for their time, encouragement and support throughout the completion of this project. I offer my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Travis Kroeker, who introduced me to Annie Dillard's work, and whose encouragement, insightful questioning, and direction over the course of this program were essential to my academic development and to this project. I am also grateful to Dr. Dana Hollander and Dr. Peter Widdicombe for their helpful comments and questions, as well as to Dr. Zdravko Planinc for providing such a rich environment in which to learn. I owe much to my colleagues and friends in the Department of Religious Studies, in particular to Caleb DeJong and Matthew Lee, for their companionship in both academic dialogue and the much needed relief from academic work. Thank you also to my parents for their never-ending love and support. Finally, to Sam, for keeping me nourished with love and laughter these past years. Thank-you.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AC            *An American Childhood*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.
- HTF           *Holy the Firm*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- FTB           *For the Time Being*. New York: Random House Inc., 1999.
- LBF           *Living by Fiction*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.
- PTC           *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974.
- TST           *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*.  
New York: Harper and Row, 1982.
- TM            *The Maytrees*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

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## INTRODUCTION

When Annie Dillard moved to an Island in Puget Sound in early November of 1975, she decided she would write about whatever happened in the next three days, and out of her experience—and fifteen months of reflection and writing—came *Holy the Firm*. Hailed as a brilliant book about the beauty and cruelty of the natural world, Dillard’s short piece of poetic narrative continues to grapple with many of the themes she began in her 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning narrative *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Bursting with her beautiful poetic language, the book examines the extravagance and chaos of nature, much like *Pilgrim*, however, *Holy the Firm* is tremendously different in both tone and structure, and is also more directly theological.

In an interview with Philip Yancey shortly after its publication, Dillard describes her approach to writing:

I must stay faithful to art. I get in my little canoe and paddle out to the edge of mystery; it is unfortunately true that words fail, reason fails; and all I can do is to create a world which by its internal coherence makes a degree of sense. I can either do that or hush. And then I learn to make statements about that world, to furrow deeper into the mystery. Every single thing I follow takes me there, to the edge of the cliff. As soon as I start writing, I’m hanging over the cliff again. (“A Face Aflame” 17).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip Yancey, “A Face Aflame: An Interview with Annie Dillard,” *Christianity Today* 22.15



Dillard approaches her art as an encounter with the mysterious, which she then attempts to incarnate for her readers in her poetry and prose. Indeed the world she examines is overflowing with mystery; by looking closely and carefully at its particulars, she hopes to glimpse the moments in which eternity is manifested in the temporal. The natural world, for Dillard, has the ability to reveal to the attentive observer, to the lover, something of the divine.

But she also seeks to know her place in the world—her relationship to the natural cosmos broadly, and more profoundly, her relationship to the divine. Her art as a whole is an exploration of these relationships, between humanity, creation, and God, between eternity and time. In her quest to understand these relationships, her primary metaphor is that of sight; her quest for clarity of vision is both her literary preoccupation and her religious quest, which she attends to through her art. Her prose, which often reads more like poetry, is an attempt to be true to the particulars of time, while revealing those liminal fringes where the eternal cuts through to reveal a deeper reality. In order to cultivate such sight, she draws upon a wide range of genres—theology, literature, literary criticism, philosophy, and ecology—so that her work resists easy classification. Ultimately, dividing her work into categories fails to represent what she is doing, that is, engendering a “whole”, and truly integrated, vision of reality, and of the human’s place within that reality.

If Dillard’s project is one of helping her readers to see, *Holy the Firm* incarnates a particularly acute form of sight, that of vision. In its three-part structure she ushers the reader through what I suggest are three modes of seeing, three “languages” with which to

speak about the divine, and three stories of the divine-human relationship: through the artist, the thinker, and the nun she explores the distinctions—and the entanglements—between matter, mind and spirit. However, such boundaries within the text are ultimately transcended, for only as a layered account can they illuminate a whole vision of reality. The separation between mind, matter, and spirit, is for Dillard, ultimately an impoverished, or partial, understanding of that reality. At the height of the narrative, distinctions blur in a luminous vision of the eternal, a vision only possible through her mystical experience of wholeness in divine love.

In order to bring to light these mystical resonances within the text, I will suggest that Dillard employs several literary techniques in her poetry to convey her experience of that wholeness, or, rather, her inability express such an experience. Denys Turner has insightfully challenged the association of ‘mysticism’ with ‘experientialism’, suggesting rather that the Medieval Christian mystics were attempting to convey an experience of the divine *beyond* experience.<sup>2</sup> His suggestion is that the metaphors of inwardness, ascent, and light-darkness, which are so commonly found in specifically apophatic Christian mysticism serve very different functions today than they did when they were used in ancient and medieval traditions. Specifically, he suggests that the Neo-Platonists who made use of them—from Augustine to John of the Cross—did so deliberately “to deny that they were terms descriptive of ‘experiences’” (*The Darkness of God* 4). Turner looks rather to the language of mysticism, and the inability of language to express knowledge of God as an elemental feature of Christian mysticism.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Introduction of Denys Turner’s *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

In Dillard's text, I will suggest that the climactic mystical experience of the divine is similarly beyond experience, beyond language. This leaves Dillard with a particularly challenging task as a writer, for she must attempt to depict such a moment for her readers. She thus makes use of various literary techniques in her poetry, and particularly at the climax, to convey her inability to express what she knows of the divine. The first is her use of metaphor as the central literary technique through which to communicate. Not only is the text composed around the central metaphor of a moth in a flame, she also makes use of metaphors inherited through the mystic tradition—light, ascension, fall—and plays upon key words—fire, salt, wax, rock—to build and carry meanings outside of their everyday usage throughout the text. Secondly, she embraces both *apophatic* (knowledge of God attained through negation) and *cataphatic* (knowledge of God attained through affirmation) language within her work, intimating that God both conceals and reveals divine presence. While the apophatic is often emphasized in Christian mysticism, a true account of Dillard's work exposes her use of both *and* neither, for she is able to maintain a dialogical tension between the two in her poetry, only to finally transcend both in a language of un-knowing. At the pinnacle of the narrative, Dillard also uses paradox to coax the reader beyond logical formulations about reality. Finally, the climax of the narrative occurs in a moment of wholeness in love through Christ, revealing a distinctly Christian articulation of mysticism. Ultimately, it is not through what is said or experienced in *Holy the Firm*, but through that which is un-speakable and beyond human experience that the text might be read as Dillard's mystical account of love in the face of human suffering.

In this project I give a detailed exegesis of Dillard’s formidable poetic narrative, *Holy the Firm*, in order to illuminate these mystical resonances, and to trace the drama of the text toward a vision of the world that is oriented by the sacraments. To consider the mystical themes of the text is to recognize that she explores, and even affirms, paradoxes rather than flattening them to understand the divine. Dillard is able in her prose to hold these paradoxes—for example, God’s emanation and God’s immanence, God’s presence and absence—suspended within the narrative, so that she might examine them through her poetry. The reader is granted a glimpse of these seemingly opposed understandings of the divine in a way that a strictly philosophical or doctrinal formulation might not allow. For Dillard, it is in surrendering to the paradoxes that she comes, in self-abandonment, to relinquish part of herself and experience mystical union—through communion, a bringing together in Christ—in a movement much like the paradox of Matthew 10:39: “He that finds his life shall lose it, and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it.”

The question guiding my reading is how might we read Dillard’s text within the context of Christian mysticism, without coercing it into a single theological system? How might we understand the deep religious resonances in her work without crystallizing her poetics into a closed and rigid profession of belief? The answer in the present study is, I think, to regard her text as a poetic depiction of mystical vision, rooted and culminating in a sacramental vision of reality, and the contemplation of that vision through her writing over the subsequent year. In an interview, Dillard describes the arduous writing process for the short piece:

I kept getting stuck. Those forty-three manuscript pages took me fifteen months to write. In *Pilgrim* I would get stuck for three days at a time and I would just plow through. But in *Holy the Firm* the problems were enormous. The question I constantly faced was, “Can it be done?” After the second day’s plane crash... how could I resolve anything on the third day? I would have to crank myself up to approach the stack of manuscript pages. Then I’d read what I had written on the last pages and even I couldn’t understand it. I don’t live on that kind of level. (“A Face Aflame” 16)

Here Dillard describes her own impassioned process of writing the text, one that required her to move outside of herself before she could sit down and write, only to barely recognize her own written work afterwards. She compares the experience to being on the edge of a cliff verging on mystery, “as soon as I start writing, I’m hanging over the cliff again” (“A Face Aflame” 17). This exhilarating state becomes evident to the reader in the passages such as the one in which she carries the communion wine on Day 3; her sentences become short, repetitive, and she makes use of alliteration and abrupt shifts (*HTF* 64-68). It is commonly observed that Dillard accepts mystery as an integral part of her understanding of the divine, but she also incarnates this mystery in her poetry.

The artist, in Dillard’s view, is one who is particularly well-suited to communicate such vision. In *Living by Fiction* she considers the role of the artist as an interpreter of the universe, able to illuminate the eternal in the world by carefully paying attention to how it is incarnated in the particularities of human existence. She writes specifically:

As symbol, or as the structuring of symbols, art can render intelligible—or at least visible, at least discussible—those wilderness regions which philosophy has abandoned and those hazardous terrains which science’s tools do not fit. I mean the rim of knowledge where language falters; and I mean all those areas of human experience, feeling, and thought about which we care so much and know so little: the meaning of all that we see before us, of our love for each other, and the forms of freedom in time, and power, and destiny, and all whereof we imagine: grace, perfection, beauty, and the passage of all materials to thoughts and of all ideas to forms. (*LBF* 170)

Dillard holds the bold conviction that art has the ability to articulate the most mysterious human experiences: through her poetry, the artist probes at the mysterious, at the depth and complexity of human life and the natural world, though she does so always by examining the particulars of temporal existence.

The chapters in the present study parallel the three days of Dillard’s narrative, “Newborn and Salted”, “God’s Tooth”, and “Holy the Firm”, in order to show three stories of reality within a greater meta-narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. As I will show, these chapters also correspond to the artist, the thinker, and the nun, and to matter, mind, and spirit. I will examine the layers of the narrative each in their specificity, ultimately moving with Dillard beyond their distinct boundaries toward a synthesized vision, whole and unified, of the eternal in the material world. In Chapter 1, I begin by laying out how my own interpretation will differ from the two most sustained studies of Dillard’s work. I then demonstrate how on this day Dillard imagines a reality in which

creation is filled with the divine: the gods of each day are immanent in creation, the sacred is incarnated in the natural world and presents her with its own mark of holiness to worship. Central to her understanding of this day is the acknowledgement of her own createdness. Even on this day of creation, however, I suggest that there are intimations of the fall, and a separation between the earthly realm of matter, and another, spiritual reality that appears far away on the horizon, a “fringe” to which all of creation points. Finally, I consider the image of the burning moth that is so central to the text, illuminating the way Dillard depicts its relationship to the “artist” and to matter.

In Chapter 2, I consider a second story, that of God’s absence in creation, and the intellectual resistance to God’s love. Dillard considers the theodicy problem on this day through the “thinker”, wondering how a benevolent and omnipotent God allows human pain and suffering. She attends to the problem of human pain through the particular suffering of a seven-year old girl, Julie Norwich, whose face is badly disfigured in a freak airplane crash. In light of the namesake of the main character I turn to the 14th century anchorite Julian of Norwich, and her parable of the lord and servant—Julian’s own story of creation, fall, and redemption—in order to illuminate the parallels in Dillard’s conception of the Fall. On this day, I argue that Dillard dramatizes the existential condition of Julian’s fallen servant—the sense of abandonment, the disorientation in relation to the divine, the pain, and the lost sense of createdness. The story Dillard presents on Day 2 is one of earnest desire for understanding in the face of the human condition of fallenness. She attempts to construct for herself a moral scheme by which to make sense of human suffering, and through which she judges God’s involvement in the

world. However, the narrative she constructs for herself is necessarily limited, and she is left at the end of Day 2 with few answers, doubting that reality can be known at all.

In Chapter 3, I explore Dillard's themes of "nun" and "spirit". Dillard's longing to know is transformed into a longing for the unknown. I begin by bringing some nuance to interpretations of Dillard that position her as an anti-rationalist, or anti-intellectual. Rather than rejecting or restraining reason, I suggest that Dillard comes to a new way of knowing, guided by spiritual sight. I look to the Gospel story of Jesus healing the blind beggar from John—a story that Dillard herself cites—in order to suggest the possibility of another vision of the world, one that is oriented by faith and love. In humility Dillard moves forward into the climactic moment of the book, a scene in which she carries communion wine up a hill in her backpack, and witnesses Christ's baptism in the bay below her. This third narrative is that of God's descent in Christ and the self-sacrificing love of the Atonement which re-orientes Dillard's heart. The image of the moth unites the many themes which surface throughout the book—purity, sacrifice, illumination, and love—in the artist, the thinker, and the nun.

Ultimately, it is through the Christian sacraments, specifically of baptism and communion, that Dillard experiences Christ's love and the wholeness of vision it engenders in order for her to approach the mysteries of human pain and love. She presents a sacramental vision of the world, not only in the sense that she reveals how matter is deeply in touch with spirit in the created world, but also in that such a vision is cultivated in the church's sacramental liturgy; God's mystery is acted out in communion with others and with Christ. Dillard's artistic-mystical vision of the world is not one that



remains cloistered, a self-gratifying search “within”, or a fleeing from this material world to a “higher” spiritual realm. What is so particular about Dillard’s vision is her firm affirmation of material existence in time. Art, in its highest expression, is for her able to point beyond itself to the eternal, in order to illuminate the world.

## CHAPTER ONE: KENOTIC CREATION

Framed by the three days and divided into three parts, Dillard's narrative arcs both structurally and thematically to explore the drama of those days, revolving around a freak airplane accident in which a little girl, Julie Norwich, is seriously disfigured by an ignited piece of gasoline. The event stirs indignation in the narrator as she wonders about the nature of a God who allows such suffering. In a rare interview after the publication of the book, she explains how the narrative emerged from her desire to write about those three days:

The literary possibilities of that structure intrigued me. On the second day an airplane crashed nearby, and I was back where I had been in *Pilgrim*—grappling with the problem of pain and dying. I had no intention of dealing with that issue at first, but it became unavoidable. (“A Face Aflame” 16)

What begins on Day 1 as emphatic praise of the created natural world as it unfolds around her quickly descends into intellectual contemplation of the Fall, and finally arcs back up into ecstatic mystical vision of the divine. Her tripartite structure presents the reader with three distinct movements, entire in and of themselves, but whose sense is deepened when read as a layered whole.

This structure has been variously interpreted. Dillard herself has noted that it parallels creation, the fall, and redemption (Lucas 187). William Scheick suggests that the narrative is structured by the narrator's process of faith, doubt, and faith renewed (61). Robert Paul Dunn, on the other hand, traces the mystical resonances in the text,

noting that the structure follows the mystical journey towards the divine of illumination, purgation and union (18). Finally, Colleen Warren argues that the structure of the book is framed by the artist's own writing process of gathering materials, formulating ideas into language, and the resolution of the work (138). These diverse interpretations speak to the richness and openness of the text, prompting the reader to consider its many layers.<sup>3</sup>

Dillard's hermeneutical key for *Holy the Firm* is found early on in the text, which Dunn fittingly describes as "the nearest thing available to an orderly treatment of the themes" (18). In the passage, Dillard elucidates the differences—and the interconnections—between the multiple threads that are woven together within her three-day structure:

A nun lives in the fires of the spirit, a thinker lives in the bright wick of the mind, an artist lives jammed in the pool of materials. (Or, a nun lives, with that special poignancy peculiar to religious, in the exile of materials; and a thinker, who would think of something, lives in the clash of materials, and in the world of spirit where all long thoughts must lead; and an artist lives in the mind, that warehouse of forms, and an artist lives, of course, in the spirit. So.) (22)

Here Dillard presents a configuration in which spirit, mind, and matter are distinct yet integrated. Each day of the text, representing the artist, the thinker and the nun, are likewise three distinct modes which culminate in a whole experience or vision of reality. Dillard explores the relationship between these modes through the imagery of an

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<sup>3</sup> For further possible readings regarding Dillard's three-day progression see Susan M. Felch, "Annie Dillard: Modern Physics in a Contemporary Mystic," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 22.2 (Spring 1989), p.5.

immolating moth—the central metaphor of the text—which we will consider in some detail as it appears on Day 1, and then again as it resurfaces in various forms throughout the text.

### 1.1 From Theology to Mystical Poetry

In my interpretation of Dillard’s text I will take my departure from the two most sustained treatments of Dillard’s work, Sandra Humble Johnson’s *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard* and, to a larger extent, Colleen Warren’s *Annie Dillard and the Word Made Flesh: An Incarnational Theory of Language*, in which the authors offer extensive analyses of the literary techniques employed in Dillard’s opus. Johnson’s reading of Dillard closely examines how the epiphanic moment functions as a literary device in Dillard’s prose, comparing Dillard’s technique to that of Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Wordsworth. Johnson identifies this moment as one which the author opens for the reader to experience “an illumination of human essence and its relationship with a greater being” which is experienced out of proportion to the “strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it” (2, 6). This moment, she claims, is similar to, but distinguished from, other illuminated moments: the experience of the sublime, the mystical experience, the conversion, and the vision (6).

Of note in Johnson’s analysis are the mystical experience and the vision, which she claims are also present in Dillard’s work—notably in *Holy the Firm*—and are most similar to the epiphanic moment. Though both the mystical experience and the epiphany are “fleeting, intuitive, and irrational,” Johnson differentiates between them by

suggesting that the epiphany is not necessarily a revelation of divinity, but might also be a revelation of the self (7). The vision, she explains on the other hand, is a moment experienced and recorded by the author, and re-experienced by the reader outside of the moment. This contrasts with the literary epiphany, which works upon the reader from within the text itself. For Johnson, the distinction lies in the acting force of each moment: in the vision, the one initiating the experience is outside the moment (the divine), whereas in the epiphanic moment, it is initiated by an internal force (the artist) (8-9). In other words, Johnson’s primary focus in Dillard’s work is the space within the text itself in which the reader spontaneously experiences a moment of clarified understanding about him- or herself, and possibly (though not necessarily) about their relationship to the divine. Johnson contends that the moments Dillard creates in her prose defy rationality, and occur within—and even because of—the limitations of language, or the “spaces in between,” that allow the reader to form their own deep connections which the writer herself cannot explain (182).<sup>4</sup>

While Johnson elucidates some helpful insights concerning the technical functioning of the epiphanic moment in Dillard’s text on the reader, as she notes herself, *Holy the Firm* does not fit easily within her scheme because its illuminated moments lie more closely to those she describes as vision or mystical experience, rather than literary

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<sup>4</sup> For another analysis of Dillard’s technique of maintaining an openness to the reader’s own exploration see Robert Paul Dunn, “The Artist as Nun: Theme, Tone, and Vision in the Writings of Annie Dillard,” *Studia Mystica* 1.4 (1978): 17-31; and William J. Scheick, “Annie Dillard—Narrative Fringe,” in *Contemporary Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, ed. Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985): 51-63. Both suggest that Dillard maintains an open space for the reader to discover for him- or herself. For Dunn, Dillard does this primarily through tone, by “inviting, cajoling, surprising them into adopting new ways of looking” (Dunn 28), while Scheick suggests that Dillard creates liminal spaces in her work by the absence of linear, temporal narrative, which compels the reader to find a sense of continuity below the surface of temporal details “into the depths of their eternal significance” (Scheick 55).

epiphany.<sup>5</sup> Johnson supposes that Dillard’s language in *Holy the Firm* does not create the conditions for the reader’s own illumination, but rather depicts an outside moment in which the author herself has been illuminated by the divine. As such, her analysis is helpful for a reading of this text in that it articulates the ways in which Dillard helps her reader to experience moments of clarified sight, but is limited when considering *Holy the Firm*, other than the visionary moment at the climax of the text. We will return to Johnson’s careful analysis when we consider Dillard’s vision of Day 3, when she gives an account of Christ’s baptism at the peak of the narrative.

Colleen Warren’s monograph is more attentive to the religious resonances in Dillard’s work. Her argument stands against claims by some critics that the Incarnation has no place in Dillard’s prose,<sup>6</sup> and that nature takes the place as the supreme mediator between the temporal and the eternal in her work (16-17). Warren argues, rather, that Dillard’s understanding of Christ as the Word is integral to her conception of language, an argument she roots in the opening verses of the Gospel of John, beginning: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was

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<sup>5</sup> See Sandra Humble Johnson, *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1992). Johnson notes that *Holy the Firm* is constructed around an illumination as well, but that because the story is centred around a metaphor, it is not an epiphanic moment: “Because Dillard uses the moth to set up a metaphor representing the dedicated individual, this particular illumination is essentially visionary. The insight is within the artist, an insight shared with rather than created within the reader as an epiphany might be” (11).

<sup>6</sup> See Colleen Warren, *Annie Dillard and the Word Made Flesh: An Incarnational Theory of Language* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2010). Warren cites, in particular, Cheryl Forbes, “With a Shake of the Fist,” *Christianity Today* 22.14 (May 5, 1978), p.12; Terri Brown-Davidson, “‘Choosing the Given with a Fierce and Pointed Will’: Annie Dillard and Risk-Taking in Contemporary Literature,” *The Hollins Critic* 30.2 (April 1993), p.6; and Margaret Loewen Reimer, “The Dialectical Vision of Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*,” *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 24.3 (Spring 1983), p.190, all of whom make the suggestion that nature replaces Christ as the mediator between God and humankind.

made that has been made” (vv. 1-3). Warren suggests that, as a Christian writer, “Dillard’s investment in Christ as the Word compels her to regard language as having the same functions and purposes as the Incarnation” (142). The incarnated Word, in her account, brings together the spiritual and the material, bridging the falsely constructed dichotomy between the two realms. Her thesis, then, is that Dillard expresses an incarnational theory of language: that it is the formidable calling of the writer to en flesh and realize the spiritual with tangible words, in imitation of—and even participation in—Creation and God’s Incarnation in the Divine Word (28-29).

Warren’s analysis is carefully divided between chapters which lay out her theoretical suppositions, and mirroring chapters which present close textual interpretation of those themes in key passages of Dillard’s work. The bulk of her analysis seeks to establish that for Dillard, the natural world contains an inherent spiritual element, and that concurrently the spiritual realm is made material, which corresponds with much of the scholarship on Dillard.<sup>7</sup> The difference in Warren’s understanding lies in her assertion that Christ’s Incarnation provides the integral link between the material and the spiritual, and thereafter becomes the model for the work of the artist.

In the final chapters of her book, Warren considers *Holy the Firm* in some detail, illustrating the way in which Dillard lays out the sacrificial life of the author and interpreting this movement as an imitation of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Other

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<sup>7</sup> For an extended consideration of the way the material and the spiritual overlap in her work, see, amongst others, Pamela A. Smith, “The Ecotheology of Annie Dillard: A Study in Ambivalence,” *Cross Currents: The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life* 45.3 (Fall 1995): 342-357; John E. Becker, “Science and the Sacred: from Walden to Tinker Creek,” *Thought* 62.247 (December 1987): 400-413; and David L. Lavery, “Noticer: The Visionary Art of Annie Dillard,” *The Massachusetts Review* 21.2 (Summer 1980): 255-270.

critics have likewise considered the sacrificial role of the author in Dillard’s work,<sup>8</sup> however this is particularly important for Warren because it demonstrates her central thesis that Dillard imagines a mimetic relationship between author and Christ. She suggests that Dillard explores this relationship most extensively on the final day of *Holy the Firm*, where the sacraments of communion and baptism—contingent upon the Incarnation for their significance—culminate in an ecstatic moment of mystical understanding for the narrator. Warren proposes that the sacramental system is a perfect example of the fusion of physical and spiritual that is central to Dillard’s view of language (114). However, by trying to fit Dillard’s texts into her scheme, Warren misses some of the subtle nuances of the text. I will examine Warren’s claims further as they become pertinent to the present study, however, first I will briefly distinguish my interpretive approach from hers, and identify the places I see that require a more nuanced account.

My own interpretation will differ from Warren’s in two ways: the first one being one of hermeneutics, the second of emphasis. First, although Warren claims to avoid the problem of separating Dillard’s artistic vision from her religious vision (and with her “incarnational theory of language” she certainly shows that Dillard’s understanding of language is drawn from a Christian notion of the Word made flesh), she presents Dillard’s poetics as a presentation of a unified and systematic set of theological conclusions or religious claims, rather than Dillard’s attempt to truthfully depict a reality affected by religious insight. In other words, although Warren recognizes that for Dillard

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<sup>8</sup> Most notably, see Dunn 17-31; and Warren 30.



the artist's vision is fused with her spiritual vision, Warren's interpretation of the content is dissociated from that vision, and she approaches *Holy the Firm* too narrowly as a theological treatise, rather than as a piece of poetic narrative. We might do well to keep in mind Dillard's own articulation of her orientation:

I am grounded strongly in art and weakly in theology. There is a profound difference between the two fields. If I wanted to make a theological statement I would have hired a sky-writer. Instead, I knock myself out trying to do art, and it's not so airtight. It isn't reducible to a sealed system. ("A Face Aflame" 17)

While Dillard's work may often fall in line with a theology of divine *logos*, as Warren argues, and certainly draws heavily from theological discourses, the richness of the text is lost when it is read as a tract for theological persuasion rather than as a poetic and dramatic depiction of reality.

Nevertheless, to give a full account of her work one must look to the theological currents that are interwoven so seamlessly into this text, recognizing that although Dillard is reluctant for her work to be placed strictly or reductively within a religious tradition,<sup>9</sup> her narrative bears deep theological resonances, which she acknowledges as central to its meaning.<sup>10</sup> Warren's interpretation is helpful in that it outlines the importance of Christ's Incarnation in Dillard's work, revealing a crucial gap in scholarship on Dillard. However, in *Holy the Firm*, Dillard draws from another set of theological writers who have often

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<sup>9</sup> Dillard explains, "my prime audience is the skeptic, the agnostic, not the Christian. Just getting the agnostic to acknowledge the supernatural is a major task" ("A Face Aflame" 15).

<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Eleanor B. Wymard, excerpted in her review of *Pilgrim*, "A New Existentialist Voice," in *Commonweal* (October, 1975): 495-496, Dillard describes her orientation: "Art is my interest, mysticism my message, Christian mysticism" (496).

also been regarded as dwelling on the fringes: the mystics. She mentions Dionysius, Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart most specifically on Day 2 of the narrative. In her oft-quoted interview she intimates the influence of Julian’s text: “The sixteenth-century British mystic named Juliana of Norwich wrote *Revelations of Divine Love*, which I’ve only had the courage to read once. Its main idea, God’s love, is the most threatening of all, because it demands such faith” (“A Face Aflame” 19).<sup>11</sup> The book clearly affected Dillard greatly, and the resonances are strong within the narrative, moving well beyond the namesake of the little girl who suffers. Yet in spite of the clear connections, there has been little scholarship on where and how elements of Julian of Norwich’s theology are realized in Dillard’s poetry.<sup>12</sup>

My second departure from Warren becomes evident in any discussion about the similarities between Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations* and Dillard’s *Holy the Firm*. Warren attends to many of the implications of the Incarnation for Dillard’s work, however, the theodicy problem, which Dillard examines so ardently in the story of the little girl Julie, is largely absent from Warren’s account. I would argue that it is precisely in the Incarnation and the Atonement that Dillard finds a response to the human suffering

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<sup>11</sup> See Denise N. Baker, “Julie Norwich and Julian of Norwich: Annie Dillard’s Theodicy in *Holy the Firm*,” in *Julian of Norwich’s Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, ed. Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009): 87-100. Baker suggests that Dillard comprehends more of Julian’s ideas than she admits in this interview (89).

<sup>12</sup> The exceptions are J.C. Gaskins, ““Julie Norwich” and Julian of Norwich: Notes and a Query,” *14<sup>th</sup> Century English Mystics Newsletter* 6.4 (December 1980): 153-163; and Baker 87-100, who we will examine in more detail in chapter 3. Gaskins briefly outlines the similarities in language between Dillard and Julian of Norwich, and Baker carefully points to Dillard’s debt to Julian of Norwich, while making careful note of where Dillard diverges. Baker argues that in the despairing mood of Part II, Dillard rejects Julian’s understanding of a personal God who sustains the world with love, and that it is not until Part III that her “resolution of the problem of evil bears some resemblance to Julian’s and reveals her profound understanding of the medieval mystical tradition” (91).

that drives the action of the narrative. As I have already suggested, my own reading will ultimately lead to a demonstration of the centrality of love for Dillard, as she is confronted by human pain and the Incarnation. To attend to these gaps, I will highlight the similarities in language between Dillard's text and Julian's *Revelations*, and will more specifically consider Julian's understanding of the fall in her parable of the lord and the servant in order to demonstrate the centrality of love in Dillard's own confrontation with fallenness and pain on Days 2 and 3. Admittedly my reading of Julian of Norwich is through Dillard's own poetic consideration of the Fall, and is largely limited to her parable. However, Julian's parable presents the reader with her own narrative account of creation, fall, and redemption, and thus presents us with an insightful mirror through which to view Dillard's poetic account. Building on Warren's assessment of the importance of the Incarnation, I will bring to light how both Dillard and Julian of Norwich imagine Christ's self-giving love as central to the human understanding and response to the suffering other.

### 1.2 The Kenotic Movement of Creation

Dillard's short narrative unfolds in an act of creation; the world is birthed around her, from the water in the Pacific, and the green pastures and fir trees, to a sky that arches far above. She awakens with the knowledge that "every day is a god," a reference to a letter written by Ralph Waldo Emerson to Margaret Fuller (and the epitaph of Dillard's *The Writing Life*) that guides the drama of this first day: "Heaven walks among us ordinarily muffled in such triple or tenfold disguises that the wisest are deceived and no

one suspects the days to be gods” (Rusk xxvi). Dillard awakens innocently on Day 1, as a witness to the world undisguised and its holiness laid bare before her. The world is new, the days are gifts unravelling before her eyes, and she celebrates this grace that overflows into living creation. She responds in awe and worship of the god of each day, which she imagines as particles of divinity “splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk” (11). Divinity here is immanent in time and matter of creation, easily apprehended by Dillard’s watchful eye.

On this day of innocent awakening, we find what we would come to expect in Dillard’s prose after *Pilgrim*; that is, beautiful descriptions of the natural world—both the beauty and the chaos—with sharp attention to its revealing details. The narrator expresses a sense of the sacred incarnate in all of matter, arching through all things and bringing a dynamic vibrancy to the world:

I open my eyes. The god lifts from the water. His head fills the bay. He is Puget Sound, the Pacific; his breast rises from pastures; his fingers are firs, islands slide wet down his shoulders. Islands slip blue from his shoulders and glide over the water, the empty, lighted water like a stage. (12)

Dillard’s depiction here is contrary to the modern tendency to imagine the sacred as removed from the world, and is reminiscent of her transcendentalist forebearers, who sought to re-imagine a world in which the spirit was embedded in the mundane landscape, moving through it to touch the human heart.<sup>13</sup> The god of today is “a boy,

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<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of Dillard’s relationship to the tradition of Thoreau, see, in particular, Marc Chenetier, “Tinkering, Extravagance: Thoreau, Melville, and Annie Dillard,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 31.3 (Spring 1990): 157-172; James I. McClintock, “‘Pray Without Ceasing’: Annie Dillard Among the Nature Writers,” *Earthly Words: Essays on Contemporary American Nature and Environmental*

pagan and fernfoot” (30). She invites a sacramental view of the world, in which holiness is evident everywhere in the natural landscape, and each day is ushered in by the little gods of time. Re-imagining the world as overflowing with the sacred is evident in the most of Dillard’s work. In her essay “Teaching a Stone to Talk” she contests what she sees as the degradation of the natural landscape into material reality only: “We have drained the light from the boughs in the sacred grove and snuffed it in the high places and along the banks of sacred streams. We as a people have moved from pantheism to panatheism” (69). The artist of Day 1 is witness to another reality. The opening scene is one of rapturous celebration of this god’s pouring into creation, making divinity known through the vast landscapes and minute details of the created world, through the miracle of the spider’s web and the fragility of a moth’s body.

The text is punctuated by exclamations of “Oh!” as she feels the intimacy of this god who envelops her in her blanket, kissing her awake. The god of this day surrounds her gently and protectively, “he vaults, vaulting and spread, holding all and spread on me like skin” (12). She dwells within divinity, resting and awakening in his all-encompassing safety, and stirred by the beauty of the natural world. The gods she depicts here, however, are never personal. Although she might abide in the divine, the gods of these days do not yet dwell within her. The divine is immanent, but there is no personal affection. She apprehends as the artist does, living in the “pool of materials”, a lover of the aesthetics of material creation. Warren notes this ability to see as lover, describing it in Dillard’s work

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*Writers*, ed. John Codey and Ann Arbor (MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994): 69-86; and Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998); and Becker 407-412. McClintock quotes Edward Abbey writing that amongst American nature writers, Annie Dillard is “the true heir of the Master” (44).

as “the ability to look beyond the expected to a deeper plane, a plane accessible only to ‘a lover’ with eyes attuned to truly see” (Warren 70).<sup>14</sup> Her reference here is to Dillard’s chapter on “Seeing” in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, but it is equally applicable to the first day of *Holy the Firm*, in which her innocence and un-self-consciousness dissuades preconceptions or intellectual categories that might hamper her perception of holiness in the ordinary.

The world is lovingly crafted on Day 1, there is an intrinsic order to it that is visible in the way that everything clicks into place, “the sky clicks securely in place over the mountains, locks round the islands, snaps slap on the bay. Air fits flush on farm roofs; it rises inside the doors of barns and rubs at yellow barn windows” (12). Everything is where it should be, “there is not a chink” (29), for it has been meaningfully ordered and artistically designed. She beckons the reader to notice their created-ness with her:

All day long I feel created. I can see the blown dust on the skin on the back of my hand, the tiny trapezoids of chipped clay, moistened and breathed alive. There are some created sheep in the pasture below me, sheep set down here precisely, just touching their blue shadows hoof to hoof on the grass. Created gulls pock the air, rip great curved seams in the settled air: I greet my created meal, amazed. (25)

Such an anthropology brings integrity to temporal existence, and she stands in awe of both the world’s createdness, and of her own place within it as a created being. When this

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<sup>14</sup> Dillard describes such sight effectively in *Pilgrim*, in a scene in which she tries to draw a horse. Her aunt and uncle, who live on the farm she is visiting, laugh at her attempt and each draw a perfect likeness. She writes, “The point is that I just don’t know what the lover knows; I just can’t see the artificial obvious that those in the know construct” (20). She recognizes that to see with a lover’s eyes, with affection, is transformative of sight.

idea is shattered on Day 2, she is utterly disoriented, but for now, she knows where she dwells, and that she is a part of a meaningful whole.

Near the close of Day 1, she meets and describes one of the gods whom her cat has dragged in. This little god is perfect, he looks like a little man except for his wings and his head aflame (27). She tries to put out his smouldering yellow hair, but “in so doing so I accidentally touch his skull, brush against his hot skull, which is the size of a hazelnut, as the saying goes, warm-skinned and alive” (27). This is the first clear indication of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*. In Julian’s first revelation, she is shown how intimately God loves human creatures through a little thing the size of a hazelnut, which God explains to her is all that is made. Julian, amazed that such a small thing exists, comes to understand that “it exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it” (*RDL* 68). She sees three truths in this tiny piece: “The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God sustains it” and that God is therefore Maker, Keeper, and Lover (68). In this same passage Julian describes God as “true rest”, that in his love “he clothes us, enfolds and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us” (68). These references in Dillard’s encounter with the little god are suggestive of the love which is present in all things, even the smallest of them, though not yet in terms of the personal love of a monotheistic creator-god. In her poetic language, she already evokes the Julian’s mystical theology centred in God’s love. Carefully noting these associations, and how and when she cues the reader to them, we are brought to Dillard’s poetic explorations of those theological themes. Dillard crafts her own understanding of the workings of divine love as exhibited in creation, and

her hints of Julian's text are suggestive of her own awe at the enfolding love and createdness of the first day.

Dillard's language evokes a movement of the divine's self-emptying into the world when she describes the god of this day at the end of the chapter thus: "He rises, new and surrounding; he is everything that is, wholly here and emptied—flung, and flowing, sowing, unseen, and flown" (31). In this rich passage the divine is described as full of movement, rising into everything as the primeval seed from which all life blossoms, sown into the particular in order to sprout up in time. But the divine here is not only the source of all that is, nor simply that which surrounds the narrator in love, but also *is* everything that is made: "He is Puget Sound, the Pacific; his breast rises from pastures; his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders" (12). The god of this day is "wholly here", not far away but emptied entirely into material existence. Indeed this kenotic language is present throughout Day 1, this god "arches," "vaults" and spreads (12), the world becomes literally filled with colour and beauty (12), land is a "poured thing" (21). The material world is filled in around her with the divine.

However, the kenotic movement of the divine into creation is not fully developed on Day 1, and Dillard merely hints, poetically through intimation, that in the act of creation, the divine is lavishly poured into the material world, making the eternal evident to the careful observer, or more specifically, to the worshipping artist. This is not the same kenotic movement as God's emptying of divine prerogatives into the figure of Christ, as Philippians 2:6-8 (the primary text informing a kenotic Christology) implies. As we will see, this descent becomes a personal expression of love only on the second



and third days. However, on Day 1 it is understood as an eternal motion, as the divine's continual act of becoming present and involved in creation, in each day's expression of the sacred.

### 1.3 Intimations of Disjuncture

Even amidst the glorious creation, on the first day there are glimpses of the Fall: the cat bites her “metal sutures,” a mark of the pain of a wound (12), the empty insect corpses that litter her floor (14) and the dead wren that the cat drags in (26) point to the presence of death even on this day's birth. Moreover, she stands on a tiny piece of land bordering “east of the mountains”: “The rest of the country—most of the rest of the planet, *in some very real sense*, excluding a shred of British Columbia's coastline and the Alaskan islands—is called, and *profoundly felt* to be, simply “East of the Mountains.” I've been there” (19, italics mine). The phrase she uses here is reminiscent of Cain's exile from the garden to a place “east of Eden” in Genesis 4:12-16. Dillard's use of this phrase—which contains “profound” meaning for her—points to the human condition as one of “a restless wanderer on earth” (Genesis 4:12), yet still under God's loving protection. Within the beauty of creation, the fallen-ness she will struggle with so earnestly on Day 2 is already present; for the descent of the divine into creation is already a form of the fall.<sup>15</sup> The sacramental vision of the natural world she presents on Day 1 already implies a metaphorical descent into matter.

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<sup>15</sup> In *Pilgrim*, Dillard notes similarly: “creation itself was the fall, a burst into the thorny beauty of the real” (221).

Although she imagines herself enveloped by the god of this first day, she moves here to gaze out to the ocean, her metaphor for the ephemeral realm of the beyond. The artist's position is not simply from a materialist perspective. She consciously turns away from the solid mountains in the east—from the edge of the known world, or the Ultima Thule—to the sea in the west:

The sun rose over the snowfields and woke me where I lay, and I rose and cast a shadow over someplace, and thought, There is, God help us, more. So gathering my bowls and spoons, and turning my head, as it were, I moved to face west, relinquishing all hope of sanity, for what is more. And what is more is islands: sea, and unimaginably solid islands, and sea, and a hundred rolling skies... Here is the fringey edge where elements meet and realms mingle, where time and eternity spatter each other with foam. (20-21)

Everything in the landscape points towards the sea, and towards this meeting place of time and eternity, of matter and spirit. In order to see beyond, the artist beckons her reader to follow the direction of the landscape, and cast their gaze toward the fringes as well, outwards beyond what she knows in material reality. The creation that Dillard describes is pointing “as an arrow” towards the horizon, to the sea and the islands at the edge (23). She recognizes the disjuncture between her own existence in material creation and the possibility of another reality, oriented by eternity. “Teach me thy ways, O Lord,” she beckons,<sup>16</sup> acknowledging that such a prayer, as all prayer, is a “rash one, and one I cannot but recommend” (19). She seeks out the unknown—“I came here to study hard

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<sup>16</sup> See Psalms 25, 27 and 86.

things—rock mountain and salt sea—and to temper my spirit on their edges” (19)—turning away even from matter to be shaped by the mysterious, longing for more than what she knows.

The natural world, in Dillard’s depiction, has a transparency and is able, at times, to reveal something beyond or behind it. These moments when the eternal is revealed are particularly available to the artist on Day 1, whose ability to see the world carefully and insightfully can puncture through at the fringes of sea and land. Dillard, self-admittedly, is in her own Middle Ages, “the world at my feet, the world through the window, is an illuminated manuscript whose leaves the wind takes, one by one, whose painted illuminations and halting words draw me, one by one, and I am dazzled in days and lost” (24). She is pulled into this reality, attracted by its beauty, its extravagance and simplicity. Moreover, she is attracted to her “idea” of this day: “In the Middle Ages, I read, “the idea of a thing which a man framed for himself was always more real to him than the actual thing itself”” (23). The vision she has of this reality is a subjective, self-created idea, for the “artist lives in the mind, that warehouse of forms” (22). As we will see shortly, at the end of Day 1 she recognizes herself as a participant in the very act of regeneration, in the creation of that reality.

The reader must look to the fringes of Dillard’s art in order to interpret the narrative, for she tells us that “nothing is going to happen in this book. There is only a little violence here and there in the language, at the corner where eternity clips time” (24). Looking simply to the events that unfold in the narrative, there is little to satisfy one’s expectation of a linear storyline, but if we follow where Dillard points beyond the

temporal surface, a great deal occurs. William J. Scheick posits that Dillard makes use of a narrative technique that pushes the reader to scrutinize the text beyond the surface narrative, and that for a sense of continuity in her book “one must look not at the surface of temporal details, but into the depths of their eternal significance” (Scheick 55).<sup>17</sup> The artist in Dillard’s portrayal, he argues, is someone who is particularly apt to encounter the intersection of matter and spirit in the world (54). By beginning her story in the “pool of materials” of the artist, however, Dillard grounds her the events in the particular where, for her, reality must always be grounded.

#### 1.4 The Moth and the Artist

Dillard describes her iconic image of a moth in a flashback on Day 1. She had been camping alone, seeking out a quiet place to read, among other things, James Ramsey Ullman’s *The Day on Fire*, a novel inspired by the life of French poet Arthur Rimbaud which had inspired her to be a writer when she was sixteen. She sits alone under a tree in the night, the light of her candle forming a circular ring around her. Moths kept flying into the candle, burning up quickly with a hiss and dropping down to the ground or onto her cooking pots (15). But one night, a moth—a “golden female” with a two-inch wingspan—flies into the candle and gets caught. Her wings, legs, and head ignite in flame and sizzle out, but her torso keeps burning: “The wax rose in the moth’s body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson makes a similar claim regarding Dillard’s style of prose. “Like other contemporary modernists, Dillard has smoothed out her surfaces, allowing the upper tier of grammar and syntax to move without abrupt changes. But her lower tier allows ellipsis; transitions of logic are removed, frequently forcing the reader into tying together whole ideas rather than grammatical structures” (166).

be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk” (17). The moth burns for two hours, “glowing within” like a “hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God” (17). All the while, the moth’s light illuminates Dillard’s world, as she enters into the life of Rimbaud, who is burning his own brains out in a thousand poems (17).

In some sense, the whole book is an extended meditation on this image, which brings together much of the imagery of the text: flame and fire, light, the arcing flight of the moth and (later) airplane, solitude, purity, and self-sacrifice. This language of wax, wick, and light is also notably what she uses to describe the relationship between matter, mind, and spirit, which we saw in the passage laying out their relationships. Together, these two “keys”—the metaphor of the burning moth and her formulation of matter, mind and spirit—appeal to both the intellect and to the imagination, drawing the reader in to contemplation of their relationship. On Day 1, the moth is immediately tied to the life of the artist; first in Dillard’s description of Rimbaud who *burns his brains out* in his poetry, and then by jumping directly to ask her students which of them has what it takes to be a writer. “How many of you, I asked the people in my class, which of you want to give your lives and be writers? ... And then I tried to tell them what the choice must mean: you can’t be anything else. You must go at your life with a broadax... They had no idea what I was saying” (18). The moth, like an “immolating monk” and a “flame-faced virgin” gives her life sacrificially to alight the world; the moth, the artist, and the nun, it is already suggested, are layered within the same image.

As we saw above, Dillard depicts each day as a god of its own, suggesting both the sacredness of time and creation as a continual process. Dillard herself becomes an actor in this creation. “I seem to see a road; I seem to be on a road, walking. I seem to walk on a blacktop road that runs over a hill. The hill creates itself, a powerful suggestion” (28). These phantom creations gather substance and appear before her as she participates in the very act of creation. The god stands on her shoulder whistling into her ear, calling the world into being as she walks up the hill. Warren notices the similarity between this passage and Psalm 33:6: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host”, noting the importance this passage has for her thesis that the artist mimics the Word made flesh (Warren 23). As Dillard continues to walk she writes, “I cannot escape the illusion. The colorful thought persists, this world, a dream forced into my ear and sent round my body on ropes of hot blood” (28). Her gaze is a brush, “painting in the world” (28). Dillard reciprocates in worship, in loving awe of the world, by participating in creation through her appreciative gaze as artist.

She ends this day in an ecstatic affirmation of what she sees: “I see it! I see it all! Two islands, twelve islands, worlds, gather substance, gather the blue contours of time, and array themselves down distance, mute and hard” (28). She insists upon the illusion of the material world creating itself around her as she walks, and this created illusion within time and matter, in all its particularity, is enough. “Time is enough, more than enough, and matter multiple and given” (29). This first day is a poem of praise, of worship and awe of the material world and an acknowledgement of her affinity with it as an artist, a fellow creator who meddles in the realm of matter, manipulating it by her own thoughts.

The arches and buttresses Dillard uses in her language—the dead sow bugs, the hollow moth and expanses under which god arcs, and Dillard’s own empty work space—connote creation as an immense cathedral or temple, a worship-place in which divinity is always near, through the gods that permeate the days and in the natural world itself. The artist’s vision of the material world is from the eyes of a lover and a participant in creation.

## CHAPTER TWO: DILLARD’S INTELLECTUAL THEODICY

Dillard’s scene of a quiet but dynamic creation filling itself out is violently interrupted by a plane falling from the sky. Suffering and pain literally fall into her world in the inexplicable and seemingly meaningless event of an airplane crash, in which little Julie Norwich burns her face off. The narrative, which has thus far been ascending in ecstatic celebration of the divine emptying into creation, likewise arcs downward as Dillard plummets into doubt and mistrust of the world around her. Language of the fall—the plane’s descent, but also references to the second Genesis story including fruit, self-consciousness and shame—permeates the text and Dillard, faced with the reality of Julie’s pain, is urged to re-assess what she knows and sees in the beautiful creation which has unfolded around her. Her account of the accident is plain and sparse, and she notes simply that “there was no reason” for it, the plane’s engine simply failed and it fell easily from the sky, snagging its wing on a tree branch (35). As the suffering of Julie Norwich is brought into focus, Dillard becomes sceptical of the imminent gods of time and the natural world, and considers the intellectual theodicy problem of how a good and loving creator could allow pain and suffering within creation.

In this chapter I will begin to illustrate the parallels between Dillard’s text and Julian’s parable of the lord and the servant in order to illuminate the centrality of God’s boundless love in the face of human pain for these two women. Although we do not see the fullness of the parallels between Dillard’s and Julian’s narratives of fall, creation, and redemption until Day 3, even on Day 2 they begin to emerge. First, I will consider how



the fall of the servant in Julian’s parable sheds light on Dillard’s own depiction of fallenness; that is, in her sense of abandonment and disorientation to the divine. I will then consider what Dillard’s intellectual vision means for her confrontation of the fall on this second day, as she tries to make sense of the world within her own constructed sense of punitive justice. Finally, I will address the way in which Dillard is challenged by Christ’s fall in the Incarnation, significantly also on the second day. In her consideration of God’s kenotic outpouring in Christ, Dillard’s text shifts markedly to reveal a Christian soteriology. Dillard wonders, in indignation, how God’s descent in one man at a particular time and place in history might be personally salvific, expressing scepticism at this “scandal of particularity”. Admittedly, she finds no satisfying resolution to the problem of human pain on this day, and she moves forward into Day 3 in exasperation, intellectually defeated, for she realizes that she is unable to make sense of Julie’s suffering—or Christ’s own suffering in love—through human understanding alone.

### 2.1 Julian and Julie

A brief outline of Julian of Norwich’s account of the Fall will be helpful at this point. The Medieval anchoress considered theodicy most attentively in the middle and longest chapter of her long text, through the parable of the Lord and the Servant. After deliberating on sin in her 13th revelation, Julian was still not satisfied by what was revealed to her, for she was unable to align the Church’s teaching about sin and judgement with her own revelation that sin has no substance (Ch.27 p.104), that all will

be well (Ch.32 pp.109-110) and her very real experience of human suffering.<sup>18</sup> She asks God for further clarification, which is given to her in the form of a parable, a story in its own right of creation, fall, and redemption; first she sees the “bodily likeness” in its simplest terms, and after years of contemplation she further elaborates its “spiritual significance” in the lengthiest chapter of her *Revelations*.

In the parable, she sees the lord lovingly and tenderly sending out his servant to fulfil his purpose. The servant, in his own loving willingness to do his lord’s bidding, hurries away and without warning falls into a deep ditch, injuring himself so that he is unable to get out. In his fallenness the servant is too weak to look up and be comforted by the sight of the nearness of his lord, and thinks he must be utterly alone in his pain (141). Julian is surprised that she can find no fault in the servant, and that his lord does not regard him as blameworthy, but rather, that it was the servant’s loyalty and longing which had made him ready to do his lord’s bidding in the first place. The lord, for his part, looks upon the servant with gentleness and pity, delighting in the thought of the rest and honour he will give his servant, a gift that will surpass his previous health and well being exponentially (142). As Julian considers this vision, she comes to see the fall of the servant as a layered account of the fall of Adam, of Every-man, and the fall of Christ into Mary’s womb (and further down into hell) in the Incarnation. These falls, she comes to

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<sup>18</sup> Julian of Norwich writes, “Good Lord, I can see you are real truth, and I know too that we sin, indeed grievously every day, and are most blameworthy. I can never hide from you the truth about myself, and yet I never see you blame us. How is this? The normal teaching of Holy Church and, indeed, my own experience, told me of the blame of sin which has been hanging over us, from the time of Adam until we reach heaven.” (Ch. 50, pp.139-140). Turner persuasively argues that this is not for Julian a conflict in two authorities, but is rather in two “stories” of sin, the story of sin that sin tells, and the story of sin. See Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), especially chapter 3, for an insightful analysis of how the one story is a reality in divine love, and the other is a rejection of such a reality of divine love.

know through spiritual insight over the decades, are simultaneously one—though admittedly multidimensional—downward movement, the one contained within the other, and all willed by, and acted out in, God’s divine love.

In his interpretation, Denys Turner suggests that Julian effectively collapses history, time, and historical identities: “Creation, Fall, and Redemption coincide, as Adam, “everyman,” and Christ are one and the same. Ultimately, they are one and the same reality, all are but one event, one persona” (*Julian of Norwich* 117). He argues against the suggestion, however, that this collapsing sucks all the drama out of the biblical narrative of salvation history, because such criticisms mistake the point of Julian’s parable, “which is intentionally eschatological, not historical, intentionally embodying the ultimacy of the divine plan in which all is from eternity foreseen” (*Julian of Norwich* 118). Like Dante’s *Commedia* (and all stories and narratives), Turner argues that Julian’s narrative of the lord and servant is only a partial story, for the whole will always exceed our mortal comprehension (110).<sup>19</sup> In Julian’s parable, the Fall is neither an afterthought of creation, nor is the Incarnation simply a “solution” to the Fall, for they have all been eternally willed as one movement, one “drama of love” (*Julian of Norwich* 119). On Day 2 of Dillard’s narrative, she tries, from the perspective of the “thinker”, to construct her own whole story of human suffering within creation, one that ultimately fails to be intellectually satisfying. Refusing the possibility of a divine plan, she judges God’s participation in the world based on an ethical system that would make sense of

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<sup>19</sup> See Julia Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors of our Time: Julian of Norwich, The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1986). Gatta presents a similar reading, suggesting that Julian’s allegory “represents the story of salvation seen in retrospect... We are presented with salvation history from God’s perspective, as it were, as an already accomplished fact” (67).

Julie's suffering within her own, human terms of justice. As we will see, the reality she envisions on this day is necessarily a limited one, for her sight is focused on seeing with the mind, or the intellect. Within such a narrowly defined reality, she is not yet able to accept the greater narrative of God's love.

As I have already noted, Dillard has suggested that Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* were deeply stirring. While I propose that the parable helps to illuminate Dillard's conception of evil in the world, there is a notable difference to address before we begin: that is, that Julian considers how God allows human creatures to sin, while Dillard wonders how God allows human suffering in the world. Though not unrelated, the emphases are different, in that Julian's concern is primarily soteriological, whereas Dillard's primary concern is how God's relationship to the temporal is manifested in time. As Denise N. Baker suggests, a key difference lies in the fact that Julian is seeking unity with God, while Dillard seeks faith in God (88). And yet, to bring further nuance to Baker's suggestion, I would argue that for Dillard, the accident never makes her doubt the *existence* of God, but rather stirs doubt that God is involved in the temporal events of this world, in terms of earthly justice. In other words, Julie's suffering is the primary impediment to accepting faith in God's divine justice on Day 2, not in accepting faith in the existence of the divine itself.<sup>20</sup> Dillard's and Julian's emphases are different, then, but in a slightly different way than Baker suggests.

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<sup>20</sup> To bring further nuance to Scheick's suggestion that the narrative follows a structure of faith, doubt, and faith renewed, I would suggest that it is not faith and doubt in God that Dillard is concerned with, but rather faith and doubt in God's justice. As we will see, the renewed faith that Dillard experiences on Day 3 is one within a different reality than the one she knew on Day 1.

In Dillard’s depiction, Julie’s suffering occurs haphazardly. The airplane falls from the sky not as a result of Julie’s or the pilot’s fault, nor because the airstrip was built unsafe (37). Her description of the event is one of the few instances in the book when she uses a passive voice, “Into this world falls a plane” (35), emphasizing the absence of responsibility for the action. The girl’s suffering comes as the consequence of a simple accident, “There was no reason: the plane snagged its wing on a tree, fluttered in a tiny arc, and struggled down” (35). Though admittedly she depicts a natural accident, and the consequences thereof, as I will argue, the plane’s descent is Dillard’s poetic rendering of the fall of creation—in the literal fall of a particular girl—and her contemplation of the implications of that fall. Similarly, in Julian’s account of the servant’s fall, there is no intentionality, no willed distancing of the self from his lord, and no revolt or resistance to the lord’s love in the parable. Nor does the lord show any wrath, for the servant is not “blameworthy” since his departure was acted out in loving obedience. The fall into a place of separation itself is the cause of the servant’s suffering, not the reverse.

Dillard reflects on her only other previous encounter with the girl Julie, on a farm surrounded by piles of apples making cider (an indiscreet allusion to the fruit in the garden of Eden). Julie plays with the cat, chasing it around the yard and trying to put it into a small dress that resembles a nun’s habit. She is described delicately; in childlike innocence she is learning to whistle with her “sweater unbuttoned and bony knees bare” (39). Yet her play is not entirely innocent: she knowingly inflicts pain on the small creature as she runs after it, hits its face and roughly drags it back under the hawthorn tree where she plays (41). Dillard mentions Julie’s age several times in the narrative: the little

girl is seven years old, traditionally regarded by the Catholic church as the “age of reason” when children are able to act rationally and are held morally accountable for their actions. Even the child Julie is not untouched by sinfulness, for she, too, is a fallen creature, knowingly acting in sin. Dillard, watching Julie fondly from her cider pail, exchanges a “conscious and self-conscious look” with the girl (41), an indication of her awareness of her own condition of fallen-ness. In her comment that the two “look alike” (41), Dillard points to their shared brokenness, but also anticipates the possibility for a shared redemption on Day 3. Dillard’s self-conscious recognition of fallenness resembles the experience of the servant fallen into the ditch: his pain, his loneliness, and his forgotten relationship to his loving lord are mirrored existentially in Dillard’s dramatization.

Julian of Norwich describes the condition of the fallen servant thus:

Though he groans and moans and cries and struggles he is quite unable to get up or help himself in any way. To crown all, he could get no relief of any sort: he could not even turn his head to look at the lord who loved him, and who was so close to him. The sight of him would have been of real comfort, but he was temporarily so weak and bemused that he gave vent to his feelings, as he suffered his pains. (Ch.51, p.141)

The servant’s pain is sevenfold; he experiences both physical and mental anguish, as he falls into loneliness and forgetfulness of the love for his lord, which had prompted him into action (142). Dillard aptly dramatizes this forgetting, expressing disorientation about her place in relation to the divine: “We *looked* a bit alike. Her face is slaughtered now,

and I don't remember mine" (41). Like the fallen servant, her ability to see the divine present around her, enfolding her in love, and moving through all things as she had envisioned on Day 1, is eclipsed by the little girl's suffering, and she becomes disoriented, unable to imagine how material creation could be linked to the eternal in any way. Although the servant in the parable suffers his own pain, and Dillard's account on Day 2 is a distanced attempt to intellectually understand another's suffering, Dillard's identification with the girl Julie enables her to struggle *with* her, experiencing the brokenness and disorientation of human creatures in the face of unwarranted pain.

In Julian's account of fallen humankind she writes, "he was quite alone: wherever I looked, high and low, far and near, I could see none to help him" (142). Of course, in reality his lord is near him, always watching over lovingly, yet his fall into the pit is so great, and his own sense of estrangement so strong that he cannot see his lord. Dillard struggles with this abandonment to time, and to the gods of each day: "There are only days. The one great god abandoned us to days, to time's tumult of occasions, abandoned us to the gods of days each brute and amok in his hugeness and idiocy" (43). Whereas time and matter were enough on the previous day, they now seem senseless when cut off from their orientation to the eternal. "It is the best joke there is," she writes, "that we are here, and fools—that we are sown into time like so much corn, that we are souls sprinkled at random like salt into time and dissolved here, spread into matter, connected by cells right down to our feet..." (41). Dillard depicts an abandonment to mechanical laws, to a vision of the world in which humans are insignificant and matter is senseless.

On Day 1, Dillard felt at home within the world—even merging into the background of cabin and mountains (22)—wrapped safely within its blanket-like confines, but her understanding is radically altered on Day 2 as she wonders whether we are all sojourners, victims cut off—as she imagines creation is cut off—from the divine, torn asunder by the human condition of brokenness: “We are precisely nowhere, sinking on an entirely imaginary ice floe, into entirely imaginary seas themselves adrift” (46).<sup>21</sup> She worries that we have all fallen into senseless darkness, abandoned to aimless wandering among odious days. Her orientation has shifted drastically, from an understanding of herself as meaningfully placed on this planet, to a lost sense of createdness. Although she had expressed a similar sense of the stage-like quality of the world on the previous day, the gods’ continual part in creation had not called it into question. Here, however, she wonders about the nature of divine authorship, and what place human creatures have within a flawed creation, spinning in a universe ordered by mechanical causality alone.

## 2.2 Intellectual Sight

In the text, Dillard moves from celebration, to shock, to moral indignation. She longs to understand God’s relationship with the world, moved to seek a deeper

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<sup>21</sup> Dillard’s “imaginary ice floe” here is reminiscent of her essay “An Expedition to the Pole” in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, in which Dillard pairs stories of polar expeditions with the church’s search for The Absolute, or the “Pole of Relative Inaccessibility”. In the final scene she imagines a picture of absurdity in which the images of arctic and church coalesce in a comical depiction of the human search for the divine: clowns, captains, penguins and Christ all sail on, underprepared and joyful, in a preposterous journey towards the Pole (and the Absolute).



understanding of how Julie's suffering corresponds to an omnipotent God. As we will see on Day 3, she will become passive and receptive, but on Day 2 she yearns for knowledge of God, actively seeking out the meaning of human suffering. With the rest of the town she fights grass fires, prays, and wanders "from window to window, fierce" (37).

Confronted by such an unintelligible event, all Dillard can do is stand exasperated at the absurdity, "We wake up a hundred times a day and laugh" (42). Intellectually perplexed, she considers the absurdity of a meaningless existence, shifting her tone to outrage and offense.

If we return to Dillard's image of the moth, and to her formulation of the relationship between mind, matter, and spirit, we are reminded that for Dillard the thinker lives both "in the bright wick of the mind" (22), but also within "the clash of materials, and in the world of spirit where all long thoughts must lead" (22). This day, the day of the thinker, depicts the world from within a reality constructed by the intellect, yet it is also forcibly related to the "clash of materials" which she experiences in the plane accident. She reasons toward a solution of this clash, this conflict between what she knows of God's relationship to the world and what she knows of suffering. Her assumption on this day is that she *can* know, however, and that the mind is indeed a wick that is able to illuminate the world.

Dillard's understanding of divine justice is necessarily limited by the boundaries of her own mind, and her resistance to the justice of a spiritual reality outside of herself. Her lost sense of createdness results in the mis-understanding of her self as autonomous, and she makes judgements in terms of her own constructed ethical system. Within such a

scheme, she is unable to align God's omnipotence with human suffering, knowing that an earthly, punitive justice requires there to be punishment of sin and reward for virtue. Dillard's vision of justice is, like the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal son,<sup>22</sup> necessarily her own, human conception in which it appears that *God* has fallen away beyond human perception.

In order to formulate a systematic understanding of the divine's relationship to the world, Dillard considers two alternatives regarding the nature of God's power: either that God is powerless in the face of human and natural workings of the world—removed from the world—or that God is all power, but devoid of love. In many ways this middle chapter is an extended dialogue with herself about the relationship of the small pagan gods of each day to the one God of eternity. She wonders about the power of this one great God, and whether human creatures have been abandoned to the petty, though often malevolent, gods of time. She writes,

Has he no power? Can the other gods carry time and its loves upside down like a doll in their blundering arms? ... No, that day's god has no power. No gods have power to save. There are only days. The one great god abandoned us to days, to time's tumult of occasions, abandoned us to the gods of days each brute and amok in his hugeness and idiocy. (43)

She wonders whether we have been abandoned to the violent gods of time who change with each day. The one great god is then powerless in time, immutable yet removed like

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<sup>22</sup> The story of the prodigal son, from Luke 15:11-32, is a narrative that I will turn to in Chapter 3. Turner argues that Julian of Norwich's parable intended to gloss the gospel story (*Julian of Norwich* 126), and certainly in Dillard's own narrative the parable is revealing of Dillard's attempt to understand according to a punitive, human, justice system.

the analogy of the watch-maker who has abandoned the earth to its own movements (“there are only days”).

Or, she wonders, if God has a stake in the world, is it simply as a powerful tyrant, reminding human creatures of their powerlessness. The vastness and abundance of creation no longer affects her, and she imagines a God who looks upon the world’s insignificance with contempt, for the earth after the plane crash is but a “mineral speckle planted in trees” (35). The gods of each day are tormentors: “It is November 19 and no wind, and no hope of heaven, and no wish for heaven, since the meanest of people show more mercy than hounding and terrorist gods” (36). Moreover, the one God is a “brute and traitor” (46). She wonders agonizingly about his power: “Has God a hand in this? Then it is a good hand. But has he a hand at all? Or is he holy fire burning self-contained for power’s sake alone? Then he knows himself blissfully as flame unconsuming, as all brilliance and beauty and power, and the rest of us can go hang” (48). In this imagery God is omnipotent, but distant and hostile, all power and no compassion.

Such a God bears little resemblance to Julian of Norwich’s. Indeed, Denise N. Baker writes, “In the despairing mood of Chapter 2, Dillard entertains the idea of an utterly transcendent and indifferent deity, closer to the incomprehensible God of negative theology than Julian’s courteous and familiar personal God who creates all that is made and sustains it with his love” (91). However, in the spirit of Day 2, Dillard’s pursuit of knowledge of God bears little resemblance even to the God of negative theology; she does not yet accept the limits of human knowing, and insists that the faculty of human reason is enough to fashion a system into which God’s actions fit logically. She does not

understand God through negation, but rather understands God as one who allows the negation of all meaning. In the spirit of Day 2, she insists on positivism, even a Christian positivism, which self-assuredly presumes that one might know the intricacies of the divine.

Her supposition presents her with a troubling image of reality: she insists on knowing, and yet, is increasingly drawn into intellectual skepticism that God—or reality at all—can be understood in any objective terms. She questions whether the landscape she sees, even Julie’s accident, is connected to any reality at all. If God is “flame unconsuming,” then the world has no connection to the real:

Then the accidental universe spins mute, obedient only to its own gross terms, meaningless, out of mind, and alone. The universe is neither contingent upon nor participant in the holy, in being itself, the real, the power play of fire. The universe is illusion merely, not one speck of it real, and we are not only its victims, falling always into or smashed by a planet slung by its sun—but also its captives, bound by the mineral-made ropes of our senses. (48)

The material world, here, is but sensory illusion, felt and experienced, but ordered by biological causality and lacking the place for a moral subject. The reality she presents the reader with is detached from meaning outside herself; there is no link between matter and mind, between mind and spirit, or between spirit and matter. As such, the reality she constructs appears as a facade, for it is all created according to human criterion, and is otherwise chaotic wasteland. She cannot find a moral order within such a scheme because there can be none.

At the lowest point of the narrative, reality is but an illusion—a thin and fragile curtain—and time rolls onward, wild and detached from the real, a mere mockery of human life. Everything spins in a meaningless universe, “Time is a hurdy-gurdy, a lampoon, and death’s a bawd. We’re beheaded by the nick of time. We’re logrolling on a falling world, on time released from meaning and rolling loose, like one of Atalanta’s golden apples, a bauble flung and forgotten, lapsed, and the gods on the lam...” (50). Time was enough on the previous day, but now “it is late, a late time to be living” (49). Her own mind’s fragmentation is projected onto the material world to suggest the disorder of creation. Her underlying perception of reality on Day 2 is that it is but a thin shell, a shallow delusion, flattened into the horizontal plane on which she lives. Her head spins and the universe spins out of control. She wonders whether language can correspond to reality at all:

If he abandoned us, slashing creation loose at its base from any roots in the real; and if we in turn abandon everything—all these illusions of time and space and lives—in order to love only the real: then where are we? Thought itself is impossible, for subject can have no guaranteed connection with object, nor any object with God. Knowledge is impossible. (45-46)

She wonders about the relationship any thoughts can have to the real world, a concern she examines in *Living by Fiction*: “Does fiction illuminate the great world itself, or only the mind of its human creator?” (13). On Day 3 she relinquishes her desire to express reality in words for she is opened to the mysteriousness of the divine, but here she doubts whether language can refer to reality at all. She had begun this day assured that she could

know, and now her certainty dissolves into intellectual scepticism.<sup>23</sup> Day 2 is both a critique of this notion that language creates reality, and is an exploration of what Dillard can come to know and express of the world through language.

She sits at her window, “It is a fool’s lot, this sitting always at windows spoiling little blowy slips of paper and myself in the process” (44), no longer certain that a life of sacrifice for her art is meaningful, that it represents a reality that is dense and full, rather than thin and flat. She sinks deeper into doubt about the world’s createdness: “What is the relationship of color to this sun, of sun to anything else? It all looks staged. It all looks brittle and unreal, a skin of colors painted on glass, which if you prodded it with a finger would powder and fall” (49). She falls into philosophical doubt, wondering whether language, her tool as a writer, corresponds to what it signifies, and whether the reality she sees corresponds to anything permanent and substantive.

Dillard’s contemplation on this dark and silent day brings her to a fringe of unknowing. Scheick describes this “dark night of the soul” as positioning Julie—and by extension Dillard—at “the Thule-like fringe of life and of its meaning—the fringe where they are torn by God’s Tooth” (Scheick 60).<sup>24</sup> She pushes against these limits of human knowledge, desperate for a glimpse of how God moves down into the world and how the eternal might be imagined within the confines of a broken material creation. Her

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of how Dillard’s texts are informed by modern, empirical science, and the philosophical and scientific doubt they entail, see Becker 400-413; and Felch 1-14. Felch suggests that Dillard frames her narrative by “traditional science naming reality in Part One, modern science promoting skepticism and randomness in Part Two, and a post-modern unified field theory in Part Three,” though she admits that all such neat schemes are ultimately unsatisfying for the reader (5). She contends that “the question of what is real and what is illusion permeates the book”, which is a theme I consider in terms of Dillard’s suggestion of a possible “religious” reality, or one oriented by the divine.

<sup>24</sup> See Turner’s *The Darkness of God*, specifically Chapter 10, for an elaboration of John of the Cross’s “dark night of the soul” to which Scheick compares Dillard’s Day 2.

experience of Julie's suffering calls into question all tidy, humane assumptions about God, and she is confronted with the possibility that God's ways are not our ways.

As we will see on Day 3, Dillard's longing to know in intellectual certainties is relinquished, and she is opened to accept her limited ability to know as the appropriate disposition with which to approach the divine. She re-adjusts the mind, away from self-righteousness and an over-inflated opinion of the self as autonomous. If on Day 1 she had imagined herself as a participant in creation, now on Day 2 she becomes the judge of it, and the sole creator of its meaning. She has grown in awareness of her fallen condition on this day, acknowledging her need to be saved ("no gods have power to save"), yet as we will see, she still unable to accept it. In her struggle to understand within human terms she cannot look beyond or outside her own scheme, to another, radically different understanding of reality.

The faith that is needed would require a letting go of intellectual pride, a deep humility, in order to trust (with Julian of Norwich) that in God, all is acted out in love. This does not mean an abandonment of reason, far from it, for as Julian of Norwich shows, she spent nearly twenty years reflecting on her mystical revelations, working through their possible meanings, finding the alignment between her showings and the teachings of the Church. Rather, such faith requires recognition of creation's fallen-ness. Julian writes:

We need to fall, and we need to realize this. If we never fell we should never know how weak and wretched we are in ourselves; nor should we fully appreciate the astonishing love of our Maker... By the simple fact that we fell we

shall gain a deep and wonderful knowledge of what God’s love means. (Ch.61, p.172)

The drama of Day 2 is Dillard’s growing recognition of her fallen-ness, through her “conscious and self-conscious” look with Julie, and the contemplation, in rage and despair, of what that fallen-ness away from God might mean. Dillard never doubts the existence of God, even in her wonder at the chaos of the universe, but rather, she expresses a deep scepticism about God’s participation in the workings of justice in the world. There are intimations on Day 2, however, of the possibility of God’s descent into time, bridging the chasm of human fallenness, in the form of the man Christ, a possibility she knows to be personally salvific.

### 2.3 Love’s Long Line

Thus far, the suffering of the child Julie in the tragic plane accident has disoriented Dillard, and she experiences loneliness and a sense of abandonment, forgetting both herself and her relation to the divine, much like the servant’s experience of the fall in Julian’s parable. The divine no longer appears to participate in creation’s continual regeneration, nor are the gods of each day powerful enough to save her from either pain or the meaninglessness of Julie’s pain. Dillard has depicted two downward movements: the divine’s out-pouring into creation on the first day, and the fall into sin and suffering on the second. As we will see, she considers a third fall on Day 2: that of Christ falling into the world in the Incarnation. Here, the narrative shifts to reveal a markedly Christian arc of creation, fall, and (as we will see) redemption, and the kenotic



god is now identified explicitly with the suffering Christ. Dillard wonders how this descent could be meaningful in light of human fallen-ness, and how God's descent in one man might save a broken creation.

The “thinker” of Day 2 positions faith and truth as orienting her to divergent views of reality, and does not yet have the faith required to see Christ's fall as an act of love that could save, or make Julie's suffering meaningful: “Of faith I have nothing, only of truth” (46). The truth that she sees on this day—a truth that is limited by her reduction of knowledge to reason alone—is Julie Norwich's suffering as evidence of God's abandonment of creation to mechanical laws. “This is no leap,” she writes, “this is evidence of things seen” (46). Her sight on this day, however, is one of the intellect; she perceives Julie's pain and seeks to understand it, as we have seen, within the framework of an ethical system formulated through her own necessarily limited perspective. Notably, Dillard's acute awareness of Julie's suffering is not a removed exploration of suffering as an abstract concept, but is a personal attempt to understand this one child's pain; the experience sparks a sensation that bewilders the heart and enrages the mind (46). There are intimations that another way of seeing is possible through faith, however, and that such faith would be utterly transformative of her ability to know. However, her intellectual pride inhibits her from crossing the chasm.

Only through faith can she make sense of Christ's descent: “Faith would be that God is self-limited utterly by his creation—a contraction of the scope of his will; that he bound himself to time and its hazards and haps as a man would lash himself to a tree for love” (47). God's descent into creation is senseless, as is the atonement (a man lashing

himself to a tree), and Dillard cannot make sense of such debasement. She likens Christ's descent to an eternal dive into time, "eternally splitting the spread of water, and eternally drowned" (47). Faith, as she understands, is an acceptance of Christ's humiliation, descending to earth in the form of an infant "wondered at by cattle and oxen" (47). The descent of God in the form of a child complicates all assumptions about the divine's omnipotence and immutability. Such divine humiliation is bewildering for Dillard, and she remains unsettled as she tries to make sense of such an unreasonable movement.

Returning to Julian of Norwich will bring to light Dillard's consideration of the fall of Christ as divinely willed and foreseen. Julian describes her interpretation of the servant's fall for her readers, maintaining that through years of consideration she came to understand that the servant represented both Adam and Christ:

When Adam fell, God's Son fell. Because of the true unity which had been decreed in heaven, God's Son could not be dissociated from Adam... God's Son fell, with Adam, but into the depth of the Virgin's womb—herself the fairest daughter of Adam—with the intent of excusing Adam from blame both in heaven and on earth. (148)

She continues to interpret every small detail of the parable, from the colours of the servant's clothing to their placements. Most importantly here, she describes the attributes which suggest Christ's fall to earth:

The starting is a reference to his Godhead, the running to his humanity, for the Godhead started from the Father to enter the Virgin's womb, falling, as it were, to

take our human nature upon himself. Thereby he accepted great hurt, the hurt which was our flesh, in which from the first he experienced mortal pain. (149)

This passage makes use of the imagery of emptying from Philippians 2, in which Christ is described taking on human form:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross. (vv. 6-8)

However, Dillard cannot make sense of how such a descent could be personally meaningful. Whether God descended once at creation, or again in the human form of Christ, she wonders what it might mean to Dillard's own time, in which children fall from the sky in senseless airplane crashes. Her question is whether the eternal's puncture into time could be personally meaningful, could it extend beyond its particular moment. She grants that perhaps Christ "holds the tip of things fast", but wonders whether there is anything deep within matter itself, not the "highest" part of the soul, but that which is at the base of things:

Is anything firm, or is time on the loose? Did Christ descend once and for all to no purpose, in a kind of divine and kenotic suicide, or ascend once and for all, pulling his cross up after him like a rope ladder home?... Is there no link at the base of things, some kernel or air deep in the matrix of matter from which universe furls like ribbon twined into time? (47-48)

These questions, taken in the context of Julie's pain, probe whether her suffering in its materiality is connected in any way to the divine, and whether Christ's descent into time might be transformative.

The text is interjected by small signs of hope, intimations that the narrative might arc back upwards. Dillard asserts that some things are real amid her growing intellectual scepticism. Within the falling arc is hope that there is something that reaches back upwards, vaulting away from the material, something that we might hold on to like a live wire "loosing its sparks to a cloud" (44). There are some experience—pain and love, she writes—that cut through to reveal the real: "The pain within the millstones' pitiless turning is real, for our love for each other—for world and all the products of extension—is real, vaulting, insofar as it is love, beyond the plane of the stone's sickening churn and arcing to the realm of spirit bare" (44). Julie Norwich's accident stirs doubt in the thinker, but also moves her to experience a deep love, binding her to Julie. In a beautiful passage Dillard cries out about such love:

And you get caught holding one end of love, when your father drops, and your mother; when a land is lost, or a time, and your friend blotted out, gone, your brother's body spoiled, and cold, your infant dead, and you dying: you reel out love's long line alone, stripped like a live wire loosing its sparks to a cloud, like a live wire loosed in space to longing and grief everlasting. (44)

She knows the human experiences of love and pain to be real, however, reason cannot penetrate their mystery. And it is even precisely in the pain and love that she also glimpses the mysterious workings of the divine.

Throughout the three days Dillard reads. Love, she remembers, is greater than knowledge according the nine orders of angels, which she reads about from Dionysius. The highest of the orders, the seraphs, stand closest to God and are born in a stream of fire, so enflamed by love for God that their singing causes them to burst into flame. In their cries of “Holy, Holy, Holy,” they ignite and dissolve in a perpetual cycle of worship (45). The seraphs, she is reminded, stand closer to the divine even than the cherubs, who possess perfect knowledge of him, “So love is greater than knowledge; how could I have forgotten?” (45). But knowledge of this is not enough, it requires an action, a movement of faith.

At the end of Day 2 there is no resolution, and Dillard is left troubled and bewildered. She is moved beyond her desire to know God in concrete intellectual formulations, because she is unable to conceive of a power that would allow Julie’s suffering and, more broadly, creation’s fall. She concludes intellectually unsatisfied with what she comes to know. Instead, she chews her wrists and prays for Julie and Julie’s parents (49). A new island suddenly appears before her eyes, and she is back where she began, mapping out what she can know of the ‘beyond’. It is an indication that creation is, after all, still in progress, boundless in its reach, moving always beyond human intelligibility. She tries to orient herself, drawing out the landscape around her, yet she has no way of knowing whether it is a cape or the mainland. She surrenders, “How long can this go on? But let us by all means extend the scope of our charts” (50). Though she longs to know, her human understanding must expand even to include this island, “God’s Tooth”, and an understanding of the divine that encompasses both the violence in

creation and the love that is so great that God limits divine prerogatives to dwell amongst humans in time.

To return to Turner's analysis of Julian's parable will be helpful in the present consideration of Dillard's account of the fall alongside Julian of Norwich's parable. As we can now see from Dillard's account, she tries to construct a whole story of creation and earthly salvation from reason and the intellect alone, within a moral order that lacks a transcendent referent, however she is unable to account for the horror of some human experiences. Such a story, a vision of the world seen primarily through the intellect, is, for Dillard, limited when confronted with the mysteries of love and pain. There are hints that another way of apprehending the world is possible, though it requires knowledge in faith. Julian's own narrative rendering of the Fall will be illuminating of Dillard's, when, on Day 3, Dillard is challenged by the potential to suffer *with* another in the shared descent of Adam, Every-man, and Christ. That these descents might be three parts of one descent—and three parts of a whole story—marks a shifting point in Dillard's narrative, as it does in Julian's, and opens the way for God's personal love to enter into the narrative.

### CHAPTER THREE: SACRAMENTAL VISION

At the end of Day 2, Dillard is exasperated by the inadequacy of the solutions she finds to her question of how the divine's descent into the world—now explicitly the monotheistic God of Christianity—might be aligned with human sin and suffering. Her poetic depiction of the fall in the form of an airplane crash puts the emphasis on Julie's innocent suffering, although she realizes in a self-conscious look, and the way they look alike, that they share the same fallenness. The day is filled with questions about how an omnipotent and benevolent God could allow the fall into such sin and suffering, and how Christ's own fall into the world in the Incarnation could be personally meaningful to, or transformative of, Julie's pain. She considers these questions earnestly and relentlessly from the perspective of the thinker, that is, by attempting to measure Julie's suffering within an ethical system based on human terms of justice. Her thinking here is not strictly abstract reasoning, however, for Dillard is always firmly grounded in her experience of the world, in the particularity of the life of Julie Norwich. At the end of the day, her questions are left unanswered, and she is left staring out at the bay where another island has formed, another mystery on the horizon of time and eternity.

On day 3, the narrative circles to a close.<sup>25</sup> Having witnessed the divine's lavish outpouring in creation, she moves to contemplate the fall that interrupts the beauty and goodness she sees all around her. She sinks into doubt that this created world could mean anything beyond the facade it presents to her as artist. Moving forward into Day 3,

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<sup>25</sup> Johnson suggests the centrality of the circle as a motif in Dillard's work, specifically in her depiction of time. For her analysis of the circle in *Holy the Firm*, see Chapter 3, particularly pp. 84-89.

however, she comes to a new way of knowing—and even of unknowing—realizing that she will only ever attain a partial understanding. She relinquishes control and moves forward in humility, emptied of her moral indignation of the previous day and receptive to God’s loving mercy. At the height of the narrative she is opened entirely to the communion wine she carries on her back, transforming her from within and lighting the landscape through her ribcage to experience a vision of Christ’s baptism in the bay below her. Dillard moves from seeking understanding to relinquishing to love.

### 3.1 Longing for the Un-known

Dillard’s narrative circles back to morning on Day 3, having passed from dawn on the first day (11) to afternoon on the second (49), and again to the birth of a new day. She surrenders in wonder to the incomprehensibility of God, letting go of her insistence that human sin and suffering might be understood through human categories alone: “I know only enough of God to want to worship him, by any means ready to hand” (55). On Day 2, Dillard had been incredulous at the possibility of a senseless creation, one that did not conform to her own expectations of order and meaning. She struggled onward, baffled by the apparent absence of “the one great god” of creation in the face of Julie’s pain, until on this day she surrenders, relinquishing her desire to know and to judge, and receptive to the possibilities that have been opened through an acceptance of God’s mystery. Rather than longing to understand, she now desires the unknowing of love.



The narrator becomes aware of her limited view, realizing that her temporal existence in time only ever allows a partial understanding of sin and salvation, and that some things will always remain hidden to human understanding. The “problem” of fallenness and suffering had challenged her notion that she could comprehend God’s actions in their entirety, and had thrown into question her experience of the divine evident in all things from the first day. On the third day, Julie’s suffering, which had seemed utterly senseless, is clarified—in that she recognizes that understanding pain in terms of individual merit is a mis-construal of the human relationship to God and a blindness to love—and, like Julian of Norwich, she surrenders, after much difficult intellectual introspection, to the divine’s unknowability.<sup>26</sup> In Denys Turner’s analysis of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations*, he suggests that through the parable of the lord and servant Julian comes to recognize her own limitations in her struggle to understand sin and salvation. To recapitulate, he explains:

We are not in a position to tell the ultimate story—its plot is hidden from us. We are given only a story fragment, and our condition is defined by the partial character of the story as we possess it, both by what it can disclose to us and by what is implied by the very incompleteness of what it discloses. (*Julian of Norwich, Theologian* 109)

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<sup>26</sup> Although Julian makes use of many metaphors in order to describe God (most notably, Christ as mother), she also grants that some things will remain unknown to human understanding. She writes, “He gave me to understand that in these things there were two parts. One part concerns our Saviour and our salvation. There is no mystery about this part—it is clear, beautiful, splendid, and abundant. . . The other part is completely hidden from us, for it deals with all those things that do not concern our salvation. It is our Lord’s own private matter. . . It is not for his servant, obedient and reverent, to pry at all into those secrets.” (Ch. 30 pp. 106-107)

Julian is unable to understand the full meaning of the parable, even after spending years in prayer and contemplation. Its very incompleteness reminds her of the profound gap between herself and the divine, and of the incompleteness of her own being. Julian suggests that the gap in human understanding is a consequence of our spiritual blindness: “But man in this life is blind and cannot see God, our Father, as he is” (145). Such blindness may be healed, though never completely. Although the story is clarified through rigorous thought and humble prayer, mystery always remains. As we will see, Dillard comes—with Julian—to have faith in a divine yet inscrutable plan, only made known in part through eternity’s manifestation in the particular. On Day 3, Dillard gives a poetic account of her experience of Christ’s incarnation in time, which she witnesses through the sacraments of communion and baptism.

We must be clear that on Day 3 Dillard by no means dismisses human reason or the intellectual faculties as completely ineffectual in one’s journey away from ignorance towards a deeper understanding of the divine. The “thinker” is as integral a part as the artist and the nun to Dillard’s structure and to her understanding of what it means to see wholly. Although Robert Paul Dunn has highlighted the parallels between the artist and the nun, arguing that the theme of the “thinker” of part 2 is the least developed of the three (19), it is only through an investigation of what Dillard means by “thinker” that we can clarify that her unknowing is but another form, or way, of knowing. When, before buying the communion wine, Dillard becomes increasingly conscious of her place in relation to the divine, she exclaims “And then, when we wake to the deep shores of light uncreated, then when the dazzling dark breaks over the far slopes of time, then it’s time

to toss things, like our reason, and our will; then it's time to break our necks for home" (62), we must contextualize her exclamation within her growing realization on Day 3 that human reason *alone* is not enough to untangle the mysteries of human pain.

If on the first day Dillard comes to an understanding of the divine through the *via positiva*, or a cataphatic knowledge, in her awareness of divinity's presence in the beautiful creation around her, and on the second day she questions such an understanding in the face of human suffering, on Day 3 she begins to imagine a new way of knowing, one that depends upon the un-imaginability of God. In other words, she begins to pursue an apophatic understanding of God. Her poetics suggest that she uses both understandings of God, for she pushes language (particularly through her use of metaphor) to its limits in order to express something of the divine, but also accepts the limitations of language—and thereby human reason—to describe God in God's entirety, eventually transcending *both* understandings in acceptance of God's unknowability.<sup>27</sup>

Turner considers the etymology of the terms apophaticism and cataphaticism to clarify their sense for his investigation of the neoplatonic roots of Christian mystical theology, noting that *apophasis* comes from the Greek neologism for the breakdown of speech, and that apophatic theology (*theology* being 'discourse about God') is therefore "the speech about God which is the failure of speech" (*Theologian* 20). However, he

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<sup>27</sup> Critics differ on how Dillard makes use of *via negative* and *via positive* understandings of the divine. See Eugene H. Peterson, "Annie Dillard: With Her Eyes Open," *Theology Today* 43.2 (1986): 178-191; and B. Jill Carroll, "An Invitation from Silence: Annie Dillard's Use of the Mystical Concepts of the *Via Positiva* and the *Via Negativa*," *Mystics Quarterly* 19.1 (March 1993): 26-33. Peterson suggests that she prefers the cataphatic—seeing the divine in the natural world—which he suggests is "praying with your eyes open" (191). Both Carroll and Baker, however, suggest that Dillard comes to see the apophatic and the cataphatic as cyclical understandings of the divine (Carroll 31; Baker 96), which I argue is certainly evident in *Holy the Firm*.

suggests that the apophatic is not a naive pre-critical ignorance of God, but is rather an “acquired ignorance” (*Theologian* 19). Conversely, cataphatic theology appeals to as many modes of speech about God as possible, including—most notably in terms of Dillard’s poetry—the metaphor. Turner does not identify the cataphatic and the apophatic as two successive moments, as ascension away from speech, but rather as reciprocal moments. As we will see, Dillard’s narrative peaks at precisely the moment when language fails—or better, when both affirmative and negative language of God falter—for she has come to know what and how much she can know, and when she must accept, and even strive for, unknowing. Before we arrive at this point, however, I would like to show how we might come to a better understanding of her transition from the day of the “thinker” to the day of the “nun” by considering another kind of understanding, one that is guided by faith. Dillard’s journey of critical questioning brings her to a very particular kind of unknowing, one dependent upon acknowledgement of her place in relation to the divine.

As Eugene H. Peterson has noted, Dillard alludes to biblical references liberally and seamlessly within her texts, often so subtly that the inattentive reader might miss them altogether.<sup>28</sup> But she also quotes specific biblical passages explicitly—and nowhere more copiously than in Part 3 of *Holy the Firm*—inviting her readers to deepen their

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<sup>28</sup> Peterson notes that “She has assimilated Scripture so thoroughly, is so saturated with its cadences and images, that it is simply at hand, unbidden, as context and metaphor for whatever she happens to be writing about. She does not, though, use Scripture to prove or document; it is not a truth she “uses” but one she lives...She seldom quotes Scripture; she alludes constantly—there is scarcely a page that does not contain one or several allusions, but with such nonchalance, not letting her left hand know what her right is doing, that someone without a familiarity with Scripture might never notice the unobtrusive ubiquity of biblical precept and story.” (184)

appreciation of her text and her poetic explorations of those passages within the narrative. Dillard primarily references the Old Testament in her work, drawing heavily from Hebraic scripture,<sup>29</sup> the psalms, and the prophetic books, but given the centrality of God's embodied love for creation in the person of Christ in *Holy the Firm*, she also quotes the New Testament directly and indirectly. One such reference is to the story of the blind beggar from John 9, which she turns to unexpectedly as she considers Julie Norwich lying in a hospital bed, linking her questions about Julie's pain to Christ's response to his disciples about who is to blame for a blind man's suffering. Sin, suffering, and Christ's justice are brought together in the story, in which Christ heals a blind man by spitting on the dirt and rubbing the mud into his eyes, and then sends the man away to a lake to wash and be healed. When his disciples ask him whose sin is to blame for the man's blindness—the man's or his parents'—Christ effectively redirects the disciple's attention away from assigning blame, towards God's revelation of divine love and mercy in the man's healing. Within the context of Dillard's narrative, the story reveals to the disciples that such questions about sin and blame mis-construe what God is, that is, wholly and entirely love.

Julian of Norwich's response to sin in her parable similarly eschews blame altogether, and rather redirects the focus of the story to God's love. In Baker's chapter illuminating the parallels between *Holy the Firm* and Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*, she writes that in part 3 "Dillard's resolution of the problem of evil bears some

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<sup>29</sup> For an exploration of Dillard's use of the themes from Leviticus, specifically blood and sacrifice in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, see Stan Goldman, "Sacrifices to a Hidden God: Annie Dillard's "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" and Leviticus," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 74.1 (1991): 195-213.

resemblance to Julian's and reveals her profound understanding of the medieval mystical tradition" (91), specifically in the way she considers the Gospel story of Christ healing the blind man. Although she is still exasperated by the way Christ rebukes the question of blame entirely, she slowly comes to recognize that the profound gap between the creator and human creatures necessitates the faith in God's love that is needed in the face of the incomprehensibility of the girl's suffering, not unlike Julian's recognition of the chasm between the human and divine.

Dillard has been quoted admitting that this central idea in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*—that is, God's love—is the “most threatening of all, because it demands such faith” (“A Face Aflame” 19). It requires of Dillard a faith that even the darkest moments, events such as Julie's plane crash, are contained within God's loving reach. Such a radical notion threatens what Dillard thinks she knows of the divine, and she continues to be incredulous. She, along with Christ's disciples, cannot fathom such love to be aligned with a divine justice, for it offends expectations she had formulated on the previous day of punishment and reward in this life based on merit. Dillard quotes the story of the blind beggar, alongside a second passage, a portion of John 14:27, in which Christ comforts his disciples, saying, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” To these two responses given by Christ, Dillard responds, “Really? If we take this answer to refer to the affliction itself—and not the subsequent cure—as “God's work made manifest,” then we have... two meager, baffling, and infuriating answers to one of the few questions worth asking, to wit, What in the Sam Hill is going on here?”

(60). And yet, by placing these two passages side by side, Dillard effectively suggests the beginning of her bewildered acknowledgement that Christ's ways are not our ways, and that we may take comfort—to echo Julian's refrain—in Christ's assurance that all will be well.

It is significant that the passage Dillard quotes (from John 9) is also about sight. Although the beggar has been blind since birth, he is able to see Christ's true identity as saviour, even while his parents and the Pharisees, who have always been able to see, cannot see Christ for who he really is. The blind man, who is faithful, has a "spiritual sight" which the Pharisees lack, and because of this sight he is able to see a reality that is not evident to the others. His faith has literally opened his eyes, but it was dependent on his genuine trust in Christ, in stark contrast to the unbelief of his neighbours, his family and the Pharisees (vv. 8, 18, 23). In the passage, Christ turns the Pharisee's assumptions about sight and blindness upside-down, bringing a man from darkness to light, both physically and spiritually, and revealing the Pharisee's spiritual blindness. On Day 3, Dillard reveals her own inability to know and, as we have already seen, she confesses in faith "I know only enough of God to want to worship him" (55). Moving forward, her faith is deepened as she comes to a renewed understanding of herself as a created being in relation to the Creator God.

In her transition from Day 2 to Day 3, from the theme of the "thinker" to the "nun," Dillard has come to new ways of knowing and unknowing. She realizes that her expectations will be disrupted as she considers the baffling story of the blind beggar in the Gospels. She does not simply reject reason or critical thought, but comes to

understand that she must pass through the labour of reasoning, admitting that she cannot know all. She has emptied the mind of all images and assumptions about the Creator, and pushes beyond reductive definitions of what it is to be a “thinker”, passionately seeking out the unknown in wonder. What we will now consider is how this transformed understanding of the relationship between herself and the divine allows her to relinquish control, knowing that human creatures are not the source of meaning, and that ultimately one must approach God—and one’s ability to know God—in faith and humility.

Leading up to the climactic moment of the book, she shifts from demanding answers of God to accepting the profound division between herself and the divine. “Yes, in fact, we do,” she writes, “We do need reminding, not of what God can do, but of what he cannot do, or will not, which is to catch time in its free fall and stick a nickel’s worth of sense into our days” (61). God is not bound to make sense of God’s actions for us, nor is God required to satisfy logical explanations for humankind. She continues:

And we do need reminding of what time can do, must only do; churn out enormity at random and beat it, with God’s blessing, into our heads: that we are created, *created*, sojourners in a land we did not make, a land with no meaning of itself and no meaning we can make for it alone. (61-62)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The theme of sojourning is prominent in Dillard’s work. In her narrative essay “Sojourner” she writes, “I alternate between thinking of the planet as home—dear and familiar stone hearth and garden—and as a hard land of exile in which we are all sojourners” (TST 150). In the essay she quotes 1 Chronicles 29:15: “For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as shadow, and there is none abiding,” evoking the Hebrew peoples sense of estrangement from God. This oscillation between feeling at home in the world and sensing that we have been contingently placed here is a tension she explores in many of her works.



Bewildered, she is reminded of her createdness, reminded that she lives in a land of unlikeness in which she is separated from her creator. When her gaze is turned inward, to a removed contemplation of the fallen human race in broad terms, and to Julie's pain in particular, she is consumed by the despair of her condition and forgetful of her createdness. Like the servant in Julian's parable, who is so focused on his own condition that he no longer sees how close his lord is, Dillard loses—and is then reminded of—her orientation to the divine. Julian of Norwich has suggested that human createdness is the primary—if not only—ontological distinction between God and humankind.<sup>31</sup> Julian describes the human soul as God's dwelling place, noting the only distinction that God is creator and humankind is God's creation: "I could see no difference between God and our substance: it was all God, so to speak. Yet my mind understood that our substance was in God. In other words, God is God, and our substance his creation" (Ch.54, p.157). For Julian the nature of faith is this acknowledgement. She continues in the same passage: "Our faith is nothing else but a right understanding, and true belief, and sure trust, that with regard to our essential being we are in God, and God in us, though we do not see him" (Ch.54, p.158). As Dillard turns to knowledge through faith, it is through a similar

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<sup>31</sup> See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, in which he elaborates on Julian's thought: "In so far as we are divinised by grace we become indistinguishable in what we are from what God is, but our existence remains radically created. We cannot be, in *any* dimension, God. Hence, in our highest powers, in what Julian calls our 'substance', we can become by grace such that nothing in us serves as a way of distinguishing us from God *except that* we are created and God is not" (159-160). Baker similarly notes that Dillard's growing recognition of the profound gap between herself as a created being and God as the creator, is also central to Julian of Norwich's coming to terms with human sin and suffering (91).

acknowledgement of herself as a created being, fallen but still close to God, that she is able to encounter human suffering in love and humility.<sup>32</sup>

Dillard prefaces the climactic moment of her poetic narrative with this realization, suggesting its importance to her experience of the sacraments. The difference between her createdness on Days 1 and 3 is her acknowledge of the fall. Rather than imagining God as close beyond distinction, on Day 2 she becomes aware of a schism, of human brokenness within creation, and the need to ask for God's mercy to heal the divide between herself and the eternal. The createdness she now imagines on Day 3 emphasizes the distance between herself and God, and the need—but also the possibility—for redemption. The fall does not dismiss the significance of her createdness, but rather awakens her to her need for her creator.

Dillard moves away from a sense of meaning that is solipsistic, in which the world's order is measured against her own human formulations of significance. Rejecting the autonomy that she had insisted upon on Day 2, she comes to recognize a new—or rather, to remember an old—reality which had been eclipsed by the plane accident. She can see how limited her construal of meaning is when it is oriented around the self alone, when human creatures become their own measure and source of that meaning, and when Julie's pain is measured against a self-referential idea of value, forgetting God's goodness.

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<sup>32</sup> For a beautiful reflection on human createdness in the face of theoretical abstraction see Erazim Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), most specifically on suffering and createdness see pp.40-46. Kohak writes: "When humans no longer think themselves alone, masters of all they survey, when they discern the humility of their place in the vastness of God's creation, then that creation and its God can share the pain. For the Christians, the Cross symbolized that reality; confronted with it, the human is not freed of grief, but he is no longer alone to bear it. It is taken up, shared." (45)

Furthermore, she realizes that it is human creatures that have fallen away, and that God has gone nowhere. Baker has suggested that this realization is the turning point in the narrative: “Dillard’s allusion to the medieval idea that the earthly realm is a land of unlikeness reverses the trajectory of her argument... she now realizes that human creatures have fallen away from their creator” (92). Evoking Meister Eckhart’s suggestion that “God is at home, we are in the far country” (*HTF* 62), Dillard expresses the notion that she is a sojourner, reminding herself of her place in relation to the divine, for “Who are we to demand explanations of God?”. Echoes of God’s response to Job appear in Dillard’s text as she comes to know her place: “Where were you when I laid the foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4-7). Similarly, Julian’s lord shows her that there is no abandonment in God’s actions, the lord is inactive in her depiction, and it is the servant who falls away (149).<sup>33</sup> Dillard becomes conscious of where she is in relation to the divine,<sup>34</sup> transforming her stance from one of self-righteousness to humility. Her longing to close

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<sup>33</sup> Julian writes, “That the Father sits is a sign of his Godhead: it shows rest and peace, for in the Godhead there can be no activity. That he showed himself lord is a sign of his authority over our humanity. The servant’s standing means however that he is active, and the left side shows he was not worthy to stand on an equal footing with the lord. The starting is a reference to the Godhead, the running to his humanity, for the Godhead started from the Father to enter the Virgin’s womb, falling, as it were, to take our human nature upon himself.” (Ch.51, p.149)

<sup>34</sup> For a treatment of the theme of consciousness in Dillard’s work, see Slovic. Slovic suggests that consciousness is Dillard’s primary concern, however, he uses this language primarily in terms of psychological consciousness. Slovic argues that Dillard’s art is concerned with the “interior life” or self-consciousness, however in *Holy The Firm*, as we will see shortly, I will argue that her consciousness is one of knowing her place in relation to the divine.

this gap is illustrated dramatically in her desire to buy the communion wine and her vision of Christ's baptism that follows.

But this realization of separation does not cause doubt or worry as it did on Day 2; a longing is sparked for completeness, to bridge the gap in existence between herself and where she has come from. She glimpses the closest possibility of such union on earth in her experience of the communion wine, in which Christ literally communes with his followers, assuring her of a divine plan. Her awareness of fallen creation kindles in her the longing for wholeness, and the understanding that she is in need of God's mercy. Julian of Norwich assures that even in the deepest condition of sin, human humility and contrition spark a genuine longing for God (Ch.39, p.120). Moreover, in her parable, Julian insists that her vision of the lord sitting on the bare earth means that he made man's soul to be his own city and his home, "When man fell into sorrow and pain, he became unfit to serve in that noble office, yet our kind Father would prepare no other place for himself, but would sit upon the earth," waiting for his son to restore his city. In spite of the division between God and humankind, God mercifully sent God's son to dwell on earth, amongst his creatures.

In her growing understanding of the human-divine relationship, Dillard relinquishes her desire to be in control, realizing that such control is only illusory:

We are most deeply asleep at the switch when we fancy we control any switches at all. We sleep to time's hurdy gurdy; we wake, if we ever wake, to the silence of God. And then, when we wake to the deep shores of light uncreated, then when

the dazzling dark breaks over the far slopes of time, then it's time to toss things,  
like our reason, and our will; then it's time to break our necks for home. (62)

I have already suggested that Dillard's comment about "tossing" reason must be qualified in light of the fact that she moves *through* the labour of reason towards unknowing.<sup>35</sup> Even on Day 2, she reminds herself of Dionysius' hierarchy of angels, which places love above knowledge. In the passage above she also urges the wakeful searcher to toss their will, releasing one's own desires and intentions in humble submission: to receive rather than to impose, to submit rather than to resist.

Over the course of Day 3, Dillard grows in humility. Her humility is not self-deprecation, nor a fixation on her limits as a human, but rather it is an acknowledgement of what she can and cannot inquire about. She comes to know the place of humans in relation to the divine; that they are neither innocent, nor irredeemably fallen in God's sight. As we will see, Dillard comes to know that it is a shared humiliation with Christ, and that therefore, humiliation is not final. The tone of Day 3 rests on this hope: that in spite of the fact that we have fallen away, God continues to be a loving participant in God's creation.

### 3.2 Purity and Grace

The god of Day 3 is explicitly the god who was baptized and died on the cross, he "peels from eternity always, spread; he winds into time like a rind" (62-63); the Christ

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<sup>35</sup> Lavery writes: "This jettisoning of reason and will is not, however, a rejection of language; it marks, rather, for a logos beyond the limitations of logic, the attempt to discover a "Rosetta Stone" (PTC 108) which will enable her to learn the "sensual speech" with Jacob Boehme claimed once existed before the fall of man" (266).

she sees spirals downward, “coiled and white under the water” (66), sent down into the particularity of this world for Dillard to witness in a vision effected by the communion wine. The divine’s descent into an historical moment in time, which had seemed unlikely to her the previous day—scandalizing even—continues to appal her, for she sees that the divine continues to descend into time: “There is an anomalous specificity to all our experience in space, a scandal of particularity, by which God burgeons up or showers down into the shabbiest of occasions, and leaves his creation’s dealings with him in the hands of purblind and clumsy amateurs” (55). She sees now that God continues to descend, revealing God’s self to ordinary people (those who surround Christ in Dillard’s baptism scene are “ordinary people—if I am one now” (66)), and in the practices of the church: specifically, in the sacraments. That God might be revealed to common people, regardless of whether they are prepared or merit it, continues to amaze her throughout this day.

In much of her work, Dillard presents a comical depiction of the church;<sup>36</sup> she pokes fun at the professionalism with which the “high” churches approach God with their ostentatious display of ceremony, as though people were “an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God” (59). She gently mocks the assumption that God is gentle and mild only, a figure of calm benevolence, forgetting the mighty, and often seemingly wild, God who is also present in the biblical narrative.<sup>37</sup> She dislikes pious sentimentalism, and

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<sup>36</sup> See Dillard’s *An American Childhood*, pp.132-135, in which she describes her childhood of growing up in a Presbyterian church; and “An Expedition to the Pole” in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* 17-52.

<sup>37</sup> In “An Expedition to the Pole”, Dillard describes how Christians who are “sensible of the conditions” must approach God: “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect,

the belief that their polished displays of reverence might make them more suitable to approach God. Instead, she loves the moments of spontaneity, and the honest confessions of bewilderment in the face of the divine. The very existence of the Christian church, in all its flawed attempts at worship and purity, is, for Dillard, a sign of God's unending mercy and continual love. She still attends the church in the area, however, "On Sunday mornings I quit the house and wander down the hill to the white frame church in the firs" (57). Although she is often described within the class of American nature writers, many of whom preferred the outdoors as their places of worship to enclosed church sanctuaries, she nonetheless finds it important to attend.<sup>38</sup> It is in spite of her criticism that the church does not have enough awareness of "the conditions" (*TST* 40) that she finds it, incredibly, necessary to go. It is only through the sacramental liturgy, as we will see, that her vision is made whole.

In *Holy the Firm* the churchwomen bring flowers for the altar of the church she attends in the woods, arrangements "as big as hedges" in vases "the size of tubs", yet she writes that the altar still looks bare and empty (58), a sign of the emptiness of all sacrifice, and that human attempts at purity before God will always be inadequate.

Conscious that these efforts will always be flawed, Dillard wonders about what it might

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does not one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to our pews." (40)

<sup>38</sup> Peterson suggests that this differentiates Dillard from the other nature writers: "The American writers with whom Dillard is often grouped—Henry Thoreau, Waldo Emerson, John Muir—didn't go to church. They distanced themselves from what they saw as the shabbiness and hypocrisy of institutional religion and opted for the pine purity of forest cathedrals. Emily Dickinson gave them their text: "Some worship God by going to church/I worship him staying at home/with a bobolink for a chorister/and an orchard for a throne"." (187)

mean to be pure before God. She echoes the question of the psalmist of Psalm 24: “Who shall ascend into the hills of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?” (56), to which is given a list of ways one must be pure in order to enter the holy sanctuary. Given the brokenness of human nature, and the knowledge of a fallen condition, what might human creatures do, she wonders, in the face of such a disparaging reality? She wonders how she might be “holy” enough to buy the communion wine, and what she might do to make herself ready to approach the divine. She realizes instead that there is nothing that humans can do to be more worthy of God, or to make God love them more. However the notion of purity is a preoccupation throughout the book, represented in her poetic symbol of salt: “I came here to study hard things—rock mountain and salt sea” (19), “Armenians, I read, salt their newborn babies” (24), “I salt my breakfast eggs” (24, 25), God’s promise is “a covenant of salt forever” (25), and the island she draws she names “Newborn and Salted” (26). While her use of the word “salt” carries a variety of meanings throughout the text drawn from the Old and New Testaments—permanence, desolate lands, purification, an association with light—on Day 3 her concern with purity comes to the forefront. In the middle of this final day Dillard’s narrative dramatizes King David’s questions from 1 Chronicles 29:14:

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope.



In many ways, the movement of the third day of Dillard's narrative is an elaboration of this passage: her humble submission before God, her growing acceptance of the divide between creator and created, her acknowledgement that all things therefore come from God, and that she is a sojourner in a land away from the divine. It binds together her themes of unknowing, createdness, purity, offering, and sojourning, all of which have played a role in the development of the narrative. Yet there *is* hope for David, who recognizes God's lordship, seeing that all things come from him. God's lordship takes precedence in Dillard's own imagination and she repeats the words of David: "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee" (63), forgetting her self-consciousness about her own purity, and instead turning to praise.

There is no one else, she realizes, but human creatures with human faults and shortcomings. In humility, she sees that she needs God. Dillard rejects the notion that the "Sunday school watercolor figures" she hears about from the past were any more simple or innocent than people of today, that they were more adequately prepared to be before God. With urgency she contends that "there is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been..." (56). The brokenness and human misery in the world can crush the human spirit into stillness, but on Day 3 she is offered a sign of hope, that amidst such fallenness God's lordship encompasses even the pain, and divine grace outshines her concerns about purity. She realizes that she must come as she is; with God's mercy that is enough.

In the last moments before her vision, Dillard loses herself entirely, and proceeds in self-abandonment and emptiness. Approaching the boy Chandler at the store where she will buy the communion wine—incidentally where she also buys her mundane supplies of sandpaper and broccoli—she forgets herself and greets the boy, who likes to play in the bins of nails: a playful allusion to the Cross and Christ’s sacrificial death which undergirds all of Day 3. She has resigned herself to the knowledge that God is beyond human comprehension; she has been humbled, reminded of her place as a created being in relation to God’s lordship; she has relinquished her reason and her will; and she has been opened to the possibility of accepting a love beyond conception. She is now emptied, totally receptive to the divine’s entering herself, and, in self-abandonment, prepared to worship that which is beyond her understanding.

### 3.3 Wholeness in communion and baptism

At the peak of the narrative, Dillard ascends a hill with a bottle of communion wine in her backpack. The landscape begins to shift and change as she mounts, each petal and shrub she passes uttering its “infinite particulars” (64) yet ultimately fusing together into a unity. She is surrounded by motion, though no wind stirs. All the while, the communion wine in her backpack increasingly sheds light through the slats of her ribcage, transforming the landscape around her and her own being from within. As she reaches the top, everything around her is made whole (66). She experiences a vision of Christ being baptized by John the Baptist in the bay below; she sees both the human,

historic Christ in the flesh and the cosmic Christ, whose beads of water dripping down his shoulders become transparent, containing the reflections of tiny worlds of their own. It is a vision of both Christ's particularity and his universality, both the fleshiness of God's human embodiment and his eternal, cosmic significance are held within this one image of baptism. Everything merges around her and she disappears, self-extinguished and emptied.

It is significant that Dillard's climactic moment of vision occurs as she experiences two of the Christian sacraments. Day 3 pivots on the existence of mystery within the church's sacramental liturgy. For Warren, the emphasis on the sacraments is evidence of the important theme of the fusion of the physical and the spiritual in Dillard's work (114), for they are affirmations of matter by attaching spiritual significance to that material reality. As Warren puts it:

The Christian church's sacramental system, in fact, perfectly exemplifies the meaning-charged fusion of the physical and the spiritual that is so central to Dillard's view of language, especially since the sacraments—physical in their elements and spiritual in the sacramental ritual—are indebted to, and contingent upon, the Incarnation for their significance. (114-115)

In Warren's assessment, the sacraments reiterate the truth of the Word made flesh in contemporary life. The sacraments of baptism and communion are ways in which God's eternal grace is acted out in the temporal. Moreover, for Dillard, this requires a continual practice of such a vision of the world through the Catholic liturgy, reminding the self to see God manifested in the ordinary. By grounding her vision thus in the sacraments acted

out in time, in the mundane matter of water and wine, she ensures that the reader does not read her journey through the three days as an ascension away from the material towards a “higher” existence or experience. It is paramount to understand that in Dillard’s work she never stipulates overcoming the material world in preference for an interiorized or spiritual life away from material reality. Rather, on the third day, as we will see, she affirms that the holy is connected at *base* to the deepest part of matter, and that to come to know the eternal one must penetrate the material even more deeply.

Nevertheless, Dillard does experience an ascension of sorts; her climb up a hill towards a moment of illuminated sight is laden with the imagery of Plato’s allegory of the cave and Moses’ ascension of Mount Carmel. Such imagery of ascent transpires in the metaphors of mystical experience from Dionysius to the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* to the present,<sup>39</sup> and Dillard, as a contemporary mystic, makes use of it as well to metaphorically announce the height of the narrative, capturing a sense of the mystical. Although her sight is clarified in this moment, she also announces that “I am moth; I am light. I am prayer *and I can hardly see*” (65, italics mine), a suggestion that the sight she is talking about here is not an ordinary eyesight. She arrives at a place on the top of the hill that is, for her, paradoxically both one of clarity and one of unknowing.

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 1, “The Allegory and Exodus,” of Turner’s *The Darkness of God*. Turner’s argument is that the metaphors of darkness and light, ascent and descent—so evident in Christian mysticism—owe their prominence to the convergence of Greek and Hebraic influences on Western Christian thought. More specifically, he suggests that the “linguistic building blocks” might be extracted from two specific and foundational stories, the ‘Allegory of the Cave’ of Plato’s *Republic*, and the story in Exodus of Moses’ encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai (11). Turner lays out this convergence of Greek and Latin traditions, of Plato and Exodus, brought together intentionally by theologians.

Dillard recognizes that the communion wine on her back is “holiness splintered into a vessel, very God of very God” (64), but this very holiness becomes a part of her own being in the light it casts through her rib cage. In effect, after she has emptied herself of pride, of reason and will, and of her desire to know all, she is left open, receptive to this light that penetrates her innermost being. She internalizes the divine so that God is incorporated into her whole body—as she walks up the hill she can feel the weight of the wine, even as her body becomes weightless and buoyant. The communion wine is physically consumed, so that Christ’s body is incorporated into the participant’s, his body becomes a part of hers.<sup>40</sup> Dillard’s poetic depiction of the communion wine allows her to simultaneously ascend towards light and to grow in light from within, transforming not only the conditions but also herself as she becomes a channel for illumination.

The transformation thus begins internally; through the physical nearness of the communion wine she becomes filled with Christ’s love. But the change affects her vision as well, so that the physical landscape transforms before her: “The world is changing. The landscape begins to respond as a current upwells... It is starting to utter its infinite particulars, each overlapping and lone, like a hundred hills of hounds all giving tongue” (64-65). As she carries the eternal in a bottle on her back a new reality presents itself to her, one in which the particulars—of the world and of Christ’s descent—are not opposed to, or exclusive of, God’s universality. The wine magnifies the world, and the mountains become “raw nerves, sensible and exultant; the trees, the grass, and the asphalt” are “living petals of mind” (65). Her descriptions of the natural world are similar to those of

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<sup>40</sup> See Warren, 116.

the first day, yet here, rather than manifesting a deity who lacks personal particularity, her vision is transformed through union with Christ, so that the world is revealed for what it is: a created whole, alive in motion with the divine, made entire in Christ's personal and sacrificial love. Her vision becomes articulated as a form of Christian mysticism: she strives to express a momentary unity in which paradoxes are brought together in the wholeness of love, a moment that is ultimately inexpressible.

The communion wine illuminates that the world is made whole and integrated in Christ. "Everything, everything, is whole, and a parcel of everything else. I myself am falling down, slowly, or slowly lifting up" (66). Robert Paul Dunn has examined this theme of union on the third day, suggesting that the structure of the book follows the mystic way of illumination, purgation, and union. For Dunn, this is manifested primarily in the way that Dillard brings together the themes of nun and artist: both give themselves up in joyful devotion to their work, abandoning everything in order to display "the glory of God to the world" (22). Furthermore, he suggests that Dillard unifies being and non-being, both renouncing the world (the nun) and living within it (the artist) (22). She effectively unites God's wrath and God's love, flawed human existence and the hope of renewal, though she does so artistically rather than theologically (23). To this I would add that such union, for Dillard, is possible in its highest form only through the passion of Christ, which unifies God's love for the world and Christ's suffering on earth.

As the vision intensifies, she increasingly employs paradoxical language to express the inexpressibility of what she sees. As we will consider in the final part of this chapter, it is the failure of language to express such an experience that presents Dillard

with a particular challenge as a writer, who seeks to manifest something of the divine to the reader in her poetry. In her text, she expertly draws the reader in, challenging assumptions about reality. As we have already seen, in one of the most epiphanic moments of the text, Dillard writes, “I am moth; I am light. I am prayer and I can hardly see” (65), she follows this shortly after with “I myself am falling down, slowly, or slowly lifting up” (66), and later, “there is nothing, no one thing, no motion, nor time. There is only this everything” (68), making use of language that defies logic. Joseph Keller, writing about the function of paradox in mystical discourse, proposes that “the mystic suggests an encompassing, elemental, or ultimate unity through a juxtaposition of opposites that frustrates the analytic intellect’s conventional attempt to join them” (5). Describing Annie Dillard more specifically, Keller notes that she uses the same strategy employed by Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross 650 and 400 years ago, shifting to paradoxical language at the climax of the text (11).<sup>41</sup> When read in its “poetic context”, he suggests, the author’s use of both affirmation and negation makes the sentence indeterminate, requiring of the reader something other than affirmation or denial (3), even suggesting an elemental unity by juxtaposing opposites within the same sentence (5). In the moment, Dillard beckons the reader past logical formulations to a place where language can no longer adequately describe what has happened, towards a new mode of seeing.

Although Sandra Humble Johnson confesses that *Holy the Firm* does not fit well within her analysis of literary epiphany in Dillard’s work—as I have noted above,

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<sup>41</sup> For further discussion of Dillard’s use of paradox, see Goldman 196; Dunn 17-31; Loewen-Reimer 182-191; and Lavery 255-270.

because for her it is a moment experienced within the artist herself and subsequently shared with the reader, as opposed to a moment created within the text for the reader to experience—she nonetheless suggests some helpful insights as to how Dillard’s description of the vision functions within the text. Johnson suggests that in *Holy the Firm*, Dillard achieves a transparency of language, which allows the reader to probe beneath the surface of a two-tiered structure of language to reveal another layer of meaning. She explains:

The surface, although it remains generally undisturbed, becomes somewhat ruffled with repetition, shortened sentences, shouts of praise. The understructure concurrently becomes more elliptical, an ellipsis achieved through metaphysical leaps and paradoxical juxtapositions, including confluences of time periods, combinations of colloquial and elaborate diction, and infusions of chaotic motion which is acting in elements such as fire or water. (190)

Here Johnson is talking about an “upper-structure” and an “under-structure” which become realigned in the moment with the communion wine. The surface layer is broken up in short phrases, “He lifts from the water. Water beads on his shoulders. I see the water in balls,” (67), while at the same time the understructure which holds meaning “becomes more elliptical, sketchy, and metaphysical” until the two layers are brought together, “woven into the epiphanic circle of no time” (192). In the pinnacle of the text, Dillard writes:

For outside it is bright. The surface of things outside the drops has fused. Christ himself and the others, and the brown warm wind, the hair, sky, beach, the



shattered water—all this has fused. It is the one glare of holiness; it is bare and unspeakable. There is no speech nor language; there is nothing, no one thing, nor motion, nor time. There is only this everything. (67-68)

Johnson suggests that in this moment, Dillard is at the centre of time, enclosed by God and the light (191). She has reached a point of time beyond time. She sees the human Christ, the one who dipped down into earthly time, but he transforms into the cosmic Christ, who collapses all within himself. He is real in his particularity, yet also encapsulates eternity. She sees birth and death, destruction and renewal, God's immanence and God's eminence. Ultimately, although she makes use of many of the language tools at her disposal, at the height of her vision she comes to a point at which language fails, signifying her abandonment of human reason to be comprehended in the moment.

Dillard envisions Christ being baptized by John the Baptist in the bay below her. Rather than Christ's death at the height of the narrative, she is witness to an image of re-birth, his birth into the life of the spirit. And yet, Christ's death is also contained within the same imagery. The sacramental rite of baptism is a re-enactment of Christ's decision to relinquish himself to a life of the Spirit, which, Linda Smith writes, is theologically considered "the beginning of his ministry and the choice that made meaningful his subsequent death on the cross. The act of dedication transformed his apparently meaningless suffering and death into redeeming sacrifice and salvation" (74). Dillard's language is suggestive of her own understanding of how these pieces of Christ's life—his baptism, death, and resurrection—fit together to reveal a redemptive whole. The beads of

water dripping down Christ's body in Dillard's description are especially evocative of Julian of Norwich's witness to the beads of blood dripping down his forehead from the crown of thorns. In Julian's first revelation, after requesting to understand Christ's passion more deeply, she describes a characteristically mediaeval image of Christ's suffering body:

Great drops of blood rolled down from the garland like beads, seemingly from the veins; and they came down a brownish red colour—for the blood was thick—and as they spread out they became bright red, and when they reached his eyebrows they vanished... They were as fresh and living as though they were real: their abundance like the drops of water that fall from the eaves after a heavy shower, falling so thickly that no one can possibly count them... (Ch.7, p.72)

Dillard's own description reads strikingly similarly:

Water beads on his shoulders. I see the water in balls as heavy as planets, a billion beads of water as weighty as worlds, and he lifts them up on his back as he rises... Each one bead is transparent, and each has a world, or the same world, light and alive and apparent inside the drop: it is all there ever could be, moving at once, past and future, and all the people. (67)

The similarities in language are pronounced: the *heavy* shower, water beads as *heavy* as planets; *beads* of water, *beads* of blood; the drops *vanish*, the beads are *transparent*.

Dillard fuses these two images together, of Christ's suffering and his baptism, so that the two moments are layered into one complete moment. Whether her layering of images was intentional or not we have no way of knowing, but for anyone who has read Julian's

*Revelations*, attentive to Dillard's suggestive naming of the little girl, the parallels in language are evident and they illuminate deep resonances within the text. Jacob C. Gaskins and Denise N. Baker concur that the similarities in language between Dillard and Julian are reminiscent of the hazelnut passage (that we saw on Day 1), and Baker also notes the similarity between the drops and the blood from Christ's crown, though she does not suggest any implications for Dillard's text (Gaskins 156-158; Baker 92). Baker's perceptive suggestion is rather that the allusion signifies Dillard's deep recognition of the unity of all creation. I would suggest that additionally, Dillard's layering tells multiple stories at the same time, uniting the many layers which she sees altogether as one vision of Christ's sacrificial love and dedication. In the scene of baptism, Christ becomes the ultimate symbol of paradox in the text, bringing together humiliation and lordship, sacrifice and grace, and birth and death.

The communion wine and Christ's baptism reveal another reality for Dillard. The material world around her becomes translucent: "Why are there all these apples in the world, and why so wet and transparent?" (65); "Each thing in the world is translucent, even the cattle, and moving, cell by cell" (65); "He stands wet in the water. Each one bead is transparent, and each has a world" (67). She sees the world as it is transformed by Christ's redemptive act of self-giving love, revealing a different kind of reality that she remembers, but had forgotten ("I remember this reality. Where has it been?" (65)). After the plane's falling from the sky, and Julie's subsequent pain, Dillard's attentiveness to the human condition of brokenness, and her realization of herself as a fragmented person, had darkened all other realities. Now she is reminded of the possibility for wholeness in

Christ. She has prepared herself for such a reality by becoming empty, receptive, and humbled, yet it has still, as always, come as a surprise and a gift.

The sacrament of baptism indicates a dying to the old self. In the final moments of her vision, Dillard loses herself entirely:

I deepen into a drop and see all that time contains, all the faces and deeps of the worlds and all the earth's contents, every landscape and room, everything living or made or fashioned, all past and future stars, and especially faces, faces like the cells of everything, faces pouring past me talking, and going, and gone. And I am gone. (67)

Dillard's final chapter is full of language of her self-negation. Returning to the passage in Matthew 6: 24-25, one of the central motifs of the book is revealed again: Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." Dillard loses her identity and herself in love for God. As we will see, she, too, is birthed anew, initiated into a life of sacrifice. Her tone shifts from one of questioning and judgement to gratitude and praise.

### 3.4 Holy the Firm

Dillard is finally able to reconcile some of the tensions in the book by looking to a substance posited by esoteric Christianity, a "created substance, lower than metals and minerals" (68) that reaches far below into "the waxy deepness of planets, but never on the surface of planets where men could discern it" (68-69). She calls it "Holy the Firm," and

writes that it is “in touch with the Absolute, at base” (69). It is that which closes the arc of the narrative, answering her question of whether anything ‘arcs back up’, for it is both rooted deep in the natural world—in touch with material creation—but also arches back upwards, “straight on up, till “up” ends by curving back” (69), where it connects to the Absolute, to the Creator.

Holy the Firm is what allows her to bridge the two strains of thought about human knowledge of God that she has been considering throughout the three days. The “accessible and universal view,” that she identifies with the thought of Eckhart, is that the world is immanation, and that God is present in everything. The other is that the world emanates from the divine, who is far away and irreconcilably other, though linked to God through Christ. Both have proven to her to be inadequate understandings of the relationship between God and the world; she describes her troubling options:

For to immanence, to the heart, Christ is redundant and all things are one. To emanance, to the mind, Christ touches only the top, skims off only the top, as it were, the souls of men, the wheat grains whole, and lets the chaff fall where? To the world flat and patently unredeemed; to the entire rest of the universe, which is irrelevant and nonparticipant; to time and matter unreal, and so unknowable, an illusory, absurd, accidental, and overelaborate stage. (70)

If God operates in all things, moving through the world at all times in history, Christ’s descent into the world and further on to death is meaningless. She cannot reconcile the position that makes Christ’s sacrificial love redundant. The other, however, means that God is only in touch with the holiest, or “highest” part of human creatures, with spirit or

soul only, and that the rest of matter is inconsequential. The earth and the cosmos, in this view, are shallow illusions in which human beings operate like actors on a stage. The metaphors for these two views, a “vertical” relationship to the divine and a “horizontal” relationship, are both inadequate, and she prefers to think about the relationship of world and divine as circular. She knows that the world is more than a stage, and Holy the Firm confirms the connection: “Eternity sockets twice into time and space curves, bound and bound by idea” (71). The material world is not illusion, as she had feared on Day 2; ideas are bound to their objects and those objects to the eternal. Holy the Firm is created, but in touch with the un-created. What she saw on Day 1 and Day 2 is not untrue, but is rather reconciled with the whole:

Thought advances, and the world creates itself, by the gradual positing of, and belief in, a series of bright ideas...Matter and spirit are of a piece but distinguishable; God has a stake guaranteed in all the world. And the universe is real and not a dream, not a manufacture of the senses; subject may know object, knowledge may proceed, and Holy the Firm is in short the philosopher’s stone.  
(71)

With Holy the Firm, Dillard is able to reconcile her conflicting notions about God’s involvement in the world, allowing her some understanding of how Julie’s suffering might fit within a meaningful creation. That Holy the Firm is grounded in the waxy depths of the earth assures her that material existence is meaningful, that it is not a “lower”—in a pejorative sense—existence, but rather that life on earth is connected deeply to the Absolute; “are islands rooted in it, and trees? Of course”, she writes (69).

Even Julie's suffering, then, in its specificity, is connected to the Absolute in mysterious ways.

### 3.5 The Artist and the Mystic

On the final day, Dillard comes to a self-conscious realization that her vocation as an artist is no different from her spiritual vocation. That is, her aesthetic and her spiritual vision become entangled, for she imagines her task as a writer is to make the eternal known in the particulars of the temporal for her reader. We may see this theoretically in her works of non-fiction, *Living by Fiction* and *The Writing Life*, and here she depicts that role poetically. In her final chapter, Warren briefly elaborates on the way that Dillard imagines the work of the artist as mimetic of Christ, primarily in the artist's self-sacrifice. The artist transforms images of death into images of beauty and spiritual potential, which Dillard depicts in the image of the moth burning in the flame (Warren 138-139). Moreover, she writes, Dillard takes on a role of Christ's self-sacrifice both in her identification with the suffering girl Julie and in the artist's ability to incarnate the eternal in her art (140-141). In my own interpretation, I will suggest that it is only by considering Christ's love that such self-sacrifice becomes meaningful within the text, for it is love that binds the images of moth, artist, Julie, and Christ, together.

As we saw briefly on Day 1, Dillard suggests that one of the central themes of her poetic narrative is the author's sacrifice. She lives in a single-roomed cabin on northern Puget Sound, alone (13); the room itself resembles a skull, "a fire tower, wooden, and empty" (22), or an anchor-hold. She tries to tell her students what the life of a writer must

mean: “you can't be anything else, you must go at your life with a broadax... They had no idea what I was saying” (18). Part of the sacrifice she describes here is that of a life amongst people; the artist in her depiction resigns herself to solitude, much like an ascetic. But it is also more than a sacrifice of the accoutrements of ordinary life, for the artist gives her whole life in sacrificial love. Dillard explores the metaphor of the artist to the moth in a flame throughout the three days to vividly illustrate the sacrificial life of the artist. On Day 1, she contemplates the burning moth, wondering, “Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her eggs, had she done her work?” (16-17), and then on Day 2, she sits with her cat, wondering “Shall I be old?... Do you have any earthly idea how young I am? Where’s your dress, kitty? I suppose I’ll outlive this wretched cat. Get another. Leave it my silver spoons, like old ladies you hear about” (44-45). Dillard ponders her own celibacy, worrying about the life of a solitary. The comparison between the moth and the artist is confirmed on Day 3 as she walks with the communion wine: “Walking faster and faster, weightless, I feel the wine. It sheds light in slats through my rib cage, and fills the buttressed vaults of my ribs with light pooled and buoyant. I am moth; I am light. I am prayer and I can hardly see” (65). She revisits these connections between moth, nun, and artist, in light of her transformed vision of reality.

The moth sacrifices her very life, in order to light Dillard’s world as she reads alone in the woods. So, too, the artist experiences self-extinguishing, emptying herself of her will and her ego in order to illuminate the world—both its beauty and its fecundity—in all its particularity. On the third day, Dillard strings together a series of questions:



What can any artist set on fire but his world? What can any people bring to the altar but all it has ever owned in the thin towns or over the desolate plains? What can an artist use but materials, such as they are? What can he light but the short string of his gut, and when that's burnt out, any muck ready to hand? (72)

By now, the reader is enough attuned to Dillard's language to recognize that she has created her own set of word associations within the text: fire and light bring forth the image of the burning moth, the altar to sacrifice and purity, and the artist recalls the significance of corporeal materials. Her sentences grow weightier as the narrative progresses until at the end they are loaded with meaning. Fashioning these meanings in a way that is internally coherent within the text is precisely the role of the artist, for she is appointed the formidable task of using the material world around her, in all its mundanity, to alight something of the eternal within it. She must express the inexpressible. However, Dillard is careful to ensure that the reader does not suspect her of imagining the artist above anyone else. In an interview with Karla Hammond, she acknowledges: "Being an artist does not put you above your fellows. You are not higher; you are merely off to the side a bit" ("Drawing the Curtains" 35). The artist's life has nothing to do with glory or fame: it is rather the opposite, in Dillard's eyes, and requires the person to become a no-one, imitating the ultimate humiliation of Christ's self-effacement on the Cross, as we will see momentarily.

What Dillard envisions is a radical departure from contemporary notions of art, which so often place the individual at the centre of creative expression. Her suggestion—that the artist points away from, or beyond herself in her work—is radically counter-

cultural, for she urges the artist to let go of the self entirely. “How can people think that artists seek a name?” she wonders, “A name, like a face, is something you have when you're not alone” (72).<sup>42</sup> Instead, the artist, like the nun, practices self-denial, perhaps (though not necessarily) in solitude, sacrificing herself to her creative work through which she seeks to look closely at the material world in order to decipher the eternal within it. She is consumed by it. Moreover, her work is not in any way carried out for the artist’s self, nor is its content self-reflexive, but is a humble enactment of a kenotic self-emptying, a passionate desire to fulfil her prophetic role, in imitation of Christ.

The vocation of the artist, then, does not make her “higher” or holier than anyone else. However, it does mean that she accepts a prophetic role in the world. Quoting Isaiah 6:8, Dillard shifts from questioning her purity and worthiness, to a willing response to her calling: ““Whom shall I send”, and Isaiah—who is the only one there—responds, “Here am I; send me” (73). Isaiah goes, not because he is more holy or pure than anyone else, but because he is called. The artist’s task is to be receptive to such a calling, making herself open to movements beyond herself, rather than pushing for her own vision of the world in her art.<sup>43</sup> Dillard juggles the biblical metaphors for the author in her text: she is

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<sup>42</sup> In her description of writing the moth piece, Dillard warns the reader against reading the image of the self-sacrificing moth as romantic excess: “I think that this moth piece is a risky one to read: it seems to enforce these romantic giddy notions of art and the artist. But I trust you can keep your heads” (“How I wrote the Moth Essay—and Why” 15).

<sup>43</sup> See Julia A. Ireland, “Annie Dillard’s Ecstatic Phenomenology,” *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17.1 (Winter 2010): 23-34. Ireland suggests that Dillard is interested in a transformation of how we see phenomena from active to passive: “But the transformation in agency from activity to receptivity is not reducible to an adjustment in perspective as an act of will. Instead Dillard understands this shift as a ‘letting go.’ It is a peculiar form of action that requires preparation, but that we, strictly speaking, don’t really *do*. Thus although we initiate the transformation in agency that allows things to literally show themselves in a new light, we are simultaneously transformed by what then happens; we are acted upon by how things come to appear...” (24).

Mary, carrying Christ within her (“I bear holiness splintered into a vessel, very God of very God, the sempiternal silence personal and brooding, bright on the back of my ribs” (64)), she is Christ, and she is Isaiah—all of whom experience radical callings. She becomes the poet Rimbaud in Paris, burning his brains out to unleash his poetry into the world. The artist empties herself in response to a divine calling, selflessly laying aside her own desires to be a flame of light for the world to see.

In this way, then, the artist mimics John’s depiction of Christ as the light of the world.<sup>44</sup> Christ, in loving self-sacrifice gives of himself entirely. The artist follows similarly:

His face is flame like a seraph’s, lighting the kingdom of God for the people to see; his life goes up in the works; his feet are waxen and salt. He is holy and he is firm, spanning all the long gap with the length of his love, in flawed imitation of Christ on the cross stretched both ways unbroken and thorned. So must the work be also, in touch with, in touch with, in touch with; spanning the gap, from here to eternity, home. (72)

This passage is buzzing with accumulated images from the text: flame, seraphs, light, wax and salt, gaps, love, Christ, holy and firm. Like Holy the Firm and like Christ, the artist “spans the gap” between time and eternity, though always less perfectly than Christ. “His face is flame like a seraphs,” for his art is a display of his worshipping love. Just as Christ took on the fleshiness of human life, descending into the particularity of human

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<sup>44</sup> See John 8:12, which notably comes just before the story of the blind beggar who receives sight in John 9, which Dillard has quoted previously.

matter, so the artist's vision motions towards the eternal manifested in the particularities.<sup>45</sup> Dillard's own vision is always firmly rooted in these particulars. In *Holy the Firm*, she describes, beautifully, the places and people with whom she lives, and, specifically, she bears witness to human fallenness and suffering through Julie Norwich's accident in time and space. Although the artist's vision oriented to eternity, it is manifested in the world's particularities, crafted through words by Dillard as artist.

Dillard acknowledges that she is not the creator of the vision, she is merely the carrier or channel for it, "As a writer, I am less a creator than an audience to the artistic vision... I merely point to the vision" ("A Face Aflame" 16). Or, in her poetic imagery, she writes, "There is no such thing as an artist: there is only the world, lit or unlit as the light allows. When the candle is burning, who looks at the wick? When the candle is out, who needs it? But the world without light is wasteland and chaos, and a life without sacrifice is abomination" (72). In this beautiful passage, Dillard describes the artist's self-effacement, in which she is completely emptied of herself, a mere channel through which the words may flow out onto the page. All that matters is the light, and the artist is a channel for that light. In the darkness, the world is wasteland and chaos, language that is evocative of the first words of Genesis, before God created the heavens and the earth, when "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep". The introduction of light into the world transforms it into a created and meaningful whole.

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<sup>45</sup> In "Teaching a Stone to Talk," Dillard describes her attraction to a life of witness, calling attention to the eternal. The palo santos trees, she writes, "interest me as emblems of the muteness of the human stance in relation to all that is not human. I see us all as palo santo trees, holy sticks, together watching all that we watch, and growing in silence" (74). She would like to return as a palo santo tree, "So that I could be, myself, a perfect witness, and look, mute, and wave my arms" (76).

The artist continues to set the world alight, bringing order to the chaos, wholeness to vision.

A deep passion is needed for such a life, Dillard contends.<sup>46</sup> Warren notes that it is a passion that goes beyond interest or personal investment in ideas, it is also the passion that moves one into action, into the dedication to transfer “from mind or from spirit to the material” (125). But furthermore, Dillard exhibits a self-renouncing love that mimics the embodied love of God in Christ. Warren rightly notes that the writer “participates in a degree of Christ’s sacrifice when she commits herself to her work, abandoning the self so the words may be revealed” (134), but this abandonment is motivated by, and acted out in, imitation of Christ’s self-giving love. The artist’s sacrificial death to herself is simultaneously an act of re-creation, following the paradox of Christ’s dying to live. This third day connects the circle of the narrative, for the birth and dying of the self is set forth in creative motion—even as one sweeping motion—paralleling God’s kenotic out-pouring into creation, into the birth and death of the man Christ, who then arcs back upwards in loving, redemptive re-creation. Dillard imagines a radical calling for the artist and for a profoundly different vision of art, one that is acted out in self-annihilating love.

The central image of the text—that of the moth in the candle—depicts the all-consuming love and sacrifice required to bring light to the world. The images begin to coalesce in love and sacrifice. For Julie is like a nun, and Dillard is Christ-like, and yet

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<sup>46</sup> In *The Writing Life*, Dillard describes her writing process for *Holy the Firm*: “This book interested me more passionately than any other. The task was to change intellectual passion to physical energy and some sort of narrative mastery, from a standing start.” (49)

Julie is also the suffering Christ and Dillard is also Christ's redemptive self-sacrifice. In the final pages, Dillard portrays Julie as a nun, "You might as well be God's chaste bride, chased by plunderers to the high caves of solitude, to the hearthless rooms empty of voices, and of warm limbs hooking your heart to the world. Look how he loves you!" (74). Her burnt skin, like a nun's veil, is a black shroud of flesh (74), not unlike Julian of Norwich's own depiction of her vision of Christ on the cross: "I could see that the dear skin and tender flesh, the hair and the blood, were hanging loose from the bone, gouged by the thorns in many places. It seemed to drop off, heavy and loose, still holding its natural moisture, sagging like a cloth" (Ch.17, p.89). In the face of Julie's accident—and human suffering more broadly—we are reminded of Christ's own suffering in the Atonement. For Julian of Norwich, the contemplation of Christ's suffering face and body, in all its detail, brought comfort, reminding her that humanity suffers *with* Christ, and recognizing that "his suffering and self-abnegation so far surpasses anything we might experience that we shall never wholly understand it" (105).

Dillard tells Julie of her life as a nun: "you cry, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof! Held, held fast by love in the world like the moth in wax, your life a wick, your head on fire with prayer, held utterly, outside and in, you sleep alone, if you call that alone, you cry God" (76).<sup>47</sup> The love that grounds her in the temporal is that which makes her suffering and her sacrifice meaningful, for as Dillard realizes before she buys the communion wine, "There are no events but thoughts and the

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<sup>47</sup> See Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings 2:12.

heart's hard turning, the heart's slow learning where to love and whom. The rest is merely gossip, and tales for other times" (62).

If Dillard does not offer a resolution at the end of her narrative, she does offer comfort—or at least inspiration—in this possibility to suffer with another, in imitation of Christ's loving suffering with a fallen human-kind. Within the overlapping narratives, humankind enters into Christ's suffering and Christ enters into ours, opening the possibility for a shared ascension as well. She gives her reader no simple or sentimental solutions to the reality of human suffering within God's creation, but she illuminates the particulars of Julie's suffering with affection and grace, incarnating in her art the very mysteriousness of the divine in her poetry. With Julian of Norwich, and with the child Julie, she can span space and history in coterminous suffering through compassion. And so, in the final pages, the narrative takes a dramatic turn as Dillard the artist—now one with Julie—will-fully takes on Julie's suffering to be her own, just as Christ shares in the world's:

Julie Norwich; I know. Surgeons will fix your face. This will all be a dream, an anecdote, something to tell your husband one night... You'll dress your own children, sticking their arms through the sleeves. Mornings you'll whistle, full of the pleasure of days, and afternoons this or that, and nights cry love. So live. I'll be the nun for you. I am now. (76)

Dillard's own experience of God's erotic kenosis into creation and into the man Christ, and Christ's love made evident in his baptism and death cannot be contained: so Dillard is also unable to contain such love. It pushes her outside of herself, into self-less sacrifice

for the other and into the creative, flaming love of the artist, all in loving worship of the divine.



## CONCLUSION

Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm* presents a mystical vision of the world that is deeply needed in a time of fragmentation and isolation. She imagines a whole vision of reality, and of the place of human creatures within that reality, that allows for mystery and awe at human createdness. In her art, she points to the possibility of seeing the sacred embedded in the natural world, as she so beautifully depicts on Day 1, challenging the assumption that human creatures stand at the centre of creation, autonomous and the source of all meaning. Rather, she imagines the human as witness to, and participant in, the world as it is continually being created, wild and fertile and hopeful.

Her poetics point to the possibility of the self made whole, in which matter, mind and spirit are distinguishable, but recognized as parts of one being. On Day 2, she presents a critique of the fragmentation incurred by strict Manichean dualism, of reason divorced from love and faith, and the attempt to construct ethical schemes or punitive systems of justice through which human suffering can be measured and judged. Dillard suggests that the intellect alone is not capable of making sense of human pain and of the seeming chaos of the world. Rather, an integrated vision of the world—requiring an integrated self—is the only vision that can account for the mysterious encounter with both beauty and pain. Such a vision is one in which reality is complex and overflowing with mystery, but it is only through such vision that she suggests we might see reality wholly.

In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard's vision of such a reality is specifically a Christian mystical vision. The narrative both culminates in an ecstatic Christian mystical vision of wholeness in love, and points to the cultivation of such vision in the sacramental liturgy of the church. In this thesis I have sought to suggest that for Dillard, a whole vision of reality is one that accounts for creation, the fall, and redemption, as they encapsulate one narrative, on-going story of the relationship between human and divine. Dillard's mysticism must not be confused with narrow or reductive definitions of mysticism, which suggest a journey of interiority, or a rejection of material reality. At the end of *The Writing Life*, Dillard quotes Teilhard de Chardin: "Purity does not lie in separation from but in deeper penetration into the universe" (110). Dillard penetrates the world through her art, by noticing the particulars of creation and incarnating them in her poetry. A faithful account of these particulars requires that she illuminate both the beauty and chaos of nature, and the human dramas of both love and pain. Christ's embodiment, God's own self-giving act of love in God's descent into time, affirms material existence for Dillard. Moreover, it is through the fleshy, human experiences of pain and love that she comes to know the mystery of the divine.

More specifically, her Christian vision is a sacramental vision of the world. As many have noted about her work, she presents the world as alive with the divine. But additionally, and astonishingly to Dillard, it is through the Christian liturgy that such a vision might be cultivated: practiced in the sacraments of baptism and communion, within the community of the church. The sacraments, acted out in the church's communal

liturgy, re-enact Christ's loving descent into the world as a ritualistic embodiment of God's continual descent into the world.

For Dillard, the artist has an important role, in that she is capable of incarnating the eternal within the temporal through her art. In her self-emptying act of love—in imitation of Christ—she is able to illuminate the particularities of the world in poetry, drawing from mind, matter, and spirit to alight a true reality that is comprised of all three. In her introduction to Fred Chappell's *Moments of Light*, Dillard writes, “Now, in the modern world, in the fallen world, in the world in which neither the old order nor the new science has any answers, human vision must take over as the sole epistemological tool. In these new realms, only art can speak” (Forward xi). Dillard's is a radical view, a hopeful one, and one that even she doubts at times. But, she concedes, it is only through such kenotic, enflaming love that we are given the possibility to see.

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