

Meditation on seeing

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

By Annie Dillard.
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By EUDORA WELTY

"I am no scientist," says Annie Dillard, "but a poet and a walker with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts." In "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" she offers "what Thoreau called 'a meteorological journal of the mind.'"

The book is a form of meditation, written with headlong urgency, about seeing. A blind child the author happened to read about saw for the first time after cataracts had been removed from her eyes. "When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw 'the tree with lights in it.'" Annie Dillard had found the central metaphor for her book; it is the vision, the spiritual conception, that she will spend her days in solitude tramping the Roanoke creek banks and the Blue Ridge mountainside in search of for herself.

A reader's heart must go out to a young writer with a sense of wonder so fearless and unbridled. It is this intensity of experience that she seems to live in order to declare.

There is an ambition about her book that I like, one that is deeper than the ambition to declare wonder aloud. It is the ambition to feel. This is a guess. But if this is what she has at heart, I am not quite sure that in writing this book she wholly accomplished it. I don't say this, though, to detract from her declared intention in laying herself open to the experience of seeing. It is a state she equates with innocence: "What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration."

But apparently it is an unself-consciousness that can be consciously achieved and consciously declared. And part of her conception of seeing is that in the act of doing it she is herself, in turn, being seen.

"I walk out; I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell. I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself. . . . I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by un-

Eudora Welty is the author most recently of the Pulitzer Prize novel, "The Optimist's Daughter."

expected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood."

What happens to that paragraph is what happens to her book. As the episodes begin, we can imagine an appealing young woman standing alert in a meadow, dressed in shirt and pants, holding her field glasses and provided with a sandwich: she is waiting to see, being very patient and still. By the chapter's end, we realize or suspect we are watching a dervish dancing. Receptivity so high-strung and high-minded has phases of its own. The author shows us that it has its dark side too.

"The world has signed a pact with the devil; it had to. . . . The terms are clear: if you want to live, you have to die; you cannot have mountains and creeks without space, and space is a beauty married to a blind man. The blind man is Freedom, or Time, and he does not go anywhere without his great dog Death. The world came into being with the signing of the contract. . . . This is what we know. The rest is gravy."

I honestly do not know what she is talking about at such times. The only thing I could swear to is that the writing here leaves something to be desired. "What's going on here?" is one of the author's refrains. "The creator loves pizzazz," she answers herself.

She is better at stalking a muskrat: "Stalking is a pure form of skill, like pitching or playing chess. Rarely is luck involved. I do it right or I do it wrong; the muskrat will tell me, and that right early. Even more than baseball, stalking is a game played in the actual present. At every second, the muskrat comes, or stays, or goes, depending on my skill." This is admirable writing.

So is her account of the polyphemus moth—first in its cocoon, then emerging, then crawling away in the presence of a roomful of schoolchildren. It has been directly experienced at what I should say is eye-level. Her account of the migration of the monarch butterflies, which makes the reader see what they looked like coming, how they went over, what they left behind them, what the author learned from the whole event, is precise and memorable.

She can also write straight narrative, showing what the book would have gained in point, direction, and shape from being given a little more of it. She takes us through a flood on Tinker Creek and I think she sees truly when she says: "Tinker Creek is out of its four-foot banks. . . . It looks like somebody else's creek that has usurped or eaten our creek and is roving frantically to escape, big and ugly, like a blacksnake caught in a kitchen drawer." She walks out into the flood on a wall and on the return trip meets a young boy who's going in the opposite direction. "The wall is one brick wide; we can't pass.



Annie Dillard.

ve clasp hands and le
ds over the turbulent
interlace like teeth on a zip
pull together, stand, and
e on our ways." There's g
quickness of writing. It
ks the rare appearance, mor
as it is, of another human b
her book, and the closest
an being comes into the pres
he author.

Annie Dillard is the only pe
her book, substantially the
in her world; I recall no outs
man speech coming to break
g soliloquy of the author. Spe
of the universe very often, sh
self-surrounded, and, bey
t, book-surrounded. Her own b
ght have taken in more of hun
without losing a bit of the won
was after. Might it not h
ned more? Thoreau's wisdom
everything to do with the relations
saw between nature and the c
unity of man. She read Thoreau,
ding of course his own meter
ical journal of the mind.

While spending her days stalk
e young author was spending
ghts reading. She read everytl
e could get her hands on
ould elucidate and expand what



copied long passages into her jo
and many excerpts appear in
book—not only from Thoreau, I
Darwin and so on, but from nov
artists. (An odd bit, unattribut
tantalizing me: Who said, "Gr
to Copernicus, is the nostalg
things to become spheres"?)
search for a vision has been at
hand and at secondhand; a
search.

There remains something abo
wishes which is not quite rela
the human world. She remarks
where, "I am interested in,
mainly when she eats the cook
makes her smaller. I would pai
self or be pared so that I too
pass through the merest crack,

I know is there in the sky. I am look
ing just now for the cooky." (Con
trariwise, she will need to be look
ing for a little bottle, tied around
the neck with a paper label with
the words "DRINK ME" beautifully
printed in large letters. And eating
the "little cake"—if this is what she
means by a cooky—will only result
in her having to say, "Goodbye,
feet!")

Actually, and not unlike the char
acters Alice herself meets in Wonder
land, the author is given to changing
style or shifting moods with discon
certing frequency and abruptness.
"Thanks. For the Memories." "This
oft was thought, but ne'er so well
expressed as by Pliny." "The cottage
was Paradise enow." You might be
reading letters home from camp,
where the moment before you might
have thought you were deep in the
Book of Leviticus.

The relationship between the writ
er and the reader is fully as peculiar
and astonishing as the emergence of
the polyphemus moth. It too has got
to leave the cocoon, has got to draw
breath and assume every risk of being
alive before the next step, real under
standing, can take place.

But a writer writes as a wh
sees, and while the eyes are rolled
up, what appears on paper may be
exactly what it sounds like, invoca
tion. "Mystery itself is as fringed and
intricate as the shape of the air in
time." This is a voice that is trying
to speak to me out of a cloud in
stead of from a sociable, even an
swerable, distance on our same earth.
And if I ask, as I do too at times in
a book, "What's going on here?"
author would be likely to invoke
voice again, and we'd be told as
were before: "The creator loves
zazz."

She concludes her book by saying,
nd then you walk fearlessly . . .
e the monk on the road who knows
cisely how vulnerable he is, who
tes no comfort among death-for
tting men, and who carries his vis
i of vastness and might around
his tunic like a live coal which
ither burns nor warms him, but
th which he will not part. . . . The
giant water bug ate the world. And
like Billy Bray I go my way, and my
left foot says 'Glory,' and my right
foot says 'Amen': in and out of
Shadow Creek, upstream and down,
exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the
twin silver trumpets of praise."

And that's the way Annie Dillard
goes. Is the Pilgrim on her right
road? That depends on what the Pil
grim's destination is.

But how much better, in any case,
to wonder than not to wonder, to
dance with astonishment and go spin
ning in praise, than not to know
enough to dance or praise at all; to
be blessed with more imagination
than you might know at the given
moment what to do with than to be
cursed with too little to give you—
and other people—any trouble. ■