WRITER OF THE INEFFABLE: THE PARADOXICAL ROLE OF ANNIE DILLARD

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I. Introduction: Wrestling with God, Wrestling with Words

In a 1992 article in The New York Times, Mary Cantwell recounts her interview with Annie Dillard. Cantwell builds up the moment when she will broach the subject of religion, telling us that Dillard “hates being interviewed” and that she is only “comfortable” when discussing issues other than her marriages or her religious beliefs. When the conversation makes its inevitable turn toward religion, Dillard seems unfazed, recounting her religious development over time: “a Christian since she was 20” and a Catholic of two years, Dillard also expresses a lingering partiality to Protestantism and a penchant for non-Christian theologians, and all without the fireworks Cantwell has been foreshadowing. The next morning, however, Dillard asks Cantwell if she “heard her during the night”:

“No,” I say. “Did you have a nightmare or something?”
“I was crying uncontrollably,” she replies. “Those questions you were asking me about faith....”
“But how could I not?” I protest. “It threads through all your books.”
“Just because I’m religious doesn’t mean I’m insane,” she replies, and cries some more (Cantwell 8).

So what’s the big deal? Why is a single, seemingly harmless conversation about religion cause for tears? Cantwell doesn’t attempt to explain (perhaps because her own nonplussed reactions to Dillard’s answers account for the outburst?), but it seems evident from the tears and the tone of Dillard’s response that discussing her faith is extremely frustrating work for Dillard. Given the fact that virtually all of Dillard’s writing in some way or another addresses religious themes, Cantwell’s account is a bit surprising. One would think that of all potential topics of discussion, Dillard would feel most at home chatting about religion. Why, then, is Dillard frustrated to tears?
Critics have long noted—and Dillard has long acknowledged—that she is a Christian mystic (Smith 18; Slovie 63). As Scott Slovic points out, “The overwhelming inclination of critics responding to Dillard’s work since the mid-seventies has been to analyze the nuances of her mystical methodology” (63). While this is clearly the case, few if any of those critics have linked her particular type of mysticism to its source: the Orthodox Christian mystic tradition expressed in The Way of a Pilgrim and The Philokalia. Yet these works have served as models for Dillard: they are essential to explicating her mystic philosophy and to teasing out how that philosophy informs her writing technique.

Put (perhaps too) simply, the mystic’s job is to know God as intimately as possible, given human limitations, which, mystics note, are many and crippling. Attempting to achieve such knowledge inevitably involves navigating limitations of language and the seeming contradictions of God’s activities in the world. God is “mother” and “father,” “merciful” and “vengeful,” “beautiful” and “horrifying,” and “known” and “unknowable”; even finding a proper pronoun for God is tricky (for convenience, this paper will refer to God as “he” and “him,” with the disclaimer that “she” and “her” or even “it” could also have served, both in my own comment, and for the most part, in those of my sources). The paradoxical notion that God is known and yet unknowable is perhaps the most to blame for Dillard’s outburst in the Cantwell interview. According to Dillard’s Christian mystic sources, knowing God is a lifelong struggle, a wrestling match that is never definitively won or lost, but is instead a series of temporary victories—moments of insight into God’s identity—and devastating setbacks. Dillard never ceases in this struggle to know God; even Cantwell notes that she is “always
wrestling” (3), though Cantwell mistakes the struggle for a “moral” one, rather than a theological one, and therefore misses the focus of Dillard’s work.

The task of the mystic is slippery and frustrating, and articulating those moments of insight—which, as I will explain later, is a necessary part of the process of knowing God—is perhaps the most maddening and wearisome part of all. Even Dillard, who is undeniably both brilliant and insightful, and who might rightly be called a virtuoso of language, sometimes offers illustrations which fail to resonate. In his book God’s Defenders: What They Believe and Why They Are Wrong, S. T. Joshi provides a powerful example of such a failure, complaining that Dillard’s eloquence is worthless because it only communicates “moony and muddle-headed” religious logic (Joshi 218). Analyzing several of Dillard’s works—most notably Holy the Firm and For the Time Being—on their treatment of what he calls “the problem of evil,” Joshi contends that her “windy essay[s]” are rife with “intellectual murkiness” (219). Joshi seems to make a powerful point: as he accuses, Dillard does in fact stretch and even “snap” logical considerations in her writing; she does repeatedly allow moments of inarticulate gaps in language and logic to stand without attempting to fill them in; and she does paint an frequently paradoxical picture of God. However, Joshi fails to consider—in fact, he seems utterly unfamiliar with—the mystic philosophy that underlies Dillard’s project. In the Orthodox Christian mystic tradition, Dillard’s use of language would be deemed inadequate—but such a characteristic would not be to its detriment, since all writing about God is inevitably insufficient to its subject. Joshi’s ignorance of Dillard’s sources may account in large part for his frustration with her supposed “muddle-headedness”: Dillard is dealing in a different kind of knowledge, the “intellective aptitude of the heart.”
Dillard's so-called "murky" language is not intellectual laziness; it is a conscientious technique.

Using words, in all their inadequacy, and navigating paradox to "get at God" is Dillard's special gift—and, if her tears are any indication, her occasional torment. How can she explain? Doubling Dillard's difficult task is the fact that not only does the God she attempts to know abound in paradox, but appropriately, so also does her life. As a mystic and a writer, Dillard inhabits a paradoxical role. She is a writer of the ineffable, and as such, must struggle to say the unsayable. This paper will explore how Dillard's sources, particularly *The Way of a Pilgrim* and *The Philokalia*, inform her undertaking as "mystic writer," as well as the specific tools and techniques Dillard uses to navigate that task. Dillard juxtaposes seemingly unrelated images, and then does not link them for us. She leaves a gap and insists that we jump, demanding our participation and, in effect, taking us with her on her journey to God.

II. Defining Christian Mysticism

A proper definition of mysticism, like the identity of the deity that is its subject matter, is elusive. As the New Encyclopedia Britannica (which I will refer to as the NEB) points out, "to define is to limit, and no single definition will cover every aspect of mysticism" ("Religious Experience" 583). Agreeing with this assessment in the introduction to his book *Great Western Mystics*, David Baumgardt rejects several definitions of mysticism on various grounds: "Consciousness of the beyond" is too general (2). To call it the "suppression of any egoistic selfhood in man" is to fall prey to
the same problem (3). To claim that the mystic believes “in the goodness of everything” is misleading and too narrow (4). Mysticism has also been defined as “the union of man with the Infinite, the unity of human consciousness with infinite reality…in which man tries to lose his identity in an immensely greater life than his own—the life of God, an all-embracing life.” Baumgardt rejects this definition as well, claiming that it is only one of many of the aims of mystics (5) and does not accurately speak for all mystics.

Continuing the technique of clarifying what mysticism is by distinguishing it from what it is not, Baumgardt contrasts mysticism with science. He notes that while the scientist uses “pure analytic intellect,” the mystic adds to this “avowed emotion and a kind of highly concentrated intuitive vision” (8). While science values distance on the part of the observer in order to obtain objectivity, mysticism “tends toward a perfect and consciously performed union between the subject and the object of knowledge”—i.e., God (8).

Baumgardt’s suggestion that mysticism is something “performed” is important, since, as the NEB points out, it is “At once a praxis (technique) and a gnosis (esoteric knowledge)” ; indeed, Dillard’s writing technique involves “performance” of her mystic philosophy.

Even with all his care to define accurately, however, Baumgardt still seems to miss the mark a bit. It is after all misleading to set up a dichotomy between mysticism and science, since the mystic endeavor to know God is often “considered both a science and an art” (“Religious Experience” 584), as it decidedly has been in Dillard’s hands. Further, while Baumgardt’s suggestion that mysticism is “intuitive” rather than “analytical” is helpful, the implication that mysticism is antithetical to intellect is
inaccurate: to the contrary, intellect is a central component of mysticism. As Adolf Lasson explains,

The essence of Mysticism is the assertion of an intuition which transcends the temporal categories of the understanding…Rationalism cannot conduct us to the essence of things; we therefore need intellectual vision ("Religious Experience" 583).

Mysticism, then, does not entail the absence of intellect, so much as it attempts a combination of intellect and sense—a quality of "vision" that William James has called a "noetic quality." "Noetic" is the adjective form of the Greek word "nous," often translated (if poorly) "knowledge" or "intellect," and which is central to the teachings of the Dillard’s Orthodox Christian mystic sources. Swami Bhajananda, editor of Prabuddha Bharata, the Ramakrishna mission’s English journal, explains the "nous":

in Greek mysticism mystical experience is regarded as the function of certain faculties. Just as physical eyes are needed to perceive external objects, so also an inner spiritual sense is needed to perceive the energies of God. This spiritual sense, regarded as the ‘eye of the soul’, is the nous. Unfortunately, the word “nous” is used in different senses in the teachings of Greek mystics. We may, however, take it to mean the intuitive faculty. It is different from reason and is said to be located in the heart. Owing to Original Sin, the nous remains stained or clouded. When it is purified by divine grace during contemplation, it becomes fit to receive the reflection of Divine Light.

Significantly, the NEB also comments that the church and mysticism “have been uneasy bedfellows,” which may or may not account, in part, for some of Dillard’s frustration.

Certainly this component helps to explain her overlapping and changeable affiliations with religious institutions, because although “it validates religion, mysticism also tends to escape the fetters of organized religion” (583).

Mysticism comes in several varieties, including nature mysticism; but while this is the variety “to which poets and artists are particularly prone” ("Religious Experience"
it is not necessarily Dillard’s. In pinpointing Dillard’s kind of mysticism, is important to distinguish between “nature mysticism” and “religious mysticism.” The former “refers to the kind of intense experience whereby the subject feels himself merging with the cosmic totality,” while in the latter, “a sense of transcendence persists throughout the experience of cosmic union either with regard to nature as a whole or to its underlying principle.” While in some writers “the distinction between the religious and the nonreligious is particularly hard to maintain” (247), Dillard’s work is unequivocally religious. Her experiences in nature do not have significance in themselves, so much as they point to insights about God’s being. So although Dillard is often accurately described as a “nature writer,” her mysticism decidedly leans toward the religious variety.

It is appropriate that mysticism should be difficult to define, for it concerns itself with the infinite. The boundlessness of God leads the mystic to constantly grapple with the daunting task of speaking “precisely of that which can never be exhaustively revealed” (Baumgardt 10). The NEB helpfully explains,

There is obviously something nonmental, alogical, paradoxical, and unpredictable about the mystical phenomenon, but it is not, therefore, irrational or antirational or “religion without thought.” Rather…it is knowledge of the most adequate kind, only it cannot be expressed in words (“Religious Experience” 583).

Language, after all, almost always classifies and distinguishes, while mysticism unifies. Already we begin to see the paradox of Dillard’s task: if “the mystical phenomenon…cannot be expressed in words,” then what has Dillard been writing about?
III. The Problem of Ineffability

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James famously lists four defining characteristics of “mystical experience”: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (299-300). Elaborating on the first of his four characteristics, James explains:

The handiest of marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystic states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists...The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences...incompetent treatment (300).

In short, it is the “mystical state of mind,” according to James’ essay, that is unexplainable.

Philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen vehemently disagrees with James’ assessment of the ineffability of mystical experience. In her book, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Jantzen argues that, contrary to popular scholarly acclamation of him, James quite literally doesn’t know what he is talking about. She points out that although “James himself tried to present his philosophical discussion as anchored in the lives and writings of actual mystics...the documentation is not as sound as it first appears” (305). She complains that James “did not actually spend much time reading the mystical writers himself, but rather culled almost all of his quotations from a compilation of short extracts put together by his friend and former student, R. Starbuck, without any literary or historical context” (306). When “the literary contexts” and “historical and
social situations” are considered more carefully, she argues, “we often find that James’ interpretations are doubtful” (305). Most notably, his claim that “ineffability…is a primary characteristic of the mystical” “comes as something of a shock,” given the “vividness and wealth of expression in mystical writings” (279)—qualities which James himself points out (Jantzen 307). Even with such “wealth” and “vividness,” human language, she explains, is “inadequate to contain God”; therefore, it is God, and not “a quality of subjective human experience,” which is “beyond words.”

In actuality, both Jantzen and James are correct: while pursuing God’s unknowable identity is the actual center of mystical life rather than explaining “mystical experience,” neither is easily expressed. God’s identity is inevitably ineffable since it is ultimately beyond understanding, but mystical experience, too, is difficult to articulate, forcing Dillard to resort to creative uses of language in her role as “mystic writer.”

God’s boundlessness—the actual central preoccupation of mystical life—is explored in detail in the writings of Gregory Palamas, a Christian mystic monk of the Orthodox Church in the 14th century (Ferguson 77) who was influenced by many of the same spiritual thinkers Dillard later studied and incorporated into her writing. Palamas distinguishes between God’s “essence” and his “energy,” explaining,

Man cannot know the invisible, incommunicable Divine Essence. He can know the energies or activities of God. God is not a being, for he is above all beings. Nothing created can have communion with the supreme nature. But through his energies God communicates himself to man (Ferguson 138).

In other words, the “essence” is the “being of God, which is unknowable, inapprehensible, ineffable,” while the “energies or activities” of God are the medium “through which we may be said to know Him and find union with Him” (Ferguson 54).
Palamas defends “hesychasm” or “quietism” as a method of contemplating God’s energies to apprehend his essence (to be elaborated below). God’s energies, then, are the more specific subject of what James calls “mystical experience,” and while words and human intellect are inevitably inadequate to fully apprehend God’s essence, his energies allow us a place to begin.

Language is inadequate, but not useless in attempting to know God—in fact, words are a necessary component of the mystic struggle; they are, in fact, a way. After all, religious experience, demands expression in language and symbolic forms. To know what has been experienced and how it is to be understood requires the ability to identify things, persons, and events through naming, describing, and interpreting, which involve appropriate concepts and language. No experience can be the subject of analysis while it is being had or undergone; communication and critical inquiry require that experiences be cast into symbolic form that arrests them for further scrutiny (“Religious Experience” 579).

Words serve as a crutch, or perhaps a ladder: they offer the mystic a way of directing her thinking about God, even if taking signifiers for God as literal truths is to miss the point. God is not really a “father,” but shares some characteristics that we typically associate with fatherhood (strictness, strength, protection, etc.). God is not actually a “mother,” but he does “give birth” to life like a mother, and he does nurture like one. The same care must be exercised any time we name God. Terms like “warrior,” “king,” and even “Lord” and “God” tell us something about God’s identity, and yet get in the way of our fully knowing: such naming “partly reveals, and partly conceals.” As Jantzen suggests, God is ineffable because of his unparalleled fecundity—we are not dumb to explain God’s identity, but rather have infinite things to say about it (283). A single word or title is inadequate, but an outpouring of words can offer a glimpse, and herein lies the key to
understanding the task of the mystic writer: if indeed the primary task of the mystic is to know God, and if “To know what has been experienced and how it is to be understood requires the ability to identify things, persons, and events through naming, describing, and interpreting, which involve appropriate concepts and language” (“Religious Experience” 579), then the mystic needs language. It makes perfect sense that Dillard and other mystics would not be mute in the face of the inexplicable, but rather would gravitate toward the paradoxical occupation of “mystic writer,” seeking to at least speak around that which cannot be spoken directly.

IV. Dillard’s Sources: The Way of a Pilgrim and The Philokalia

Dillard gleans the concept of God’s ineffability primarily from two sources: The Way of a Pilgrim and The Philokalia. Both of these texts emerge from the Eastern Orthodox Church, “that form of Chrisianity which obtains in much of the Near East, Greece, and the Balkans, Russia, and most of Ukraine” (Golitzen 1). The former text Dillard probably encountered in an independent study course on mysticism during her time at Hollins College (Parrish 106), and it probably led her to the latter. These texts soon became and have remained central to her thinking and writing, providing her with concepts—wrestling with God’s concurrent imminence and hiddenness, theophany in nature, and unceasing prayer—as well as methods of navigating God’s boundlessness: hesychasm, a way that is alternately one of affirmation and negation.

The Way of a Pilgrim was written by an anonymous Russian Christian, now thought to be Archimandrite Mikhail Kozlov (Pentkovsky 16), and in 1881 came into the
hands of a monk in the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos (Pentovsky 1)—in the same area, incidentally, where Gregory Palamas studied hesychasm five centuries earlier (Ferguson 138) and where The Philokalia was compiled in the eighteenth century (Palmer Vol. I 11). In 1884, a revised and edited edition of the text was published and “subsequently received universal distribution” (Pentkovsky 1). In it, the central character and author, an ascetic who wanders throughout Russia and Siberia in the mid-nineteenth century, visits several monasteries, shrines, and villages in search of someone who can teach him to “pray without ceasing.” He eventually meets a spiritual adept, a “starets” or elder, who teaches him the hesychast method using The Philokalia and the method of prayer that it describes.

The Philokalia contains the spiritual writings that form the foundation of the mystical philosophy and methodology of Gregory Palamas, the narrator of The Way of a Pilgrim, and Annie Dillard. Editor G.E.H. Palmer gives a brief background of The Philokalia in his introduction to the four-volume English translation. He says,

The Philokalia is a collection of texts written between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries by spiritual masters of the Orthodox Christian tradition. It was compiled in the eighteenth century by two Greek monks, St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain of Athos (1749-1809) and St. Makarios of Corinth (1731-1805), and was first published in Venice in 1782 (Palmer Vol. I 11).

The text was first published in Greek, and later selectively translated into the Russian version, Dobrotoliubie, cited by the narrator of The Way of a Pilgrim (Pelikan x). The Russian text also adds selections from St. Isaac of Syria. Only within the last thirty years have the Greek texts been translated nearly in their entirety into English (Volume 5 has yet to appear). The title of the collection of Greek texts means “love of the beautiful, the
exalted, the excellent, understood as the transcendent source of life and the revelation of
Truth” (Palmer Vol. I 13). These texts intend to

show the way to awaken and develop attention and consciousness, to
attain that state of watchfulness which is the hallmark of sanctity. They
describe the conditions most effective for learning what their authors call
the art of arts and the science of sciences, a learning which is not a matter
of information or agility of mind but of a radical change of will and heart
leading man towards the highest possibilities open to him, shaping and
nourishing the unseen part of his being (Vol. I 13).

In Palmer’s definition, we hear the echoes of the sources surveyed above which attempt
to define mysticism: these texts “develop attention and consciousness,” as Baumgardt
pointed out (8); they encourage learning “the art of arts and the science of sciences,” a
mystic trait that the NEB pointed out (584); and the type of “learning” encouraged by
these texts is “not a matter of information or agility of mind,” by a “change of
will…shaping…the unseen part of his being,” again recalling Baumgardt’s lengthy
distinction between mysticism and science (8), as well as James’s reference to the
“nous.” In short, these texts are collectively a guide to the contemplative life of the
Eastern Orthodox Christian mystic, full of ways of thinking about God and methods for
achieving “watchfulness.” The Philokalia illuminates a variety of significant themes,
including creation, death, desire, grace, prayer, the senses, the soul, and so on. Along
with hesychasm, these interrelated topics are of special interest to this project because
they address issues that are central to Dillard’s writing: 1) “wrestling” with God’s elusive
identity and its puzzling action/inaction, 2) theophany in nature, and 3) striving for
unceasing prayer.
A Wrestling with God’s Elusive Identity

A frequently discussed theme in The Philokalia is the notion that one must wrestle with one’s own limitations and with God in order to discern his hidden nature. The wrestling match between Jacob and the “stranger” on the banks of the Jabbok is emblematic of this struggle: Jacob grapples with God and is blessed with the knowledge of his identity (Genesis 25-32). Much of the Eastern Orthodox Christian notion of struggle and theophany is derived from this Biblical image (Golitzen 2). Not unlike Jacob, the mystic’s struggle with God is largely a physical one, even if it may not involve hand-to-hand combat. Through the senses, the mystic must contemplate what little she can apprehend about God: the multitudinous forms of creation. But while she must practice “watchfulness” to become open to this struggle, it is ultimately initiated not by the mystic, but by God. As St. Mark the Ascetic, one of the Orthodox spiritual fathers whose work is collected in the Philokalia, puts it, “Initially grace arouses the conscience in a divine manner. That is how even sinners have come to repent and so to conform to God’s will” (Palmer Vol. I 132). God reaches out to the mystic, and engages her in a struggle in order to show her, briefly but brilliantly, a flash of God’s unknowable “essence.” St. Hesychios the Priest, another contributor to the Philokalia, calls God “inapprehensible,” and designates the primary function of the mystic to gain “sure knowledge” of God and, in doing so, “to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries” of the world (Palmer Vol. I 162). Central to this work, and at the very heart of the reason that it is such a struggle, is the necessity of accounting for the frequency of seeming horrors in God’s creation.
While retaining infinite goodness, God also creates violence and pain. The mystic must wrestle with this apparent paradox, until she can understand just what this duality indicates about God. St. Antony the Great offers an explanation of this problem:

We savour pleasure and joy to the degree to which we taste affliction. One does not drink with pleasure unless one is thirsty, nor eat with pleasure unless hungry, nor sleep soundly unless very drowsy, nor feel joy without grief beforehand (Palmer Vol. 1 345).

St. Antony’s lesson appears to refer simply to appreciation: God gives humanity “affliction” so that we may “savour pleasure.” But the issue is more complex than a mere compare/contrast exercise. If Dillard’s ultimate goal is to gain “sure knowledge” of God, then she realizes that she cannot turn a blind eye to the seemingly unpleasant aspects of God’s creation, for to do so would be to misunderstand—or ignore—an essential set of energies that provide clues to God’s identity. If she fell short of knowing God in this way, Dillard could not fully understand or appreciate the nature of God’s blessings, or anything else about God for that matter. Further, if Dillard were to refuse to grapple with the notion that pain and pleasure are not distinct, but are two facets of the same, paradoxical deity then she forgoes what ought to be (and thankfully is) the central occupation of her life. Or, to put it in Gregory Palamas’s terms, if she willingly ignored certain manifestations of God’s energies, we are bound to double our blindness to God’s essence. God is capable of both harm and healing, and Dillard cannot begin to know God until she seeks the explanation for both of these phenomena.
B. Theophany in Nature

One of the ways to accomplish the goal of coming to know a hidden God is through contemplation of nature, God’s creation. Echoing Gregory Palamas’ distinction between God’s energy and essence, St. John Cassian explains,

God is not only to be known in His blessed and incomprehensible being...He is also to be known from the grandeur and beauty of His creatures, from His providence which governs the world day by day...When we consider that He numbers the raindrops, the sand of the sea and the stars of heaven, we are amazed at the grandeur of His nature and His wisdom. (Palmer Vol. I 96-97).

God’s qualities shine through his creation. A key, then, to beginning to know the divine essence, so inapprehensible and ineffable, is to look for how it infuses the physical world. As St. Maximos the Confessor puts it,

We do not know God from His essence. We know him rather from the grandeur of His creation and from His providential care for all creatures. For through these, as though they were mirrors, we may attain insight into His infinite goodness, wisdom and power (Palmer Vol. II 64).

Nature is the looking glass of God, and God’s energy is everywhere on display in it. Therefore, in order to learn about God, the mystic must be attentive; she must “achieve watchfulness” (Palmer Vol. I 190) by studying her own heart and then, through its lens, the world. God can be found anywhere the mystic directs her eyes if she will only train herself to look, “For a man who enjoys the love of God is fully aware that nothing exists without God. God, being infinite, is everywhere and in all things” (Palmer Vol. I 346). However, it is not enough merely to look at the world and attempt to see God shining through it. The visions of God’s energies in nature may be considered something of a crutch to the mystic, a first step in a process that demands much more intensity of
attention and insight than this. In order to begin to apprehend God, one must not look merely to the visible, but delve into the realm of the invisible. St. Maximos the Confessor explains,

> When the intellect is engaged in the contemplation of things visible, it searches out either the natural principles of these things or the spiritual principles which they reflect, or else it seeks their original cause. When the intellect is absorbed into the contemplation of things invisible, it seeks their natural principles, the cause of their generation and whatever follows from this, as well as the providential order and judgment which relates to them (Palmer Vol. II 64).

The invisible then, more so than the visible, is the avenue to “the providential order and judgment,” and yet it is precisely the “invisible”—which can be expanded to designate all that is outside of sensory experience—that is ineffable. God, then, is “bigger” than creation; he stretches beyond it, and yet infuses it. The mystic searches out theophanic revelation in nature and takes it a step farther: she must strain at the boundaries of the known, always trying to stretch into a greater awareness of God beyond the physical—she must engage the “nous.”

C. Unceasing Prayer

The mystic searches for God first in the places accessible to the five senses, then in the realms of contemplation where the senses serve no purpose, and finally, as the narrator in The Way of a Pilgrim did, aspires to unceasing prayer, the condition of dwelling always in God’s presence. Abba Philimon elucidates this process:

You must purify your intellect completely through stillness and engage it ceaselessly in spiritual work. For just as the eye is attentive to sensible things and is fascinated by what it sees, so the purified intellect is attentive to intelligible realities and becomes so rapt by spiritual contemplation that
it is hard to tear it away...The intellect is perfect when it transcends knowledge of created things and is united with God (Palmer Vol. II 345).

First the mystic struggles with understanding God’s unknowable essence; then she learns to see God’s energy infusing creation; and finally, through contemplation, she sees that the way to communion with God is through unceasing prayer. But this process is never completed definitively; in this model, the mystic cannot maintain insight indefinitely, so the mystic must forever struggle for new moments of illumination and, through contemplation, blaze a trail to God. Like St. Maximos, Evagrios the Solitary defines prayer as “communion of the intellect with God,” and suggests that if we “wish to behold and commune with Him who is beyond sense-perception and beyond concept, you must first free yourself from every impassioned thought” (Palmer Vol. I 57)—i.e., employ the hesychast method to “purify” and “uncloud the nous” (Bhajananda). Dillard definition of prayer is similar to St. Evagrios’, as is her notion that finding God first in the sensible and then in the invisible leads to “communion,” for it involves the use of the entire intellect. And once God can be detected in every crevice of life, this communion cannot stop, for there is nowhere to escape from it. Having reached this level, “He who prays in spirit and in truth is no longer dependent on created things when honoring the Creator, but praises Him for and in Himself” (Palmer Vol. I 62). Such direct, unmitigated praise implies knowledge of God, and therefore it makes sense to infer that unceasing prayer is the final outcome of the struggle to “know” God. To be constantly aware of God’s energies and constantly in intellectual communion with him is to “know” him, i.e., to have at last achieved an intimate relationship—the goal with which God incited the wrestling match.
As we shall see, the components of the Orthodox Christian mystic life mentioned above—wrestling with God’s identity, theophany in nature, unceasing prayer and the hesychast method (to be explained in further detail later)—are expressed throughout Dillard’s writing as she attempts to navigate the ineffability of both God and mystical experience.

V. Ineffability in Dillard’s Works

Several of Dillard’s critics have noted that she seems to be trying to expose the reader to a hard truth by way of a circuitous route. Peggy Rosenthal claims that “Dillard’s whole enterprise as a writer is to make us marvel. But she’s sure that the sacred is too stupendous for us to stare at directly; we can handle only glimpses, and even these usually come in disguise” (391). In a similar vein, one book reviewer suggests that Dillard’s technique is reflective of the Dickinson line: “Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant” (Elshtain 542). The apparent implication of both of these critiques is that Dillard refuses to tell the truth to the reader directly, presumably because she feels we cannot handle it. More accurately, the “truth” at the heart of Dillard’s work—God’s essence—is itself incomprehensible and inexpressible, and her verbal circuitries are not so much a voluntary withholding of the truth, as a straightforward attempt at guiding the reader toward a truth which withholds itself, or rather, a truth about God which escapes us. Cantwell gets it right when she says,

What Dillard does is this: First she guides the reader through the microscope that is her eyes, enlarging frogs, bugs spiders, water snakes—whatever flies, swims or crawls—to monstrous proportions. Then she aims that microscope, only by now it is a telescope, at the heavens. To
perceive God’s creatures is, in a sense, to perceive God. Except that, in
the end, God defeats her (and all of us), being unknowable (2-3).

Dillard does not play tricks with us because she thinks we cannot handle the truth; rather,
she tells as much truth as she can, which is bound never to be the whole truth,
considering her subject.

Further shedding light on Dillard’s role as “writer of the ineffable,” Linda L. Smith helpfully clarifies Dillard’s mystic philosophy: it is “panentheism,” as opposed to
“pantheism.” While pantheism “views God as immanent in all things, entirely identified
with and contained in nature,” panentheism “views the natural world as contained within
God but sees God as extending beyond the natural world. Accordingly,” Smith notes,
“the panentheist considers God both immanent and transcendent—both within the world
and beyond it” (16). Because God is “beyond it,” Dillard must find ways to invoke the
unsayable: she must develop writing techniques that allow her to navigate God’s
boundlessness. Dillard’s writing regularly includes any combination of these several
defining elements, which help her do just that:

1) Constant use of exhaustive and startlingly vivid description of her surroundings,
especially natural environment.

2) Integration of observation, bits of information from her reading, and personal
episodes as jumping-off points for theological contemplation and a search for
“deeper meaning.”

3) Exploration of the interplay between grace and horror, the beautiful and the
terrible in the natural world.

4) Juxtaposition of seemingly only tangentially related images, between which are
gaps in language and logic left open to the reader.
The influence of Eastern Christian mysticism is evident in each of these techniques. Dillard’s extensive description is in keeping with the mystic emphasis on attentiveness to the details of the world. Her use of this description of facts and episodes, as well as her ability to gain insight into the nature of things, is reminiscent of the mystic sensitivity to theophany. The recurrence of religious themes in her writing reinforces her affiliation with the Christian mystics, as does her concurrent interest in the beauty and the terror of the world, a fundamental component of the struggle of the mystic. And her technique of juxtaposing images and leaving unexplained gaps, which I will describe in more detail in the sections below, is an effort to perform the mystical apprehension.

In order to clearly explicate these techniques and to show how they are informed by Orthodox Christian mysticism, it will be useful to examine her use of them in specific works, particularly “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, and For the Time Being.

VI. “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel”

Annie Dillard’s first poetry collection is perhaps her least noted work, and yet is arguably the one that most directly indicates her mystic influences. She published Tickets for Prayer Wheel through the University of Missouri Press only a few months before Pilgrim at Tinker Creek was published, bringing her fame and critical acclaim. She expressed exasperation that this collection, which took five years of her life to write, was so completely overshadowed by Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, which was the effort of little more than a year (Parrish 124). Tickets for a Prayer Wheel, and most notably its
title poem, contains explicit references to Dillard’s readings in Christian mysticism. “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel” is a meditation on the desire for genuine prayer, and it is the culmination of the theme of seeking God’s hidden identity explored through the rest of the book. Its refrain, “Teach us to pray,” which Dillard later called her favorite prayer (Cantwell 7), echoes the quest of the narrator in The Way of a Pilgrim. This poem tackles the paradox of God’s hidden presence, exploring the overlapping themes of wrestling with God’s unknowable identity, theophany in nature, and attaining unceasing prayer through the hesychast method, concepts which Dillard derives from The Philokalia.

A. Wrestling with God’s Elusive Identity

The essential problem of “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel” revolves around “looking / for someone who knows how to pray” (ll. 1-2). As the poem progresses and the search develops, it becomes apparent that proper prayer requires better understanding of prayer’s recipient. In other words, the lesson of how to pray is inextricably intertwined with the struggle to come to know a hidden God. The speaker strains toward glimpsing God throughout “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel.” At the beginning of the poem, the search having just begun, we find the narrator far from communion with God, trying to use a “doll dressed in feathers / And beads of mistletoe” to pray (ll. 10-11), but the characters are “uncertain / whether to shake the doll / like a rattle, or worship him” (ll. 16-18). The proper use of the doll is a mystery, and Dillard paints this attempt to pray as, at best, well-meaning absurdity and at worst, idolatry. As the narrator tries to understand how to pray with it, the doll itself becomes the focus of the prayer. God is never mentioned in
this section, perhaps indicating that the prayer is entirely misdirected. Dillard suggests
the doll is more of a distraction than a help, itself becoming a “rattle,” a possible source
of worship, a necklace, and even food. The identity of God is further obscured and
forgotten thanks to the man-made doll, and thus the attempt to pray properly becomes
muddled. Herein lies the first clue toward Dillard’s project: when we know not even
where to begin to look for God, so-called “prayer” is futile and even counterproductive.

When we reach the image of the “sister,” who wears “a device…on her wrist” (ll.
67-70), the characters have made a small step in the right direction, i.e., toward ceaseless
prayer. In this section, Dillard invokes the “Jesus Prayer” tradition in which the Divine
Name is repeated like a mantra. As the sister’s heart beats, “A sensitive lever…touches
her pulse” and responds by flipping “open a door / to a circular well / in which is
inscribed the word ‘GOD’” (ll. 71-75). This is the first time the word “God” occurs in
the poem, and thus it is an important step in the process of learning to pray. This device
serves as a guide to remembrance, and moves its wearer toward continuous prayer, for
the user is reminded that every heartbeat of her life is the work of God. We see hints of
the “prayer of the heart” prized by the title character of The Way of a Pilgrim, so called
because the “Invocation of the Divine Name is…ultimately integrated into the rhythm of
the heartbeat” (French xii), but ultimately, the sister fails to learn “unceasing interior
prayer.” Although there is an important shift of focus toward God, the device ends up
becoming yet another distraction, another idol, and an added degree of separation
between the devotee and God, keeping the sister’s attention directed to an exterior device
rather than to interior prayer. God, after all, is not a word in a well—God is the well.
Through the language of the poem, Dillard reminds the reader of the limitations of
language: naming God is not an end in itself, but a step in a process of contemplation. The characters are once again caught in the trap of trying to understand an infinite God through a human contrivance, rather than through attentiveness and prayerfully appealing to God's grace. While the sister made progress by recognizing that prayer should be directed toward God, she simultaneously negated that progress by situating her device as an intermediary between herself and God. God is hidden already, and in a sense, her device is a step backward rather than a move toward understanding of God's identity. Dillard echoes the writers of The Philokalia here, particularly Evagrios the Solitary, who insists that such trinkets are not necessary since

The intelligible temple is the pure [nous] which now possesses in itself the Wisdom of God, full of variety; the temple of God is he who is a beholder of the sacred unity, and the altar of God is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity.

Alexander Golitzen eloquently explicates Evagrios' statement: "The liturgy of the individual Christian, the offering that he or she brings as priest for sacrifice at this inner temple and altar, stripped of the idols of the intellect, is the incense of "pure prayer" (2). In short, idols such as the doll and the wrist device are rooted in the intellect and must be abandoned to attain pure "prayer of the heart."

Dillard implies that God lives among us even as we are oblivious him, and he initiates the "wrestling match" by allowing us glimpses of him in spite of our misguided attempts at understanding. But he does it on his own terms, not bound by our contraptions and contrivances. We struggle for a relationship, yet ironically, God is already with us at all times. In lines 90-97, the narrator introduces a mysterious intruder in the house of the God-seeking family:

24
There’s someone else in the house;
I saw the edge
of his topcoat round the stair.
Mother went out to the kitchen for milk
and found a kettle of bones
boiling on the fire.
We smell
Wind in our beds…

The intruder is God, lurking just out of sight. Only his outermost garment has been seen, the most superficial and unrevealing glimpse possible—and yet it is enough to let those who live in the house know he is there. He is always just beyond reach, and both the narrator and the reader remain always one step behind him: Dillard suggests that, although he does not fully reveal himself, God leaves clues. This is an image of the frustration of seeking God’s perpetually hidden identity: the seeker knows he is there, just out of sight, and yet it is impossible to catch up to him. Like the narrator, the reader longs to know who the mysterious character is that eludes us and to understand finally what the scattered clues of his identity mean, and yet we cannot because the clues—boiling bones and windy beds—make no sense really. In fact, at this point in the poem, the narrator has not even figured out that the intruder is God: she is still unaware of God’s identity and thus still far from proper prayer.

In a moment of sudden clarity, mimicking the suddenness and unexpectedness of divine revelation noted by St. Mark the Ascetic, Dillard quotes Pascal: “‘Every religion / which does not affirm that God is hidden / is not true.’” With this statement, the poem makes a dramatic leap from wrestling in obscurity with the unknown to suddenly understanding the nature of the struggle. Up to this point, the images in the poem seemed equivalent to shots in the dark. Now, suddenly, the narrator has pinned down what it is she is trying to accomplish: God is hidden, and we have to attempt to know him in spite
of this. After this statement, the momentum of the poem changes drastically, and God becomes the focus. Shortly afterward, the narrator is trying to understand why those who pray to live still die (ll. 137-142); she has gone from looking for God in something as arbitrary as a rattling doll, to seeking him where she may actually make some headway: in his action in the world, his energies. Further, where the family previously sought God in their own devices and naming, now they seek meaning through his words: ""Not / as the world gives do I give to you" (ll. 141-142). A small victory has been won in the struggle to know God. This is reinforced by the corresponding step forward made in prayer: rather than asking men, suddenly we are asking God to "Teach us to pray" (ll. 149-151). The narrator finally knows where to look for her solution, which does not mean that the struggle with God's identity has ended, but rather that it has finally properly begun. The struggle is enacted in the remainder of the poem through theophany and the challenge of proper prayer.

B. Theophany in Nature

The narrator of "Tickets for a Prayer Wheel" painstakingly begins to "know" God, and it is central to Dillard's project that the knowledge comes not from any man-made tools or techniques, but through theophany in nature. The Christian mystic does not apprehend God through her own effort, but rather through God's choice to reveal himself. Glimpses of God's essence are apparent in his energies, which are evident in creation. In the beginning of the poem, when the family uses dolls, books, and little inventions to seek God, God is nowhere to be found (ll. 7-24, 27-31, 67-81). Yet later in
the poem, as God chooses to reveal himself, he does so using the elements of nature. He is manifest in the “Wind in our beds” (l. 97). His will is implied in the fact that those “who do not wish to leave” still die: God is showing the narrator that “We must not need life” (ll. 140-141).

When the narrator discovers that finally “Many things are becoming possible for us,” it is because “We are exploring / our own house and garden / like hard men charting / the Ultima Thule” (ll. 165-172). Through exploration of the world around them in which God is hidden and yet everywhere present, the seekers finally begin to accomplish their goal. Dillard draws a parallel between the “house and garden” and “the Ultima Thule,” referring to the Northernmost region of the habitable world as well as a remote goal or ideal (American Heritage). In doing so, Dillard implies that if we wish to search for God we must turn our attention to our own surroundings. Thus, throughout the remainder of the poem, God shows himself through “rain water, salt,” “rocks / hung damp in sea thong / living mussel,” “eglantine,” “the short, inspired night,” “the drear day,” the river that flows to the sea, water-filled sand spirals, “the distant, dizzying stars,” and “fossil shells...in solid shale” (ll. 175, 178-180, 181, 211, 212, 227-231, 235-237, 274, 330-331). Each of these images function both in the world and in the poem to reveal something essential about God’s identity, respectively: that he saturates his creation; that he wraps seeming inanimate objects in life; that he is both beautiful and violent, that he “wound[s] to heal” (l. 184); that he wants our attention both night and day; that human time is merely a route to eternity, as a river to the sea; that eternity washes into each of our creations, not washing them away but filling them with God; that his will for us is beyond our reach or understanding; and that the universe, vast as it is, is a mere “hollow
in the side” of the vastness of God. Dillard suggests that through “attentiveness”—here in the form of a re-vision of the local natural phenomena—it becomes apparent that insight into God’s identity is immediately apprehensible. Dillard indicates that infinity is present in the nearest plant or grain of sand.

God is everywhere, inviting us to seek him out, begging us to see him just beneath the clues he lays for us through his energies, the “topcoat” of his essence. When the characters in the poem cultivate the “watchfulness” suggested by The Philokalia and endorsed by Dillard, they are rewarded with theophany everywhere they look.

C. Unceasing Prayer

Dillard advocates the hesychast method in “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel”: she suggests that the best way to cultivate watchfulness and, through it, unceasing prayer is through simplicity and stillness. This concept is evident in the image of the “four white cups—/ earth, air, water, and fire” waiting for study on a “stray, austere” “wooden desk” (ll. 161-164). As professional wine tasters require white tables and walls and minimal distraction to truly appreciate every subtlety of flavor, Dillard holds the Orthodox Christian mystic belief that in such stillness even the minutest manifestation of God’s presence will become apparent. Indeed, by the time the poem culminates, “God is in the house / teaching us to pray” (ll. 260-261), and the narrator at last acknowledges the most important lesson of all: “[T]hou only art holy, thou only art the lord” (ll. 356-357). The resolution comes when we stop our striving and pray on God’s command. The narrator and characters of “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel” are ultimately seeking knowledge of God
and the intimacy that comes with it; such a relationship manifests itself as unceasing prayer.

The title of the poem indicates the focus: the narrator hopes to gain access to a “prayer wheel.” Literally, a prayer wheel is a cylinder inscribed with prayers that is revolved on its axis in devotions (American Heritage). It is used by Tibetan Buddhist monks, who believe that spinning the wheel inscribed with prayers is equivalent to uttering them ceaselessly. The title image then is of a tool for prayer, not unlike the doll and the wrist device later in the poem. The prayer wheel is more useful than those tools, however, since it is directed toward the correct goal: ceaseless prayer. The image contains within itself both the misguided and the successful avenues toward proper prayer. By calling for “tickets” to a prayer wheel, the title invokes the image of the Ferris wheel and juxtaposes it with this devotional symbol. There are several implications inherent in this image. The first is a sense of ridiculousness: the fact that the narrator seeks “tickets” for the prayer wheel invokes the image of an attraction at a carnival, obviously silly and inadequate as a vehicle for relating to God. The mystic may be metaphorically spun around and invigorated—it may seem a “wild ride”—but she ultimately goes nowhere. The title mocks the characters of the poem for their misunderstanding of what prayer is early in the poem. However, behind this mocking tone is a hint at the deeper meaning of how humans seek and a gesture toward the final goal of the poem, and by extension, the collection of poems. (After all, Dillard titles not only the poem, but also this collection Tickets for a Prayer Wheel, implying that all the included poems serve as such “tickets.”) Our methods of seeking God, Dillard implies, are inevitably absurd and trivial given the vastness and transcendence of the object of the
search, but that does not mean we should abandon our seeking. Ultimately, no method is adequate, yet even with our rudimentary tools, we must not cease, however pettily, to hammer out a way to God. The image of the wheel, of circular motion and a single surface that never ends, implies eternity, mandating incessant seeking and foreshadowing the ultimate goal of unceasing prayer to an eternal God. Thus, proper prayer shines through even the most misunderstood beginnings.

The poem is meant to answer the question, “Whose prayers are good?” which Dillard states twice for emphasis. The poem explores several people’s methods of praying, but most are described only briefly and then apparently dismissed, not to be mentioned again. The one refrain that echoes throughout the poem is the need to pray constantly. “Pray without ceasing,” we are told, and “The Dominican, Gregorio Lopez” who “prayed continuously for three years” “at God’s command” is mentioned again and again (ll. 56, 84, 351). Since even the most well-intentioned prayer is inevitably inadequate to the point of absurdity, our only recourse is to pray continuously and hope for the best. To learn to pray, we must abandon all distractions, like Gregorio Lopez (and the narrator in The Way of a Pilgrim), and ask God directly. The process is itself a kind of “prayer wheel,” the circularity of which lies in this: that we must pray in order to learn how to pray. We must begin, and never cease, in order to learn to do it properly: “There is one prayer left”—Dillard’s favorite—“’Teach us to pray’” (ll. 149-150).

The characters in the poem learn about prayer—i.e., developing a relationship with God—through prayer itself, and also through reading the Bible. Dillard points out that in Luke 11 and 18, “Christ demands / importunate prayer, / prayer that does not faint. / Fatigare deos, / wearing God out” (ll. 213-219). God himself, through his incarnation in
Christ, has told us all how to pray properly, she reminds the reader: we must wear him out with prayer. And since, being omnipotent and eternal, we can of course never "wear God out," the implication is that we must never stop praying. To do so is not to neglect food or drink, nor to never rise from our knees, but rather to foster the attentiveness prized by Eastern Christian mystics. If we learn to see God evidenced in his creation, bursting with Glory, we will pray "not 'please' / but 'thank you'" (ll. 338-339) continuously, aware every minute of God's presence.

At the end of the poem, continuous prayer is finally achieved. The characters acknowledge God's power, saying, "thou alone art holy, / thou alone art the lord," and in doing so, they "are drowned," presumably within God. God is everywhere, and becoming interruptedly aware of this essential fact is to lose oneself in God; to "drown" in this way is a hallmark of Orthodox Christian mysticism. Since Dillard defines prayer communing directly with God, as St. Evagrius the Solitary did, this immersion is equivalent to unceasing prayer.

In "Tickets for a Prayer Wheel," Dillard uses vivid description and imagery of nature, as well as facts from readings and personal episodes to explore intensely religious themes and to reflect on the interplay between the beautiful and the terrible in her search for deeper meaning in the world around her. Carrying us from the start to the finish of the poem, Dillard forces her reader to enact a concurrent pilgrimage: through the language and imagery of the poem, we achieve insight into Dillard's journey in the poem as the characters simultaneously achieve insight into God's identity. Dillard communicates the ineffable "mystical experience"—here the process learning to seek God—by engaging us in it. The result is a striking process of learning to "know" an
unknowable God. For some poets, such an intensely significant and powerful work could be the culmination of a career. For Annie Dillard, it was only the beginning.

 Appropriately, given what Jantzen calls “God’s ineffable fecundity,” Dillard had much more to say about the contemporary efficacy of Christian mysticism, and thus emerged her next—and most celebrated—work.

**VII. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek***

Annie Dillard has published eleven books, including a novel, two collections of poetry, and several nonfiction volumes, yet she “is still known primarily as the author of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*” (“Pilgrim” 253). Of her works, it is perhaps the most powerful and certainly among the most accessible. As the title suggests, this work continues the religious theme introduced in *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*. In fact, a few of the same quotes pop up again—for example, Pascal’s observation that “Every religion that does not affirm that God is hidden is not true” (*Pilgrim* 146). The reemergence of the same issues is no coincidence, nor is it laziness, for Annie Dillard is never lazy in her attempts to express her point; she simply makes use of those observations and tidbits of information that are most revealing about the nature of God.

The title implies a spiritual journey: Dillard’s narrator—“more properly…thought of as a persona than as Dillard herself” (“Pilgrim” 253)—is making a “pilgrimage” toward a holy destination. Traveling through nature both physically and mentally, she is moving toward God. Dillard has pointed out on multiple occasions that in spite of the seemingly fragmentary content of the chapters, the book is meant to be
read as a whole and the chapters are structured to reflect the nature of the Orthodox Christian mystic’s pilgrimage:

The first seven chapters represent the *via positiva*, or ‘the journey to God through action and will and materials.’ In these chapters, Dillard focuses on the beauty and intricacy of nature. After a meditative eighth chapter, ‘Intricacy,’ the last seven chapters represent the *via negativa*, ‘or ‘the spirit’s revulsion at time and death.’ In this half of the book, beginning with the destruction of ‘Flood,’ Dillard’s anecdotes are more negative, focusing more on parasites, poisons, and death” (“Pilgrim” 258).

Like “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* chronicles the struggle of the Christian mystic to understand a hidden God through theophany, and, more subtly in this work, to eventually learn unceasing prayer.

Also, it is important to more clearly explicate hesychasm since it plays a more central in this work. Hesychasm is “mental prayer,” a “state of inner rest and silence which victory over the passions gained for a monk and so allowed him to proceed with contemplation” (Meyendorff 134). It is meant to assist the devotee in escaping the distraction in her quest to know God the ineffable and it is the primary method employed by the narrator of *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Most of the narrator’s favorite passages from *The Philokalia* are sections on “interior prayer of the heart,” written by proponents of the hesychast method: Nicephorus the monk, Gregory of Sinai, and Simeon. These are the same authors who, along with Evagrios the Solitary, influenced Palamas’s views on hesychasm and God’s ineffable essence (Meyendorff 134, 139). These particular authors suggest the method of ‘linking the ‘prayer of Jesus’ with breathing, fixing the eyes on one point in the body, and ‘making the spirit thus descend into the heart”’ (Meyendorff 139). The narrator of *The Way of a Pilgrim* does precisely what these mystics suggest: he uses the “Jesus Prayer”—the constant, mantra-like repetition of the phrase, “Lord
Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” (French 11)—through which the person praying is supposed to quiet her mind in order to connect with God. Having learned the technique of unceasing interior “prayer of the heart” from The Philokalia with the help of his starets (French 10), the pilgrim later gets a copy of this text, his only possession other than the Bible, and carries it with him in his travels, practicing its teachings and recommending them to all he meets. The narrator’s solitary excursions into nature are in part an enactment of the hesychast method in that they are attempts at ceaseless communion with God.

After the journey into silent contemplation, Dillard must emerge and find a way to reenact her process which incites her reader to participate. The prose genre allows Dillard a different kind of linguistic freedom than poetry. She tells Mary Cantwell,

> When I switched from poetry to prose, it was like switching from a single reed instrument to a full orchestra. I thought: ‘My God, you can do everything with this stuff. You can do everything you can do with poetry, and more besides’ (4).

Given the obvious challenges inherent to the role of “writer of the ineffable,” it is unsurprising that Dillard would prefer “a full orchestra.” Her subject matter is infinitely complex, and her task as a writer is to explicate that indescribable intricacy, so she certainly needs a linguistic form that allows her to “do everything.” One result of her expansive use of language is that the episodes and subsequent reflections in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek usually include all three of the elements of Christian mysticism discussed here, thus it will be useful to change the organization of this section to fit the work. Rather than addressing each of the mystic concepts one at a time as in the previous section, this section will instead be organized episode by episode, exploring the interplay of God’s hiddenness, theophany, and unceasing prayer, one narrative passage at a time.
A. “The frog skin bag”

It is unsurprising that this episode is possibly the most commonly noted and analyzed by Dillard’s critics, considering the power and horror it invokes. Dillard describes a small frog being “sucked by a giant water bug,” the way that its “skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse like a kicked tent” (8). She then notes that many carnivores eat their prey live, including frogs themselves and ants. This image is emblematic of the “monstrous and terrifying” side of nature (8), and it may properly be considered the first stop on the narrator’s “pilgrimage” to God.

Because nature is the site of theophany, the narrator must deal with the interplay between the beautiful and the horrible in nature if her goal is to comprehend God’s identity. Dillard reflects on the implications of the presence of such horror in nature, first considering whether some creatures might just be accidental. “What do we think of the created universe, spanning an unthinkable void with an unthinkable profusion of forms?” Dillard asks (9). Dillard notes, “In the Koran, Allah asks, ‘The heaven and the earth and all in between, thinkest thou I made them in jest?’” (9) The implication is obvious: God intended every element of his creation; his essence is poured into every contour of nature. When nature contains such horrors as the eating habits of the giant water bug, Christian mysticism asks the question, what does this say about God? Or, as Dillard puts it, “If the giant water bug was not made in jest, was it then made in earnest?” (9) From the perspective of the mystic, the answer is a resounding yes. Just as with any moment of profound beauty, God is present in moments of horror, for all “nature is a manifestation of God” (“Pilgrim” 254). For Dillard, nature provides a lens for viewing God.
In this portion of the book, Dillard poses such preliminary questions, and is not yet attempting to deal in many answers. She speculates that perhaps “God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem” (9). This solution is infused with the Orthodox Christian mystic notion of God’s unknowable essence: the idea that God is present yet hidden, that we seek him without really knowing where to begin, and that we can at first accomplish only minimal, superficial knowledge of him. For, in the same way that “Cruelty is a mystery,” Dillard notes, so too is “the inrush of power and light,” “beauty, a grace wholly gratuitous” (9). The narrator bravely seeks a holistic view of God’s creation, agreeing with the writers of The Philokalia that such “watchfulness” is necessary to begin to know God. The first chapter, and the image of the frog in particular, introduce the theme of wrestling with God’s energies in order to gain insight into his elusive identity, which will become the focus of the majority of the book.

B. Seeing “the tree with the lights in it”

As noted above, one of the primary methods prescribed by the writers of The Philokalia for seeking knowledge of God is to learn “attentiveness”—God is always there, etched into the details, if we will only learn how to look. The Eastern Christian mystics tell us not to rely on human inventions, for they are only distractions from true union with God. Language, as a human contrivance, may properly be considered as one
of these distractions. Dillard addresses both the difficulties of watchfulness and the problems of language in Chapter 2, entitled “Seeing.”

She bases her reflections in this chapter on a book by Marius von Senden called Space and Sight. She describes the reactions of patients blinded since birth by cataracts, now newly sighted thanks to an operation that cured their blindness (27). After reading this book, she claims, she “saw color patches for weeks,” and she longs to see the world with the freshness and clarity of the newly sighted (31). Paradoxically, she explains in detailed language how she hopes to learn how to use her eyes divorced from the distraction of language— “to unparch the peaches,” as she puts it (32). And she does, but only briefly; frustrated, she finds that she cannot “remember ever having seen without understanding” (32). Her own “useless interior babble” prevents her from seeing things as they truly are—as God’s energy, a reflection of his essence. Dillard wishes to silence it, and attempts to do so using something like the stillness of the hesychast method, but her own linguistic “understanding” of the world provides a massive obstacle. And of course, language is not only a barrier between Dillard and God’s energy; it also serves as an obstacle between the reader and her meaning. How can she tell the reader in words about moments of insight when language falls away? Dillard’s flashes of insight—like the reader’s into her meaning—are temporary, but recurring, occurring in the “transient” (James 300) or “rhythmic” (“Mysticism” 246) fashion which is supposedly among the hallmark characteristics of “mystic experiences.”

The problem of transience of insight is part of the reason that Christian mystic writers, who teach the devotee how to apprehend God in spite of his hiddenness, stress the importance of constant attentiveness. As noted above, St. Maximos the Confessor
tells us that to know God one must learn how to see better. Dillard shows the influence of this teaching in her own meditation on seeing. She wishes to see the world as it really is, free from the projections of human conceptualizations; she wants to apprehend it “unraveled from reason” (32). She longs for the day that the “scales would drop from [her] eyes,” when she would “see trees like men walking” and, in response, “run down the road against all orders, hallooing and leaping” (32). She longs for the ecstasy that only the vision of God unveiled could give. However, she notes that this “effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle” (34-35), and so echoes the struggle with God’s hidden nature described in The Philokalia. Dillard admits that, in describing her own efforts, she is indicating a religious—and even a specifically mystic—struggle, saying, “it marks the literature of saints and monks of every order East and West” (35).

The solution is the same for Dillard as for the writers of The Philokalia—one must discipline oneself to attain attentiveness, to be open to the flashes of theophany in nature. Dillard elaborates,

you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness; you raise your sights; you look along it, mildly, acknowledging its presence without interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance. ‘Launch into the deep,’ says Jacques Ellul, ‘and you shall see’ (35).

She describes a consciously cultivated watchfulness, a determination to “see” God and to wrestle with his elusive identity. Because of God’s concurrent imminence and hiddenness, looking about us as we are accustomed won’t work: we must look again, letting our eyes blur, and then, like a Magic Eye 3-D picture, suddenly, there is the hidden image where only meaningless color was before. By silencing the unending “utterance” of our brain and with it, reason, we may apprehend the “nous” and through it,
God. Reflecting St. Mark the Ascetic’s teaching, Dillard also points out that it is God who must initiate moments of illumination. As God initiated the wrestling match with Jacob on the riverbank, only he can choose to make himself known to the mystic. The devotee can train herself to attentiveness, but moments of insight cannot be found until God gives them: “although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise” (35). Dillard directly acknowledges her Christian mystic sources, claiming that she gleans this concept from “literature of illumination” (35). God has all the power; the mystic cannot presume to reach him through her own effort, but only through being open to God’s suggestion.

Dillard, acting as “writer of the ineffable,” must undertake the paradoxical task of finding words to describe the moment that God finally opens her eyes with the clarity of the newly sighted, a moment when she at last, briefly, sees God “unraveled from reason” and the limitations of language. She is “walking along Tinker Creek” and “thinking of nothing”—without meaning to, she had silenced the drone of her “interior babble.” The accidental nature of the experience illustrates the Catch-22 of the moment of insight: Dillard longs to see without reason, but since the techniques the mystic devises to pursue such a goal are painstakingly concocted by the reasonable mind, only by blankly forgetting her quest, along with all reason and intent, can she do the thing she most longs to. Only when she forgets her goal and is given wholly over to God’s grace can she attain that goal and see without distraction. Heightening the paradox of the moment of insight as Dillard describes “the tree with the lights in it,” the reader must simultaneously accept that the moment is beyond “utterance,” and yet access it through Dillard’s telling of it. Using language, she must articulate a moment that is beyond language. Dillard
navigates this paradox through a metaphor of fire: she “saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed” (36). The image of fire invokes something destroyed, or something changed, from solid mater to ephemeral light. That “something” here is the “backyard cedar” and the grass—as in “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” the local is infused with the eternal. God was right in front of the narrator all along, in her own backyard, and the metaphorical flame is not only an indicator of God’s energy, but also a reminder that nothing is familiar and mundane when we recall God’s immanence and transcendence.

“It was less like seeing,” she tells us, “than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance” (36). It is a moment of theophany and moment of prayer. After the narrator has struggled to find God “through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years,” God has finally made himself apparent (36). The moment is not one-sided, but rather a two-way interaction, a communion. The narrator is seen (at least) as much as she is seeing: knowing God’s identity, she has suddenly achieved a momentary sense of relationship with him. Subtly underlying this passage is a sense of prayer: in the tradition she has chosen, to commune with God is to pray, and thus this moment of seeing eye to eye is a moment of prayer. The narrator is a “bell…lifted and struck” by and for God, and afterwards, though “The vision comes and goes”—again, Dillard describes the “rhythmic” nature of mystic insight—she claims, “I live for it.” She longs for it constantly, and thus, strives toward unceasing prayer. Whether in its direct statements or
its subtler implications, the Eastern Christian mystic concept of God’s unknowable essence is at the heart of this chapter.

C. “the hardiness of complexity”

Having established a methodology for seeking out God, as well as some of the fundamental problems one may encounter in doing so, Dillard goes on to “stalk” God for the remainder of her book, seeking elements of his energy in creation. Chapter 8, entitled “Intricacy,” contains several significant observations about theophany, and begins a discussion of “God’s ineffable fecundity” that spans multiple chapters.

In this chapter, Dillard notes the minutia of creation, including red blood cells, plankton, chloroplasts, and so on. She directly states “the point” of all this microscopic attention:

‘Nature,’ said Thoreau in his journal, ‘is mythical and mystical always, and spends her whole genius on the least work.’ The creator, I would add, churns out the intricate texture of the least works that is the world with a spendthrift genius and an extravagance of care (128).

By observing nature, in other words, we can see God’s “extravagance of care.” Dillard further explains: “[N]ot only did the creator create everything, but…he is apt to create anything. He’ll stop at nothing” (136). God’s creation is insistently intricate, and he never seems to tire of making it so. So what is the central point, the lesson to be learned about God’s identity? Dillard tell us:

The wonder is—given the errant nature of freedom and the burgeoning of texture in time—the wonder is that all the forms are not monsters, that there is beauty at all, grace gratuitous…Beauty itself is the fruit of the creator’s exuberance that grew such a tangle, and the grotesques and
horrors bloom from that same free growth, that intricate scramble and
twine up and down the conditions of time (148).

This passage is about theophany: God’s creation shows us his “exuberance,” his love of
infinite variety, his patience, his creativity, and his ability to deal in both beauty and
horror. Dillard expounds upon the incomprehensible energy and creativity that must be
at the heart of such a task, declaring,

If creation had been left up to me, I’m sure I wouldn’t have had the
imagination or courage to do more than shape a single, reasonably sized
atom, smooth as a snowball, and let it go at that. No claims of any and all
revelations could be so far-fetched as a single giraffe (146).

She struggles to understand an infinitely creative, infinitely fecund God, asking not only
“How could he?” but also, “Why would he bother?”: “The question from agnosticism is,
Who turned on the lights? The question from faith is, Whatever for?” (146) Because
God is unutterably boundless—because he not only exists within, but also beyond his
creation—the pilgrim, according to Dillard, is drawn not only to notice as much as
possible, but also to meditate on the motivation for such proliferation.

In this chapter, Dillard also introduces the concept of the bewildering immensity
and variation of human population, which she later develops further in For the Time
Being. Like nature from which we emerge, humanity is infinitely diverse and “as many
as the leaves of the trees” (146). God, in his ineffable fecundity, not only creates an
infinitely varied array of humanity, but he also seeks a relationship with each and every
person. Echoing Biblical text, Dillard asks God, “What is man, that thou art mindful of
him?” and notes, “This is where the great modern religions are so unbearably radical: the
love of God!” (146) In a display of infinite incomprehensibility, God neglects nothing
and no one, in spite of the immeasurable intricacy of his creation, because God’s creation
and his own identity correspond with one another. Dillard's panentheistic philosophy dictates that every single element of nature is not just the effort of God, but part (though not all) of God himself: “Hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen in a ring around magnesium... You are evolution; you have only begun to make trees. You are God—are you tired? finished?” (132) The answer is obviously no, and thus Dillard implies that God will never tire of creating, nor then will he probably ever tire of initiating relationships with men. While she does not explicitly name unceasing prayer as her goal, Dillard has indicated a dialogic relationship between the devotee and God who demands it. In “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” she mentioned that “Christ demands / importunate prayer... wearing God out” (ll. 216-219), and in Chapter 8 of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek she points out that God is tirelessly prolific, forever trying to get our attention—only with similar tirelessness can we begin to know him in all his intricate and ineffable detail. Dillard’s process echoes The Way of a Pilgrim: only through unceasing prayer can we hope to approach a relationship with boundless God.

D. “life so astonishingly cheap”

In Chapter 10, Dillard continues her exploration of God’s fecundity, noting that he is not only tirelessly prolific as she pointed out in Chapter 8, but shifting to the via negativa, she notes that he is also unabashedly and shockingly profligate. But unlike the previous chapter, she does not merely express her awe, but is up in arms, wrestling violently with God’s identity and motive. Throughout the chapter, her words evidence her struggle. She ponders,
I don’t know what it is about fecundity that so appalls. I suppose it is the teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives (162).

God’s extravagance baffles Dillard because it is incomprehensible that individual value can be retained in the face of such wild proliferation and seeming wastefulness. She is terrified that “God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles” (169). What if, like us, his “brain is full of numbers” (169) and he is as numb to the “awesome pressures to eat and breed” which Dillard finds “wholly mystifying” (173)? What if life and death were merely a series of “coincidences” (174)? She finds the thought appalling, and she writhes in the grip of her horror, trying to figure out “what’s it all about?” (171)

In this chapter, Dillard is clearly stymied by the paradox of God’s concurrent nearness and hiddenness, and she admits outright that there is a gap of communication between the writer of the ineffable and her reader when she says, “This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe. The words are simple, the concept clear—but you don’t believe it, to you? Nor do I. How could I, when we’re both so lovable?” (178). She has reached the place that all mystics must go when wrestling with God’s unknowable essence, the place beyond the sensory world and beyond what we know, where “logic snaps”: “This direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness” (179). She cries in despair at all this incomprehensible death, asking, if nothing is “amiss” (180), then “Are my values then so diametrically opposed to those that nature preserves?” Yes, she answers, and “This is the key point” (178). God’s profligacy is not amiss; the author’s
understanding of it is. Dillard admits, “My reservations about the fecundity and waste of life among other creatures is... mere squeamishness” and evidence of her shortsightedness (181). As she suggested in “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” “we must not need life.” In keeping with the teachings of The Philokalia, she has wrestled with God’s elusive identity and has achieved a greater awareness of it.

E. “a kind of nortning”

Dillard revisits some of the now familiar concepts that she introduced in Tickets for a Prayer Wheel, including, notably, her advocacy of hesychasm. In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, the need for stillness surfaces in Chapter Fourteen, in which Dillard wishes to accomplish “a kind of nortning,” and with it, “a reduction, a shedding a sloughing off” of distracting details (255). Standing outside watching the winter come, she notes the “winds and flickering lights and the mad cries of jays,” but instead of reveling in them, she complains that they “stirred” her (248). She wishes for the stillness of winter to come, profound and ultimate: “colder, colder than this, colder than anything, and let the year hurry down!” (248). She dreams of escaping distractions, of “unfixing” her eyes and her mind (249) and “seeing” more deeply into nature, and through it, into God.

Throughout the chapter, Dillard wishes to “go north,” into intense cold, deeper silence, and profound simplicity:

A kind of nortning is what I wish to accomplish, a single-minded trek towards that place where any shutter left open to the zenith at night will record the wheeling of all the sky’s stars as a pattern of perfect, concentric circles. I seek a reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off (255).
The coming of winter accomplishes this “sloughing off” of distraction for her. By sending the birds south and silencing the forest, the winter helps Dillard accomplish the “stillness” and “watchfulness” she yearns for. She explains,

The dark night into which the year was plunging was not a sleep but an awakening, a new and necessary austerity, the sparer climate for which I longed. The shed trees were brittle and still, the creek light and cold, and my spirit holding its breath (261).

The terms in which she describes the effect of the winter—as “an awakening” of “spirit” born of “austerity”—is a perfect depiction of hesychasm. Through stillness, she believes she can apprehend “the real world, not the world gilded and pearled.” She can “stand under wiped skies directly, naked, without intercessors” and feel God directly, like an exposed nerve (263). Dillard clearly echoes her mystic influences, The Way of a Pilgrim and The Philokalia, expressing that God the ineffable is more apprehensible in “stillness,” in the absence of distraction.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is a meditation on the essence of God as expressed through his energies in the world, and Dillard shows repeatedly that while he is not apprehensible in his entirety, the pilgrim nevertheless must never tire in her search for communion with God and must never falter in her progress toward greater understanding of God’s identity. Determination to communicate to the reader the wonder of God’s ineffable fecundity informs the text throughout. In her most recent work, Dillard revisits many of these themes, incorporating the gathered insights of years of study and “pilgrimage,” but, in a perfect performance of the mystic pilgrim’s progress, the movement from via positiva to via negativa which structures Pilgrim also seems to
structure her career: she heightens her consideration of “the spirit’s revulsion at time and death” in her most recent work.

**VIII. For the Time Being**

In *For the Time Being*, Dillard again struggles to understand a hidden God through nature, though in this work her “pilgrimage” is accomplished largely through her reading, with fewer actual excursions into nature than in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In *For the Time Being*, she examines the horrors of birth defects, the cruelty of time, and the staggering numbers of human beings alive and dead, among other things, again attempting to deal with the violence and horror of God’s creation. She is less conclusive and considerably less optimistic—her awe and wonder take on a more strained tone, one of skepticism and frustration. Nevertheless, Christian mysticism still asserts its influence: she uses quotes from several mystic figures, both Western and Eastern, and she continues to address the mystic theme that dominates “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel” and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: wrestling with God’s hidden presence.

The title of the book is a reference to W. H. Auden’s long poem, “For the Time Being.” The poem, also called “A Christmas Oratorio,” is an exploration of the struggle to make sense of a seemingly absurd world, the logic of which is bound to remain incomprehensible to us since we cannot grasp God’s design. The title of the poem—and of Dillard’s text—is drawn from the narrator’s closing speech, in which he anticipates the mundane down-time between the temporary illumination provided by Christmas and the next reminder of God’s presence, Lent and Good Friday:
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,  
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware  
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now  
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,  
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city  
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid’s geometry  
And Newton’s mechanics would account for our experience,  
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.  
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets  
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten  
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen  
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,  
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all (Auden 123).

The span of life on earth—"The Time Being"—is mundane and frustrating in the  
rhythmic ebb and flow of insight and forgetfulness. The activities of the world—our  
science and math, sewing, catching the train, doing household chores—distract us and  
lead us to forget God’s hand in existence, and we allow ourselves to be distracted because  
we cannot make sense of creation anyway. Justin Replogle eloquently explains Auden’s  
passage, and inadvertently gives a key to Dillard’s book as well:  

Floundering in the slough of theological paradoxes, worldly wise truth  
seekers sink deeper the harder they struggle to comprehend. Commanded  
to make an utterly irrational, absurd leap, the bewildered leaper will  
hesitate to make any move at all, and the more intelligent he is the more he  
hesitates. Forced to choose between a desperate present and an absurd  
future, everyone will feel baffled and terrified (65).

Dillard, as a “worldly wise truth seeker,” engages in—or more precisely, continues—this  
“struggle to comprehend” in her most recent work, and she expresses the same mood of  
“bewilderment” and “terror” that characterizes Auden’s poem. The world does not—will  
not—make sense, and the rational mind balks at the command to accept the irrational.

But Dillard’s prose seems to accept the “cure” Auden’s poem offers:
He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy (Auden 124).

The solution, as it was in “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” is to embrace our absurdity—it is, after all, all we are certain of. Rather than turn away from the absurdity of the world, “the Land of Unlikeness,” she, like Auden, embraces it and through it, strives for mystical union with the divine, the heart of “religious mysticism” (“Mysticism” 247); Auden’s “marriage” here is akin to Dillard’s “unceasing prayer” in its implication of intimacy with God, with “Life” himself.

“This is our bleak world,” she laments. “We see only the demonic shells of things. It is literally sensible to deny that God exists. In fact, God is hidden, exiled, in the sparks of divine light the shells entrap” (50). The point of For the Time Being is just this: Dillard insists we must look within the “demonic shells” of the world that horrify us and find the “sparks of divine light” hidden within. Theophany can occur, but not if we turn away from the manifestations of God’s energy that appall us. The mission of the mystic is to contemplate even, and perhaps especially, the most distressing elements of creation to seek out God’s identity. Dillard sums up the difficulty of the task in a quote from Augustine: “We are talking about God. What wonder is it that you do not understand? If you do understand, then it is not God” (47).
More noticeably than in previous works (though certainly not for the first time), Dillard utilizes quotes and concepts from religious traditions other than Christian mysticism, including especially Judaism and Islam. Although she retains her Christian mystic focus, introducing the figure of Teilhard de Chardin as her new mystic hero, she does so while integrating the reflections of non-Eastern Orthodox theologians, giving this work a sort of cosmopolitan spirituality which, while it may seem a betrayal of Dillard’s Orthodox Christian foundation, is in fact an excellent tactic for expressing a more universal vision. The mystic, after all, “tends to escape the fetters of organized religion” (“Religious Experience” 583). Since Christian mysticism is not exactly “organized religion,” and since mystic writing tends to acknowledge God’s ineffability more directly than any other tradition, mystic writers are loathe to set limits around God’s essence (as, of course, they inevitably must), so it makes perfect sense that Dillard would observe multiple traditions in search of helpful insight. In fact, Dillard’s use of the words of many theologians echoes the intertextuality of her mystic sources: it is, after all, common practice in Eastern Christian spirituality to construct “a treatise by stringing together quotations and references from earlier sources” (Pelikan ix). In the medieval literary tradition from which The Way of a Pilgrim comes, various texts were often “used in the composition of new works” (Pentkovsky 32). In many ways, Dillard’s use of several theologians from various religious traditions is the ultimate expression of her ideological roots in The Philokalia, the writers of which advocate pursuing God’s inexpressible boundlessness by any means necessary.
Dillard’s grimly comic look at time and the mercilessness with which it buries human beings, regardless of the quality of their lives or the earnestness of their prayers, contains none of the optimism of the moment in “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel” when the narrator concludes, “We must not need life” (ll. 141-142). She laments that we are all doomed to face our own obscurity. Dillard discusses time in terms of sands that are always washing over us: “If you stay still, earth buries you, ready or not” (122). Civilizations are built, one on top of another, and sand as the agent of time buries us all eventually. “We live on dead people’s heads,” she points out (124), heads that have been covered over by the sands of time, as ours soon will be, too. Of course, we try to stall the process of time and to put off being dead and buried, not only with medicine and street-smarts, apparently, but also with household chores. With a tone of drear humor, Dillard remarks, “Quick: Why aren’t you dusting? On every continent, we sweep floors and wipe tabletops not only to shine the place, but to forestall burial” (123). We resist time, she says, but its passage is inevitable. We ourselves are merely “rammed earth” (18), blown to a million bits as easily as the dust that threatens to cover us. Yet, still we ignore that the fate of our ancestors is our own fate. Dillard remarks the incredible willful forgetfulness that characterizes humanity:

In every arable soil in the world we grow grain over tombs—sure, we know this. But do not the dead generations seem to us dark and still as mummies, and their times always faded like scenes painted on walls at Pompeii? (187)
This is the real cruelty of time: we, too, will seem “dark and still as mummies” in a mere blink of an eye in the eternal span of time. Our own forgetfulness of these facts, she suggests, is an inexcusable omission in our consideration of God’s energies.

Time is ever against us; yet time, like all elements of nature, is of God. Is God then against us, Dillard asks? According to Dillard’s spiritual philosophy, God set us here in this brevity, to face our inevitable demise. For the Orthodox Christian mystic, time and nature are his creation, and, as Dillard points out, “Nature itself is a laid trap. No one makes it through; no one gets out” (187). The obvious question is “Why?” And from this, Dillard’s—and Christian mysticism’s—usual question emerges again: “What can we learn about God from this? Who is he?” However, unlike her earlier works—as when she asked why people continue to die in “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” or when she asked “Who turned on the lights?” and “Whatever for?” in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek—she is not so quick to offer answers to her questions in For the Time Being. While the constant questioning and the tone of absurdity is no different from her earlier works, she seems worn out as never before with the unsolvable mystery. However, the struggle, though fatigued, is still mystical in nature: Dillard is still struggling to understand God’s identity through the stuff of his creation. She still unabashedly asserts that there is more to be learned about God from “Any patch of ground anywhere” than even from visiting the very place Christ was born (79-80).
B. Birth Defects: "WHAT'S with the bird-headed dwarfs?"

Dillard opens her book by listing several birth defects mentioned in Smith's Recognizable Patterns of Human Malformation by Dr. Kenneth Lyons Jones. She warns the reader of the horror that she finds there, saying it "is a volume to which, in conscience, I cannot recommend your prolonged attention" (3). Among the many cases of innocent children deformed in ways painful for the reader to imagine are the bird-headed dwarfs, about which she longs to question "God the compassionate" (53). She ponders:

Maybe 'all your actions show your wisdom and love' means that the precious few things we know that God did, and does, are in fact unambiguous in wisdom and love, and all other events derive not from God but only from blind chance, just as they seem to. What, then, of the bird-headed dwarfs?" (86-87)

She waffles between attributing all to God's will and allowing for the possibility of chance, struggling to reconcile her observations with the image of a benevolent God. Dillard is still engaged in the Christian mystic quest of understanding God's purpose, and theophany in nature is still the source for her answers. But here the struggle is harder-wrought than ever before, for—she reminds us, lest we forget—the abominations of nature are not only apparent, but seem to outweigh the beauty. Are these horrors merely the fault of the trials and errors of evolution, she wonders (87)? She notes that there is a Talmudic blessing offering thanks to God even for such moments of natural tragedy; in this case, the blessing is, "'Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, WHO CHANGES THE CREATURES" (6). In other words, even the Talmud all but sidesteps this issue. Dillard provides her reader with no conclusive answer, and in
enflaming our curiosity without “giving up the goods,” incites us to engage with her in this continued mystic struggle.

She quotes Teilhard de Chardin, a mystic and geologist whose ideas inform other moments in this work, as saying, “Fortune will not necessarily turn out the way we want but in the way it must” (87). She seems to flirt with the idea that God created the earth and set it in motion, and then simply turned his back, or at least that he chooses not to assert his power in most cases of pain and evil in the world. “The omnipotence of God,” Dillard claims, “makes no sense if it requires the all-causingness of God” (85). And yet, “Of God, the Kabbalah asserts: Out of that which is not, He made that which is” (7).

Which is true, Dillard asks? That God made everything, even the bird-headed dwarves? Or that he merely set the wheels of nature in motion to do what they would? She seems at first unable to come to a conclusive answer. The struggle to know God through exploration of the implications of his actions in the world continues for Dillard, emblematizing the fact that the struggle of the mystic to “know” God through nature is life-long. The work that Dillard began in her 20s continues in her 50s.

C. Human Population: “I mean, there are so many people.”

Dillard deals extensively with the issue of numbers and the implications they have for the ability for any one person to achieve a direct relationship with God. She fears not only that God may be incapable of feeling unabated compassion for so many, but that we are as well. She struggles to “wake” the readers, to keep their minds from “going slack” in the face of the numbers of people on the planet in the past, present, and future. The
numbers of people boggle the mind of any one person, and so, she wonders, how can God keep track of each and every single one? Must we resign ourselves hopelessly to obscurity? It seems so. She especially focuses on the inevitability of death for the masses of humanity; no one wants to die, and yet so many do, “who do not wish to leave” (“Tickets” l. 139). She offers as an example the drowning of 138,000 people in one day in Bangladesh, a number so large that, given the inevitably complex personality of each individual who lost his or her life, our minds cannot contain the significance of the incident, but rather we tend to see the whole thing as Dillard’s daughter does—“Lots and lots of dots, in blue water” (48). She juxtaposes this event with the quote from Thomas Merton: “‘God rises up out of the sea like a treasure in the waves’” (108-109). In doing so, she questions and even openly mocks such a glossy vision of God. She reminds us further that “‘The dead outnumber the living,’” and that they always will (49). This imbalance seems to suggest that death will always be of greater significance than life, and those who die will be forgotten and merely lumped among the ever-increasing numbers of deceased, who already “outnumber us...by about 14 to 1” (49). This means nothing to us; it falls on dead ears, because we are desensitized by such staggering numbers. Dillard quotes Stalin as saying, “‘One death is a tragedy; a million deaths are a statistic’” (75).

Dillard uses such numbers to foreground yet another baffling question about God’s identity: against these odds, “How can an individual count?” (75) From these staggering numbers and from the infinite proliferation of nature, Dillard saps insights about God’s essence. She claims, “Only some deeply grounded and fully paradoxical view of God can make sense of the notion that God knows and loves each of 5.9 billion of us” (134). To the mystic, of course, noting that “paradox” is required to hold this view
does not necessarily negate its truth or its sense. Instead, she calls for a re-evaluation of
our traditional manner of perceiving God. As in her earlier works, God's power and
horror are central to her search for God's identity—following the teachings of her
Orthodox Christian mystic sources, she insists on grappling with these issues in order to
come to any sort of useful conclusions. If our current notions are "fully paradoxical," we
must not automatically discard them, but instead attempt to come to an understanding of
God that accounts for this paradox, since it is our limitations and not God which are
responsible for the seeming contradiction.

As an illustration of God's mysterious design, Dillard suggests, we might attempt
to discern God's intent and identity as it is reflected in the human population, which we
can hardly consider without becoming numb to the statistics. These "HEAD-SPINNING
NUMBERS CAUSE [the human] MIND TO GO SLACK," and yet "our minds must not
go slack" (130). The Eastern Christian mystics warn that we must remain "watchful" to
comprehend God, and so Dillard struggles to meet God face to face, even in spite of the
problem posed by such massive numbers. Indeed, the conundrum of understanding
God's essence emerges largely from his supposed ability to connect with each of us at an
individual level; such an infinite capacity for compassion is bewildering, especially when
considered in comparison with our own inability to grasp the individual identities of so
many human beings. In order to comprehend God, Christian mysticism insists, our minds
must stay alert to our surroundings and to our predicament—they "must not go slack."
Dillard is still engaged in the Christian mystic's wrestling match with God, and again
knowledge of him, however difficult to handle or hard to believe, comes through
theophany in nature. Affirming Smith's characterization of her as a "panentheist,"
Dillard reminds us that in his ineffable infinity, God contains and stretches beyond not only nature, but also every single one of us, and that herein lies the solution to the problem of “head-spinning numbers.”

\[ D. \textit{The Solution: } ‘\textit{God needs man}’ \]

Dillard aligns herself with panentheism, which “according to David Tracy, theologian at the University of Chicago, is the private view of most Christian intellectuals today” (Parrish 176). In accordance with Dillard’s panentheist spiritual philosophy, she believes that God is both immanent—“remaining within or existing within the confines of a limit”—and transcendent—“going beyond a limit or surpassing a boundary” (“Religious Experience” 580). In this case, that “limit” is creation:

The divine is said to transcend man and the world when it is viewed as distinct from both and not wholly identical with either; the divine is said to be immanent when it is viewed as wholly or partially identical with some reality within the world, such as man or the cosmic order (“Religious Experience” 580).

For Dillard, God does both: he is both distinct from—or more precisely, beyond—“man and the world,” and yet “partially identical” with his creation. Or, as she puts it, “Not only is God immanent in everything, as plain pantheists hold, but more profoundly everything is simultaneously in God, within God the transcendent. There is a divine, not just bushes” (176-177). God’s immanence provides her with the solution to the problem of overwhelming numbers and God’s hiddenness: God apparently needs people to “disclose him, complete him, and fulfill him” (195). Dillard departs slightly from The Philokalia here, taking her influence from Teilhard de Chardin. Rather than being
insignificant for our sheer numbers of living and dead, Dillard insists that we matter in an ultimate sense: God is in us, or rather, we are in God. Dillard sums up Teilhard’s philosophy about God through the telling of Abbe Paul Grenet, his friend and fellow mystic: “His name is holy, but it is up to us to sanctify it; his reign is universal, but it is up to us to make him reign; his will is done, but it is up to us to accomplish it” (195). Through humanity, God’s “work is being done” (195).

Dillard rejects, however, the notion that God immanence is therefore limited by the will of his creation. She refuses to accept that “The only body he’s got is us,” because it “bollixes the doctrines of God’s omnipotence and completeness-in-himself” (200). Yet, although he is larger than the body of humanity, he includes us: “God needs man,” she says, “kenotically or not, he places himself in our hands” (200). In other words, she makes a point similar to Symeon the New Theologian’s in his poem, “We Awaken in Christ’s Body”:

We awaken in Christ’s body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters
my foot, and is infinitely me.

I move my hand, and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of him
(for God is indivisibly whole, seamless in His Godhood) (ll.1-8).

God is “indivisibly whole,” such that man’s action is God’s action; we partake in God’s moving, and with it, infinite responsibility. In an attempt to further explain this notion, Dillard paraphrases Rabbi Tarfon: “The work is not yours to finish…but neither are you free to take no part in it” (202). Through us, Teilhard says, “The mystery will be accomplished” (202). Dillard utilizes the words of religious thinkers of various faiths as
she used nature before—as a vehicle for contemplating God’s identity and action in the world.

In her emphasis on the importance of humankind as part of God’s identity, Dillard overlaps and adds to both Kant’s and Ferrer’s suggestions that experience—and specifically “religious experience,” or “spirituality”—is co-participatory in nature. The NEB sums up Kant’s position as follows:

Experience is not identical with passively received sensible material but must be construed as the joint product of such material and its being grasped by an understanding that thinks in accordance with certain necessary categories not derived from the senses (“Religious Experience” 579; Ferrar).

In this model, the “experiencer” is of equal importance with the thing experienced. So, when the thing experienced is God, we need not discount the importance of the person who is experiencing. But Dillard lends the mystic an additional element of importance: not only does she participate in creating the experience by “doing” the experiencing, as in Kant’s and Ferrar’s assessments, but also shares part of the thing experienced—God’s nature.

For Dillard, reminding the reader that God is immanent is not tantamount to saying, “Look! He’s there! In us! Silly us for not seeing it before.” God is no less hidden, even with Dillard’s solution. She explains:

When one of his Hasids complained of God’s hiddenness, Rabbi Pinhas said, “It ceases to be a hiding, if you know it is hiding.” But it does not cease to hide, not ever, not under any circumstances, for anyone (173).

Again echoing Palamas, Evagrios the Solitary, and St. John Cassian, Dillard insists that we cannot know God’s essence, which is inevitably, invariably hidden. We may be attentive to his energies when we do as Dillard suggests and comprehend our
participation with these energies in “God’s work,” and therefore are privy to a suspicion of his infinite essence, though he is ever to remain beyond us. Whatever insights Dillard gains, God’s ultimate ineffability remains.

IX. Dillard, Jantzen, James, and Joshi: Resolving the Problem of Ineffability

Dillard clearly draws her recurring themes of wrestling with a hidden God, theophany, and unceasing prayer from The Way of a Pilgrim and The Philokalia, which, as we have already established, emphasize the unknowable essence of God. It would seem, then, that Dillard, like Jantzen, believes that it is God, and not mystic experience, that is in fact ineffable. However, Dillard’s concept of ineffability seems to include not only God’s essence, but also a personal sense of mystery and incommunicable truth that stretches beyond logic. Dillard’s task as a writer of the ineffable includes not only clarifying her insight about God’s identity, but also describing the experience of insight itself, which is likewise difficult to articulate, especially to those who have not had similar experiences themselves.

Although Jantzen’s argument is compelling, James is not incorrect when he suggests that mystical experience is also ineffable. James notes that such experience “defies expression” and that “no adequate report of its contents can be given in words” (300). These criteria seem to challenge Dillard’s role as a writer of the ineffable—after all, as Jantzen asks, how can one write about an experience that “defies expression”? James explains of mystical experience that “its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others” (300), but even James admits that such
communicability or incommunicability is dependent on the predisposition of those “others.” It is important to note the caveat James places on this inexpressibility: mystical experience is ineffable to those who have not had similar experiences themselves. In other words, “The spiritual life...justifies itself to those who live it; but what can we say to those who do not understand?” (James 312) According to James, the only ones who can comprehend the mystic writer who tries to convey her experiences is one who shares what might be called a “mystic predisposition.” In an attempt to explain this notion via allegory, James compares mystic states to “states of feeling,” such as love, and to “the value of a symphony”:

One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one’s self to understand a lover’s state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the love justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd (300).

James suggests that many simply do not come from a perspective that includes the possibility of such insights, which are beyond what James calls “mere logic” (73). While this is certainly the case, James does not account for the possibility of the intercession of Divine Grace to bridge this gap.

The critique of S. T. Joshi introduced earlier echoes almost to the word the accusations James claims are often leveled at mystics by “rationalists.” Joshi is annoyed with Dillard’s writing because he feels that it is “random” and “dismally meandering” (219), not to mention that it is “flatly contradicting the Old Testament” (221) while calling itself Christian. He is dismayed that she “is perfectly happy to worship a god of whom she admits she knows very little” (219). He calls her “religious opinions” “vacuous, nonsensical, meaningless, fallacious, and simply erroneous” (223). He also finds her writing “inane” and “opaque” because of “its fragmentary presentation of a
multiplicity of narratives...which Dillard herself makes no attempt to link into any kind of unity” (220), entirely missing Dillard’s point of leaving these “gaps” in logic, which is to perform apophatic apprehension and to draw the reader into participation in the work’s meaning-making. He misses her meaning again when he complains that she “reveals a quick and irrational prejudice against science,” when in actuality she simply means to demonstrate the inadequacy of science—along with all other forms and disciplines of human knowledge—to package God. Dillard’s reflections are “a series of unsupported assertions” which fail to contain “anything coherent or intelligible,” and—horror of horrors—there is no “use” for such a worldview (222)—as though utility were even remotely the point.

Why is Joshi bewildered and even disgusted with Dillard’s attempts to communicate her experiences? James’ text offers a viable explanation:

The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion (74-75).

Well, the reverse is also true: our “inarticulate feelings of reality” (or in Dillard’s case, our “feelings of reality” which may only be articulated through circuity), too, are only “cogent” for those whose feelings “have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion,” i.e., who have had similarly unspeakable, albeit powerful experiences. Joshi is what James would call a “rationalist,” whose stance he places in direct opposition to the “mystic.” According to James, a rationalist is one who “insists that all our beliefs ought ultimately to find for themselves articulate grounds” (73-74). Dillard grapples with the ineffability of both God and her experience, often forced to speak around what cannot be explained directly, yet Joshi is unimpressed, because “Vague impressions of
something indefinable have no place in the rationalistic system” (James 74); they are absurd, “unsupported,” and “useless.” Any reader approaching Dillard from a purely analytical perspective would find her “opaque” because she utilizes a more intuitive form of knowledge, i.e., the “nous,” or “intellect of the heart.” Dillard fails to involve Joshi in her mystic project because he is disinterested in intuitive knowledge and is thus entirely without the “mystic predisposition,” or for that matter, a familiarity with Dillard’s Orthodox Christian mystic sources, that would let her insights resonate. And yet, his resistance does not deny the value of her task. The staret of The Way of a Pilgrim tells the pilgrim that such experience must be passed along in writing because of love, and then quotes Proverbs 18:19: “a brother helped by a brother is like a strong and lofty city.” The love at the root of the task demands that Dillard persist, even when misunderstood, so that she may participate in God’s work and make a space for Divine Grace to intercede. While Dillard must always struggle to communicate, it is ultimately up to God to validate her insights and engage people like Joshi—or not to.

Dillard has suggested, in her essay “Write Till You Drop,” that the task of the writer is to “play the edges,” to take push the reader to where he “must recoil,” where “Reason balks, poetry snaps; some madness enteres, or strain. Now gingerly, can she enlarge it, can she nudge the bounds?” (1-2) If we attempt to process Dillard’s explanation of her “mystic experience” through “mere logic” alone, we will fail utterly to process it at all. Further, Dillard assumes her audience is much less interested in logical conjectures, and is rather in search of a deeper truth. She asks,

Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?...Why are we reading, if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage and the hope of meaningfulness, and press upon our
minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power? (2-3).

Dillard writes for a reader searching to “magnify,” give “meaning,” and explore “mysteries,” rather than to define, to categorize, and to expose. Rather than assuming at the outset that logic is the only viable form of knowledge, Dillard begs to know,

What do we ever know that is higher than that power which, from time to time, seizes our lives, and which reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered?...We still and always want waking (3).

The rationalist demands articulation, clarity, and reason; but in Orthodox Christian mystic fashion, Dillard revels in bewilderment and in moments when “logic snaps.” How can Dillard ever articulate her insight to a reader with Joshi’s tenacious bias toward exacting logical explanation? Her method demands a reader willing to participate in the meaning-making and fill in Dillard’s gaps him or herself; without such willingness, it seems, that the ineffability of God and mystical experience is cause for going to the effort of the journey.

In Jantzen’s assessment of the task of the mystic writer, the issue is divided into two mutually-exclusive options: either the writer writes about her experience or about God, and Jantzen endorses the latter. But Dillard writes about both—she reflects on God’s identity, but she does so through telling of her own, often ineffable experiences of insight. Jantzen’s separation of “mystical experience” and God into two separate concepts is problematic, since that “experience” is ultimately of God. Given Dillard’s conclusion in For the Time Being that “God needs man” and Ferrar’s assertion that spirituality is co-participatory, it makes little sense to divide the thing experienced—
God—from the experience itself when discussing ineffability. The two are inextricably intertwined, and so in her writing, Dillard attends to both.

X. Conclusion

Dillard’s writing follows and continues the current of Christian mystic thought laid out in The Way of a Pilgrim and The Philokalia. In varying levels of directness, throughtout her works she weaves the method of hesychasm, and the concepts of God’s hiddenness, theophany in nature, and unceasing prayer. In doing so, she presses language to serve, provisionally, as an indicator of God’s identity and her own experience of his presence—if, evidently, to a degree of success that is directly proportionate to the predisposition of the reader. Again and again she makes grand and surprising discoveries within the realm of the ordinary, reinvigorating common everyday occurrences and experiences. Orthodox Christian mystic influence is the driving force behind this insight; it leads her to and through the visions she so artfully depicts in her writing. As is perhaps apparent by how utterly Joshi misses the point, recognizing the influence of Christian mysticism is fundamental to understanding Dillard’s project. Though it is especially apparent in the three works mentioned in this paper—and to a much greater extent than space here permits—such a permeating influence no doubt emerges again and again in others, if not, all of her writings. Thus, this paper is by no means intended to be a complete summary of Dillard’s Christian mysticism, but rather an invitation to employ that tradition as an assisting discourse for the reader of her work.
God shines through nature as Christian mysticism shines through the works of Annie Dillard, and her philosophy as a writer mimics something of the extravagance she attributes to God when he creates:

One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you” (“Write Till You Drop” 4).

Ever the mystic, Dillard cheerfully lives espouses paradox: she strives at all costs to speak glimpses of the unknowable into view; she demands that her fellow writers “spend” inspiration in order to get it; she suggests that we “give freely” in order to keep that which would otherwise be lost; and she devotes her life to writing what cannot be written off.
Bibliography


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APPENDIX 1: SURVEY

DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THIS FORM
Please answer the following questions:

1. Before reading this paper, were you familiar with any forms of mysticism? Christian mysticism?

2. Do you consider yourself religious? Spiritual? Do you distinguish between the two?

3. How would you describe your religious affiliation (or lack thereof)?

4. What role does religion/spirituality play in your life (especially academic interests and/or creative expression)?

5. What images and/or words come to mind when you think of “mysticism”?

6. Does your school or university have a Religious Studies department? (If no, go on to question 8)

7. Does your school’s Religious Studies department include courses on Christian or other forms of mysticism?

8. Have you read other texts that address the role of mysticism in the works of Annie Dillard? If so, which ones?

9. Have you studied the role of religion/spirituality in other literary texts and/or works of art?