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Out of Despair, Into the Wilderness: A Study of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Gary Snyder's *Myths & Texts*

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Out of Despair, Into the Wilderness:
A Study of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
and Gary Snyder's *Myths & Texts*

A THESIS

The Honors Program

College of St. Benedict / St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"

and the Degree Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of English

by

Megan Ann Casey

May, 1997

PROJECT TITLE: Out of Despair, Into the Wilderness: A Study of Annie Dillard's
Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and Gary Snyder's *Myths & Texts*

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Introduction: Unthinkable Universe, A New Myth

*What do we think of the created universe, spanning an unthinkable void with an unthinkable profusion of forms? --Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 7*

*I sit without thought by the log-road
Hatching a new myth --Gary Snyder, *Myths & Texts* 19*

Annie Dillard and Gary Snyder are contemporary American writers who find themselves at a place in time and space where humans are overwhelmed with a sense of alienation and isolation. A number of human traditions, especially the development of the scientific method, have led us moderns in the West to separate ourselves from and exploit the earth so well that both our ecosystems and our spirits are damaged. We wander, as Eliot and countless others have described, through a wasteland devoid of cohesive systems of meaning. Dillard and Snyder, unwilling to blindly accept such a tradition, both look to the wild, the uncultivated, the uncultured, to reassess this modern despair that seems to be self-induced and to look for a way out of desolation. They look carefully at the world around them, the world in their backyards, and to the wild unconscious of the dreaming mind, in the hope that finding something wild—something not defined by and in relation to human subjectivity—will provide the passage to another, less bleak way of understanding the world and human existence within it.

So they look. They describe their surroundings in detail, using both literary images and scientific terms. They describe unitive experiences and find hope and joy in connections which ground the human—the food chain, dying into earth, the inspiration of the wild in the creation of art—in the living, breathing mandala world. They perform myth criticism, each using old myths from a number of traditions and their own, self-created myth-images to explore humans' relationships to the wild and to suggest the possibility of better relationships. Both examine the

discourse between “me,” little person here and now with dreams of eternity, and the rest of the world, mountains and oceans and all living beings, time on the universe's scale and processes.

I call my theoretical approach ecological criticism. Ecological criticism is a form of ethical criticism, which examines assumptions and developments in texts for their ethical underpinnings, and belongs alongside Marxist and feminist criticisms. Ecological criticism challenges human social structures even more radically than Marxist or feminist criticisms because it is concerned with ecosystems as well as social structures, with domination and subjugation according to species rather than class or gender. As I closely read Dillard's and Snyder's texts, I am concerned with ecological systems, with humans as a part of a larger world, and with language and story arising organically out of humans as natural beings in their environments. I am concerned with the ecological and spiritual health of cultures, and with how Dillard's and Snyder's texts reveal their concerns about these issues. The wild of which I speak is not simply areas of the earth unaltered by human hands, but energy and abundance, that which drives life in diversity and its own sorts of order, both human and nonhuman, exterior and in the mind, living and nonliving, and also chaos and the unknown.

I read Dillard and Snyder not merely as nature writers, but as postmodern writers, rejecting and, in the case of Snyder, subverting the alienation and despair of the moderns, rejecting the idea of the wasteland. So, though their texts appear markedly different, though Dillard writes about God and art while Snyder writes about wilderness, our destruction of it, and how we might heal our deteriorated spirits, I find them both doing the same thing. Both write out of the desolation of the modern landscape that is fueled by our thinking in science's terms of object and subject and the havoc this has wreaked upon the earth and our spirit. Both write about how we need to understand ourselves here on this planet in relationship, by using old myths and

creating new/old metaphors which circle through the categories and divisions of scientific thinking and connect at a higher logical level than deductive reason.

I focus on two texts, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard and *Myths & Texts* by Gary Snyder. When read alongside, counter-illuminating, I find that the spiritual journeys of Dillard's pilgrim in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Snyder's narrator in *Myths & Texts* mirror each other. Each moves out of binary thinking into paradox in what Snyder would identify as Buddhist enlightenments. Both create visions of living in movement, but only Snyder makes real his vision and grounds the ethics implicit in it in the real, political world as he begins laying out a path for compassionate human action in our paradoxical and ever-changing world. Both seek to ground their language in the real, but only Snyder understands his writing as sustainable, arising from earth like heat from compost, while Dillard feels she must burn herself up, destroy herself in an attempt to bring light to the world.

“These Acrid Stones”: The Modern Landscape

Dillard and Snyder are both writing out of the modern landscape, in reaction to the alienation and fragmentation that seem to pervade mainstream philosophy and literature. At their place in time, science, violence, and clashings of cultures have combined to shatter the fragile shells of old systems of belief. Religion, nationalism, and traditional Western humanism no longer provide believable answers to life's deepest questions in a world of random violence, shallow relationships, consumerism, and ecological disaster. Deconstruction in academic circles only echoes less formal deconstruction of dominant ways of interpreting the world. We concern ourselves with surfaces, because as time progresses we become increasingly doubtful that there is anything behind our surfaces. The self is left in the spiritually and physically barren landscape of

T. S. Eliot's wasteland, and the absence of viable sources of meaning could easily lead one to despair. Dillard, in particular, is sensitive to the temper of the modern age, as an essay in her collection *Teaching a Stone To Talk* reveals:

These are enervating thoughts, the thoughts of despair. They crowd back, unbidden, when human life as it unrolls goes ill, when we lose control of our lives or the illusion of control, and it seems that we are not moving toward any end but merely blown. Our life seems cursed to be a wiggle merely, and a wandering without end. Even nature is hostile and poisonous, as though it were impossible for our vulnerability to survive on these acrid stones. (152)

But nature has not always seemed hostile. Our understanding of the wild around us (and inside us) is a reflection more of ourselves and what we want to see than of the actual world. Snyder writes in *The Old Ways*, "As the discriminating, self-centered awareness of civilized man has increasingly improved his material survival potential, it has correspondingly moved him farther and farther from a spontaneous feeling of being part of the natural world" (OW 9). Premodern human beings felt connected to and dependent upon their natural surroundings, as can be shown through Native American and other premodern societies' rituals and practices around the globe. Morris Berman, professor of the history of science at Concordia University in Montreal, explains the process by which Westerners have "disgodded" nature in his book *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, claiming that the process began in the Jewish and Greek traditions of 2000 B.C. The Old Testament reveals that the Jews understood themselves as waging a war on pagan gods (the gods of woods and waters, the gods of particular places) for the sake of their supreme and only God. Socrates, in turn, shows contempt for any form of cognition other than Greek rationalism, thereby excluding tacit knowing (Berman 70). These traditions fed our

Western tradition until the sixteenth century brought us Descartes and Newton. Cartesian dualism, the legacy of Descartes, which recognizes no self-contradictions, separates mind from body and subject from object. The tangible contains no immanent meaning, as what is really “real” is the abstract, that which can be quantified and measured. Max Oelschlaeger describes this phenomenon in his book *The Idea of Wilderness*:

Knowledge (conceptualized as episteme) and the essence of the psyche have been associated with a transcendent and immaterial domain beyond space. . . . The palpable world of experience--the natural world of the Paleolithic mind--becomes profane, a manifestation only of mere particulars, pallid reflections of transcendent, universal forms.

(57)

In the modern world view, to know is to control, or rather to imagine one controls and to assert one’s will upon the universe in order to establish such control. To study something, one must take it out of its environment to isolate variables. Of course, attributing truth to any methodology is always an act of faith, which is something moderns seem to have forgotten in regards to the scientific method. Because we assume that the mind is something separate from our body (which is undeniably an organic part of the larger natural world), we moderns see the self as an island, as opposed to premoderns who generally saw the self as an embryo, the world as a womb (Berman 77). Again, Dillard writes:

Now we are no longer primitive; now the whole world seems not-holy. We have drained the light from the boughs in the sacred grove and snuffed it in the high places and along the banks of sacred streams. We as a people have moved from pantheism to pan-atheism. Silence is not our heritage but our destiny; we live where we want to live. (TST 69)ⁱ

We live where we want to live. We as moderns live under a number of illusions--illusions of eternal progress, unlimited resources, the supremacy of our culture, the intrinsic worth of the accumulation of goods, and the idea that reason can solve all our problems and answer all our questions. Not only are these things illusions, not only are they results of the same attitude that leaves us as alienated islands of self, but they are destructive and leading us to a state of environmental degradation from which it will be very difficult to recover. Snyder describes the sickness of modern civilization in his recent collection of essays, *A Place in Space*:

For several centuries western civilization has had a priapic drive for material accumulation, continual extensions of political and economic power, termed 'progress.' In the Judeo-Christian worldview humans are seen as working out their ultimate destinies (paradise? perdition?) with planet earth as the stage for the drama--trees and animals mere props, nature a vast supply depot fed by fossil fuel, this religio-economic view has become a cancer: uncontrollable growth. It may finally choke itself and drag much else down with it. (53)

Modern physics, though, has cast doubt upon the supremacy of the scientific method. In 1927, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle asserted that one cannot measure both velocity and position simultaneously, that our instruments and our minds have become parts of the experiment; that the observed cannot be isolated. The boundary between subject and object blurs and disappears. "The 'lesson of modern physics is that the subject (perceiving apparatus) and object (the reality measured) form one seamless whole.' *Panta rhei*, said Heraclitus; everything flows, only process is real" (Berman 145). Heisenberg's principle, in revealing that the scientific method only studies its own methods, allows for the legitimacy of other ways of knowing.

Artists, poets, people who intuited all along, even in the midst of our super-rational modern era,

that one could apprehend the universe through emotion and sensations, have begun to look back to premodern ways of thought—original participation, “the feeling, the bodily perception, that there stands behind the phenomena a ‘represented’ that is of the same nature as me—*mana*, God, the world spirit and so on” (77); the alchemical paradigm, which has at its core the idea that reality is paradoxical, “that things and their opposites are closely related” (82); and the myths of peoples in direct and vital interaction with their natural surroundings—for knowledge that has been ignored, suppressed, and forgotten. These artists look for deep knowledge which could bring us out of our island-selves to understand the larger connections and symmetries which could give human life meaning and rescue us from despair and absurdity.

When everything human can be deconstructed, Dillard and Snyder look to wild regions in nature and in human-in-nature to learn about the world, reassess human values, and find a source of meaning that might rescue moderns from the despair we’ve created for ourselves. John Elder explains in his book *Imagining the Earth*, “Nature fills the wasteland’s need for a wider world by avoiding dissolution into human terms. Such a world elsewhere is the only hope for redemption in the face of radical cultural despair” (35). Dillard, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, watches her backyard to question her relationship to the wild and her relationship to human history and culture. She then describes her explorations in a back-and-forth rhythm between construction and deconstruction, belief and doubt, as she refuses to release her words from the pull of the world and her world changes around her. Gary Snyder, in *Myths & Texts*, conveys his vision of meaningful human life within the wild through the progression his narrator makes as he moves from logging to hunting to understanding himself and the wild as burning, dying to rebirth. Both visions offer alternative world views to the modern seeker, but though the visions are similar, only Snyder convinces himself of his vision and is able to attach his words to the world in a

practical and political making real of the vision.

Annie Dillard: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Dillard's first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, is a book of observations and speculations, both a carefully crafted journal of a year spent wandering the banks of a creek near Dillard's Virginia home and a spiritual autobiography centered on what the earth, the creation, reveals about its creator. The narrator, the pilgrim, struggles to understand what she sees as the human condition by examining the world around her, the woods and marshes alongside the creek and the animals and insects that inhabit them. Through her entire narrative, she re-enacts in the modern world the metaphysical dilemma that faced the American pioneer as she tries to make what she sees in her backyard cohere with the stories she has been told by her parents, pastors, and teachers; she tries to see her backyard fresh and real, without the blinders of expected forms and conclusions, and with an understanding that she cannot surrender herself to raw sense impressions if she is to understand what is going on in her backyard, in her world, in herself. She tests what she sees against what she reads and has been told; she tests the stories she has inherited against what she sees.

The pilgrim professes many aims throughout the book, different reasons for taking days to explore the creeks near her home, for sitting and waiting for muskrats and December bees to appear, and for describing what she sees, making a record of what she encounters and her reactions. "We don't know what's going on here" she declares (PTC 8). The preceding pages, the opening of the narrative, introduce her subjects: beauty, violence, death, God the creator. She demands, "We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here" (9). "Here," however, does not mean merely her backyard, but

also the larger world her bit of nature represents, and herself within that larger world. She describes what her senses take in--the play of light and dark on a mountain--feeling that though a magician is at work before her eyes and she cannot always trust her senses, the way his tricks affect her is equally interesting and equally important as what is really, scientifically "going on." And so she "propose[s] to keep here what Thoreau called 'a meteorological journal of the mind,' telling some tales and describing some of the sights of this rather tamed valley, and exploring, in fear and trembling, some of the unmapped dim reaches and unholy fastnesses to which those tales and sights so dizzyingly lead" (11). She makes herself an anchorite to the church of Tinker and Carvin's creeks, aiming "not so much to learn the names of the shreds of creation that flourish in this valley, but to keep [herself] open to their meanings" (137). Her focus is not the natural world itself, but the abstract questions to which her gleaned experiences and readings lead. She is interested, like Plato, in the forms that underlie the peculiar particulars she encounters, but she wants to arrive at these forms on her own, by synthesizing her own encounters with symbols and images traditionally used to signify enduring, universal truths and ideas, the forms at which the traditions she inherits and continues have arrived.

Though the pilgrim speaks of her aims, she does not speak of her assumptions. And she does assume much. She assumes both science and religion to be valid tools for investigating and explaining the world's phenomena. She enters her backyard with these two tools, each of which provide entire schemes for understanding the world and the self, schemes whose rigidity have come under attack in the modern era and which seem to be significantly at odds with one another. The tension between the microscope and sacred myth pulls the pilgrim and her narrative back and forth along her path of exploration. She depends upon the writings of biologists and naturalists for much of her information about the world she observes and uses the scientific

method of removing a phenomenon from its environment to isolate and study it (a moth in a Mason jar, microorganisms in a glass bowl and under her microscope, and cocoons tied to the bush in front of her window). Still, she cannot accept science's premise that fact and value are unrelated. Dillard's pilgrim, in every chapter, follows her scientific reportage with metaphysical and ethical questions about whatever phenomenon she has witnessed or discovered. By creating mythic images out of scientific texts and weaving these new images with traditional mythic and religious images, she attempts to bridge the gap between amoral science and human culture's notions of ethics, between the specifics of her backyard and universal questions of meaning and human purpose. She depends upon "the customary categories and discriminations of traditional Western thought" and their images, stories, and methods, but she crosses the boundaries of these categories to create her visions (Fritzell 239).

Dillard's pilgrim is both aware of and dependent upon modern physics because modern physics seems to offer a gap where science and religion can meet. Modern physics, particularly Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which states that one cannot know both a particle's velocity and its position because "the very fact of an observer seem to bollox the observations," gives permission and the possibility of legitimacy to the Romantic vision, which could only be seen as irrational in a wholly mechanistic world (PTC 203). Dillard writes, "Heisenberg himself says, method and object can no longer be separated. The scientific world-view has ceased to be a scientific view in the true sense of the word." (203). The pilgrim finds, much to her relief, that "[t]hese physicists are once again mystics" (204). Now she too can be a mystic and intuit the connection she, the observing subject, has with the objects she observes. And, as she states that "physicists are saying that they cannot study nature per se, but only their own investigation of nature," she must also realize that she cannot study the creek, but only herself in her reactions to

what she finds (203). This understanding, which is at the heart of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, is both a fundamental separation of the human from the wild (because the pilgrim's every glance at the wild is altered by the human mind) and a fundamental connection (because these glances are not absolute but instead only a partial picture of a world in which the human is both subject and object at once, the line between the two having disappeared). Though she borrows heavily from botanists and biologists and their straightforward descriptions of the inner workings of plants and insects, she refuses to concede that such scientific facts have explained the universe: "knowledge does not vanquish mystery, or obscure its distant lights" (241).

The pilgrim, when she looks at her backyard, finds paradoxes, pairs which seem to contradict one another but which are, on a more fundamental level, bound to one another. The idea of paradox conflicts with Descartes' dualisms and with deductive logic. But the pilgrim watches the creeks as nature conceals and reveals and finds that the pairings of beauty with violence and death with life are indeed paradoxical, seamless connections. In fact, the pilgrim is herself a paradoxical figure, both pilgrim undertaking a spiritual journey and anchorite attaching herself to the creeks.

"What Blood Was This, and What Roses?": Beauty and Violence

The first paradox that Dillard's pilgrim finds in her world is one she returns to again and again: how is it that beauty, that which she lives for, seems to be so undeniably bound up with violence, its opposite, that which she hates and fears? The first page of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* begins with the pilgrim describing her old tomcat, who would jump through her window from the wild night outside into the familiarity of her bedroom, "stinking of urine and blood," and cover her body with paw prints of blood until she looked as if she were painted with red roses (1). This

blood, from the world beyond her window, spoke of something powerful played out beyond her knowledge:

What blood was this, and what roses? It could have been the rose of union, the blood of murder, or the rose of beauty bare and the blood of some unspeakable sacrifice or birth. The sign on my body could have been an emblem or a stain, the keys to the kingdom or the mark of Cain. I never knew. I never knew as I washed, and blood streaked, faded, and finally disappeared, whether I'd purified myself or ruined the blood sign of the passover.

(1-2)

She witnesses and reads about other pairings of beauty and violence: the shimmer of hundreds of feeding sharks in the ocean's waves, the rash of pellagra that appeared like roses on the bodies of starving Algonquian Indians, the lacy, clear wings of insect mothers who eat their own eggs.

These pairings of violence and beauty disturb her. A contemporary middle-class American, she is as removed from the gore and the underside of natural life as the rest of us. As she explores this natural world, she gradually realizes that she is a part of the horror as well as the freshness. She is not clean and innocent, alien to violent splayings of blood, to the frog sucked lifeless by the giant water bug:

I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them, under the wind-rent clouds, upstream and down. (242)

Beauty and violence are two sides of the same coin; renewal means nothing without decay.

Grasshoppers and locusts are the same animal; Shiva with her faced turned is Kali; Tinker Creek

becomes Shadow Creek on dark nights. The contradiction of beauty and violence is only an apparent one, a paradox difficult to accept only for those who, like the pilgrim in the early part of her journey, fear their own death. Beauty and violence are inseparable parts of the natural world that moderns are bound to and within, if alienated from. The pilgrim's narrative is one of recognizing that she is a part of this dance of light and blood, surrounded by grasshoppers and locusts, the renewal of spring and the rot of late summer.

"A Pact With the Devil": Life and Death

Acceptance of violence is difficult because it requires, also, an acceptance of the pilgrim's own death—not the death of an individual, important and noticed, but a death from far off, small, insignificant, affirming the insignificance of her life. The pilgrim looks at the fecundity, the mass procreation and death of organisms in her backyard, and is, again, disturbed. She is disturbed 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" (PTC 160). What does it mean that the values we humans seem to have agreed upon are so fundamentally opposed to the rule of the wild? What kind of God makes such a world? What kind of beings are we who care for the individual, who value life over death? The pilgrim stops:

I have to look at the landscape of the blue-green world again. Just think: in all the clean beautiful reaches of the solar system, our planet alone is a blot; our planet alone has death. I have to acknowledge that the sea is a cup of death and the land is a stained altar stone. We the living are survivors huddled on flotsam, living on jetsam. We are escapees. We wake in terror, eat in hunger, sleep with a mouthful of blood. (175)

She faces a second and perhaps more fundamental paradox: to live is to die. Again, this paradox is only a contradiction until the pilgrim can accept the two elements' seamless connection. Though they seem opposites, and they are opposites, they are also inseparable. Perhaps the pilgrim's difficulty in coming to terms with this pairing reveals something about the culture out of which she writes and its tendency to ignore horror, ugliness, and death. Overcoming the paradoxical appearance of life and death, then, is a major moment in the pilgrim's journey:

The world has signed a pact with the devil; it had to. It is a covenant to which every thing, even every hydrogen atom, is bound. The terms are clear: if you want to live, you have to die; you cannot have mountains and creeks without space, and space is a beauty married to a blind man. The blind man is Freedom, or Time, and he does not go anywhere without his great dog Death. The world came into being with the signing of the contract. A scientist calls it the Second Law of Thermodynamics. A poet says, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age." This is what we know.

The rest is gravy. (181)

"A pact with the devil," she calls it. "If you want to live, you have to die."

Not only do we die, but we also kill, "grapple, . . . crush and starve and betray. . . . We want it; we take it out of each other's hides; we chew the bitter skins the rest of our lives" (PTC 240). Once the pilgrim can accept her own death and the fact that her life inevitably causes others' deaths, she is able to live in communion with the world, connecting her transitory self to a larger and more meaningful whole:

I am a sacrifice bound with cords to the horns of the world's rock altar, waiting for worms. I take a deep breath, I open my eyes. Looking, I see there are worms in the horns of the altar like live maggots in amber, there are shells of worms in the rock and moths

flapping at my eyes. A wind from noplacé rises. A sense of the real exults me; the cords loose; I walk on my way. (242)

This she knows: she will die. Whatever stories she has been told, whatever dreams she holds dear, whether she understands her world or not, this one fact is guaranteed. And this guarantee is enough to persuade her to get on with the business of living, living this time, though, a different sort of life. The cords loose and she walks on her way because she has finally understood what countless pilgrims have journeyed to understand throughout the history of this weighty human culture: accepting death is a release from fear and all that fear compels. "You see the creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life. Obviously" (270).

You see the creatures die, and you know you will die. Die, die. The heart of the pilgrim's experience in her backyard is the realization that she is so closely related and deeply connected to all other living things that, whatever moral questions and unease arise, she is grass, the commonest, most mundane of all organisms, metaphorically, essentially. It is this connection that can save her human self from the starvation of isolation in the modern wasteland. The common predicate links the human to the natural world, the subject to the object of study, for one thing that dies is in death equal to any other thing that dies (Opitz 9). But this realization is not an easy one. The pilgrim is more reluctant to accede this link than anything else, reluctant to surrender her special rank as human. She begins her journey down the path toward this understanding with scientific investigation, looking at duck-pond water through a microscope:

I do it as a moral exercise; the microscope at my forehead is a kind of phylactery, a constant reminder of the facts of creation that I would just as soon forget. . . . These are real creatures with real organs leading real lives, one by one. I can't pretend they're not

there. If I have life, sense, energy, will, so does a rotifer. (PTC 121)

She reads books of science, field guides, botany. A molecule of chlorophyll is distinguished from a molecule of red blood merely by an atom of magnesium in place of an atom of iron; the gap between human and animal, human and plant, diminishes as she investigates.

This understanding of the world to which science leads is not an understanding the pilgrim desires. It is also not one she can accept, not until she senses her connection to the whole in powerful and overwhelming moments, moments where her ego is diminished and she joins the world around her. The pilgrim calls her pursuit of these moments "stalking," a kind of disciplined unself-conscious awareness, "seeing that involves letting go" (31). Like love, honest experience of nature requires this dropping of the ego, an awareness of the individual as only a part of a larger system (Berman 177). She describes stalking as being outside of herself:

I center down wherever I am; I find a balance and repose. I retreat--not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance. I am the skin of water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone. (PTC 201)

She is delicate, sensitive, not human, not clumsy like her self-conscious self. A goldfinch touches the head of a thistle and the down is lifted by the wind to fill the pilgrim's window, to lightly cover her world. Beauty, the pilgrim's yearning for the eternal, is eternally ephemeral, the lucky meeting of bird and flower, down and wind. The scandal of particularity, that the eternal enters time, must exist in time, in actuality, if it is to exist in this world at all, is both mystery and grace:

Had this place always been so, and had I not known it? There were blowings and flights, tossings and heaves up in the air and down to grass. Why didn't God let the animals in Eden name the man; why didn't I wrestle the grasshopper on my shoulder and pin him

down till he called my name? I was thistledown, and now I seemed to be grass, the receiver of grasshoppers and eels and mantises, grass the windblown and final receiver.

(220)

Now she seemed to be grass, she finds. In unitive experiences, unplanned and momentary, the pilgrim's ego diminishes until she senses her profound entanglement and joyful interdependence with all of the beautiful and violent, living and dying natural world.

A diminishing of the ego is, of course, both a portion of and a hint toward the death of the self which the pilgrim claims is necessary for the individual to create something that transcends the self. Many of the most significant moments in her journey are marked by the striking of a bell. She describes herself as a bell—an image at once romantic, transcendental, and religious—which some unknowable force sets in motion, and her narrative becomes its reverberations. Like Eskimo girls blowing each other's throat chords, she is “played on like a pipe” (PTC 13). Because her breath is not her own, her testimony reveals the presence of this other power. The feeling of being struck like a bell is one reason she continues to search for the spirit in her backyard, despite the difficulties and dilemmas she inevitably finds: “I walk out; I see something, some event that would have otherwise been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes past me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell” (12). This is participatory nature, the bodily perception that the human is connected to her environment, that this wild participates with her, subject in a world of subjects rather than subject acting upon a world of objects. The death of the self enables one to escape the self's confines, confines that have become the despair and focus of much modern literature. This death is nourishment; it is salvation. One becomes an acorn, with a root in the earth for grounding and nutrients and a tiny green shoot of creation:

The death of the self of which the great writers speak is no violent act. It is merely the joining of the great heart of the earth in its roll. It is merely the slow cessation of the will's sprints and the intellect's chatter: it is waiting like a hollow bell with stilled tongue.

Fuge, tace, quiesce. The waiting itself is the thing. (258)

The waiting is "the thing" because one cannot control or force moments of participatory nature. The moments come unexpected, but only if one is open to them, willing to experience, willing to take note, and but not willful, explaining the moments away through science or another wholly rational system. The pilgrim states near the end of her narrative: "And the bell under my ribs rang a true note. . . . Flung is too harsh a word for the rush of the world. Blown is more like it, but blown by a generous, unending breath. That breath never ceases to kindle, exuberant, abandoned; frayed splinters spatter in every direction and burgeon into flame" (268).

"Eating of the Bittersweet Fruit": Self-Definition and Awareness

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is the story of the pilgrim recognizing paradoxes--beauty and violence, life and death--as opposite arcs of single circles, each arc requiring its opposite to become whole. Ours is a paradoxical world, she finds, where nature conceals and then reveals, and power and delicacy go hand-in-hand. But it is also a story of tensions, a less fully articulated story of pairs that are incompatible, mutually dependent for the power the tension between them provides, but irreconcilable, relentlessly pulling apart. Self-definition and true awareness of the world are incompatible. Doubt and belief pull one apart. Similarly, the way most modern Americans understand the world (the way the pilgrim understands the world at the beginning of her journey) and this other way of understanding the world toward which the pilgrim moves throughout her journey (the way Snyder understands the world, the way I am setting up as a path

out of modern despair and isolation) cannot be reconciled. Dillard finds that not all difficulties can be resolved as paradoxes, and so an examination of the tensions the pilgrim encounters and the ways these tensions pull her along her journey is perhaps as important as an investigation into her understanding of paradox.

Dillard explores the tensions in her pilgrim's mind and soul, the contradictory impulses, by laying bare her oscillations between conscious awareness and self-conscious deconstruction. Each chapter follows a rhythm: the pilgrim describes what she encounters, her sense impressions (Snyder's "texts"); then adds to these impressions stories, symbols, and experts' testimonies (Snyder's "myths"); and makes symbols out of her encounters to interweave with traditional mythical figures. This creates the vision, this interaction of her own experiences with those stories that have traditionally explained human meaning; but the vision lasts only a moment before the pilgrim begins to deconstruct it by questioning the validity and constancy of its delicately balanced parts. The pilgrim states:

The first question—the one crucial one—of the creation of the universe and the existence of something as a sign and an affront to nothing, is a blank one. I can't think about it. So it is to the fringe of that question that I affix my attention, the fringe of the fish's fin, the intricacy of the world's spotted and speckled detail. (PTC 129)

Her attention to the details means that her visions are created where these details join. As the pilgrim reminds us, adherence to any method requires a leap of faith. Dillard's methodology reveals that she posits meaning in spaces, as the passages most vital to the pilgrim's overall vision are the passages most loosely articulated. As William J. Scheick describes, Dillard recreates for her readers the sensation of watching nature which reveals and conceals, in her chapters, in her construction and deconstruction of vision, and in drawing attention to words, as

words themselves both signify and conceal ideas in their opacity (54).

At the center of the tension between self-absorption and participation in the world is the pilgrim's dilemma of self-consciousness, which she discusses much herself. The pilgrim finds herself at the center of a dilemma—she wants to see truly and finds that she sees with the fresh eyes of an infant only when she drops her own ego and becomes unconsciously absorbed in the object of her gaze, but in order to understand what she sees, she must endow the shapes and colors before her eyes with forms she has learned through her education in human culture, which demands a self-consciousness that necessarily destroys her true vision. As Fritzell points out, she wants, “on the one hand, to see through and beyond her own language, to see without words, so to speak; on the other hand, to recognize that the human can only ‘see’ through language, that what she (and her readers) ‘see’ here is a function (and solely and forever a function) of her own (and their) compositions” (Fritzell 231).

She describes two different kinds of seeing; the first is “very much a matter of verbalization” (PTC 30), by which reason “analyze[s] and pr[ies]”(31), and by which one inevitably “see[s] what [one] expect[s]” (18). After reading accounts of cataract-operation patients suddenly given sight, the pilgrim tries to look at the world as if she has never seen it before, tries not to distort her raw sense impressions with the her brain's expectations of normality, but finds that “form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning: I couldn't unpeach the peaches. . . . I live now in a world of shadows that shape and distance color, a world where space makes a kind of terrible sense” (29-30). Acquiescing to the brain's imposition of form on shape and meaning on the dazzle of light and color is a trading of innocence for knowledge, an “[eating] of the bittersweet fruit” (30).

Because the pilgrim is exploring the woods with the typically American attitude that raw experience is a purer school than the library, she is of course uncomfortable when she looks into the creek and sees only her own self. She intuits that if she can diminish her ego, she can more purely experience her surroundings at the moment. This is the second kind of seeing, the kind that “involves letting go” (PTC 31), “at once a receptiveness and total concentration” (82). She tells the story of how, sitting at a gas station drinking coffee and petting a puppy, she forgot herself and the world became more real than the hollow of her own skull:

This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here. This western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much black asphalt. But at the same second, the second I know I’ve lost it, I also realize that the puppy is still squirming on his back under my hand. Nothing has changed for him. . . . It is ironic that the one thing that all religions recognize as separating us from our creator—our very self-consciousness—is also the one thing that divides us from our fellow creatures. It was a bitter birthday present from evolution, cutting us off at both ends. (78)

Only in living the in present without holding onto it, in physically sensing each moment’s movement, can she experience her world in its true nature, constantly changing, herself only a temporary part of it. This is the aim of the pilgrim’s stalking, as it is the aim of all forms of meditation, formal and formless—this trying to “gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing just as surely as a newspaper dangled before my eyes” (32). The double irony of the pilgrim’s dilemma is that, though our self-consciousness separates us from our creator and the rest of creation, the present, forever present everywhere,

rushes on in beauty and violence, life and death, in her very backyard, on her fingertips. If she can stop agonizing over her commentary and pursuing time's fleetingness, the present comes to her. She looks up the creek, at the water moving toward her:

This is the present, at last. I can pat the puppy any time I want. This is the now, this flickering, broken light, this air that the wind of the future presses down my throat, pumping me buoyant and giddy with praise.

My God, I look at the creek. It is the answer to Merton's prayer, "Give us time!" It never stops. If I seek the senses and skill of children, the information of a thousand books, the innocence of puppies, even the insights of my own city past, I do so only, solely, and entirely that I might look well at the creek. . . . You don't run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled. You'll have fish left over. The creek is the one great giver. It is, by definition, Christmas, the incarnation. (102)

God is incarnate in the headlong rush of the world, organic *and* holy, present *and* eternal. This is the fringe, the intersection of matter and spirit, a resolution of sensory experiences and sacred myths, and though it lasts for only a moment before the next chapter begins and the pilgrim moves on to other questions of beauty and cruelty, this is the vision (Scheick 54). But again and again, throughout her journey, the pilgrim must remind herself that she cannot participate in the rush, cannot be filled, if her hands are already full of self-absorbed concerns. Even near the end of the book, this self-absorption follows her and she doubts what she has witnessed: "Or is beauty itself an intricately fashioned lure, the cruelest hoax of all?" (PTC 265). She shakes off her doubt: "No, I've gone through this a million times, beauty is not a hoax—how many days have I learned not to stare at the back of my hand when I could look out at the creek?" (266).

“A Live Coal Which Neither Burns Nor Warms”: Doubt and Belief

The tension between self-absorption and participation leads directly, then, to the obvious but also silent tension between doubt and belief. Dillard writes out of a culture of radical doubt, to an audience craving something enduring, something to believe in. The pilgrim oscillates between belief and doubt while carrying out the progression of traditional Christian mystics. She first tries to approach God by way of the *via positiva*, by contemplating God’s positive aspects, for the first seven chapters, then tries to approach God by way of the *via negativa* for the last seven chapters, by ultimately denying her own ability to *know* the mystery and surrendering attempts to *know* it. “I didn’t know, I have never known, what spirit it is that descends into my lungs and flaps near my heart like an eagle rising. I named it full-of-wonder, highest good, voices” (PTC 221). Once she denies her ability to know the mystery, she contents herself, instead, with experiencing her participation in its movements. She dances “a tarantella until the sweat pours” (21), “to keep warm” (63), to jump wildly into the movements of the universe. Finally, at several points in her narrative and particularly at the end, she realizes that she cannot continue to question, analyze, and doubt if she is really to believe. Whether right in her understanding of the world or dreadfully wrong, she must, to find meaning, believe, and then offer thanks:

There is nothing to be done about [the universe], but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part. (270)

Her dance of oscillation between construction and deconstruction, belief and doubt, turns, pivots, and leaps: "If I am a maple key falling, at least I can twirl" (268). Doubt and self-consciousness may haunt the pilgrim, but she evades them by continuing her movement, always walking, participating in the dance.

Also irreconcilable are the rigidly rational, scientific way most modern Americans understand the world and the way of understanding, knowing, seeing, and believing that Dillard's pilgrim moves toward through her narrative and finally envisions in the end of the book. She learns to see through metaphor, the simultaneous coexistence of several levels of meaning, a way of seeing that depends upon relationship and is able to point toward mystery without attempting to pin it down. Metaphor hints at greater truths than the mechanistic world allows, hints at connections better felt than explained. And, while analysis pulls the world apart, metaphor brings it together, creating connections (Opitz 9). Metaphor is Dillard's primary tool, the tool which enables her access to something other than her modern singular experience. Metaphor pulls the individual out of the self and into the whole:

Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone. (PTC 32)

For a poet, the subject/object distinction dissolves. The pilgrim *is* the leaf, *is* the feather, *is* the bone. And so metaphor is radical. Classification according to predicate rather than subject includes both observer and observed in the same system (Opitz 9). The world becomes a world of systems rather than a world of individual objects. And a world of systems, a world of process, is not the conception of the world offered by the modernists, but a world wholly other, a world whose vastness and power drive off despair.

Dillard creates, then, a vision of the world opposed to that of the waste land. Her vision, created through metaphor, through a weaving of images from different scientific and religious traditions with images she finds on her walks and makes mythic through her discourse, is of a paradoxical world of beauty and violence, life and death. Unitive experiences persuade her to abandon, for a moment, self-definition and doubt and embrace the dance of the world's processes in full awareness and belief.

Snyder: *Myths & Texts*

Gary Snyder, contemporary American poet and depth ecologist, examines many of the same questions as Dillard. His poems speak of the relationship between human beings and nature and about how we humans understand ourselves better as a part of the wild. He examines beauty, violence, death, and rebirth, and studies other cultures and their myth traditions to find alternatives to the modern Western separation of mind from body and human from wilderness. As Alan Williamson has noted in *The American Poetry Review*, the everydayness of his poems remind us that "everything is temporary, that we are not in control of the world, that the things we think give our lives significance and hope are also temporary" (35). In the ever-changing, paradoxical world, Snyder offers moderns meaning in being part of larger systems, part of the ecology of human societies as well as part of natural ecosystems.

Snyder's career as a poet has been long and prolific, the focus of his poems tracing the changing sources of his energy and inspiration as he moved from college to mountaintop to engine room in the Pacific to Zen Buddhist Monastery in Japan and finally to his present home in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Northern California. He has published nine books of poetry and several books of "notes" and essays, but I am going to look primarily at one long poem. *Myths &*

Texts is Snyder's first completed work, begun as he started his life as a poet. In it, he details a spiritual progression astonishingly similar to that of Dillard's pilgrim. Snyder's narrator faces the same modern dilemma of meaning as Dillard's pilgrim, living in a human culture whose traditional systems of meaning seem to have fallen apart, wanting to find meaning and in doing so to find a way to heal the anxious soul and damaged earth. So, he "set[s] out like anyone else, to make sense, and to find somehow a way to actually 'belong to the land'" (MT viii)ⁱⁱ. The narrator in *Myths & Texts* begins as a logger, alienated from the wilderness he is systematically destroying, and gradually comes to understand the ecological cycles he is a part of, the animals he lives with, and the compassion demanded of him if he is to live and love thoroughly grounded and in communion with the world. Though Snyder's ecological and spiritual vision is more fully developed and examined in his more recent works, *Myths & Texts* parallels *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in ways other books do not because the narrator begins as estranged from the land as Dillard's pilgrim does, a rare moment in Snyder's writings.

The narrator's Buddhist enlightenment evolves through a weaving of myths and texts, the "two sources of human knowledge—symbols and sense-impressions," the same two sources Dillard's pilgrim weaves together in her creation of vision (MT vii). Stylistically, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Myths & Texts* have very little in common, as *Myths & Texts* appears to depend on the juxtapositioning of seemingly random thoughts and images into collage while *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is obviously, carefully narrated. But I believe both are what Snyder scholar Patrick Murphy calls mythopoeia, "the adaptive retelling and creating of myths that have guided or are needed to guide a culture," though Dillard's myths are Judeo-Christian and Snyder's come from all kinds of Native American and Asian traditions (21). Max Oelschlaeger describes in his lengthy book *The Idea of Wilderness* how Snyder makes an important move away from the

modernist idea, “finding in ancient myth a premodern wisdom that underlies a psychologically satisfying, intellectually liberating, and ecologically feasible mode of postmodern existence, where humankind is again bound with the land, the plants, and animals” (245). *Myths & Texts* is a dense, complex long poem, and I do not attempt here to exhaust its wealth, nor even to do a thorough reading of the entire poem. I am interested in how it parallels *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, believing that these two texts’ shared focus allows them to play light off one another, to give us a fuller understanding of what it means and could mean to look to the wilderness and our dying into earth as a remedy for our modern ecological and spiritual ailments. Looking at these two texts alongside one another also highlights Snyder’s final departure from the path Dillard’s pilgrim takes; Snyder’s narrator understands his vision as an ethical imperative and Snyder’s later poems and essays show how Snyder makes real this imperative through political action and by changing the way he lives.

“The Groves Are Cut Down”: Logging

“Logging,” the first section of *Myths & Texts*, describes the alienation that accompanies the modern destruction of the wilderness. *Myths & Texts* begins with a vision of fertility which Snyder then contrasts with the images and stories of destruction and estrangement that comprise the rest of the first section of the book. “Logging” is filled with moments that seem to be drawn from Snyder’s summers spent setting chokers for the Warm Springs Lumber Company (Steuding 66). The epigraph to “Logging 2” could easily be an epigraph to the whole section: “But ye shall destroy their altars, / break their images, and cut down their groves / *Exodus* 34:13” (MT 3). The narrator describes a world in which the monotheistic Judeo-Christian god demands destruction not only of other god’s altars, but also of the groves, the woods, the wilderness these other gods

were believed to inhabit. "Logging 14" further details the destruction of the wilderness by those of the Greco-Roman tradition, Hebrew and Christian traditions, and Protestant and capitalist traditions:

The groves are down
cut down
Groves of Ahab, of Cybele
Pine trees, knobbed twigs
thick cone and seed
Cybele's tree this, sacred in groves
Pine of Seami cedar of Haida
Cut down by the prophets of Isreal
the fairies of Athens
the thugs of Rome
both ancient and modern.
Cut down to make room for the suburbs
Bulldozed by Luther and Weyerhaeuser
Crosscut and chainsaw
squareheads and finns
high-lead and cat-skidding
Trees down
Creeks choked, trout killed, roads.

Sawmill temples of Jehovah.
Squat black burners 100 feet high
Sending the smoke of our burnt
Live sap and leaf
To his eager nose. (15)

The trees understood as important by the premodern civilizations who worshipped Cybele, "ancient earth mother of Asia Minor," by the Japanese No dramatist Seami, by the Northwest coast Indian tribe Haida, by many peoples ancient and close to the earth but feared and commodified in modern Western traditions, become a burnt offering to the Judeo-Christian god Jehovah, who demands the groves be cut down (Schuler 18). Western civilization has a history of destroying the wilderness rather than living at peace within it, and the confusion of the Protestant work ethic with capitalism (Luther and Weyerhaeuser, an American lumber firm, working

together to bulldoze the groves) has only furthered the devastation of the wild in the interest of suburban homes and “San Francisco 2x4s” (MT 4). When we consider other parts of our ecosystem mere commodities for exploitation, we put the human at the center of the world and distort the ecosystem, eventually damaging “All America”:

Someone killed and someone built, a house,
a forest, wrecked or raised
All America hung on a hook
& burned by men, in their own praise. (4)

“Logging” is the story of a logger, at this point in his journey the “someone [who] killed” of the poem above, coming to terms with his own participation in a destruction whose costs he is just beginning to understand.

The costs of the destruction of the wilderness, the costs of persisting in an owner’s attitude about the wild of which humans are only a portion, are both physical and spiritual. In “Logging 8,” animals—chipmunks, a black ant, and yellowjackets—are forced out of their homes to “flee,” “swarm and circle” above the fallen logs that were their homes (MT 10). In “Logging 3,” Snyder’s narrator comments that “it’s hard to farm / Between the stumps: / The cow gets thin, the milk tastes funny” (5). The human community loses traditional knowledge and skills like those of Ray Wells’ father-in-law, who can geld ponies quickly and easily (12). And the Wobblies, the International Workers of the World, with whom Snyder’s parents were involved when he was young, are left out of work or exploited by the logging industry, “shot and beat up,” “Soldiers of Discontent” (9).

For the narrator, the most profound cost of logging is his alienation from the natural world. In Logging 2, he “wake[s] from bitter dreams” to begin another day of chopping down trees (MT 4). Later in the same poem he contemplates a Chinese poem praising pines and finds

that when the trees become boards, humankind loses their beauty and spirit:

“Pines grasp the clouds with iron claws
like dragons rising from sleep”
250,000 board-feet a day
If both Cats keep working
& nobody gets hurt. (4)

The irony, of course, of “nobody get[ting] hurt” is that even if no one is physically injured, the narrator is spiritually damaged and America is destroying herself. The narrator is beginning to comprehend the spiritual costs of acting on what Snyder describes in a 1976 interview as “the myth of the frontier, the myth of boundless resources and a vision of perpetual materialistic growth” (RW 69). In “Logging 10” the narrator confesses: “What bothers me is all those stumps: / What did they do with the wood?” (MT 12). He “dream[s] of home,” because he has lost his ties with the earth, the wilderness he works and lives within, and feels his spiritual barrenness, the barrenness of the “dead white heat” (11, 12). Logging 12 reads:

“You shall live in square
gray houses in a barren land
and beside those square gray
houses you shall starve.”
--Drinkwater. Who saw a vision
At the high and lonely center of the earth:
Where Crazy Horse
went to watch the Morning Star,
& the four-legged people, the creeping people,
The standing people and the flying people
Knew how to talk.
I ought to have eaten
Whale tongue with them.
they keep saying I used to be a human being (13)

Drinkwater, a Sioux, offers a vision of modern mass-produced suburban America, marked by spiritual starvation and emptiness, alongside a vision of harmony where humans interact with animals on an equal level. The narrator feels remorse and loss as he sees how moderns have

chosen the wasteland when we could live in harmony with our ecosystems. He has been logging when he ought to have been participating in the sacramental meal, a meal he will describe further in the second section of *Myths & Texts*, "Hunting." Here, he mourns: "I used to be a human being." And he returns to the idea of "myths" by setting the logging industry and all modern spiritless vision (which operates under the myth of capitalism) in contrast to Shiva, the Hindu god of fertility and creation, who is said to come at the end of a period of cosmic time to destroy those who try to break apart the universal cycles (Schuler 79):

Shiva at the end of the kalpa:
Rock-fat, hill-flesh, gone in a whiff.
Men who hire men to cut groves
Kill snakes, build cities, pave fields,
Believe in god, but can't
Believe their own senses
Let alone Guatama. Let them lie. (MT 16)

People believe in an abstract God before they believe in the holiness of the everyday, the godliness in things that they experience. If they had the spiritual vision that the narrator is gaining, they would not choose to systematically destroy the wilderness, kill animals that seem to be pests, or build cities of convenience at the expense of the wild. Let them lie down to die, Shiva says, and let them lie to themselves about the true nature of the world. The world will outlast them.

"Hatching a New Myth": Hunting

Shiva's admonition to willful, spiritless humans propels the narrator to a new phase of spiritual development. "Hunting" is the phase of gathering food, stalking animals and seeking an understanding of the world that reaches broader and deeper than that of an isolated individual in a hostile environment. In "Hunting," Snyder's narrator encounters the nonhuman, sings shaman

songs, senselessly and uselessly kills deer then mourns the deer and his wretched spirit, learns to make a spoon out of a part of the mountain-goat he cannot eat, smells enough like the mountains that a swarm of bees do not sting him, and reconciles himself to the importance of food.

“Hunting” begins with a shaman song, a song that reveals both an important point in the narrator’s journey and Snyder’s own understanding of the role of the poet in a society. Snyder talks about shamanism at length in a 1979 interview:

To step outside of [the social nexus] and make contact with a totally nonhuman other is where a certain kind of power, wisdom, and experience comes from. That is what I’m talking about when I talk about shamanism, which is a worldwide phenomenon and not limited in a proprietary sense to any one culture. (RW 155)

The shaman diminishes the self, that clumsy self-consciousness with which Dillard’s pilgrim grappled, to the point where he or she is able to reach something beyond the narrow human experience and then communicate the understanding gained from the experience with the community. The first poem in “Hunting,” then, reads:

first shaman song

In the village of the dead,
Kicked loose bones
ate pitch of a drift log
(whale fat)
Nettles and cottonwood. Grass smokes
in the sun
Logs turn in the river
sand scorches the feet.

Two days without food, trucks roll past
in dust and light, rivers
are rising.
Thaw in the high meadows. Move west in July.

Soft oysters rot now, between tides

the flats stink.

I sit without thoughts by the log-road
Hatching a new myth
watching the waterdogs
the last truck gone. (MT 19)

The shaman provides access to the Other, makes whole, heals. He experiences death in the smoking grass, birth in the meadow thaw, death in the rotting oysters, and birth in the hatching of a new myth. He “sit[s] without thoughts” so that a new myth may be born in his emptiness, a myth to replace the destructive myths of the frontier and Jehovah, a myth of human beings in powerful and egoless communion with the earth. As Snyder draws images and myths from any place he finds “health and sanity,” his narrator puts some of those myths together in “Hunting” as mythopoeia (RW 156).

“Hunting” contains poems for birds, bear, and deer which touch on the beauty and wisdom of animals and explore the gap between humans and animals, both through myth and through the narrator’s personal experiences. For example, in Hunting 8, “this poem is for deer,” the narrator kills a deer and leaves it in a ravine to rot. He remembers the deer, its beauty and magic, how wild deer inspired Picasso and Issa. Later, drunk, he shines and shoots another deer:

Pull out the hot guts
with hard bare hand
While night-frost chills the tongue
and eye
The cold horn-bones.
The hunter's belt
just below the sky
Warm blood in the car trunk.
Deer smell,
the limp tongue.
...
Deer don't want to die for me.
I'll drink sea-water
Sleep on beach pebbles in the rain

Until the deer come down to die
in pity for my pain. (MT 27-28)

The narrator feels the animal in his hands, feels its life go cold, and continues to learn what he should already know, that animals' lives have spiritual value. He wants to suffer and purify himself for the deer he's killed. He asks the deer for compassion, an idea in which the long poem will eventually culminate.

"Hunting" naturally focuses on the food web, that vast web of interdependencies, violent and beautiful in its complexity, that defines any living being's existence on this earth. This focus on food, on the sacrament of eating each other, is another specific way that that journey of Snyder's narrator parallels that of Dillard's pilgrim. In hunting as the premoderns did, "creeping" and "waiting to hunt seals," the narrator not only experiences shamanistic contact with the Other, but also witnesses the paradoxical coexistence of violence and beauty and participates consciously in the hunt and the feast in which we all must participate, though we moderns seem to have lost awareness and understanding of our participation (MT 19). Whether one likes it or not, "[e]very living thing impinges on every other living thing," as Snyder declares in "Nets of Beads, Webs of Cells," an essay in his most recent book of prose, *A Place in Space* (71). He describes a pairing of beauty and violence in "Hunting 7":

All beaded with dew
 dawn grass runway
Open-eyed rabbits hang
 dangle, loose feet in tall grass
From alder snares.
The spider is building a morning-web
From the snared rabbit's ear to the snare. (MT 25)

Dead rabbits, beautiful corpses "beaded with dew" hang alongside a sparkling spider's web. The web is a trap as completely as the alder snares. Spiders kill to eat, too. Violence is inevitable. We

all partake of the meal, “—not that we’re cruel-- / But a man’s got to eat” (20). In a 1979 interview with *Western Slopes Connection*, Snyder explains his understanding of eating:

If you look at life itself as a ripping off process, then your metaphysics are hopeless. Your only choice then is to reject the world and opt entirely for spirit. Which has meant historically to neglect the biological and to really rip off nature consequently. (RW 89)

So, to live in this world responsibly one must accept a certain amount of violence in the food chain. Further,

If you think of eating and killing plants or animals to eat as an unfortunate quirk in the nature of the universe, then you cut yourself from connecting with the sacramental energy-exchange, evolutionary mutual-sharing aspect of life. And if we talk about evolution of consciousness, we also have to talk about evolution of bodies, which takes place by that sharing of energies, passing it back and forth; which is done by literally eating each other. And that's what communion is. (RW 89)

In a striking parallel to some of Dillard’s most famous lines in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Snyder proclaims in “Nets of Beads, Webs of Cells” that “[e]verything that breathes is hungry. But not to flee such a world! Join in India's net!” (APS 70). Revulsion upon seeing the world’s natural violence gains nothing. Eat and join in the dance.

The webs of interdependencies are beautiful; sacramental participation brings meaning of the kind that moderns long for in our self-created wasteland. “Hunting” brings the reader to this understanding, an understanding of renewal and regeneration that loosely coincides with the Buddhist concept of the transmigration of souls. Hunting 13 is merely a detailed list, “what food we lived on then,” the food that a Southwest Native American tribe lived on without exhausting their resources, though modern Americans dam up rivers and irrigate. More important than the

contrast between Native Americans' and moderns' use of resources, however, is the realization that a list of food is not mere. The narrator's biological understanding of the food web he lives within and upon becomes a spiritual understanding, described by Snyder in *The Old Ways*:

The biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) a spiritual dimension. We must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles, as sacramental—and we must incorporate that insight into our own personal spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received from the nearer past. The expression of it is simple; gratitude to all, taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (i.e. dirt, water, flesh). (63)

Hunt. Sing shaman songs. Sing to the animals. Learn to make tools of their bones. These seem to be Snyder's suggestions in "Hunting." As Dillard could say, partake of the sacraments and dissolve feelings of alienation by finding meaning in being part of a whole.

"This Whole Spinning Show": Burning

In the third section of *Myths & Texts*, "Burning," the narrator experiences an enlightenment moment and begins to understand how death leads to rebirth. "Burning" begins with another shaman song that continues the themes of Hunting. The narrator passes through death and decomposition in a diminishing of the self that becomes central to the "Burning" and to *Myths & Texts* as a whole:

second shaman song

Squat in swamp shadows.
mosquitoes sting;
high light in cedar above.
Crouched in a dry vain frame

--thirst for cold snow
--green slime of bone marrow
Seawater fills each eye

Quivering in nerve and muscle
Hung in the pelvic cradle
Bones propped against roots
A blind flicker of nerve

Still hand moves out alone
Flowering and leafing
 turning to quartz
Streaked congestion of karma
The long body of the swamp.
A mud-streaked thigh.

Dying carp biting air
 in the damp grass,
River recedes. No matter.

Limp fish sleep in the weeds
The sun dries me as I dance (MT 37)

Death is no longer terrifying. As Dillard's pilgrim learned, dying into earth becomes a comfort and a grounding. Death is not the end, but only a new form as the energies that filled one's body become food for other organisms and substance to turn to rock. This is death for all of us, but for the shaman singing this song, it is only the death of the self. The joy of being part of the unending processes of earth and the joy of fearlessness cause him to dance.

In diminishing the self, the shaman claims, one attains an awareness of the life processes constantly occurring. I have already described Dillard's versions of such moments and her thoughts on self-consciousness. Snyder's poem contains similar investigations into the nature of consciousness from a typically Zen Buddhist stance, movement toward this heightened unself-conscious awareness being essential to the Buddhist concept of enlightenment. In fact, a large portion of Snyder's poems seem to be attempts at diminishing the poet-self, attempts at pure

description of places and moments, allowing those places and moments to be beautiful and meaningful in themselves, not surrendering to the temptation to attach his own forced meaning to them. The last portion of the narrator's spiritual progress that Snyder offers us, the portion detailed in "Burning," describes the narrator's struggling with his own self-consciousness and a few moments of unself-conscious delight. Snyder describes the unitive experience of "ringing nerve-knowledge" in a 1969 interview (Schuler 64): "I have had a very moving, profound perception a few times that everything was alive (the basic perception of animism) and that on one level there is no hierarchy of qualities in life" (RW 17). This is, I believe, the same perception as Dillard's feeling of being struck by a bell or blown by a breath not her own. "Burning 2" offers a description:

One moves continually with the consciousness
Of that other, totally alien, non-human:
Humming inside like a taut drum,
Carefully avoiding any direct thought of it,
Attentive to the real-world flesh and stone. (MT 38)

In diminishing the self, in surrendering the ego (a difficult task, to which Snyder's ten years of study at a Zen Buddhist monastery in Kyoto attest) one can go beyond—to the wilderness and to the unconscious. According to Snyder, one then finds that "both of these terms meet, one step even farther on, as *one*" (EHH 122).

The connection between wilderness and unconscious is important to the Buddhist enlightenment toward which the narrator moves through all *Myths & Texts*, but it is particularly vital in "Burning." In "Hunting 14," the narrator "packs his bags, loads his mules, and "start[s] to climb" the way of enlightenment (MT 32). "Burning" is then the story of this struggle which is also not a struggle to attain enlightenment. Though "Hunting 14" and "Burning 8" speak of the enlightenment experience as everyday and sudden, respectively, "Burning 13" describes most

completely and cogently the dangerous, thrilling, and ordinary process of enlightenment. The last section of the poem begins with a leap past the ego, then describes the paralyzing passage of surpassing oppositions, jumping into paradox:

Bluejay, out at the world's end
perched, looked, & dashed
Through the crashing: his head is squashed.
symplegades, the *mumonkwan*,
It's all vagina dentata
(Jump!)
"Leap through an Eagle's snapping beak"

Actaeon saw Dhyana in the Spring.

it was nothing special,
misty rain on Mt. Baker,
Neah Bay at low tide. (49)

The symplegades are the wandering rocks of the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, difficult to pass through; the *mumonkwan* is a text called "The Gateless Barrier," a book of koans, a Buddhist text that describes "paralyzing mental condition" of the "paradoxical passage." This instantaneous passage is a "difficult rebirth" through a sharpened vagina, a snapping beak, a crashing, and the narrator/bluejay's head is squashed (Schuler 56-57). It is the huge jump the one who seeks enlightenment must make, from understanding the world as a world of oppositions and polarities, a world that can be understood through logic alone, to experiencing the world as paradox. This passage is the one that Dillard's pilgrim makes as she comes to terms with paradox after paradox. Actaeon is the hunter who saw Diana, essence of wilderness, naked, and who was then transformed into a stag and torn apart by dogs. Dhyana is not only Diana, wood goddess, but also Dhyana, the Zen Buddhist term for *satori*, enlightenment, apprehension of universal truth (75). The hunter/seeker who experiences the naked truths of the wilderness cannot remain the same. He is torn apart, recreated, renewed in other forms in the spring. In order to diminish the

importance of the enlightenment experience, the last three lines of the poem set the experience in the context of everyday life, as all experiences happen within this world of rain and mountains, ocean and tide. Robert Schuler, in his analysis of this poem, quotes the Zen Buddhist explicator D. T. Suzuki:

Not only satori itself is such a prosaic and non-glorious event, but the occasion that inspires it also seems lacking in supersensuality. Satori is experienced in connection with any ordinary occurrence in one's daily life. (74).

First, foremost, the enlightened one knows that enlightenment is everyday, and the individual self relatively unimportant. The world will go on, whether the narrator attains enlightenment or not.

Though Snyder understands that the world will go on regardless of the individual, he is well aware of the problems facing the modern world. *Myths & Texts* is not only a poem drawing its images from premodern myths; it is also a direct response to the modern crisis of meaning, a response to the void, the cavity that has suddenly shown itself below the shattered constructs of our past sources of meaning. "Burning" contains many references to and descriptions of the void and the clutching we do in an attempt to avoid falling into it. "Burning 3," "Maudgalayayana saw hell," provides a particularly apt description:

Blown on winds of karma from hell
To endless changing hell,
Life and death whipped
On this froth of reality (wind & rain
Realms human and full of desire) over the cold
Hanging enormous unknown, below (MT 39)

The narrator, obviously, knows the void, as he knows the wasteland and the modern landscape. In "Burning," however, he passes through the gates of paradox and comes to a different understanding of the void. First, he learns that he must doubt his sensory impressions. His

meetings with the void are only hallucinatory visions, the influence of jimson weed and wine

(Burning 5 and 6). Into the void, through the void, appears:

The thin edge of nature rising fragile
And helpless with its love and sentient stone
And flesh, above dark drug-death dreams (39)

The void is no longer a place of desolation, but of love. "Burning 3" continues:

Clouds I cannot lose, we cannot leave.
We learn to love, horror accepted.
Beyond, within, all normal beauties
Of the science-conscious sex and love-receiving
Day-today got vision of this sick
Sparkling person at the inturned dreaming
Blooming human mind
Dropping it all, and opening the eyes. (39)

The narrator drops his ego and sees himself, both sick and sparkling, here on this earth, unable to leave for there is no other place, unable to lose the clouds of unknowing, for unitive experiences are only momentary and muddying ego always returns. "We learn to love, horror accepted," the narrator states. This is not an existentialist statement, affirming the need to love and create one's own meaning in a senseless world. Rather, the void is full, as it is described in "Burning 17," the last poem in *Myths & Texts*:

Into the absolute cold
Into the spiral whorls of fire
The storms of the Milky Way (54)

The void is a paradoxical place of both absolute cold and fire, filled with the storms of the Milky Way, *our world*, our own paradoxical world. Philip Kapleau, Zen explicator, writes:

The void is "not mere emptiness. It is that which is living, dynamic, devoid of mass, unfixed, beyond individuality or personality—the matrix of all phenomena" (qt in Schuler 66).

And so, though the modern mind may cling to the self out of the fear that there is nothing beyond the self, and this clinging may lead to alienation and despondency or a surrender to absurdity, the mind that drops the ego experiences the void as full, as the Dharma, as all of reality. The world is no longer foreign and hostile, but communion between life and life, constant transformation and process.

Into this world comes fire, the fire that ends the *Myths & Texts* and toward which all of “Burning” points, the wild, clarifying, chaotic force that defies reason, prevents entropy, and brings about rebirth and the continuation of life. In the beginning of *Myths & Texts*, “Logging 3” introduces the lodgepole pine:

“Lodgepole Pine: the wonderful reproductive power of this species on areas over which its stand has been killed by fire is dependent upon the ability of the closed cones to endure a fire which kills the tree without injuring its seed. After fire, the cones open and shed their seeds on the bared ground and a new growth springs up.” (4)

This quotation from what seems to be a biology textbook explains what will become the long poem’s primary symbol of cyclical, re-birthing nature. The forests have been logged, as “Logging” has shown. The seeds must undergo a burn for a new stand of lodgepole pine to grow. Though the poem is filled with other images in other poetic lines, the image of the lodgepole pine is particularly important. The narrator returns to these seeds in “Logging 14”: “Lodgepole / cone/seed waits for fire” (16). We wait, too. The burn finally comes in the end of the book, in “Burning 15,” seen from Mt. Sumeru lookout. From high up on the mountain, both the mountain of rock and earth and the mountain of enlightenment the narrator began to climb in the end of “Hunting,” he can see:

Across the whole country

Steep towns, flat towns, even New York,
And oceans and Europe & libraries & galleries
And the factories they make rubbers in
This whole spinning show (51).

The fire begins, and the narrator watches:

It's all falling or burning--
rattle of boulders
steady dribbling of rocks down cliffs
bark chips in creeks (51)

This can be read both as a description of the actual fire and as a statement about the nature of the constantly changing world. The important thing, though, is that "The hot seeds steam underground / still alive" (51). And so "Burning 15" ends, seeds steaming, rebirth in progress.

"Burning 16," a letter from Coyote, is placed between the two poems that describe the fire in the end of "Burning." We can understand, then, that this fire is a form of Coyote, renewal with a face of destruction, one of Snyder's favorite figures. Primitive cultures, very directly dependent on nature's bounty for survival and therefore much more aware of the happenings in their surroundings than moderns tend to be, created trickster myths to explain what they understood to be this chaos-force. Schuler describes Coyote:

Coyote is an enigmatic being, a force, perhaps even a god, who, for no reason . . . destroys order. He is the trickster, the force that man's reason cannot comprehend; he is the disorder that arises suddenly just when we think we have order. . . . He is also the avatar of the *elan vital*, the ultimate survivor, the ultimate life-pulse that cannot be dominated or eliminated. (75-76)

"Burning 16" of *Myth & Texts*, the letter from Coyote to earth, warns: "Dream, Dream, / Earth! those beings living on your surface / none of them disappearing, will all be transformed" (MT 52). Coyote, like Shiva, like the fire, brings chaos and destruction, transforms, provides the

element that allows all life to go on in its various forms, varied, ever-changing, and ever-recurrent. If Coyote exists, there is always a new beginning. And so, the last section of “Burning 17,” the last poem in the book, reads:

Rain falls for centuries
Soaking the loose rock in space
Sweet rain, the fire’s out
The black snag glistens in the rain
& the last wisp of smoke floats up
Into the absolute cold
Into the spiral whorls of fire
The storms of the Milky Way
“Buddha incense in an empty world”
Black pit cold and light-year
Flame tongue of the dragon
Licks the sun

The sun is but a morning star (54)

The fire is put out by nature’s own forces. The smoke from the fire drifts up into the sky, filling the ever full, constantly changing void, like incense in praise and reverence of the life-force many call god. “Flame tongue of the dragon” calls us back to the Chinese poem praising the spirit and beauty of pines quoted in Logging 2. The pines grow again, tall into the sky to “lick the sun.” And the last line of the *Myths & Texts*—“The sun is but a morning star”—is the last line of Thoreau’s *Walden*, connecting Snyder to the American tradition of nature writing, and to a certain Romantic vision. It is also a slightly altered form of the first line of *Myths & Texts*—“The morning star is not a star”—which connects the end of the book to the beginning in a circle which echoes the regenerative cycles of the wilderness; but its emphasis on connection (the sun *is* a morning star) rather than distinction (the morning star *is not* a star) reveals the narrator’s spiritual progress from alienated modern to shaman-poet in appreciation of and communion with the wild (3).

“Meaning: Compassion”: Ethics in Snyder’s Poetry

Snyder’s narrator and Dillard’s pilgrim undergo similar struggles in their spiritual journeys, but Snyder’s narrator takes his vision of harmony and communion to an ethical dimension, and this is where Dillard’s pilgrim fails to go. This ethical dimension, I believe, makes all the difference, and is the reason Snyder is able to move on to grapple with other issues within his vision while Dillard keeps returning to the same questions in different forms, over and over again, burning herself out rather than allowing what she has already learned to feed her, compost-like, in her creation. The question of how Snyder and Dillard deal with the creation of their art is an important one, so I will return to it in the next section. First, however, I want to examine how the ethical dimension is laid out in *Myths & Texts*. While both Snyder and Dillard see the webs of interdependencies upon which we exist as beautiful and interesting, only Snyder recognizes other beings as having spiritual value and sees these webs themselves resting upon compassion, the primary virtue of Buddhism. Several poems in “Burning” detail this compassion. “Burning 14” begins:

A skin-bound bundle of clutchings
unborn and with no place to go
Balanced on the boundless compassion
Of diatoms, lava, and chipmunks.

Love, let it be,
Is a sacrifice (MT 49)

We, clutching at our egos though we do, depend upon the compassion of all living and nonliving things on this earth to provide us with the energy to live. Death is a sacrifice of the self, for all beings, for the love of the world. Later in the same poem: “Astrologers, go-betweeners present,/ a marriage has been” (MT 50). This marriage is a union between humanity and the world. There is

no self, nothing wholly independent. The Buddha-nature is that which recognizes this marriage. The ethical response to a compassionate world is compassion in return, not only in the form of one's body eventually decomposing into earth, which after all is inevitable, but also in the form of responsible behavior that deeply acknowledges one's own union and relationship with the wild that runs around and through. Schuler explains:

Nature, violent, beautiful, and beneficent in its turns, creates man, who, violent, but also beautiful at times precisely because he has responded to the beauty and power of nature, learns to love not self but the whole and gives himself bodily, compassionately back to the beloved on-going surge of the whole, the life with which he has been blessed. (9)

The narrator offers a vision of compassionate human action in *Hunting 16*, as girls nurse "wild gazelle or wild wolf-cubs" at their breasts, hold the animals in their arms. At this compassion "the whole world-system tremble[s]" (MT 33).

Meaning: compassion.
Agents: man and beast, beasts
Got the buddha-nature (MT 34)

Further, *Burning 10*, "*Amitabha's vow*," is a vow of compassion, the vow of the Bodhisattva, the ideal figure of Mahayana Buddhism, who renounces Nirvana in order to help other beings attain enlightenment. Snyder's narrator uses Amitabha's vow as a model, expressing special concern for those oppressed or displaced in modern society. This model of "boundless compassion" is a model for all human beings who seek to live in communion, be grounded in their world, and find meaning in their transient existence (MT 49). This compassion alters not only our relationship with the wild, but also the way we treat our fellow human beings.

Snyder takes the ethical dimension of the end of *Myths & Texts* even further in his later poems, speeches, and essays by sustaining his vision and addressing the questions that follow

from that vision: how do human beings act with compassion in our world? And how do we alter the way we, as a culture, civilization, and species, interact with the wild around and inside us? How do we translate the vision into political action? Snyder has spent the rest of his life as poet and environmentalist attempting to find viable answers to these questions. In answer to the first question, that of how we act with compassion, he writes poems which provide perspective, poems like “What Happened Here Before” in *Turtle Island*, which detail the history of the earth or of a specific place to point out both the profound beauty of that long, long history and the recent appearance of human beings. They are humbling poems, for we find that, no matter which country or culture or individual claims to own a place,

the land belongs to itself.
“no self in self; no self in things”

Turtle Island swims
in the ocean-sky swirl-void
biting its tail while the worlds go
on-and-off
winking (80)

Turtle Island is how Snyder refers to what most of us call North America, an old name for the continent based on the creation myths of its oldest peoples. He wants to redraw political boundaries so that they follow the natural boundaries of watersheds and the cultures that once formed within those watersheds, the communities that ought to come together to care for and protect their own watersheds.

Further, Snyder wants our political systems to take the interests of other species into account, interests that of course become our own interests if we understand how interdependent our webs really are, and more importantly interests that become ours if we care more for the whole than for the part. In “Mother Earth: Her Whales,” another poem in *Turtle Island*, he calls

for solidarity with all living beings:

North America, Turtle Island, taken by invaders
who wage war around the world.
May ants, may abalone, otters, wolves and elk
Rise! And pull away their giving
from the robot nations.

Solidarity. The People.
Standing Tree People!
Flying Bird People!
Swimming Sea People!
Four-legged two-legged, people!

How can the head-heavy power-hungry politic scientist
Government two-world Capitalist-Imperialist
Third-world Communist paper-shuffling male
non-farmer jet-set bureaucrats
Speak for the green of the leaf? Speak for the soil? (48)

Yet someone must speak on behalf of the other beings we share with whom we share this earth if we want to live democratically. Snyder sees himself, as a poet, bringing the voice of nature into the discussions of ethics and rights. He looks in admiration at the ceremonies of primitive cultures, who put on the skins of animals and danced to gain access to both the wisdom and the needs of other beings. He “think[s] there is a wisdom in the worldview of primitive peoples that we have to refer ourselves to, and learn from” (107). He twists the pledge of allegiance in “For All,” a poem in *Axe Handles*, pointing out that our ultimate allegiance ought to be to the soil rather than the state.

In the essay “Four Changes” that was originally distributed freely as a pamphlet but now appears at the end of *Turtle Island*, Snyder offers practical suggestions about how to make real his vision of compassionate, meaningful human life. He divides his suggestions into four areas: population, pollution, consumption, and transformation. The key for changing all these areas, of course, is in the last. Transformation is what he asks, because:

Our own heads: Is where it starts. Knowing that we are the first human beings in history to have so much of man's culture and previous experience available to our study, and being free enough of the weight of traditional cultures to seek out a larger identity; the first members of a civilized society since the Neolithic to wish to look clearly into the eyes of the wild and see our self-hood, our family, there. We have these advantages to set off the obvious disadvantages of being as screwed up as we are—which gives us a fair chance to penetrate some of the riddles of ourselves and the universe, and to go beyond the idea of “man's survival” or “survival of the biosphere” and to draw our strength from the realization that at the heart of things is some kind of serene and ecstatic process which is beyond qualities and beyond birth-and-death. “No need to survive!” “In the fires that destroy the universe at the end of the kalpa, what survives?”—“The iron tree blooms in the void!”

Knowing that nothing need be done, is where we begin to move from. (102)

This transformation, though personal and spiritual, is also undeniably political and ethical. Though philosophers argue that one cannot deduce ethical judgments from observations of the world, that fact and value are unrelated, poets like Snyder step outside of deductive reason's bounds, in fact point out deductive reason's lackings, by using metaphor and language-as-symbol to point toward larger connections. Snyder can look at the world, tell stories, sing songs, and work toward transformation.

Eco-Poetics: Dillard and Snyder Writing in the Modern World

In my ecological criticism of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Myths & Texts*, I am not only concerned with how Dillard and Snyder understand humans' relationship with the wild, but also with how they understand language and stories as arising from the natural world and the energy that powers their poetry as coming from the ecosystem. I am concerned, too, with how they understand themselves as poets in this world. I find that Dillard feels she must destroy herself in order to create while Snyder is able to function, poet-in-society, as a sustainable part of a larger system which fuels him.

Language is typically thought of as a purely human construct, words being metaphorical labels we put on objects and processes in certain grammatical orders to help structure chaos and create systems of meaning for the world. Dillard is cautious about language because, as a human structure, it inaccurately represents all it attempts to contain. She describes language in her nonfiction book about contemporary fiction writing *Living By Fiction*: "Language is itself like a work of art; it selects, abstracts, exaggerates, and orders" (70). Because it is a "selection and abstraction from unknowable flux," it "scarcely accounts for things, or for the . . . mystery of experience" (69-70). In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard both uses language with all its connotative qualities and embedded myth history and questions her use of words, calling herself time and time again to quit abstract philosophizing and pay attention to her description of the world, to ground her words in reality. Jim Cheney, in his essay on myth and ritual in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, describes Dillard's desire for her text to remain faithful to the world and mind it represents:

Rejection of traditional epistemology [the correspondence theory of truth and the

metaphysical distinction between fact and value] does not release language from the pull of the world, but frees it into a deeper commitment, a deeper faithfulness—or the promise of one—to the complex interplay of question, experience, narrative, ceremony, and world. It returns language to the world, recognizing it as an expression of the world, emergent from it. (43)

No, language cannot perfectly describe the world in all its mystery, but as a part of the world, a natural product of a species, it is a part of the world as well. It can attempt to describe, not by pretending a false objectivity, but from within, by remaining faithful to complexity. In *Living By Fiction*, Dillard explains the importance of texts' complexity:

Material complexity is the truth of the world, even the workable world of idea, and must be the truth of the art object which would imitate, order, and penetrate that world: complexity and contradiction, and repetition, diversity, energy, and largesse. I am as attracted to purity as the next guy. But it must not happen here. (172)

This statement describes Dillard's' writing in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as well as any. Though her text is carefully crafted, its faithfulness to complexity and repeated grounding in the real world suggest a reverence for the world as complex creation that her own work attempts to imitate.

Snyder, in *Myths & Texts*, also uses and doubts language. His words are playful, collected from many traditions and environments and interacting in interesting ways. Though *Myths & Texts* does not feel nearly as painstakingly crafted as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, it is still entirely a human structure, both as a work of art and in the words that it uses. Snyder, like Dillard, repeatedly stops mid-poem to ground himself in stark description of his surroundings, to firmly attach his poem to the world it seeks to represent, but Snyder is more at peace with language, as he understands his words as wholly natural and language as a gift from the cosmos. In *The*

Practice of the Wild, he explains:

The subtle and many-layered cosmos of the universe have found their own way into symbolic structure and have given us thousands of tawny human-language grammars.

(77)

So, humans do not order the chaotic universe through language, though we often think we do, but rather the universe manifests its structure through human language as it does through layers of rock, the circles in the trunk of a tree, “information stored through time,” as well as through a breeze in the pines, information passing through (66). Human intelligence is not a solitary accomplishment of a species, but is rooted in the world that has given birth to the human mind.

Both Dillard and Snyder understand art, and their art of writing in particular, as that which approaches difficult wild places in the exterior world and in the deep unconscious through symbols and language and then communicates meaning from these areas to the rest of the human community. Dillard writes in her nonfiction book about contemporary fiction writing *Living By*

Fiction:

Art itself is an instrument, a cognitive instrument, and with religion the only instrument, for probing certain mysteries in those difficult areas where blurred and powerful symbols are the only possible speech and their arrangement into coherent religions and works of art the only possible grammar. (164)

The writer structures symbols (both words and the images created by words) to interpret the world, to approach and approximate that which is impossible to reason about, to “render intelligible . . . wilderness regions” and “hazardous terrains” (L 170). And since our minds are creating the order, any work of art is a study of the mind as well as of the world. A work of art, a poem or a chapter of narrative, is “juncture itself” between mystery and human constructs, “the

socketing of eternity into time and energy into form” (L 164). Because the juncture can not be put into words, the “fringey edge,” as Dillard calls the details and the space they surround, must be a place “where elements meet and realms mingle, where time and eternity splatter each other with foam” (HF 431).

Similarly, Snyder seeks to bring wholenesses to human attention. In his view, the role of artists, seers, and singers in a society is to remind that society of the larger systems and processes of which each person is a part, to prevent anxiety and to work as a means of negative feedback for their culture’s runaway systems. Snyder, in his poems and essays, calls his readers to recognize onenesses, connections he described in a 1979 interview as “our oneness with nature, the oneness of mind and body, the oneness of conscious and unconscious, the oneness in society with each other” (RW 157). In his essay “Poetry, Community, and Climax,” he elaborates on the connections a poet calls forth:

The poet as healer is asserting several layers of larger realms of wholeness. The first larger realm is identity with the natural world, demonstrating that the social system, a little human enclave, does not stand by itself apart from the plants and animals and winds and rains and rivers that surround it. . . . The poet as myth-handler-healer is also speaking as a voice for another place, the deep unconscious, and working toward integration of interior unknown realms of mind with present moment immediate self-interest consciousness. (171-172)

In speaking from dreams and for other beings, an artist who understands his purpose as Snyder does attempts to rescue our modern selves from the cages we have built up so elaborately around ourselves, from the cages we now feel trapped inside, alone and anxious and teetering on the brink of despair. “The true poem . . . , [which] walk[s] that edge between what can be said and

that which cannot be said,” calls its readers to recognize the juncture, wonder at it, and carry the remembrance of the juncture, the knowledge that such juncture exists, with them through their lives and into their ethical decisions (RW 21).

Singing, the poet’s work, becomes then a matter of recognizing not only wholenesses and juncture in the world and the mind, but also the spirit which fuels the poet in his or her work. Dillard’s pilgrim speaks of resounding like a bell that has been struck and of being blown by a breath that is not her own. If we are to believe the pilgrim’s narrative, Dillard understands creation as coming from some Other, an idea made visible in her image of Eskimo girls blowing one another’s throat chords. Her image is radical through its treatment of the Other, as Jim Cheney remarks: “The image is not one of incorporation, assimilation, or of destruction and domination, but one of openness to the Other” (60). Snyder, on a similar note, writes poems that describe where his energy to create comes from—the energy he takes in from his environment, the inspiration from the world around him and the dreams deep within him. In “Without,” a poem in *Turtle Island*, Snyder writes:

singing

the proof

the proof of the power within. (6)

The poet is, as part of creation, a means of “the power’s” expression. Another poem in *Turtle Island*, “By Frazier Creek Falls,” clarifies this sentiment:

listen.

This living glowing land
is all there is, forever

We are it
it sings through us— (41)

Snyder expresses union, the not destructive nor dominating connection between land and human, and makes his art both means of conveying union and an experience in union itself.

Though Dillard's pilgrim is sustained by the breath that blows her and is able to walk in paradox, swallowing self-definition and doubt, at the end of her narrative "upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise" (PTC 271), Dillard herself remains unconvinced of the vision she has created for her pilgrim. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is Dillard's first book. She concludes the book with her pilgrim walking in praise, but as she begins her next book, *Holy the Firm*, she addresses many of the same questions as those in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—questions of belief, doubt, pain, praise, and creation. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard creates an image of the artist that corresponds to the modern Romantic ideal—"Rimbaud in Paris [who] burned out his brains in a thousand poems," Rimbaud who inspires her whenever she becomes tired of being a writer (429). Her image is a moth who flies into a candle, gets stuck in the molten wax, and then burns like a second wick:

The wax rose in the moth's body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. . . .

She burned for two hours . . . like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled. (429)

Dillard's moth becomes, in *Holy the Firm*, a central symbol representing what it means to be an artist and how it is that one creates light for the world. She returns to her moth image after meditations on faith and human suffering and reveals her understanding of the artist as self-

destructive, burning up one's own life in the process of creating a work:

There is no such thing as an artist: there is only the world, lit or unlit as the light allows.

When the candle is out, who needs it? But the world without light is wasteland and chaos,
and a life without sacrifice is abomination.

What can any artist set on fire but his world? . . . What can he light but the short string of
his gut, and when that's burned out, any muck ready to hand?

His face is flame like a seraph's, lighting the kingdom of God for the people to see; his
life goes up in the works; his feet are waxen and salt. (453)

The artist, the writer, "hollow," has nothing from which to create but his or her own life (432).

And so, when teaching creative writing, Dillard tells her class that to be a writer, you cannot be
anything else: "You must go at your life with a broadax" (429).

Snyder, on the other hand, understands his poetry as passing through him rather than up
out of his own guts, and so he is able to create without simultaneously destroying himself. He is
able to sing sustainably. His poems arise out of his life like energy out of compost; his muse is
fed by the wild, as we all are fed physically, and comes into his body like breath. In "How Poetry
Comes To Me," a poem in his recent collection *No Nature*, Snyder describes how a poem, like a
wild animal, comes to meet him:

It comes blundering over the
Boulders at night, it stays
Frightened outside the
Range of my campfire
I go to meet it at the
Edge of the light (361)

The world offers itself to the poet, for the poet to sing to the human community. In *Mountains
and Rivers Without End*, Snyder's most recent book, a long poem begun alongside *Myths & Texts*

and written over a span of forty years, the mountain spirit asks Snyder to read his poem “The Mountain Spirit” to her. He does, and when he is finished she “whispers back: / ‘All art and song / is sacred to the real. / As such’” (146). Then Snyder and the mountain spirit “dance the pine tree / old arms, old limbs, twisting, twining” to the movement of rock and shooting stars (147). The poet is in communion with the wild, a healer for the human community, and is as such sustained by the energy of the cosmos which passes through him and of which we are all comprised.

Snyder quotes himself in the introduction to the reissued edition of *Myths & Texts*:

As poet I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the upper Palaeolithic: the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth, the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe.

(viii)

Snyder, poet-as-healer, need not destroy himself, but merely serves as a passageway for the communication of the structure of the universe’s processes, calling the human community to a recognition and appreciation of wholenesses that bring the alienated modern self out of despair and into communion with the world. In “On ‘As For Poets,’” a short essay that appears at the end of *Turtle Island*, Snyder speaks of the power of poetry:

But the poem was born elsewhere, and need not stay. Like the wild geese of the Arctic it heads home, far above the borders, where most things cannot cross.

Now, we are both in, and outside, the world at once. The only place this can be is the *Mind*. Ah, what a poem. It is what is, completely, in the past, present, and future simultaneously, seeing being, and being seen.

Can we really do this? But we do. So we sing. Poetry is for all men and women. The power within—the more you give, the more you have to give—will still be our source

when coal and oil are long gone, and atoms are left to spin in peace. (TI 114)

Poetry, the expression of metaphorical levels of meaning and wholenesses through language which is emergent from the earth in which we live, is sustainable and calls us moderns to a recognition of wholenesses that can, if we allow the recognition to transform us and the way we live, heal our deteriorated environment and souls.

Annie Dillard and Gary Snyder, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Myths & Texts*, arrange their words to point toward mystery, toward paradox, toward the wild both exterior and interior which inspires, destroys, rebirths, and sustains. Their visions are created outside the boundaries of what we moderns in the West generally accept as viable ways of knowing. Snyder, in *Earth House Hold*, writes of contemporary science as different from modern science. His vision of contemporary science contains:

the knowledge that society and any given cultural outlook is arbitrary; and that the more we conquer Nature the weaker we get. The objective eye of science, striving to see Nature plain, must finally look at "subject" and "object" and the very Eye that looks. We discover that all of us carry within us caves; with animals and gods on the walls; a place of ritual and magic. (131-132)

Snyder's and Dillard's narratives point toward these caves and invoke the magic of words and metaphor. Though their concerns are different, their visions are similar, but while Snyder works to find ways to make his vision become real, Dillard holds her vision in her hands until it burns her like a moth gone up in flame for light for the world.

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