

***The Living*, Annie Dillard. New York: Harper Collins, 1992, 397 pages.
Reviewed by K. D. Kragen**

Annie Dillard won the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in 1975. Her first work of fiction, published only six years ago, is already a classic. *The Living* follows the lives of three families settling the Bellingham Bay region of Western Washington between 1855 and 1893.

Throughout this sweeping chronicle, Ada Gleason Fishburn Tawes and a host of other very real characters work and die, suffer and struggle and celebrate and die in a world where one is constantly "life-stung" and "death-stung." So much death; yet, Dillard, in speaking of death, speaks even more of the living.

Like Melville's *Moby Dick*, Dillard's *The Living* will be one of the enduring epics of American Literature. Like *Moby Dick*, underneath the every-day--so well described you can smell it!--are those ever-present metaphysical currents of eternity: swirling eddies of spiritual sight, myriad portraits of love and marriage, youth and age, scenes which illumine the streets of 1893 Seattle and 1855 Whatcom, and the ever-present gargantuan rain forests stretching north. But, unlike *Moby Dick*, Dillard's book neither goes on forever, nor requires a degree in philosophical theology to dredge out the implications of its mystic visions and myriad truths.

For example, at one place the hulking, strangely brutal Beal Obenchain announces to Clare Fishburn, quite philosophically, that he is going to kill Clare. From that point on things changed for Clare:

There was a wagging patch of light on the wall above the sink; the bushes outside the dining room wagged, too. The planet wagged on; the man who planted those bushes was dead. And time, for Clare, had sprung a leak....

Clare could see the dark at the edge of the plain. He felt a hole in the wall behind him; things rushed out that hole. He was running low on air. Yesterday, talking with John Ireland in front of the high school, he had imagined and seen the long horizon of bay water and beach begin to tilt and upend. On the low side a gap appeared, and water and houses and schools and all the world's contents slid into the gap and blew away. [p. 197]

Dillard's style is a finely crafted *fugue* of concrete reality and its infinite underpinning, the little things tentatively moored to a space-time universe, the mooring lines illumined in startling flashes of the writer's art.

Mabel and her cousin Nesta, and flat-nosed Cyrus Sharp, and his youngest brother, Horace, were tying each other to a tree. They had found a length of line and were tying each other to the cottonwood tree. Clare watched from the kitchen. He had forgotten this piece of information: children tie one another to trees. Children find wild eggs, treasure, and corpses; they make trails, huts, and fires; they hit one another, hold hands, and tie one another to trees. They tied Horace Sharp to the tree; he cried. They tied Mabel to the tree; her flat beret fell off, and she could not break away.

Clare had looked out past the pie safe. Here is a solid planet, he thought, stocked with mountains and cliffs, where stone banks jut and deeply rooted trees hang on. Among these fixed and enduring features wander the flimsy people. The earth rolls down and the people die; their survivors derive solace from clinging, not to the rocks, not to the cliffs, not to the trees, but to each other. It was singular. Loose people clung in families, holding on for dear life. Grasping at straws! One would think people would beg to be tied to trees. [p. 350-51]

This passage is so typical of Annie Dillard! It is so characteristic of her delightfully harsh, human view of life, of all of us--the living.

Elegant and refined prose, mature and seemingly effortless descriptions flow seamlessly between dialogue and narrative, *resounding* everywhere with the ring of truth and a great and glorious depth of humanity. *The Living* is a work of astounding eloquence and sweet, unforgettable aesthetic fire.

***For the Time Being.* Annie Dillard.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, 205 pages. Non-fiction.
Reviewed by K. D. Kragen**

Be sure to read carefully the author's note at the beginning. It all starts there. Dillard sets out three defining questions: 1) "Does God cause natural calamity?" 2) "What might be the relationship of the Absolute to a lost schoolgirl in a plaid skirt?" 3) "Given things as they are, how shall one individual live?"

These three questions divide into two fundamental categories of philosophical inquiry. One and two raise the issue of "the problem of evil" (first, generally, and then in a particular case of an emotionally gripping sort). Question three raises the existential concern in a very Kierkegaardian fashion: How does the subjective individual live in a world dark with evil and suffering and all-pervasive mortality?

For the Time Being marks a shift back from Dillard the great novelist to Dillard the essayist, the lay philosopher, the inquirer. This book journeys into the world of human suffering with an eye toward better understanding things *vis-a-vis* the three questions. We travel through Dillard's book as she has traveled through the world in writing it. *For the Time Being* is also Dillard's attempt at a theodicy, an answer to the problem of evil from an existential, personal perspective in the form of a "Kierkegaard communication"—an "indirect communication"—walking the reader along the path, step by step, to experience the experiences of the author, along with the author.

Dillard's journey through the world starts with *Smith's Recognizable Patterns of Human Malformation* (evil in the particular instance), then moves to the *Talmud* (more questions than answers), especially delving into the thoughts and life of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism. The author goes next to Teilhard de Chardin, the Catholic paleontologist whose admittedly eloquent religious philosophy crossed back and forth between process theology (natural theology that denigrates the authority of special revelation, the *Bible*) to a purely naturalistic *panentheism*. All these twists and turns give the reader the feeling of a highly mystical journey through a wholly material world evolved mindlessly over eons. And it's the question of a "mindless" evolution that, as one moves along Dillard's journaled journey, seems most to trouble the author.

For the less philosophically trained, a little background on Teilhard de Chardin, panentheism, process philosophy/theology, and theistic evolution (the modern descendent of the Deism of the Enlightenment) would be helpful. "Panentheism" is distinct from "pantheism"; in the latter, all things *are* God; in the former, God is *in* all things, as a divine spark (cf. Paul Tillich or John Shelby Spong). Panentheism is thus a compromise, emphasizing to the almost complete exclusion of God's "transcendence" the primary and essential "immanence" of God in the world. Panentheism makes this metaphysical move in order to avoid equating God and nature, which is recognized as incompatible with historic Christian theology at its most basic: "The belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in him, but (as against pantheism) that his Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe" (quoted from *the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* by J. A. T. Robinson, in *Exploration Into God*, Stanford, California, Stanford University, 1967, pp.15-16).

Beginning with the presupposition of panentheism, "Process theology" holds that God is in process of learning, evolving, even as we may participate in that process of spiritual and divine evolution. (Process theology gives a whole new meaning to "theistic evolution.")

Chardin's views were a precursor to panentheism and what was to become process theology. Born in 1881 in France and a life-long Jesuit priest, Chardin "engaged in speculation on a cosmic scale, projecting a vision of reality which reconceptualizes traditional Christian dogmas in terms of an all-inclusive evolutionism" (*Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, Stanley Gundry, ed., Chicago, Moody Press, 1976, p. 56). Chardin, in grand Hegelian-style process methodology, sought to combine macro-evolution, theology and Christology, Christ being that pantheist divine spark in all things. In the priest's own words, "Taken at this degree of generalization (in other words where all experimental reality in the universe forms part of a process, that is to say, is born) evolution has long ago ceased to be a hypothesis and become a general condition of knowledge (an additional dimension) which henceforth all hypotheses must satisfy" (*op. cit.*, p. 59; see also Chardin's *The divine Milieu*, New York, 1965).

Then there's the title, *For The Time Being*. Who knows. Maybe it's the church-sanctioned hermit living in New York, Theresa Mancuso, who inspired Dillard; she quotes from Mancuso: "The thing we desperately need is to face the way it is" (*For The Time Being*, p. 19).

By page thirty, we see Dillard moving into the *Ecclesiastes* motif, King Solomon in his latter, secular existential years, there's nothing new under the sun, all is vanity and futility and smoke in wind. Anyone who has read her first novel, *The Living*, knows the eloquence and passion of Annie Dillard, and in this strange and cynical remake of *Ecclesiastes*, her literary art shines like diamonds! But like diamonds, she borders on the hard, the harsh, the nihilist. What happened to Dillard to make her fall into the primitive, anti-rationalism of Chardin and Tillich, theological deconstructionist romantics intimidated by A.J. Ayer and other verificationist hacks?

"The dead will always outnumber the living" (p. 49). "I have realized we all have plague, and I've lost my peace," wrote Albert Camus (*The Plague*, New York, 1948, p. 228). Solomon's *Ecclesiastes*, Camus' *The Plague*, Dillard's *For the Time Being*.

Dillard quotes from the *Talmud*, "I have dreamed a dream, and I do not know what it means" (p. 52), and on the following page, it comes out, her despair (in reference to two horribly deformed children), "...and inquire, hollering at God the compassionate, the all-merciful, WHAT'S with the bird-headed dwarfs?" The problem of evil drives this book—and drives its author mad. For two hundred and four pages Dillard suffers anew the age-old dilemma that strikes down the sensitive, the empathetic, the angry and embittered in the crisis of faith; like heart disease to the body, it's the number one philosophical killer. And *For the Time Being* is one more testament to this fact.

While enamored with Baal Shem Tov, Dillard at times does question the *Talmud*, even as she questions God. In the midst of numbering the hundreds and the thousands and the millions died of plague, genocide, war, while taking great care not to "befog" evil's specificity," moving back and forth from the masses of deaths across the ages to the deaths of this individual and that individual, this child and that rabbi, we are benumbed by the sheer numbers Dillard dredges up of history's slaughtered, and yet we are brought by Dillard back again and again to our own place in the universe. "One death is a tragedy; a million deaths are a statistic". Joseph Stalin, that gourmandizer, gave words to this disquieting and possibly universal sentiment.... Of Allah, the Qur'an says, 'not so much as the weight of an ant in heaven and earth escapes from him'. That is touching, that Allah, God, and their ilk care when one ant dismembers another, or note when a sparrow falls, but I strain to see the use of it.... We arise from dirt and dwindle to dirt, and the might of the universe is arrayed against us" (p. 75+76).

At the center of this modern *Ecclesiastes*, this theist's version of Camus' *The Plague*, at the center we come to *Romans* 8:28, all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to God's purpose. "Many times in Christian churches I have heard the pastor say to God, 'All your actions show your wisdom and love'. Each time, I reach in vain for the courage to rise and shout, 'That's a lie!'—just to put things on a solid footing.... Again, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome: 'In all things God works for the good of those who love him'. When was that? I missed it" (p. 85-86).

While Dillard's honesty and forthright discourse is refreshing, she sadly plants her feet firmly in the camp of the natural theologians: "Of course, God wrote no scriptures, neither chapter nor verse. It is foolish to blame or quit him for his admirers' claims, superstitious or otherwise" (p. 86). For Dillard, process theology replaces Biblical theology:

What, then, of the bird-headed dwarfs? It need not craze us, I think, to know we are evolving, like other living forms, according to physical processes. Statistical probability describes the mechanism of evolution—chance operating on large numbers—so that, as the paleontologist said, 'at every moment it releases a given quantity of events that cause distress (failures, disintegrations, death)'. That is, evolution's 'every success is necessarily paid for by a large percentage of failures'. In order to live at all, we pay 'a mysterious tribute of tears, blood, and sin'. It is hard to find a more inarguable explanation for the physical catastrophe and the suffering we endure at chance from the material world. [p. 87.]

Thus Dillard's theodicy rests upon the old positivist triad: verificationist scientism, naïve biological and social evolutionism, and romanticist process philosophy—twentieth century science and empiricism at its most uncritical. While being "existential" in literary style, *For the Time Being* is wholly in the Hegelian idealist

philosophical tradition of a century ago. Yet, to her intellectual credit, Dillard's effort at a kind of faith is unhappy with even this naïve, modernist worldview: "What use is material science as a philosophy or world view if it cannot explain our intelligence and our consciousness?" (p.93.)

In the last quarter of the book, Dillard asks, "To what end were we billions of oddballs born?"

Maybe the closest to a resolution to this question is Dillard's thoughts on the God of Chardin, Tillich, and the process theologians:

God participates in bad conditions here by including them in his being and ultimately overcomes them. True prayer surrenders to God; that willing surrender itself changes the situation a jot or two by adding power which God can use. Since God works in and through existing conditions, I take this to mean that when the situation is close, when your friend might die or might live, then your prayer's surrender can add enough power—mechanism unknown—to tilt the balance. Though it won't still earthquakes or halt troops, it might quiet cancer or quell pneumonia. For Tillich, God's activity is by no means interference, but instead divine creativity—the ongoing creation of life with all its greatness and danger. I don't know. I don't know beans about God.

Nature works out its complexities. God suffers the world's necessities along with us, and suffers our turning away, and joins us in exile. Christians might add that Christ hangs, as it were, on the cross forever, always incarnate, and always nailed. [p. 169.]

If Paul Tillich were a great novelist and poet, he might have written the things Dillard writes here. He wasn't. Dillard is. (See, for example, the closing pages of chapter six.) Nonetheless, a great number of Christian intellectuals would have to take exception to Dillard's caricature of Christian intellectuals: "Pantheism, according to David Tracy, theologian at the University of Chicago, is the private view of most Christian intellectuals today" (p. 176). Such an assertion is simply wishful thinking on the part of the old guard of modernist academicians. And among the upcoming generation of young Xian (Christian) scholars and theologians, fewer and fewer succumb in timidity to the old naïve and nihilist scientism that is already being seen as one of the major intellectual failures of the twentieth century.

I don't want to give away the fascinating ending of *For the Time Being*, but that little story Dillard recounts seems to be a metaphor for the journey she has taken in writing this existential diary of theodic despair. I cannot recommend this book to the lay reader, it's simply too unsettling and confusing without a strong background in the philosophical categories underlying it. For the theologian, it's a fascinating personal account of a well-respected and eloquent literary master. I pray Annie Dillard comes through her crisis of faith, and, ever a devoted fan, I look forward to her next novel telling *that* story.