

**“One thing only, as we were taught’:  
Eclipse and Revelation in Annie Dillard’s ‘Total Eclipse’”**

Isabelle Laurenzi

*Excerpt 1: Introduction*

At approximately 8:15am on Monday, February 26, 1979, Annie Dillard and her then-husband Gary stopped their car and climbed a hill overlooking the Yakima valley in Washington to watch a total solar eclipse. Two years after seeing the eclipse, Dillard wrote about the experience. “Total Eclipse” was one of fourteen essays published in Dillard’s 1982 book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. The total eclipse leads Dillard to evaluate her beliefs about the moral connectivity of humans to each other and to the world they inhabit. In the four-sectioned “Total Eclipse,” Dillard’s “re-membering”<sup>1</sup> brings about a revelation or, in Dillard’s terminological framework, a moment of “waking up.”

Dillard’s essay is a woven masterwork in which images, themes, and memories overlap and intertwine. She circles back to the same perceptions, and even words, over and over again, such that it is difficult to ascribe a linear narrative to the essay. In this sense, she resembles her predecessor Ralph Waldo Emerson. And like the path of Emerson’s essay “Experience,” one that goes “into hell and out again,”<sup>2</sup> our journey in Dillard’s essay is one that brings us into utter darkness before we come to the revelatory moment of “waking up.”<sup>3</sup> As with Emerson, the goal of the essay is revelation or, for Dillard, “waking up.” What is different about Dillard’s take on the Emersonian journey of traveling into hell and out again is that the motion of the piece, of going into darkness before coming back into the light, mirrors the motion of an eclipse. We must recognize Dillard’s essay not only as the relating of the complex and fractured experience

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<sup>1</sup> Remembering can be thought of as “re-membering” in that it is the act of putting together bits and pieces of memory into a contiguous, meaningful narrative. In writing her essay, Dillard strings together the impressions of her experience viewing the total eclipse of 1979. I owe this play on the word “remembering” to Professor Stout.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Stout, “The Transformation of Genius into Practical Power: A Reading of Emerson’s ‘Experience,’” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 35, no. 1: 6.

<sup>3</sup> Annie Dillard, “Total Eclipse,” in *The Annie Dillard Reader* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 13.

of watching the total eclipse of 1979 but also as an eclipse itself. The task of this paper, then, is to determine the moment of the eclipse in the essay so that we might more deeply and fully grasp Dillard's moral revelation about human connectedness to each other and to our world, about the gravity of remembering, and about why and how we should "wake up."

*Excerpt 2: Eclipse of the Narrative*

At this point in the essay, the last paragraph of the second section, the total eclipse of the narrative occurs.<sup>4</sup> In a series of metaphors and similes, Dillard describes the moon sliding over the sun, creating "dark night, on the land and in the sky." In the eclipse, there is the image of the final hole, previously mentioned in this paper: "the hole where the sun belongs." After Dillard describes the eclipse, she resumes her concern with remembering and forgetting and their connection to familiarity and also death. In the darkness of the eclipse, Dillard says, "we were the world's dead people... our minds were light-years distant, forgetful of almost everything... we had, it seems, loved the planet and loved our lives, but could no longer remember the way of them. We got the light wrong." Not only does Dillard consider herself part of the dead, but she also considers everyone on the hillside looking over the Yakima valley dead. As one of the dead, she assumes a plural first person voice of "we." Whereas in the final moments of the partial eclipse, Dillard could at least "remember" a conjured way of life—life on the hillsides along the Euphrates—now, in the total eclipse, she is "forgetful of almost everything." She cannot even remember the light but only knows that the "ring of light" in the black sky "should not be there."<sup>5</sup> It is unfamiliar to her, but she cannot recall the way the sky should look. And so as the sun, moon, earth reach the moment of perfect alignment, Dillard feels even greater distance from her world. Without much more thought, however, the eclipse

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<sup>4</sup> From this point onwards, when I use "total eclipse," I am referring to this last paragraph of section two, on page nine of *The Annie Dillard Reader*, in which Dillard first describes the total eclipse that she saw in 1979. Later, I will be drawing some comparisons between this passage, on page nine, and the paragraph on page twelve that I argue is the "essay's eclipse."

<sup>5</sup> Dillard, "Total Eclipse," 9.

ends, and the paragraph and section of the essay are over.

The paragraph that follows, the first of section three, is pivotal for the essay: “It is now that the temptation is strongest to leave these regions. We have seen enough; let’s go. Why burn our hands any more than we have to? But two years have passed; the price of gold has risen. I return to the same buried alluvial beds and pick through the strata again.”<sup>6</sup> The “now” is this moment immediately after the total eclipse; “these regions” are the darkest moments at the bottom of the hole. We have experienced the eclipse, so why not leave the “region of dread”?<sup>7</sup> The burning of hands is an allusion to the gold miner motif; we are down in the deep, hot gold mine, in the best position for finding gold but also in a place of peril. Dillard says it is our temptation not to go any further, not to dig into deeper and hotter territory. Yet, because of the passing of time, the value of remembering her experience of the eclipse—and the “gold” she might find as a result of remembering—is at its greatest peak, so Dillard will not exit the hole yet. Simply put, Dillard is telling the reader in this paragraph that we have not yet reached the darkest moment in her essay. We are not yet at the bottom of the hole or in possession of gold. Thus, she will pick through her recollection of the total eclipse once more. What follows in the rest of section three is precisely that—a revisiting of the eclipse and its meaning for Dillard.

*Excerpt 3: Eclipse of the Essay*

The height of the essay’s eclipse happens in the last few sentences of the paragraph: “If there had ever been people on earth, nobody knew it. The dead had forgotten those they had loved. The dead were parted one from the other and could no longer remember the faces and lands they had loved in the light.” Earlier, we came to the conclusion that the darkest moment of the essay would be the moment when the world is void of people because Dillard believes that without people, there is no significance. Such a moment occurs in this final paragraph of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3.

third section. The appearance of the world under the vast darkness of the eclipse appears to be void of people. None of the dead, standing atop the hill, knew if people ever lived on the planet over which they looked. Because there are no people, there is no meaning to the world of the eclipse. These final thoughts also let us know that the cause of the world's emptiness is the fact that the dead have forgotten "the faces and lands they had loved."<sup>8</sup> Dillard comes full circle: she begins the paragraph of the essay's eclipse with the idea that the world looks like the "memories of the careless dead," and at the end, she mourns the fact that the dead have forgotten their people, their way of life, and their land, such that the memory of the world is an empty one—one with no people, and thus no significance.<sup>9</sup> During the essay's eclipse, Dillard realizes that it is because the dead are careless that they can no longer remember the people and world they loved; and because they cannot remember, the world looks empty and has no significance.

There are similarities between the paragraph of the essay's eclipse and the paragraph of the total eclipse. The total eclipse expresses Dillard's thought that all are dead and that they have forgotten "the way" of their "lives" and "the planet."<sup>10</sup> One might mistake this total eclipse as the eclipse of the essay, but there are two differences from the total eclipse and what this paper argues is the essay's eclipse. First, the dead in the essay's eclipse are, more specifically, "careless." Second, not only do these careless dead forget their own lives and land but also "those they had loved." These two differences are critical; they each relate to the two convictions that Dillard articulates in the course of section three: that without people, there is no significance, and that "caring for each other, and for our life" is the "unified field" that empowers both good and evil.<sup>11</sup> The reason that the manifestations of these convictions are present in the second eclipse—the eclipse of the essay—and not in the first one, the recounting of the physical occurrence, is that Dillard does not come upon the two key ideas until she actively decides to reevaluate the experience. As she states in the opening of section three, she chooses to "pick

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

through the strata again.” Likewise, the part in section three in which Dillard identifies the two key ideas about significance and caring is not the eclipse of the essay because it is purely conceptual. Not until the end of the section, until the essay’s eclipse, does Dillard make a connection between these concepts.

### **Works Cited**

- Dillard, Annie. “Total Eclipse.” In *The Annie Dillard Reader*, 1–17. New York: HarperPerennial, 1995.
- Stout, Jeffrey. “The Transformation of Genius into Practical Power: A Reading of Emerson’s ‘Experience.’” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (n.d.): 3–24.

*Fellow Commentary*

Kelly Rafey

Building the body of a paper is like building a bridge. On one side is the nebulous, unproven thesis, and it is only by trotting across the entire length of the essay that the reader can reach the other side: the satisfied, informed conviction that the thesis was right all along. It is the author’s job to make sure that the bridge is built in a sensible order: that each plank is set one after another from start to finish, with no gaps or holes. If the author skips a few feet ahead, the reader will be forced to make a long leap of logic and will be at risk of falling off the argument completely into a ravine of deep skepticism or confusion.

Isabelle Laurenzi, in her essay “‘One thing only, as we were taught:’ Eclipse and Revelation in Annie Dillard’s ‘Total Eclipse,’” builds a very ambitious bridge to accommodate an ambitious and unexpected thesis. She puts forth the claim that Dillard’s essay not only recounts the experience of watching an eclipse, it replicates an eclipse in its very structure. By establishing the eclipse of Dillard’s essay, Isabelle is able to perform a unique and compelling close reading, arguing that the essay’s eclipse reveals Dillard’s personal revelation about humanity, remembrance, and “waking up.”

Isabelle switches between two different organizational strategies in her paper: thematic and chronological. In the portions excerpted here we have highlighted the latter. Writing a close-reading essay that chronologically follows its primary source is an uncomfortable business. The chronological structure is often a default for many students at a loss to decide how best to organize their argument, and it can often limit them from finding a more a flexible and logical organization. In this case, however, a chronological structure bolsters Isabelle’s claim and helps her guide the reader across her essay’s bridge to the solid ground at the other end.

In the portions excerpted here, Isabelle describes two eclipses in parallel: the eclipse of the narrative and the eclipse of the essay. Following the chronology of Dillard’s essay, Isabelle describes the narrative’s eclipse first. She then uses the analysis she just made as evidence for her next section, in which she describes eclipse number two. At this point, Isabelle takes a step back and zooms out to examine the two eclipses from a fresh perspective. She shifts away from a chronological reading and into a more flexible organization as she examines the eclipses side by side in a single paragraph.

Isabelle writes in a style that is lyrical and crisp. As she moves through her essay she does not present observations and analysis willy-nilly, but smoothly builds her analysis out of her previous analysis, creating an interlocking structure that carries her reader step by step across the span of her argument.