

THE WAY OF EXCHANGE  
IN  
JAMES DICKEY'S POEMS: 1957-1967

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

James Dickey's work as an artist grows out of the way he feels about life, and about the world of art. He believes that aesthetic experience can revitalize the reader, that it can give him a new vision. And because of the new vision the artist and the reader are united.

The poem , therefore, becomes a very alive, vibrant medium. And during his poetic career James Dickey explores the possibility of poetry as a statement. He is never afraid to push a poem to the limits of experience. The result is sometimes a strange, and grotesque work of art. However, in his best moments James Dickey is capable of loading the poem with intense energy. And it is this energy which he hopes to transfer to the reader so that the reader can see the world with new eyes.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Unlike many contemporary American poets, James Dickey began to write relatively late in his life. He was twenty-four when he first discovered that he wished to become a poet. It is significant that within four years of the publication of his first collection Into the Stone, which appeared in John Hall Wheelock's series Poets of Today, Dickey had formulated a system of aesthetics which remains basically the same to date.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning Dickey was impressed with the importance of the act of perception, the artist's perception which helps to create the work of art and the reader's perception which brings the work of art to life. Within the poem, Dickey was interested in the intensification of the persona's perception. Dickey's poetry and his critical works are interrelated attempts to explore the nature of perception.

Perhaps because Dickey underwent a kind of conversion from businessman to poet, he emphasizes the importance of the poet's nature and considers the formal aspect of verse to be of secondary, although vital concern. His conversion and his poetry indicate that Dickey is interested in creating a mytho-poetic world. His poems frequently describe an

experience which Evelyn Underhill would term a mystical experience. In answer to the question "What is Mysticism?" she says that, "Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment."<sup>2</sup> The mystic does not initiate the experience but rather must wait patiently:

Some great emotion, some devastating visitation of beauty, love, or pain, lifts us to another level of consciousness; and we are aware for a moment of the difference between the neat collection of discrete objects and experience which we call the world, and the height, the depth, the breadth of that living, growing, changing Fact, of which thought, life and energy are parts, and in which we "live and move and have our being," (p.7).

Intense emotion lifts the initiate to a sublimity of vision in which all discrete things become continuous. This is what constitutes the mystic vision. Moreover, this experience which Dickey describes again and again in his poetry is the same experience that brought him into the world of art.

In Howard Nemerov's collection of critical essays, Contemporary American Poetry, Dickey describes the conversion.<sup>3</sup> The transition from businessman to poet is magical, a release of the true self. "There is a poet-- or kind of poet-- buried in every human being like Ariel in his tree...." The spirit of air, the creative spirit, is imprisoned and must be freed. Although James Dickey describes the process as being magical, it is possible for all men. "The people whom we are pleased to call poets are only those who have felt the need and contrived the means to release the spirit from its prison."<sup>4</sup> Each man thus contains the entirety of

the Ariel myth. He is, in a sense, held captive by his own inability to believe in the possibility of magic. And he alone can act as Prospero to the imprisoned Ariel.

Once released from his prison, the artist begins to prepare himself for the act of creation. Before he may even begin to write, however, the artist must be capable of emotional honesty. "The touch upon words of a humanly perceived beauty, terror, or mystery is rare indeed, for a fundamental kind of unliterary innocence is necessary in a writer before he can undergo these feelings."<sup>5</sup>

The poet must be innocent and open to the most mundane of human emotions before he can find truth because the true poem, for Dickey, is one which honestly reflects life. If the poet becomes too literary, or too concerned with creating a finished work of art, the current of perception between the world and the artist, the artist and the poem, the poem and the reader, and finally (to complete the cycle) from the reader back to an awareness of the world, is short-circuited. A merely technically good poem is a suspect poem: one that can never possess the spark of life.

Here, as in his discussion of the awakening poet, Dickey bases his critical theories on paradox. The poet is both everyman and an orphic figure. Poetry is capable of creating "true" vision or of destroying that vision. For Dickey truth is both a universal and a relative term. In his largest collection of critical essays Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now Dickey explains that his admiration for A.E. Robinson stems from Robinson's understanding that truth

"takes different forms for different people and different situations."<sup>6</sup>

However, there is a subjective test for the veracity of a poem. Dickey states emphatically that, "One thing is certain; if the reader does not, through the writing, gain a new, intimate, and vital perspective on his own life as a human being, there is no poem at all, or only a poem written by a collective entity called 'Modern Poetry, Period 1945-1960'."<sup>7</sup> The artifact must contain enough vital energy to stir the reader to a new awareness, not only of the aesthetic experience itself but more importantly, to a new awareness of the very fiber of his own life. The sense of heightened awareness should stay with him after he has put down the poem. There must be, Dickey believes, a personal kind of communication between the poet and his audience.

If each reader is to gain a vital perspective on his own life, how then can a poem "speak" to a varied audience? The answer to this question lies in his discussion of the nature of reality in The Suspect in Poetry:

The poet must evoke a world that is realer than real: his work must result in an intensification of qualities, you might say, that we have all observed and lived, but the poet has observed and lived most deeply of all. This world is so real that the experienced world is transformed and intensified, through the poem, into itself, a deeper itself, a more characteristic itself. If a man can make words do this, he is a poet, (p.76).

The artifact becomes not only true to life but also bigger



than life. When the experience becomes bigger than life it then also becomes characteristic. Perhaps James Dickey would say that Constable was a great painter because someone experiences, for the first time, the feeling on a strangely overcast day that he is seeing a "Constable sky." With that realization he can visualize the painting and see that it is accurate. He begins to look at nature as searchingly and with as sensitive an eye as he would a fine work of art. The perception of art and the perception of nature fuse and both are intensified. The sky is truly seen for the first time. A particular mixture of sun and shadow is, in a sense, created by Constable: He brings them to life. Thus the painter is able to "transfigure" and to "intensify" the world of nature.<sup>8</sup>

That is not to say that Dickey, either in his criticism or in his poetry, is concerned with representing life exactly as it is. To say that poetry must adhere to a kind of mirror-like reflection of the world would be to make an arbitrary and restrictive demand on the poet's gift. His task is to create a greater awareness of reality and, Dickey believes, this can sometimes best be done by not demanding the merely probable of the work of art. In his own poetry animals are given voice( as in "The Owl King"), the dead revive and speak with the living (as in "In the Tree House at Night") and man experiences a second

birth (as in "Reincarnation (I)"). These are all events which are, in the strictest sense, unreal. And yet Dickey utilizes the interchange of the animal and human worlds and the worlds of the dead and the living in order to present an intensified experience, a mystic experience. The experience causes the release of energy necessary to activate the reader's perception.

Dickey believes that the vitality of the work of art is the result of the subjective nature of the artist's vision. Without the presence of the artist we are told that the particular work of art cannot come to life. The formal aspects are unimportant without the infusion of spirit. Thus the subjective perception becomes a universal perception. The logical leap from relative to universal truth is possible, Dickey insists, because man's experiences are universal. And the poet's experiences become more universal the more he is able to subjectively live into his poem. This paradox forms the basis of James Dickey's poetic theories.

Because of this, Dickey's critical essays concentrate almost exclusively on the role of the poet. It is important for Dickey that the poet live deeply before he can write effectively. The poet is an orphic being who must learn to synthesize a vision. He does this by opening himself to life, by cultivating awareness. Through the creative act the poet once again becomes a Prospero figure; he releases the reader from bondage and allows his liberated spirit a new freedom of perception. The circle is complete. The

poet experiences life in order to create the artifact. The reader experiences the artifact in order to perceive life.

Even though Dickey's theories about art contain mystic elements, he is far from being an aesthete. In an interview by Carolyn Kizer he says, "My God, a poem is not anything but some words on a page. In the eternal battle between life and poetry or life and art, I'll take life. And if poetry were not a means, in my case, of intensifying experience and of giving a kind of personal value to it I would not have any interest in it whatever."<sup>9</sup>

The act of creation is the act which frees the imprisoned Ariel. Again, Dickey emphasizes the cyclic nature of creation. The poetry creates and is created by the personal vision of the poet. For this reason it is important for Dickey that the poet's voice ring true. Sincerity is the major criteria to be used in evaluating a work of art.

Truth, sincerity and vitality are all extremely subjective qualities. The problem of deriving a universally, or consistently valid test for great art remains unsolved. And Dickey prefers it that way. All poems may contain some element of the suspect:

What makes the whole thing difficult, of course, is that what may be suspect to me may well be genuine to you, and consequently we enter into a thorough critical chaos. This is, I suspect, where we should be anyway. What matters is that there be some real response to poems... that for certain people there be certain poems that speak directly to them as they believe God would.<sup>10</sup>

Like Emerson, James Dickey shrugs off mere consistency and attempts, in a more emotionally direct manner, to discover the voice of "God." The act of criticism becomes a religious and highly personal activity. The critic does not feel obliged to make his aesthetic judgments adhere to a rigidly intellectualized system. On the other hand, as a result of the particularly subjective criteria which Dickey chooses in his attempt to define good poetry, his criticism is, at times, arbitrary and self-contradictory.

The best example is to be found within The Suspect in Poetry in the essay entitled "Randall Jarrell." In this particular instance Dickey has created a debate between two aspects of his critical personality in order to discover what it is he both likes and simultaneously dislikes in Jarrell's work. Speaker "B," the dominant personality, finds Jarrell's poetry dull and lifeless, the images flat, the language uninspiring and the inhabitants of the poetic world vague and inhuman. However, Speaker "A," the alter-ego, is given the longest speech and the last word; that word is "Reality." Speaker "A" believes that Randall Jarrell's poetry is effective because he portrays "humanity in the twentieth century," (p.83). What the critic responds to is Jarrell's ability to empathize with others, to experience a time "in which everything to pity is clear as death, and none of the reasons for any of it," (p.83).

It is impossible to separate the critic from the poet in most of Dickey's critical work. Critically, he finds Jarrell's view of the present day relevant because he perceives a similar kind of world in his own poetry. "Fathers and Sons," "The Scarred Girl," "The Lifeguard," and "The Wedding," all describe people who are either visited by death or by either physical or psychological wounding. In each case the victims are described passively, life just happens to them. Dickey responds to Jarrell's poetry because he too is able to pity mankind.

The three poets whom Dickey most admires are William Stafford, Robert Penn Warren, and Theodore Roethke. Like his fellow poet-critics, Dickey praises those artists whose work is similar to his own or whose poems reflect similar attitudes about the world. And all three of the older poets offer Dickey what he considers to be a relevant view of life. Like him, they have worked within the more conventional schools of poetry and yet each has created a markedly individual voice.

Dickey admires the calm presence which William Stafford is able to project. "His natural mode of speech is a gentle, mystical, half-mocking and highly personal day-dreaming about the landscape of the Western United States," (p. 112). However, this statement from Dickey's essay on Stafford in The Suspect is only a partial means of discovering what it is in the West Coast poet's work that

attracts James Dickey. Robin Skelton, in his "Introduction" to Five Poets of the Pacific Northwest, more closely analyzes Stafford's mystical tone. He discovers that "Stafford's poetry almost always moved from an apparently direct presentation of the concrete and particular toward a sense of the almost numinous unknown."<sup>11</sup> The mundane objects and experiences of life become charged with a strange intensity. What Skelton terms the "movement toward mystery," (p. xxxiii), can be found frequently in James Dickey's poetry as well.

In "Fog Envelops the Animals," "The Dusk of Horses," and "Deer Among Cattle," Dickey shares with Stafford a feeling for open landscape, populated by animals, in which a quiet communion takes place. In some poems the two poets resemble one another even more closely in tone and in use of imagery. Dickey acknowledges this debt when he includes the following quotation from Stafford's book West of Your City in The Suspect:

The mangled hand made the water red.

That was something the ocean would remember:  
I saw me in the current flowing through the land,  
rolling, touching roots, the world incarnadined,  
And the river richer by a kind of marriage. (p. 113).

Four years later "The Poisoned Man" was published in Dickey's volume Helmets:

The freezing river poured on

And, as it took hold of my blood,  
Leapt up round the rocks and boiled over.  
I felt that my heart's blood could flow

Unendingly out of the mountain,  
Splitting bedrock apart upon redness,  
And the current of life at my instep

Give deathlessly as a spring.<sup>12</sup>

In both poems the injured speaker washes his blood into a stream. Nature has wounded and soothed him. In both cases the stream becomes an extension of the man. His blood flows out of himself into the water and is carried to sea. With the ritual offering up of blood he becomes "wedded" to nature. Thus the flowing of blood brings a mystic release, a kind of exchange between the speaker and nature.

Another poet whom Dickey consistently admires is a fellow Southerner, Robert Penn Warren. Dickey believes that Warren's work, like Stafford's, is capable of actually transforming the reader: "Opening a book of poems by Robert Penn Warren is like putting out the light of the sun, or like plunging into the labyrinth and feeling the thread break after the first corner is passed. One will never come out in the same Self as that in which one entered."<sup>13</sup> The black intensity of the poetry forces the reader into a crisis situation. One feels pursued by the "Secret-terrible, unforeseen, inevitable...[which will either]... strike us dead, drive us into crime inexplicable to any but ourselves,

"or yield up in transfiguring and releasing pain our Definition."<sup>14</sup> The process of creating and then releasing tension is one Dickey, too, finds effective. This technique requires time, and when Dickey employs it in such poems as "Falling," "The Firebombing," and "Sermon" the poems become lengthy.

Both Dickey and Penn Warren are able to create a Kafkaesque universe in which one is continually pursued. The speaker in "Pursuit from Under" feels the dark, underworldly presence constantly under his heels. In his poem "Pursuit" Penn Warren despairs because the grotesque quality of life is inescapable.

However, it is in "The Being" that Dickey most effectively creates the kind of Vague Other that inexplicably terrifies:

It is there, above him, beyond, behind,

Distant, and near where he lies in his sleep  
Bound down as for warranted torture.  
Through his eyelids he sees it

Drop off its wings or its clothes. (p. 154).

The visitation is inevitable and the speaker cannot force himself to awaken in order to rid himself of its presence. In Penn Warren's "Original Sin: A Short Story" the speaker also attempts to escape the torture brought on by his constant companion, original sin:



Nodding, it's great head rattling like a gourd,  
 And locks like seaweed strung on the stinking stone,  
 The nightmare stumbles past, and you have heard  
 It fumble your door before it whimpers and is gone:  
 It acts like the old hound that used to snuffle your  
 door and moan. 15

Both poets utilize grotesque imagery in order to create an atmosphere of tense semi-darkness. The Presence appears because it is a necessary part of life. The torture which it inflicts is "warranted." The guilt which comes from being alive is a necessary part of life as well. In both of these poems tension is created and then released. Warren seeks that sense of purgation which is brought on by distress. In the same way, Dickey's Being is able to bestow a mystic awareness on the sleeper as a result of the torture he has undergone. He exchanges identities with the Being during sleep and retains from the experience the ability to "raise/ Dead plants and half-dead beasts."

Perhaps because of his great admiration for Stafford and Penn Warren, Dickey asserts that Theodore Roethke is the greatest contemporary American poet.<sup>16</sup> Roethke combines Stafford's loving sympathy for the world of root and rock with Robert Penn Warren's ability to depict the ever present workings of the subconscious mind. The result is a poetry of domestic terror and natural joy. Ted Roethke frequently explores the dark underside of nature, the damp and mold of root cellars becomes synonymous with the dark workings of the primeval subconscious of man. The encounter between

poet and Other, whether the Other is simply another person or another manifestation of the poet himself, results in the release of energy. It is because of the release of either terrifying or joyous vitality that Dickey most admires Roethke's work.

Both poets use the motif of the encounter as one of the major thematic devices in their poetry. The encounter between the poet, the speaker, the human voice and the subject whose consciousness may be that of the human, <sup>with</sup> the animal or the vegetable world is so intense that the reader becomes a part of the encounter. He is included in the psychic exchange.

The encounter may be one which creates sympathy in the speaker. If the experience is <sup>so intense</sup> more intense the poet becomes involved; ~~He~~ <sup>he</sup> undergoes an intellectual identification with the subject. But the highest intensity of emotion is capable of causing the poet to lose himself and to take on the personality, the emotions, and the life of the Other within the poem. These are, in a sense, the options that are open to the artist as he approaches his work.

Although Roethke and Dickey share with William Stafford a concern for the natural world, they involve themselves more completely in it. Stafford can describe a "kind of marriage"<sup>17</sup> and yet, with these words he places a distance between the speaker and the natural world. The wedding is

complete in Theodore Roethke's poem "Her Longing," from The Far Field. The tumultuous emotions that the poet experiences in love sweep him into the air and he becomes "A pheonix, sure of my body,/ Perpetually rising out of myself,/ My wings hovering over the shorebirds."<sup>18</sup>

James Dickey's "Reincarnation (II)" presents a similar experience. In this case, however, the sea-bird is the reincarnated form of the speaker who has first had to experience death before he could exchange his perceptions for that of another. Only then is he free. "He hurtles as if motionless/ All the air in the upper world/ Splitting apart on his lips," (p. 244).

In two other poems "Winter Trout" and "The Owl King" the experience is more like Roethke's because the human and the animal perceptions exist simultaneously. In the first poem the poet comes to see the world in a new light, with greater clarity, because he has been capable of envisioning the natural world through the eyes of a fish:

Before his eyes as he lifts

Into spring, with the wood upside down  
Balanced perfectly in all its leaves  
And roots as he deeply has  
All winter made provision for,

The surface full of gold flakes  
Of the raw undersides of leaves,  
And the thing seen right,  
For once, that winter bought. (p. 129).

The vision from beneath, from the underside of consciousness, is the truer vision. Things are "seen right" in the same way

that the Owl King is capable of seeing clearly although he is the monarch of the blind. In both cases the perceiver comes closer to truth than man's rational vision can bring him. Roethe explores the consciousness of a creature who dwells under water in the title poem to The Far Field. He considers the possibility that he, the poet, "might return again,/ As a snake or a raucous bird,/ Or, with luck, as a lion," (p. 26).

James Dickey would be pleased with Louis Simpson's comparison of his work with Roethke's because of Simpson's concentration on the poetic process. Simpson has said: "In ways James Dickey resembles Roethke. In Poems: 1957-1967 time and again Dickey creates a poem that enlarges our experience. The mind in these poems is original and even inhuman. I can think of no one else who could have imagined, as Dickey does in 'The Sheep-Child,' what it might be like to be half-sheep and half-human."<sup>19</sup> He and Ted Roethke are able to create an entirely new experience for the reader and this experience, because of its intensity, is a "true" one.

It is the often the poets who are most like Dickey who please him the most. Stafford's quiet understatement, Warren's use of the grotesque and Roethke's concentration on an exchange between two worlds are all "real" for Dickey because they constitute his own particular poetic vision. Simpson's evaluation would please Dickey because of this, and because Simpson understands "Sheep-Child" to be wholly original and yet unmistakably attributable. Dickey discusses

this point more fully in the article entitled "Your Next-door Neighbor's Poems" in which he describes what it is he most admires about the poetry of Robinson Jeffers:

Despite his much-cited impurity and his excesses, Jeffers does have something that all poets probably need and few have: a life-view, a hard core of utter belief, a perspective against which things are measured, a place to stand from which the poet cannot be dislodged, a temper of mind and will that enters into everything the poet writes, conditioning it, accounting for its unique weather -- in a word, creating it as a coherent and immediately recognizable world.<sup>20</sup>

And here, finally, is the last step in the definition of Dickey's term "Reality." The poem which seems real to the critic is, in part, able to communicate to him because the poet uses similar images, employs much the same subject matter, or creates poetry of similar intensity as that which can be found in the poet-critic's own work. But, in order to qualify as a great poet, the artist must create an organic world, one which is true to its own vision. This is one way in which Dickey attempts to escape from an overly subjective view of poetry.

Thus Dickey's criticism concentrates on the cycle of perception, on the freeing of the artist, the necessity for the artist to retain a kind of unliterary innocence and, at the same time, be able to portray his vision with a kind of intensity that will give it life. Style is important because it is only by finding "a place to stand" that the poet becomes effective. His voice must be distinctive.

It would seem that because of his emphasis on the subjective nature of the poet's vision Dickey would allow the poet the technical freedom to create his own vision in his own particular manner. And in his introduction to Paul Carroll's anthology he praises the new poets for their "personal explorations, for which, most of the time, there is no precedent."<sup>21</sup> Here as in his other critical works he attacks the technically perfect poem for its lack of poetic sincerity. James Dickey shares with William Carols Williams an abhorrence of Eliot's formalistic influence on contemporary poetry:

I'm awfully tired of the English poetic tradition and of the awful kind of dead hand that Eliot insists has to be clamped on the individual talent by the poetic tradition.... You can use something from it every now and then for your own purposes but the main emphasis to me is not tradition and the individual talent but tradition (small letters) and the individual talent ( large letters). <sup>22</sup>

If overly technical verse is artificial and destructive of the cycle of perception, then the rough, experimental quality of the poems in Carroll's anthology is an indication of the process whereby the poet attempts to harness his creative energy and utilize it to its fullest. The poet does not fall back on established patterns but tries to create his own organic world. Finally, Dickey dislikes Eliot's critical stance because he feels that it turns poetry into a parlor game. Technical achievements become mere quaint diversion and irreparably separate poetry from life.

On the other hand, in the two critical essays dealing with anthologies in The Suspect (New Poets of England and America I (1957) and The Grove Press New American Poets (1960) ) Dickey clearly favors the more conservative English poets' collection. He feels that, " 'The Movement' poets are considerably more interesting than ours ... [although they are] ... "not of great moment." (p. 42).

In his discussion of American poets Dickey pinpoints another possible failure of authenticity. He believes that the American artist has a tendency to violate the organic integrity of a poem. He insists on an organic form within the poem. The technique must grow from the nature of the artist's vision. On the one hand, Dickey objects to the confessional poets, charging them with artificiality even at the moment when they are attempting to speak naturally, personally. He believes them to be too fully conscious of manipulating the poem, and Dickey feels that because of this the despair and the insanity that they portray is unconvincing. They finally become mere caricatures of themselves. On the other hand, Dickey dismisses many of the San Francisco Renaissance poets as mindless men who can only "moan or howl," (p. 119). In either case, when the poet's perception and his means of expression are incongruous, Dickey believes that the poem can not work effectively.

Dickey terms this breakdown in the creative process a

failure of the "censor," a concept he has taken from Auden. He defines it as "the faculty or indwelling being which determines what shall and what shall not come into a poem, and which has the final say as to how the admitted material shall be used," ( p.50). The censor can be overactive and create a dry, sterile verse. On the other hand, it can be inoperative; in both cases the poet creates an insincere vision and for this Dickey damns him .

Once again, the critical criteria cannot be said to be systematic. The contradiction between utter freedom and the possibility of this technical freedom producing "mindless" poetry is impossible to resolve, and Dickey does not attempt to resolve it. This reluctance is part of the cycle of perception. As the critic grows so do his concepts change, and with this his reactions to the poem itself change.

The contradictory responses to the American poet's attempt to find a voice are, in part, a factor of time. In 1964 The Suspect in Poetry indicates a greater response to the more traditionally technical expression by the English poets; but by 1968, with the introduction to Paul Carroll's anthology, Dickey has expanded his views. That he had begun to alter his reaction is evident from the interview by Carolyn Kizer which appeared in 1966. Dickey states that the great poet of the future must find a "place to stand" that is utterly his own. His poetry, "will have nothing whatever to do with tradition except insofar as the poet uses the English language " (p. 12). Even here he calls



for a new vision, a vision so intense and personal that it carries the poet and the reader with him beyond the customary boundaries of "traditional poetry," it brings him once again to life.

In his discussion of technique, Dickey concentrates most on the poet's use of imagery. He believes that "when the stream of images is rich and full the censor is at his best."<sup>23</sup> And this is one of the few specific tests that he offers of the censor's active presence.

L.S. Dembo, author of Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry, discusses the concern with the image as a particularly twentieth century interest. In this Dickey is typical of other American poets. Pound, Williams, Stevens, and their various disciples share what Dembo recognizes as a Bergsonian concept of the creative use of language. "The implication is that the image is not simply a vehicle for transcribing a sensation but represents part of the sensation itself-- or, better, it is an idealized re-creation of a sensation, a 'new vision,' which has come to be a thing-in-itself."<sup>24</sup> Although the Bergsonian aesthetic has been emphasized and applied differently by each of his fellow contemporary poets, Dickey's system of aesthetics is derived from Henri Bergson as well. The role of the artist is that of a revealing agent. The insistence on both the subjective perception and the communicability of the artist's vision are both Bergsonian. Both the philosopher and the poet believe that past precedent is not the motivating force in the evolution of style, but rather that intuition

is the means of "finding the true duration."<sup>25</sup> The implication finally is that each new poet faces infinite possibilities; he is free to discover his own "reality."

For James Dickey "reality" involved intensity of vision, a kind of intensity that calls for the dramatic, or the violent image. The poet must bring the full force of his personality to the poetry. He must write about that which he knows best because he can then speak more truly. Therefore, Dickey's poems find their subject in the poet's experiences. In this sense Dickey's poetry could be understood more fully if we examine Roy Harvey Pearce's discussion of the American epic. Pearce explains the epic in terms of its audience:

Ours is not the heroic sensibility. We cannot really believe in heroes; yet they must be created for us. It follows that the author of the American epic must be his own hero, as his epic is the record of his struggle to make something of himself and of the world which constitutes his central subject.<sup>26</sup>

And this is certainly the case in Dickey's poetic universe which consists of memories of his past, dreams, and the very personal struggle with both named and unnamed guilt.

One of Dickey's clearest statements of what he believes to be the function of poetry is found in "Spinning the Cry Crystal Ball: Some Guesses at the Future of American Poetry," which was first delivered as a lecture at the Library of Congress on April 24, 1967. Although Dickey dislikes William Carlos Williams' influence upon contemporary poetry (he feels that Williams is too prosaic), he begins to sound surprisingly like Williams:

I think the new poetry will be a poetry of the dazzlingly simple statement, the statement that is clairvoyantly and stunningly simple... which has a ... warm simplicity of vision: The simplicity that opens out deeper into the world and carries us with it...( p. 16) We shall have a truly tribal poetry, something naive and utterly convincing. (p. 17)

At one time Dickey described the poem as merely "words on a page," and yet he obviously believes that the poem can be much more. The poem is the agent capable of inducing a mystical experience. As Ariel releases himself from the dark prison, his liberating act releases his reading audience from a similar emprisonment. Finally, the only test for the excellence of a poem is a perceptual test. In a good poem the cycle of perception complexes itself. The poem comes to life.

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## CHAPTER TWO

A Chronological Examination of James Dickey's Poetry:  
The Early Poems

The preceding brief analysis of James Dickey's aesthetics and his critical work is important insofar as it leads back to the poet. In his four volumes of poetry ( Into the Stone, 1960; Drowning with Others, 1962; Helmets, 1964; and Buckdancer's Choice, 1965) which appear almost entirely in his latest book ( Poems: 1957-1967) Dickey has attempted to present an organic universe. Falling is the fifth volume which is collected for the first time in Poems. Distortion, darkness, madness and violence (whether actual or suggested), continually find their way into his work. The point of view is nearly always eccentric, off-center. The speaker's vision is sometimes limited by half-light, sometimes by the strange environment in which he is placed. He falls through air, floats in water, sees with the eyes of the dead, the mad, the mutilated, or the bestial being. The new vision is a clairvoyant one. It results from an exchange of entities, whether the poet attempts to live into the life of someone very different from himself as in "The Scarred Girl," or "The Fiend," or whether the exchange of perception occurs between the speaker in the poem and the dead as in "The String," or between the speaker and the animal world as in "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet," or

## " The Sheep-Child"

Critics more readily understand what it is that Dickey is attempting to do in poems such as "Sled Burial, Dream Ceremony" and "The Birthday Dream" because of the widespread acceptance of Freudian dream psychology as a literary device. Most are reluctant to attempt to understand his poetry as a closed system: a primordial world.

Although Dickey's literary goals and the view of the universe which he presents in the five volumes of his poetry remain essentially the same throughout, the technical treatment varies. This is in part true because the poet is involved in the attempt to discover a voice. Peter Davidson in his article "The Difficulties of Being Major," attributes the changes in style to lack of experience:

Unlike Lowell, whose work had matured in technique before he was thirty, Dickey, starting from scratch at thirty-four, brought a fully inhabited imagination to his work, but he had to find his own technique, a rhetoric that would enable his ideas and sensations to move freely in verse.<sup>27</sup>

His poetry changes from a more tightly constructed formal work in which the vision is highly subjective to a looser verse form in which the poet works continually toward the narrative, and dramatic impact. Finally, Dickey moves from the narrative poem to the novel with his publication of Deliverance.<sup>28</sup> Although the technical approach varies, the

cosmology remains the same throughout his work. The images of stone, darkness, water, bird, moon, and sun dominate the poems.

There is wide critical variance as to the importance and success of the technical changes in Dickey's style. Peter Davidson, W.D. Strange, Laurence Lieberman, Howard Kaye and Norman Friedman would all generally agree that Dickey's evolution toward a more objective treatment is an improvement. On the other hand, Donald W. Baker, Ralph J. Mills jr., Louis Simpson, Robert Duncan, and M.L. Rosenthal would tend to disagree. All critics, however, feel it important to discuss the strange quality that gives Dickey's poetry its vitality. Ralph J. Mills jr. calls this quality Metempsychosis,<sup>29</sup> H.L. Weatherby terms the movement in Dickey's poetry the "way of exchange,"<sup>30</sup> and Robert Bly prefers to describe the tension Dickey is able to create in terms of a spiritual struggle.<sup>31</sup>

In order to understand both the nature of and the reason for the critical controversy which Dickey's technical changes have aroused and the poet's own justification of these same experiment, it would be best to examine the poetry chronologically. This chapter will deal primarily with the first two books of his poetry.

Into the Stone is unusual for contemporary poetry in that the poet utilizes the anapestic and the dactylic metrical foot. He chooses this "strongly cadenced language"

because he believes it to have a "very compelling sound: an unusual sound of urgency and passion and grave conviction, of inevitability...."<sup>32</sup>

The title poem of this first volume is one of the best examples of the manifestation of the driving rhythm which underlines the emotional intensity established by theme and imagery. He begins "Into the Stone" in *Medius Res*: "On the way to a woman, I give/ My heart all the way into moonlight."<sup>33</sup> The tone is mystical. The speaker, while rowing to a liason, is suspended on a dark lake lit only by the moon. He is suspended between two shores and between the past and future meetings with his loved one. Because of his alienation from the definitive shore, sunlight, and love he loses himself. He becomes a negative being who partakes of all around him. He can, for instance, become the moon.

The exchange between the speaker and the moon occurs first in the poem when he gives his heart "into moonlight." At the same time the moonlight becomes synonymous with the lover's longing for his woman. His passion is externalized: "Now down from all sides it is beating."

The speaker's identification with the moon becomes fused with a second identification: "Like the dead, I have newly arisen,/ Amazed by the light I can throw." Darkness, quietude, and alienation make him think of the dead. The cycle of sun and moon lead him to think of the corresponding cycle of life and death. And he, like the

moon, which journeys in the space between the planets, journeys in the dark space of water between the shores of the lake. This space, this darkness becomes, by virtue of its negative existence, a positive place. The darkness is in itself a "land between."

Howard Nemerov is capable of understanding and of admiring this quality in Dickey's work. "The paradoxical continuousness of all disparate forms on with another, in this generated world, is what Mr. Dickey's poems concentrate on representing, often by the traditional lore of the four elements."<sup>34</sup> Earth, air, water and fire continually reflect or partake of one another in Dickey's poetry.

The exchange and the use of paradoxical imagery are devices found throughout "Into the Stone." The line, "My thin flesh is shed by my shadow" utilizes both of these techniques. There are possibly two readings for this line. The first is that there is a shell of flesh over the shadow substance of man. The shedding off of the flesh reveals the interior darkness, the negative being who glides through the dark water. A second possibility is that the body is cast by the shadow, rather than vice versa. It is a kind of looking-glass world in which the moon, the dead, and the land made of water are the positive features. The speaker can "see by the dark side of light." He is not deprived of his vision but rather given a new perspective. He at this moment has reached his full potential: "I am he who I should have become." This mystic experience is the



result of a performed ritual:

Each time, the moon has burned backward.  
 Each time, my heart has gone from me  
 And shaken the sun from the moonlight.  
 Each time, a woman has called,  
 And my breath came to life in her singing. (p. 47)

By participating in the ritual, by losing himself utterly to the moon and the dead, he is recreated. The deliverance from necessary alienation is facilitated by his loved one. She participates in the rebirth. "I give up my father and mother;/ My own love has raised up my limbs." And as he lives so do all of those whom he has met in the negative universe, the land of the dead.

In this poem the sun and moon are played against one another; however, they are not mutually exclusive spheres. In James Dickey's cosmology they are opposed only that they may be considered as continuous qualities of the basic harmony of nature. This is particularly true in his earlier poems. The living and the dead, the act of loving, and the act of dying partake of each other.

At this time in the poet's development he used several formal structuring devices such as regular stanza length, traditional punctuation, and a pronounced pre-dominant rhythm. However, the structuring plays against the esoteric vision and the romantic use of language to create another source of tension in the work. The intensity that Dickey considers necessary is generated by his use of sound. The poetry becomes a primitive chant intent on casting a spell on its audience. It is

in the use of the refrain line that the chant of ritual incantation becomes most effective in these early poems.

"Sleeping Out at Easter" and "On the Hill Below the Lighthouse " are two poems set in half-light. In the first the twilight vision is resultant from the night's passing and the emergence of day. With the coming of light the world emerges out of darkness and begins to take shape: the world is created out of chaos. "All Presences change into trees." As the world is recreated the speaker becomes identified with the sun; the "One eye which opens slowly without me." And as the world merges out of chaos so does the speaker emerge from the subconscious world of sleep which he describes as a kind of world of animal consciousness. "My animal eyes become human." The light is seen as an active, liberating agent. It is the light that gives the birds their song, that creates the forest that surrounds the camper, and that awakens the camper's conscious mind.

Another source of life is the vegetable world. As the speaker identifies with the sun so does he identify himself with the vegetable world. While sleeping on his hand he has cut off the circulation and now his hand "hoveringly tingles, with grasping/ The source of all song at the root." With this two-fold exchange he becomes one with the process of creation and takes on the power of sun and root. He now can "put down those seeds" of life he has discovered in his deadened hand. The man's body

recreates the world and fulfills the potential of life. At the same time the world is created so that he may have a world to perceive. Both are simultaneously necessary.

When Dickey says that "the King's grave turns him to light," he is speaking of the camper who, by sleeping or surrendering himself to a comatose state, actually insures a reawakening. And the king is also the Vegetable King, the spirit of nature who finds life only through death, and day only by the presence of darkness.

Four of the six stanzas in "Sleeping Out at Easter" end with a refrain line which repeats the first line of that stanza. The last stanza consists of lines taken from the rest of the poem and reordered. The selecting principle seems to be that the most oracular lines are collected for the last stanzaic unit. The incantation necessary to both celebrate and to facilitate the creation of light seems both familiar and new to the reader:

All dark is now no more.

In your palm is the secret of waking.  
Put down those seeds in your hand;  
All Presences change into trees.  
A feather shall drift from the pine-top.  
The sun shall have told you this song,  
For this is the grave of the king;  
For the King's grave turns you to light. (p. 17).

The tension thus created between a personal statement ( the description of waking in the morning after having spent the night out of doors) and the impersonal ritual of Easter(which consists of the enacting of the death and life cycle) is resolved. The reader is finally addressed in the imperative voice. Although the occasion is Easter

Dickey returns the reader to a pre-Christian primitive celebration of spring.

"On the Hill Below the Lighthouse" again presents the speaker as a man between worlds. He is half-asleep, yet conscious of the room around him. After having made love the speaker lies with his woman beside him and rests on the edge of sleep. As in "Sleeping Out at Easter" the speaker's solitude is emphasized by the presence of a sleeping loved one. The camper finds comfort in his son's bird-like sleep. But while their bodies are next to one another, their minds exist on two different levels of consciousness.

Deep sleep, half-sleep, and wakefulness are played against one another in "The Lighthouse" in the same way that darkness, the moonlight, and the lighthouse's beam of artificial light are contrasted with one another. "The bright arm sweeps through the moon" and transforms the room that they sleep in. The shadows, cast by his love's clothing which is spread over a chair, seem to the speaker to form the figure of an angel with spread wings. The lighthouse's beam of light is stronger than the moon's light and the natural world becomes confused with the unnatural. "The sun is dead, thinking of night/ Swung round like a thing on a chain." The sun itself exchanges entities with the light house lamp and is described as if it were a mechanical rather than a natural body of light.

Thus the speaker is again placed in a suspended

state. He exists in a world in which reality and fantasy are indistinguishable; where conscious rational perception and the unconscious dream-vision are inextricably fused. The light issues from both the outside world and from within the sleeper. "From a place in the mind too deep/ For thought, a light like a wind is beginning." And it is the light from the depths, from the dark part of the mind, which Brings the cessation of the rational perception of light (however relative and paradoxical the various kinds of rational light may be). And it is within the sleep that the image of the moon is unadulterated. The peace of love, and the contentment of sleep slowly steal over the speaker.

Again, Dickey uses eight stanzaic units and each of the first seven stanzas ends with a refrain line. The eighth stanza is a compilation of the previous refrain lines and allows for a reduction of the level of intensity created in the rest of the poem. The atmosphere of tension results from the play of the speaker's perception of external stimuli against his subconscious perceptions of that same stimuli as he gradually sinks into sleep. Although the lines in the eighth stanza are by now familiar to the reader there is a shift in tone. The last stanza is more personal and concentrates more specifically on the sleeping man and his love and less on the outside world. There is greater tenderness here. Finally, as the speaker sinks into sleep he discovers the true vision of both the moon and of his lover: "A woman comes true when I think

her."

Richard Howard particularly admires Dickey's use of this technique:

We have a kind of morphology of the refrain as Dickey uses it so that ... we can put the italic lines together at the end of the poem and have yet another poem, a kind of mythographic gloss on the experience presented, a marginalia which accounts for and perhaps justifies the separate poem in this ritual universe.<sup>35</sup>

He goes on to point out that "the device is one taken over from Yeats, ... and the tone, caught from Roethke."<sup>36</sup> In addition, all three poets share an interest in folk mythology and rhythms.

"The String" and "The Jewel" are two more poems from Into the Stone which utilize the refrain. In both of these poems a line is repeated at the end of each stanza. "The Jewel" is a work in which the grotesque depersonalized images of war are contrasted with the poet's attraction to these same instruments. And the contradiction results in an alienated vision. The refrain "Along, in late night" emphasizes the pilot's alienation from his own specific and highly personal humanity, and his alienation from human society in general. In all of his earlier poems Dickey uses the refrain line to create atmosphere and to further delineate a ritual universe. Now, however, the pilot's guilt, which is the subject of the refrain, separates him from the ritual universe.

It is important to note that James Dickey was drawn to the more traditional poetic forms at the beginning of his work. Into the Stone consists of poems which contain from five to eight stanzas. These poems are composed of tight lines which end on a rising note. This creates a choppy rhythm and emphasizes the dramatic quality which interests Dickey consistently. Dickey's belief that the process of creation is an organic one has led him to try several techniques in an attempt to get the voice right:

I began to write poems by ... starting with a subject-- often very vaguely defined-- and letting rhythms develop out of it, aided, no doubt by years of guitar playing, and then supplying what I thought were the right words to inject the subject into the cadences that now seemed to be running in my mind endlessly, not stopping even while I was asleep.<sup>37</sup>

So the more traditional ballad and narrative forms appealed to Dickey both because they grew from folk-mythology and because of their relationship to music. The poems came to him at times of semi-consciousness, as well as when he was fully alert. The intellectual selection of theme was followed by a ~~period~~ in which the poem was allowed to grow by itself without the imposition of the purely intellectual faculties. In a sense, he carried the poem at the back of his mind and allowed it to develop by itself. At this stage Dickey is now able to hear the poem much like one hears a poem that one remembers from the past, although the specific words or images are not immediately recalled.

It is because of his attitude toward the creation of

poetry that each of Dickey's books of poetry is not a collection of unrelated works. The rhythms, the themes, the cosmology which Dickey utilizes create a unity among his poems. Although he begins his poetic career with predominately anapestic or dactylic feet, he works gradually towards a greater freedom of rhythm.

The stanza form eventually disappears and punctuation is gradually replaced by a more contemporary technique. In the 1967 collection Falling the title poem is free of stanzafication and pauses are indicated by spaces between words: the split-line technique is used. However, the volumes of poetry are not exclusive of one another. The poet remains interested in the same subjects. Familial relationships, alienation, death, hunting and love all continue to be explored.

And certainly the poems themselves reveal Dickey's concentration on the mystic ritual of creation. The speaker in his poetry is both an individual and a prototype. He speaks for the Twentieth century figure, the poet himself, and at the same time, he speaks for the unnamable inhabitants of the mystic universe. In "Sleeping Out at Easter" and in "The Vegetable King," he comes to be identified with what Jessie L. Weston calls the "Fisher King" and J.G. Frazer sometimes calls the "May King." However, both serve the same function. The poet creates life by the creation of the poem in the same way that the



Vegetable King is responsible for the return of the harvest season. The title itself suggests a return to folk-mythology, to sympathetic magic.

Dickey speaks of his fascination with ritual and folk-mythology when Carolyn Kizer interviews him:

I have read for years all these, well, translations when I didn't know the language ... but I've tried to come into conjunction in one way or another with Eskimo dance rituals and Bantu hunting songs and that sort of thing.<sup>38</sup>

The thing that he feels the study of various folk cultures has given him is an evocative sense of imagery, and has, in part, aided him in his development of a poetic cosmology. He explains the reason for his constant use of paradoxical imagery in terms of folk-culture. The people who still exist close to nature," are saying something out of a condition with which they are in precarious and dangerous and sometimes desperate harmony, but always a harmony of some kind which, even when the environment destroys them is some kind of harmony with the environment."<sup>39</sup> The destruction itself is an integral part of creation.

Perhaps an examination of Frazer's reference to stones and the use of the stone as a ritual device would clarify some of Dickey's intentions in the poem "Into the Stone." The moon-stone in Dickey's poem turns the speaker into a shadow-figure, and turns his hair a ghostly white. Frazer points out that some peoples believe stones capable of casting spells. One stone of this type is called "eating

ghosts,' because certain powerful and dangerous ghosts are believed to lodge in them. If a man's shadow falls on one of these stones, the ghost will draw his soul out from him, so that he will die." 40

However, Dickey utilizes traditional techniques and folk-patterns in order to incorporate them into his own ritual universe. In the mythological world that Dickey portrays there are no barriers. All worlds partake of one another. It is only by the fusion of contrary worlds that they may exist as separate entities. The fusion results in the creation of life and of light:

The light seems to come from some rather mysterious process of exchange between a man and his opposites... it may occur ... between men who are opposited to each other by nationality, between the living and the dead, between men and trees and even between men and wrecked machinery. 41

And it is this fusion that is termed "the Way of Exchange" by H .L. Weatherby. One of the ways in which Dickey achieves a mysterious effect is, as we have seen, by carefully not distinguishing the external events from the subjective imaginings of the speaker who inhabits the poem. Mind and action become confused much as in a dream the elements of reality become fused with fantasy.

In his second volume of poetry, Drowning with Others, the poems tend to be longer. Most of them are composed of ten stanzaic units except for the longer narrative poems "The Owl King" and "Dover: Believing in Kings." The

relationship of man to woman, of man to members of his family, the experiences of war-time, and the poet's experiences as a hunter continue to be explored.

Although the poet continues to utilize the same group of subjects each volume of poems concentrates with greatest emphasis on one particular subject. Thus Into the Stone includes poems which are set in "darkness and a specialized light."<sup>42</sup> Although Drowning includes former poetic themes, most of the poems are explorations of familial relationships. "The Owl King," "To His Children in Darkness," "Facing Africa," and "The Magus" are poems which express the poet's feelings for his son. "In the Tree House at Night" is an exploration of the relationship between the poet and his living and his dead brothers. Although one brother no longer lives, we are told that he is still intricately bound to the two living brothers. "The String" in Into the Stone is similarly a poem about the ever-present dead. The poet's relationship with his own parents is the focal point of "The Hospital Window" and "A Birth."

The half-light which creates a new vision in the first volume of poetry is still present in Drowning but the suspension and the altered vision that can be created by water becomes a major concentration. "The Lifeguard," "Drowning with Others," and "Inside the River" are all set in the world of water. "Lifeguard" combines several of Dickey's former attitudes. It is a poem of guilt, incurred through no fault of the speaker, a guilt which results from his unintentional failure as a father-figure. The

child of water is lost because the older man cannot find him in the dark lake. Again, the speaker feels intimately and physically connected to the moon which shines on the water.

In this poem, as in "Walking on Water," from Into the Stone, Dickey plays with the Christ image and the power to perform miracles. However, the Christ image in "The Lifeguard" only further emphasizes the speaker's guilt. He walks on water "in quest of the miracle." The death is described through the use of disconnected images. Even the water itself becomes synonymous with the boy's dead body. The water, as it reflects the moonlight, becomes the "skin of the sky." All that the lifeguard saw of the drowning victim was his hair: "I saw his cropped haircut go under." Water becomes associated with the life-guard's failure to save the boy. The children who are entrusted to him have witnessed his failure. But as darkness falls and as the lifeguard is left alone he dives again in the spot where the boy drowned. And it is at this time, with the return of the lifeguard, that the mystic ritual begins:

As I move toward the center of the lake,  
Which is also the center of the moon,  
I am thinking of how I may be the savior of one  
Who has already died in my care.

...  
I call softly out, and the child's  
Voice answers through blinding water. (p. 52).

The water is blinding both because it has cut off

the boy's vision through death, and because it is bright with the reflected ripples of moon-light. In order to magically revive the boy it is necessary for the life-guard to be within the moon's and the lake's heart. And it is when the magical revival has been performed that the life-guard can "wash the black mud from" his hands. The guilt that had earlier completely paralyzed him has abated somewhat.

However, the child who he now holds in his arms is a child of "water, water, water." He is both from the water, and, because of that, from the land of the dead. As the lifeguard stoops from his boat he lifts nothing but water in his arms.

The difference between this poem, and earlier poems of darkness, moonlight and magic is that the action tends to follow a chronological rather than a cyclic pattern. The death of the boy is clearly a single event which is followed by a period of guilt so intense that it alienates the speaker from his own kind. However, the life-guard re-emerges from the comatose state of shock in order to act out his guilt. Finally, the denouement arrives leaving the lifeguard more consciously and terrifyingly aware of the loss he has suffered.

This poem is one of the first in which Dickey makes use of the persona who is utterly different from the usual speaker. The poet frequently uses himself as the persona but increasingly, in the later volumes, he

attempts the exchange between his own perceptions and those of a highly different individual in order to present the reader with yet another kind of altered vision. We will see more of this in the discussion of Helmets and Buckdancer's Choice.

The poem "Drowning with Others" is similar to "The Being" which appears in Helmets, in that the original strangeness of the tone and the complex mystic vision that dominate the work in Dickey's first volume is found again in these poems. In "Drowning" part of the tone of mystery is a result of Dickey's conscious refusal to designate the boundaries of subjective and objective observations. One possible reading of the poem is that the speaker again stands in a boat on water, and this time he watches a friend who is swimming underwater. While the speaker envies the man his great freedom, he is unable to arrive at the same degree of free action. The act of going into the water transforms his friend; his shoulder-blades which are the last parts of his body to completely submerge look like "human, everyday wings." His hair stands out from his head like "a kingfisher's crest." Once again the elements partake of one another. The water world is described like the world of air.

The diver's liberating flight underwater is the result of kinesthetic freedom. His body is released from the pull of gravity much as a bird in flight would be.

Even his hair has been set free. The water is capable of "releasing his hair from his brain." In Dickey's universe hair becomes a sentient extension of the brain. In this case the diver's thoughts are unrestricted by the usual boundaries between air and water, or between matter and flux, or between life and death because, as we have seen, water functions as the dwelling place of the spirits of the dead. Thus in the poem "Inside the River" the swimmers' freedom is only possible because of the exchange with the dead:

Your freed hair floating  
Out of your brain,

Wait for a coming  
And swimming idea.  
Live like the dead (p. 105).

In both "Drowning" and "Inside the River" the swimmer floats in a kind of watery cosmos of humanity in which perfect communion is possible with all men living and dead, if only he can find the "heart of the current."

When Peter Davidson, in his article "The Difficulties of Being Major," says that "to drown is to become one with water, one with the dead," he comes quite close to an understanding of Dickey. He goes on to say that "to drown in nature is to die on behalf of it, to enrich nature by losing yourself."<sup>43</sup> However, the literal sense of drowning is not the only sense that Dickey extracts from the word. One can drown, or submerge oneself into nature and the land of the dead, in order to enliven one's perceptions. Dickey insists that the image retain the force of both of its

paradoxical implications.

In "Things, Voices, Minds" a review of Drowning by Thom Gunn, the English poet-critic demonstrates a deeper comprehension of Dickey's world-view: "Dickey's is an effort to make fantasy meaningful, to turn it into vision.... And the basic vision is maybe a participation which involves a simultaneous loss of identity and a keen awareness of the total process. In fact, Dickey implies that the awareness results from the loss."44

The earth is another means of achieving psychic communication in Dickey's poetry. In "Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek" two brothers set out together to unearth the scraps of metal that lie buried in an old Southern battlefield. The speaker, again, is the observer. As the brother holds the metal detector the speaker watches his face. The brother serves as the intermediary between the dead who have been buried at Nimblewill and the living. When the detector emits a sound it is not just the result of radio waves striking metal but rather it is the sound of the dead speaking:

... but he the brother  
Must be hearing the grave,  
In pieces, all singing  
To his clamped head,  
For he smiles as if  
He rose from the dead within  
Green Nimblewill  
And stood in his grandson's shape. (p. 99).

As the medium's body becomes inhabited by the voice of the



the dead, so does the brother's body become infused with the spirit of the dead.

Ancestor worship becomes part of the experience as the brother offers up "a metal dish,/ Afloat in the trembling weeds." The speaker himself then kneels to the dead, as he digs for relics. By the act of worship a communion is established and the brothers are then allowed "to go underground." They are allowed to turn back the earth and discover the instruments of war. And the ancestor is not merely the grandfather who fought at Nimblewill; he has become a more generalized figure. The speaker kneels, overcome by the mystic experience. He is like one:

... who shall lift up the past,  
Not breathing "Father,"  
At Nimblewill,  
But saying, "Fathers! Fathers!" (p. 99)

In this way James Dickey combines two subjects. He still utilizes the folk-ritual but at the same time he concentrates on his own past, on his feeling toward his Southern forebearers. It is because of this poem and others like it that John William Corrington believes that "Dickey grasps the special and permanent relationship between a people and its own past. The ritual of discovery figured at 'Nimblewill' places the Southern past beside that of the Hebrews and Christians, setting the confederate dead, 'Fathers!, Fathers!', into the archetypal pattern of Ecclesiasticus." 45

In this poem, as in others, the mystical and chronological sense of time exist simultaneously. There is a kind of narrative plot, and at the same time the impetus of the narrative is toward an experience which must, by its very nature, supercede time. At all times Dickey has been interested in creating tension between the two dimensions of time.

However, there is a noticeable change in the treatment of the encounter in Drowning with Others. Although the poet still deals with the theme of the uniting of contrary qualities or persons and still attempts to create a mythic world, the myths now begin to find themselves more firmly rooted in the domestic life of the poet, or of the persona which he explores in his poems of empathy. It is easier now for the reader to exactly comprehend the nature of the exchange in poems like "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet." In this poem, as in "Sleeping Out at Easter," a deadened limb becomes the necessary instrument of the exchange. The poet sits alone in his living room writing. Because his dog lays sleeping over his feet, his circulation is cut off and his legs become deadened. However, because of this discomfort the poet is allowed to share the sleeping dog's sensibilities. The poet becomes a dog involved in the excitement of chasing a fox, and the dog in turn becomes the poet. In this way the dog is responsible for the creation of the poem. It is his vision that the poet uses in the poem.

In James Dickey's ritual universe images become magic

symbols capable of bestowing a new vital clairvoyance upon the initiate. The lifeguard must row to the center of the lake because it is also the center of the moon, the sun, and the earth. All exists together as one. Michael Goldman terms this journey into a position which empowers the initiate the journey to the "heart of experience." "His Dickey's images are bodies within which he changes, moving toward a heart which is not his heart but a heart of experience--an animal center, usually dangerous."45

Often in his poetry there is a sense of incurred risk, or of a not always attributable sense of guilt which generates tension. Tension, which arises from the continual use of paradox also gives Dickey's poetry an intense quality. Each of the ritual encounters, or journeys must be to the heart of experience. At the center exists the resolution of tension. The magic stone, which at times represents the moon, is at this moment both more alike, and more unlike all the other elements in Dickey's cosmology. The moon itself is a light in darkness, but its presence is responsible for night. Water both liberates, and imprisons the swimmer. And the earth itself is a barrier which cuts the dead off from the living and it is, also, the place in which the potential for new life dwells. All contradictions exist only so that there may be harmony. Like the Yin and Yang, Dickey's images are defined so that they may finally be viewed as continuous. In this way James Dickey is a mystic poet.

## CHAPTER THREE

Helmets and Buckdancer's Choice

It is evident from only one reading of Poems: 1957-1967 that this work stands whole and unified even though there are definite evolutionary stages in each volume. However much a critic may object to the particular manifestation of Dickey's cosmology, or his poetic voice, each of Dickey's poems are immediately attributable to him. In this sense Dickey's art fulfills the most important criteria of his own critical canon. He has found "a place to stand." Moreover, he satisfies his own criteria on a second point. The poet is constantly trying to infuse the poem, and through the poem the reader, with an intense vitality. The vitality, the energy and the tension which he creates in his art are difficult for both the poet and the reader to sustain unless the bridge between the two is capable of bearing the necessary emotional strain. In this way Dickey is, sometimes, caught short. At times the cycle of perception fails because the poem is incapable of generating the amount and quality of intensity necessary to give the poem life.

The critical opinion differs about which of Dickey's poems are the most and which the least successful. Some feel that the earlier poetry is flawed and others that it

was only in the last few volumes that Dickey began to fail the reader. A few have remained with him throughout the evolution. Most critics agree that the transition begins most clearly to manifest itself in Dickey's third book, Helmets. The poems in Helmets are generally less rhythmic, and there is greater variation in the kinds of stanzaic units that the poet uses. For instance, "At Darien Bridge" consists of two line stanzas, while "Springer Mountain" and "Drinking from a Helmet" consist of a type of verse paragraph. The form of "Approaching Prayer" is determined by the nature of the poem and, here again, the poet utilizes the italicized line in order to designate a change in voice. Dickey italicizes and indents the lines that are spoken by the wild boar.

An examination of companion poems ("Near Darien" from Into the Stone and "At Darien Bridge" from Helmets) is, perhaps, the best way to determine the exact nature of this transition. In the earlier poem the poet creates enclosures such as the boat that the lover is in, or the enclosure of the land around the water, in order that these may be contrasted to the boundless consciousness he is experiencing. The lover draws an "infinite breath." His wife is both a passionate mate and an ethereal being. He can float in her mind both because she thinks of him and because she sustains him. He will "lie in the quick of her image." Thus she

partakes of the water and the moon and becomes one with both of them. She holds a "vast, shining place in the moonlight," and, because of this, in the poet's heart.

The second poem, "Near Darien Bridge," describes the poet's return to Darien. He is a changed man, older and less romantic. He is now more aware of his own particular frailty and of approaching death. The poet becomes concerned with an enclosing space, space which turns inward upon itself. What was once, in the earlier poem, a sea of mystery in which "all water shines down out of Heaven," now seems to the poet "As if many convicts had built it." The sea which was the dwelling place of the moon, a "huge, ruined stone in the sky," is now a flat impinging gray body which threatens the poet. "As the gray climbs the side of my head/ And cuts my brain off from the world,/ I walk and wish mainly for birds." The gray sea comes to be identified with death, sterility and imprisonment.

In "Near Darien" the lover's breath was able to shed "the light of the sun." However, in the later poem the image of the sun is a memory from childhood. It is a childhood memory of the sun's reflection ~~from~~ a convict's hammer that returns to the poet. As the bridge was built by those in captivity, so the poet's love is now in captivity. The "scratched/ Wedding band" on his finger is reminiscent of the chains that the convicts wore on their feet.

The poet ends "At Darien Bridge" with the lines:

I stand and look out over grasses  
At the bridge they built, long abandoned,

Breaking down into water at last,  
And long, like them, for freedom

Or death, or to believe again  
That they worked on the ocean to give it

The unchanging, hopeless look  
Out of which all miracles leap. (p. 117)

We see, again, that death and decay lead to a new life.

The bridge, and the poet's life seem to be the most permanent elements in the poem; however, even they are slowly being encroached upon by nature and are being reclaimed. Although the miracle is obviously the alternative the speaker prefers, it is still one of three alternatives; and in this we see a narrowing of the mystic's vision in "Near Darien" to a more rationalizing vision in the later poem.

Richard Howard finds the later poem to be better in that it offers more concrete details, and a more specific demarkation between that which the speaker sees and the thoughts that arise in his mind as he views the area around Darien. Howard believes that it is only with the publication of Helmets that Dickey is "now content with the poem as its own reward, rather than as a magical charm...."<sup>47</sup> He is accurate in his observation that the poem is no longer a charm. Incantation is slowly being replaced by the

narrative poem while a growing emphasis is being placed upon the unfolding of narrative action. "On the Coosawatte," "Cheerylog Road," "The Scarred Girl," "Kudzu," and "A Folk Singer of the Thirties" are some of the poems in Helmets which follow a narrative plot. In some of Dickey's middle and later poems the action itself is the enactment of ritual.

Frequently, the ritual that Dickey describes in his poetry involves animals. And the enlightened vision which can result from the exchange with animal consciousness is the subject of both "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet," (Drowning) and "Approaching Prayer," (Helmets). In the later poem "there is an actual 'putting on' of the beast," as H.L. Weatherby notes.<sup>48</sup> The exchange is described in a manner which places most of the responsibility for the encounter on the speaker. He is no longer taken over while he is in a demi-conscious state, as in the earlier poems and some later poems like "The Being." Now he must put the boar's head over his own in order that he may initiate the exchange and consequently offer up a prayer. With this act he is released from the paralyzing loneliness and grief that he finds in his father's empty house. The prayer he offers is a prayer of the warrior who through the enactment of the hunt can guarantee the discovery of food, and with this discover his own masculinity.

In this poem we can see the direction that Dickey will



take later. The exchange is initiated by the speaker and the speaker becomes more and more an aggressor in the natural world. With this, the poems come to be more active. Furthermore, the poet has begun to experiment with the use of voices, as in the "Owl King." In this sense the Other, the being, or the partner in the act of exchange becomes more objectified.

"The Scarred Girl," and "A Folk Singer of the Thirties" are two of the poems from Helmets which express James Dickey's interest in the empathetic exchange. In both of these poems the reader is introduced to the personae and then watches them become passive victims. They are both mutilated. The girl loses her beauty in a car accident, and the folk-singer is crucified and finally suffers the loss of his integrity.

There is a kind of irony suggested if these two poems are considered together. The scarred girl is irreparably mutilated by her accident. Because the windshield of the car broke on her face the "small war for her beauty/ Is stitched out of sight and lost." However, of the two victims it is she who remains more wholly alive. She can piece together her shattered world by accepting its imperfections and her own. She learns that "a newborn countenance" may be "put upon everything."

The folk-singer, who suffers and in turn is given a new vision, utilizes what he has learned in a negative way.

He becomes a prophet for a sick society and makes himself rich. The conversion, in this case, is from a Christ figure to a mass-medium demagog. In both poems, as in "Drinking from a Helmet," clairvoyance is the possible effect of an experience so over-whelming that it takes the initiate out of himself.

"Drinking from a Helmet" is a frequently anthologized poem like "The Performance" from Into the Stone, "Between Two Prisoners" from Drowning with Others and "The Firebombing" from Buckdancer's Choice, which takes as its subject the experiences of war. A helmet is, of course, the necessary head-gear that soldier's wear during battle. On the other hand, it becomes another symbol in Dickey's mythos. In "Armor" Dickey explains the function of this symbol. When the speaker puts on armor" there is no way of standing/ alone/ More, or no way of being/ More with the bound, shining dead." Again the poet creates opposition so that there may be continuum. At one and the same time the speaker loses himself to the dead, and recovers his identity. His physical body becomes identified with the armor: "I took off my body of metal." (p. 81). With the removal of boundaries he is now free to completely experience the exchange, in this case with his dead brother and through him with all of the dead. Finally, the poet is saying that when he, the speaker, has lost his armor or his body he may put on other entities: "I long to dress deeply at last/

"In the gold of my waiting brother/ Who shall wake and shine on my limbs."

In "Drinking from A Helmet" the helmet becomes an extension of armor. The image functions in much the same way in both poems. The helmet is protective of both the soldier's physical well-being and of his individuality. He does not care to remove his helmet while on the battlefield, particularly at a spot "where somebody else may have come/ Loose from the steel of his head." In this manner the steel of the helmet is envisaged as an integral part of the soldier's head. At the same time Dickey introduces the reader to the poem by implying that the soldier has not ceased to exist, but rather that he has just escaped from the encasing body which was much like a helmet to him.

As Dickey establishes the theme of the exchange in "Drinking from A Helmet" he also goes on to present the reader with a more physical ambience. The battlefield itself is described and many of the more concrete details of the scene are presented to the reader. In this poem, as in others from the later books, the reader is more aware of the precise nature of the encounter and the duration of the exchange becomes a factor. Perhaps, because of this the reader is more aware of the mystic experience occurring within time rather than superceding time. And perhaps, also because of the more specific descriptions, Dickey wishes his audience to now concentrate on the ritual preparation for the mystic experience. As we can see, it is

but one more step to "The Firebombing," a poem in which the poet prepares himself for the exchange, submits himself to the ritual preparation and yet never achieves the mystic experience.

The soldier in "Drinking from A Helmet" can still achieve the exchange. Because he does not remove his own helmet to drink, and thereby retains his integrity, his own identity, he must pick one up from the ground. The first thing that he sees, as he gazes into the helmet he has now filled with water, is himself. The death of the other soldier thus gives the speaker back to himself. The dead man's brain:

...I killed early that morning,  
Most likely, and now  
In its absence holding  
My sealed, sunny image from harm (p. 174)

The ripples in the water disturb his image and the experience begins to change into a mystic one. As he drinks from the helmet he becomes literally possessed by the dead man.

"I swayed, as if kissed in the brain." His consciousness has been altered. "In the closed dazzle of my mouth/ I fought with a word in the water/ To call on the dead..." He begins at this moment to understand what it is the dead understand. "On even the first day of death/ The dead cannot rise up,/ But their last thought hovers somewhere/ For whoever finds it." So that, in this way, the living soldier inherits the thoughts of the dead soldier. At this moment he is overcome by the

presence of the dead and by a heightened awareness of his own vitality. "My uninjured face floated strangely/ In the rings of a bodiless tree." He seems strangely whole to himself because of his union with the wounded dead. He is literally given himself again; he is reborn. And with the feeling of new life he undergoes a feeling of ecstasy so intense that at this moment he feels that he "could have stepped up into air."

Because the soldier has chosen not to separate himself from his armor, his steel, his helmet, he has undergone an encounter with the dead and the initiation now frees him for action:

I threw my old helmet down  
And put the wet one on.  
Warmed water ran over my face.  
My last thought changed, and I knew  
I inherited one of the dead. (p. 177).

He has, in a sense, earned the complete mystic experience at this point. He has partaken of the water and now is baptized by it. As he baptizes himself with water from the helmet he accepts the responsibility that he has incurred and is given a vision of the dead soldier's homeland. He must now go there and tell the dead man's brother:

...where I had stood  
What poured, what spilled, what swallowed:  
XIX

And tell him I was the man. (p. 178)

He was the man who was allowed to enter the living thoughts and the dead life of the deceased soldier and he will forever

carry this with him. Once more the poem becomes for Dickey the enactment of a mystic ritual. The initiate becomes infused with the spirit of the dead after he has proved himself worthy.

The ritual nature of James Dickey's poetry offends Howard Kaye. In his article "Why Review Poetry?" which appears in the June 29, 1968 edition of the New Republic, Kaye registers his disappointment with Dickey's continuing use of a private cosmology:

I had hoped that some of the elements of his poetry that I don't like, such as his meters and his animistic mysticism, had somehow slipped in accidentally, like bad habits; it turns out that he did exactly what he intended.<sup>49</sup>

Kaye prefers the more domestic poem which describes the more common experiences of man, like teen-age lust in "Cherrylog Road" and the domestic nightmare of the never-ending impingement of nature in "Kudzu."

On the other hand, Laurence Lieberman, a critic who frequently takes James Dickey's poetry as the subject of his critical writings, has a very different opinion. In his evaluation of "Drinking from A Helmet" Lieberman applies some of the poet's own criteria, and, on this basis, finds the poem to be successful:

So far are these images from creating the usual remove, the abstracting from literal experience, we expect from figures of speech, these figures seem to carry us into a more intense and immediate literal-ness than literal description could possibly afford.<sup>50</sup>

Both Dickey and Lieberman would reject a mere depiction of

the everyday world of reality. The very strange and mystical quality that displeases Kaye is what attracts Lieberman. He is drawn by Dickey's ability to penetrate to the heart of experience. That Dickey is capable of generating a great intensity of emotion is considered by Lieberman as the mark of his ability as a poet. He notes particularly the poet's use of images. "These figures suggest a mind stretching its natural limits of perception to assimilate experience of pain and anguish that can only be apprehended accurately through hallucination."<sup>51</sup> The intensity of emotion that the soldier undergoes can only be portrayed by distortion, by the grotesque or, as Kaye would have it, the "unreal" image. However, the symbols that the poet uses in this poem, as in others, are consistent with the poet's created ritual universe.

"The Firebombing" is another equally intense poem of war. However, it is the antithesis of "Drinking from A Helmet" because in the earlier poem the soldier's encounter with the dead was an empathetic consummation of the ritual of exchange. The empathy and the resultant exchange are missing from "Firebombing," and the reason for this lies in the former pilot's own inabilities. Like "Cherrylog Road" the poem deals with the poet's own past.<sup>52</sup> The images are domestic; flashlights, a screwdriver, spoons, tennis shoes and hedge-clippers become mythic instruments. It is through these objects, as through the helmet, that the former pilot can hope to communicate with those he

cannot normally reach: the dead.

Ironically the very domesticity of the pantry in which he places himself, in order to isolate himself in preparation for the ritual of exchange, acts as a barrier to the exchange. The images of war alternate with the images of the household in a jumbled manner at the outset of the poem in order to establish the state of mind of the former pilot. He is caught in a kind of limbo; he remembers the past and yet cannot completely escape to it. As he dwells in the present, the past (with its message of death and guilt) constantly intrudes. The true continuousness of time cannot be established because the harmony which relieves tension must be created out of two equally vital opposed forces.

As the former pilot sits in the pantry, he looks down at his hands and experiences alienation. He remembers the "technical- minded stranger" who piloted the plane which carried napalm and gasoline over a Japanese town twenty years ago. As always Dickey is entranced by reflection or altered half-light. When the pilot looks forward from the cock-pit he sees the plane push forward out of complete darkness into "the moon." The brightness of the moon is reflected by the "moon-metal-shine of propellers." The plane then journeys into the solitude of a cloud. "In the white-dark the aircraft shrinks; Japan/ Dilates around it like a thought." Thus Dickey emphasizes the strange luminescence of the cloud, the suddenness of time while in flight, and the fact that the firebombing is a remembered occasion. The half-light, the sleeping town beneath him,



and the description of the flight which does not include the other members of the crew, all serve to isolate the pilot from the sun, from the town below him and from the men around him.

The mysterious shining half-light which the pilot sees makes the town appear to be dream-like, unreal. But he actually terminates the description of the country-side with the use of the split line:

The woods with one silver side,  
Rice-water calm at all levels  
Of the terraced hill.

Enemy rivers and trees  
Sliding off me like a snakeskin (p. 182)

He immediately reminds himself and the reader that this is the country of the enemy. The language itself is revealing. The rivers, trees, and fields are the pilot's enemy because a hostile people dwell in that country. At the same time, he is obviously aware of the fact that a river or a tree is a neutral inhabitant of nature's world. His attack, is, in part, on nature as well as on those who dwell in that country.

The pilot looks behind him and sees the trail of vapor that the plane leaves. This impermanent artificial cloud is the first mark that he leaves on the country-side. It foreshadows the irreversible scarring which he the bringer of fire, will inflict on the earth below. Watching the vapor

trail settle and dissipate creates a feeling of distance and separation from the land below. The pilot has a "glassed-off forehead." His being, his intellect, and his empathy are enclosed in the cock-pit which becomes synonymous with the suburban pantry. He is trapped; he cannot escape from himself. The expansional space in the earlier poems is altered to become an enclosing space.

Finally, as the pilot remembers the plane's approach to the town of five-thousand sleeping people, the movement of the poem quickens. The repetition of his thoughts suggests obsession. He seems to speak in a stuttering voice as one who is trying to articulate something that he is simultaneously suppressing. The suppression is a defense; it guards the pilot from a realization that would drive him mad. H.L. Weatherby understands this when he says that "the cost of the exchange makes it impossible."<sup>53</sup>

The original moment and the memory itself are equally unreal to the pilot. He moved then, and moves now:

In a dark dream      that      that is  
That is like flying inside someone's head

Think of this      think of this

I did not think of my house  
But think of my house now. (p. 183)

After twenty years, the former pilot must even now demand of himself an intense concentration in order to empathize. And even now it is only on the most easily manageable level of awareness that he can face the realization of what he has done.

The thought of the instantaneous fiery destruction of his own house only brings his thoughts back to himself, the suburban banalities of his own existence. He tries to lose twenty years by dieting and by the willed act of memory but he cannot:

The enemy-colored skin of families  
Determines to hold its color  
In sleep, as my hand turns whiter  
Than ever... (p. 184)

As he flew over the sleeping country-side, the people of the town did not awaken, they did not grow whiter with fear. The pilot's failure to experience the exchange is emphasized by the difference in color of the two peoples. The factor of "otherness" is established most clearly for the pilot by skin-color. And twenty years later, as he tries to dismiss this racial difference, he succeeds only in becoming more intensely aware of it. Finally, it is with a distant tone that the pilot describes the dying. The speaker isolates himself even further from the suffering which is actually occurring by emphasizing the panoramic-view he has from the plane's great height. The fire itself is "a mote of red dust/ At a hundred feet... he sails ...

artistically over" the town and admires the beauty of the fire as he exults in the god-like feeling of power which the release of such vast energy gives him:

It is this detachment,  
The honored aesthetic evil,  
The greatest sense of power in one's life. (p. 186)

Concurrently, the speaker realizes that what he should have felt at this moment is a great rush of grief and personal

guilt.

Now, twenty years later, he must still carry the memory of the bombing with him because of his failure to assume the necessary responsibility for his actions at the time of the bombing. The failure of guilt is in itself a curse. He was unable to activate the exchange and to suffer with the dying and, consequently, he now feels so full of guilt that the exchange becomes impossible. He is caught in a psychological trap and he is fully aware of it. He knows that empathetic vision should have allowed him to inhabit a dying villager's psyche, as the soldier in the poem "Drinking from A Helmet" was able to do. His vision should have been so intensified that it would have allowed him to see "the inside of houses, the low tables/ as they Catch fire from the door mats." Instead he is so isolated by the cock-pit that the raging fire can only be reflected by the plane as a blue light. It is cooled, shaped to the body of the plane, and transformed, again, into a strangely beautiful light.

In the last section of the poem Dickey most clearly expresses the guilt and failure of empathy that the pilot must live with. He cannot invite the spirits of the dead into his house because they cannot "pass this unfired door." The explicit and living being that the soldier in "Drinking from A Helmet" is able to bring to life cannot be envisioned by the pilot. He sees a more terrifying figure, a kind of

ghost-like disembodiment of the dead. He can only imagine

... nothing  
 With its ears crackling off  
 Like powdery leaves,  
 Nothing with children of ashes, nothing not  
 Amiable, gentle, well-meaning  
 . . . .

... nothing I haven't lived with  
 For twenty years... (p. 188)

This section of the poem expresses the same kind of intense despair that Hemingway creates with the Nada prayer in "A Clean-Well Lighted Place."

"Firebombing" begins and ends with a cliché. Although all homeowners cannot unite in a mutual understanding of one another, although they turn against one another in war and inflict painful death on one another, the justification is, as always, patriotism. He still sees "nothing not as American as I am, and proud of it," (p. 188). The line can be read in two possible ways. He is unable to envision any homeowner who is not American; he can see only his own kind. And the second possibility is that his pride in being an American and the guilt which he incurs from not understanding the exchange are in themselves the answers to his questions twenty years later. In any case, the poet demonstrates a very different awareness of self in "Firebombing" from that which is expressed in "Drinking from A Helmet." The confidence and awe of the line "I am the man" becomes the mere expression of a cultural self when he says "As American as I am."

James Dickey received the greatest critical praise for the volume in which "The Firebombing" appeared: Buckdancer's Choice. He was awarded the National Book Award in Poetry in 1966 for this particular book. Certainly Buckdancer can be considered a transition volume. In the years preceding this prize we have seen that Dickey's art has undergone significant changes. A summarial discussion of some of his war poetry and of some of the poems which take as their subject man in nature will make the transition more clearly evident.

In "Armor" (from Drowning with Others) the boundaries which separate living man from the animal world are represented by "the crab and the insect," and the boundaries which separate the speaker from his dead brother are easily crossed. In the poem "Drinking from A Helmet" the speaker must participate in a clearly established ritual before he can inhabit the psyche of the dead. Dickey emphasizes the need for the ritual by changing the form of his poetry in "Drinking from A Helmet." It is, as Lieberman discovers, like a film strip; each frame (or stanza) focuses on a particular event:

This form is an extremely important development for Dickey, since it readily achieves effects exactly opposite to the unbroken flow and rhythmic sweep of most of the previous works.<sup>54</sup>

The ethereal or flowing quality of the earlier poems is also disturbed by the boundaries of objects, and the

setting itself now offers itself as a boundary. This is in part because Dickey's images now seem to gain a greater weight and solidarity in the poems in Helmets. Whereas in "Armor" the setting is "Place itself," in "Drinking" the setting is clearly a battlefield. Finally, even the mundane and specific description delineates the setting in "The Firebombing." In this poem the boundaries between the living and the dead are insurmountable.

Most of James Dickey's poetry has expressed a lingering feeling of guilt. As we have seen, he was drawn to the work of Robert Penn Warren because of his admiration for the older poet's ability to describe the constant presence of the guilt which can only come from a type of "Original Sin," or as Franz Kafka describes it, "corporate sin." All men share the guilt because they all have been given life. As Dickey's poems have undergone a transistion, so has the species of guilt which the poetry describes. It begins as a passive kind of awareness that the speaker has survived, while his brother (whom he has never known) has had to die. Once again, in the poem "Armor" the poet suffers from the guilt of survival in a situation in which others have perished. In the poem "Drinking from A Helmet" the soldier who survives a battle that has destroyed other soldiers can expiate his guilt by suffering. Finally, the poet expresses the most hauntingly guilt-ridden statement in "The Firebombing." The pilot must suffer the pains of the specific and inescapable guilt of knowing that he has

willingly taken the lives of others.

A similar change can be found in the poet's use of nature in his work. The poetry grows more earth-bound, more tied to the laws of nature and his imagery becomes heavier. In the poem "Trees and Cattle" Dickey creates a Chagall-like landscape. The cattle walk through him. He and the trees are described as so weightless that they are "about to get wings." A tree is described as if it had become uprooted and floats about the speaker's head. Nothing is constrained by the laws of gravity, or by its own particular physical qualities. The red bull, the sun, and the poet's golden sight are all continuous images of virility and vitality. Perceived correctly the landscape is capable of creating a new vision. These are the rewards that the speaker reaps from the exchange.

The spacial concepts are quite different in "Fog Envelops the Animals." Red cattle, heat, and the sun are all thematic images in "Trees and Cattle," whereas fog, mist and whiteness become thematic images in the later poem. The presence of the fog is a major difference because now the poet is creating an optical illusion rather than a purely mystical experience. In this poem the poet floats through the air once again. But the double-vision which Lieberman discovers in other poems from Drowning is operative in this poem as well.<sup>55</sup> The poet's being is not utterly merged with the landscape; he experiences a bifurcated vision. The fog is both the creator of the strange landscape and



a spirit of the mystic land. The poet submits himself to ritual and yet he remains self-conscious. He is aware of his "long sought invisibility" and, at the same time, he is aware of his physical appearance as his white teeth shine in the dim light. The duplicity is operative on yet another level. In this poem the speaker comes to the landscape prepared to hunt; he carries a bow and a sheaf of arrows with him. The arrows are transformed into part of the country-side itself; they are white like the fog-layered earth. On the other hand the arrows separate him from nature. He has come to take life.

In "Fog Envelops the Animals" the hunter's sense of himself is constantly duplicitous. He exists as a physical and as a spiritual entity. Even the description of his clothing suggests this. His hood is "peaked like a flame." Its solid shape suggests pure energy and the flicker of the hood in the half-light of the fog as it appears and disappears suggests the energy of flame. On the other hand, a very different feeling is evoked by the description of the hunter's clothing in the poem "Springer Mountain" from Helmets. The hunter is trapped by his own flesh. It is difficult for him to walk swaddled with warm clothing. On the other hand he cannot free himself from clothing. In this case the hood he wears is no longer made of flame; instead it is a simple woollen hood. His arrows are not snow-flakes but rather noisy cumbersome weapons that rattle as he walks.

The environment around the man in nature has become increasingly wilder. The early poem is set in a cultivated meadow, or farm land; the next places the hunter in a magic forest; and the third places him in a heavily undergrown wood that makes even walking difficult.

In "Trees and Cattle" the poet states that he is the animal that he views. He wears the horns of the red bull upon his head. In "Springer Mountain" as the hunter views the deer he can only experience a tenuous exchange. "I may be there, also,/ Between them, in head bones uplifted." The exchange fails, in a way, because the buck's presence only serves to remind him of his own particular mortality; he is forty-years of age. When the hunter tries to activate the exchange by the removal of his clothing he makes himself into a ludicrous figure. He does not merge with nature but feels even more foreign to the perfection that he has seen. He realizes that he is "a middle-aged, softening man."

Wendell Berry finds "Springer Mountain" to be a flawed poem. It is an insufficient conductor and rather than generating emotion the poem becomes self-conscious:

The poet seems to be using capabilities developed elsewhere, but to be using them deliberately and mechanically. The hunter's gesture, or transport of whatever it is, seems to have been made to happen ....<sup>56</sup>

Berry charges Dickey with the same kind of artistic failure that Dickey reacts against in his own critical writing.

The manufactured emotion, the manipulated gesture, make the poem unreal, a fantasy. And this is what the poet constantly risks by attempting to create a highly energetic and unusual poetic statement: The poem creates a believable organic universe or it suffers a collapse under its own intense emotional weight. Certainly, there is a greater tension generated by some of the later poems because of the disparity between the desire for the exchange and the impossibility of the exchange occurring. This, in itself, gives the poetry vitality and helps the poet to bring to life his created vision. Buckdancer's Choice contains three poems which are examples of this kind of reality. In "The Firebombing," "The Fiend," and "Slave Quarters," "the self is frustrated, paralyzed, helplessly unable to establish liberating connections with the world. The chief obstacle to self-liberation is a sense of moral guilt."<sup>57</sup>

As the title of Buckdancer indicates, many of these later poems are drawn from the poet's own Southern background; the guilt that he expresses in "Slave Quarters" and "Buckdancer's Choice" is inherent in his regional identity. In the earlier books the Southern poems deal with love, lust, and violence. It is only later that Dickey comes to write about the racial guilt he has inherited.

Dickey articulates some of the attitudes which underlie poems like "Slave Quarters" and "Buckdancer" in "The Decline of Outrage."<sup>58</sup> Here again the poet suffers from a dual vision. His education and experience have liberated him enough so that he is able to dismiss the blatantly

racist argument and, upon boarding a segregated bus, to sit with a black man and his son at the rear of the bus. With this gesture he is demonstrating his belief that "the Negro is a man like any other." At the same time the act causes him to become very self-conscious, to escape into his own mental activity in order to avoid a confrontation. He feels inextricably bound to the South and to his own particular clandestinely southern family. Even at this moment he imagines the anger of his now dead grand-father because of the 'sin' he is committing by violating the code of the white Southern culture. He thinks of "the outrage with which he the grandfather would view a white man sitting among blacks."<sup>59</sup> And the poet suffers guilt for betraying his grandfather's ideals. The poet is thus caught doubly in guilt. He suffers guilt in any case.

But finally he is still caught up by the Southern Myth. He admits to himself that he still "flinches at the idea of Negro-White intermarriage," (p. 276). He goes on to say that "he can at least begin to recognize the common humanity of himself and the young man sitting beside him." And it is just this attitude which bothers some of James Dickey's critics. Although Lieberman responds to these poems favorably, other critics are disturbed by Dickey's ability to bring-up the question of his own moral failures and at the same time to admit that they are inescapably a part of him. While Lieberman believes that Dickey is making an

honest attempt to face his own short-comings, Louis Simpson disagrees. He believes that:

"Slave Quarters" is thoroughly unconvincing.... A white man speaks as he lurks around the slave quarter's at night; he is sweating with ... lust; at the same time he is ridden with modern liberal guilt.<sup>60</sup>

Simpson believes that James Dickey's inability to face his own guilt results in a technically flawed poem:

...sometimes Dickey seems to be writing in a panic. He seems to be faced with a choice: either to inflate and lose himself, like Thomas Wolfe, in volumes of pseudo-writing, or to tell the truth. When he does the latter he is a magnificent poet, (p. 90).

In some ways Simpson has arrived at an apt comparison. Like Wolfe, Dickey is trying to create a romantic vision. The esoteric vision, the mythic symbolism, the emotive language, and the very length of his poems suggest a comparison to Thomas Wolfe. Like Wolfe, Dickey writes relatively easily and voluminously. In an interview by Nat Robertson which appears in the New York Times, Robertson reports that Dickey was at work on a poem which ran to five hundred type-written pages at the time of the interview. The poet intended to cut it back to four or five pages in its final form.<sup>61</sup> From this, and from an examination of his work, it becomes clear that Dickey is afire with the same kind of creative energy that Thomas Wolfe manifested. It is when Dickey is able to construct a strong enough bridge to the reader that Simpson finds his poetic statements to be "truthful."

One poem which generates emotion from within, rather than having emotion infused into it, is "The Being."

M.L. Rosenthal and Robert Duncan believe that this poem shows Dickey's talents at their best. Rosenthal has said of it that it comes closest

... to the discovery of its own proper form in addition to discovery of the character of an experience.... The stages of the experience, from the first realization of what is happening through submission to "utter delight" to a state of frozen terror and then the revitalized awakening, constitute a series of six beautifully paced movements.<sup>62</sup>

Rosenthal believes that Dickey achieves this height because the experience that the poet describes is so ephemeral that it demands a kind of formal and stylistic exactitude that many of his other poems do not. The exchange here is with pure spirit. There is no correlative for the "Other," not man, beast, nor the dead. The complexity of the exchange is increased by the range of emotional reactions the initiate undergoes.

The process itself is one that Dickey has, perhaps, learned from Theodore Roethke. The infusion of pure spirit into body and the creation of human poems which enter into a kind of sub-conscious world are what Dickey most admires about Roethke's work. He also admires Roethke's ability to oppose intense emotions so that the greater insight can be reached?

The balance, the tranquil awareness that comes occasionally ... is... the product of a terrible tension not far from madness at times, not far from total despair, but also not far from total joy.<sup>63</sup>

See

And it is, finally, that emotional exhilaration and that sense of relief which can only be described as joy that Dickey tries to achieve in his own poetry. The comments that Dickey makes on Roethke's work are applicable to his own. In "The Being" madness, despair, and joy all partake of one another. All of these reactions are from the dark side, the irrational side of man's nature, and by that very fact they are capable of releasing him from the narrow prison of rationality. As the poet awakens after his visitation from the Being he is capable of "seeing straight/ Through the roof."

Although the Being is a purely spiritual entity, it awakens in the sleeper a greater sense of his own physical being; of his own nudity. Rosenthal concludes that Dickey is describing a being that is vaguely like a Succubus.<sup>64</sup> The description of the relationship between the nude sleeper and the Being does bring to mind a similar kind of description from D.H. Lawrence's short story "Glad Ghosts." Certainly the encounter, the infusion of each into the other and the strengthening of the sleeper as a result of the encounter, is a similar pattern in both of the works.

Both "The Being" and "Drinking from A Helmet" are difficult poems, poems in which the poet attempts to describe an experience that by its richness seems almost ineffable. Robert Duncan believes that in both of these poems Dickey achieves a kind of higher truth. That the poet is able to "tell of seizures of psychic invasions," pleases Duncan. However, "The Firebombing" and "Reincarnation (I)" are

less vital poems because:

...He [Dickey] has shifted from the tense verse and concentrated stanza sequence, the direct mode of a poetic experience and commitment, towards a more casual verse following a set story line, allowing even clichés of the supernatural tale: "My hat should crawl on my head/ In streetcars thinking of it."<sup>65</sup>

He goes on to explain that he is disappointed by Dickey's imagination in the later poems. He believes that the poet has trapped himself into the narrative pattern so that he is no longer capable of the great vision he displays in "The Being."

On the other hand, Lieberman considers the later poems to be the result of evolution, of the stripping away of the excessive or unnecessary in order to create a more effective style. That which has become suspect is eliminated. Lieberman believes that James Dickey has moved toward "a more direct engagement with life-experience,"<sup>66</sup> in the more recent poetry.

If Dickey's own evaluative criterion is used to measure the success of his poetry, it becomes clear that both critics are right. In order for the reader to come away from the poetry with that sense of exhilaration, joy, and through this to gain a new insight into life, it is necessary for the poet's voice to ring true. The poem must be strong enough to act as a conductor. During the entire transition that the poet undergoes he has demanded a great deal of the poem and of the reader. Some of Dickey's earlier poetry is



extremely difficult and demands a great deal of the reader, while in his later work more of the poem is paraphraseable, more is given to the reader. On the other hand, many poems in the last few books suffer from over-statement or clichéd sentiments. They seem, at times, to be inflated. One seriously wonders where Dickey can go after writing such massive, intense works as "Sermon" and "Falling". The very intensity of emotion which the poet evokes in these last poems places, again, a demand on his audience. But when the poet lives up to the demand that his art places on him, when the poetry loses the self-conscious quality and moves away from the merely dramatic, Dickey is as effective a creator of the ritual universe as he was in the best poems of Into the Stone. It is at these moments that the reader is willing to meet Dickey half-way and to let the work of art come to life.

Each volume in Poems: 1957-1967 has a characteristic quality all its own. The poems work together as a unit within each volume, while at the same time all of the books share similar subject matter: man alone, man in nature, man with his loved ones, and man at war. James Dickey's vision in the first volume centers on the poetry of war and love. He is concerned with the magical power of the natural world. Moonlight, as the title suggests, is the governing element in most of the poems while in Drowning water is the element which most frequently alters vision. In Drowning he begins to discuss his own southern past, and to explore

familial relationships. Again, the South concerns the poet in Helmets and, again, he explores the individual's relationship to the animal world. While the poetry gains in awareness of the environment, it travels outside of the poet's own view point. Empathy, the exploration of particular presences, the attempt to see the world through the eyes of another specific being, begin to interest the poet more as he grows older. In Buckdancer the poet explores the minds of those who are sick or disabled: "Gamecock," "Mangham," and "Angia." In Falling he is able to describe the feelings of those who live in two worlds; in "The Leap" the woman partakes of earth and air, of the past and the present and of the living and the dead. The Sheep-child is both man and animal and exists in an intermediary world between the two kinds of consciousness.

Generally speaking, the country-side and place settings become highly important in Helmets. The earth itself is the most important element and continues to be in Buckdancer. In this volume, also, the poet's personal ties to his past and to the two sons who constitute his future are explored. The awareness of time, the duration of time, begins to impress itself.

As the poetry moves from the world of light, to water, to earth and, finally, to air (with "Falling") it begins to generate an ever greater tension. In the last volume man inhabits a world in conflict. His relationship with the animal world has changed. The mystic love of man for

for woman, which becomes the captivity and the familial love found in marriage, has now changed to a passionate expression of sexual energy. The poet expresses a concern for his own approaching death, an awareness of the aging process, and he now writes more about the life possible after death: "Reincarnation (I)," "Reincarnation (II)," "The Head Aim," and "The Common Grave." The passivity and calm of the moon-lit world of Into the Stone are not always to be found in the later poetry. Many of the poems from the last volume are alive with a kinetic kind of energy which is only suggested in the earlier poetry.

However, in all of James Dickey's work the goal remains the same. The poetry must awaken in the reader a heightened awareness. What Dickey admires about the work of Theodore Roethke is that which he would most like to be noted for himself: the creation of a "true" vision. The poet must be able "to relate to you, the unknown but potentially human Other, to the world that all of us exist in."<sup>66</sup> And the reader alone can judge the sincerity of the poet's vision. There must be a very personal relationship established between the artist and his audience in order to allow the reader to believe the artist. The experience should be "at first sight like a look into the one right pair of eyes in the world."<sup>67</sup> When the eyes are right, when the poem is effective, Dickey believes that the same kind of exchange which he describes as occurring between the initiate and the Other in a poem can occur between the poet and his audience.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Three Poems: A Look at the Later Poetry

James Dickey continues to create a ritual universe in the later poetry from Poems: 1957-1967; however, the cosmology of imagery is more accessible to the reader, in part, because of the greater formalistic freedom the poet allows himself. "Sheep-Child," "Falling," and "May Day Sermon to the Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church" (referred to in this text as "Sermon") are three of the later poems which seem to indicate another transition in the poet's work. All of them utilize the split-line technique, and the shifting from narrative voice to the voice of a speaker who is involved in the action. In these poems the exchange is not initiated by the persona. It is inflicted upon him. The encounter between two worlds or between two elemental forces, places the speaker in a crisis situation. The tension of encounter is released with a good deal more energy in the later poems. Only the death of the initiate satisfies the problem of resolution. Encounter, crises, awareness and death constitute essentially the same ceremony that we have seen in the earlier work, but now the death is more dramatically physical. Pain, violence, estrangement, are all aspects of that death.

While the poet's concentration on the violent action increases, so does his ability to live into the lives of others. "The Sheep-Child" is one of Dickey's better poems

because of the poet's ability to empathize. In this poem there are two voices; the narrator and the sheep-child both speak. The narrator comes to be a spokesman for society. His voice speaks for the cultural mores that keep the members of a society operative within a given cultural system. He repeats the myth which causes the taboo to be placed on sodomy, a myth that finds its basis in fact. His description of the sheep-child is grotesque and terrifying:

... this thing that's only half  
 Sheep                    like a wooly baby  
 Pickled in alcohol...  
 ...                    his eyes  
 Are open                but you can't stand to look

What is most horrifying to the farm boys and to the reader, is the fact that this "thing" resembles a baby. It becomes a symbol of the cultural crime that they would secretly commit. As the child's eyes accuse, guilt is so strongly felt that none of the transgressors, or would-be transgressors, can withstand his gaze.

The narrator plays the apparently normal adult relationship of the now-grown farm boys to their wives against the irrefutable fact that the sheep-child has been produced. As always the sheep-child's unseeing gaze and his dead voice accuse.

At this point in the poem the sheep-child himself speaks of another kind of exchange between man and beast. The romantic language used to describe the sheep-mother who grazes like "moon-light" only emphasizes the bestiality

of the man who attacks her. While his sexuality is selfish, she gives "her best/ Self to that great need." Thus the exchange is first initiated by an act that was "something like love." The exchange is complete at the moment in which human and animal consciousness are united, at the birth of the sheep-child. And the encounter again brings with it an intense vision. The child speaks:

... I saw for a blazing moment  
 The great grassy world from both sides,  
 Man and beast in the round of their need,  
 And the hill wind stirred my wool,  
 My hoof and my hand clasped each other.

The child is a link; he makes continuous what was once separate. Two opposite perceptions are united into a harmonious vision. But the harmony is tenuous.

The dead sheep-child is brought to his "father's house," a museum which Dickey describes as being a paradoxical institution. It preserves its specimens and places them in glass cases. The sheep-child is removed from the passing of time; He is pickled inside a jar which is placed inside of a case, etc., etc. He attains ever-lasting life by his removal from life. He can live, but only as the figure in a legend may survive. And, by this preservation, he attains the same kind of power that a legendary figure may attain. Even the sun's grains, or the bits of dust, "fail" at his "closet of glass."

Lawrence Lieberman describes dust as the element of

a middle condition in Dickey's cosmology. It is "a mediating form between organic and inorganic matter, life and death."<sup>68</sup> And because the sheep-child remains in the middle world, the world of exchange, he retains the power of directing the lives of the farm boys:

...Dreaming of me,  
 They groan                    they wait                    they suffer  
 Themselves, they marry,    they raise their kind. (p.253)

In "The Sheep-Child" the act of sodomy initiates the exchange. The stewardess in "Falling" also undergoes a grotesque exchange. She becomes increasingly more aware of her sexuality as she nears her death. In this poem Dickey describes a kind of love affair between the woman and the elements: earth, air and water. The sexual encounter that the poet describes in "Sermon" is both passionate and animal while, at the same time, it is a kind of holy act. Thus, in the later poems, a strange kind of sexuality becomes an integral part of the process of exchange. To understand the importance of the sexual aspects of the encounter described in Dickey's work we will examine the last two poems that will be considered at any length in this study: "Falling" and "Sermon."

"Falling" begins with the same atmosphere of suspension, of mystic calm that we have seen in earlier poems like "Into the Stone." The earth is described as a magnetic orb which is capable of "drawing moonlight out of the great/ One-sided stone." The ruined stone, the one-sided stone, is again the only source of light in a vast darkness.

The moon is a kind of negative light in the half-dark world of the exchange. It is the reigning spirit of a ritual universe in which mere rationality is exiled. The earth itself partakes of the moon's power. And as the stewardess is swept through an emergency door in the plane on which she is working, she too becomes part of the ritual universe. Her fall frees her from the boundaries of the normal, the rational, and the well-lit world that she has known and she begins to partake of the elements. She, like the pilot in "The Firebombing," has been both shielded and separated from the elemental power of the exchange by the presence of the plane's enclosing space. She, like the moonlight, is drawn irresistably to the earth. While she falls she becomes one with air, and finally, with her fall, will become one with the earth.

But as the poem begins she is freed from her formerly rigid boundaries. The first and greatest awareness that she reaches as she falls from the plane is that none of her former definitions are operative. She is incapable of interpreting the experience of weightlessness, of total alienation from human companionship and possible deliverance, and of the momentary immanence of her death. Void, nothingness, infinity have opened up for one who is "still neat lipsticked stockinged girdled by regulation." And now, only seconds from death, she is given complete freedom; a thing which she could never attain while fully protected. Like the diver in "Drowning," she experiences kinesthetic freedom.



In the earlier poetry the persona, who is the poet, undergoes the experience of freedom while suspended in water. However, in "Drowning with Others" the poet's vision is ambiguous. The speaker is simultaneously inside of and outside of the suspended freedom that he describes. The sea offers complete liberation and yet he can only describe the weightless world through the eyes of another; he cannot achieve it himself. "The hand on my shoulder fears/ to feel my own wingblades spring." The double-vision has faded in the poem "Falling." The freedom, the release from the weight of guilt are accomplished, but not by the poet. As the double vision fades, the poet utilizes the empathetic view entirely. The persona no longer the poet, enters the weightless world. The state of suspension is no longer terminated by the ritual death-in-life and rebirth cycle of poems such as "Sleeping Out at Easter," but rather the intensified emotional tension of the later poems is resolved by a physical death.

The stewardess, like Donald Armstrong in "The Performance," did "all things in this life" that can be done by an individual whose life is circumscribed by time and chance. They both had to face death and were left with only one possible decision; and that decision was to die in as personal a manner as they could. For Donald Armstrong this meant that he would stand on his head; for the stewardess it meant the removal of her clothing so that her youth and beauty would be properly recognized and sufficiently mourned. In the few remaining seconds of life both of these individuals make of an unusual fate an even more bizarre fate.

It is the only personally significant act left to them.

Although Donald Armstrong and the stewardess share a similar kind of bravery, the poems themselves have a very different impact on the reader. There is a kind of sadness and yet satisfaction in Armstrong's death. The distance of time and the distance the poet achieves from his subject by the use of the narrative voice, permit a kind of nostalgic admiration. But in the later poem the reader is not allowed to view the painful death of the stewardess at a distance, but is forewarned of the violence of her death, allowed to experience all of the shock and terror that she feels as she falls and is forced to observe the lingering demise. The intensity achieved by this poem and the greater length of the poem act as a kind of challenge to the reader. Dickey threatens to cross that threshold which distinguishes art from a merely personal experience. In a way, one almost feels that this kind of poem is an attack on the reader, that it charges him to accept a painful reality much like the theater of cruelty does. Perhaps the poet attempts to achieve the greatest tension possible in an effort to bring the reader fully into the exchange. But it is a dangerous technique and brings with it a greater chance of failure. If the reader is not willing to participate, or if the poem fails, then the intensity of exchange may become mere bombast and contrivance. In a long poem such as "Falling" there are more occasions for the failure of the exchange and the poet places himself in greater jeopardy.

The experiences described in "Falling" are again multifarious. The stewardess' fall is a journey from moon to air to death. She thus takes on elemental power. As she nears death, she grows more physically comfortable and more physically aware. She takes on such power that she feels as if she could open her mouth and suck "All the heat from the cornfield." She is "in superhuman health." By this Dickey means that she is more than human both because she enters the minds of night-flying predatory birds and because she becomes a living embodiment of the fertility powers of the goddess Diana and of other folk goddesses. Even as she passes over the sleeping country girls, her power awakens in them and in herself a sense of sexuality which is concurrently personal and archetypal. In the creation of a myth-poetic world Dickey does not differentiate between the mundane-the magical. The stewardess is both at once.

This approach to his work shows that James Dickey is capable of mythic creation. David Bidney attempts to define the creation of myth in his essay "Myth, Symbolism, and Truth." He states that, "In primitive language, art, and magic" symbolic representations are used "without differentiating symbols from their objects."<sup>69</sup> The farm girls are described as they sleep under chenille quilts. This is a kind of objective reality. On the other hand, the very beds in which they sleep become an integral part of the enactment of the fertility ritual of the dying god.

In this case the stewardess is the goddess, the Diana, the one who can awaken the sleeping girls and awaken in them their latent sexuality. It is she who can awaken the earth itself from the sleeping darkness. And the beds that the girls lie in are a necessary part of the ritual. "The scratch-shining posts of the bed" are certainly phallic totems, and the moon becomes a "female sign." As the falling woman passes her hands over her now nude body, she awakens the desire of the men who sleep comfortably on the land beneath her. With her passing, with the approach of the goddess to the actual spilling of her own blood, she increases the excitement of sexual fever in the sleeping men. "The male blood like iron" becomes part of the sexual dream of the sleeping girls, while sleeping boys find "for the first time their loins filled with heart's blood." Dickey seems to say that in a very direct way it is the stewardess' blood which fills their loins. As she dies, the earth is enriched. The sunrise itself is made possible by her death. Because of her association with the moon she is responsible, by her passing, for the waning of it and consequently for the break of day.

With the nearing of death, the night itself comes to a close. Falling, she turns in mid-air to offer obeisance to the rising sun, to the east. And it is, again, the spilling of her blood that brings renewal. The sunrise, in all its color, is "blood unearthly drawn/ Towards clouds." As moonlight was drawn to earth, blood is now drawn back to

the sky to create day. The stewardess, therefore, becomes a virgin offering in a ritual death.

As she lies in the wheat-fields of Kansas, the farmers discover her. Even while they sleep they know of her passing because of their relationship with the land. It is an immediate, subconscious awareness which prevades their dreams. By her death she becomes one with the land and as the farmers discover her body they walk "toward the dreamed eternal meaning of their farms." With this image Dickey combines archetypal myth with dream psychology in order to create his own particular ritual universe. However, in the later poetry it is now the unconscious mind that is capable of perceiving the enactment of ritual. Thus the sleepers and the stewardess are intricately bound; they all exist in a stage of suspension, a state which cannot last. The stewardess' consciousness unites the elements, crosses the boundary between human and animal consciousness; in other words, she makes continuous what was discontinuous.

In this way "Falling" is similar to Dickey's other poetry; it is a ritual incantation in itself. While the regular rhythms of the earlier work are gone, the phrases still "multiply into a trance-like massive sound-aggregate."<sup>70</sup> However, the poet is conscious of the discovery of a new kind of sound as he composed the poem. In an interview given about the time he was writing "Falling," Dickey said:

I think I've got a new kind of sound again, another beat, a halting, hesitant, stuttering kind of sound. I haven't really made it go yet, but occasionally I can hear a halting voice saying amazing things.<sup>71</sup>

That the poet hears lines being spoken to him is not a mere figure of speech. Like other romantics before him, he can at times perceive a voice. "The surging unstoppable rhythm" that Lieberman so admires brings to mind the prose style of William Faulkner. The violence of the stewardess' death and the violence of her extreme emotional state as she nears death, are also reminiscent of Faulkner. That the stewardess is not representative of a fertility goddess, but in fact is one is similar to Faulkner's treatment of Eula Varner, the earth-mother of The Hamlet. Certainly the strangely romantic description of bizarre sexuality in Dickey's poetry brings to mind similar descriptions in Faulkner's work, such as the sodomaic relationship of Ike Snopes with a cow. However, this particular characteristic of Dickey's work can be discussed more thoroughly after an examination of the poet's most ambitious poem, "Sermon."

The frontice piece poem of Poems: 1957-1967 continues in the tradition of "Falling." The long phrase, the split-line, the unwinding of mythic narrative, are technical devices which Dickey employs in this poem once again. A woman who symbolizes the dying god and the country setting are also found again. However, Peter Davidson places it apart from Dickey's other poetry. He believes it to be the culmination of Dickey's poetic career as it stood in 1967. He says that the poem, " contains everything that Dickey, at this stage, can put into a poem. The new metric and syntax are there; the obsessive theme of death and renewal and repetition and eternity; the transformations of the

"earthbound, the archetypes of country life. It strains toward universality."<sup>72</sup>

In "Sermon" Dickey moves his mythic vision nearer to the more usual literary archetypal poetry and further from the esoteric vision represented in the earlier poetry. The sermon is a kind of speech against organized religion, in favor of the ritual renewal of May Day (the day of the crowning of a May Queen who traditionally represents fertility and the reawakening fecundity of the earth). The cycle of life and death is again evoked as a part of the magic of ritual. As the farm girl dies again every spring, so the preacher retells the story of her death. The sermon itself is a necessary part of the renewal of spring; it becomes an integral part of the ritual. The Lord whom the preacher reveals to her audience is an ambiguous figure. The first implication is that he is the guiding spirit of nature who abides darkly in all living things; he is the creator. At the same time he is the destroyer whose very act of destruction enables creation in a never ending cycle. The second Lord, the Lord of organized religion, is played against and sometimes merged with the vegetable king. The poem itself is a reflection of a statement which James Dickey made to Paul O'Neil in an interview on July 22, 1966. At this time the poet said that, "I haven't killed Jesus off. I feel we understand each other. But my religion is akin to some primitive stick and stone religion."<sup>73</sup> The poem is a part of that religion. Instead of an actual stick,

or the actual movement of a stone bringing on the power of the sun in the sixth month darkness of the Eskimo winter, the poet has access to the imagistic stick and stone. The poem itself is an implement of a ritual religion.

In the enactment of the ceremony which reawakens the earth from Winter's death-sleep, the fertility potential resides specifically in one woman. This is true for "Sermon" as well as for "Falling." It is the farm girl who Dickey emphasises in the frontice-piece poem. On the other hand, the particular manifestation of fertility is transferred to other female figures; the sermon is delivered by a female preacher to an annual gathering of women. The sermon begins with the evocation of the symbols of mythic power. "Fog, gamecock, snake, and neighbor" will, together, give "men all the help they need/ To drag their daughters into barns." The presence of fog provides the necessary alteration of vision and perception. Again, one must remember that in Dickey's cosmology when perception is altered the perceiver and the objects which he views take on a new, more vital life.

The gamecock, which is instrumental in the exchange, is a symbol of virility, of obstinancy. In one poem ("Gamecock") Dickey associated it with his father. The snake is a less direct image. In its ambiguity it is both the reincarnation of evil (one who carries poison), the devil manifest, and it is a symbol for life.



Like the bedposts in "Falling," the snake is a phallic sign of suggested masculine sexuality. Finally, with the necessary altered vision, and in the presence of male virility symbols, the ritual can begin. But first the necessary communion must take place: the neighbor must be present.

In this particular poem Dickey sees the neighbor both as a projection of the self, and, at the same time, as an alien being. At times the social and cultural ties which eliminate or minimize individual differences are of foremost importance. In this case the presence of the neighbor forces the father to punish his daughter for a transgression against the cultural moral code. However, by acting out a neighborhood condemnation of his daughter's sexual behavior he alienated himself from humanity. He takes on the wrath of the Lord and loses himself to it. By his passionate anger he, perhaps, becomes a part of the very sexual fever that he condemns in his daughter.

As the woman preacher continues her sermon about the ritual suffering of the farmer's daughter the language with which she recreates the May Day Ceremony is typically Biblical. She addresses her audience as "children" who have come to learn. "Children, I shall be showing you/ The fox hide stretched on the door like a flying squirrel." And with this she reveals the part that the father is to play in the ceremony. The fox, as we see in "Listening to Foxhounds" and in "Fox Blood," is associated with masculine stoicism.

At the same time the presence of the pelt on the barn door indicates that the father is a hunter, another sign of virility and power. In this way Dickey uses the fox-skin in the same manner that D.H. Lawrence does in his short story "The Fox." John B. Vickery's essay "Myth and Ritual in the Shorter Fiction of D.H. Lawrence." contains an analysis of the symbolic quality of the fox-skin. Perhaps Vickery's observations could apply to Dickey's "Sermon" with equal accuracy. Both Dickey and Lawrence evoke the primitive fertility deity, Dionysus, and both utilize the fox as a ~~divine~~ divine animal to be sacrificed.

The fox skin also comes to be identified with the daughter. The fox must be killed and laid flat on the barn door in the same way that the girl must be beaten and tied to the phallic May-pole which finds its particular manifestation in the center-pole of the barn. Even the light itself which filters into the barn becomes a kind of extension of the May-pole image. The light of the sun proclaims that spring has come to break-up the winter darkness. The thin beam of sunlight is described by Dickey as if it too were a supporting pole in the barn's structure. As it touches the grotesque barn dwellers, it stirs them and transfers to them a new vitality.

Again, we see that Dickey's images partake of one another. The sun, like the snake, is not merely a symbol, anymore than a note in a movement with variations is a symbol.

Because it is combined, altered by, and contrasted with other major symbols it gains a kind of poetic energy. The continuum of images such as the snake, sunlight, center pole, and the winding roadway which leads to death is a particularly apt technique for the creation of mythic poetry. And the cycle is a particularly appropriate device for the action of the mythic poem. As the women in the audience partake of the preacher's experience they become part of the cycle. The preacher in turn recreates the farm-girl's experience. The cycle completes itself.

The phallic energies of the father and the lover, although different in kind, are also continuous qualities. Thus, out of particular people Dickey again creates two opposed sexual forces. And as male and female beings they are also social, religious, and mythic entities. When the father chains his daughter to the centerpole in order to beat her, a transformation begins. The Lord Jehovah becomes a snake which goes "Down on His Belly descending creek-curving blowing his legs/ Like candles out." Thus the father, the vengeful God, the snake, the Devil and the lover become one. In the hellish dark of the barn the temptor is Jehovah, and the father himself becomes the Jehovah of the negative world. Like the copper-headed snake, the father is a deadly creature. In this universe the very air is red with dust, and the inhabitants, the "swelling ticks," are full of blood. The snake becomes a reigning King, the ruler of the dark world, much like D.H. Lawrence's snake in the poem of

"Snake" is a regal creature by nature of its ominous power. In his description of the barn Dickey has created a negative world in which revenge, passion, lust and death are the creative forces. Creation is certainly suggested by the possibility of breathing "the breath of Adam" into the arid dust.

And as the father, who thinks of himself as "the Lord's own man," becomes a kind of living vengeful god he becomes a part of the cycle of death for the purpose of re-birth that is central to the poem. As the intensity of passion increases there is a transference of energy; all things, inanimate, human or animal, begin to partake of one another. Time itself is jarred loose from the basic frame of narrative chronology. The wrathful father becomes less human as the animals and even the tractor absorb his rage and become like him. Although the tractor remains motionless in the barn, it absorbs so much energy that it seems to believe that:

It must pull up a stump pull pull down the walls  
of the barn

Like Dagon's temple set the Ark of the Lord in its  
place change all

Things for good, by pain. (p. 4)

And this kind of ambivalence is prevalent throughout the poem. The love/lust of the farm girl for her lover, the revenge/lust that the father enacts by his beating, and the journey to death all are necessary parts of the recurring ritual.

While the poet is sympathetic with the girl and vehemently

decries the self-righteousness of the father who would justify his actions with a Bible belt rational, he, at the same time remains aware that the crucifixion is necessary for the coming awakening of nature. This in itself helps to create tension within the poem.

The poem is electric with passion and, yet the poet is strangely distant from his subject. He achieves this by carefully utilizing the narrative voice. As the poem builds to a passionate description of the love-making of the girl and the motorcycle rider, there is a shift to a more generalized description. The girl lies in her bed after she is beaten and with her thoughts the tempo of the poem builds. She

With dignity walks with no help to the house lies  
face down

In her room, burning turning in hearing in the spun  
rust-groan of bedsprings. (p. 8)

Her physical pain and her mental turmoil increases. The verbs begins to pile one upon another. Because of the pain she receives from the beating, her sexual awareness is heightened. And when the girl, in her specific suffering, is sufficiently aroused she loses her individuality. In other words, the poet shifts focus from the farm girl to a more generalized kind of female demiurge. Her sexuality is transferred to the listening women. And the preacher sanctions this when she says, "In May O glory to the sound of your man gone wild/... let your nipples rise." Thus the poet is able to build a passionate crescendo and then to

lesson the tension by moving back from the persona. At this point the progress of the poem itself is overlaid with another dimension. The magic words "Each year" remind the reader that this is a cyclic occurrence. Each year marks another anniversary of the day of murder and death; and with the commemorating of the anniversary, spring is again brought to the land.

As we have seen the poetry of James Dickey, particularly the longer poems, are works of violence and passion. Whether this quality can be considered to be an inheritance of the Southern tradition is a debatable point. Although Dickey is a Southern poet in the general sense of that category (he was born in Georgia and educated at Vanderbilt), Professor Louise Cowan would not place him within the Fugitive Tradition:

Where in prose fiction there seems little or no abatement of the Southern Literary Renaissance that began in the 1920's... there has been no comparable literary succession in Southern poetry. Jarrell, Dickey, Smith and others seem to have far less in common with such other non-Southern poets of their own generation as Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, John Berryman, William Meredith and Reed Whittemore, than is true for the novelist.<sup>74</sup>

And, as we have seen, Dickey's poetry does provide enough material for comparison with non-Southern poetry so that critics feel secure enough to publish critical statements to that effect. It has been said that he owes a certain debt to Yeats, perhaps to Auden, certainly to Roethke and Stafford. His poems have been compared to John Berryman's and Robert Lowell's, without too great an extension of

that particular critical imagination which is operative in comparisons of this sort.

Perhaps the best way to resolve the dilemma as to whether or not Dickey is a Non-Fugitive Southern poet might be to examine some of his own observations of the Southern tradition. In Dickey's admiration of Robert Penn Warren rests a clue. Warren, a Southern poet, is also a novelist and in that genre he utilizes some of the techniques of the poet. Certainly Warren's work was considered to be the bridge between the Agrarians and the neo-romantics. The Southern tradition has been altered for a new age. Dickey's poetry is another bridge; he, like Warren, can be seen to have been influenced by the prose fiction tradition. The themes that one finds repeatedly in Robert Penn Warren's and William Faulkner's novels are taken up by Dickey. The problems of guilt, responsibility, individual action and paralysis are concerns which appear frequently in the Southern novelists' tradition. What Waggoner says of Warren is equally applicable to the more contemporary poet:

Warren simply takes it for granted that we are all guilty, and involved in each other's guilt, whether we choose to think about it in psychological or theological terms.<sup>75</sup>

Richard Tillinghast, in fact, sees Dickey as the Southern Contemporary Poet and places him in the tradition because of Dickey's concerns: "Nowhere else does one find so many poems about animals, hunting, fishing, fighting, and the natural world."<sup>76</sup> However, these are relatively superficial

qualities. Finally, guilt, damnation, a concern with the responsible relationship between man and nature and between man and fellow man, give the subjects Dickey chooses for his poetry a kind of Southern quality.

Even his language, particularly in the later poetry, begins to be reminiscent of the Southern novel. In Dickey's search for a voice he came upon the Southern tradition and changed it to suit his needs. In this following statement he places himself firmly in the romantic tradition:

But I sensed immediately that writers like Faulkner and Wolfe had different orientations with language than, say, Maugham. I responded to this quality. I kept looking for writers who had this thing. Melville. James Agee.<sup>77</sup>

In fact, in his recent book Self-Interviews, Dickey states that his "personal heroes of the sensibility are John Keats, James Agee, and Malcolm Lowry."<sup>78</sup> He goes on to praise Agee more specifically.

James Agee, for me, word by word and sentence by sentence, is the writer I care for more than for anybody I've ever read in any language. It's not only that he was a Southerner and came out of somewhat the same background as I, but that he had the kind of verbal sensibility that my own responds to most. (p.75)

What he admires about all of these fellow writers is their ability to commit themselves completely to a work of art. And this sense of largeness, the freedom to express the kinds of perceptions and emotions which are not easily discernible by the logical use of language, is what Dickey continually works toward. This is what he finds to be a particularly



useful aspect of the romantic tradition. This is what drove the poet on to experiment with the longer poem, the freer line. In April 1968, he explained how he had come to use the poetic line found in "Falling" and "Sermon":

What I wanted to do, it seemed to me that the poetic line, you could take it and wring its neck, as Mallarme said, you could take it and take all the punctuation out and you could make a line that would do something about approximating the way the human mind really does associate-sort of, in jumps, it's not continuous at all.<sup>79</sup>

What Dickey says here, and the way he says it, begins to sound like Faulkner's experimentation with the stream of consciousness technique. The piling up of images and phrases, the continuousness of time, the association of contradictory emotions in an instant of time, and the violence and passion of the atmosphere are all to be found in both the novels of Faulkner and in the poetry of James Dickey. Both artists utilize the elements of ritual and attempt to create a prophetic voice: the prophecy of the nightmare world of the Southern Gothic tradition.

In fact, in another Southern poet's work Dickey is drawn to the gothic quality. Dickey admires Allan Tate's portrayal of the "everyday nightmare."<sup>80</sup> The tension between the familiar and the terrifying aspects of life is explored and creates a kind of amalgamation of the mundane and the horrifying. This tension is, in part, responsible for the prophetic vision.

Thus James Dickey can be considered a poet who utilizes some aspects of the Southern prose fiction tradition.

And what appeals to him most from the tradition is its use of the gothic. In order to understand the poet's reason for the use of the grotesque it is important to arrive at a definitive statement which will correlate the poet's own statements about the purpose, direction, and meaning of his work with the function of the grotesque.

The presence of grotesque can be determined by the influence it has upon the perceptions of the reader. Clayborough, in his book The Grotesque in English Literature, reiterates G.K. Chesterton's definition of the grotesque:

...[it is]... an artistic device which does not so much serve to draw our attention from the natural world as to make us see the world with new eyes in a way which is not less but more truthful than the usual attitude of casual acceptance.<sup>81</sup>

In other words, the grotesque is capable of inducing wonder, of leading the reader to clairvoyance. With this definition in mind one can place Dickey's own aesthetic criteria firmly in the romantic tradition. Both Clayborough (who here paraphrases Chesterton) and James Dickey believe that the altered vision, although unattractive, can lead to an intensity which results in the sublime. In fact, when Clayborough describes Kayser's treatment of madness in the German author's book The Grotesque in Art and Literature, a substitution of Dickey's name for Kayser's would not alter the veracity of Clayborough's observations:

Even in describing madness, it is not dementia, insane energy which he Kayser stresses, but the strangeness and impersonality of madness: "It is as though an alien inhuman spirit had entered the soul."<sup>82</sup>

This statement is applicable to Dickey's treatment of madness in poems such as "The Fiend."

The fiend does not consider himself to be incapable of controlling his passion, and in this lies his madness. The sense of strangeness and of impersonality is an identifying characteristic of Dickey's poetry. He is able to create tension while at the same time the poetry seems strangely distant. There is a cool rationality, a distance between the poet and the persona, even in the most empathetic poetry.

"The Fiend," in fact, can be placed with "Sermon" and "Falling" in the sense that in this poem the poet combines the exploration of the split-line technique in a long poem with the exploration of a strange sexuality. The romantic-tragic voice is played against an occasionally humorous image in all three poems. Although the Fiend is sick and dangerous the poet humorously discusses his voyeuristic delight at the sight of the undressing woman. "She touches one button at her throat, and rigor mortis/ Slithers into his pockets, making everything there--keys, pen/ and secret love-- stand up." With this line Dickey achieves a kind of perverse "slap-stick." In the same way he uses humor to relieve the dark tension which is created in "Sermon." Even as the farm girl brutally killed her father, the poet turns a religious maxim into a black-humor pun. "A girl will tend to take an ice pick in both hands.../ Things happen quickly and it is easy for a needle to pass/ Through the eye of a man bound for heaven." Even his

peculiar use of humor places Dickey in the grotesque tradition. William Van O'Connor has said that the grotesque is a "new genre, merging tragedy and comedy, and seeking, seemingly in perverse ways, the sublime."<sup>83</sup>

The sublime, the experience of elation or joy, is the ultimate goal of the grotesque, whether molded specifically to the Southern tradition or to a more generally gothic one. In Edmund Burke's definitive work On the Sublime and Beautiful one finds the clearest expression of the grotesque and its place in the world of art. Burke says that

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. <sup>84</sup>

The grotesque pushes the mind to the threshold; it threatens the reader. And it is the grotesque, present in James Dickey's poetry, which produces the necessary tension for the creation of the sublime. More specifically, Dickey's poetry fits aptly into Burke's point-by-point delineation of the grotesque. Burke lists six major imagistic themes which may be found in a gothic work. The first is the creation of monsters; certainly the sheep-child can be considered to be a monstrous figure. The second is the presence of strange animals such as owls, snakes, spiders, toads, boar, and vermin; in short the presence of nocturnal or creeping creatures. As we have seen Dickey's poetry is generally set in a night-time or darkened world. The owl-king rules because his day-time blindness allows him to see clearly at night

at night. The barn in "Sermon" is a microcosmic gothic world in which the snake rules, and blood filled ticks are the populace. And for Burke's third imagistic theme, the unruly plant life which creates a jungle, Dickey supplies the Kudzu vine. In the poem "Kudzu" the plants are encroaching, almost sentient vines which provide the necessary environment for reptilian-life. The Kudzu again foliates the countryside in "Sermon."

The last three items in Burke's catalogue of grotesque images are: the use of tools, the presence of the mask, and the exploration of the insane mind. Tools which take on a kind of life of their own provide the fourth category. The plane, the tractor, and the wire fence all take on a kind of organic vitality in Dickey's work. Similarly, Dickey is fascinated by the mask, by the wearing of the mask in the Dance of Death in such poems as "Approaching Prayer," and "Drinking from A Helmet." In both of these poems the persona relives the death of another being by wearing , in the one case, a boar's head and a father's sweater, and in the other a dead man's hat. Finally, the sixth item in Burke's list is the artist's interest in the insane. As we have seen, Dickey writes specifically about insanity in "The Fiend" and he explores the minds of people who reach the limits of sanity in such poems as "The Leap" and "Falling."

The area of the mind which lies in darkness fascinates James Dickey. And the manner in which he treats the

unconscious powers, the thematic imagery of the grotesque is in itself an extension of the gothic tradition. Irving Malin's description of the gothic again sheds light on James Dickey's negative world, as have other definitive statements about the grotesque. Malin has said that: "Chronology is confused, identity is blurred, sex is twisted, the buried life erupts. The Total effect is that of a dream."<sup>85</sup> (Italics are the author's). It is certainly the buried life, the dark-side of the moon, which Dickey explores.

But that is not to say that the dark vision is a lesser vision. Dickey's criteria for a truly good poem would not, in any way, conflict with Thomas Mann's feeling about the function of the grotesque. Mann believes that "The grotesque is that which is excessively true and excessively real, ~~but~~ that which is arbitrary, false, unreal and absurd."<sup>86</sup> By the very nature of its excess, of its generative energy, the vision is more real than if it were the result of a highly intellectualized activity. It is, in part, because the grotesque threatens the reader that it involves him more completely in the work of art. Both of the major critics who write about the grotesque and about James Dickey cite, as the basic criterion of art, that it involve the reader and that it bring him to a state of sublimity, of joy.

Moreover, this is specifically what Dickey has attempted to achieve in his own poetry. He calls for "the touch upon words of a humanly perceived beauty, terror or mystery."<sup>87</sup>

However, terror and mystery are in themselves capable of being beautiful. They are devices by which the poet, and through him, the reader, may be lead "Toward a Solitary Joy."<sup>88</sup> This is the title Dickey gives to his essay about the work of Theodore Roethke. And in this essay on Roethke he brings together his critical criteria, his attitude toward his own art, and the reason for his admiration of Roethke and other poet's work. Dickey admires in others and wishes to produce in his own art a ritual universe. And by placing the grotesque image in a ritual universe he wishes to produce "A terrible tension not far from madness, at times, not far from total despair, but also not far from total joy."<sup>89</sup>

And this is finally what the ritual structure of Dickey's poetry is working toward: to find the reader, to pass him through the fire, to subject him to an intense experience and to then release the tension, to allow the reader to experience a new vision.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Conclusion

James Dickey is a poet with a great critical awareness. He writes poetry while consciously formulating an operative aesthetic. In the poetry itself he creates a consistent mytho-poetic world. This world, and his critical work are both based on the cyclic nature of perception. And it is the pattern of the gyre, the circle which turns back on itself in order to arrive at an entirely new place, that comes to mind when one examines Dickey's work in Poems 1957-1967.

As we have seen, Dickey has experimented with his poetry during that ten year span. He moves from a misty world where the exact correlation between man and nature, or man and the spirit world, remains unclear to a less esoteric enactment of the ceremony of initiation. The poet draws more on his Southern heritage toward the end of the volume and he moves from the tight metric line to a more prosaic kind of expression. The poems become increasingly longer. It is not surprising that Dickey, just three years after the publication of this volume, brought out a novel which takes as its setting the Southern countryside.

However, though he experiments with the use of language, and with the pattern of initiation in his poetry, his critical goals have remained the same. The ritual cycle in the poem can be viewed as a kind of cyclic extension of the creation of the poem itself. Both are capable of lifting



man out of himself and uniting him with the Other. In this way Dickey attempts to write a "tribal poetry," believing that he can thereby give man a clear view, perhaps for the first time:

... the very saying has the peculiar grace of being able to raise one's random perception of a blade of grass bending in the air to a kind of Nth power of fragile significance. It is this that we have, in the end, against "the silence of the infinite spaces." We don't have it forever, but for a while we do have it; and it is, because this is our condition, magnificently enough.<sup>90</sup>

Because of its fragility, time becomes important to Dickey. He constantly tries to create the eternity within the second. In his earlier poetry he is concerned with the encroachment of the mundane boundaries of life upon the momentary mystical experience. In the later poetry he is concerned with the moment of suspended life before death. As the stewardess, Donald Armstrong, the Mourning son, the dying pilot face the terror and mystery of death, they also realize the beauty of life. They are human, "magnificently enough."

The trinity of beauty, terror, and mystery is important to the poet and the grotesque elements within his poetry create beauty out of terror and mystery. They create in the reader a certain sublimity of vision when the cycle of perception is complete and when the poem is strong enough to hold the immense emotional weight that Dickey places on it.

Dickey understands this when he says, "It's like Roethke said somewhere toward the end of his life: 'In spite of everything I seek to establish some kind of condition of joy.' "9 And at his best, Dickey can intensify the reader's perceptions of life. He can create joy when the cycle of perception is complete. The resolution of all paradoxes and the continuity of all disparate qualities reside, for James Dickey, in the instant of exchange. The still point in a turning world is "Joy, by God."

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Poets of Today VII, ed. John Hall Wheelock (New York, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>Evelyn Underhill, Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People, (London, 1948), p.3.

<sup>3</sup>Howard Nemerov, "The Poet Turns on Himself," Contemporary American Poetry (Washington, D.C., n.d.), p.284.

<sup>4</sup>Contemporary American Poetry, p. 284.

<sup>5</sup>James Dickey, The Suspect in Poetry (Madison, Minnesota, 1964) , p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>"Edwin Arlington Robinson," Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now (New York, 1968), p. 214.

<sup>7</sup>The Suspect in Poetry, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>In this sense Dickey reflects some aspects of Bergsen's philosophy. The artist becomes the revealing agent. Bergsen has said that Corot and Turner are capable of showing us what "we had perceived without seeing." Bergsen uses the word perceived to mean an intellectual activity whereas Dickey uses it to mean a complete experience, a "seeing." Henri Bergsen, The Creative Mind, Trans. Mabelle L. Andison, (New York, 1946), p. 160.

<sup>9</sup>Carolyn Kizer and James Boatwright, "A Conversation with James Dickey," Shenandoah, XVIII, 1, (Autumn 1966), p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>The Suspect in Poetry, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Five Poets of the Pacific Northwest, ed. Robin Skelton (Seattle, 1964), p. xxiii.

<sup>12</sup>James Dickey, Poems: 1957-1967 (New York, 1968), p. 145.

<sup>13</sup>Babel to Byzantium, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup>ibid, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Penn Warren, Selected Poems: New and Old; 1923-1966 (New York, 1966), p. 245.

<sup>16</sup>James Dickey, "The Greatest American Poet," Atlantic CCXXII (November, 1968), p. 53-56.

<sup>17</sup>The Suspect in Poetry, p. 113.

<sup>18</sup>Theodore Roethke, The Far Field (New York; 1964) p. 39.

<sup>19</sup>Louis Simpson, "New Books of Poems," Harperts, CCXXV (August, 1967), p. 90.

<sup>20</sup>James Dickey "Your Next-door Neighbor's Poems," Sewanee Review, LXXII, (April-June 1964), p. 311.

<sup>21</sup>"The Son, the Cave, and the Burning Bush," The Young American Poets (Chicago, 1968), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup>Carolyn Kizer, Shandoah, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>The Suspect, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup>L.S. and L.A. Dembo, Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry (Berkeley, 1966), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup>Henri Bergson, The Creative Mind, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup>Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1961), p. 134.

<sup>27</sup>Peter Davidson, "The Difficulties of Being Major," Atlantic, CCXX (October 1967), p. 119.

<sup>28</sup>Published by Houghton Mifflin in March 1970.

<sup>29</sup>Ralph J. Mills jr., "The Poetry of James Dickey," Tri-Quarterly (Winter 1968), p. 233.

<sup>30</sup>H.L. Weatherby, "The Way of Exchange in James Dickey's Poetry," The Sewanee Review, LXXIV, 3, (July-September, 1966) p. 669-680.

<sup>31</sup>Robert Bly, "The Collapse of James Dickey: Buckdancer's Choice," The Sixties, IX (Spring 1967), p. 70-79.

<sup>32</sup>Contemporary American Poetry, p. 288.

<sup>33</sup>All poems of Dickey's are from Poems: 1957-1967 unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>34</sup>Howard Nemerov, "Poems of Darkness and A Specialized Light," Sewanee Review, LXXI, 71 (Winter 1963), p. 103.

<sup>35</sup>Richard Howard, "On James Dickey," Partisan Review, 33, (1966), p. 416.

<sup>36</sup>ibid, p. 417.

<sup>37</sup>Contemporary American Poetry, p. 289.

<sup>38</sup>Shenandoah, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup>ibid.

<sup>40</sup>J.G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (London, 1911), III, p.80.

<sup>41</sup>H.L. Weatherby, Sewanee Review, p. 670.

<sup>42</sup>Howard Nemerov, Sewanee Review, p. 100.

<sup>43</sup>Peter Davidson, "The Difficulties of Being Major," Atlantic, CCXX (October 1967), p.119.

<sup>44</sup>Thom Gunn, "Things, Voices, Minds," Yale Review, LII, (October 1962), p. 132.

<sup>45</sup>John William Corrington, "James Dickey's Poems: 1957-1967: A Personal Appraisal," Georgia Review, XXIII No. 1 (Spring 1968), p. 18.

<sup>46</sup>Michael Goldman, "Inventing the American Heart," The Nation, CCIV (April 24, 1967), p. 529.

<sup>47</sup>Richard Howard, "On James Dickey," Partisan Review, p. 425.

<sup>48</sup>H.L. Weatherby, p. 673.

<sup>49</sup>Howard Kaye, "Why Review Poetry," The New Republic, CLVIII (June 29, 1968) p. 29

<sup>50</sup>Laurence Lieberman, "Notes on James Dickey's Style," The Far Point (Spring/ Summer 1969) , p. 59.

<sup>51</sup>ibid

<sup>52</sup>The reference here and elsewhere to the poet as speaker in the poem is a consideration of the poet as persona. This consideration is necessary for Dickey's poetic ontology: there is no greater "truth" than that which exists in the poem. Therefore, the poet must be free to create a mythos of his own life and to abstract from or alter biography at any time.

- 53 H.L. Weatherby, p. 677.
- 54 Laurence Lieberman, The Far Point, p. 60.
- 55 Laurence Lieberman, The Achievement of James Dickey,<sup>2</sup> (Glenview, Illinois, 1968), p. 10.
- 56 Wendell Berry, "James Dickey's New Book," Poetry, CV (November 1965), p. 130.
- 57 Lieberman, "The Worldly Mystic," Hudson Review, XX (Autumn 1967), p. 513.
- 58 Dickey, "The Decline of Outrage," From Babel to Byzantium, p. 257-266.
- 59 "Decline of Outrage," p. 260.
- 60 Louis Simpson, "New Books of Poems," Harper's, CCXXXV (August 1967), p. 90.
- 61 Nat Robertson, "Interview with James Dickey," New York Times, (September 10, 1966), Sect. 1, p.11.
- 62 M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Since 1956 (New York, 1967), p. 327.
- 63 Dickey, "Theodore Roethke," Poetry, CV (November 1964) p. 121.
- 64 Rosenthal, p. 327.
- 65 Robert Duncan, "Oriented by Instinct- by Stars," Poetry<sup>7</sup> CV (November 1964), p. 132.
- 66 The Far Point, p. 60.
- 67 J. Dickey, "Theodore Roethke," p. 119.
- 68 The Far Point, p. 62.
- 69 James Bidney, "Myth, Symbolism, and Truth," Myth And Literature, ed. John B. Vickery (Lincoln, 1966), p.7
- 70 Lieberman, "New Books in Review: The Expansional Poets: A Return to Personality," Yale Review, LVII (Winter 1968), p. 266.
- 71 Dickey quoted by Laurence Lieberman, Yale Review, p.267.
- 72 Davidson, Atlantic, p. 121.

<sup>73</sup>Paul O'Neil, "James Dickey: Improbable Poet," Life (July 22, 1966), p. 78.

<sup>74</sup>American Poetry, ed. Irving Ehrenpreis, (London 1965), p. 41.

<sup>75</sup>Hyatt Waggoner, American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present (Boston 1968), p. 551.

<sup>76</sup>Richard Tillinghast, "Pilot Into Poetry," The New Republic (September 9, 1967) p. 28.

<sup>77</sup>Paul O'Neil, Life, p. 74.

<sup>78</sup>James Dickey, Self-Interviews, ed. Barbara and James Reiss (New York 1970)

<sup>79</sup>Carol Buck, Poetry Australia, III (April 1968), p.6.

<sup>80</sup>Dickey, Spinning the Crystal Ball (Washington 1967), p. 13

<sup>81</sup>Arthur Clayborough, The Grotesque in English Literature (Oxford 1965) , p. 58.

<sup>82</sup>Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington 1963) , p. 80

<sup>83</sup>William Van O'Connor, The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays (Carbondale 1962), p. 1.

<sup>84</sup>Edmund Burke, On the Sublime and Beautiful (New York, n.d.), p. 32.

<sup>85</sup>Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Carbondale 1962) p. 9.

<sup>86</sup>Quoted by Kayser from Mann's Reflections of An Unpolitical Man, p. 128.

<sup>87</sup>The Suspect, p. 9.

<sup>88</sup>The title of the concluding essay in The Suspect.

<sup>89</sup>James Dickey, "Theodore Roethke," Poetry, p. 121.

<sup>90</sup>Hyatt Waggoner, American Poets contains excerpts from Dickey's speech acknowledging receipt of the national Book Award for Buckdancer's Choice, p. 614.

<sup>91</sup>Kizer, Shenandoah, p. 26.

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