

The Poetics of James Dickey: *The Early Motion*

By Douglas Keesey

The following, a speculative inquiry into the forms and functions of James Dickey's poetry, is an *explication de texte* that takes as its object of close reading not an individual poem but the early part of Dickey's poetic career. What I want to capture is something of the volatile interplay of styles in Dickey, between and among formal and free verse; lyric and narrative poem and epic; fiction and poetry. Is it possible to see a poet of so many changes as nevertheless developing toward some vision of a coherent whole? The question of whether or not Dickey can make it cohere (the "Preface to *The Early Motion*" finds him stating with proleptic certainty that "in the 'early motion' can also be seen and heard the later motion, and doubtless, when all the poems are done, the whole motion as well" [115]) is complicated by this poet's disdain for the too-easy conclusion, his willingness to admit the world's resistance to the word's ordering principle, his sense of the stylistic exertions involved in art's redemption of experience: "an effort, perhaps a desperate one, to get back wholeness of being, to respond fullheartedly and fullbodiedly to experience, aware all the time that certain constants must be affirmed" ("Spinning" 203)—or "aware all the time that certain constraints must be affirmed," as Gordon Van Ness tellingly misquotes Dickey, replacing the affirmation of "constants" with that of "constraints," thus emphasizing the importance Dickey places on acknowledging obstacles to wholeness even if this makes the effort to achieve a complete vision more "desperate" (*Outbelieving* 14). Rather than have his "huge collected poems" form a "tombstone" of pat answers, Dickey has risked incoherence and changed styles many times over the years, trying like Picasso "never to be trapped in a single style" (*Voiced* 192, 141): "Poetry: write in as many styles as you can cultivate and will be useful or that seem attractive to you. Try to use what seems appropriate to the general intent of the poem. Your own 'style' will develop out of this. (Though there is reason to hope that it won't!)" (*Striking In* 44). It is perhaps noteworthy in this connection that the first two parts of Dickey's *oeuvre*, *The Early Motion* and *The Central Motion*, both have analytic prefaces, whereas *The Whole Motion* is given as an unexplained *summa*.

With the publication of the early notebooks (*Striking In: The Early Notebooks of James Dickey*), the fact that Dickey wrote poems earlier than those collected in *The Early Motion* is no longer such a secret. Also excluded from *The Whole Motion*, most of these poems published in periodicals during the 1950s have in effect been disowned by Dickey; however, they are vital to an understanding of the origins of his style, for Dickey began writing under the influence of modernists such as Pound and Eliot, as mediated through the poetry of the Southern Agrarians and New Critics—Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Donald Davidson—whose traditions Dickey adopted while an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University. Dickey's 1950s poems are extremely allusive in the modernist style, and the 1960s work he considers his own is written in reaction against such formalism. As Dickey came to believe, formalism's "absolutely and uselessly far-fetched and complex manipulation of language" only calls attention to itself rather than employing an "unliterary innocence" to get people more deeply in touch with each other, themselves, and the world (*Suspect* 9).

Although one would want to make certain crucial distinctions all around, it may be helpful to place Dickey in the company of other poets such as Lowell, Plath, and Rich, and to view contemporary poetry's turn away from modernism as a repetition of the Romantic reaction against eighteenth-century neoclassicism. Certainly, Dickey shares with the Romantics a suspicion of

"classical" literariness as elitist rather than populist; narrowly logical rather than emotional; closed instead of open; ironic, not direct; and satiric rather than life-affirming. (One might also note that, like the Romantics, Dickey disavows his own poetic imitation of his "classical" predecessors by accusing them of being the imitators, of perpetuating a merely literary tradition rather than connecting with life.)

Dickey has said that his own writing began when, stationed on the island of Okinawa in 1945, he was first inspired by reading a line from a Joseph Trumbull Stickney poem: "And all his island shivered into flowers.' . . . I felt a new kind of possibility for myself coming out of the words" ("Preface to *The Central Motion*" vi). Like the Romantic who moves from dejection to joy by perceiving a living connection among all things, Dickey uses poetry to "charge the world with vitality: with the vitality that it already has, if we could rise to it" ("Journals" 5). The man-made desolation of war threatens to alienate him from nature, but Dickey takes this experience as an "impetus" to his poetry, "maybe a sort of desperation or intensity" (*Night* 232) driving him to "affirm" the "miraculous," to "write from the standpoint of a survivor" (*Voiced* 20). But, like the Romantics, Dickey betrays an uncertainty regarding the source and efficacy of this vitality: can one discover it in the external world or must it be created by the words of the imagination? If it is not to be found outside, is *poesis* strong enough to make it? Note the equivocation in the following: "My poetry: the image or fantasy—life *against* and *in conjunction with* 'real' life events and things. The need to *reconstruct, or arrive at*, in the mind a tapestry of events in which the self can move in harmony with what it contemplates and so *gain (transcend)* the outer world"; "Human life is a search for the images, . . . *experienced or imagined*, that will redeem it by ecstasy from . . . sloth, ennui, and death" (*Striking* 165, 151; emphasis added). One can trace a movement in Dickey from Romantic pantheism through Victorian doubt to a modernist sense that alienation may only be overcome through "the creative possibilities of the lie": the poet "understands that he is not trying to tell the truth but to *make* it, so that the vision of the poem will impose itself on the reader as more memorable and value-laden than the actuality it is taken from" (*Self* 156); "the most miraculous thing in the whole of existence to me: those pictures of the world inside one's head; pictures made of the real world, but pictures that one *owns*, that one infuses with one's own personality. They are fragments of the world that live, not with the world's life, but with ours" ("Metaphor" 180).

Whether poetry's remaking of the world be understood as a modernist rage for order or a Romantic creative perception—and Dickey uses terminology from both literary movements—Dickey rarely rests easy with the idea that words impose their own order on the world: such an imposition seems too subjective (the egotistical sublime) and too desperate (the rage for order). Dickey is loath to surrender the notion of a natural-spiritual order underlying social-material chaos, a deep connectedness with which poetry should put us in touch rather than further alienating us with artificially literary forms: poets "are more attuned to the connections between language and things, existence and experience" (*Night* 316); "What I want to do in poetry is to connect people to their deep, instinctual sources, whether they lie in the stars or in the caves" (*Voiced* 90).

For Dickey, the history of poetry is divided into two groups: on one side are the "Magic-Language exemplars" such as Hopkins, Hart Crane, Stevens, Berryman, Mallarme, Valery, Eluard, Lorca, and Paz: "For the Magicians, language itself must be paramount: language and the connotative aura it gives off; one remembers, here, Mallarme's injunction to 'give the initiative to *words*.' The words are seen as illuminations mainly of one another; their light of meaning plays back

and forth between them, and, though it must by nature refer beyond, outside itself, shimmers back off the external world in a way whereby the world—or objective reality, or just Reality—serves as a kind of secondary necessity, a non-verbal backdrop to highlight the dance of words and their bemused interplay" ("G.I. Can" 126-27). In their autotelism, the Magicians' words attempt to make something other and better than the world, transcending referentiality because it would bind poetry to a fallen reality. One might describe the French Symbolists' pointedly verbal correspondences between the material and the spiritual worlds as a more literarily emphatic version of the Romantics' natural supernaturalism, and surrealism's explorations into the unconscious could be seen as a more metaphorically adventurous version of the Romantic effort to rediscover the feeling self beneath the social veneer.

However, it is precisely the word-centeredness of these Magicians that worries Dickey; his concern is that their interverbal connections seem arbitrary, mere formalities that do not link up with spirit or self. The word-centered poet "invents without discovering"; "there is a terrible inconsequentiality about poems of this kind, for the *world* is lacking, and the buzz of language and hit-or-miss-metaphor generation is everything; the poem itself is nothing; or only a collection of fragments" ("G.I. Can" 137-38). Dickey is drawn to the other side, to the "literalists" such as Homer ("G. I. Can 126"), Frost, Robinson, Masters, Hardy, Larkin, R.S. Thomas, and Randall Jarrell, "experience-oriented" poets (*Night* 313) whose works are "grounded firmly or deeply enough in ordinary reality" to discover a *real* unity, not one invented or imposed ("Journals" 97). Literalists use "words as agents which illuminate events and situations that are part of an already given continuum, and which are designated by means of words" ("G.I. Can" 131).

This tension in Dickey between word-oriented and experience-oriented poetry is exemplified in his troubled relation to Imagism. On the one hand, as Ernest Suarez has shown, Dickey participated in the modernist revolution against Victorian verbiage and Romantic-egotistical vagueness and gas, preferring the "clean phrase and the hard-edged, imaginative image" of Pound ("Water-Bug's" 37), a concrete image that reflected the real world and yet saw through to its essence, its "deep simplicity" (Dickey, qtd. in Suarez, 36). On the other hand, Dickey disliked Pound's "lack of actual concern with people," his use of them as "a stand-in for an abstraction: good government, bad government, artistic excellence, economic right-mindedness, and so on" ("Water-Bug's" 43). The paradoxes are revealing: Dickey admires Pound's experience-oriented poetry as long as the "experience" is one of natural-spiritual unity and not social divisiveness. Dickey approves of Pound's "hard-edged, imaginative image" which is both concrete mirror (reflecting realities) and deep-seeing lamp (highlighting a Platonic Reality of formal unity), but this imaginative image is obviously already a unifying abstraction from the flux of social-material experience, and yet Dickey laments Pound's tendency toward abstraction. Pound's abstraction could be seen as his attempt to bridge the gap between experience and word, to view society from an ideally unifying point of view, to re-form people into a natural-social harmony, but Dickey sees such abstraction as an imposition of the word (premature or narrow order?) upon the world (which has its own more comprehensive order?). Dickey likes the impersonality (or larger personality) of the modernist image because it seems like less of an imposition than the Romantic egotistical sublime, but when Pound attempts to enlarge the natural-spiritual image to re-form people and society, Dickey accuses Pound of narrow egotism ("a complex in-group snobbery, a very off-putting air of contemptuous intellectual superiority"), as if the impersonally unifying image didn't already involve the poet's playing God and imposing his own

order ("Water-Bug's" 43). Dickey's poetic career could be viewed as a continuing attempt to bring together the Magicians and the literalists, to heal this division between word and world: "What I want is language seeming to live off itself but [!] bearing an intimate, empathetic relation to the world and to men" (*Striking In* 33).

As a student of Monroe Spears, Dickey wrote imitations of eighteenth-century satire in heroic couplets, using rhymes as "clinchers" or "intensifiers" (*Striking In* 116) that had the "great virtue" of making the lines "easy to remember" (*Self* 31). Such decisive memorability seemed to impose a narrow order on the world ("too much conclusiveness and not enough strange inevitability") or to close the poem off from natural vitality: "rhyme as artifice sets me at just that much more of a remove from the situation depicted" ("Journals" 128). Dickey's early poetry moved from full or perfect rhyme, through slant or off rhyme, and finally to assonantal and alliterative effects virtually unrecognizable as rhyme: "Assonant or slant rime a kind of subtlety device, making us realize connections where there apparently were none: work 'undercover'" (*Striking In* 116).

To compensate for the absence of unifying rhyme, Dickey felt that "*rhythm* must be worked harder than the prose-verse people work theirs" ("Journals" 97); hence the strongly marked anapestic meter of the early poems, with its "carrying flow" (*Self* 48); its "great, powerful, surging rhythm" (*Voiced* 14); its "compellingness" (*Self* 48). This "night-rhythm" is "something felt in pulse not word"; it emphasizes "sound over sense," *shaping* chaotic experience into an underlying order: the "themes that poured into the night-sound were memories of warfare" ("Preface to *The Early Motion*" 113-14). Meter would unify the troubled matter of the poem, even as the poem's musical wholeness would save the poet from fragmentation: "A poem must sing, itself: *together*. It must *sing* itself together"; "I wonder if the discipline of writing can hold me together" (*Striking In* 133, 65). However, like perfect rhyme, regular meter would soon be rejected as artificial, imposed ("thump-loving") and imposing ("almost coercive"): "It can get to be a vice, writing overly rhythmical poems" (*Night* 286, 222, 286). Dickey may have been responding to reviewers who, though generally positive about the early poems, occasionally criticized the meter: In their reviews of *Drowning With Others*, Thom Gunn found the anapests "a limiting and monotonous meter at best," and Howard Nemerov faulted the poems for singing their way to unearned conclusions: "Where his poems fail for me, it is most often because he rises, reconciles, transcends, a touch too easily, so that his conclusions fail of being altogether decisive" (qtd. in Kirschten, Introduction 4). It was also to avoid the too-easy conclusion that Dickey soon broke the habit of ending poems with a summation or coda composed of the refrain lines from previous stanzas: what once had seemed to him like a satisfyingly "complex ordering," the "same words again but slightly altered" (*Voiced* 253), came to be seen as glibly literary, "gimmicky," a premature foreclosure of the real (*Self* 85).

The stylistic changes in Dickey's early verse might be described, *mutatis mutandis*, as a recapitulation of the move away from neoclassical satire and the heroic couplet, where literary order rhymes with the social order which in turn ideally rhymes with the natural order, and toward the freer form of the Romantic lyric ode, whose organic unity finds or asserts a personal-spiritual order over against social fragmentation. Dickey values the lyric in that it "transcends all topicality," for "we are universal as well as time-bound, and it is the universal that I am trying to connect with" ("Journals" 123-24). But the lyric's "supreme concentration on a moment of intuition," on a "small exquisite moment," comes to seem narrowly subjective and prematurely idealizing, as Dickey renounces the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime for a more dramatic Keatsian negative capability: "Keats is

arguing . . . for a willing and outgoing sensibility, for a greater accessibility to experience, for a greater range of response" ("Computerized" 326). Like Keats, James Agee had "this quality of complete participation, of commitment of the self to whatever it was he contemplated" (*Self* 75). In Dickey's view, the Romantic egotistical sublime has led to the anguished solipsism of contemporary confessional poets, whose self-involvement merely exacerbates the alienation of modern society and whose protests against isolation are as vociferous as they are impotent. Instead, Dickey wants an "impersonal," "more inclusive" poetry "causing you to, allowing you to, inviting you to participate in existence, which includes your own existence" (*Night* 219-20). The point is "to get away from one's own mind; to be relieved, in some kind of permanent way, of that"; "I have self-dramatized myself out of myself into something else. What was that other thing I have left? I don't know, but this is better; it can do something" ("Journals" 7, 74).

Much as the lyric ego gives way to the dramatic persona in whom poet and reader can find a more vital self, so lyric must combine with narrative. In this way, "the lyric flight, the pure cry of the soul" can be brought down to earth in order to act upon impure reality (*Voiced* 170). A "driving lyric" (*Striking In* 103) uses the "long thrust of narrative" to get readers involved in the what-happens-next of a topical story (*Voiced* 170), but then departs from the typical teleology of fallen realism (social division, material death) by troping a linear conclusion into circular redemption. It builds up realistic detail into symbolic significance, propelling the temporality of discrete narrative events beyond fragmentation into timeless unity: "I think of the poem as a kind of action in which, if the poet can participate *enough*, other people cannot help participating as well" ("Metaphor" 173); "But for it to be poetry the words must be better chosen, and the rhythm and the *drive* of the words must be much more telling. It is prose, if you will, but raised to the height of poetry" ("Journals" 58); "I . . . tried to get the lyric 'timeless-moment' intensity and the enveloping [involving, driving] structure of a narrative into the same format" ("Preface to *The Early Motion*" 114).

One word for narrative building to lyric transcendence, for realism redeemed by romance, is *myth*, and Dickey shares with the modernists an interest in myth as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (as Eliot said of Joyce's "mythic method" in *Ulysses*). Gordon Van Ness ("When memory stands") and Robert Kirschten (Introduction) have written insightfully about Dickey's attempts to bring mythological order to his wartime experience, noting Dickey's fascination with Arnold Van Gennep's "rites de passage" or the three stages in the journey of the mythic hero: "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (*Voiced* 79). In myth, the particular characters of realism attain the universal status of archetypes, and the narrative movement toward death and dissolution circles back toward reunion and regeneration, time spatialized.

In the "Preface to *The Early Motion*," Dickey lists the themes of his first poetry collection in seemingly arbitrary order, with the merest hint that they might be related, but I would suggest that he has already arranged them in a way that shows narrative redeemed by lyric rhythm and mythic order: "The themes that poured into the night-sound [lyric rhythm] were memories of warfare, particularly the air and island combat of the South Pacific, and also (perhaps related in some way) hunting with bow and arrow, which I discovered and began to practice at this time. Also, themes of animals in their alien and instinctive existence, . . . and the continuities of blood and family" (114). In "The

String" (from Dickey's first book, *Into the Stone*), the international tragedy of warfare and war-survivor's guilt is personalized, made more manageable, by being turned into the family-survivor's guilt felt by Dickey over the death of his older brother. Guilt is overcome and loss restored through the poet's imagining a tradition of string tricks passed from the dead brother to the living one, and from the living poet, who will one day die, to his son:

Mark how the brother must live,
 Who comes through the words of my mother.
 I have been told he lay
 In his death-bed singing with fever,
 Performing with string on his fingers
 Incredible feats of construction
There before he was born.

A man, I make the same forms
 For my son, that my brother made,
 Who learnt them going to Heaven. . . . (8-14, 36-38)

Alliteration (note the nasals) and anapestic meter help to knit together these imagined "continuities of blood and family," whose broken reality ("I actually never heard that my brother did string tricks") is not even allowed into the poem (*Self* 89).

"The Performance" (also from *Into the Stone*) deals more directly with the losses inflicted by war, bringing into the poem itself the fact that fellow pilot Donald Armstrong "never mastered" the handstand (*Self* 94), and following the wartime narrative to its realistic conclusion of downed pilot, toppled handstand, and beheaded corpse in the grave:

And I saw how well he was not
 Standing there on his hands,
 On his spindle-shanked forearms balanced,
 Unbalanced, with his big feet looming and waving
 In the great, untrustworthy air
 He flew in each night, when it darkened. (7-12)

Even as enjambment ("not / Standing") and the forward- and falling-movement ("balanced, / Unbalanced") of the narrative drive toward their inexorable conclusion, the lyric lines, considered as free-standing ("Standing there on his hands," / "On his spindle-shanked forearms balanced"), work to redeem the time, to make the motion whole. As the poet imagines Armstrong perfecting his handstand and bringing tears to the eyes of his executioner, enmity is converted to empathy, and the Fall to (implicit) resurrection:

And the headsman broke down
 In a blaze of tears, in that light
 Of the thin, long human frame
 Upside down in its own strange joy,
 And if some other one had not told him,
 Would have cut off the feet

Instead of the head,
 And if Armstrong had not presently risen
 In kingly, round-shouldered attendance,

And then knelt down in himself
 Beside his hacked, glittering grave, having done
 All things in his life that he could (37-48)

Although cut down in actuality, Armstrong is raised in myth to the level of an archetype, a kingly Christ who rises to his fall, who offers his body's end as a testament to his faith in the eternal spirit.

The attempt to convert war's decapitation of the social body back into natural-spiritual wholeness, to fold violence back into the inviolate, necessitates a move from human "warfare" to "animals in their alien and instinctive existence" ("Preface to *The Early Motion*" 114). In "The Heaven of Animals" (from Dickey's second volume, *Drowning with Others*), predation is naturalized as instinctive; the killers are guilt-free and the victims fearless because they are animals; and death is not the end but merely part of the larger cycle of life, one creature dying so that another may live, the dead in a sense reborn through the living:

For some of these,
 It could not be the place
 It is, without blood
 These hunt, as they have done,
 But with claws and teeth grown perfect,

More deadly than they can believe.
 They stalk more silently,
 And crouch on the limbs of trees,
 And their descent
 Upon the bright backs of their prey

May take years
 In a sovereign floating of joy.
 And those that are hunted
 Know this as their life,
 Their reward: to walk

Under such trees in full knowledge
 Of what is in glory above them,
 And to feel no fear,
 But acceptance, compliance.
 Fulfilling themselves without pain

At the cycle's center,
 They tremble, they walk
 Under the tree,
 They fall, they are torn,
 They rise, they walk again. (17-41)

More memorable than the end-stop at "blood" is the three-line, run-on "descent" of the predators in "joy," an expression of such omnipotence that it almost needs no prey, is less a fall into time and death than a "floating" forever. Similarly, the prey, in conjunction ("And") with their predators' "joy," fall into life, move horizontally toward vertical transcendence ("they walk / Under the tree, / They fall, they are torn, / They rise, they walk again"), and trip lightly through anapests past the end to renewal ("Fulfilling themselves without pain / At the cycle's center").

However, the animal's "instinctive" union of opposites is "alien" to modern man, whose technological forms of "warfare" such as "air and island combat," dropping bombs and shooting guns,

are merely divisive, destructive. To bridge the gap between human and animal, a transition is needed, and for Dickey this is "hunting with bow and arrow" ("Preface to *The Early Motion*" 114).

Dickey's use of hunting as a transition between animal predation and human warfare has led to a major crux in Dickey studies. On the one hand, the point of hunting with bow and arrow seems to be that it brings modern man back into close contact with nature. Thus in "Springer Mountain" (from *Helmets*, Dickey's third book), the point is so little about killing that the speaker hangs his longbow on a branch and strips naked to feel what it is like to be a deer in winter: "He is moving, I am with him. . . ." (75). In essays and interviews Dickey is at pains to stress how using the bow and arrow "stacks the deck very heavily on the side of the animal"; "The animals, I can tell you, are actually in very little danger. At least not from me" ("Style" 173). "My luck has been notoriously bad!" (*Self* 111, 126). The main reason for hunting is to "re-enter the cycle of the man who hunts for his food. Now this may be play-acting at being a primitive man, but it's better than not having any rapport with the animal at all"; "Just to be in the animal's world you suffer much more than he does. Then you go and hunt him, probably without success. But you pay him that homage, too, of entering with him into the kingdom of life and death, into the eternal cycle of predatory animals and those hunted by predators" (*Self* 111, 126).

On the other hand, the point of hunting *with bow and arrow* does seem to be in the killing, in the power felt in challenging an animal on something like its own terms, in the thrill of discovering what it takes to prevail in a physical contest over an opponent, to survive a life-and-death situation:

Our ancestors had to hunt to live, and if you have even a faint inkling from engaging in this activity, a plain inkling of what it must have been like for them, then you know more about yourself than you did until then. If you have been around animals very much, you know they don't have humanitarian sentiments about each other. Some of them have to kill others to survive. . . . [people p] lacing themselves face to face with the most elemental conditions of life and death . . . [will] force realizations and decisions that may seem brutal to some. But they tell a man a lot about himself For instance, two terriers at the corner of my block will stand across the street from each other with hackles up and defend their territory like two wolves. The 'humanitarians' say that we're not like that, that we're men, not animals. But that's a false distinction. We are animals. And the sources of our animal nature go just as deeply as the sources of animal nature in wolves or dogs. (*Voiced* 97)

Thus, for Dickey, hunting allows modern man to identify with his primitive ancestors and to reestablish a connection with the animal within as a way of proving to himself that he has the strength to defend his territory and to kill when killing is necessary to survive.

This is myth in the service of realism, archetypal energy harnessed toward defensive and offensive action in the fallen world, and its appropriate literary form is not the lyric poetry of transcendent unity (the myth of natural-spiritual connection), but prose fiction—the kill-or-be-killed language of Dickey's novel *Deliverance*. *Deliverance* makes it clear that, if the hunting in Dickey's poetry tends toward a Romantic reintegration and resurrection of all life, the hunting in his prose fiction surrenders to the only "realistic" end—death and divisiveness. Whereas the speaker in "Springer Mountain" puts away his bow in order to identify with the animal, Ed Gentry in *Deliverance* identifies with the animal in order to find the strength to use his bow to kill a man threatening his survival. In the poetry, hunting has animals show warring men the way to natural harmony; in the fiction, hunting teaches men how to kill like animals. (This ambiguity surrounding hunting is not exclusive to Dickey: versions exist in Faulkner's writing on bear-hunting and in

Hemingway's on bullfighting, with a similar generic equivocation between lyric harmony and narrative conflict.)

"Drinking from a Helmet" (from *Helmets*) exhibits the tensions that result when the lyrical and the realistic senses of the hunting myth interact within a single poem. This poem is not ostensibly about killing the enemy, but about establishing a vital connection with a dead fellow soldier by drinking from his helmet. As the speaker drinks and then exchanges his helmet with that of his fellow, he imagines the dead reincarnated in him and envisions surviving the war and going to California to commune with the soldier's older brother. The poem could be seen as an attempt to extend the brotherly bond in "The String" to encompass the brotherhood of man, to have lyric lift a universal burden beyond the familial, to bring lyric's redemptive energy more directly into contact with the reality of war's mass destruction. Yet the realistic situation presses hard against lyric transcendence, threatening to convert a myth of natural-supernatural unity back into a myth of social power over other men. Not often noticed by readers of this poem is an equivocation between drinking as the reincarnation of the other in the self: and eating as the self's violent assumption of the other's power:

XII

I stood as though I possessed
A cool, trembling man
Exactly my size, swallowed whole.
Leather swung at his waist,
Web-cord, buckles, and metal,
Crouching over the dead
Where they waited for all their hands
To be connected like grass-roots.

XIII

In the brown half-life of my beard
The hair stood up
Like the awed hair lifting the back
Of a dog that has eaten a swan.

Now light like this Staring into my face
Was the first thing around me at birth.
Be no more killed, it said. (98-113)

The swallowing and eating hover between two linguistic registers: they are poetic metaphors for vital connection, and they are prosaic metonymies for deadly contiguity, for the murderous, failed connection that is the only realistic one obtaining in war's kill-or-be-killed situation. Ideally, we are still alive together, and he lives on through me; in actuality, he is dead but I am alive; I survive by taking (on) his life. It becomes very difficult to give "The [transcendent] Performance" of "A Heaven of Animals" with real men on war's battleground.

Prosodically as well as thematically, the poem manifests this split between lyric and narrative. It is this poem that Dickey singles out as "his most ambitious effort up to that point" in his career: "I splintered the experience undergone in the poem into nineteen fragments of varying lengths, and by this means tried to get the lyric 'timeless-moment' intensity and the enveloping structure of a narrative into the same format" ("Preface to *The Early Motion*" 114). Dickey splinters and

fragments as a means to formal wholeness; more than earlier poems, this one acknowledges realistic obstacles to unity so that its harmonious conclusion will be felt as something earned. First, the narrative's prosaic details and suspenseful action draw us in—this is the world we know, a speaker with whom we can identify, an involving story. The uneven fragments seem mimetic of the war's chaos as it impinges upon the psyche of the speaker. Then, realistic narrative runs on past the expected end of a war story—death—and into lyric transcendence; we are carried over the gap separating stanzas as war's fragments are reunited into a natural—social—spiritual continuity:

IV

Keeping the foxhole doubled -->
 In my body and begging -->
 For water, safety, and air,
 I drew water out of the truckside =>
 As if dreaming the helmet full.
 In my hands, the sun
 Came on in a feathery light.

V

In midair, water trimming
 To my skinny dog-faced look
 Showed my life's first all-out beard
 Growing wildly, escaping from childhood,
 Like the beards of the dead, all now
 Underfoot beginning to grow. (21-33)

The first four lines of stanza V expand as the speaker feels his young beard growing in an extension of the dead's still-living beards of grass, an allusion to America's most expansive writer of lyric who most vitally contains multitudes: "A child said *What is the grass?* . . . / And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves . . . / Darker than the colorless beards of old men . . . / What do you think has become of the young and old men? . . . / They are alive and well somewhere, / The smallest sprout shows there is really no death . . . / I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (Whitman, *Song of Myself* 99, 110, 117, 123, 125-26, 1339-40).

However, the narrative that enveloped us into experiencing this moment of timeless intensity drives inexorably on and drops us down into the demotic-demonic, into the ruthlessly denotative world unredeemed by merciful connotation:

Selected ripples wove through it [the water in the helmet],
 Knocked loose with a touch from all sides
 Of a brain killed early that morning,
 Most likely, and now
 In its absence holding
 My sealed, sunny image from harm,
 Weighing down my hands,
 Shipping at the edges,
 Too heavy on one side, then the other. (34-42)

The fantasy of the helmet as protection barely holds water; the image of the speaker sealed off from harm may be knocked into time and death at any moment by war's narrative. The rippling water

which shimmers the definitively dead brain into continuity with one still alive is also a reminder of mortality, burdens the self with attempting to keep a life from running out.

Some of the poem's fragments seem effortlessly to trope chaotic movement into eternal wholeness, time's end-stops into enjambments, the other's perishing into self-renewal—though the vision of unity is tremblingly indefinite, and requires the effort of similes, not just metaphors, *like* instead of *is*, some linguistic struggle beyond the pure achievement of "The Heaven of Animals":

VIII

At the middle of water
Bright circles dawned inward and outward
Like oak rings surviving the tree
As its soul, or like
The concentric gold spirit of time.
I kept trembling forward through something
Just born of me. (58-64)

Other fragments end in bathos, as the image of continuity gives way to a more realistic narrative of individual survival in the midst of general death, of Heaven not as universal redemption but as brief reprieve:

I drank and finished
Like tasting of Heaven,
Which is simply of,
At seventeen years,
Not dying wherever you are. (130-34)

Here Dickey's radical simplification of language, which elsewhere has such connotative reach, such natural supernaturalism, proves merely reductive, limited to the *I* here and now over against the absence of the *other's* brain; the self poignantly and triumphantly continuing, barely protected by having taken (on) the other's helmet, that of the fellow soldier who no longer needs a helmet, not because he is now pantheistically "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees," but simply because he is most likely dead (Wordsworth, "A Slumber Did My spirit Seal" 7-8).

This is a poem that deliberately shows its seams, that highlights narrative's strenuous leap across the gap to transcendence and then falls bathetically back into reality, mixing metaphors and modes of diction, pure and putrid:

XVI

Enough
Shining, I picked up my carbine and said. (135-36)

"What could be worse than a bit of narrative transition like" this one?, Neal Bowers asks, arguing that because of such clunkiness the poem's "evocation of a sense of union with the dead seems contrived and false" (72-73). This is the risk Dickey runs by letting reality in, by admitting that timeless lyrical unity may be interrupted by the situational pressure to defend and kill, that pantheistic joy at universal persistence may be converted back into the thrill of personal survival and harnessed toward that bathetic mundanity called fighting spirit.

The poem concludes with the speaker's vision of surviving the war and going to meet his fellow soldier's brother:

...to walk with him into the wood
 Until we were lost.
 Then take off the helmet
 And tell him where I had stood.
 What poured, what spilled, what swallowed.

XIX

And tell him I was the man. (1644-169)

Epitomizing the poem's conspicuous struggles for unity, this final "And" works hard to pull the fragments together, much as "was" makes the leap from simile to metaphor, asserting continuity between the speaker and his fellow soldier. "Was," however, is not "is"; the past tense of narrative inflects (infects) lyric's eternal present (presence); "lost" threatens to register in its ordinary senses of disorientation and death and not to shimmer into its intended connotation of pastoral unity in a time outside of time; and "spilled" makes "poured" lose control, a balance only precariously reestablished by "swallowed" with its ambiguous suggestions of natural continuity (satisfied thirst) and aggressive consumption (self-satisfied survival). "And tell him I was the man" presents the timeless image, the eternal connection, as a single line, a one-line stanza, a poem unto itself, even as it stands as the saving conclusion ("And") of an otherwise deathward-tending war story, the spiritual value into which mere narrative finally worked hard enough to trope itself, the final fragment (XIX drawing all the others together).

Is the speaker's spiritual union with the dead soldier made more or less credible by Dickey's admission of the material obstacles to its success? Significantly, Dickey's meditation on this question makes implicit reference to these final lines of "Drinking from a Helmet" and to the Whitman poem which they rework: "When the poet says 'I' to us—or, as Whitman does 'I was the man, I suffer'd, I was there'—we must either believe him completely or tell him in effect that he's a damned liar if his poem betrays him, by reason of one kind of failure or another, into presenting himself as a character in whom we either cannot or do not wish to believe" (*Self* 159).

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
 The courage of present times and all times,
 How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck
 of the steamship, and Death chasing it up and down
 the storm,
 How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch,
 and was faithful of days and faithful of nights,
 And chalk'd in large letters on a board, *Be of good
 cheer, we will not desert you;*

 All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it
 becomes mine,

I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there. ("Song of Myself 822, 831-32).

Whitman's identification with the captain who "saved" his "drifting company at last" (828) is effected through rather conventional literary means—or at least they now seem that way: the implicit comparison of the skipper to Christ, supported by biblical tradition; the personification rendering Death a localizable and manageable opponent; the already mythologized narrative of a ship's survival, never really suspenseful because framed as exemplum: and the comma splices that

subordinate parataxis itself to one smoothly all-encompassing vision of unity. By contrast, Dickey's poem *does* contradict itself, and it is more labored in its attempt to contain multitudes. In the move from Wordsworth to Whitman to Dickey, Dickey writes the most narratively troubled lyrics of the three, and in the poems following "Drinking from a Helmet" the credibility Dickey attempts to build by acknowledging realistic obstacles to transcendence will either be impressively assured or fatally jeopardized, depending on the reader's point of view, as narrative strains lyric to the breaking point—and perhaps to some unity beyond.

N.B. This essay is heavily indebted to the many critics and reviewers who have written on Dickey over the years. In addition to the specific sources acknowledged here, there are others too numerous to cite whose ideas have had a formative influence upon the conversation surrounding Dickey's works.

Works Cited

- Bowers, Neal. *James Dickey: The Poet as Pitchman*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri Press, 1985.
- Dickey, James. "Computerized Rape and the Vale of Soul-Making." *Night Hurdling: Poems, Essays, Conversations, Commencements, and Afterwords*. Columbia and Bloomfield Hills: Brucoli Clark, 1983. 323-29.
- . "The G. I. Can of Beets, The Fox in the Wave, and The Hammers Over Open Ground." *Night Hurdling: Poems, Essays, Conversations, Commencements, and Afterwords*. Columbia and Bloomfield Hills: Broccoli Clark, 1983. 124-40.
- . "Journals." *Sorties*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1971. 1-151.
- . "Metaphor as Pure Adventure." *Sorties*. Garden City, NY, Doubleday. 1971. 172-88.
- . *Night Hurdling: Poems, Essays, Conversations, Commencements, and Afterwords*. Columbia and Bloomfield Hills: Brucoli Clark, 1983.
- . "Preface to *The Central Motion*." *The Central Motion: Poems, 1968-1979*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1983. v-vii.
- "Preface to *The Early Motion*." *Night Hurdling: Poems, Essays, Conversations, Commencements, and Afterwords*. Columbia and Bloomfield Hills: Broccoli Clark, 1983. 113-15.
- . "The Self as Agent." *Sorties*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971. 155-64.
- . *Self-Interviews*. Ed. Barbara and James Reiss. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970. *Sorties*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971.
- "Spinning the Crystal Ball" *Sorties*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971. 189-208.

- . *Striking In: The Early Notebooks of James Dickey*. Ed. Gordon Van Ness. Columbia, MO: UofMissouriP, 1996.
- . "Style and Chance." *Night Hurdling: Poems, Essays, Conversations, Commencements, and Afterwords*. Columbia and Bloomfield Hills: Broccoli Clark. 1983. 172-74.
- . *The Suspect in Poetry*. Madison, MN: Sixties Press. 1964.
- . *The Voiced Connections of James Dickey: Interviews and Conversations*. Ed. Ronald Baughman. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1989.
- . "The Water Bug's Mittens: Ezra Pound: What We Can Use." *Night Hurdling: Poems, Essays, Conversations, Commencements and Afterwords*. Columbia and Bloomfield Hills: Broccoli Clark. 1983. 29-46.
- Kirschten, Robert. Ed. "Introduction." *Critical Essays on James Dickey*. NY: G.K Hall. 1994. 1-25.
- . *James Dickey and the Gentle Ecstasy of Earth*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988.
- Suarez, Ernest. *James Dickey and the Politics of Canon: Assessing the Savage Ideal*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1993.
- Van Ness, Gordon. *Outbelieving Existence: The Measured Motion of James Dickey*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1992.
- . "When memory stands without sleep': James Dickey's War Years." *James Dickey Newsletter* 4.1 (Fall 1987): 2-13.

* * * * *