

James Dickey's *To the White Sea*: A Critical Controversy

By Douglas Keesey

PRO. It seems Dickey has been preparing for this adventure all his life. A triumph of prose poetry, Dickey's new novel combines the narrative thrust of *Deliverance* with the lyrical heights of *Alnilam*.

CON. Like most advertiser-friendly pull-quotes, yours divorces aesthetics from ideology. Never mind that the "narrative thrust" in this new novel tends to be through the bodies of human beings (using that American-made kitchen knife which, as we are told numerous times, has the flex to go around bone and out the other side), and never mind that the lyrical heights sought by the novel's protagonist are the icy northern regions where his egotistical sublime need not be troubled by society or humanity!

PRO. You're the one divorcing aesthetics from ideology and reducing the former to the latter! As Ernest Suarez has recently pointed out, too many critics ignore the ambiguity of Dickey's complex literary style in order to condemn a politically incorrect straw man. This is certainly what happened in negative reviews of *Deliverance*.

CON. But even if one finds ambiguity in *Deliverance*, *To The White Sea* is like a *Deliverance* narrated not by Ed Gentry but by Lewis Medlock, a Medlock who hasn't had his egotism chastened by a broken leg or challenged by a Drew Ballinger.

PRO. You're reading with ideological blinders on! Muldrow is the new novel's Ed Gentry, Arlen is Medlock, and the red-haired Florida boy and the decapitated American soldier are a combination Drew Ballinger/Bobby Trippe. Like Medlock, Arlen is a boaster whose swaggering challenges bespeak an inner weakness. Arlen, who has "a snake tattooed on one forearm," calls Muldrow a "little prick" and asks him if he is going to "jack off," but it is Muldrow who has potent virility and who draws strength through his way of exchange with animals. "Let's see if that snake can give you what you ain't got," Muldrow scoffs at Arlen's bragging, then proves his superior arm strength doing pull-ups on a ceiling bar, ending by dropping down from above with the suddenness of a "snake" (5-8). Muldrow tries to instruct Arlen's companion, the red-haired Florida boy, much as Gentry attempts to do with Bobby, but the boy is too nervous, frightened, and pampered by civilization to heed the lesson ("He had probably already forgotten everything I'd said, in the time-wasting time before the mission"); consequently, the boy dies on his first mission, flailing about when the plane is hit and "going wild trying to fetch up against something solid, to get hold of his chest chute," whereas Muldrow keeps his head, finds his chute, and survives (19, 24). Later, Muldrow

takes revenge for the fiery explosion of the plane in which the boy died and he himself suffered ("The [explosion] was not fire, though later I realized that it had to do with fire, had fire in it") by "calling . . . down" the firebombing raid on Tokyo, and he avenges the decapitation of an American soldier by beheading a Japanese woman ("A head for a head"), much as Gentry wreaks revenge on the rednecks for Drew's murder and Bobby's rape (24, 56, 118).

CON. Notice how Drew Ballinger as a *live* character seems to have disappeared from your comparison! The fact is that there simply is no character like Drew in *To The White Sea*, no one to embody and argue for civilized values such as justice and compassion—unless this character is Muldrow's mother who, revealingly, "died before [he] ever knew anything about her" (18).

PRO. All that your last comment "reveals" is how inconsistently PC you are! You accuse Muldrow of being a macho primitive, but then you stereotype women as possessing feminine virtues and exerting a softening influence; you don't know anything about what Muldrow's mother was like as an individual! More importantly, you are obstinately refusing to grant the artist his *donnée*: *To The White Sea* is a war novel about an American soldier trying to survive behind enemy lines. There is simply no place for "civilized values" in this situation; in fact, showing justice and compassion would almost certainly have gotten Muldrow killed! I might add that Muldrow does spare the Japanese children to whom he shows the Jacob's ladder trick; he doesn't kill except where it is necessary for self-preservation.

CON. Yes, once again Dickey has cleverly contrived a situation where, as in *Deliverance*, killing seems like the only way to survive—

PRO. Dickey didn't contrive World War II! That situation was contrived by factors larger than one man—

CON. Wasn't it in fact contrived, as all war is, by masculinist ideology, by paranoid fears about "the enemy" and macho fantasies of proving one's manhood in combat—an ideology promoted by this novel?

PRO. Once again, you're mistaking historical accuracy and entertainment value for ideological indoctrination! The fact—since you like to use this word, let's use it correctly—the fact is that Dickey actually fought in a real war called World War II; he flew night missions in the South Pacific, much as Muldrow does. *To The White Sea* is not a negative essay on the War like Paul Fussell's *Wartime*, nor does it anachronistically import a post-Vietnam sensibility into its treatment of the War like Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s

*Slaughterhouse-Five*; instead, Dickey's war novel gives an historically accurate depiction of the War from one soldier's point of view. For example, when Muldrow calls the Japanese "Japs" and "Nips," it is because a man in his time and place would do so; many men did!

CON. I notice how, in your argument for the novel's historical accuracy, you seem to have dropped your point about its entertainment value! Or perhaps you think that the use of slurs like "Japs" and "Nips" is not only historically accurate, but also has entertainment value? Would you say the same about killing Japanese?

PRO. You seem incapable of understanding history on its terms; you keep judging it by contemporary standards. You also seem unable to read a war novel for the sheer excitement of combat, without ruining your own enjoyment by seeing everything as a moral issue. Finally, though it may be hard for you to grasp, it is possible for some of us to appreciate the novel as a document of historical value and to be stirred by its action scenes without being troubled by a sense of self-contradiction; the two aren't necessarily related, except in the minds of kill-joy moralists for whom all entertainment must be politically correct and every historical novel a representation of today's values.

CON. Dickey's novel is not an historical document, but a fiction combining scenes he has imagined (Dickey himself was not shot down behind enemy lines!) and details which are called "historical facts" because they are the way certain people saw events at the time—other people may have seen events differently, but, since theirs was a minority view or since they did not have the power or influence to have their view recorded, posterity has been deprived of their insight. There are other stories—imagined, remembered—about World War II that Dickey might have told, but this is the one he brings us—

PRO. I suppose that you would have Dickey write a story about a downed fighter who is befriended by kindly Japanese who give him shelter and—what?—not help him to win the war against their own countrymen, for this would be a case of taking sides and you consider all war unjustified—perhaps they find a way to smuggle him back to America where, with their kindness as his example, he joins an antiwar movement and campaigns for universal peace. But Dickey is writing about the *real* world, not some PC heaven; his novel is *historically* accurate.

CON. It is this "historical accuracy" that I have been trying to question: what do you really know about the actual experiences of American soldiers behind enemy lines in World War II? And I mean the experiences of those whose tales weren't often told because they did not fit in with official wartime propaganda?



PRO. What do you really know about them?

CON. Moreover, don't you think that an author has a certain responsibility to the time and place in which s/he is writing? America in the 1990s is already guilty enough of Japan bashing. I hope that there is a public outcry against Dickey's novel much like the protests against Michael Crichton's Orientalist book and movie *Rising Sun*, but I fear that Dickey's book will only further the hatred in the minds of certain Americans toward the Japanese.

PRO. Although I think you're making too much of what is basically an action-adventure entertainment, for the moment I will meet you on your own obsessively ideological ground and counter your argument. Dickey's new novel is socially responsible and appears at just the right time. Its story of an American who engages the Japanese on their own territory and *wins* may well instill a new competitive spirit in America. The Japanese have dominated the market in certain areas, and America's economic survival will depend on its willingness to fight even against the odds.

CON. Yes, I see what you mean! American businessmen must be mindful of the danger of economic emasculation posed by the Japanese, as figured in the beheading of the American soldier and in Muldrow's concern over castration and decapitation (a concern repeated to the point of paranoid obsession: e.g., 15, 35, 67, 162, 212, 232).

And, in this time of economic survivalism, it is a matter of self-defense to restore the Orientalist imaginary typical of World War II propaganda. (Just how much Japan bashing is there in *To The White Sea*. Let me count the ways:) The Japanese are depicted as a subhuman people, barely evolved from primitive savagery. They are constantly associated with the slimy earth from which they have not quite distinguished themselves: "the Japanese spend most of their time looking at the ground"; they are "crouched over" and "near-sighted"; they "dig like moles"; their "sorry" "soil" is "half water" like "shit"; the "assholes in Tokyo" exude a "concentrated stink" of "Tokyo shit" (164; 105; 153; 223; 39, 33, 35). Like pigs, the Japanese enjoy "wallowing in hot water": "How could anybody live like this. . . . They didn't deserve the world" (122). Unlike Americans, the Japanese have not yet developed a sense of fellow feeling or social responsibility: the men oppress the women, loading them with burdens so that they have "a lot of trouble raising up" and "hit[ting them] across the face "very hard" to get them to move—"This was the way people treated each other over here" (113, 209). These are a people who "don't even seem to like to look at each other" and who would kill their own children: "those poor bastards trying to stand on top of their own kids, just for one more breath" (164, 59). Indeed, it would seem that the old adage is true: "Orientals didn't have any respect for life" (74). After all, what kind of person would decapitate a man and then kick his headless body, as the Japanese do to

an American soldier (104)?

Luckily, though their subhuman nature may make them savage, it also makes them weak and childish: much of the novel is devoted to proving to potentially fearful American readers that the Japanese can be beaten. They are a "little" people (this literally belittling adjective is applied to the Japanese so often that I lost count); their uniforms are "always too big," making them look like "a bunch of sad sacks . . . trying to be an army"; they even have "rotten" teeth! (50, 51 etc.; 150; 127). The war machines they build are rotten, too; Muldrow reckons a Japanese army truck to be "the worst I had ever been in"—"everything I could reach was loose" (204). Thus Dickey assures Americans today who might despair at the sight of so many tightly constructed, high-performance, economically triumphant Japanese-made cars that America was first and best when it comes to making machinery and that, if it strives to, it can beat the competition again: "the Japanese love machinery, and they try their damndest to be like white people, especially Americans. If it weren't for us they wouldn't have any factories, any cars, much less any airplanes. I would have bet that the [Japanese] trucks had the same gearshift as an American make" (151). It was the white fathers who gave the gift of machinery to their yellow sons—sons now rising in ungrateful challenge to their fathers. But Americans will prove to be the true patriarchs, as Muldrow shows himself to be a better father to Japanese children than their biological parents when he spares the lives of a boy and a girl (unlike the Japanese who, as we saw, will kill their own children) and passes on to them American know-how (the Jacob's ladder trick, or how to catch the moon in a ladder of string and make it walk evolutionarily step by step from bottom to top) (155). If Americans are superior fathers, they also make better husbands, as even Japanese women intuitively realize. One such woman displays her naked body before the eyes of an admiring Muldrow; she doesn't know that he is there, but she yields naturally to the "energy of [his] focus": "I was concentrating on her feeling me. She lifted her arms straight up and shook herself—that was for me. I'm damned sure" (130-31). Japanese men have no secure center or focus. In tense situations, they become hysterical and unheroically conformist. Thus Muldrow defeats one soldier whose "Japanese excitability" makes him vulnerable to attack, and another who fires senselessly in imitation of a comrade when he should have been watching for Muldrow (196, 199-200). "What an enemy!" Muldrow concludes in disgust (127). Is there any doubt that America will win this latest war against the Japanese just as it did the previous one?

PRO. What an extraordinary tirade! Your list of grievances sounds more like a prosecutor's summation than it does literary criticism, and I have to wonder why you would choose to write on Dickey if you can't find anything positive to say about his work. Although your lengthy catalogue of the ways in which the Japanese are represented in this novel may seem exhaustive (it is certainly exhausting!), it is in fact highly selective. You neglect to mention

Muldrow's admiration for the fighting prowess of the samurai warrior, whose quicker movement and superior hearing make him a worthy opponent even in old age: "I was up against somebody who could hear better than I could"; "He had too much quick, too much training for me" (170, 172). Just as Muldrow is able to act on what his father taught him years ago, so the samurai uses his Japanese "training" in the battle against Muldrow, "holding his form, holding on to his ancestors, who must have been soldiers, sure enough" (173). Consider the superb balance of this samurai and explain how you can say that the Japanese men in Dickey's novel "have no secure center or focus"! This key scene shows Dickey's respect for the Japanese, who are depicted as having ancestors, traditions, and battle skills of their own. When Dickey says that the samurai and the Japanese man who decapitates the American soldier wield their swords like baseball bats, he is not only describing their grip and stance; he is also likening their traditions to our own (168, 104). Dickey has a Japanese sword catch the sun's blaze in much the same way that candlelight flashes off Muldrow's knife blade or that moonlight is caught in his Jacob's ladder: the Japanese are shown as having the same ability as the Americans to harness nature's power (103-4, 81, 155).

I could go on and mention Muldrow's wonder over the sound of a Japanese musical instrument or his praise of the Japanese skill at woodworking which can create an exquisite water wheel, but instead I'd like to call attention to a scene so important that Dickey put it at the very beginning of his novel (60-61, 116-17). Here an American colonel gives a fire-breathing speech about the upcoming raid on Tokyo ("We're going to put [fire] in [every Japanese man's] eyes and up his asshole, in his wife's twat, and in his baby's diaper"); Dickey confronts us right away with the most virulent—and sacrilegious—racism: "We just got the good word this morning. White phosphorus and napalm. That's our good stuff for the little yellow man and his folks" (1-2). Muldrow's—and Dickey's—reaction to this kind of thing?: "bore[dom]"; "I was glad [when] the Colonel had quit talking about fire. That had nothing to do with me" (30, 2). Muldrow is not a believer in nor an embodiment of wartime racist propaganda. In fact, once he is shot down behind enemy lines, Muldrow makes it clear countless times that he is no longer fighting a war (killing the enemy for his country); he is now fighting just to survive (45, 64, 66, 69, etc).

CON. I've been looking at these pages you cite, and I don't see the same thing you do. In fact, I'd like to present a counter argument to everything you've just said—and I'll try to be brief! Muldrow's point in the aforementioned passages is that he is killing not because there is a war on, but for his own personal satisfaction: "I had my .45 and one extra clip, and that was something I could use in what I needed to do; *wanted to do, you might even say*. It was one of those times. And there was a war on too, as the Colonel and everybody else used to tell us" (45; my emphasis). I *am* going to say that Muldrow *wants* to kill because he enjoys the feeling of power it gives him: "The war was there, and I'd have to deal with certain

things connected with it, certain situations, and they'd come up. But the war was not the main thing. It might have been to them, to the others, to the Japs, but it was not to me. *There didn't need to be any war. There were not any rules, except the ones I made*" (69; my emphasis). Muldrow enjoys being in this life-and-death situation because it gives him the chance to "hide" (the power of seeing without being seen) and to "hunt" (the proof of his superior strength found in killing others) (100). In killing a Japanese soldier by jumping down on him from above (he had practiced this on Arlen!), Muldrow aspires to the "heartless" "power" of a predatory bird, like the hawks who "did more than other creatures for the wish I had that was most like me: not only the need to attack but to fall on something from above" (201, 262). Basically, Muldrow is an egomaniac. Like the Romantics, he seeks strong sensations ("I felt my strength grow until it was better than any sensation I or anybody else has ever had—a million times better than fucking or being drunk"), but unlike a true poet he has no sense of individual restraint or social responsibility: what he prizes most is the feeling that "there was nothing in the world that I couldn't do, no place I couldn't get to, nothing I couldn't eat or fuck or kill" (92, 141).

The only reason Muldrow ascribes any positive attributes to the samurai is that he intends to test his strength against him, and what kind of test would this be if his opponent were completely unworthy? Of course Muldrow (the American) proves himself superior and then, in a fantasy inspired by Dickey's reading in anthropology (not in ethics!), he proceeds to make needles out of the dead man's bones which supposedly transfer their "life" to Muldrow, giving him renewed "confidence" (130). Elsewhere, this appropriation of another's "life" through murder is figured as a "transfusion," as in the scene where Muldrow "replaces" the blood he is losing from a wound by drinking the blood of the brave mountain goat that gored him (241). "Don't let anybody ever tell you blood is not good to drink," Muldrow tells us, thus heading off any carping criticism that an over-civilized society might be inclined to make about his philosophy of cannibalistic consumption (241).

Similarly, the enemy's women are appropriated: Muldrow hides and watches voyeuristically (the power of seeing while not being seen) as a Japanese woman bathes (130-31). If only this scene had some of the saving irony of Dickey's poem "The Fiend," which it otherwise resembles! Unlike Muldrow, the poem's voyeur does have a fiendish aspect: he is a "worried accountant" with "painfully vanishing hair," a Prufrock "gone wrong," who will one day use his "knife" as an instrument to work out his sexual frustration (*Poems* 230, 233).

Muldrow treasures the Japanese musical instrument only because its sound reminds him of young girls' voices; his taking of it is a way of appropriating them (60-61). And the intricate workmanship of the water wheel serves Muldrow as a display case for his own



handiwork: the severed head of a Japanese woman he has decapitated (118).

Muldrow may attempt to dissociate himself from the racist rhetoric of war (the Colonel's speech), but his thoughts and actions are all dictated by the macho ideology that makes for war. Japanese swords are compared to baseball bats to show up the contrast between deadly earnest savages and fatally naïve American boys better suited to sports than to combat: "The Jap . . . bent his left knee like somebody getting ready to hit a baseball, and brought the sword around in a fast lick like a man who knew exactly what he was doing, had done it before. The American's head fell forward" (104). In Dickey's poem "The Performance," the Japanese are at least granted some compassion and humanity, even if only in the form of the speaker's wish-fulfillment fantasy: "the sun poured up from the sea / / And the headsman broke down / In a blaze of tears, in that light / Of the thin, long human frame" of the American soldier he is about to execute (*Poems* 31). In this poem, light binds the sun, the Japanese man, and the American soldier in a vision of natural sympathy, a connection stronger than the merely social division of war. But the "blaze" in *To The White Sea* is natural power used for unnatural ends, by this Japanese executioner and by Muldrow with his flashing knife blade that also cuts off heads (103-4).

Muldrow claims to have realized only after decapitating the Japanese woman that his was a retaliatory act related to the War: "A head for a head, I thought. But really, when I'd done it I didn't have that idea at all. It was just something that came to me later, after I was gone" (118). What a coincidence that Muldrow's instinctive act should so perfectly match wartime behavior! And how amazing that the way Muldrow thinks of his flashing knife blade—"I knew the flame was in every house in Japan"—sounds so much like the firebombing raid, which literally put a flame in so many Japanese houses (206)! Muldrow is not separate from the War; his acts reveal the macho ideology underlying all war—the fear of Otherness, the self-aggrandizement, the desire to "eat or fuck or kill" whatever or whomever one wants (141). "There must have been seventy-five of them at least, and with a .50 caliber—or even a hand-held .30—I could have laid them all down in just a couple of three-second bursts" (181-82): Muldrow is a macho racist like Rambo, and his battle can be read as the American attempt to fight the Vietnam War over again and win this time!

PRO. I suppose that there's no point in reminding you that *To The White Sea* is set during World War II . . .

CON. But it appears in 1993, after more than a decade of right-wing war novels and films!

PRO. I would also remind you that it's told from a soldier's point of view. Do you expect some omniscient narrator to interrupt Muldrow's first-person tale to signal every time the



character does something wrong or has an immoral thought? Readers can make up their own minds about Muldrow without your condescending interference!

CON. An author has a social responsibility not to promote immorality. Dickey's novel should be criticized for the same fault that made Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* such a pernicious movie: a first-person narrator/hero who thrives on and revels in abominable behavior! Dickey showed in "The Firebombing" that he could write an account of the War from the viewpoint of a participant and still maintain a moral focus: "Homeowners unite. / All families lie together, though some are burned alive"; "It is this detachment, / The honored aesthetic evil, / The greatest sense of power in one's life, / That must be shed in bars, or by whatever means" (*Poems* 181, 186). If Robert Bly had trouble with "The Firebombing," *To The White Sea* will confirm Bly's worst nightmares about Dickey!

PRO. Don't be too sure! After all, Bly is now the leader of a primitivist, rather macho "men's movement" of Iron Johns, whose back-to-the-woods philosophy may have been influenced by *Deliverance* and may find further inspiration in *To The White Sea*!

CON. While we're on the subject of Dickey's previous poetry and fiction, I would add that even *Alnilam*, despite its near-worship of Joel Cahill (a protagonist who, like Muldrow, vanishes into thin air), still manages to warn about the sexual sadism and fascist violence implicit in its hero's drive for transcendent power.

PRO. If you're now through making invidious comparisons—pitting Dickey against Dickey, as it were—I'd like to return to the novel itself (which you seem to have lost sight of) and offer a reading that I consider to be both more faithful to the text and less predeterminedly hostile. Earlier, I claimed that critics like you often ignore the ambiguity of Dickey's complex literary style in their prosecutorial zeal to convict him of ideological crimes; now I want to show you what you've missed.

As Gordon Van Ness has demonstrated in his study of Dickey's war letters, Dickey went into World War II with the same enthusiasm as many other enlisted men: "I am absolutely crazy about it, and feel as if I were doing something for the first time in my life" (4). Training exercises seemed reassuringly familiar to Dickey: "It's just like actual war, except we don't shoot each other. It's also quite a lot like the cowboys and Indians . . . I used to play in the back yard" (5). The War itself, however, was a different matter. Among the many men whose deaths tormented Dickey was that of his closest friend, Donald Armstrong, who was captured and executed by the Japanese. Shocks such as these made the wartime Dickey hate the Japanese ("Everything you hear about the Nips is true. They are really brutal. I wish we could kill them all") and made him angry at those on the home front

who did not understand what the men at war were going through ("It's not them that has to get over here and get their ass shot off"); indeed, the war experience is so horrible as to provoke in Dickey a disaffection with all humanity, present and future: "I don't think much of the human race, especially after this, so why should I do anything to perpetuate it?" (9, 10, 9). Dickey's stoic brevity should not lead us to underestimate the psychic damage inflicted upon him by the War: "I really didn't think I had much chance of getting back. You can't imagine how this work tells on you, unless you've done it"; "I am pretty well shot as far as nerves go" (10).

Van Ness argues persuasively that the War "underscored for Dickey the transitoriness of life, the inexplicability of chance, and the need for a philosophy of life that redeemed experience," and Van Ness goes on to show how myth provided that philosophy of life for Dickey (6). I would like to give Van Ness's Jungian and Campbellian theory a Freudian inflection: as I see it, Dickey wrote *To The White Sea* under a compulsion to repeat his traumatic wartime experiences in a form allowing him to master them. The unavenged murder of his friend Donald Armstrong (subject of "The Performance" and model for the executed American soldier in *To The White Sea*) is satisfyingly answered in the novel by Muldrow's decapitation of the Japanese woman ("A head for a head" [118]). Terror at war's incalculable risks, anonymous foes, and moral uncertainty is rewritten as an enjoyable fantasy out of "cowboy movies," where the "hero" or "good guy" always wins because of his superior virtue and virility, and where every confrontation is a showdown face-to-face: "It was important to do it that way, with just him and me. I pulled the .45 and leveled it right into his chest. Shoes, you son of a bitch. Shoes. I squeezed off" (170, 57).

But the true interest, the great drama, and the main achievement of *To The White Sea* lie in the tension between wish-fulfillment fantasy and nightmarish reality. Behind the dream one can always sense the unbearable truth of war threatening to break through; as Muldrow puts it, "I wanted to sleep in control, and not just like some desperate guy with no chance" (33). This battle-fatigued veteran fears that war has emasculated him ("I was shot . . . between both legs") and so must maintain a constant check on his equipment: "My bread knife was riding down my leg, almost a part of me"; "I put one hand on my knife in the position to draw it, and touched my dick with the other. It was the same as it had always been. That was good, real good. Nobody had done a thing to me" (26, 45, 99). The fear of having been unmanned gives rise to compensatory fantasies of invulnerability ("No blade could penetrate me") and paranoid phallic aggression ("finally—I couldn't help it—didn't want to—I bent forward on one knee and pulled the knife up along my thigh and out"), but nothing can stop the recurrent anxieties about having lost a vital part of the self: "I don't like to have anything loose, where it might get away from me"; "they were still loose from me, not right on me like everything else I had and I didn't trust them not to swing or

separate from me" (163, 109, 14, 112). Freud would call Muldrow an anal-retentive personality (literally, in the case of his "asshole compass") and would explain Muldrow's hatred of anal-expulsive types (the "assholes in Tokyo" and their "Tokyo shit") as a phobia about his own loss of self-control and fear of self-exposure (38, 39, 35). To Muldrow's "nightmares" about dismemberment ("Not having a weapon") must be added his "terr[or]" at being "exposed" and his fear of "being in a situation I didn't have any control over" (65, 207, 65). Surely, Muldrow's identification with the animal that leaps with supreme grace from tree to tree "across the free space" above him ("if that happened there was nothing in the world that I couldn't do") is related to his phobic disavowal of any connection with the Japanese man who is helplessly "shot" or "Hurtled" over Muldrow's head, crashing through the window of one building and into that of another on the other side of the street: the animal has control; the man, just as spectacularly, does not (140-41, 56).

One of the feelings that Dickey's post-traumatic stress disorder fantasy works hard to control is guilt over the murders committed during the War. Although Muldrow admits that the firebombing of Tokyo "killed a lot of people," he attempts to convince himself that "there were things that were worse," such as his own dire situation: "if you say nightmare to me, you don't mean a fire raid on Tokyo. You'd have to be talking about something else" (65). But who is saying nightmare to him? Who is equating the fire raid on Tokyo with a nightmare? Only Muldrow's own conscience. Given that "The Firebombing" deals with the suppressed guilt of a man driven in spite of himself to imagine what it would be like to suffer the burning he has inflicted on others ("ears crackling off / Like powdery leaves, / . . . children of ashes" [*Poems* 188]), it is tempting to read Muldrow's peculiar description of his plane being shot down—"The next thing was not fire, though later I realized that it had to do with fire, had fire in it. Maybe we had exploded from inside ourselves"—as the verdict of his own conscience: for what you have done, you too shall burn (24). When Muldrow beheads a Japanese woman in retaliation for the American soldier's death, he comments, for some unexplained reason, that the body was "hardly bleeding" (118). Earlier, Muldrow explained that he shot a Japanese man in a certain way because he "didn't want any blood on the clothes" he planned to take off the dead body (48). Muldrow over- and under-explains, when the simple fact is that at least a part of him "didn't want any blood"—period: "I thought about blood, too, and couldn't reach it. I had killed three people, and I couldn't remember that I had seen any blood at all" (79). Indeed, even though Muldrow had "blown the top of [the] head off" the guy he shot for his clothes, "there was not any blood that I'd noticed": "he didn't look too bad right then" (79, 49).

Strange as it may seem, Muldrow tries to rid himself of guilt by associating it with an ignoble emotion like cruelty. The bear people taunt a cub, and they also sing, dance, and make speeches (like the Colonel's at the beginning of the novel?) to expiate the "guilt" over

having killed for "bear meat and furs"; Muldrow would rather be like the "animals," who are neither cruel nor conscience-stricken: "A wolvenine would have eaten up that whole dinky little village in half an hour and not thought anything about it" (247-48, 249). But only human beings with a conscience can recognize cruelty and so avoid it; ideally, guilt is associated with cruelty only insofar as conscience compels us to better behavior. Muldrow aspires to amoral animality because he is guilt-stricken over his own cruelty; his attempt to associate guilt and cruelty with the bear people and to cut himself off from them by killing one of these men fails when his own sense of guilt leads Muldrow to reconsider (albeit too briefly and too late) whether he may have misjudged these people and whether he himself may have been the cruel one: "more than one time I was sorry I had killed the little bearded man who had hunted the goats at the same time as I did. I wish I hadn't done it, because in a way he had been a good friend, and he was a hunter, too" (268).

Muldrow's refusal to admit that he shares in the cruelty and guilt of humankind, his projection of these attributes onto others, cuts him off from humanity and makes him a misanthrope. Even the bear people, who as hunters bear a close resemblance to the predatory animals Muldrow aspires to be, are really just "men like all the others": "The animals are a lot better than any such. Better, a lot better, than the people" (247-48). Muldrow was reared in icy Alaska by a father who, because of a mysterious "something that had happened to him" in his past, had moved "as far away from other people as he possibly could" (211). Perhaps the father's traumatic past experience was a war, abroad or back home, making him like Dickey, Muldrow's authorial father. At any rate, the isolation Muldrow inherits, though teaching him how to be self-sufficient, seems also to have starved any feelings of compassion in him and to have fed his growing paranoia; even his hermit father starts to suspect the danger of such an upbringing: "he thought that maybe we ought to move" from Alaska to Colorado so "I could grow up with more people around" (110-11).

The conflict within Muldrow between a desire for human warmth and a fear of human weakness is one of the most poignant aspects of *To The White Sea*. In the monochromatic snow of Alaska one gets "starved for color" and Muldrow associates "home" with the "red wall" his father built, but he also thinks of the "snow" as the only place "where [he] belong[s]" (215, 10-11). The red wall makes him "glad"; it is "beautiful" because it has "no use" other than to brighten the spirit, yet Muldrow claims that he doesn't "spend time on anything [he] can't use" (11, 18, 10). In the end, Muldrow connects the red wall (human feeling and companionship) with self-exposure and vulnerability to attack: "you had to stand out against it"; "I was trapped, you could see me, and there was death in that" (215-16).

One part of Muldrow seeks company ("For some reason I wanted to see people, even one person alive, moving. I can't tell you why"; while another part of him rationalizes away



his need for fellow feeling as merely a desire not to be caught unawares or a plot to take other people's "food" (87, 112). Because Muldrow believes that "Everybody was [his] enemy," the only place where [he] could control and live" is some icy realm "where there were no people" (67, 235, 252). Muldrow attempts to sever himself from humanity the way a fish's eye "cuts things into clean outlines," the way lynxes "cut out a calf" from a herd of caribou, or the way a glacier "calve[s] off": "The ice just slid down off it, and it was there, a thing, a new color just invented" (139, 141, 39). Muldrow even feels "better" when his beloved father has died because "It was just me now. . . . It was all mine" (255). (This "calving off" is so satisfying that it is repeated when the wrinkled Oriental man who is Muldrow's mentor dies and leaves Muldrow his hawks.)

CON. Touche! Your lengthy argument convinces me—that I was right all along! Muldrow is a misanthropist, a misogynist, a racist—

PRO. Then you've missed the point! Dickey has laid a trap for critics like you, who will find in this fiction only confirmation of their most negative views of Dickey's work. But those who listen to Muldrow's story with a more sympathetic and understanding ear will sense the pain behind the cries of triumph. When Dickey describes Muldrow as putting his ear against the rails of a train track "like somebody who was trying to commit suicide when the train came or who was just practicing for it," we should read this as no idle comparison (120). When Muldrow goes fishing (158-61), it is not just for rest and recreation; he is attempting to heal physical and psychic wounds, much as the autobiographical protagonist of Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" uses fishing to regain control of himself and some sense that there is beauty—and not just war—in this world (see Young). Make no mistake: Dickey intends Muldrow to be a "hero" only in the most severely qualified sense of the word. Why else would Dickey have Muldrow admit—in another seemingly insignificant but extraordinarily telling comparison—that, even before the War, he killed the one girl friend he ever had: "There may be stronger hands somewhere in a man my size, but I haven't seen them. I knew as soon as I had a hold of [the Japanese soldier] that I could kill him, and probably could have done it with one hand, *like with the Kansas girl*" (199; my emphasis). Was ever a "hero's" bragging so devastatingly undercut?

Dickey has prefaced his book with dueling epigraphs which convey the psychic conflict within Muldrow: the first describes the invincible power of fire, while the second shows an identification with the victims of such all consuming forces: "*Si je suis . . . d'une autre étoffe. / La trame n'en est pas de vos oiseaux de mer / Mais de leur froides proies ourdie*" ("If I am made of different stuff, / The texture does not consist of seabirds / But is woven out of their cold prey"; my translation). (Compare the conflicting postscripts to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, one from Malcolm X advocating armed rebellion, and the other by

Martin Luther King, Jr. promoting nonviolent resistance.) There are two sides to Muldrow. The first tries to trope his wartime suffering into strength: "your mind gets sharper when you're hungry"; loss of weight makes you lighter and faster; surviving being gored by a goat means that you take on that animal's strength ("I liked my thigh gored to the bloody bone"; "I've got that goat right down to the bone, in my left leg"; "there was no human thing or animal that could stand against me") (91, 145, 255-56). This is the side of Muldrow that identifies with the aggressor in a desperate attempt to deny his victimization: "My father used to tell me I was . . . half wolverine"; "I never saw but one wolverine . . . I was proud of mine, which I saw on the gut pile of a drowed caribou, because I knew then that the wildest animal in the world, the one with the most stories about him, the most bad and strong magic of any of them, had looked at me—looked right at me" (19). (Compare "Encounter in the Cage Country," *Poems* 274-75.)

But the other side of Muldrow mourns the deaths of the animals and the humans killed by his predatory side; Muldrow's continual attempts to exculpate himself reveal that, through it all, the most important part of him survives—his conscience: "As soon as all the blood [of the prey you have killed] is out, you go looking for the next one. You? I? Who? What had me was more than I was. I couldn't help myself and didn't want to. All I could do was what it said" (142). In the end, Muldrow is cornered by Japanese soldiers, his back up against the red wall of human vulnerability. As they shoot, Muldrow's mind turns exposure to invisibility, helplessness to invincibility: "A bullet went through me but didn't touch me"; "I had that seen-through feeling, like I had been shot by something that wouldn't kill me but would change me" (272, 260-61). While Muldrow's spirit soars with the predatory birds that have the power to which he aspires, there is every reason to believe that his body is dead. These birds are the dream of a man who—understandably, frighteningly, poignantly—would rather be a live predator than "cold prey."

---

#### Works Cited

- Dickey, James. *Poems 1957-1967*. NY: Collier Books, 1968.
- . *To The White Sea*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.
- Suarez, Ernest. "James Dickey and the Politics of Canon: A Literary Civil War." *James Dickey Newsletter* 9.1 (Fall 1992): 2-11.

Van Ness, Gordon. "'When memory stands without sleep': James Dickey's War Years."  
*James Dickey Newsletter* 4.1 (Fall 1987): 2-13.

Young, Philip. "Adventures in Nick Adams." *Hemingway: A Collection of Essays*. Ed.  
Robert P. Weeks. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 95-111.