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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE ELEMENT OF MYTH IN JAMES DICKEY'S POETRY

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

CLYDE FIXMER

Norman, Oklahoma

1974

THE ELEMENT OF MYTH IN JAMES DICKEY'S POETRY

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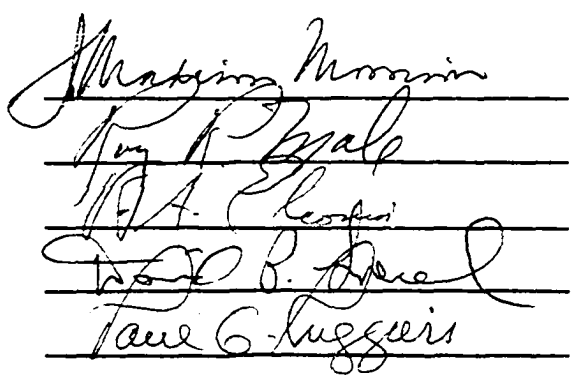

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Chapter I

Of Myths and Visions

My interest in James Dickey's uses of mythology was prompted by the titles of some of his poems. A look at the table of contents of his Poems: 1957-1967 revealed to me that he had perhaps written a dozen or so poems concerning Biblical and classical mythology. Such titles as "Sleeping Out at Easter," "The Vegetable King," "Walking on Water," "The Heaven of Animals," "The Magus," and "Approaching Prayer" appeared to indicate that the poet had more than a passing interest in the mythological. It was not, however, until I had read his complete published poetry that I realized the extent of his debt to mythological sources.

I was also interested in a poet who writes a love poem with lines such as these in it: "Like the dead, I have newly arisen," "No thing that shall die as I step/ May fall, or not sing of rebirth," "Elsewhere I have dreamed of my birth,/ And come from my death as I dreamed," "Once more I come home from my ghost," and "The dead have their chance in my body." These lines are all from Dickey's poem "Into the Stone," which is the title poem of his first collection. The poem describes the thoughts of a man as he goes to meet his lover. Yet the context in which these lines appear is of little help to the reader. Here is the first stanza:

On the way to a woman, I give
Myself all the way into moonlight.
Now down from all sides it is beating,
The moon turns around in the fix
Of its light; its other side totally shines.
Like the dead, I have newly arisen,
Amazed by the light I can throw.
Stand waiting, my love, where you are.

The poem appears to be describing a man who has been spiritually "resurrected" by the power of love. In this way of viewing the poem, then, the line "Once more I come home from my ghost" is certainly explainable, as well as the lines "Elsewhere I have dreamed of my birth,/ And come from my death as I dreamed." Even these lines--"No thing that shall die as I step/ May fall, or not sing of rebirth"--may be explained as descriptive of the apparent suspension of time which lovers often speak of. Yet what of the line "The dead have their chance in my body"? Here is this line's context:

I take my deep heart from the air.
The road like a woman is singing.
It sings with what makes my heart beat
In the air, and the moon turns around.
The dead have their chance in my body.
The stars are drawn into their myths.
I bear nothing but moonlight upon me.
I am known; I know my love.

The reason that the dead can have their chance in the poet's body is not apparent from the context of this poem but is readily apparent, as we shall see, when viewed in relation to the poet's overall vision.

While I was in the process of reading Dickey's poetry,

I read as well his then recent book Self-Interviews in which the poet states that he was working both "semi-consciously and quite consciously toward mythologizing my own factual experience."[1] In the same book Dickey also states that "the ancient Biblical and Greek myths are always reclaimable if you can bring something new to them."[2] He cites Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan" as an example of this process of reclamation and then states that the "ancient myths are always accessible if you have the poetic power to bring that kind of renewal to them."[3] Elsewhere in Self-Interviews Dickey says that his poem "The Vegetable King" is his answer to Eliot's use of the Osiris myth"[4] and his "Walking on Water" portrays a sort of "junior Christ."[5]

These admitted attempts to mythologize his own experiences are, as Wallace Stevens might have said, "merely instances." The facts are that Dickey has attempted this mythologizing on a rather large scale. My study, then, has been an attempt to discover just how extensive Dickey's uses of mythology have been, whether or not he has indeed mythologized his own factual experiences, whether or not he has brought anything "new" to these myths, and to what extent his poetic vision has been shaped by his uses of mythology.

With reference to the extent of the poet's uses of mythology, I have found that of the one hundred and eleven poems in Dickey's collected poems, at least seventy-five are mythological in one sense or another.[6] In some of these poems, for example, the narrators become mythological figures. In

other poems, the narrators remain human but are compared to mythological figures. The poems themselves, especially the earlier ones, are the poet's versions of a number of Biblical and classical myths, or parts of these myths, some of which are well-known and some not so well-known. In addition, Dickey has drawn upon several other mythological sources for figures and myths. One of these sources is what may be called folklore, and another is legend.[7] Involved in any study of this kind, of course, is a certain amount of "source-hunting." Some of Dickey's sources are quite obvious; others are not so obvious. Part of my study has been a kind of literary sleuthing, and I believe that I have found a number of Dickey's sources in the writings of several anthropologists whose works the poet read with much interest during his last two years of college.[8]

With reference to Dickey's attempt to mythologize his own factual experiences, we have his statement that in "The Vegetable King" he tried to mythologize his own family.[9] There are a number of other poems as well which he talks about in Self-Interviews as having been based upon his own family experiences. One is "The String," another, "In the Tree House at Night." In addition to poems about his family, Dickey has written several poems based upon his experiences in World War II and the Korean War, and he talks about these poems in Self-Interviews.[10] However, we also have Dickey's statement that personal experience, for him, includes anything he has ever experienced in any manner.[11] For example,

Dickey believes that even those experiences which he has imagined are his own factual experiences. Still, the situation is not hopeless, for the poet has written enough about himself that it is possible to point out at least some of the factual experiences in his poems and to infer them in others.[12]

As to whether or not Dickey has brought anything new to these myths, I have tried in my discussions to show this, sometimes by comparing Dickey's treatment of the myth or mythological figure with one or more earlier versions of the myth itself, and sometimes by comparing Dickey's treatment to some other poets' uses of the same myth. Also, I sometimes discuss Dickey's poetry in relation to what he does not do with a myth or mythological figure that he might have done with that myth or figure.

As to the matter of how much Dickey's poetic vision has been shaped by his uses of mythology, it is my thesis that the poet has attempted to create a mythic poetry, particularly in the first few years of his career. Moreover, it appears to me as well that the poet has in fact attempted to be rather systematically mythic and has tried to create what one critic has called a "Dickey Cosmos."[13] To put it another way, I see Dickey's poetry as an attempt to create a poetic vision based upon borrowings from various mythologies, legends, and folklore. What holds his vision together, however, is Dickey's point of view, which is the poet's version of what the world might be like when viewed through the eyes of a primitive.

As the poet tells us, much of his poetry seems to be religious. Although he does not believe in organized religion, he feels that his view is "a very personal kind of stick-and-stone religion," and he also feels that he would have made "a great bushman or an aborigine who believes that spirits inhabit all things."[14] In addition, Dickey says that what he wants more than anything else is "a feeling of wholeness, a sense of intimacy with the natural process."[15] The two following quotations from Self-Interviews further illustrate this attitude:

> I go out on the side of a hill, maybe hunting deer, and sit there and see the shadow of night coming over the hill, and I can swear to you there is a part of me that is absolutely untouched by anything civilized. There's a part of me that has never heard of a telephone. By an act of will I can call up the whole past which includes telephones, but there is a half-dreaming, half-animal part of me that is fundamentally primitive.[16]

> The parts of the universe we can investigate by means of machinery and scientific empirical techniques we may understand better than our predecessors did, but we no longer know the universe emotionally. It's a great deal easier to relate to the moon emotionally if the moon figures in a kind of mythology which we have inherited, or maybe invented, than it is to relate to it as a collocation of chemical properties.[17]

It is this attitude of relating to the universe emotionally which Dickey is striving to get across in his poems. Yet Dickey's "invented" mythology is not without a source. Besides his reclamation of Biblical and classical myths, and in addition to his reworking of various legends and folklore,

the poet has other sources.

Earlier I mentioned Dickey's anthropological studies. During his last two years of college, the poet tells us that he was fascinated by the writings of several anthropologists, among whom were W. H. R. Rivers, Bronislaw Malinowski, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. The particular primitive peoples which these men studied were the Melanesians and the Andaman Islanders. As an example of how impressed by these anthropologists Dickey was, he tells us that he could not remember his college major but in the same paragraph recalled quite clearly the names of these men.[18] After reading the books by these men which would have been available to the poet,[19] I have found what I believe to be remarkable similarities between the ways, customs, and myths of some of these peoples and the events in Dickey's poetry. While it would have been possible for the poet to have come by his primitive view of nature in some other way--from American Indian folklore, for example--it seems probable that he may have relied partly upon his recollections of these earlier authors' writings. At any rate, the Dickey Cosmos is almost certainly a product of his own "primitive" feelings and whatever else about primitive ways he has read or heard about. What the poet has done is to try to "see" the world from a non-rational point of view, much as a primitive might, and to write poetry which expresses this attitude. There are a large number of poems which are based upon this "primitive" view of the world, and it is around this point of view that the Dickey Cosmos is

constructed. In chapter four, I will discuss this aspect of Dickey's poetry and in particular his possible debt to the studies of Rivers, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown, and I will develop the thesis that the poet's fondness for the mythic comes from his interest in primitives.

Elsewhere in Self-Interviews the poet tells us that he set out at the beginning of his career having already decided to become a visionary poet,[20] and having either discovered or intuited that myths and mythmaking are often the stock-in-trade of the visionary, he has seldom written a poem in which myth and ritual do not play some part. This tendency toward the mythological is so strong in Dickey's poetry, for example, that of the first sixty-four poems in his Poems: 1957-1967, fifty-five of them have to do with the mythological in some way or another.[21] By contrast, of the last forty-six poems in this book, only twenty-five have to do with the mythological, and these poems show a significant difference in the poet's use of myth. Whereas Dickey's earlier method was to write poetry in which his narrators became mythological figures or were presented as being like mythological figures, his later poetry has presented narrators who are only human but who occasionally remind us of mythological figures. In other words, the poet began his career writing a mythic poetry but has moved on to writing a symbolic poetry.[22]

In my study I attempt to show this development from a poetry of presences to a poetry of persons,[23] which has taken

place over a relatively short span of time.[24] I have limited this study to the poems which Dickey has published between 1958 and 1967 and mainly to those poems which Dickey has included in his collected poems. I have done so because the poems from these years comprise the bulk of his first five published books of poems, beginning with Into the Stone (1960), and continuing with Drowning with Others (1962), Helmets (1964), Buckdancer's Choice (1965), and Falling (1967), which was not published separately but as the final section of Poems: 1957-1967.[25] Although Dickey published seventeen poems during the years 1951 through 1957, none of these is included in any of his books. Also, although some of Dickey's fondness for the mythological may be seen in some of these early poems, it was not until 1958, with the publication of his poems "Genesis" and "Poem," that Dickey began what I call "phase one" of his career,[26] at which time he began to make his poetic vision a mythological one.

I use the term "phase one" to denote those poems which are characterized by the following: the narrator either becomes, or is presented as, some mythological figure (whether explicitly or implicitly so), or the narrator describes persons who become or are presented as mythological figures.[27] In addition, the narrator or figure in the poem may perform actions which are the same as or similar to actions occurring in some myth, or he may be cast in a role which is the same as or similar to the role of a figure in some myth. An example of the "phase one" poem is "The Magus," first published

in 1960 and later collected in Drowning with Others.[28]

It is time for the others to come.
This child is no more than a god.

No cars are moving this night.
The lights in the houses go out.

I put these out with the rest.
From his crib, the child begins

To shine, letting forth one ray
Through the twelve simple bars of his bed

Down into the trees, where two
Long-lost other men shall be drawn

Slowly up to the brink of the house,
Slowly in through the breath on the window.

But how did I get in this room?
Is this my son, or another's?

Where is the woman to tell me
How my face is lit up by his body?

It is time for the others to come.
An event more miraculous yet

Is the thing I am shining to tell you.
This child is no more than a child.

If "The Vegetable King" was Dickey's answer to Eliot's use of the Osiris myth, then we may take "The Magus," perhaps, as Dickey's answer to Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." At any rate, Dickey presents a poem in which his narrator, a recent father, is so overwhelmed by the "miracle of birth" that he confuses his son with the Christ child and himself with one of the three traditional wise men. Except for the references to cars, to the bars of the crib, and the confusion of the narrator with the magus, the poem is much like the Biblical

scene which it is based upon. The narrator becomes one of the three wise men; his son becomes the baby Jesus.

Here, however, the use of this myth and of the mythological figures ends, and the other aspects of the poem are the something "new" which the poet has brought to the myth. In this case, the setting is in fact in modern times, and the child is a real child as well as the newly incarnated Christ. The father is a suburban householder as well as a magus--at least in the sense that he has become a "wise man" because of the event. The twelve "simple bars" of the crib are an obvious allusion to the apostles, and the ray of light which illuminates the father is both the light from the child's halo and the light of Divine grace. The light is also compared to the light from the star of Bethlehem which guided the Magi to the child and which, in the poem, is drawing the two other men "in through the breath on the window." In addition to these allusions, Dickey's narrator has opened the poem with the line "This child is no more than a god" and ended it with "This child is no more than a child," thus calling the reader's attention to the duality of Christ. Yet the poem ends with these three lines: "An event more miraculous yet/ Is the thing I am shining to tell you./ This child is no more than a child." Here the narrator makes the point of the poem depend upon the "fact" that a miracle has taken place in this modern setting that to him is even more miraculous than the Biblical one.

Moreover, this poem is the kind which Dickey likes to

write, with his narrator existing in two worlds at the same time--one a transcendent realm where myths and mythological figures "exist," and the other the immanent world where ordinary men are spiritually "resurrected" because of their contact with this transcendent world. In fact, most of Dickey's poetry may be interpreted as a search for spiritual elements, and it may be that his widespread uses of mythology are a result, in part, of a belief that mythology is a genuine source of the spirit. While we may only suspect Dickey of this, the attitude that there is something "magical" in myths is not uncommon among a number of modern poets--Yeats, for one.[29]

Some readers may feel, however, that "The Magus" is a rather ordinary poem which makes use of mythology in an ordinary way, and they may feel that any poet might have written a poem such as this. If "The Magus" were Dickey's only poem in which a narrator is presented as a mythological figure, it could be discounted as unusual but unimportant. Yet this poem is only one of more than forty poems in which Dickey presents his narrators in like manner.

In addition to this kind of "phase one" poem, the poet also writes poems in which his narrators do not become mythological figures--at least, not Biblical or classical figures. Nevertheless, the poet uses this same process. For example, in place of suburban householders who become Christ or Osiris, we find men who become animals, plants, and even wrecked machinery. In his essay "The Way of Exchange in

James Dickey's Poetry," the critic H. L. Weatherby refers to the phenomenon I have just described as an "exchange," and he says that this phenomenon is, in fact, "the central pattern in all Dickey's poetry."[30] Among the poems which Weatherby cites as having exchanges take place are "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet," and he claims that this poem may be considered as the "key" to "all Dickey's poetry, early and late."[31] In this poem, the narrator is in a chair writing a poem and his dog is sleeping on his feet. Suddenly he feels that

> The poem is beginning to move
> Up through my pine-prickling legs
> Out of the night wood,
>
> Taking hold of the pen by my fingers.
> Before me the fox floats lightly,
> On fire with his holy scent.
> All, all are running,
>
> Marvelous is the pursuit,
> Like a dazzle of nails through the ankles,
> Like a twisting shout through the trees
> Sent after the flying fox
> Through the holes of logs, over streams
> Stock-still with the pressure of moonlight.

Because the narrator has changed places with his hound, he is able to see the chase through the dog's eyes. And the dog sees through the poet's eyes and "speaks in a daze/ The hypnotized language of beasts." After the experience, the dog "gets up and goes out/ To wander the dawning yard" and the narrator goes to his own "human bed" to "grow back" his human legs.

As Weatherby has stated, the "way of exchange" is certainly illustrated by this poem. While I agree with

Weatherby in general, I think that he overstates his case and that his term "exchange" is accurate only with respect to a relatively small number of Dickey's poems. Both "The Underground Stream" and "Listening to Foxhounds" are "exchange" poems, but a number of Weatherby's examples appear to be cases of possession rather than of exchange, such as Dickey's "Drinking from a Helmet."[32] And Dickey's "The Heaven of Animals"[33] appears not to contain any exchange at all. One of the difficulties in discussing this poet's work is that no one term is accurate enough to cover all cases. Even though there is a similarity between the narrator of "The Magus" who becomes one of the Wise Men and the narrator of "A Dog Sleeping on my Feet" who becomes his dog, these two cases are different. Also, the poet sometimes uses the word "changed" to denote what has occurred,[34] and at other times he uses "become,"[35] "enters,"[36] or "wakened to."[37] Part of this study, then, has been an attempt to find terms which fit the poet's phenomena accurately.

As I have said before, Dickey's poetry has proceeded in "phases." "Phase one" is almost exclusively "exchange" poems,[38] whereas "phase two" is not. In place of narrators who become gods or animals, for example, we find narrators who remain human but are spoken of as having godlike qualities, as well as human narrators who are likened to mythological figures. One such "phase two" poem is "The Hospital Window." The narrator of this poem is a man who has just made his last visit to his dying father. As he leaves the building and

crosses the street, he apparently feels compelled to turn and wave goodbye, and he says, "Now I must turn round and face it,/ And know his one pane from the others." However, each window of the hospital "possesses the sun/ As though it burned there on a wick," and although he waves his arm "like a man catching fire," the windows all look the same. Eventually he realizes that "one pure pane among these/ Is the bright, erased blankness of nothing," and he knows that this pane is his father's. As he stands and keeps on waving, he becomes aware that he is holding up traffic:

> The traffic increases around me
> Like a madness called down on my head.
> The horns blast at me like shotguns,
> And drivers lean out, driven crazy--
> But now my propped up father
>
> Lifts his arm out of stillness at last.

As the narrator's father waves back to his son, the man receives what appears to be a blessing:

> The light from the window strikes me
> And I turn as blue as a soul,
> As the moment when I was born.
> I am not afraid for my father--
> Look! He is grinning, he is not
>
> Afraid for my life, either,
> As the wild engines stand at my knees
> Shredding their gears and roaring,
> And I hold each car in its place
> For miles, inciting its horn
> To blow down the walls of the world
>
> That the dying may float without fear
> In the bold blue gaze of my father.

Having received what he wanted, he crosses the street, and the poem ends with the narrator still waving:

> High, still higher, still waving,
> My recognized face fully mortal,
> Yet not: not at all, in the pale,
> Drained, otherworldly, stricken,
> Created hue of stained glass.
> I have just come down from my father.

Since the narrator in this poem does not make any "exchange" and since he does not become a mythological figure, I classify it as a "phase two" poem. Although the poem is about a human and takes place in the "real" world, it appears certain that the poet expects his readers to see the obvious parallel between the narrator and Christ. The poem opens with the line "I have just come down from my father," which is also the last line. The hospital windows are compared to stained glass. The narrator's hand is described as "half dead/ At the end of my bloodless arm." And the narrator's face is described as "fully mortal,/ Yet not," a phrase which suggests a parallel with the duality of Christ's existence.

This movement from a mythic to a myth-like poetry seems to indicate that the poet who started out to create his own private "cosmos" gradually gives up this plan and begins to write poems whose narrators are part of the immanent world. Richard Howard has described Dickey's shift in method as a development from a poetry of presences to a poetry of persons, a gradual giving up of his "devotion to the divine

Other."[39] This movement away from a mythic poetry continues, and beginning with Buckdancer's Choice, his fourth book of poems, Dickey even develops a new metric to go along with his new mode. Almost every poem in his first three books was written in his well-known three-beat anapestic line. With his fourth book, the poet begins writing poems that literally cover the page with words, and the lines are more like the rhythms of prose than metric poetry. In addition, these new poems are the first in which Dickey uses his split-line technique.

The most striking differences between phase two and phase three, however, have to do mainly with the poet's changed vision. His narrators are thoroughly human, and they remain part of the immanent world. Though they may occasionally remind us of some mythological figure, the emphasis is upon their humanity. These are poems not of gods and godlike beings but of ordinary mortals who sometimes encounter the transcendent world but do not become part of it. A poem which illustrates "phase three" is "Power and Light." This poem dramatizes the life of a telephone lineman. After a long day climbing himself "Bowlegged up those damned poles" in all kinds of weather, he returns home to his wife and children with whom the connections are not very good, to say the least. To avoid his domestic problems, he goes down into the basement, to "power and light," where he proceeds to get drunk. In that dark, which is "Lying on the floor, ready for use," the lineman is able to relax, able to sense that

> The heads of nails drift deeper through their
> boards
> And disappear. Years in the family dark have
> made me good
> At this nothing else is so good pure fires
> of the Self
> Rise crooning in lively blackness and the
> silence around them,
> Like the silence inside a mouth, squirms with
> colors,
> The marvelous worms of the eye float out into
> the real
>
> World sunspots
> Dancing as though existence were
> One huge closed eye

as there in the basement dark the lineman is able to experience a connection with a kind of inner reality. As the whiskey helps release the "pure fires of the Self," the lineman is able to "feel the wires running/ Like the life-force along the limed rafters." He is also able to make all the connections

> With poles with the tarred naked belly-buckled
> black
> Trees I hook to my heels with the shrill phone
> calls leaping
> Long distance long distances through my hands all
> connections
> Even the one
> With my wife, turn good turn better than
> good turn good
> Not quite, but in the deep sway of underground
> among the roots
> That bend like branches all things connect

as the lineman keeps drinking "like a man/ The night before/ Resurrection Day."

However, the lineman is no mere drunk. He is a man

"Who turns on," a connector. Just as his basement visions help him to make his own connections good, so his profession helps others to connect:

> Never think I don't know my profession
> Will lift me: why, all over hell the lights burn
> in your eyes,
> People are calling each other weeping with a
> hundred thousand
> Volts making deals pleading laughing like
> fate,
> Far off, invulnerable or with the right word
> pierced
>
> To the heart
> By wires I held, shooting off their ghostly mouths
> In my gloves.

Having stayed drunk until dawn, the lineman finally comes up from the basement, where he has been "Far under the grass" of his grave, holding "a double handful of wires/ Spitting like sparklers." These are the power lines he has ripped from the ceiling of his basement. Miraculously, he is unhurt because "It is all in how you are/ Grounded."

Dickey has prefaced this poem with a phrase from E. M. Forster: only connect. This phrase is one which recurs frequently in the novel Howard's End, whose characters discuss ways of connecting their artistic lives with their everyday ones. The poem hardly needs this kind of help, for it bristles with all kinds of symbolism. For one, the lineman is the mythological Mercury, the messenger of the gods. Even the telephone company uses this symbol. For another, the lineman is shown explicitly as a visionary whose "pure fires

of the Self" enable him to make his connections. The complete range of human emotions--laughter, tears--goes out through lines held in his hands: lines which carry, sometimes, the right words which can pierce you to the heart. The lineman is a man who turns on, and when he does, he is sure that his profession will lift him, as it will lift others. He is the poet-figure who passes on his visions through his lines, giving us both power and light. This poem, says Laurence Lieberman, shows Dickey exploring symbolically "the ideal relationship between the artist and his audience, the poet and his readers" which is to be able to raise even "the spirits of the dead and damned from hell" by making poetry a means of salvation.[40]

Dickey wrote "Power and Light" in 1967. If he had written it in 1960, he most likely would have made it a poem in which his narrator became the "spirit of electricity," or some other such fantastic being. But this poem is from phase three, and the narrators do not become gods or make exchanges. Instead, they make "connections."

Since my study is concerned with Dickey's uses of mythology, I shall discuss his poems chronologically by categories which I have divided according to his mythological sources and his "phases." In chapter two I shall discuss the poet's "phase one" and phase two" uses of Biblical mythology. In chapter three I shall go on to discuss his "phase one" and "phase two" uses of classical mythology. In chapter four I shall discuss poems which are based upon mythologies other

than Biblical and classical. In addition, I shall present my theory concerning the sources of the so-called Dickey "cosmos," which I believe had its origin in the poet's attempt to write poems whose narrators view the world as a primitive might view it. In the last chapter, I shall discuss a number of Dickey's "phase three" poems which are, as I see them, beyond categories in the sense that these later poems are inappropriate to the categories I have used in discussing his first two "phases."

Since part of my study attempts to point out mythological sources and to demonstrate influences of myth upon Dickey's poetry, I often make what are surely unnecessary source citations--that is, by pointing out that the poet's "Orpheus before Hades" is based in part upon that Greek myth. Still, I am concerned not only with sources but also with how Dickey uses his sources and with the frequency of his mythological borrowings. In this respect, also, I argue that several of Dickey's poems are based upon myths even though a poem's mythological basis is not evident from any direct reference--a poem whose title does not "give away" its mythological origin, as does "Orpheus before Hades," or a poem that does not in some other way "declare" its affinity to a particular myth. It would be more convenient for a critic, certainly, if all poets made their allusions more obvious than they sometimes do, but I know of no rule that limits them in such a manner. To ignore a probable source only because there is no direct reference in the poem which leads one

inevitably to its source, is a safer way to proceed but not necessarily the only "correct" way. It is of the nature of literary criticism to make meaningful generalizations about an author's tendencies to approach his work in a certain manner. It is also part of a critic's business to inform his readers of the less obvious and sometimes rather obscure allusions which poets do make. Therefore, whenever I have asserted the likelihood or probability that Dickey's source for a certain poem is this or that myth, I have attempted also to support my assertion principally by citing Dickey's strong tendency toward the mythological, which he demonstrates in many poems. I have as well tried to show, with reference to poems which are based upon myths other than familiar Biblical and classical ones, which mythological source is the probable one in view of what we know about the poet's knowledge of various mythologies.

Notes for Chapter I

[1]James Dickey, Self-Interviews (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1972), p. 85.

[2]Self-Interviews, p. 132.

[3]Self-Interviews, p. 182.

[4]Self-Interviews, p. 85.

[5]Self-Interviews, p. 97.

[6]See Notes For Chapter II, 15. Also, since my study is centered largely around Dickey's use of myth, and since myth is such a controversial issue in literary criticism, it seems useful to discuss here the poet's definition of myth in relation to the definitions of others. Although Dickey has written nothing in the way of a definition of myth, he talks about this term in such a way as to make it clear that he sees no real distinction between myth, legend, and folklore (see Self-Interviews, p. 182). In addition, his statements about his poetry seem to imply that myth amounts to something like a story with a supernatural event in it. Also, he might agree with Philip Wheelwright's definition of myth in The Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: "Myth may be defined as a story or complex of story elements taken as expressing, and therefore as implicitly symbolizing, certain deep-lying aspects of human and trans-human existence."

Still the poet's terminology is not in itself enough, and whether or not Dickey is mythologizing his experience depends partly upon whether or not his terminology is applicable. While nobody would argue that Dickey's "Orpheus before Hades" is not based on some aspects of the classical myths of Orpheus, the same aspects of the classical myths of Orpheus, the same might not be said of my calling "A Dog Sleeping on my Feet" a mythic poem, if I argue (as I do) that Dickey is using in this poem the primitive Melanesian myth of man's capacity to take on the forms of animals (see Chapter IV, p.104).

One of the difficulties encountered in modern myth studies is that the term "myth" is an emotionally charged term. Myth is regarded as containing something like magic, not only by poets but by critics as well. In addition to this "problem," there are certain motives behind this rather burning issue. Northrop Frye's studies of myth are concerned with establishing literary criticism as a science based upon myths as universal phenomena, as "givens" which may be studied in much the same way that scientists study the properties of matter. For Frye, myths derive from the "collective unconscious" or they at least repeat themselves so frequently in most of man's cultures that they have to be considered

"archetypal" in character. Thus "the myth is the archetype." (See "The Archetypes of Literature," in Myth and Method, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 155.)

Other critics take similar positions. Joseph Campbell maintains that mythology is "psychology misread as biography, history, and cosmology. The modern psychologist can translate it back to its proper denotations and thus rescue for the contemporary world a rich and eloquent document of the profoundest depths of human character." (The Hero with a Thousand Faces (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 256.)

Still another who takes the psychoanalytical approach to myth is Richard Chase, in his book The Quest for Myth (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949). After summarizing the history of myth studies, Chase concludes that myth is literature, plain and simple, and that "if we are to talk about literature and myth, or literature as myth, we must think of myth primarily as the aesthetic activity of a man's mind--not primarily as a cultural phenomenon." (The Quest for Myth, p. vii.) Chase also states this view: "I suggest that myth dramatizes in poetic form the disharmonies, the deep neurotic disturbances which may be occasioned by this clash of inward and outward forces, and that by reconciling the opposing forces, by making them interact coercively toward a common end, myth performs a profoundly beneficial and life-giving act." (The Quest for Myth, p. 85.)

With this statement, Chase discloses his debt to Freud, who first formulated the theory that artists were neurotics and that art was a form of therapy which artists practiced on themselves. Jung, however, denies this theory and maintains that art must not be thought of as the product of mental illness but as a plunge "into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, where man is not lost in the isolation of consciousness and its errors and sufferings, but where all men are caught in a common rhythm which allows the individual to communicate his feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole." (The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature (Princeton: University Press, 1966, p. 105.)

What these critics all have in common is that each is attempting to define myth is such a way as to give it a validity, a sense of being factually true, in order that myth criticism may be considered an endeavor worthy of the most serious study. If myth can be shown to be the "common denominator" of all artists, then literary critics will have a solid ground on which to rest and literary criticism will no longer be speculative in nature. At stake also in these arguments is the question of why the same myths are found among

almost all peoples of the earth, even among those living in the remotest areas. If myths are in some way part and parcel of the human mind, as "archetypes" or as part of the human mind's psychological makeup, then either of these theories solves the problem.

Therefore, whether or not Dickey is mythologizing his experiences depends upon whether or not one is willing to consider the primitive ideas that men can inhabit the forms of animals and other animate and inanimate objects as true myths. For some, a myth is not a myth unless it is a very old one. In a sense, myth must have "proved its validity" by surviving over a long period of time. For others, like Campbell and Chase, myth would have to occur in a large number of people's dreams in order for it to have validity. For critics like Frye, a myth would presumably have to manifest itself in a large number of "archetypal" instances in order to qualify.

There is also the problem of whether or not any distinction can or need be made among myths, legends, and folklore. Some critics tend to define these terms according to their "seriousness." Thus myths are serious narratives, while legends are less so, and folklore not very serious at all. (See Richard Chase, "Myth as Literature," in Myth and Method, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (University of Nebraska Press, 1960), pp. 130-6, where Chase summarizes the writings of Frazer, Boas, Malinowski, Lang, the Grimm brothers and others on this topic.) In addition, some critics believe myths to be the product of the deeper forces which have shaped man's destiny, while legends are exaggerated narratives based upon the lives of real persons. Beowulf and The Song of Roland, for example, do not have mythic figures but legendary ones. Folklore, in turn, is regarded as less serious than legend, being thought of as stories for the masses. Yet while we can certainly make judgments as to how "serious" we consider the Orpheus myth, for instance, in relation to the story of Tom Thumb, we can hardly do more than speculate as to how serious the ancient Greeks considered the myth of Orpheus.

What is more, myth criticism generally subscribes to the "doctrine of the unchanging human heart," the assumption that in all places and in all ages, mankind is the same. Yet this attitude is no fact but rather a corollary of democratic political theory and the underlying assumption basic to Humanism. In this day and age, ethnology is an unpopular science, and it is mainly so because of political pressures. We tend to discuss the unity of mankind rather than the diversity--hence the terms "spaceship earth" and "global village." This attitude illustrates another difficulty the myth critic encounters in his attempts to define and understand myth.

It is no longer possible to know how or why or when ancient myths originated or to know what they meant, since we no longer have their contexts. Without this knowledge, it is not possible to define myth either, except with respect to defining what the myths are as we know them. Yet myth is such an important aspect of modern criticism that critics are not presenting theories but dogmatic statements. Chase states that "myth is literature, plain and simple," and he supports this statement by saying that the term "myth" means "story." (See Myth and Method, p. 129.) Campbell states that "myth is psychology misread as history." And Frye states that "the myth is the archetype." Even a more "traditional" critic such as Robert Graves does not theorize but offers this definition: "True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like." (The Greek Myths, Volume I (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 10.)

While a broad definition of myth is desirable, such a definition must always remain a theoretical one. More localized definitions also seem desirable. Ancient Greek myths are one class. Biblical myths are another. Hindu myths are a third, and so forth. Chase's definition seems far too broad, for if myths are literature, it may be argued that literature is nothing but myths, or at least so much so that no definition of myth is specific enough to be of much use. At the other extreme is Cassirer's view that myth is the normal mode of the human mind (See The Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics). This view eliminates the element of story in myth.

In addition, myth critics need to make distinctions between "dead" myths and "living" myths. There are cultures today in which myths play a living role, and we have the records of a number of anthropologists who have gone among primitive peoples and lived there, sometimes for years, in order to find out what it is like for men to live by myths. While we may only theorize about what myths meant to the ancient Greeks, we actually possess this kind of knowledge in the form of eye-witness reports of trained scientists who have learned to speak fluently the languages of quite a few primitive tribes and who made their studies before these primitive cultures were forever distorted by civilization. I am speaking in particular about the pioneer studies of Bronislaw Malinowski, W. H. R. Rivers, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown among the Melanesians and the Andaman Islanders.

These men have reported quite a different view of myth from those of the psychoanalytical myth critics. Here, for example, is what Malinowski writes about myth among the Trobriand Islanders: "Myth as it exists in a

savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of a fiction, such as we read today in a novel....Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man." (Myth in Primitive Psychology (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1926), pp. 18-9.) In this same work he writes that myth is to the native "a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality, by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined, the knowledge of which supplies man with the motive for ritual and moral action, as well as with indications as to how to perform them. These tales, or myths, form the dogmatic backbone of the culture, of primitive civilization, and are, as such, absolutely sacred." (Myth in Primitive Psychology, p. 30.) Malinowski also stresses the point that myths do not make anything more intelligible, or explain any phenomenon, and that the Trobrianders care nothing about the "abstract meaning of phenomena." (Myth in Primitive Psychology, pp. 31-2.)

In his study of the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown presents views similar to Malinowski's: "Every custom and belief of a primitive society plays some determinate part in the social life of the community. The mass of institutions, customs and beliefs forms a single whole or system that determines the life of the society." (The Andaman Islanders (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1948), p. 229.) In addition, he writes that "The forces of the world, as the Andaman Islander conceives them, are not the blind mechanical forces of modern science; rather are they moral forces." (The Andaman Islanders, pp. 384-5.) He concludes: "Their legends are not mere theories, but are intensely practical." (The Andaman Islanders, p. 386.)

Besides these statements on the function and meaning of myths, both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown report that these primitives have their literature, their entertainment, but that they do not consider these fictions to be sacred. Thus what a different definition of myth they give compared to Chase's "literature as myth" theory. On the other hand, the views of Campbell and Frye appear to be reinforced by the findings of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Yet the existence of a myth does not prove that the myth comes from the unconscious mind, nor that it is archetypal, but only that it is a cultural phenomenon. Myth for the Melanesians and the Andamanese is not literature but religion, and it is passed down to subsequent generations not as entertainment but as a sacred way of life. I find no difficulty in understanding how an Andaman Islander, for

example, can believe that the spirits of the dead reside in trees, but I have trouble with Campbell's statement that "The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change." (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, p. 4.)

While myths--whatever they are--certainly exist, Freud's subconscious mind and Jung's "collective unconscious" may not; and theories of myth based on the theoretical existence of such phenomena seem to me to be like piling real Pelions upon what may be imaginary Ossas. I prefer a definition of myth, then, which derives from what appears to me the safer ground of the studies of Malinowski, Rivers, and Radcliffe-Brown--that Myth is a cultural phenomenon in narrative form which is intended as a guide for practical actions. Whether this definition has any relevancy to the myths of peoples other than these Melanesians and Andaman Islanders is a matter of speculation.

These anthropologists--Malinowski, Rivers, and Radcliffe-Brown--are the men whose works Dickey studied in college. In Chapter IV, I discuss what the poet may have "borrowed" from these studies in the way of ideas as well as primitive Melanesian and Andamanese myths. But whatever he may or may not have borrowed, Dickey's Poetry is an attempt to make statements about some "greater, and more relevant, reality." If looking at the world as if through the eyes of a dog, for example, can disclose something of this reality, then so much the better. In this sense, at least, Dickey's poetry presents us with a mythic vision not unlike that of some primitives.

[7]Not to be overlooked in this respect is the body of balladry, with which the poet became familiar through a life-long interest in playing the guitar and an association with other guitar players and ballad singers.

[8]See Self-Interviews, p. 36.

[9]Self-Interviews, p. 85.

[10]See Self-Interviews, pp. 91-4, and pp. 137-9.

[11]See Notes For Chapter III, 17, for this reference.

[12]Most of my information about Dickey's factual experience has come from Self-Interviews and Sorties. A short biographical sketch might also help the reader. James Lee Dickey was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1923. His parents were Maibelle Swift Dickey and Eugene Dickey. The poet's father was a practicing lawyer, and Dickey writes that his father spent many hours reading him all the famous law cases, from the trial of Jesus to the trial of Fatty Arbuckle. His father, says Dickey, had a

great flair for rhetoric, and one can probably see this influence in the poet's work. His mother was a long-term invalid and had to spend eighteen hours in bed each day during her later years. His poem "Buckdancer's Choice" is based on this old minstrel song which he often heard her whistling as she lay in her sick-bed. Dickey also had an older brother, Eugene, who died of meningitis at the age of six. His mother was told that she might not live if she had another child, but she was so heartbroken at Eugene's death that she went against all advice. Dickey was her second child, and he says that from hints which other family members dropped, he learned of the facts of his birth and came to feel rather strongly that he was only conceived as a "replacement" for the dead first son. Out of this feeling have come a number of poems: "The String," "In the Tree House at Night," "Armor," and "The Cypresses," to name several.

The poet was a star athlete in high school and was a member of the Fulton high school track team and football team. "The Sprinter's Mother" and "The Sprinter's Sleep" are based on these experiences. In 1941 he enrolled at Clemson University, where he was both a track star and football star, but he left there shortly after Pearl Harbor and enlisted in the army. His poem "The Bee" is based in part on his relationships with his former football coaches and is accordingly dedicated to them. Dickey was a fighter-bomber pilot in World War II, and out of these experiences have come quite a number of poems: "The Firebombing," "The Performance," "The Jewel," "The Enclosure," and "The Wedding," to name only a few. After the war, he returned to college, this time at Vanderbilt University, where he was again a track star. In 1950 he was graduated Magna Cum Laude and received one of the two graduate fellowships given that year. He completed his Master's degree and married his only wife, Maxine, in 1951.

Since his graduation, he has been both a teacher and an advertising executive, as well as a night club entertainer on occasion. He has taught at Rice Institute, Reed College, Wisconsin University, Florida University, and he is presently on the faculty at South Carolina University. He worked for almost ten years writing advertising copy for a number of large firms, both in New York and Atlanta, and his poetic vocabulary shows this influence in words such as these: "marvellous," "stupendous," "superhuman," "colossal," "miraculous," "amazing," "overwhelming," and so on. In 1961, he left the business world for good and traveled for several months in Europe while on a Guggenheim grant. He has given hundreds of poetry readings across the country, and was consultant to the Library of Congress

in 1967 and 1968. Besides his books of poems, he has published a novel, Deliverance, and has written hundreds of book reviews for many of the leading literary magazines and journals. In 1968 he collected many of these in a book of criticism, Babel to Byzantium; in 1970 he published Self-Interviews; and in 1971 he published Sorties, which contains part of his private journals as well as several of his longer critical essays.

[13]See Notes For Chapter IV, 54, for this reference.

[14]Self-Interviews, p. 79.

[15]Self-Interviews, p. 68.

[16]Self-Interviews, p. 67.

[17]Self-Interviews, p. 68

[18]Self-Interviews, p. 36.

[19]i.e., those books by these authors which were in print before 1950, which was the year the poet received his A.B. degree: Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology, and The Language of Magic and Gardening; A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, The Andaman Islanders; W. H. R. Rivers, The History of Melanesian Society, Vols. I and II, and Medicine, Magic and Religion. (See my List of Works Cited for complete bibliographical entries.)

[20]Self-Interviews, p. 27.

[21]I include the so-called "exchange" poems in this figure.

[22]See Chapter V for a full discussion of this change in Dickey's poetic method.

[23]Richard Howard, "On James Dickey," Partisan Review, XXXIII (1966), 420.

[24]i.e., from about 1958 to 1965.

[25]Although Dickey has published another short volume of poems since 1967, The Eye Beaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), these poems were mainly written during this same period and are stylistically much the same.

[26]As a matter of fact, the poet uses this term also, but in relation to his poem "Sleeping Out at Easter." See Self-Interviews, p. 87.

[27]The latter case describes poems which have other than first person narrators.

[28]This poem is rather late for a "phase one" poem; however, the date of first publication (December 1960) may not mean much, since we do not know how much earlier it might have been written.

[29]I suspect that Dickey has accepted the dictum of Eliot, Pound, and others regarding the mythic method, which they say has the power to make the modern world possible for art. As Douglas Bush states it in Pagan Myth and

Christian Tradition in English Poetry: The Jayne Lectures for 1967 (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 96: "If myth is not now the staple currency it was in most earlier ages, it has furnished memorable images and symbols for the two greatest modern poets in English /Yeats and Eliot/ and for a number of lesser ones /Graves, Pound, etc./. The reason is not merely literary tradition but the instinctive sense, so urgent in modern times, that myth belongs to man's natural and imaginative being and is a unique resource in a world of intellectual abstractions, technological power, and contempt for the past."

[30]H. L. Weatherby, "The Way of Exchange in James Dickey's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LXXXIV (Summer 1966), 670.

[31]Weatherby, p. 670. Except for a few long articles such as Weatherby's, there is relatively little in the way of scholarship pertinent to my topic. There are about a hundred short book reviews, but few of these contain comments on myth in Dickey's poetry. Richard Howard's article "On James Dickey" is the longest one which attempts anything like a "developmental" study of the poet's method, and I make a number of references to this article in Chapter V. Although Laurence Lieberman has published a pamphlet-sized work called The Achievement of James Dickey, his book is largely made up of full texts of twenty or so poems along with occasional commentary of a rather general nature. In a later article titled "The Worldly Mystic," however, Lieberman concentrates on Dickey's last two books, Buckdancer's Choice and Falling, and he argues that the poet has developed into a man with a "life-mission" of teaching his audience how to "connect" the material and spiritual worlds. He also argues that the poet has been able to liberate himself from the guilt-ridden predicaments of poems such as "The Firebombing" and "Slave Quarters," and has become "the joyous, expansive personality" of such poems as "Power and Light" and "Encounter in the Cage Country." With respect to the last two poems, Lieberman argues that Dickey has finally achieved a "comic vision" and that the poet has recovered the ground lost in such spiritual nightmares as "The Firebombing" and "The Fiend." Howard Nemerov's short article "Poems of Darkness and a Specialized Light" is a review of Dickey's first two books, and he presents interesting and cogent comments on Dickey's use of "light" as a symbolic technique, which is relevant to the mythic elements in the early poems. Almost every time some "miracle" or supernatural event occurs, says Nemerov, it does so in some peculiar light. Nemerov was the first to notice this aspect of the poet's vision. Finally, Robert Bly's first essay on the poet, called "The Work of James Dickey," calls attention to the poet's visionary qualities and argues

that in his first two books Dickey has managed to return poetry to its "rightful kingdom of fantasy" once more. He also argues that Dickey has found a "a way out of the old sterile war poem" by reversing the usual "roles." Whereas, says Bly, most modern poets, like Randall Jarrell, portray "the sensitive, quirky lovable private contrasted to the nasty illiberal machine-tooled machine," Dickey maintains that the machines are lovable and faithful, and the men either cruel or "living hypnotized with a kind of numb animal-like heroism." One more thing must be said of Bly, however. His second article on Dickey, "Buckdancer's Choice," is an all-out attack on the poet who, says Bly, has become just another middle-class propagandist in his point of view, although Bly adds that he hopes this "sell-out" is only a passing phase.

[32]See Chapter IV, p. 113, for my discussion of this poem.

[33]In Chapter II, I argue that this poem is part of "phase two," in which Dickey draws a parallel between the animals' Heaven and mankind's version.

[34]as in "Cherrylog Road," for example.

[35]as in "The Vegetable King."

[36]as in "The String."

[37]as in "Reincarnation (I)."

[38]In his later books, for example, Dickey still occasionally writes this kind of poem.

[39]See note 23 in this chapter's notes for the reference.

[40]Laurence Lieberman, "The Worldly Mystic," Hudson Review, XX (August 1967), 514-5.

Chapter II

The Reclamation of King James

In Self-Interviews James Dickey writes that at the beginning of his career he was very much taken by Kenneth Patchen's poetry, especially by the fact that a man from Niles, Ohio, in the twentieth century, could write mystical and visionary poetry. And, says Dickey, if he could do it, so could I.[1] The first stanza of Dickey's poem "Sleeping Out at Easter" is indicative of this visionary point of view:

> All dark is now no more.
> This forest is drawing a light.
> All Presences change into trees.
> One eye opens slowly without me.
> My sight is the same as the sun's,
> For this is the grave of the king,
> Where the earth turns, waking a choir.
> All dark is now no more.

This poem opens Dickey's first book, Into the Stone, and it is fairly typical of the poet's work at this stage of his career. It is the kind of Dickey poem that prompted R. W. Flint to remark:

> The poet sits in his trance pushing his numinous counters around the board: Light, Holiness, Fire, the Dead, Self, etc.[2]

Though not altogether complimentary, Flint's remark is, I think, basically correct in its assessment of Dickey's style. Others have also made similar remarks.

Howard Nemerov characterizes Dickey's early poetry as having "a willed mysticism" about it,[3] indicating that he feels Dickey is straining for the effect. However, both Flint and Nemerov are more complimentary than critical of the poet's work. Flint states that he is "struck dumb by Dickey's deep Dixie spiritual approach to poetry,"[4] and Nemerov says to us: "If you believe you care for poetry, you should read these poems with a careful attention."[5] James Wright, a contemporary of Dickey's, recommended Into the Stone as a book that everyone should buy as a favor to himself.[6]

I have yet to read of anyone who has become ecstatic over "Sleeping Out at Easter;" however, it is Dickey's choice to open his first collection of poems and as good a starting point as any. But lest the reader assume that this poem is one of Dickey's first publications, I should point out that it is not nearly the first. The poet published his first poem in 1951, his second also in that year, his third and fourth in 1953, his fifth in 1954, poems six through nine in 1955, ten and eleven in 1956, and six more in 1957.[7] The year 1958 saw six more poems published and, in my opinion, was the first year that a truly good Dickey poem appeared in print ("Dover: Believing in Kings").[8] During the next two years, Dickey published fifteen and twenty-one poems respec-

tively, and it is from these poems that almost all of Into the Stone and about one third of Drowning with Others come. It is significant as well that of the twenty-three poems Dickey published during his first eight years (1951-1958), only three find their way into any of his books, and only one of these, "Dover: Believing in Kings," is included in the collected poems. Yet every one of these first seventeen published poems appeared in the best literary magazines and journals.[9]

"Sleeping Out at Easter" is one of the first poems from what I call "phase one" in the development of the poet's mature style. It is also one of the first poems in which Dickey attempts what he calls "mythologizing my own factual experience,"[10] a technique which becomes more and more a part of his poetry during the next few years. Dickey himself offers some interesting (and perhaps illuminating) comments about the origin of this poem:

> I wrote "Sleeping Out at Easter" in an American business office over a period of two or three weeks. I had been experimenting with these Hardy-like forms: long, long, short, and refrains. But it was always too complicated. The language was too busy, and I was trying to work with a line with a lot of rhetorical effects. It was more of a game than a poem....So I thought, "Now why the hell get so complicated with the line? Nobody wants to read something that busy! Why not try to say it starkly, making statements one after the other: this happens, that happens, this happens. And then if you want to become complicated, use an interchangeable refrain technique invented for the occasion." I also told myself "Make it immediate. Put the reader and yourself in Medias res, in the middle of an action." So I just sat down and wrote:

All dark is now no more.
This forest is drawing a light...

I wrote several more lines and thought, "Hot dog! That sounds like something!"[11]

Over a period of several weeks, the poet says that he worked on it, italicized the refrain, and came up with his final version, which he felt was "quite a lucid poem--at least more lucid than what I had written up to that time--and at the same time mysterious."[12] Dickey goes on to say that the poem is about a man sleeping in back of his house and becoming another person on Easter, and that his rebirth is symbolized by his waking up in a strange place which is near a familiar place. Yet, says the poet, "there is here the mysteriousness that I wanted my poems to have," as indicated by these lines: "My child, mouth open, still sleeping,/ Hears the song in the egg of a bird."[13] The poet also states that he considered this poem "the beginning of Phase One" in his career because none of his previous poems had satisfied him as much as this one.[14]

His satisfaction with the poem is our satisfaction as well in the sense that Dickey reveals here one of the important lessons that he learned while writing "Sleeping Out at Easter"--namely that his poetry became from that time a confirmation of a desire he had, which was to write "not amazingly about ordinary events, but matter-of-factly about extraordinary events."[15]

A resurrected man in the twentieth century certainly

qualifies as an extraordinary event, even if it is only in a poem. Yet Dickey states flatly that he is no Christian.[16] The fact that he has gone to the trouble of casting himself in the role of a resurrected Christ is part of his early attempt to create a visionary poetry, and it happens that some of the materials which Dickey knows best are Biblical myths. Apparently, it was his feeling that he could achieve an apocalyptic poetry (or at least some of that apocalyptic quality in his poetry) by re-working such myths. Whether he has succeeded or not is a debatable point. That this attempt was a step in the right direction has been, I think, confirmed by his later poetry.

Apocalypse or not, in "Sleeping Out at Easter" we have a poem in which we meet a number of Dickey's "numinous counters." There are miracles, ritual transformations, the idea of "kingship," statements which the poet himself cannot wholly understand, a peculiar quality of light, and the three-beat anapestic line which the poet has become so famous for. This poem is typical of what one reviewer called his "supreme contribution," the "creation of a Dickey cosmos: a landscape into which breathe Dickey plants and in which are enscounced Dickey objects, through which race Dickey meters and metaphors overtaking the slower Dickey animals and people under the gaze of emblematic Dickey-birds."[17]

How this Dickey "cosmos" came into being is probably not altogether knowable. Yet it is there: a world (in his poetry) beyond the ordinary, where one may grasp "The source

of all song at the root," where the reader will hear "the song in the egg of a bird," and be the recipient of "some kind of immortal message"[18] which the poet has been charged with delivering to mankind.

Dickey tells us that he did in fact once sleep outdoors in a grove of pines near his Atlanta house, but confesses that he did not wake up thinking he was actually Christ.[19] Nonetheless, the importance of the poem is not whether it is true but that it acquaints the reader with Dickey's poetic vision.

Another Biblical myth which Dickey makes use of is the miracle of Christ's "Walking on Water." The narrator of this poem becomes, as Dickey tells us, a sort of "junior Christ"[20] who, by the trick of standing upon a plank which has just sunk under the surface of the water, appears to be walking on it, "A curious pilgrim hiking/ Between two open blue worlds," his "motion a miracle." The marsh-birds, pelicans, and a hammer-head shark follow the boy on his journey across the inlet. They represent the Apostles, and one of them, like Judas, is potentially dangerous. Because of the boy's miracle, the animals have fallen under a spell and must "ponder that footstep forever," or at least until the boy's ghost returns with his magic staff and looses them "beak and feather, from the spell."

Like "Sleeping Out at Easter," this poem is also a "phase one" poem, with its narrator described as having become a god with supernatural powers. Yet here the Dickey

cosmos is shown to us in an innocent and childlike state, much like Dylan Thomas's world of the child in his poem "Fern Hill," except that in Dickey's poem, the narrator is resurrected as a boy, never having had to "die" into the adult world. Dickey's cosmos is not disturbed by the normal life-processes. Still there are limits to the borrowing of myths and re-working them to one's own poetic ends. One of these limitations is a poetic version of the "locked-in syndrome" in which one runs the risk of a severe straight-jacketing of the imagination, a sort of self-imposed mythic claustrophobia. If a poet were to say to himself that he was only going to write poems which are based upon mythological figures, he might soon find that he was missing out on a number of good poetic subjects because they did not in some way reflect the mythical.

One way out of this condition is not to present your narrators as gods but only as god-like figures. By 1962, with the publication of his second book, Drowning with Others, Dickey's narrators begin to resemble, rather than become, mythological figures. "The Lifeguard" presents the story of an older boy, one of those boys' camp counselors, who has allowed a young child to drown. Unable to find the child's body, even though he has dived so often that his fingertips have "turned into stone/ From clutching immovable blackness," he hides in the boathouse until night. He then returns to the lake "To wait for the lake to shine back/ At the risen moon with such power/ That my steps on the light of the

ripples/ Might be sustained."

Because the lifeguard has been able to transcend the immediate world, his quest is successful. He moves out on the water, "thinking of how I may be/ The savior of one/ Who has already died in my care." As he calls out, the drowned child answers and begins rising to the surface. The lifeguard then brings the child to shore where he discovers his mistake:

> I wash the black mud from my hands.
> On a light given off by the grave
> I kneel in the quick of the moon
> At the heart of a distant forest
> And hold in my arms a child
> Of water, water, water.

If this poem had been written in "phase one" of the poet's career, the lifeguard would have performed the miracle. But this poem is from "phase two" and its narrator is no god. Dickey's lifeguard-Christ fails in his quest, and the child-Lazarus remains truly dead in the real world. In order for the child to be saved, there would have to be a connection between the poet's personal cosmos, the transcendent one, and the lifeguard's immanent one. The Christ-figure in this poem remains unable to effect the transformation between these two worlds, which Dickey symbolizes in terms of the moonlit water and the black mud of the shore.

In Dickey's changing vision, we can see a growing awareness of the need for connections between private cosmos and public universe. But there are no connections here. The

lifeguard remains a kind of failed demi-urge, and we see Dickey in a sort of poetic limbo, remaining for a while in contemplation of one of those special human tragedies which may not be overcome, even though the poet rages "against the dying of the light." It is the poet at this stage of his career whom Richard Howard has characterized as still a "poet of Presences rather than persons."[21]

This "phase two" method of mythologizing his experiences may be seen also in Dickey's "The Heaven of Animals," one of his most anthologized poems. If men have a heaven to look forward to, then why not animals? Accordingly the poet creates this "heaven," but one which the poet wants to be true to the animals' real natures:

> Here they are. The soft eyes open.
> If they have lived in a wood
> It is a wood.
> If they have lived on plains
> It is grass rolling
> Under their feet forever.

In this miraculous place, says Dickey, the animals find that "Their instincts wholly bloom," and the landscape "flowers/ Outdoing, desperately/ Outdoing what is required:/ The richest wood,/ The deepest field." Yet for some the heaven could not be a heaven without blood, and so these hunt as they always have, but with "claws and teeth grown perfect,/ More deadly than they can believe." As they leap, "their descent/ Upon the broad backs of their prey/ May take years/ In a sovereign floating of joy."

The hunted animals also cooperate in this scheme, for they "Know this as their life,/ Their reward: to walk/ Under such trees in full knowledge/ Of what is in glory above them." Rather than fear, they feel compliance and acceptance, fulfilling themselves "At the cycle's center," where they "fall, they are torn,/ They rise, they walk again." In the same way that "The Lifeguard" presents a narrator who is not Christ but only Christ-like, so "The Heaven of Animals" does not present the traditional myth of Heaven but only one like it. In this respect, both poems look ahead to Dickey's further uses of this method.

With the publication in 1964 of his third book of poems, Helmets, we find Dickey still actively mythologizing his experiences. Yet there are additional factors. For one, the poet seems to be forsaking some of his devotion to "the divine Other."[22] He is moving out of his transcendent cosmos and into the immanent world. In existential terms, he is moving from a state of being to one of becoming. Dickey the poet is beginning to step into the river and feel himself involved in its "flux."

Another factor in this transitional stage is the poet's developing sense of humor, especially of ironic humor. Till now, Dickey's poetry held sway in dead seriousness, except for an occasional pun, or an incongruous image, or use of archaisms which are a little corny, or in a few lines which are funny because they are so bad. In "The Hospital Window," for example, the narrator is standing outside the building

looking up and trying to find the window to the room where his father is dying, and he says: "Now I must turn round and face it,/ And know his one pane from the others," which is surely an accidental pun--pane/pain. Also, a line which is probably meant to be paradoxical but which falls a little flat is this one, from "In the Tree House at Night": "The half-moon completely is shining." From this same poem, we also find this well-worn cliche: "The needles and pine cones about me/ Are full of small birds at their roundest." (Italics mine.) Finally there is this piece of jangling verse: "With the sun on their faces through sand/ And the polyps a-building the land." One who courts the sublime may occasionally become ridiculous. If it is true, as Bergson says, that humor results from the juxtaposition of incongruities, then real humor could not occur in the perfect realm of the Dickey cosmos.

Helmets is a book of becoming, becoming gradually aware of another kind of existence. In the words of Richard Howard again, Dickey becomes cognizant of "the distinction between recurrence and reality, the dissension between the incantatory ageless order of transcendence with its themes of hierarchy, immutability and terror, and on the other side the prosaic, mortal accommodation of immanence with its themes of becoming, of change, waste, and desperation."[23] Over half the poems in Helmets show a marked increase in Dickey's awareness of others, and they show an interest in others for themselves, for their problems and their disasters. Some of the

poems are, as expected, much like those in his earlier books, existing in and for the Dickey cosmos. But in the exact middle of this third book there is a poem called "The Being," which one critic has described as a poem about possession by a succubus.[24]

The poem describes the so-called possession as taking place entirely while the narrator is asleep, and the "being" is described as "there, above him, beyond, behind,/ Distant, and near where he lies in his sleep/ Bound down as for warranted torture." Then "Something fills the bed he has been/ Able only to half-fill," as the creature becomes "an infinite, unworldly frankness,/ Showing him what an entire/ Possession nakedness is." In the next stanza, set apart from the rest of the poem, are these two italicized lines (the only use of italics in the poem) which I take to be the voice of the being: "The praying of prayer/ Is not in the words but the breath." Then in the last stanza the narrator finds that he has been given a "renewed/ Fertility, to raise/ Dead plants and half-dead beasts" as "true to themselves as he/ Is" and "as he is now, seeing straight/ Through the roof wide wider/ Wide awake."

It is not clear from the text whether the being has stayed with the narrator or left, and yet one way or another it seems clear that there has been a ritual transformation and that the narrator has been given a new vision and been awakened, not in the old cosmos but in the immanent world, where he can raise up dead plants, half-dead beasts, and also

raise children up from mortal women or angels. The poem appears to present as its theme the necessity of being complete in order for a man to be able to exist in more than one world; and thus what Dickey's narrator has awakened to is the possibility of functioning equally well in both worlds.

A minister might say that the narrator has been "touched," and might say that the being was either friendly or malevolent, but more likely the latter. Yet there is the matter of the being's statement that it is breath and not words which counts. One can hardly avoid drawing a parallel between the "breath" images in the poem and divine wind (inspiration). The being breathes, the walls breathe, the narrator breathes, and the being enters the narrator in the form of breath. The poem is certainly a religious one, however unorthodox its point of view. The main image appears to be a close one to the well-known image of God breathing the breath of life into Adam. Once again we see Dickey's narrator become like a god rather then become one.

From the demonology of "The Being," with its over-tones of the birth of a new Adam, Dickey moves in this same book to his version of The Flood myth in a poem titled "Chenille." The poem, says Dickey, is taken directly from his own experience.[25] Once when he was hunting in north Georgia near the town of Dalton, he became lost at night and stopped at an old farmhouse. He paid the owners for the use of their attic bedroom, but it was not heated and as a result he nearly froze. Fortunately, someone realized how cold it was and

when Dickey woke, he found that he was covered with chenille bedspreads, perhaps a dozen of them. But the interesting part of his story is that the farmer's grandmother, who was a bit demented, spent her time sewing crazy-looking designs upon the white commercial bedspreads which are made in Dalton, "the Chenille capital of the world." Dickey could not keep his eyes off the one she was making, which looked like an elephant with great pink wings. He asked her what it was and she replied, "Just something I made up. I thought it would be pretty." Then the poet asked her, "Ma'am, do you think things like this really exist in the world?" The old lady replied, "Of course they do, because they ought to."

Then she showed Dickey more of her designs, and they were all more or less crazy concoctions that she had made up, some of which looked like griffins and basilisks--all sorts of curious Disney-like characters.

The poem, for Dickey, becomes a vehicle by which he can contrast the commercial idea of beauty (symbolized by the stylized bedspreads which the textile mills make with their equally stylized flamingoes, peacocks, and mallards), with the creative imagination (symbolized by the old woman's strange-looking menagerie of crowned ants, unicorns, and winged lions). Of the former, Dickey says:

> These you can buy anywhere.
> They are made by machine
> From a sanctioned, unholy pattern
> Rigid with industry.
> They hoard the smell of oil

And hum like looms all night
Into your pores, reweaving
Your body from bobbins.

The latter, of course, are the kind which Dickey prefers, the ones that "came/ To save me from freezing." When enough of the animals have been deposited, there naturally comes a bedspread with "A lung-winged ship/ On its own sail." Then, says the narrator,

The last two nails
Of cold died out in my nostrils
Under the dance-weight of beasts.
I lay, breathing like thread,
An inspired outline of myself,
As the rain began greatly to fall,
And closed the door of the Ark.

And the poem closes with the narrator asleep once more in the eternal, immutable Dickey cosmos, as a kind of north Georgia Noah in a universe filled with "Beasts that cannot be thought of/ By the wholly sane."

Even though the poem ends with the poet back in his transcendent world, the poetic experience has nevertheless been prompted by an excursion through a portion of the every-day universe, and the poet has taken the occasion to look closely at this other cosmos. Although the hellish world of industry will reweave your body into its own "unholy pattern" if you take its set of givens for your own aesthetic norms, there is the possibility of "defeating" the system through

the creative imagination, much in the way that the half-demented grandmother has, now safe with all her animals, rising with the Ark above the countryside flooded with textile mills.

Still, no one should have to become mad in order to prevail over technological ugliness and everyday human desperation. In the post-Adamic world, man must learn to live with imperfection. Dickey's poem "The Poisoned Man" describes the exit from paradise in terms of a man who is bitten by a snake and whose blood, mingled with the poison and dumpted into a river, blights the whole countryside and sends the farmer and his wife on their own "solitary way." Dickey himself interprets this poem as a re-working of the Fall of Man myth.[26] The poem is another example of his belief that any myth may be "reclaimable" if the poet can bring something new to it.[27] In this case, the "something new" is the allegory of the ordinary human who has lost his paradise because of some inherent evil in his own being. The unholy mixture of snake venom and blood have ruined his world. We know, however, that the Biblical Fall was the result of man's disobedience, so it seems fair to ask how a man suffering from snake-bite has been guilty in any way. The answer is given by the poem.

The narrator, being a knowledgeable woodsman, has sense enough to cut open the wound and immerse his foot in a river in order to carry away the poison. As he tells it, "I sat with a jackknife and quickly/ Opened my sole to the water,"

which is (perhaps) a forgivable pun, if we consider the circumstances. The mixture of poison and blood is said to take on "the hid shape of the channel," and as the river carries this mixture downstream, the narrator makes these comments:

> 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.
> Some leaves fell from trees and whirled under.
> I saw my struck bloodstream assume,
>
> Inside the cold path of the river,
> The inmost routes of a serpent
> Through grass, through branches and leaves.
>
> When I rose, the live oaks were ashen
> And the wild grass was dead without flame.

After a while, the narrator hobbles home and meets his old wife "in the garden/ Where she reached for a withering apple." When his fever subsides and the wound heals, the old couple leaves the farm, moving "eastward and weeping,/ Through the copper fields springing alive/ With the promise of harvest for no one."

In support of the poet's reading, I have to say that the farmer's musings over the power his blood has to work miracles (splitting bedrock apart, flowing unendingly, giving deathlessly as a spring) tend to confirm his position, especially if we accept the theological argument that Adam and Eve disobeyed God because of their pride. For the narrator

has attributed qualities to his blood which it does not possess. But other interpretations present themselves. The poem may be a portrayal of a poet who has become dissatisfied with his poetic idiom, and the snake-bite an indication that all is not well in the transcendent Dickey cosmos. It is perhaps the poet's way of saying "I thought I could remain here forever, but I find that I have outgrown my childlike vision of life." In this interpretation, we would then see the poem as an allegory of the narrator's developing awareness of others. Dickey is developing from a poet of Presences to a poet of persons.[28] Finally, however, the importance of the poem for Dickey may not be a matter of what the poet has "lost," but rather of what he has gained in terms of his developing awareness of more than one world.

Earlier I spoke of the new element of humor which comes into Dickey's poetry with his book Helmets. "A Folk Singer of the Thirties" presents a situation which, while not literally funny, becomes so because it is so fantastic. Any situation pushed to the limits of credibility and beyond is likely to become humorous. The folk singer is a hobo who hitches a ride in a box-car filled with gravel. At one stop, however, the yard crew finds him and, as an example to other would-be hitch-hikers, they nail him to the side of a cattle-car and send him off cross-country with the train.

For many poets, I imagine this situation would be enough to make a poem of. But Dickey carries the situation to comic preposterousness. On his "trip," the folk singer develops an

incredible power: he is able to see reality as it is, his new vision cutting through the outer layers of appearances. In the hobo's words:

> I learned where the oil lay
> Under the fields,
> Where the water ran
> With the most industrial power,
> Where the best corn would grow
> And what manure to use
> On any field that I saw.

The American depression of the Thirties was indeed a desperate economic disaster. In Dickey's poem, the hobo's vision achieves a practical end. He is eventually rescued from his predicament by a group of other "orphans" of the railroad yards, who take him home with them to the town of "Hooverville." To show his gratitude, the hobo begins a kind of "tour" of the local soup-kitchens and tells his visions to the desperate and starving masses. Once he even addresses a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous at which the following occurs:

> One night I addressed the A.A.,
> Almost singing,
> And in the fiery,
> Unconsummated desire
> For drink that rose around me
> From those mild-mannered men,
> I mentioned a place for a shoe store
> That I had seen near the yards
> As a blackened hulk with potential.
> A man rose up,
> Took a drink from a secret bottle,
> And hurried out of the room.
> A year later to the day
> He knelt at my feet
> In a silver suit of raw silk.

What we have here is Dickey's version of Christ's "Sermon on the Mount." We also have the poet's first deliberate use of parody.[29] Instead of feeding the multitude loaves and fishes, Dickey's hobo-Christ feeds them hot tips on potential business ventures as some guest-lecturer might do at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon. It is American capitalism which the hobo is preaching, not a vision of the next world.

From this "modest" beginning, the hobo proceeds to perform a miracle of transformation which would rival "The New Jerusalem." Says the hobo:

> I sang to industrial groups
> With a pearl-inlaid guitar
>
> And plucked the breast-straining strings
> With a nail that had stood through my hand.
> I could not keep silent
> About the powers of water,
> Or where the coal beds lay quaking,
> Or where electrical force
> Should stalk in its roofless halls
> Alone through the night wood,
> Where the bridges should leap,
> Striving with all their might
> To connect with the other shore
> To carry the salesman.
> I gave all I knew
> To the owners, and they went to work.

In addition to the particular parody of Christ's "Sermon on the Mount," Dickey's general parody is of "The Second Coming." The hobo has been crucified, "dies" to the immanent world, descends into Hell (the transcendent cosmos), is "resurrected," and comes back to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. "I waked," says the hobo, "not buried in

pebbles,/ Behind the tank car,

> But in the glimmering steeple
> That sprang as I said it would
> And lifted the young married couples,
> Clutching their credit cards,
> Boldly into and out of
> Their American lives.

At the end, the hobo believes that he has "literally sung/ My sick country up from its deathbed." Yet the final shock in the drama has not been spoken. The hobo, now back in his apartment where he began his tale, has to admit the truth: that he has deluded himself:

> But nothing would do,
> No logical right holds the truth.
> In the sealed rooms I think of this,
> Recording the nursery songs
> In a checkered and tailored shirt,
> As a guest on TV shows
> And in my apartment now:
> This is all a thing I began
> To believe, to change, and to sell
> When I opened my mouth to the rich.

From beginning to end, it has been only a dream-vision. The folk singer has accomplished nothing.

The mad grandmother in "Chenille" was convinced that her animals really existed in this world "because they ought to." Unlike her, the folk singer discovers that for his vision the opposite holds true, because "No logical right holds the truth." In addition to the Biblical parody, Dickey gives us his commentary upon the idealized but impossible "Third World"

dream of the folk-singing flower-children of the Sixties, his serio-comic parody of the songs of men such as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. Dickey's is a grim humor.

The grimmest part of his vision is the image of those tramps and winos, rehabilitated by the folk singer's "revelations," marching out to rejuvenate the stricken land. And one might very well ask, isn't there another parody going on here?--one of the WPA and the CCC, of the TVA and especially of the New Deal, with the folk-singing FDR making good the false promises of the former resident of "Hooverville?"[30] Here is a new Dickey, who in just three years has descended from his otherworldly realm, and whose narrators, themselves formerly gods, now laugh at them. It has been a long way from Orphic songs which literally change the whole earth to recorded "nursery songs" which change nothing.

Notes For Chapter II

[1]James Dickey, Self-Interviews (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1972), p. 27.

[2]R. W. Flint, "The Poetry Chronicle," Partisan Review, XXXII (Spring 1962), 292.

[3]Howard Nemerov, "Poems of Darkness and a Specialized Light," Sewanee Review, LXXI (Winter 1963), 100.

[4]Flint, p. 293.

[5]Nemerov, p. 104.

[6]James Wright, "Comment," Poetry, XC (1961-62), 180.

[7]See Eileen K. Glancy, "James Dickey: a Bibliography," Twentieth Century Literature, XV (1969), 46-7.

[8]This poem was first published in Poetry and it won their prize for the best poem of 1958.

[9]They appeared in Sewanee Review, Poetry, Shenandoah, Partisan Review, Hudson Review, Yale Review, Quarterly Review of Literature, and the Beloit Poetry Journal.

[10]Self-Interviews, p. 85.

[11]Self-Interviews, pp. 85-3.

[12]Self-Interviews, p. 87.

[13]Self-Interviews, p. 86.

[14]Self-Interviews, p. 87.

[15]Self-Interviews, p. 94.

[16]Self-Interviews, p. 78.

[17]See Hudson Review, XV (Autumn 1962), 466. (Book review of Drowning with Others.)

[18]James Dickey, Sorties (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 54.

[19]Self-Interviews, p. 85.

[20]Self-Interviews, p. 97.

[21]Richard Howard, "On James Dickey," Partisan Review, XXXIII (1966), 420.

[22]Howard, p. 416.

[23]Howard, p. 486.

[24]M. L. Rosenthal, American Poetry Since 1945 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 327.

[25]See Self-Interviews, pp. 124-25.

[26]Self-Interviews, p. 131.

[27]Self-Interviews, p. 132.

[28]Howard, p. 420.

[29]See also the poet's rather harsh treatment of religion in "The Sheep Child" and in "May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Georgia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving

the Baptist Church." (See Chapter V for discussions of these poems.)

[30]Here one might argue that the New Deal was itself conceived as a myth and that Roosevelt was well aware of the mythic nature of his proposal.

Chapter III

Encounters in the Ancient World

A professor of mine used to tell his classes that all good poets "borrow" liberally from their culture's great treasures. What distinguishes the great poets from the good ones is that the great poets have sense enough to steal from the greatest treasures.[1] He was speaking in particular of Milton's plunder of the Bible, and we have seen in chapter two how often Dickey has gone to this same source. Another of our culture's great treasures is classical mythology, to which Dickey has often gone in order to "reclaim" whatever myths he could.

In his essay "The Work of James Dickey," however, Robert Bly lauds the poet for not filling his poems with all those "phony Greek heroes."[2] In fact, Bly was reviewing Dickey's first two books of poems, and I find it hard to believe that Dickey's use of "phony Greek heroes" has escaped Bly's notice so easily and so completely. In his first two books, Dickey makes direct use of a number of figures from Greek mythology (Apollo, Callisto, Orpheus, Orion) and indirect use of still others (Chiron, Hero, Leander, Zeus).

Dickey is as much at home borrowing from classical mythology as he is borrowing from Biblical mythology. The way in which he uses Greek, Roman, and Egyptian myths and figures

from these myths is much the same as the way in which he uses Biblical myths and figures from these myths, which I have described in chapter two. In what I call "phase one" of Dickey's poetic career, I have said that it is usual for the poet's narrators to become mythological figures. In "Walking on Water" we have seen how the young boy becomes a "teenage" Christ and performs the sort of miracles which Christ performed: he walks on water, places a spell on both the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, and later comes back from the dead to release them from the spell and lead them into heaven.[3] This phenomenon of the narrator "becoming" a mythologocal figure occurs in several of the "phase one" poems based upon Biblical mythology. The same occurs in poems based upon figures from classical mythology.

"Orpheus before Hades," a poem from Into the Stone, is Dickey's version of one aspect of the Orpheus myth. The poem depicts Orpheus standing year-round, in all weather, in the rags of a supplicant before the entrance to Hades, asking the gods of the underworld to give his Eurydice back to him. The first four stanzas describe the seasons as they change from fall to winter, to spring and to summer, while Orpheus patiently waits, noting how bleak even the summer season is without Eurydice. The last stanza is a prayer by Orpheus to the muse:

> God add one string to my lyre,
> That the snowflake and leaf-bud shall mingle
> As the sun within moonlight is shining,

That the hillside be opened in heartbreak,
And the woman walk down and be risen
From the place that she changes, each season,
Her death, at the center of waiting.

Dickey seldom retells any myth in its entirety. Usually, he is content to borrow the mythological figure and give a few details from that figure's myth. Thus his Orpheus is a role of the poet's own making. I am not familiar with any version of the Orpheus myth which has the figure stand for a year outside the entrance to Hades. Also, it is not clear from Dickey's poem whether the scene he represents takes place before or after Orpheus' visit to the underworld.[4] However, one detail of the myth is echoed by Dickey's poem. In stanza one, the leaves drifting down from the trees are said to halt halfway, remaining hypnotized. Presumably they do so because of the power of Orpheus' song, which in some versions of this myth could cause such phenomena as this. Here, one recalls the familiar scene in which trees uprooted themselves and followed the singer and rivers literally changed their courses.[5] In stanza two, the clouds are described as letting fall their "leaves/ Like the eyelids of fossils." Since the scene here is winter, the power of Dickey's Orpheus causes snow to fall, a variation on the familiar "pathetic fallacy" in which the rain is likened to tears being shed in sympathy with the god's plight. Yet one detail in the poem which certainly does not come from the Greek myth is the allusion in the last stanza to the phenomenon of reflected light. By this touch, the poet demonstrates his interest in astronomy, which

he often does throughout his poetry, and we have "God add one string to my lyre,/ That the snowflake and leaf-bud shall mingle/ As the sun within moonlight is shining."

Dickey's "Orpheus before Hades" is unique in one way, for it is the poet's only published poem in which he uses the mythological figure as the direct narrator. His usual method is to present a human narrator who becomes a god or mythological figure. In "Sleeping Out at Easter," for example, the real narrator of the poem is a suburban householder who becomes Christ. Still, I think we can consider even this poem one of the poet's attempts to mythologize his own experiences, since Orpheus is one of the better known poet-figures in literature. What Dickey's Orpheus-poet is asking is for his poetry to bring the dead to life, and the several uses of leaves as images may possibly be taken to represent "leaves" in a book. In fact, there are several other poems in the poet's first two books which can be read as poems based upon the theme of "hoped-for," or oncoming, feelings of poetic inspiration.[6] Yet in another way, this poem is very traditional in its use of a mythological figure as its narrator. I am thinking of Tennyson's "Ulysses" and "Tithonus," whose narrators are also the mythological figures. One could recall many poems such as these throughout literature.

Another classical "borrowing" from Into the Stone is "Poem." The narrator's uncle is dying of cancer and the narrator, then a young boy, is at his bedside remembering the man's last day:

There were powerful strides in his sighing.
He rose. His body made a centaur of the bed.
With him, four-square,
Death stood on wooden legs. He swayed about
in its form.
He looked for a way out of dying

Like a myth and a beast, conjoined.
More kinship and majesty
Could not be,
And nothing could look away.

As the uncle dies, he breathes his last breath into the boy's "mind." Thirty years later, the narrator finds that his own son has his uncle's same "deep features," though none of his own. The son has "the main strength of shining/ Of the centaur's eye," and his animal body "burns through it." The narrator thus realizes that his function thirty years ago was to serve as a human carrier of life from the dying god-centaur to his own son, and that his uncle has indeed escaped death after all. In the last lines the narrator asks the question "am I now/ Death, you smile in the face of, who look like neither?"

In one version of the Chiron myth, Apollo's wife has been killed and, just before she is cremated, Apollo has his still living child ripped from her womb and gives the boy to Chiron to be raised. The boy becomes the famous doctor Asclepius, a mortal who had the ability to bring the dead back to life.[7] Dickey's poem is not at all exactly parallel with the Chiron myth, and yet there are certainly resemblances here. As we shall see later on, Dickey is very much interested in the theme of the relationship between members

of a family, especially with his idea or belief that members of a family are able to share close experiences and even to enter each other's bodies, sometimes from the living members to the dead members and vice versa. He calls this phenomenon "continuity," and it is one of his most often used poetic ideas.

Certainly classical mythology contains a great many instances of such "continuities" as the one described in this poem. In Dickey's poem the uncle's last breath is described as "Like Apollo" blowing on the boy's mind. The uncle-centaur becomes Apollo and passes his visage into the nephew who will in turn carry it until he passes it into his own son, who then becomes reborn as the uncle-centaur. Again, Dickey's parallel is not exact. In his poem, the narrator acts as a go-between, much as Chiron did when he became the teacher of the boy Asclepius. In Dickey's poem, the narrator sees his dead uncle come down

> Upon my growing son,
> Unfolding your face in his features,
> Turning knowledge and power of dying
>
> To childish appalling play.

Here the narrator, who has now become a father, watches his young son as the boy indulges in some childish play, wholly unaware of his miraculous origin. Perhaps Chiron wondered the same things about the young Asclepius at play as Leda must have wondered about the young Helen, and Thetis about

the boy Achilles, or Mary about the young Jesus.

Also from Into the Stone is "The Vegetable King," which is a re-working of the Osiris myth from Egyptian mythology. In Self-Interviews Dickey tells us that this poem is his answer to Eliot's use of the same myth.[8] The poem is much like Dickey's "Sleeping Out at Easter." In both poems the narrator, who is an ordinary family man, sleeps outdoors in April and wakes believing that he has become a god. In one poem, the man is the resurrected Christ. In the other, he is the reincarnated Osiris, the corn god. Reincarnations, resurrections, miraculous transformations and exchanges between the narrator and persons, places and things are commonplaces in Dickey's poetry. In fact, these "exchanges," as one critic has termed them, are a fundamental part of Dickey's poetic vision.[9] In many of his poems, the exchange is the central image around which the poem develops. It is also part of Dickey's philosophy that there is a basic continuity between all things, living and non-living, and the poet places great emphasis upon his belief that man needs very badly to recover these lost feelings of a basic relationship between all things.[10]

In "The Vegetable King" Dickey describes the exchange between his narrator and the corn god in this manner:

I fall into a colored sleep
Enveloping the house, or coming out
Of the dark side of the sun,

And begin to believe a dream
I never once have had,

Of being part of the acclaimed rebirth
Of the ruined, calm world, in spring,
When the drowned god and the dreamed-of sun

Unite, to bring the red, the blue,
The common yellow flower out of earth
Of the tended and untended garden: when the
chosen man,
Hacked apart in the growing cold
Of the year, by the whole of mindless nature
is assembled

From the trembling, untroubled river.
I believe I become that man, become
As bloodless as a god, within the water,
Who yet returns to walk a woman's rooms
Where flowers on the mantel-piece are those

Bought by his death.

This poem is also typical of Dickey's use of mythological figures and stories in what I have called phase one of his poetic career. The narrator becomes the mythological figure, although Dickey ignores most of the details of the Osiris myth and has concentrated on the sacrificial death and rebirth of the god.[11] For Dickey, this becomes another of his "family poems," along with "Poem," about his uncle, and "The String," about his dead brother. In these poems, Dickey's interest seems to be in casting his narrators in the roles of men performing some necessary task related to the family unit. "The Vegetable King," in particular, seems to suggest that the father in a family unit is responsible for performing some sacrifice, which is symbolic of those which a provider has as a duty to make for the good of his family. Also the poem portrays a man who has been off in a visionary experience in the transcendent world and who has now come back to the

immanent world, where his mother, son, and wife have set "These flowers upon the table, and milk for him/ Who, recurring in this body, bears you home/ Magnificent pardon, and dread, impending crime." The pardon is the narrator's rebirth, and the dread, impending crime is his coming death during the next winter.[12]

There are two other poems in Into the Stone which appear to be based upon figures from early Greek literature. Although the tale of Hero and Leander is not, strictly speaking, a myth,[13] it has been told so often by poets that it has almost achieved the status of a myth. In "Awaiting the Swimmer" Dickey gives us a variation upon this story of star-crossed lovers. Although Dickey reverses the roles, the images seem unmistakable. In this poem a man is standing on the shore of a river which his sweetheart is attempting to swim in order to complete a lover's rendezvous. The narrator holds a white towel as a mark for the girl to aim at as she swims, much as Hero lighted a torch so that Leander could make his way across the Hellespont. In Dickey's version, however, the narrator cannot swim, which is why he does not go to her. That night, as they prepare to make love, the man wonders whether or not he will be able to perform the act, beginning to doubt his manhood since the woman has taken over his role in the affair. The poem ends with these lines, in which the narrator ponders his cowardice:

The bed like a river is shining,

> Yet what shall I do, when I reach her
> Through the moon opened wide on the floor-boards?
> What can I perform, to come near her?
> How hope to bear up, when she gives me
> The fear-killing moves of her body?

The answer to these questions is that the narrator must inevitably "drown" during the storm which his own fears have created, which parallels the death of Leander in a storm at sea.

Dickey's poem "Near Darien," also from Into the Stone, is still another version of Hero and Leander. It may be taken as a companion piece to "Awaiting the Swimmer." The narrator sets out at night to cross an inlet to his waiting wife. He is not swimming but rowing a small boat, guided to the waiting woman by the moonlight upon the water. He rows from east to west across the bay, sleeping for part of the night and waking in the morning to find that the sunlight behind him has replaced the moonlight upon the water as the light which guides him to his wife. She is pictured as having risen from darkness,

> From her vast, shining place in the moonlight,
> Where a man slaved for hours to reach her
> And lie in the quick of her image.
> She shall stand to her knees in her shadow,
> Gazing outward, her eyes unshaded,
>
> As I ride blindly home from the sun.

The paradox in the last line above is explained by the last line of the poem: the narrator has been "blinded" by "her

eyes catching fire in the morning." Here also we have echoes of Donne, Spenser, and other Elizabethan poets whose sweethearts are said to have eyes like twin suns--eyes so bright that they may even blind the true sun.[14]

These two poems, from 1959 and 1960 respectively, are transitional ones which mark the end of phase one and look ahead to phase two. In place of narrators who become mythological figures, Dickey begins comparing his narrators to these figures. Instead of the larger emphasis of the poem being upon the mythological, the poet begins to emphasize the human narrator's role. Thus in "Awaiting the Swimmer," both the narrator and his lover are human and remain so. As if to emphasize their humanity, Dickey makes his Hero the "hero" who swims to Leander, and he also has the poem take place in daylight instead of at night. There is no peculiar quality of light, as is usually the case in poems which have some miraculous occurrence. When night does come, the narrator becomes even "less" human as he finds that he cannot fulfill his normal role.

However, "Near Darien" portrays two humans who become at least "myth-like." The narrator's wife is compared to a goddess, having risen from the darkness "Commanded by glorious powers." In addition, the heroic experience has also made the narrator godlike:

> I have rowed toward the moon for miles
> Till the lights upon shore have been blown

Slowly out by my infinite breath,
By distance come slowly as age,

and until "All water shines down out of Heaven,/ And the things upon shore that I love/ Are immortal, inescapable there." Even though the narrator has performed the same kind of heroic feat that Leander performed, and therefore become worthy of his goddess-wife's love, as Leander became worthy of his priestess-Hero's love, still there are no real miracles described nor are there any exchanges, but only the usual amount of exaggeration that we see in romantic love-poems.

"For the Nightly Ascent of the Hunter Orion over a Forest Clearing," a poem from Dickey's second book, Drowning with Others, illustrates the "phase two" method. In it, the narrator likens himself to the mythological "man of stars." The theme of the poem is "indecision," and it is an indecision that is resolved by a force outside the narrator's experience. In the same way that Orion was blinded, killed, and then placed in the heavens as a constellation, so the narrator of the poem finds that his own destiny has been decided for him, and he says:

Who can arise

From his dilating shadow
When one foot is longing to tiptoe
And the other to take the live
Stand of a tree that belongs here?

In his indecision about whether to remain secure or to seek adventure, the narrator becomes entranced by the strange power of the darkness. Finally, he is taken over by some force:

> No man can stand upright
> And drag his body forth
> Through an open space in the foliage
> Unless he rises
>
> As does the hunter Orion,
> Thinking to cross a blue hollow
> Through the dangers of twilight,
> Feeling that he must run
> And that he will
>
> Take root forever and stand,
> Does both at once, and neither,
> Grows blind, and then sees everything,
> Steps and becomes a man
> Of stars instead,
>
> Who from invisibility
> Has come, arranged in the light
> Of himself, revealed tremendously
> In his fabulous, rigid, eternal
> Unlooked-for role.

Whatever the transformation, it has taken place in typical Dickey fashion. As Howard Nemerov says, Dickey's poems are "poems of darkness and a specialized light."[15] In his essay, Nemerov notes how many of the events in Dickey's poems take place in some sort of peculiar light, and often this light is a kind in which it would be hard for a human to see. He has in mind the "slant, green mummied light" of "The Vegetable King," the light "given off by the grave" of "The Lifeguard," and the light of that "huge, ruined stone in the sky" of "Near Darien," as well as numerous other poems. So it is

also with this poem, as the narrator is confused by the "dangers of twilight."

Like Orion, the role is thrust upon the narrator by accident and circumstance beyond his control. Without being able to choose or to understand why, the narrator is blinded in order that he may see, must die in order to live, and is "arranged in the light of himself," having come to his new eternal destiny from "invisibility." If one acts at all, he must be willing to accept the result of the chain of events which the act has set in motion.

The comparison which the poem makes is between hunters, and as such it is one of several which Dickey has written on the subject of hunting. Since Orion was one of the mightiest hunters from classical mythology, it seems only natural that Dickey might use this figure in a poem. Although the poet describes himself as a notoriously bad hunter,[16] he is also known to be an excellent marksman with the bow and arrow.[17] This, coupled with the fact that astronomy was one of his favorite subjects in college, makes such a poem for Dickey "in character." In this respect, perhaps, one may say that he is mythologizing his experiences.[18]

Also from Drowning with Others is another poem about hunting, called "The Summons." It describes a hunter who is able to call his prey within easy range of his bow by making a horn of grassblades and his thumbs. With this "magical" instrument, the hunter creates something like "sympathetic" vibrations among the trees and foliage. An unidentified

beast that has been captivated in this manner slowly moves out of its safe hiding place and proceeds to cross a river to its appointment with death:

> Something falls from the bank, and is swimming.
> My voice turns around me like foliage,
>
> And I pluck my longbow off the limb
> Where it shines with a musical light,
> And crouch within death, awaiting
> The beast in the water, in love
> With the palest and gentlest of children,
> Whom the years have turned deadly with knowledge:
> Who summons him forth, and now
> Pulls wide the great, thoughtful arrow.

The hunter's prey is described as "the beast that shall die of its love," indicating the extent of its enchantment. It cannot resist the hunter's summons.

As far as I am aware, there is no specific mythological situation which fits this narrative. Yet there are certainly echoes of a number of such figures. Apollo, for one, seems to fit the description, since he was both a renowned hunter and singer. He is described in many of his myths as one who could charm anything, being at least as famous with a bow and arrow as Orion. Eros is another figure who may possibly be echoed here. He is the boy-god of love. In Dickey's poem the narrator describes himself as the palest and gentlest of children. In addition, the animal being hunted is said to be "in love" with the narrator. Besides these figures, one is reminded of figures from folklore and legend: the pied piper, and the German legend of Des Knaben Wunder-

horn. Certainly the one quality which a hunter would have the most use for would be the mythlike power to enchant his prey. Perhaps Dickey had in mind here a combined figure such as an Orpheus-Orion, or perhaps he is "inventing" his own myth. Since the poet has been "borrowing" from mythology so frequently at about this point in time, it appears probable that he is consciously attempting to make this poem "mythic"--that is, that he is seizing on every opportunity to incorporate mythic elements into this poem.

Still another poem from Drowning with Others which seems to echo the classics is "A Birth." This poem, says Dickey, is about the process of the creative imagination.[19] This poem is also the shortest one in any of his collections and is quoted below in its entirety.

> Inventing a story with grass,
> I find a young horse deep inside it.
> I cannot nail wires around him;
> My fenceposts fail to be solid,
>
> And he is free, strangely, without me.
> With his head still browsing the greenness,
> He walks slowly out of the pasture
> To enter the sun of his story.
>
> My mind freed of its own creature,
> I find myself deep in my life
> In a room with my child and my mother,
> When I feel the sun climbing my shoulder
>
> Change, to include a new horse.

Dickey credits the well-known critic Monroe Spears with showing him the "creative possibilities of the lie."[20] Spears was one of the few early friends of Dickey's who encouraged

him in his creative efforts. In Self-Interviews, Dickey says that one day as he was showing some of his poems to his friend, Spears asked him why he did not have the character behave this way instead of that way. Dickey replied that it did not happen that way. Then Spears remarked that the poem would be so much better if the character did behave in another way. It was then, says the poet, that I began to see that poets do not simply tell the truth--they make it.[21] Dickey says also that he had come from a family which placed great emphasis upon always telling the truth. However, with this problem solved, he was now free to "invent" the truth, rather than tell it. In an interview a few years ago, Dickey repeated his dictum in this way: "Personal experience includes anything that you have experienced in any manner."[22] He goes on to say that these experiences are not limited only to the facts but include as well "things that you've thought up or dreamed about, or seen in movies, or even that somebody told you about--all of these are experience as well."[23] Apparently, in the fifteen or so years since Monroe Spears talked with him about truth in poetry, Dickey has not forgotten the lesson.

In another interview, Dickey reports that he has been criticized for having too many fantastic and farfetched occurrences in his poems. To this criticism Dickey replies that his only regret is not making the poems more farfetched than he has.[24] Dickey's poem "A Birth" illustrates something of this farfetched method of composition. The narrator

is daydreaming about a young horse, when suddenly the newly-created animal walks off into "the sun of his story." Unable to nail wires around the horse or to create solid fenceposts, the narrator returns to the real room with his child and mother, where he is back in the immanent world once more. However, in a few moments the narrator feels the "creative urge" once again and discovers that there is a new sun and a new horse in his imagination.

This farfetched quality is what Robert Bly likes about Dickey's poetry. He writes:

> It is interesting to compare a Dickey poem with a poem by one of the dreary realists, like Sexton or Seidel. In the confessional poem, the poet is restricted not only to the real facts of the case, but to those facts that are the most unheroic and pitiful. It is as if Chaucer spent the entire Canterbury Tales describing the clerk. In Mr. Dickey's work, poetry returns to its old kingdom of fantasy.[25]

In the same essay, Bly continues praising Dickey's farfetched imagination in this manner:

> His work strikes us as original in current American poetry first of all because it is the exact opposite of the fashionable "my healthy limitations" school. Nemerov especially is a genius at these modest confessions of ordinariness. Other poets of the 40's, like Ciardi, Nims, Whittemore, and Shapiro also pushed this "regular guy" poem to the forefront; it says essentially this: "I have prudence; I'm very sane. I can't understand St. Teresa; as for beauty and nature, I can take it or leave it; it's wonderful to be so human!" This attitude has hardly enough spirit to sustain a filing clerk through life. It's ludicrous to see it adopted by poets. Mr. Dickey's originality, then, is

> that he discards this whole mediocre charade. He drives for something infinite. He exults, rants, says things he can't wholly understand, tries to imagine himself as a boundary-less person, like an animal or a god....He ignores everything that is ordinary and average; and tries in many poems to push to the very edge of his perceptions.[26]

What Bly has been describing, I think, are the visionary characteristics which Dickey has told us he attempts to incorporate in his poems. In "A Birth" we see that the narrator possesses the power necessary to create images which become reality. He is indeed infinite, like a god. Once born, the young horse takes on his own reality. This variation of "parthenogenetic reproduction" is the sort of idea that appeals to Dickey's visionary imagination.

In this poem, as in "The Summons," Dickey appears to be following no particular myth or mythological figure, and yet the poem is myth-like in the sense that his narrator possesses godlike powers. It may be that the poet has a particular myth in mind which I am not familiar with; or it may be that he has been trafficking in the mythological for so long that he has begun to "think" in mythic terms. I suspect the latter. In Self-Interviews, he talks at length about what he calls "consciously working toward an unconscious act."[27] In particular, he mentions how athletes such as high jumpers and pole vaulters practice for years to develop their technique. While they are learning, they pay close attention to what they are doing, but all this preparation, says Dickey, is intended to build toward "a kind of instinctive act," in which

the athletes no longer think about what they are doing consciously.[28]

I have said that I suspect the poet of beginning to "think" mythically. What I mean by this term is that with respect to "A Birth" Dickey may have unconsciously produced a poem which is similar in some respects to the Zeus-Athena myth. In other words, he may have followed the "pattern" of that myth but substituted his own images. Certainly a poem in which a man creates a horse that he cannot control or "uncreate" and which springs "full-blown" from his own head, is similar to the myth which describes the way Athena was created. It may be, however, that Dickey had this myth in mind as he wrote the poem. But whatever the case, if the similarity between his poem and this myth exists, then it exists--regardless of whether or not it was intended.[29]

Yet in both "The Summons" and "A Birth," the nexus is missing. That is, neither of these poems has a direct connection with any myth, as is the case, for example, in the poet's "Orpheus before Hades." Still, if Dickey had not titled that poem "Orpheus before Hades," it would be hard to avoid making a comparison between the figure in the poem and Orpheus. Also, the poem would owe no less to that myth without the title. In addition, Dickey's poem "The Lifeguard" would still portray the narrator as a Christ-figure even without the lines "I am thinking of how I may be/ The savior of one/ Who has already died in my care." I consider these two poems--"The Summons" and "A Birth"--as probably based upon

classical mythology in part because they are parallels and in part because the poet has written so many other poems at about this same time in his career which are obviously based upon myths.

In "The Beholders," first published in 1962 and later collected in Helmets, Dickey gives us a strange poem in which two unidentified beings are watching three men mowing wheat with hand scythes. As a storm darkens the valley below them, the beings ponder the fate of the mowers:

> From above, we watch over them like gods,
> Our chins on our hands,
> Our great eyes staring, our throats dry
> And aching to cry down on their heads
> Some curse or blessing,
>
> Some word we have never known, but we feel
> That when the right time arrives, and more stillness,
> Lightning will leap
> From our mouths in reasonless justice
> As they arc their scythes more slowly, taking care
> Not to look up.

However, as the storm becomes worse and the clouds begin to fill with a greenish light, the two beings begin to lose interest in the far-off mowers:

> The field becomes whiter and darker,
> And fire in us gathers and gathers
>
> Not to call down death to touch brightly
> The only metal for miles
> In the hands of judged, innocent men,
> But for our use only, who in the first sheaves of rain
> Sit thunderstruck, having now the power to speak
> With deadly intent of love.

With this ending, the reader discovers that the enormous godlike power of the beings was a kind of elaborate description of the power of love which the two beings divert from thoughts of killing to lovemaking. What at first appears to be a view of mortal man as seen from Mount Olympus, where Zeus, Hera, and others sit musing upon the fate of lesser beings, ends as the godlike forces are re-directed toward more creative endeavors. The talk of "reasonless justice" as well may remind the reader of the Erinyes and of their sometimes authorized, sometimes unauthorized, vengeance. Here again we see the Dickey of phase two, comparing his narrators to gods but with his emphasis now more upon his own created beings than upon mythological personages.

Two more poems from Helmets are worth mentioning in relation to Dickey's "borrowing" from the classics, even though neither of them is based upon any particular Greek myth. One is called "The Scarred Girl" and it is taken from the poet's own experience.[30] In Self-Interviews, Dickey writes that he once knew a beautiful girl who was also very good, which he thought was something of a paradox. The girl was in an automobile wreck which literally destroyed her beauty forever. But, says the poet, she still had her goodness, and the poem is based on the Platonic idea of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. The last stanzas describe the moment of "truth" when "her calm, unimagined face" will emerge "from the yards of its wrapping,/ Red, raw, mixed-looking but entire" and the girl sees herself in a mirror,

Her beauty gone, but to hover
Near for the rest of her life,
And good no nearer, but plainly
In sight, and the only way.

The other poem is called "In the Marble Quarry," and it is also written from the poet's own experience.[31] Dickey once visited a marble quarry in north Georgia, and while there he discovered that most of the marble would go into the making of tombstones. As he rode on a twelve ton block from the bottom of the quarry, he had the thought that his own tombstone might one day be carved from that very block of marble:

I mount my monument and rise
Slowly and spinningly from the white-gloved men
Toward the hewn sky

Out of the basement of light,
Sadly, lifted through time's blinding layers
On perhaps my tombstone

In which the original shape
Michelangelo believed was in every rock upon earth
Is heavily stirring,

although the narrator imagines that his tombstone will be "Badly cut, local-looking, and totally ininspired,/ Not a masterwork/ Or even worth seeing at all." Dickey attributes to Michelangelo the "myth" that the form of a statue is already in the marble and that the sculptor only chips away the excess. But the source of this idea is at least as old as Aristotle. At any rate, my point is that even when Dickey is

not dealing directly or indirectly with classical mythology, he is still making poems from his readings of ancient world literature. These two poems also indicate that at this time in his career Dickey was consciously aware of the classics as sources for poetic ideas.

Notes For Chapter III

[1]John M. Raines, former professor of English at Oklahoma University, who was himself paraphrasing Elliot's well-known comment from his essay on Philip Massinger.

[2]Robert Bly, "The Work of James Dickey," The Sixties, VII (Winter 1964), 57.

[3]James Dickey. Self-Interviews (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1972), p. 89.

[4]Which further illustrates that the poet is mainly interested in the figure and not the myth. Dickey probably means the reader to see Orpheus here before he enters Hades, since afterwards he became a woman-hater. See Edith Hamilton, Mythology (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), pp. 138-42.

[5]See Charles Mills Gayley, The Classic Myths in English Literature and in Art (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1939), pp. 165-8.

[6]Two of these are "Sleeping Out at Easter" and "For the Nightly Ascent of the Hunter Orion over a Forest Clearing."

[7]See Edith Hamilton, Mythology, p. 139.

[8]See Self-Interviews, p. 85.

[9]See H. L. Weatherby, "The Way of Exchange in James Dickey's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LXXIV (Summer 1966), 669-680. With his term "exchange," Weatherby appears to be announcing his debt to structuralism. Weatherby sees a poet's total work as a "system," in the same way that the structuralist sees society as a system. The process of "mediation," then, is the "key" to the organization of that society. Weatherby's "exchange" seems to equal the term "mediation." In his essay "Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure," Yale French Studies, XXXVI-VII, (1966), 148-68, Geoffrey Hartmann quotes the following passage from M. Mauss's essay on "Gifts": "What they /the Polynesians/ exchange is not exclusively goods and wealth, real and personal property, and things of economic value. They exchange rather courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances and feasts; and fairs in which the market is but one element and the circulation of wealth but one part of a wide and enduring contract." Mauss's Polynesians are, of course, only one branch of the Melanesian family which Rivers and Malinowski studied, and their customs are very similar with regard to the uses of mythology as a social "bond." /Dickey's poems of "exchange" can certainly be seen as ways of "mediation" between the poet and his poetical environment./

[10]See Self-Interviews, p. 165.

[11]See Sir James Frazer's account of the Osiris myth, which takes that author seven pages of very fine print to tell all the details of this complicated myth. (The Golden Bough, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), pp. 362-8.)

[12]This is the poet's interpretation of these last two lines. See Self-Interviews, p. 90.

[13]i.e., since it does not have a "supernatural" happening in it. See Gayley, The Classic Myths, p. 141.

[14]I have in mind Donne's poem "The Sun Rising," but this poem is only one of many from the Elizabethan age which makes use of this image. Then there is Shakespeare's famous parody ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun").

[15]Howard Nemerov, "Poems of Darkness and a Specialized Light," Sewanee Review, LXXI (Winter 1963), 102.

[16]See Self-Interviews, p. 110.

[17]See James Dickey, Sorties (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 40-1.

[18]See Self-Interviews, pp. 36-7, for Dickey's discussion of his astronomy classes.

[19]See Self-Interviews, p. 110.

[20]Self-Interviews, p. 32.

[21]See Sorties, p. 156.

[22]Quoted from an interview which appeared in Druid, the student literary magazine at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (Fall 1969 issue). There are no page numbers. The title of the interview is "I Like Quite a Lot of Bad Poetry."

[23]See note 17, above.

[24]Self-Interviews, p. 66.

[25]Bly, p. 55.

[26]Bly, p. 55.

[27]See Self-Interviews, p. 60.

[28]See Self-Interviews, p. 60-1.

[29]With respect to similarities between this poem and the Zeus-Athena myth, one might add that Athena was famed as a trainer of horses. Also, she was the goddess of wisdom, and in folk-lore the term for wisdom is "horse sense."

[30]See Self-Interviews, p. 131.

[31]See Self-Interviews, p. 132.

Chapter IV

Into The Dickey Cosmos

As I have stated in chapter one, I see Dickey's poetry as an attempt to create a poetic vision based upon borrowings from various mythologies, legends, and folklore, and that the poet's point of view is his version of what the world would be like if viewed by a primitive. In Self-Interviews, Dickey has written that his is a "very personal kind of stick-and-stone religion," that he feels he would have made "a great Bushman or an aborigine," that he wants a "feeling of wholeness, a sense of intimacy with the natural process," that there is a part of him which is "absolutely untouched by anything civilized," and that "there is a half-dreaming, half-animal part" of him that is "fundamentally primitive."[1] In addition to these statements, the poet has written in his Journals that "There has never been in the history of the world and never will be anyone whom the wilderness fascinates as much as it does me."[2] He goes on to say that he does not know the wilderness well and that he does not wish to know it any better technically than he does, since most of his poems depend on his not knowing these things very well. In this way, says Dickey, the wilderness remains strange to him and his poems "remain in at least some sense visions."[3]

Elsewhere in his Journals, the poet comments on the "born genius" theory in this manner:

> Win Scott says that the only way to be a genius is to be born one. Not so. Genius is the discovery of an idiom. It is the discovery of an idiom, the successful exploration and exploitation of it, and the extensive employment of it. It is something discovered, not innate.[4]

The man whose statement Dickey opposes here is Winfield Townley Scott, the American poet. Although it is not so stated, the context in which Dickey gives his opinion is presumably that of poetry. In this respect, I take the poet's comment as applying to his own discovery, exploration, exploitation, and extensive employment of the primitive point of view in his poetic vision. The Dickey Cosmos, then, is the result of the poet's application of his "idiom" to his poetry. In this Cosmos, the poet presents his narrators in the roles of "characteristic" primitives re-enacting primitive-like rituals, superstitions, and beliefs. Like primitives, these narrators view the universe from a non-rational point of view. They are not concerned with the "abstract meaning of phenomena" but with how they feel about these phenomena.[5] Dickey's narrators wake up and find that they have become Christ, or Osiris, or their own dog. But they are not at all interested in how they became so; instead, they are interested in how they feel in their new roles and in how their lives have been changed by these experiences.

In a discussion of his use of the Osiris myth, the poet writes:

> what if I took an ordinary householder in the spring of

> the year and, in the same situation as "Sleeping Out at Easter," had him sleep in the backyard and dream that he was the one who was dismembered, thrown into the water, and gathered together again? What if he then came back into the house and realized that this hadn't happened to him except in a dream? But how could he be sure? Maybe when he returned he really was the resurrected Vegetable King and the whole spring had been brought by him?[6]

As Dickey himself recognizes, the idea of a man in the twentieth century becoming a Vegetable King is absurd--by scientific standards. Yet it is not what is possible that counts:

> I think the most important ability a poet can have is the capacity to commit himself to his own inventions. Not, for example, take the attitude that nobody would believe that a man who lives in the suburbs could be a Vegetable King. This is one of the most important points I've made until now: this absolute belief I have in the poet really giving himself to his invention which, with luck, is also his vision.[7]

This commitment to his "invention" which is also his "vision" is perhaps an allusion to his Cosmos, coming as it does in a statement about one of his mythological poems. Allusion or not, this "invention" which is the poet's "vision" is an even more interesting statement when viewed along side his statement that genius is "the discovery of an idiom" and the extensive employment of it.

The Dickey Cosmos has come into being, then, because of the poet's discovery of an idiom--his primitive point of view--in conjuction with his belief in giving himself to his invention--which is his vision--together with his attempts to mythologize his experiences--his "reclamation project."

It is Dickey's primitive point of view, however, upon which this Cosmos is based; and it is primarily because of this primitive viewpoint that the poet is so interested in reclaiming Biblical and classical myths. In other words, Dickey's poetry makes use of Biblical and classical mythology not only because it is a poetic tradition to do so but because the primitive point of view is basically a mythological one.

In chapter one I also mentioned Dickey's debt to the anthropological studies of W. H. R. Rivers, Bronislaw Malinowski, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, whose works the poet studied during his last two years of college.[8] While the poet could have come by his knowledge of primitivism in any number of ways, it seems reasonable to look for his sources where he himself has been. In addition to specific knowledge of primitive mythology, which I theorize Dickey may have gotten from his readings in anthropology, we have the poet's own statement concerning his general knowledge of primitivism which he got from the writings of these anthropologists:

> For some reason the last two years I was in school I was on an anthropology kick. What especially fascinated me--I didn't know how valuable this was to me until years later--were the people who would go into 'primitive' areas and do what would be the equivalent of psychoanalyzing the natives. The difference between the natives' outlook and the outlook of so-called 'civilized' people was very instructive to me. W. H. R. Rivers' work was one of the most interesting, as were the works of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.[9]

The "key" prase here is "I didn't know how valuable this was to me until years later," which I suggest is a reference to

the time at which he first conceived of basing his poetic vision upon the primitive world-view.

In creating his "cosmos," however, the poet has not merely dredged up assorted facts about primitives and then sprinkled them liberally throughout his poetry. Instead, he has mythologized his experiences in terms of a coherent view of life and has attempted to be as faithful as possible--at least in his first two books--to what may be called his "neo-primitive" outlook. Dickey may have recalled the following statement by Radcliffe-Brown, or the gist of it, which is very similar to statements in the writings of both Rivers and Malinowski:

> Every custom and belief of a primitive society plays some determinate part in the social life of the community. The mass of institutions, customs, and beliefs forms a single whole or system that determines the life of the society.[10]

In the previous statement, Radcliffe-Brown was discussing the relationship of Andamanese myths and legends to the whole society's way of life. Malinowski, speaking of the role of myth in the life of the Trobriand Islanders, prefaces his study of these people with this statement:

> I propose to show how deeply the sacred tradition, the myth, enters into their pursuits, and how strongly it controls their moral and social behavior. In other words, the thesis of the present work is that an intimate connection exists between the word, the mythos, the sacred tales of a tribe on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities on the other.[11]

That is, the primitive world-view is a mythological one. Although neither of these men actually says so, it is clear that each considers the mythology of these primitives to be a religion. This unstated conclusion is also the reason why I consider Dickey's uses of Biblical mythology only a subordinate part of his overall vision.

With respect to the poet's specific uses of primitive mythology in his poetry, I have read the works of the above-mentioned anthropologists which would have been available to Dickey and have found what may be remarkable similarities. For example, many of this narrators exhibit attitudes toward nature which are similar in many respects to those of primitive Melanesians and Andaman Islanders. Their methods of hunting and fishing, as well as their attitudes toward spirits and the spirit world, are apparent in a number of Dickey's poems. In addition, certain poems contain images and myths perhaps drawn directly from the poet's memories of his anthropological studies, and I discuss these possible sources with respect to a number of his poems later on in this chapter.

But Dickey is not the only writer whose work shows the influence of primitivism. One finds "noble savages" throughout British and American literature. Neither is he the only man who ever felt a kinship with nature. In the nineteenth century, for example, many people shared the belief that man needed desperately to get back to a kind of closeness to the land and to the ways of a more "natural" period of man's existence. This century, too, has seen much the same kind of

attempt to return to a more basic way of life.[12] And how many authors and artists have followed D. H. Lawrence to New Mexico? It is not really surprising, then, to find that Dickey has also been fascinated by primitivism, and in this respect his poetry is certainly traditional.

In addition to his anthropological studies, the poet tells us that he read a great deal of philosophy. It is probable that Dickey is familiar with some of the better known philosophers of this and the last century, such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Camus. If so, he is aware of their thoughts concerning man's present lack of emotional knowledge of the universe, and of their idea or belief that man can still attain--in some enlightened moments--a sort of "immanent transcendence," a kind of Wordsworthian seeing into the life of things. As John N. Findlay, in discussing the thought of some of these philosophers, has recently written:

> The human cerebrum and its cortex are plainly, on the one hand, the highest product of organic evolution, and represent the highest pinnacle of complex integration and flexibility of response that organic evolution has achieved; on the other hand it is highly arguable that there is something cut off, divorced from the grass-roots of being, something stilted, parasitic and falsely privileged about this cortical, cerebral life of ours, and that our philosophical difficulties are among the many fruits of this falsely stilted position. Like St. Simeon Stylites on his column we are so elevated above the rough-and-tumble of the market-place that we are fundamentally confused as to what may be going on there....Possibly if one goes down the evolutionary ladder, or simply goes down to the humble units in one's own body, one has in one's hands cases of life and experience that are much less cut off from environing

> reality and from other conscious existences, and so much less angled and paradoxical and prone to philosophical difficulties than our own conscious existence necessarily is. Possibly also there are levels of conscious being to which we can in some illuminated moments attain, and which we may enjoy more fully in some after condition, where the defects of cerebral mediation and instrumentation will be set aside, with a consequent reduction in the philosophical and other riddles which beset us in our present life.[13]

It may be that it is a return to these "grass-roots of being" attained "in some illuminated moments" which Dickey has attempted to recapture in his poetry. It may also be that Dickey's use of primitivism has resulted from his feeling that the primitive mind is indeed "much less cut off from environing reality" than his modern counterpart's is.

If we cannot know all the factors involved in the creation of Dickey's poetic vision, we can at least see some of these factors at work in his poems. Dickey's first book, Into the Stone, was published in 1960 and contained twenty-four poems, some of which I have already discussed in chapters two and three, with reference to the poet's uses of Biblical and classical mythology. Several additional poems from this first book are typical of Dickey's "phase one" "exchange" poems, in which the narrators do not become mythological figures--at least, not Biblical or classical figures--but in which these narrators become the "primitive" equivalents of mythological figures.

The first poem in Into the Stone is "Sleeping Out at Easter," in which the narrator becomes the resurrected Christ. Having thus resurrected his narrator, the poet proceeds to

reverse the process in the second poem of the collection, "The Underground Stream," and this poem's narrator proceeds to "die" by falling down a well. Yet it is not a real death; instead, the narrator makes an "exchange" between himself and his dead brother. In this respect, the poem is similar to one myth which is wide-spread among the Melanesians. According to Malinowski, the main Trobriand Islander origin myth is as follows: man originated under the ground, where he had previously lived exactly the same kind of life as he is now living, in every respect. He came up from underground through certain holes--from grottoes, ocean blow holes, from volcanoes, and from natural springs, or wells. In addition, when he dies he returns through these holes and goes back to living the same existence in every respect that he lived while above ground. He does not repeat the exact details of his former life, but he lives the same kind of existence. The Trobrianders see life as a recurrent cycle. Furthermore, says Malinowski, as far as these natives are concerned, there is no such phenomenon as natural death. There is only this continuous cycle of "life."[14] Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown report similar myths.

"The Underground Stream" is in one sense a description of a man making a journey from his life "above ground" to his life "below." The well which the narrator describes is the entrance to this underground world. In terms which I have used earlier,[15] the narrator is moving from the immanent to the transcendent world--returning to his place of "origin."

The narrator is lying at the edge of a well imagining how his spirit might fall

> Down this moss-feathered well:
> The motion by which my face
> Could descend through structureless grass,
> Dreaming of love, and pass
> Through solid earth, to rest
> On the unseen water's breast,
> Timelessly smiling, and free
> Of the world, of light, and of me.

The spirit which falls down the well is given the image of the narrator's smile. The smile is then said "To float there, mile on mile/ Of streaming, unknowable wonder," and breaks out in "an eternal grin." The poem then turns to thoughts of love for the narrator's dead brother:

> The tall cadaver, who
> Either grew or did not grow,
> But smiled, with the smile of singing,
> Or a smile of incredible longing
> To rise through a circle of stone,
> Gazing up at a sky, alone
> Visible, at the top of a well,
> And seeking for years to deliver
> His mouth from the endless river
> Of my oil-on-the-water smile,
> And claim his own grave face
> That mine might live in its place.
> I lay at the edge of a well;
> And then I smiled, and fell.

This poem is one of Dickey's most difficult, and it is hard to see how anyone not familiar with the facts pertaining to the poet's own brother, who actually died in childhood, could see what the poet was expressing in this poem. In some

respects, it is like "Sleeping Out at Easter." It makes statements of an oracular or visionary nature such as Dylan Thomas, one of Dickey's early favorites, liked to make. The events which this poem describes seem almost too personal to have meaning for the general reader. Dickey probably wished this poem to seem so, thus giving it a kind of mysterious quality and flavor which he tells us he wished to "get into" his poems at this stage of his career.

At times I have thought of this poem as one which is making a statement of a death-wish. Some of the elements of the poem tend to confirm this view. The poem opens with these lines:

> I lay at the edge of a well,
> And thought how to bury my smile
> Under the thorn, where the leaf,
> At the sill of oblivion safe,
> Put forth its instant green
> In a flow from underground.

The narrator then speaks of thinking how the spirit could fall down the well and become "Timelessly smiling, and free/ Of the world, of light, and of me." At the end of the poem, the narrator says that he does smile and fall down the well. Perhaps for the general reader this interpretation is the one which the poet intended. That is, from this reading the poem seems to have a recognizable meaning, in spite of its obscurities.

From my point of view, the poem is typical of Dickey's many "exchange" poems as well as a poetic description of the

Trobriand origin myth, which for Dickey is a metaphor describing one way of entering the Dickey Cosmos. The specific method of entering is through an exchange between the narrator and his dead brother, who is described as longing to return to the life above ground and "claim his own grave face." Dickey then describes the narrator as fulfilling this exchange by entering the world underground, in order "That mine might live in its place." Accordingly, the narrator will now be able to experience this underground life. The reader should notice also that the narrator is not going to die, but instead is going to "live" in the dead brother's place, which parallels the Trobriand Islanders' belief that there is no such thing as death--only another form of life under the ground. In addition, this poem is only one of several in which there is an exchange between the narrator and his dead brother; and there are also several poems in which the narrator makes exchanges between himself and other members of his family.

The third poem in Into the Stone is titled "The String," and it describes an exchange between the dead brother and the narrator's son, as well as a case of possession--the dead brother "possesses" the narrator. With respect to this poem and to several others in the poet's first three books, Malinowski, Rivers, and Radcliffe-Brown all report that cases of exchange and possession are commonplace in the mythology of the Melanesians and Andaman Islanders.[16] In addition, Rivers in particular devotes many pages to descriptions and analyses

of the complicated and often peculiar social relationships between primitives, and especially to the relationships between members of a family.[17] In particular, Rivers frequently discusses the importance of the maternal uncle in the family of the primitive Melanesian as well as the relative unimportance of the father.[18] This situation occurs mainly because these people place the emphasis upon matrilineal descent, most probably because of two factors. One is that they do not as yet connect the sexual act with reproduction, and the other is that most Melanesians have a custom called "adoption." This term means, simply, that any man in a tribe can claim the new-born child of any woman if he pays the correct fee, regardless of the feelings of the mother or of her husband.[19] In addition, the husband has no right of appeal, and the tribe inflicts the severest penalities upon anyone who tells the child who his real parents are.

The maternal uncle remains the most important male family member even if an "adoption" has not occurred. It is the uncle who is the guardian of his nephew.[20] It is the uncle who "incises" his nephew in the important initiation ritual,[21] the uncle to whom the child goes for comfort and also for almost all his training with weapons.[22] When the uncle dies, the line of inheritance is from him to his nephew, or sister's son.[23] While the child may never eat with his father, which is a widespread taboo, he spends much time with the uncle. While he must respect his mother and father, he must treat his uncle with reverence.[24] Regarding the matter of inheri-

tance, in which all possessions and lands must go from uncle to nephew, these people also believe that they may be possessed by the spirits of their dead relatives, which they call "tamate." It does not seem very far from inheritance of all worldly goods to the "inheritance" of the "tamate" as well. In this respect, Radcliffe-Brown reports this belief among the Andaman Islanders: if a child dies between birth and the ages of six or seven years, the common belief is that the next child born is the reincarnation of the dead child.[25]

Dickey's poem "The String" concerns a rather extraordinary situation from the poet's own experience. In Self-Interviews, Dickey tells us about the death of his older brother, who died at the age of six from meningitis. His mother, who suffered most of her life from serious heart trouble, was told that she could have no more children. However, because of the death of her only child, she decided to take what was a great risk to her own health and have another child. That child was the poet, and he tells us the rather painful circumstances of his growing up with the knowledge that he himself was conceived as a "replacement" for his dead brother. At least, this is the way he felt about it.[26]

Out of this situation have come a number of poems concerning this and related feelings about his brother. "The String" is Dickey's second published poem based upon this theme.[27] The poem is centered upon the image of the narrator performing children's string tricks to amuse his own son. As he performs these tricks, he relates the story his mother

told him of how the brother performed on his death-bed "incredible feats of construction" with string, even in his fever. He recalls also that as he repeats his brother's string tricks, "The strings with my thin bones shake./ My eyes go from me, and down/ Through my bound, spread hands/ To the dead, from the kin of the dead." In this manner, the narrator is able to become the dead brother whom he never knew. Here we have what might best be described as a case of "possession." The exchange has been between the dead brother and the narrator's son, as stated in the opening lines: "Except when he enters my son,/ The same age as he at his death,/ I cannot bring my brother to myself./ I do not have his memory in my life,/ Yet he is in my mind and on my hands." The exchange has made it possible for the narrator to "know" his brother because the brother has entered the body of the son. It is possible, also, for the narrator to perform these string tricks precisely because the dead brother has given him this knowledge, which has come "from the kin of the dead." The last two stanzas are a description of the tricks:

> A man, I make the same forms
> For my son, that my brother made,
> Who learnt them going to Heaven:
> The coffin of light, the bridge,
> The cup and saucer of pure air,
> Cradle of Cat, the Foot of a Crow
> Dead before I was born.
>
> I raise up the bridge and the tower.
> I burn the knit coffin in sunlight
> For the child who has woven this city:

> Who loved, doing this, to die:
> Who thought like a spider, and sang,
> And completed the maze of my fingers,
> Dead before I was born.

Although this poem describes an exchange between the living and the dead, it is apparent that no one is truly dead. In addition, the exchange is between the dead brother and the narrator's son, or between uncle and nephew, and the narrator is possessed by his dead brother--a boy whom he was conceived to replace. In these respects, there seems to be a remarkable similarity between the events in this poem and some of the mythology of the Melanesian and Andaman Islanders.

We know that Dickey has read the works of Malinowski, Rivers, and Radcliffe-Brown. Since he makes such a point--both in his book Self-Interviews and in a number of poems--about the feelings he had that he was a replacement for his dead brother, one can well imagine the impact upon the poet when he read in Radcliffe-Brown's book about the Andaman Islanders' custom of regarding the second child born as the reincarnation of a dead previous child. Also, Dickey must have been quite interested in Malinowski's report concerning the Trobriand origin myth, in which men do not die but move back and forth between worlds above and below ground, since he makes use of this myth--or one quite similar--in a number of his poems. While we cannot know what a poet's sources have been without some reference in the poem or the poet's specific statement, we can deduce probabilities from clues in

the poems and from general statements which the poet has made.

There are two more poems from Into the Stone which are based upon family relationships quite similar to that of "The String" as well as to primitive Melanesian family relationships and mythology. One of these is titled "Poem," in which the narrator's uncle "passes himself" through the narrator to his unconceived nephew and thereby escapes death. Although I discussed this poem in the chapter on Dickey's uses of classical mythology, I did so principally because the "exchange" occurred between an uncle-centaur and his great-nephew. However, the poem could as well have been included in this chapter. The other of these is titled "Uncle," and the situation of this poem is similar to a number of primitive burial customs. One custom is tree-burial, or burial above ground, which is commonly practiced throughout the Melanesian Islands. Another custom is that of covering the corpse with certain leaves before it is placed upon its elevated bier. Still another custom is the practice of placing these leaves upon living bodies in the belief that they may have the power to cure illnesses or take away pain.[28]

In Dickey's poem "Uncle," the old man is unable to move his joints without pain because of some medical condition. Near the end, he suddenly realizes that all the ivy could possibly be growing so quickly and so profusely because it is drawing "unskillable force" from the ground around his house. He then begins to believe that the ivy will soon totally enclose him and the house, and lift his "marriage and

death-bed" from the floor. His tongue will turn green "as an angel's one word," and in this manner, without having to move any of the painful joints, he will be "buried" and transported to heaven. The last lines describe the uncle singing and chanting in the hope that the ivy will grow faster:

> Slowly, dancingly, he says to himself
> What the taste of his shadow tells him.
> The leaves rise up in his eyes,
> And he may be sitting there saying
> A word as alive as an angel's
>
> Increase, increase, increase.

Again, with reference to the poet's sources, it may be argued that Dickey could have found out about tree-burial and related rituals from a variety of books and legends, as well as from his own experiences while with the armed forces in the Pacific during World War II. He was stationed on Okinawa and in the Philippine Islands, both of which are close to Melanesia. Source-hunting is a precarious business at best; but while we know of other possible sources which Dickey might have gone to, we know also that he did read with much interest the works of Rivers and others. It is a matter, finally, of choosing the source with the greater probability.

In Dickey's second book, Drowning with Others, we find still another poem which deals with the poet's family relationships. "In the Tree House at Night" concerns an exchange between the narrator and his dead brother. In this poem also we find a situation similar to the myths of the Melanesians

and Andaman Islanders concerning possession by spirits of the dead, and especially of possession by dead relatives.[29] In addition, spirits which inhabit trees are also commonplace in the mythology of the Andamanese,[30] and Rivers reports that some Melanesians believe they can make prophecies and see the spirit world when they are possessed.[31] The poet tells us that "In the Tree House at Night"

> is another family poem, another way of getting at the kind of continuity that exists in families by the passing of some kind of skill or enterprise from one member of the family to another. It has obvious affinities with "The String," for example, where the family passes the string tricks from one generation to another.[32]

In this poem an older brother has built a tree house and told the two smaller boys that when they get bigger they will build a bigger tree house in the highest tree they can find. But the older brother dies, and the middle one, who feels himself the recipient of the older brother's legacy, feels constrained to build the new tree house for them all, for the younger brother as well as for the dead one. The poem is an account of the brothers' feelings during the first night they sleep in this new tree house:

> We lie here like angels in bodies,
> My brothers and I, one dead,
> The other asleep from much living.

The longer the narrator lies there, the more strongly he feels the presence of his dead brother:

Each nail that sustains us I set here;
Each nail in the house is now steadied
By my dead brother's huge, freckled hand.
Through the years he has pointed his hammer
Up into these limbs, and told us

That we must ascend, and all lie here.

Since the two brothers have completed their task, the dead brother has returned to let them know that he is still with them. In fact, the narrator feels the presence so strongly that he says "the pine cones danced without wind/ And fell from the branches like apples" because the dead brother was shaking the tree to let them know he was there. Then the dead brother touches "the tree at the root" and "A shudder of joy runs up/ The trunk; the needles tingle;/ One bird uncontrollably cries" at sensing the dead brother's presence. As the narrator feels the wind change, he suddenly feels possessed by the dead:

The wind changes round, and I stir
Within another's life. Whose life?
Who is dead? Whose presence is living?
When may I fall strangely to earth,

Who am nailed to this branch by a spirit?
Can two bodies make up a third?
To sing, must I feel the world's light?
My green, graceful bones fill the air
With sleeping birds. Alone, alone
And with them I move gently.
I move at the heart of the world.

Possessed, the narrator enters into another phase of being and moves "at the heart of the world." He then turns from asking questions to accepting the situation that has been

given to him by the dead brother, the ability to exist in a transcendent realm. Once again we have a case of a narrator, in an "illuminated moment," able to return to the "grass roots of being."

Although the poet has called this one of his "continuity of family" poems, it appears also to be based upon some primitive myths concerning the possession of men by the spirits of their dead relatives. In this way, the poet is able to continue mythologizing his family. It is a poem not unlike others in which he mythologizes his family in terms of Biblical and classical myths, as he does in "Sleeping Out at Easter" and "The Vegetable King." The difference is that while in many poems the poet relies upon his readers' knowledge of Biblical and classical mythology, in these "exchange" poems he has had to make some modifications in order that he might avoid filling his poems with "alien" figures. Thus in "The Underground Stream," he makes the exchange with his dead brother and not some primitive personage such as the Melanesian mythical figure Tugala; and in his poem "In the Tree House at Night" the middle brother is possessed by his dead brother instead of by a "tamate," or Andaman tree-spirit. And the tree house is built in a Georgia pine, not in a ficus tree. Dickey has chosen to use familiar figures such as his family members and the "I" figure, which represents a kind of universal "primitive." Because of all this, Dickey has been able to enrich his poetry by the introduction of new myths as well as by the "reclamation" of old ones, and bring

something new to both.

In primitive mythologies, however, men are not limited to exchanges with their dead relatives and ancestors. Rivers writes that identity with animals is commonplace among Melanesians, and the natives believe that they can become or take the form of animals and perform cognizant actions while in such forms.[33] Malinowski writes that among the Trobrianders he found a variation of their main origin myth which is that when men first came up from underground, some had the forms of animals. They became men at a later date. Even today, he says, the names of their four major clans are taken from these first ancestors. These clan names are the iguana, the dog, the pig, and the snake, and there are still a great many taboos connected with the killing and eating of these animals.[34]

One such poem of exchange between a man and an animal is "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet," which I discussed in chapter one. Another is "Listening to Foxhounds," also from Drowning with Others. This poem is about an American foxhunt in which men sit around a campfire and listen for the baying of their hounds, which they have set loose to track the fox. As they listen for the familiar sounds of their own dogs, they are able to tell whose hound is baying, which one now has the fresh scent, and so on. The narrator, however, has no hound in the chase. In fact, his sympathies lie with the fox. Each man around the campfire is described as taking on his dog's visage:

When in that gold
Of fires, quietly sitting
With the men whose brothers are hounds,

You hear the first tone
Of a dog on scent, you look from face
To face, to see whose will light up.

When that light comes
Inside the dark light of the fire,
You know which chosen man has heard

A thing like his own dead
Speak out in a marvelous, helpless voice
That he has been straining to hear.

Miles away in the dark,
His enchanted dog can sense
How his features glow like a savior's

And begins to hunt
In a frenzy of desperate pride.

These "brothers" of the hounds have made their exchanges, but among the group "no one's eyes give off a light/ For the red fox." "Who runs with the fox," says the narrator, "Must sit there like his own image,/ Giving nothing of himself/ To the sensitive flames,/ With no human joy rising up,/ Coming out of his face to be seen." While among Greeks, one does not side with the Trojans. Still the narrator's sympathies are for the fox, "And it is hard,/ When the fox leaps into his burrow,/ To keep that singing down." Therefore, one must sit there, pretending to have made no exchange, as all eyes turn and come in amazement upon

A face that does not shine

Back from itself,
That holds its own light and takes more,

Like the face of the dead, sitting still,

Giving no sign,
Making no outcry, no matter
Who may be straining to hear.

Nevertheless, the narrator has indeed made an exchange with the fox, and his visage, ironically, exactly duplicates that of the fox, who naturally is sitting in his den, giving no sign as to where he is, and "Making no outcry, no matter/ Who" (or what hound) may be "straining to hear."

So far we have seen exchanges between humans, both living and dead, between humans and animals, and even one exchange between a dying human and his unborn great-nephew. We have seen, in the tree house poem, an exchange between the narrator's dead brother and the tree which the tree house was built in. Perhaps also it could be argued that in "Uncle" there was an exchange between the uncle and the ivy growing over his house. We will also see poems in which exchanges take place between human narrators and inanimate objects. In this respect, I mention Howard Nemerov's comment that Dickey's poetry exhibits a sort of going down the "chain of being."[35] Dickey does indeed "make the rounds" with regard to exchange poems, for these exchanges occur at every level of existence: human, animal, vegetable, and mineral.

Another exchange poem from Drowning with Others is called "Armor." It relates the feelings of the narrator who, as he puts on a suit of armor, believes that he is now able to know "the being/ I was in a life before life." At first it appears

that the narrator is speaking of reincarnation, and in a sense he is. However, the poem turns out to be a "continuity" poem, like "The String," and the reader discovers that the "being" referred to is the narrator's dead brother: "I took off my body of metal/ Like a brother whose features I knew." Later on in the poem the narrator retells the story of the brother's early demise, and in much the same manner as he told it in "The String." As the narrator hangs the suit of armor on a tree limb, he says: "In a fever I see him turn slowly/ Under the strange, perfect branches/ Where somehow I left him to wait," with his "curving limbs giving off/ Pure energy into the leaves." The poem ends with the narrator believing that he may finally know what he himself and the brother are truly like if only he stops the turning suit of armor and raises the visor "to confront/ What man is within to live with me/ When I begin living forever." This knowledge, however, will not be revealed in this world, and the exchange does not, perhaps, produce the results that the narrator would like.

"Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek," also from Drowning with Others, describes the possession of two brothers by their ancestors, which as I have mentioned before is a commonplace myth among the Melanesian and Andaman Islanders. In the poem, two brothers take a mine detector out to an old Civil War battlefield to find "war souvenirs." What they find instead is their ancestors, who make it possible for them to relive that battle. The brother wearing the headset is the catalyst. It is he whom his grandfather "possesses," rising

out of the ground where the rest of the dead come back to life. The other man, who is the narrator, is able to know the past by the expressions on his brother's face and by the birds who keep chanting "Nimblewill, Nimblewill," which are like magic words. At the end, the narrator begins digging wherever the brother points, bringing up mess tins and bullets, but digging also to "go underground/ Still singing, myself,/ Without a sound,/ Like a man who renounces war,/ Or one who shall lift up the past,/ Not breathing "Father," At Nimblewill,/ But saying, 'Fathers! Fathers!'"

With respect to this poem, one might add that the veneration of ancestors is not unknown in the deep South. Since Dickey is a Southerner and considers himself part of that tradition, this poem appears to be one which would be "a natural" for Dickey to write. Here also we face the problem of "sources." My own opinion is that Dickey would have been glad for the chance to write such a poem. It would fit in nicely with his background. Yet I do not think he would have handled the events quite the same way if he had not already been familiar with myths which concern the idea of possession by one's ancestors. At this time, the probability still seems to be that he learned of the myth in his anthropological studies.

"A Screened Porch in the Country," again from Drowning with Others, is a variation upon the exchange method. Instead of possessions by humans or spirits, the poem describes the shadows which fall upon the lawn outside a screened porch

which are cast there because the family is sitting in front of a strong light. As their shadows "come to rest out in the yard/ In a kind of blurred golden country," the narrator says "they have laid down/ Their souls and not known it." The smallest creatures then come "to the edge of them/ And sing, if they can,/ Or if they can't simply shine/ Their eyes back, sitting on haunches/ Pulsating and thinking of music." Nothing else happens, says the narrator, but of course the "small animals" and insects are the "happening," as they sit in worshipful joy before the shadow-souls of humans which have been

> Emitted by their own house
> So humanly that they become
> More than human, and enter the place
> Of small, blindly singing things,
> Seeming to rejoice
> Perpetually, without effort,
> Without knowing why
> Or how they do it.

The situation of the poem is a poetic rendering of the poet's belief in "the universal need for contact between all living creatures that runs through all of sentient nature and recognizes no boundaries of species or anything else."[36] In this poem we have the souls of men entering into a "blurred golden country" in which, says the narrator, "they more deeply lie/ Than if they were being created/ Of Heavenly light." The shadow-souls are said to be "Floating beyond/ Themselves" and at peace.

There is an exchange of sorts, nevertheless, as the

human souls move into the human shadows and in so doing become "More than human." In other words, by entering into the life of nature, the shadow-souls have entered into the transcendent cosmos. As the last stanza relates, these more than human shadow-souls become the object of worship for creatures who do not know why or how they are rejoicing at the event. But then, in the transcendent realm, the whys and hows do not matter any more.

In "Fog Envelops the Animals," from Drowning with Others, still another exchange occurs, as the narrator, out hunting in a dense fog, is suddenly aware that he has become one with the fog:

> At my knees, a cloud wears slowly
> Up out of the buried earth,
> In a white suit I stand waiting.
>
> Soundlessly whiteness is eating
> My visible self alive.
> I shall enter this world like the dead,
> Floating through tree trunks on currents
> And streams of untouchable pureness
>
> That shine without thinking of light.

In the next stanza, the narrator feels "my own long-hidden,/ Long-sought invisibility/ Come forth from my solid body./ I stand with all beasts in a cloud./ Of them I am deadly aware,/ And they not of me, in this life." With this tremendous advantage, the narrator is "Borne by the river of Heaven," drifting unseen "Through the hearts of the curdling oak trees" to where his prey will fall easily to his "arrows, keener

than snowflakes," while above his head "the trees exchange their arms/ In the purest fear upon earth./ Silence. Whiteness. Hunting." Here is the joy of the hunter able to enter into the wilderness of a "heavenly" hunting ground, into the poet's transcendent cosmos once more. In this poem we see a narrator who "exchanges" with the inanimate; he becomes one with the fog, and vice-versa. He also is able to get closer to the "grass-roots of being" where he is no longer cut off from "environing reality."

"Inside the River" is still another poem from Drowning with Others with an exchange as the central image, a poem about entering into the most direct contact with inanimate nature. In this poem, the narrator enters the river and in doing so puts it on "Like a fleeing coat,/ A garment of motion,/ Tremendous, immortal." Once entered, the narrator tells his reader to "Let flowing create/ A new, inner being." When you can feel the heart of the current, you must

> Wait for a coming
> And swimming idea.
> Live like the dead
> In their flying feeling.
> Loom as a ghost
> When life pours through it.
> Crouch in the secret
> Released underground.

The narrator then says that once you have become "born" again, you must

> Move with the world

As the deep dead move,
Opposed to nothing.
Release. Enter the sea
Like a winding wind.
No. Rise. Draw breath.
Sing. See no one.

Perhaps this poem may best be described as one which presents the reader with the "secret" of how to become one with nature, and of how to enter into a closer communion with nature--again, where man is not so much cut off from environing reality.

The next poem in the book, "The Salt Marsh," is a companion piece to "Inside the River." The poem describes a narrator who enters a marsh in which grows a particular kind of tall sawgrass, so tall, in fact, that "You no longer know where you are," and all you can see are the tall stalks. Since you have no sense of direction, you may become frightened. But if you can control your emotions, "Green panic may finally give/ Way to another sensation." When this happens, you may notice that the sawgrass is swaying,

Not bending enough for you
To see your way clear of the swaying,
But moving just the same,

And nothing prevents your bending
With them, helping their wave
Upon wave upon wave upon wave
By not opposing,
By willing your supple inclusion
Among fields without promise of harvest,
In their marvelous, spiritual walking
Everywhere, anywhere.

The message of these two poems seems to be that it is by just

such acts as "opposing" nature that man has lost his ability to know the universe as the primitive may have known it: on a more emotional level. Like the brother in the tree house poem, the narrators of these two poems have learned how to "move at the heart of the world" once again.

In Dickey's third book, Helmets, we find the poet still writing exchange poems. "Drinking from a Helmet" concerns a soldier who picks up another man's helmet to use as a cup, not daring to remove his own in the midst of combat. When he takes a drink, he sways "as if kissed in the brain" and realizes that he has inherited one of the dead who, because it was the day he died, could not "rise up," but whose "last thought hovers somewhere/ For whoever finds it." The narrator then has a vision in which he sees these last thoughts of the dead soldier, who was dreaming of home:

> I saw tremendous trees
> That would grow on the sun if they could,
> Towering, I saw a fence
> And two boys facing each other,
> Quietly talking,
> Looking at the gigantic redwoods,
> The rings in the trunks turning slowly
> To raise up stupendous green.

The soldier then vows to survive and go to the dead man's home, which he knows is somewhere in California, and take the dead man's helmet to the man's younger brother:

> I would ride through all
> California upon two wheels

Until I came to the white
Dirt road where they had been,
Hoping to meet his blond brother,
And 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:

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And tell him I was the man.

The spirit of the inherited soldier is so strong it causes the narrator to make a journey in search of a man's family, none of whom he has ever known. Not only does he vow to make the journey; he also vows to give himself to the brother as a replacement for the dead man. Or perhaps the narrator has been so "taken over" by his inherited spirit that he has literally "become" the dead man. If it is the latter situation, then the poem is about a case of possession rather than of exchange.

"Cherrylog Road," another poem from Helmets, tells a story of an exchange between human and inanimate nature. Two teen-age lovers have made a rendezvous in an abandoned automobile junkyard. The anxious narrator has gotten there early and amuses himself by poking about among the wrecks. He gradually works his way inward, "toward/ The weedy heart of the junkyard," for he knows that his girlfriend, Doris Holbrook,

Would escape from her father at noon

And would come from the farm
To seek parts owned by the sun
Among the abandoned chassis,

Sitting in each in turn
As I did, leaning forward
As in a wild stock-car race

In the parking lot of the dead.

The boy keeps moving closer to the center of the yard, becoming more anxious with each moment, until he breaks out in a sweat with each little sound he hears. Finally, "Through the acres of wrecks she came," Through dust where the blacksnake dies/ Of boredom, and the beetle knows/ The compost has no more life." They meet in the "oldest" car in the lot (since illicit love is the "oldest" profession), and they "make an exchange" with each other:

I held her and held her and held her,
Convoyed at terrific speed
By the stalled, dreaming traffic around us,
So the blacksnake, stiff
With inaction, curved back
Into life, and hunted the mouse

With deadly overexcitement,
The beetles reclaimed their field
As we clung, glued together,
With the hooks of the seat springs
Working through to catch us red-handed
Amidst the gray breathless batting

That burst from the seat at our backs.

Because the narrator has made an exchange with the junkyard, the beetles come back to life, and the cars "convoy" them at terrific speed. The snake returns to life and begins to hunt the mouse again. Even the seat springs come back to life. As the rendezvous ends, they leave "by separate doors," and

move off "Into the changed, other bodies/ Of cars"--changed because of the "exchange" between the narrator and the yard--as Doris Holbrook goes "down Cherrylog road"

> And I to my motorcycle
> Parked like the soul of the junkyard
>
> Restored, a bicycle fleshed
> With power, and tore off
> Up Highway 106, continually
> Drunk on the wind in my mouth,
> Wringing the handlebar for speed,
> Wild to be wreckage forever.

In this comedy of exchanges, even the motorcycle has inherited the soul of the junkyard; and as the narrator speeds off up the road, he still possesses one of the attributes of the junkyard--he is "Wild to be wreckage forever."

I want to proceed now to those poems in Helmets which I term "failed exchange" poems. These are the first of Dickey's poems to exhibit narrators who are unable to move from the immanent to the transcendent world. "Winter Trout" concerns the attempt of a hunter to shoot a fish with bow and arrow. He fails to hit the mark, however, and tells us that he keeps that arrow as a reminder of his failure. The first stanzas describe the "dream of living" which the trout experiences while still in the hatchery. As the fish leaves its birthplace, it moves into its "rightful world" of the river, where even the smallest "tremors of his form" cause the banks "to shift imperceptibly,/ Shift back, tremble, settle,/ Shift, all within utter stillness." The narrator then recalls the

first time he tried to shoot winter trout:

I keep in my quiver now

An arrow whose head is half-missing.
It is useless, but I will not change
The pulled, broken tooth of its head
For I have walked upon banks

Shaken with the watchfulness of trout
Like walking barefoot in sleep
On the swaying tips of a grainfield,
On the long, just-bending stems.

The narrator continues the story, telling of how

I set myself up as a statue

With a bow, my red woolen back
Climbed slowly by thoughtful brambles
And dead beggar-lice, to shoot
At an angle down through the shadow

Of ice. and spear the trout
With a shot like Ulysses'
Through the ax heads, with the great weapon.
I shot, and the trout did not move

But was gone, and the banks
Went rigid under my feet
As the arrow floated away
Under the paving of ice.

I froze my right hand to retrieve it
As a blessing or warning,
As a sign of the penalties
For breaking into closed worlds

Where the wary controllers lie
At the heart of their power,
A pure void of shadowy purpose
Where the gods live, attuning the world.

In this new vision, with the narrator exclaiming that there are penalties for "breaking into closed worlds," we see

Dickey's narrator being refused entrance into his transcendent realm, unable to become one with the natural world. An interesting contrast can be seen between this poem and "The Summons," and also "Fog Envelops the Animals," whose narrators were invincible hunters.

The companion poem to "Winter Trout" is "Springer Mountain." They are printed next to each other in Helmets and their stories are much the same--of narrators unable to enter "closed worlds." In "Springer Mountain" the narrator is on a deer hunt, during winter, with bow and arrow. As morning comes he sees a deer, and as he watches it he imagines that the animal has had a "dream of the unfeared hunter/ Who has formed in his brain in the dark." The hunter hangs his bow on a branch and proceeds to take off his clothes and run down the mountain after the deer:

> Through trees and around, inside
> And out of stumps and groves
> Of laurel and slash pine,
> Through hip-searing branches and thorn
> Brakes, unprotected and sure,
> Winding down to the waters of life
> Where they stand petrified in a creek bed
> Yet melt and flow from the hills
> At the touch of an animal visage,
>
> Rejoicing wherever I come to
> With the gold of my breast unwrapped.
> My crazed laughter pure as good church-cloth
> My brain dazed and pointed with trying
> To grow horns, glad that it cannot,
> For a few steps deep in the dance
> Of what I most am and should be
> And can be only once in this life.

The deer, however, cannot be caught, and the hunter finds himself unable to enter "into a ritual dance with the animal," which is the meaning the poet ascribes to the poem.[37] Instead of fulfilling his quest, the hunter is humilated and becomes

> A middle-aged, softening man
> Grinning and shaking his head
> In amazement to last him forever.
> I put on the warm-bodied wool,
> The four sweaters inside out,
> The bootlaces dangling and tripping,
> Then pick my tense bow off the limb
> And turn with the unwinding hooftracks,
> In my good, tricked clothes,
> To hunt, under Springer Mountain,
> Deer for the first and last time.

The hunter has failed even though he was willing to strip himself of his weapon and his clothing, in an attempt to remove all evidence of the civilized world and come to the deer on its own terms. Perhaps the poet is saying that it takes more than a removal of superficial differences to make a man able to enter the natural world. Perhaps he has come to believe that he no longer belongs in that world.

There are two more poems in Helmets with the theme of "failed exchange." One of these, however, might be considered only a partial failure. "Approaching Prayer" tells of a man whose father has died recently. The son has not been able to say those things which a son should have said to his father, and now it is too late. So the son goes to his father's house to pray, hoping that by being close to his father's belongings

he will be able to pray more effectively. At the end of the poem, the narrator says that the right words "may have been somehow said" even though they might not have been heard. This, however, is only the barest outline. Though the narrator is not certain that he has succeeded, he hopes that he has. The situation is similar to the narrator's in "Springer Mountain" in that both men made the attempt but neither was completely successful, despite the outlandish methods each used and the lengths each went to in pursuit of his goal. In this sense, the poems are much alike. But where one narrator strips himself and throws away his weapon in the hope of being admitted to some transcendent realm, the other gathers up his father's clothes and puts them on--and even goes so far as to strap on his father's gamecock spurs and cover his head with an old boar's head trophy, believing that his words might be helped by these additions. Though he is able, dressed in this manner, to experience a vision of what the boar felt like as it was killed, the narrator remains unconvinced of the efficacy of his appurtenances, and he goes away at the end hoping that the "irrelevancies one thinks of/ When trying to pray/ Are the prayer."

The other poem of "failed exchange" in Helmets was printed next to "Approaching Prayer." "The Driver" is a much more explicit poem of failure than any Dickey has yet written. The poem is set at the end of the war, and the narrator, filled with the joy of peace, walks down to the beach of the Pacific island where he is stationed. As he walks along

singing, he continues out into the water. Below him he can see the sunken remains of amphibious landing-craft which did not make it to the beach-head on invasion day. The narrator lets himself sink until he drops into the driver's seat of one wrecked craft, and then imagines he is driving "through the country of the drowned/ On a sealed secret-keeping breath,/ Ten feet under water." He muses upon the war, but admits that he neither knows why he is alive and others not, nor even why he is sitting at "the wheel of a craft in a wave/ Of attack that broke upon coral." At that moment, almost out of breath, the narrator realizes that he is literally in it over his head; and in one last effort to make an exchange,

> "I become pure spirit," I tried
> To say, in a bright smoke of bubbles,
> But I was becoming no more
> Than haunted, for to be so
> Is to sink out of sight, and to lose
> The power of speech in the presence
> Of the dead, with the eyes turning green,
>
> And to leap at last for the sky
> Very nearly too late, where another

had tried before him and died instead. That man was the driver who went down in the same half-track on invasion day, and the man whose breath is even now "Dazzling and huge, filled with sunlight,/ For thousands of miles on the water." One might also say that it is thousands of miles from <u>becoming pure spirit to being no more than haunted</u>, which shows how far Dickey has come as well. The narrators who began by changing

places with the dead and becoming possessed by their ancestors, now end by almost drowning because of their fantasies, or freezing half to death while standing naked in the snow.

This shift in method which we see here--from exchanges to failed exchanges--is similar to the poet's shift from phase one to phase two poems in his treatment of Biblical and classical myths. Accordingly, I consider Dickey's failed exchange poems as "phase two" in his uses of primitivism and primitive mythology. Although this shift has come about a year later than the shift in his uses of Biblical and classical myths, still there appears to be a similar shift in method at nearly the same time in the poet's development.

As I have said before, I believe that there is a fairly coherent vision being presented in Dickey's first three published books of poems, and that the poet was very much aware of creating this vision. Nonetheless, the vision is certainly more coherent in the phase one poems than in phase two. We can only guess why Dickey begins to give up his Cosmos--which is practically gone by his fourth book. In Richard Howard's words again, Dickey has moved steadily from a poetry of Processes to a poetry of Presences, and from there to a poetry of Persons.[38] Perhaps Dickey felt that he might become a victim of mythomania. As he says in "The Driver": "'I become pure spirit,' I tried/ To say...But I was becoming no more/ Than haunted, for to be so/ Is to sink out of sight, and to lose/ The power of speech..."

Still other reasons for moving out of his Cosmos may well

appear in these passages from Self-Interviews:

> You shouldn't expect a consistent philosophical attitude from a poet. Some such may emerge from his work. But I think it's a serious mistake on the poet's part to try to make his work coherent as far as a rational structure is concerned...Any kind of self-consistency would be fine if it simply happens, but I don't think the poet should seek it out.[39]

This statement was, of course, written after the "fact" of much of his poetry. The next quotation is from the same paragraph:

> The larger consistency that the body of a poet's work should have, should come from the totality of the poet's personality, including all its contradictions. It took me a long time to find that out.[40]

The "key" phrase here would seem to be "It took me a long time to find that out," which perhaps indicates that he became aware of the mythical hobgoblin that was consistently with him and decided to shuck him off. But whatever the reason, Dickey's next two books are a world apart from the first three in most respects.

Notes For Chapter IV

[1]See chapter one, p. 3, and Notes for Chapter I, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 for the sources of these quotations.

[2]James Dickey, Sorties (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 39.

[3]Sorties, p. 40.

[4]Sorties, p. 63.

[5]See Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1926), p. 32.

[6]James Dickey, Self-Interviews (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1972), p. 90.

[7]Self-Interviews, pp. 90-1.

[8]See chapter one, p. 4, and pp. 7-8, for this discussion.

[9]Self-Interviews, p. 36.

[10]A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, The Andaman Islanders (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1948), p. 229.

[11]Myth in Primitive Psychology, p. 11.

[12]The numerous "hippie" communes, for example.

[13]John N. Findlay, Psyche and Cerebrum (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1972), p. 4.

[14]Myth in Primitive Psychology, p. 36.

[15]See Chapter one, p.

[16]See The Andaman Islanders, p. 321, for examples of such cases of possession.

[17]See W. H. R. Rivers, The History of Melanesian Society (Cambridge: University Press, 1914), at the beginning of almost every chapter, where he discusses family relationships among the various tribes. See also I, 35, for a specific example.

[18]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 35.

[19]See The History of Melansian Society, I, 50-5.

[20]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 37.

[21]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 308.

[22]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 308.

[23]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 204.

[24]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 36.

[25]The Andaman Islanders, p. 91.

[26]Self-Interviews, p. 89.

[27]The first is "The Cypresses," Quarterly Review of Literature, IX (Winter 1958), 269-70.

[28]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 78. See also The Andaman Islanders, p. 91.

[29]See The Andaman Islanders, p. 321, and The History of Melanesian Society, I, 164-5.

[30]See The Andaman Islanders, p. 91.

[31]See The History of Melanesian Society, I, 321.

[32]Self-Interviews, p. 111.

[33]The History of Melanesian Society, I, 210.

[34]Myth in Primitive Psychology, p. 37.

[35]Howard Nemerov, "Poems of Darkness and a Specialized Light," Sewanee Review, LXXI (Winter 1963), 103.

[36]Self-Interviews, p. 165.

[37]Self-Interviews, p. 126.

[38]Richard Howard, "On James Dickey," Partisan Review, XXXIII (1966), 416.

[39]Self-Interviews, p. 120.

[40]Self-Interviews, p. 121.

Chapter V

Great Shimmering Walls of Words

In 1966, James Dickey was given the National Book Award for Buckdancer's Choice, his fourth book of poems. With this book, the poet also began what I call "phase three" of his poetic career. In this phase, we see the poet's first use of what he has called his "split-line" technique, which was his attempt to get away from the three-beat anapestic line that dominated almost all the poems in his first three published books.[1] We see as well a number of other changes in Dickey's poetic vision. There are much longer poems than before. Some of these are well over two hundred lines ("The Firebombing" and "Reincarnation (II)"), while others are almost as long ("The Shark's Parlor," "Slave Quarters," "The Fiend," and "Falling"). One poem, "May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Geoegia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church," fulfills the "promise" of its title, being over three hundred lines. Although he had written some rather long poems before this book, some of which were nearly as long as these later ones,[2] they were almost all written in Dickey's three-beat line which makes "The Owl King," for example, only about half as long in terms of the number of words it contains as "Falling." Up to this time, Dickey's "average" poem had been about forty lines.

There are other changes in these later poems. Although he has not rejected "exchanges" and reincarnations as poetic devices, he begins to rely less and less upon them. The narrators who before were presented as gods or as god-like beings, and who were said to have performed superhuman feats, are now only mortals who occasionally may remind us of a Prometheus, as does the narrator of "The Firebombing," or of the Earth-mother, as in "Falling." It is as if the poet has descended from his "transcendent cosmos" in order to look at the world from a more ordinary human perspective. Moreover, along with this movement from the divine to the human we also see these narrators change from self-centered beings (what one critic has termed Dickey's "intense, pious, harmless narcissism")[3] to beings aware of others and of the importance of their relationships to others.

In Dickey's first book, for example, there are only two poems of the twenty-four which are concerned with the fate of persons other than the narrators themselves or their immediate families, and these two poems concern their comrades from the war.[4] Certainly it may be said that a universe limited to one's self, family, and close friends is a rather limited one. In Dickey's second book, which contains thirty-six poems, only two appear which can be thought of as poems concerning persons other than one's self, family, and comrades. The narrator of "The Lifeguard," for example, is deeply distraught by the death of a boy whom he does not even remember seeing "in this life." Yet the poem is not about this boy's drown-

ing, but about the life-guard's failure to live up to his role. In fact, the only poem which might be said to extend itself from this self-centered cosmos is "Drowning with Others," a poem about the common plight of all humanity.

It is only from his third book on that the poet's narrators begin to develop what might be termed a "conscious awareness of others." There are seven poems in this third book, nine poems in the fourth book, and twelve in the fifth[5] which may be said to exhibit specific interest in the welfare of mankind. It is not surprising, then,that this movement toward an interest in others closely parallels the poet's "descent" from the transcendent to the immanent world.

At least one other critic has commented upon these developments in Dickey's poetry. Richard Howard sees the poetry of Into the Stone as "a first book of Orphic utterance" in which "the self would put off time and matter and enter the universe of eternal being."[6] This poetry, Howard continues, is in part characterized by a "devotion to the divine Other,"[7] where the "self has its absences in eternity, then recurs in time."[8] Speaking of Dickey's second book, Drowning with Others, Howard observes that although there is "an impulse to break out of the archetypal spirals and into a linear history," nevertheless at this stage Dickey is still "a poet of processes rather than of particular presences, and of presences rather than persons, in his apprehension of nature as of selfhood."[9] Speaking of Helmets, Dickey's third book, Howard states:

> From the magical submersion of Drowning with Others, the defrocked poet rises or at least advances into a world without explicit ceremony, conscious of his task and, dispossessed of his ministry, ready to confront his heritage: he must invent his own....The poet is no longer a necromancer, a magus, but a man speaking to himself, for others....[10]

Commenting further upon his idea that Dickey must now invent "his own" heritage, Howard says:

> In thematic control, in sureness of their subject, these are poems so resolved that one would be at a loss--and quite happy to be there--to define the point where the poet's abiding struggle with himself might be located, were it not for the aura of incantation, of litany that Dickey still employs, even though he has steadily, painfully rid himself of the ritual imagination. Or rather even though he has rejected the ritual as something given, and has instead cast it ahead of himself as something to be found, invented.[11]

Here, by the end of Helmets, Howard maintains as I do that Dickey has by and large finally reported for "duty" in the immanent world.

In his discussion of Dickey's next book, Howard says that although Dickey will always "retain, for strategic use, the rhythms he had early developed to be those in which he most naturally addresses himself, entrusts his consciousness to the language, it is evident that a formal metamorphosis must occur, after Helmets, to accommodate the other change, the transformation of ritual into romance, which Dickey has effected in his poetry."[12]

Going on to Buckdancer's Choice, Howard says that this

metamorphosis has occurred in Dickey's prize-winning book

> With such a rush of impulse that the reader of earlier collections, having come to expect the somnambulistic forms of Dickey's imagination of recurrence, will be jarred by the immediacy, the brutality of disjunct actions, performed once and, however celebrated, done away with. There are, of course, reminders....But for the most part, Dickey's universe, and the measures which accommodate and express his phenomenology of exchange, has ceased to be one of eternal return, of enchantment. Instead, once out of eternity, the poet confronts and laments (exults over) the outrage of individual death, of a linear movement within time--each event and each moment being unique, therefore lost....That is the penalty of the historical imagination; its reward is the awareness of others, always incipient in this poet, but never before, by the very system of his discourse, explicit.[13]

Howard goes on to discuss what he terms the poet's movement "outward upon a real world, magic discarded like Prospero's books drowned and the natural man acknowledged--dolefully, awkwardly, but inevitably" so,[14] as he begins to acknowledge "what he knows to be the distinction between recurrence and reality, the dissension between the incantatory ageless order of transcendence with its themes of hierarchy, immutability and terror, and on the other side the prosaic, mortal accommodation of immanence with its themes of becoming, of change, waste and desperation."[15]

Although Howard's terminology and mine are different in some respects, and even though his viewpoint remains (by the very system of his discourse) more general than mine, we are essentially in agreement. We both see a poet moving his narrators from a realm of being to one of becoming, moving

from divinity to humanity. Even the verse medium--the new line--is no longer the mesmerizing three-beat anapest so emblematic of the earlier poems, which were filled with divine presences, and so reminiscent of primitive drumbeats, the rhythms of ritual. But they are not completely gone. Even through Falling Dickey still calls upon this type of poem, which H. L. Weatherby first called the "exchange" poem.[16] Dickey has continued, as Howard has noted, to use this particular type of poem, although he uses it less and less frequently than before. Dickey has also begun to treat these exchanges differently. In his first books, he made his exchanges between all kinds of beings: divine, angelic, the dead, human, animal, vegetable, mineral. In Helmets, however, Dickey began to write poems of "failed" exchanges, of narrators who were denied admittance to "closed worlds." In Buckdancer's Choice and in Falling, some of Dickey's narrators are successful in their exchanges, still others only make "connections," and still others have "encounters" but no exchanges. In these two books, the emphasis is upon "connections," upon communication between worlds.

Another result of this shift in movement from the transcendent to the immanent may be seen in the poet's use of point of view. If one looks at the points of view of all the narrators in Dickey's Poems: 1957-1967, he will find that out of one hundred and eleven poems in the collection, only twenty-five (or about twenty percent) have other than first person narrators. Even more interesting is the breakdown into the

five separate books. In Into the Stone, all sixteen poems are first person narrations; in Drowning with Others, twenty-three of the twenty-six poems are first person narrations; in Helmets, sixteen of the twenty-two poems are first person narrations; in Buckdancer's Choice, thirteen of the twenty-two poems are first person narrations; in Falling, sixteen of the twenty-five poems are first person narrations. Another way to view these "statistics" is to say that Buckdancer's Choice has as many non-first person narrators as do the first three books combined, and that Dickey's last two books, which contain little more than one-third of the total poems, contain two-thirds of the poems with other than first person narrators. Whereas about nine of ten poems in Dickey's first three books are narrated in the first person, only about two of three poems in Dickey's next two books are narrated in the first person. The assumption behind these comments is, of course, that the first person point of view is more likely to result in an egocentric attitude in poems than the second or third person point of view.

Still another characteristic of these later poems is that many of them are different from the earlier method. In the poems of phase one and phase two, Dickey constructed his poems around the image of some mythological figure and, usually, some details from that figure's myth. Thus there were poems based upon the Biblical figures of Christ, Adam, and Noah, for example, and I discussed these in chapter two. But the later poems, while alluding to some of these same Biblical figures, are much broader in their scope in that

their emphasis is not limited to presentations of mythological figures so much as the earlier poems were. In addition, some of these later poems, such as "The Firebombing," contain allusions both to Biblical and classical figures, and so discussing the poems by divisions of Biblical and classical myths would prove awkward. Therefore, I am abandoning any "categories" and discussing these later poems chronologically.[17]

"Reincarnation (I)," from Buckdancer's Choice, is like the earlier "exchange" poems but different too. In this poem the narrator speaks in the third person. He is imagining a man who has been reincarnated as a snake. Since the narrator takes the omniscient point of view, he tells us what is going on in the mind of the snake, which is

> feeling his life as a man move slowly away.
> Fallen from that estate, he has gone down on his knees
> And beyond, disappearing into the egg buried under the sand
> And wakened to the low world being born, consisting now
> Of the wheel on its side not turning, but leaning to rot away
> In the sun a few feet farther off than it is for any man.

Here is the Dickey of old, seeing the world from a viewpoint familiar to his readers, as the narrator probes the meaning of existence for the man-turned-snake. Yet here is also a new Dickey metric: the line is long--as long, in fact, as the page will permit.[18] It is a line more like prose than

the insistent three-beat anapest of the earlier poems. Its length is dictated by the page, not the stresses, and it is tending toward alliteration in order to keep some sense of regular rhythm.

The narrator continues his description of the snake's world in such a way as to leave no doubt in the reader's mind that this snake is performing a special function--a mythical function:

> He has come by gliding, by inserting the head
> between stems.
> Everything follows that as naturally as the creation
> Of the world, leaving behind arms and legs, leaving
> behind
> The intervals between tracks, leaving one long waver-
> ing step
> In sand and none in grass: he moves through, moving
> nothing,
> And the grass stands as never entered. It is in the
> new
> Life of resurrection that one can come in one's own
> good time

and wait, for the act of waiting is "a symbol of evil." But the waiting is

> Not for food, but for the first man to walk by the
> gentle river:
> Minute by minute the head becomes more poisonous and
> poised.
>
> Here in the wheel is the place to wait, with the eye-
> lids unclosable,
> Unanswerable the tongue occasionally listening,
> this time
> No place in the body desiring to burn the tail away
> or to warn,
> But only to pass on, handless, what yet may be trans-
> ferred

> In a sudden giving-withdrawing move, like a county judge striking a match.

At the end of the poem, the reader learns that the poem has not occurred merely to allow him a vision of the world from the snake's point of view, as was the case in many of the poet's previous "exchange" poems.[19] It is this particular exchange, with a snake, which the poet is interested in. For him, the snake is a symbol of evil, plainly stated. Yet it is also more, as the poem demonstrates. The snake is a judge, pretty much the same kind of judge as the Biblical serpent; it functions as God's instrument of justice. It is the natural world's counterpart, says the poet, of man's "county judge," famous as a deliverer of a kind of "rough justice," as in frontier days. Even though a man has been reincarnated as a snake, and even though he has gradually lost his life as a man, there is still a "connection" between that animal and man, which is a variation, as I see it, upon Dickey's "theme" of the need for connections[20] between all of nature--even if the connection turns out to be a deadly one. In fact, this poem is like others in these two books in that it is about the dangers inherent in "connecting" different worlds.[21] Here again we have the poet mythologizing his experiences, only this time from a new point of view--and having his narrator claim that the experiences are someone else's.

"Pursuit from Under," another poem from Buckdancer's Choice, is about "how the downed dead pursue us." Its theme

is something like that of several earlier poems--"The Underground Stream" and "Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek."[22] In both these earlier poems we saw the poet's narrators making exchanges with the dead who (apparently) reside underground. In any event, the dead in these two poems rise from underground and exchange places with the narrators. In "Pursuit from Under," however, no exchange takes place. That one will take place, though, is not left in doubt. The only question is "when."

The narrator of this poem is once again the "I" figure, and he is presented to us walking barefoot in late August, recalling an experience he had as a boy. As he walks about his father's land, he hears "what passes for the bark of seals," just as he heard them as a boy. He recalls also that

> The dark grass here is like
> The pads of mukluks going on and on
>
> Because I once burned kerosene to read
> Myself near the North Pole
> In the journal of Arctic explorers
> Found years after death, preserved
> In a tent, part of whose canvas they had eaten
>
> Before the last entry.

One entry, however, carries "more terror/ Than the blank page that signified death/ In 1912, on the icecap." The page relates the following: under the ice,

The killer whale darts and distorts,
Cut down by the flawing glass

To a weasel's shadow,
And when, through his ceiling, he sees
Anything darker than snow
He falls away
To gather more and more force

From the iron depths of cold water,
His shadow dwindling

Almost to nothing at all, then charges
Straight up, looms up at the ice and smashes
Into it with his forehead
To splinter the roof, to isolate seal or man
On a drifting piece of the floe

Which he can overturn.
If you run, he will follow you

Under the frozen pane,
Turning as you do, zigzagging,

and, of course, no one can escape. And you know, continues the narrator, "the unsaid recognition/ Of which the explorers died:/ They had been given an image/ Of how the downed dead pursue us." They knew

That not only in the snow
But in the family field

The small shadow moves,
And under bare feet in the summer:
That somewhere the turf will leave,
And the outraged breath of the dead,
So long held, will form

Unbreathably around the living.

What appears to be a poem much like earlier ones has instead become part of another set of experiences. No longer a "friendly" exchange between the living and the dead--as in

"The Underground Stream," between the narrator and his brother, or as in "Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek," between the narrator and his ancestors--we have, rather, a poem from a human narrator with human fears about death, which he symbolizes with this killer-whale myth: he is going to die, and even as he walks his father's fields remembering his childhood, he recognizes "a small bidden shape" from beneath which follows him. But there is no joyous "acceptance" or "compliance" such as the hooved animals were said to feel upon being torn to pieces by predators in "The Heaven of Animals." There is instead this fatalistic conclusion: "I shall write this by kerosene,/ Pitch a tent in the pasture, and starve."

This is a new vision, spoken by a man who is seeing the world from a human perspective. In this world, the narrator recognizes not only a "new" kind of death but something of its inevitability and its finality as well. Even the irregular line lengths, some short, some very long, but none too orderly, are an indication that the poet has entered a world which falls somewhat short of perfection. Although the myth or mythlike situation is there in the poem, it serves not as a way into the transcendent cosmos but as a symbol of that "one remaining obscenity" in our immanent world. Over half the poems in Buckdancer's Choice are about death, and most of them are about this new kind of death. There are holocausts, heart attacks, automobile wrecks, burials and murder. Dickey's previous book, Helmets, con-

tained only two poems about the death of humans.[23]

"The Firebombing" is the most remarkable poem in this collection. Its protagonist is a suburban householder who had once flown on an "anti-morale" raid against a Japanese resort town. Twenty years later this ex-pilot is poking around in his well-stocked pantry when he begins to re-live the raid. His mind wanders in free-association between his surburban life and that mission, switching back and forth between them until he is no longer able to distinguish between his imagination and reality. This is an appropriate state of mind for him to have, because his dilemma is that he feels no guilt for his actions but wishes to. He is envious of those who can and feels somehow cheated. Also appropriate is the conclusion of the poem, in which nothing is concluded--for him. He remains unable to feel guilt for his actions but feels that he should do so.

The poem ends in irony--which is where it began. The first line is "Homeowners unite." This slogan, which the narrator may have either just heard on the radio or perhaps seen in a newspaper headline, triggers memories of the firebombing and he thinks: "All families lie together, though some are burned alive." From this ironic juxtaposition, his mind moves to another thought: "The others try to feel/ For them. Some can, it is often said." In four lines Dickey has managed to compress the essential problem of his narrator, who reveals his detachment from it all with the phrases "The others try to feel" and "Some can, it is often said."

The ex-pilot does not really believe that others can feel guilt. The word "others" refers to no one, and the use of the passive form "it is often said" reminds one of the nameless entity who hides behind the editorial "we" and who hopes by doing so to give the impression that many others share his point of view. So too the surburban householder, who secretly believes there are many more like him who feel nothing. There is, after all, safety in numbers, so long as your numbers have not been collectively decimated in a holocaust.

From this detachment, the narrator shifts himself in memory some twenty years and finds himself re-living the mission:

> Snap, a bulb is tricked on in the cockpit
>
> And some technical-minded stranger with my hands
> Is sitting in a glass treasure-hole of blue light,
> Having potential fire under the undeordorized arms
> Of his wings, on thin bomb-shackles,
> The "tear-drop-shaped" 300 gallon drop-tanks
> Filled with napalm and gasoline.

Here the reader discovers that though the narrator refers to his younger self as a "stranger," he cannot hide the fact that twenty years in the suburbs have not changed his detachment from the event. That he has not changed is evidenced also by the grotesque puns: "the undeodorized arms/ Of his wings" and the "tear-drop-shaped" napalm tanks. In fact, the narrator is not simply the pilot; he has become the aircraft.

In his "treasure-hole of blue light," sustained by his canteen of "combat booze," the pilot "sails artistically over" the resort town where "Five thousand people are sleeping off/ An all-day American drone." Yet he pauses to comment that "Twenty years in the suburbs have not shown me/ Which ones were hit and which not," and then says:

> Think of this think of this
>
> I did not think of my house
> But think of my house now
>
> Where the lawn mower rests on its laurels
> Where the diet exists
> For my own good where I try to drop
> Twenty years, eating figs in the pantry
> Blinded by each and all
> Of the eye-catching cans that gladly have caught
> my wife's eye

and which now remind him of the "eye-catching" explosions of the napalm that connected the roofs of houses and made "a town burning with all/ American fire." It is a fire, he says,

> developed to cling
> To everything: to golf carts and fingernail
> Scissors as yet unborn tennis shoes
> Grocery baskets toy fire engines
> New Buicks stalled by the half-moon
> Shining at midnight on crossroads green paint
> Of jolly garden tools red Christmas ribbons:
>
> Not atoms, these, but glue inspired
> By love of country to burn,
> The apotheosis of gelatin.

Not only has he been denied the knowledge of how his victims must have died but of anything connected with them, and he has to describe it all in terms of familiar American utensils. Thus we get Buicks instead of rickshas, and Christmas ribbons in place of Bhuddist shrines. Part of the pilot's inability to empathize has to do with his ignorance.

It is from this myopic point of view that the pilot can drop his bombs,

> Singing and twisting
> All the handles in heaven kicking
> The small cattle off their feet
> In a red costly blast
> Flinging jelly over the walls
> As in a chemical war-
> fare field demonstration.

From his point of view, it is all no different from a dry run, a military exercise. Yet the suburban householder knows better, and he pauses to reflect that

> With fire of mine like a cat
>
> Holding onto another man's walls,
> My hat should crawl on my head
> In streetcars, thinking of it,
> The fat on my body should pale.

But nothing like this happens to him, and the narrator knows that unless he can come to feel guilt for his actions, with this knowledge "in the dark of the mind,"

Death will not be what it should;
Will not, even now, even when
My exhaled face in the mirror
Of bars, dilates in a cloud like Japan.
The death of children is ponds
Shutter-flashing; responding mirrors; it climbs
The terraces of hills
Smaller and smaller, a mote of red dust
At a hundred feet; and a hundred and one
    it goes out.
That is what should have got in
To my eye

and shown him "the insides of houses," shown him people dying in agony, as their heads exploded "with a roar/ Of Chicago fire."

The narrator knows also that "when those on earth/ Die, there is not even sound" because

One is cool and enthralled in the cockpit,
Turned blue by the power of beauty,
In a pale treasure-hole of soft light
Deep in aesthetic contemplation...
It is this detachment,
The honored aesthetic evil,
The greatest sense of power in one's life
That must be shed

But the only means of atonement which the narrator can envision is becoming drunk in the hope that alcohol can "soften" his heart, or by means of "starvation/ Visions in well-stocked pantries." And yet all this pales as the overweight homeowner loses himself again in the beauty of the bombs bursting beneath him and the vision of the clouds streaming from the engines like flags:

My body covered
With flags, the air of flags
Between the engines.
Forever do I sleep in that position,
Forever in a turn
For home that breaks out streaming banners
From my wingtips,
Wholly in position to admire.

This is the language of a man who has had a truly spiritual experience--but has had it, ironically, by inflicting pure hell upon others. No wonder, then, that as a mere mortal he cannot even begin to resolve his paradox. Nor will he ever, for after re-living all this, he is still hungry,

Still twenty years overweight, still unable
To get down there or see
What really happened.

And it may be, he continues, "that I could not,/ If I tried," imagine anything

With its ears crackling off
Like powdery leaves,
Nothing with children of ashes, nothing not
Amiable, gentle, well-meaning
A little nervous for no
Reason a little worried a little too loud
Or too easygoing nothing I haven't lived with
For twenty years, still nothing not as
American as I am, and proud of it.

Absolution? Sentence? No matter;
The thing itself is in that.

Even the cryptic last two lines serve to demonstrate how confused the narrator has become. Far from bringing him the

thing he most desires, his vision has left him no better off than before.

If the protagonist had been able to change places with his victims, he would be able to feel guilt. But imagination is not enough, and the pilot must remain in his emotionless limbo which has been created for him in the form of a technological marvel of machinery and, ironically, provided by others as American as he is and just as proud of it. For the overweight ex-pilot, there will be no possibility of salvation, no easy escape into some transcendent realm. He is a human narrator who only temporarily becomes godlike, and even then only in the gleam of "deranged, Old Testament light." He is a man presented as a grotesque parody of Prometheus whose gift of fire is a curse rather than a blessing. These elements--exchanges, godlike beings, magical powers--which are so familiar from Dickey's earlier poems combine in "The Firebombing" in a new way: they become part of a poem about a human whose tragedy is that he must remain human.

"The Shark's Parlor," also from Buckdancer's Choice, is a serio-comic tale of two young boys who catch a hammerhead shark. The poem is both an "initiation" ceremony and an encounter with "a moiling of secret forces." It is a poem which has Biblical, classical and literary allusions. It contains echoes of primitive superstition. It is reminiscent of Dagon, the shark god, from Egyptian mythology. Anyone who has read Moby Dick will recognize the shark as one

of those "pasteboard masks" behind which lies reality. The poem also owes something to the "fisherman's tall tale."

The poem is like a tapestry, woven from the fabric of memory of the narrator who recalls the event from his childhood:

> Memory: I can take my head and strike it on
> a wall on Cumberland Island
> Where the night tide came crawling under the
> stairs came up the first
> Two or three steps and the cottage stood on
> poles all night
> With the sea sprawled under it as we dreamed
> of the great fin circling
> Under the bedroom floor. In daylight there was
> my first brassy taste of beer
> And Payton Ford and I came back from the Glynn
> County slaughterhouse
> With a bucket of entrails and blood.

The two boys, drunk on their first beer and on their first taste of manhood as well, row out and cast their "blood on the waters" and bait the shark-hook with "a run-over collie pup." Then they sit drinking beer on the porch of their "vacation paradise" and wait there with blood on their minds. When the shark finally strikes, it almost pulls the flimsy cottage to pieces. The boards begin "to sparkle like sand/ With the glinting of the bright hidden parts of ten-year-old-nails/ Pulling out," which symbolically ties together the "pulling out" of the boys' manhood as well as the shark from its element, exposing its reality. Then Payton Ford, realizing that they have gotten hold of more than they can handle, leaves the narrator and goes to get help. Unable

to hold the shark, the narrator wraps the line around his wrist and is immediately jerked off the porch, which is reminiscent of whaling stories in which men become tangled in the harpoon lines.

But the narrator somehow manages to scramble back to the house where he finds that the whole town has come to his rescue. Then they begin a tug-of-war which ends with the shark coming up

> The front stairs the sagging boards still
> coming in up taking
> Another step toward the empty house where the
> rope stood straining
> By itself through the rooms in the middle of
> the air. "Pass the word,"
> Payton said, and I screamed it: "Let up, good
> God, let up!" to no one there.
> The shark flopped on the porch, grating with
> salt-sand driving back in
> The nails he had pulled out coughing chunks
> of his formless blood.
> The screen door banged and tore off he scrambled
> on his tail slid
> Curved did a thing from another world and
> was out of his element and in
> Our vacation paradise cutting all four legs
> from under the dinner table
> With one deep-water move he unwove the rugs
> in a moment throwing pints
> Of blood over everything we owned knocked
> the buck teeth out of my picture
> His odd head full of crushed jelly-glass splinters
> and radio tubes thrashing
> Among the pages of fan magazines all the
> movie stars drenched in sea-blood.
> Each time we thought he was dead he struggled
> back and smashed
> One more thing in all coming back to die
> three or four more times after death.

At last they get him out, cut the line, and let the shark drift out to sea, back to his proper setting. The encounter

with this "deeper element of reality" has done more, however, than wreck their "vacation paradise." The narrator must buy the wrecked cottage, but does so gladly because of "the one black mark still there" on the wall of the house. And he becomes "a forehead-/toucher," able to regain some of that deeper reality whenever he places his forehead against the "Blood hard as iron on the wall." This act becomes the narrator's way of "connecting" with that reality which lies just behind appearances. Since he is a human, there are no more "exchanges." There are only connections, because connections are the new "way" in the immanent world.

Just as there are exchanges and failed exchanges in Dickey's earlier poems, there are connections and failed connections in the later ones. "The Fiend" is about a voyeur who becomes so frustrated because of his failure to make a "connection" that he commits murder. In a sense, he is a middle-aged extension of the sex-happy teenager in "Cherrylog Road." Unlike that boy, however, the fiend is the kind of man not one of those whom he beholds would ever give as much as a second look. Not surprisingly, this middle-aged voyeur bears some close resemblances to the middle-aged ex-pilot of "The Firebombing." Both are detached from the world, each of their visions is the "wrong" vision, and each kills humans whom he does not even know. It is as if Dickey were writing variations upon a theme.

The fiend is also thoroughly human, even ordinary: "a worried accountant" in "a seersucker suit." Here is the

new vision of the poet once more, as he continues making puns. For what other kind of suit is appropriate for a voyeur to wear, if not that of a "seer?" His hat has a "natural gambler's tilt" to it as he sits in tall trees, half-hidden, almost invisible, gambling that he will "see" yet not be seen. Here we see also Dickey's new comic vision, as the voyeur is accompanied by trees, leaves, and birds which seem to respond to his vision:

> He coughs, and the smallest root responds and
> in his lust he is set
> By the wind in motion. That movement can re-
> store the green eyes
> Of middle age looking renewed through
> the qualified light

--qualified because it is no superhuman vision of life, even though he thinks he feels

> The tree with him ascending himself and the birds
> all moving
> In darkness together crumbling the bark in
> their claws

as he "holds in his awkward, subtle limbs the limbs/ Of a hundred understanding trees." How appropriate, too, that the pathetic little accountant mistakes the "pathetic fallacy" for godlike powers. It is, after all, only "a purely human light" which "Comes out of a one-man oak."

His are no ecstatic visions of some transcendent cosmos, no glimpses of heaven. Instead, he sees only "a sullen

shopgirl" getting ready "to take a shower,/ Her hair in rigid curlers, and the rest." He spends hour after hour living the same kind of humdrum existence which he climbs trees to escape:

> living with them night after
> night watching
> Watching with them at times their favorite TV
> shows learning--
> Though now and then he hears a faint sound:
> gunshot, bombing,
> Building-fall--how to read lips: the lips of
> laconic cowboys
> Bank robbers old and young doctors tense-faced
> gesturing savagely
> In wards and corridors like reading the lips
> of the dead
>
> The lips of men interrupting the program at
> the wrong time
> To sell you a good used car on the Night Owl
> Show men silently reporting
> The news out the window.

His vision takes place in "in poplar trees or beneath/ The warped roundabout of the clothesline" and in the "sordid disorder/ Of communal backyards." It is a community to which he is only marginally connected. He sees "mothers counsel desperately with pulsing girls face down/ On beds full of overstuffed beasts." He sees "men dress as women/ In ante-bellum costumes with bonnets." He sees "doctors come, looking oddly like himself, although they are inside the houses, worming a medical arm/ Up the cringing covers." He sees children put angrily to bed and told fairy stories. He might just as well go home and watch soap-operas.

Yet one day, says the narrator, the fiend will "give up his invisibility" and make himself known "to the one/ He cannot see loosen her blouse." Denied his usual vision because one girl will always pull down the shade before she undresses,

> he will casually follow her in like a door-
> to-door salesman
> The godlike movement of trees stiffening with
> him the light
> Of a hundred favored windows gone wrong some-
> where in his glasses
> Where his knocked-off panama hat was in his
> painfully vanishing hair.

A man like the worried accountant in "The Fiend" is one illustration of what results when a man fails to make connections in the real world: the murder of some "sullen shopgirl" whose only mistake was pulling her shades down. Some readers might not agree that the fiend will indeed go inside and murder the girl. However, Dickey says that he intended the poem to be read in this way. Besides, the voyeur would not be a fiend at all if he did nothing but peek in windows.[24] We will lock up the fiend but, paradoxically, give a medal to the pilot of "The Firebombing," although both men have distorted visions which allow them to destroy people.

In 1968, Dickey published his fifth book of poetry. Poems: 1957-1967 contains most of his first four books as well as a new book, called Falling. In these new poems

Dickey continues his quest for spiritual sustenance, for some reality which lies just beyond the appearances of things. His narrators continue to be thrust into encounters with this spiritual side of life: in a museum, in a flash of light from an old bifocal, in a zoo, while climbing a telephone pole--even while falling from an airplane. He continues, also, to create poems in which myths and rituals play their part. Except for three poems, however, all his narrators are human. There is one poem of reincarnation and one poem whose narrators are insects. And there is one poem which is narrated by a dead thing from its bottle of formaldehyde.

Dickey has had a good bit of adverse criticism levelled at him because of "The Sheep Child." In Self-Interviews he defends himself in this manner:

> I intended no blasphemy or obscenity by this poem at all. I tried to the best of my ability to write a poem about the universal need for contact between living creatures that runs through all of sentient nature and recognizes no boundaries of species or anything else....I tried to give the sheep child himself a double vision of the destiny of man and animal.[25]

He adds also that he feels the creature born from a human and an animal is not against nature but a very natural happening, simply because there is this need for contact between all living creatures.[26] Intentions aside, however, Dickey has produced a poem which is a grotesque parody of the Virgin Birth.

The parody is hardly avoidable. For one thing, sheep and Christianity are closer than Moses and monotheism. For another, the figure of half-man and half-beast from two worlds naturally lends itself to the mythological. The Classics are filled with such animals: sphinxes, harpies, centaurs. What almost inevitably leads us to the Biblical are the echoes which the poem contains. For example, the sheep child's first words are "I am here, in my father's house," which is reminiscent of the paradoxical answer Christ gave at his trial: "My Father's house has many mansions." These lines also echo the Bible: "It was something like love/ From another world that seized her," and "I who am half of your world." Here we are reminded of the important Christian doctrine concerning the necessity of God to have become human in order to redeem mankind, as well as of the doctrine of the duality of Christ.

The poem is more than Biblical parody, however, and the poet's use of this material can be understood without reference to sacrilege. I prefer to look at the poem in relation to others of these new poems, and especially with reference to "connections." In my mind the poem is best seen as a symbolic rendering of Dickey's theme of connections between the transcendent and the immanent. The sheep child is in position to see, with eyes "far more than human," the "great grassy world from both sides." This, then, is one of those views occurring in "an illuminated moment" in which a kind of "immanent transcendence" is achieved.[27]

Still, the poem is about a failed connection. The sheep child dies soon after he is born "because/ Those things can't live." Besides, the sheep child's only real contribution is that he frightens farm boys: "I am he who drives/ Them like wolves from the hound bitch and calf/ And from the chaste ewe." The final irony of the poem comes, however, when the reader realizes the sheep child is kept in the corner of his father's house, which is a museum. For many today, there is hardly anything more like a museum than a church. This poem is Dickey's way of telling us not to look for the spiritual aspects of life in the houses of organized religion.[28]

From the grotesque tapestry of "The Sheep Child" and its theme of failed connection, Dickey moves to less depressing visions. One of these is a poem of completed connection which is titled "The Flash." Since it contains only eighteen short lines, I will quote it in its entirety.

Something far off buried deep and free
In the country can always strike you dead
Center of the brain. There is never anything

It could be but you go dazzled
Dazzled and all the air in that
Direction swarms waits

For that day-lightning,
For hoe blade buckle bifocal
To reach you. Whatever it does

Again is worth waiting for
Worth stopping the car worth standing alone
For and arranging the body

For light to score off you

In its own way, and send
Across the wheat the broad silent

Blue valley, your long-awaited,
Blinding, blood-brotherly
Beyond-speech answer.

If Dickey had written this poem in 1960, the narrator would most likely have made an exchange with the inanimate object, and perhaps he would even have been the object which is sending the flash. Since the new poetry usually presents us human narrators operating in the immanent world, there is no exchange. There is a connection, however, and again we have Dickey's need-for-contact theme expressed. This time, it is contact between sentient and non-sentient nature, which shows that Dickey has extended his theme, as he often does, until it reaches beyond the ordinary range of vision. But connection implies communication, and several of the poems in "Falling" are poems about communication. "The Flash" concerns communication between people and things, but the message is non-verbal. It is a spiritual message which the narrator receives, striking him "dead/ Center of the brain." Although there is "never anything it could be," still you are dazzled by it. It is a message not sent to the intellect but to some deeper part of your conscious existence, and if you recognize this you respond by sending your "long-awaited/ Blinding, blood-brotherly/ Beyond-speech answer." You respond in kind by making a spiritual response. This response is said to be "long-awaited" because men have not

attempted this kind of communication for a long time. Modern man prefers to communicate in the abstract, through verbal signals, and oftentimes over great distances, as he does over the telephone. Yet any connection is better than no connection, and perhaps even the telephone itself could provide a way to contact the spirit world. In fact, one well-known church has a telephone installed in its founder's coffin.[29]

"Falling," the last poem in Dickey's collection, describes an airline stewardess who falls to her death when the emergency door of the plane comes off. Making use of the old saying that one's whole life is relived in the few moments before death, the poet describes the girl's last thoughts. Her life thus contracted to a span of a few minutes, she moves through various "stages" during her downward journey: first fear, then curiosity, then acceptance of her fate, and, finally, hope. But the poem does not end with her impact; she lies there for some minutes with her back broken, waiting for some sort of salvation, as the poet continues to extend his vision past the limits of reality.

The poem is a composite of familiar Dickey devices. There are exchanges, first with the air, then with the creatures of the air, and finally with the earth. There is a movement from immanence to transcendence, from being to becoming, and even to beyond as the girl hopes for a kind of resurrection by air. There are also mythological elements. The poem, in fact, parallels mankind's Fall, his redemption,

death, and resurrection. There are echoes of Icarus, Hephaestus, and also of the Earth-mother, as the stewardess becomes a fertility goddess returning to renew the earth.

The poem was written during that stage in Dickey's career when he wanted his poems to be like "great shimmering walls of words."[30] The words of the poem literally cover the page as he tries to create a kind of impressionistic canvas of verbal colors, like a huge tapestry or mural. It may be compared to a triptych, a series of paintings connected so as to give the impression of movement and a sense of story. First there is the stewardess trying to cover the crack she has noticed around the door, as though she were shutting out her reality. Then the door comes off and she is drawn out of her airplane-womb (she is ejected suddenly, without choice, as in "birth") and falls into "The undying cry of the void." In a sense, she has co-operated with her destiny, for just prior to her fall she had been "summoned" to the door by "the vast beast-whistle of space." Finding herself outside the plane, she begins to be something

> That no one has ever been and lived through
> screaming without enough air
> Still neat lipsticked stockinged girdled
> by regulation her hat
> Still on her arms and legs in no world and
> yet spaced also strangely
> With utter placid rightness on thin air

and she begins to lose her fear and to develop interest in

her new surroundings:

> she turns
> her maneuverable body
>
> To watch it. She is hung high up in the over-
> whelming middle of things on her
> Self in low body-whistling wrapped intensely
> in her dark dance-weight
> Coming down from a marvellous leap with the
> delaying, dumbfounding ease
> Of a dream of being drawn like endless moon-
> light to the harvest soil
> Of a central state of one's country

and here also she begins to perceive her coming role as a fertility goddess, as she is "drawn" to the "harvest soil" of her country.

Yet these mythological aspects of the poem are secondary to the real message. The poem is an imaginative description of a girl's last thoughts as she encounters the finality of death. The stewardess becomes an "Every-person," as today's jargon would have it, facing the inevitable destiny which we all must face. In this respect, she remains human. She is described as performing "endless gymnastics" as she falls to her death. She has time to live "In super-human health" and to place herself "in one after another of all the positions for love/ Making" as well. After this, she begins to hope for rescue, and

> she slow-rolls over steadies out
> waits for something great
> To take control of her trembles near feathers
> planes head-down

The quick movements of bird-necks turning her
head gold eyes the insight-
eyesight of owls blazing into the hencoops
a taste for chicken overwhelming
Her the long-range vision of hawks enlarging
all human lights of cars

which are still far below her. Her dream of flying, the age-old dream of so many, will not come to pass because the "silver sad impotent wings" on the breast of her flight jacket can work no miracles.

From her dream-hope of growing wings, she moves to a more human hope for salvation, though this new hope is little more realistic than the old one: if she fell

Into water she might live like a diver cleaving
perfect plunge
Into another heavy silver unbreathable
slowing saving
Element: there is water there is time to perfect
all the fine
Points of diving feet together toes pointed
hands shaped right
To insert her into water like a needle to come
out healthily dripping
And be handed a Coca-Cola there they are
there are the waters
Of life the moon packed and coiled in a reservoir

and she begins to maneuver her body, hoping to aim herself back into the "waters" of life. Yet this new hope is no more than a dream, a wish to return to the amniotic fluids of the womb, symbolized by the reservoir below her. "What final things can be said," says the narrator, "Of one who starts out sheerly in her body in the high middle of night/Air" to track down water? The wish is absurd.

Finding that she cannot reach the reservoir, she "comes back from flying to falling/ Returns to a powerful cry" of despair. At this point a new thought enters her mind: she remembers that "she still has time to die/ Beyond explanation." In a sense, she wants--as the saying goes--what all women want: to be found at the last still looking her best--even in death having made a "lasting impression." She wishes to be found, not as a dead stewardess but in the role of the "eternal feminine," the femme fatale who has been inscrutable to the last. Accordingly, the narrator says

> Let her now take off her hat in summer air the
> contour
> Of cornfields and have enough time to kick
> off her one remaining
> Shoe with the toes of the other foot to un-
> hook her stockings
> With calm fingers, noting how fatally easy it
> is to undress in midair
> Near death when the body will assume without
> effort any position

--except the one that will sustain it. But she knows that her death is inevitable now, and so she decides to become "the greatest thing that ever came to Kansas." When they find her nude body lying in a furrow, they will perhaps make a myth of her fall. In this way, she will indeed find immortality. She begins to pass her hands over her naked form, touching all the erogenous zones and begins to believe that she is being desired

by every sleeper in his dream:
Boys finding for the first time their loins
filled with heart's blood
Widowed farmers whose hands float under light
covers to find themselves
Arisen at sunrise the splendid position of
blood unearthly drawn
Toward clouds all feel something pass over
them as she passes

over them. They will find her "In her mortal outline" but will be able to understand nothing

But that she is there inexplicable un-
questionable and remember
That something broke in them as well and be-
gan to live and die more
When they walked for no reason into their fields
to where the whole earth
Caught her

"at the best part of her brief goddess state." Even as she lies dying, the "farmers sleepwalk without/ Their women from houses." It is "a walk like falling toward the far waters/ Of life," toward the "dreamed eternal meaning of the farms/ Toward the flowering of the harvest in their hands." Her apotheosis has occurred in their minds; she has been resurrected.

"Falling" is an appropriate poem with which to end his collected poems, since most of Dickey's poems have been about one kind of resurrection or another. It is also appropriate that he has prefaced his collected poems with "May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Georgia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church," since it, too, is a

poem of resurrection. It is printed as a separate book, called Sermon, and positioned at the front of the volume even though it was published later than "Falling." In this manner, the poet calls attention to it as well as to his later style and method. He calls attention also to his longest and most ambitious poem.

Like "Falling," this poem has many of Dickey's familiar devices as well as some new twists. The narrator is a woman preacher giving her last sermon, as the title indicates, but it is a farewell address such as no church has ever heard before, except in its frenzied, rhetorical form. In fact, Dickey has modeled his poem on the well-known "hell-fire and brimstone" sermon--except that his sermon enjoins his congregation to forsake the church, rather than cleave to it. Woven into this sermon is what amounts to a lecture on "sex education" for adults, as Dickey's narrator tells the "moral" tale of two lovers who follow their own instincts, rather than Biblical precepts as they are interpreted by the girl's father.

As he often does, Dickey returns to topics which he has written about previously. "The Firebombing" is a larger treatment of his poem "The Jewel." "Falling" is a variation upon his poem "The Leap." And "Sermon" is a direct continuation and extension of "Cherrylog Road." In fact, it is the story of what happens when Doris Holbrook's father discovers what went on between her and her motorcyclist-friend.

"Sermon" is another of Dickey's "great shimmering walls of words." However, it is twice as long as "Falling" and makes demands upon the reader which his shorter poems do not. Although it tells a story, the poem is not primarily a narrative. It is a sermon, and its form is that of a sermon. Like any good preacher, Dickey's narrator is a rhetorician, and as such she is able to "draw out" the lesson to unbelievable lengths. The poem would literally take about thirty minutes to read out loud. The woman preacher holds her discussion together by repeating herself at regular intervals throughout the poem. She often repeats phrases like "each year at this time, I shall be telling you of the Lord" as well as variations upon this phrase. Another repeated phrase is this one: "Often a girl in the country," with variations. Other repeated phrases are: "O Sisters," "Ah, Children," and such. These phrases help the reader to keep his bearings and to act as breaks in the incessant flow of words. Often, a half-page will go by without any punctuation, except for the splits in the lines, which are a form of punctuation. In addition, the poem is replete with Biblical allusions, direct and indirect quotations from the Bible, as well as snatches of popular songs and hymns. There are all sorts of idioms peculiar to preachers, which of course is only natural in such a poem. A critic would be better off trying to describe what <u>wasn't</u> in the poem.

Many images are repeated in the poem, and these serve further to tie the poem together. Fog, snakes, gamecocks,

and neighbors are most repeated, except for the explicit sexual imagery which dominates everything, for "Sermon" is Dickey's most explicitly sexual poem.

In "Falling," Dickey tries to describe every thought and action of a girl who has only minutes to live. Since the poem takes about fifteen or twenty minutes to read, it is obvious that he is working with the difference between clock time and lived time as a poetic principle. In "Sermon," the poet is under no such restrictions, and yet the reader will get the feeling that the woman preacher is somehow speaking every single thought that occurs to her, every single image that comes into her mind, as she delivers her "lecture." In this respect the poem takes on a surrealistic quality; after a few pages, everything about the poem tends to become completely unreal. The poet has occasionally done this kind of thing in some of his other recent poems--notably "The Firebombing" and "Power and Light"--but not nearly to the extent which he does in "Sermon," which is one of the poems, I believe, that the poet has in mind when he uses his phrase "country surrealism."[31] Almost any part of the poem will serve to illustrate this technique. Here are the opening lines:

> Each year at this time I shall be telling you of
> the Lord
> --Fog, gamecock, snake and neighbor--giving men
> all the help they need
> To drag their daughters into barns. Children,
> I shall be showing you
> The fox hide stretched on the door like a fly-

ing squirrel fly
Open to show you the dark where the one pole
of light is paid out
In spring by the loft, and in it the croker sacks
sprawling and shuttling
Themselves into place as it comes comes
through spiders dead
Drunk on their threads the hogs' fat bristling
the milk
Snake in the rafters unbending through gnats
to touch the last place
Alive on the sun with his tongue I shall be
flickering from my mouth
Oil grease cans lard cans nubbins
cobs night
Coming floating each May with night coming
I cannot help
Telling you how he hauls her to the centerpole
how the tractor moves
Over as he sets his feet and hauls hauls
ravels her arms and hair
In stump chains: Telling: telling of Jehovah
come and gone
Down on His belly descending creek-curving
blowing His legs

Like candles, out putting North Georgia copper
on His head
To crawl in under the door in dust red enough
to breathe
The breath of Adam into: Children, be brought
where she screams and begs
To the sacks of corn and coal to nails to the
swelling ticks
On the near side of mules, for the Lord's own
man has found the limp
Rubber that lies in the gulley the penis-
skin like a serpent
Under the weaving willow.

One cannot get the real flavor of this poem without reading it. One can only make attempts at catching a few of the many ramifications of the poem, and any discussion of it is pale by comparison. The poem, in fact, challenges one's attention span. Yet the story of the two lovers can be followed fairly easily.

Having beaten his daughter almost to death for crimes against the Lord, the father returns to his house to read his Bible:

> O daughters, he is rambling
> In Obadiah the pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou
> That dwelleth in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high
> That saith in his heart O daughters who shall bring me down
> To the ground? And she comes down putting her back into
> The hatchet often often he is brought down

in what is Dickey's version of the Lizzie Borden myth. Even before the murder, however, the preacher has given a description of the motorcyclist-lover who is coming back for the girl:

> he comes on comes
> Through the laurel, wiped out on his right by an eye-twig now he
> Is crossing the cowtrack his hat in his hand going on before
> His face then up slowly over over like the Carolina moon
> Coming into Georgia feels the farm close its Bible and ground-fog over him his dark side blazing something whipping
> By, beyond sight:

and the girl packs a few belongings and they leave. At this point in her sermon the preacher says:

> each May you will hear it
> Said that the sun came as always the sun of

next day burned
Them off with the mist: that when the river
fell back on its bed
Of water they fell from life from limbs
they went with it
To Hell three-eyed in love, their legs
around an engine, her arms
Around him.

But this is not so, she tells her congregation. The "truth" of the matter is otherwise, and she tells them to

tell those
Who look for them who follow by rayon stockings
who look on human
Highways on tracks of cement and gravel black
weeping roads
Of tar: tell them that she and her rider have
taken no dirt
Nor any paved road no path for cattle no
country trunk or trail
Or any track upon earth, but have roared like
a hog on May Day
Through pines and willows: that when he met
the insane vine
Of the scuppernong he tilted his handlebars
back and took
The road that rises in the cold mountain spring
from warm creeks:

and anyone, she says, "can show you where the tire marks gave out/ And her last stocking was cast" as the fog lifted them out of this world altogether.

But also, she continues, the lovers return each May Day and you can hear the roar of his motorcycle deep in the mists of Nickajack Creek. Yet this is not all, for the creek's ghost can still carry the double weight of true lovers, any time, any night, into the same world where the boy and girl have gone. It is also true, she says, that the animals have

left that farm, and that even the barn is gone, having been transported along with the lovers.

Thus the poem ends in familiar Dickey fashion, with the lovers off in some transcendent cosmos. But the woman preacher and her congregation are still here. The barn, which has become the Ark, cannot save real people from destruction. To be saved, the congregation must not deny the natural spirit within them but must rise up like the lovers and follow them into the saving mists of Nickajack Creek.

In a review of Dickey's Poems: 1957-1967, one reviewer writes: "The poet continues to shape a suburban mythology of poems nostalgic for youth, for home, for the 'heroic' pathos of love, adultery, flying, and sport, for mystic virility, for rebirth into non-human nature, even for death--in short, for salvation in a 'purely private embrace of impossibility.'"[32] Impossible his poems may be--especially "Sermon"--but still they contain a boundless optimism which surely is needed in our age, what with doomsday prophets crying "I quit" from every corner.

Dickey's poems are not a private vision either--at least not in the sense that they are unintelligible or that they are unrelated to others. Yet his earlier poetry is optimistic in a different way from his later poetry. We have seen him proclaim that it is possible to escape the often spiritless age we live in if we can make ourselves view the world from its spiritual side--a side which is still there, only hidden beneath old automobile junkyards; a side which may

be found lurking underground at a Civil War battlefield, or at the bottom of a well, or disguised as the movement of marsh grass, or sewn on bedspreads by a demented old lady, or in the "lean tricks" of a soldier about to be beheaded. All Dickey's poems are a search for the spirit. In his later poems, however, the poet writes poems in which men of ordinary vision are seen failing in their quests because they looked in places where there is no spirit. One such man is portrayed in "The Fiend," whose narrator hopes to be uplifted by the naked body of a sullen shopgirl. Another man, the pilot of "The Firebombing," does not find his spirit because he has failed to learn that to be superhuman is also to be inhuman.

Nevertheless, many of the narrators in these later poems do find the spirit. We have seen one man stop his car by a roadside and attempt a connection by returning the flash of light which he has received from that spirit world. We have seen another find the spiritual as she faces her inevitable death. It is this continual insistence upon viewing every possible object as a potential source of spiritual salvation which characterizes Dickey's poetry. It is a view of life which offers a way out of the ugliness of our technomaniacal lives.

Two hundred years ago, Blake asked whether the spirit can exist in an age of technology: "And is Jerusalem builded here/ Among these dark Satanic Mills?" Dickey's answer is yes, if only you will look in the right places, and if you

are "grounded" properly. Dickey has searched and has been rewarded for his persistence by "Something like three-dimensional dancing in the limbs," and he is continuing to probe deeper and deeper into the nature of the spiritual side of man

with age
Feeling more in two worlds than one in all
worlds the growing encounters.

Notes for Chapter V

[1]James Dickey, Sorties (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 114 and p. 118.

[2]Some of his very early poems were long: "The First Morning of Cancer" (156 lines), and "The Red Bow" (207 lines). Neither of these is as long as many of the later poems.

[3]R. W. Flint, "The Poetry Chronicle," Partisan Review, XXXII (Spring 1962), 253.

[4]The two poems are "The Performance," and "The Jewel."

[5]These poems are "Approaching Prayer," "Drinking from a Helmet," "Bums, on Waking," "The Scarred Girl," "The Ice Skin," "A Folk Singer of the Thirties," and "Horses and Prisoners," from Helmets; "The Firebombing," "Faces Seen Once," "Them, Crying," "Fathers and Sons" (I and II), and "The Night Pool," from Buckdancer's Choice; and "Power and Light," "The Bee," "Mary Sheffield," "The Leap," "Falling," "Coming Back to America," "Sun," "Adultery," "Bread," "Sustainment," "A Letter," and "May Day Sermon," from Falling.

[6]Richard Howard, "On James Dickey," Partisan Review, XXXIII (1966), 415.

[7]Howard, p. 415.

[8]Howard, p. 416.

[9]Howard, p. 416.

[10]Howard, p. 420.

[11]Howard, p. 425.

[12]Howard, p. 479.

[13]Howard, p. 481.

[14]Howard, p. 483.

[15]Howard, p. 486.

[16]See H. L. Weatherby, "The Way of Exchange in James Dickey's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LXXIV (Summer 1966).

[17]That is, in relation to the publication dates of the books which they appear in, not by their first publication dates.

[18]See Self-Interviews, p. 140.

[19]As in "A Dog Sleeping on my Feet," for example.

[20]See Self-Interviews, p. 165.

[21]This theme is seen also in "The Shark's Parlor."

[22]i.e., in that the dead rise up from underground to take possession of the narrators.

[23]which were "Approaching Prayer" and "Drinking from a Helmet."

[24]See Self-Interviews, p. 155.

[25]See Self-Interviews, p. 165.

[26]See Self-Interviews, p. 165.

[27]See Chapter IV, p. 89, for the source of this argument. In addition. Dickey himself maintains that this poem represents such a need for contact between all creatures. (See note 25 above.) This theme of "connections" is a frequent one in the later poems, as the "exchange" theme was in the earlier ones. As I have stated before, "connections" are the new "way" in the immanent world.

[28]See also "May Day Sermon" for a further elaboration, even more explicit, of this attitude.

[29]The church is The First Church of Christ, Scientist, whose founder, Mary Baker Eddy, ordered that a telephone be installed in her coffin. There is another in the foyer of her masoleum with which to send "messages" to her.

[30]See Sorties, p. 65.

[31]See Sorties, p. 100, for this phrase. See also Self-Interviews, p. 56, where the poet argues that as a tool, surrealism may be useful, but as a systematic method it is not worth anything. He does state, however, that he thinks some of the lines of the surrealists, like Elouard, are very beautiful, but that even his poetry is as formless as any of the surrealists.

[32]Donald W. Baker, "The Poetry of James Dickey," Poetry, CXI (March 1968), 400.

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