MAJOR THEMES IN THE POETRY OF JAMES DICKEY

THESIS

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The themes of sensual experience, nature, and mysticism in James Dickey's poetry are examined. Dickey's Poems 1957-1967 and The Eye-Beaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy are the primary sources for the poems. Selections from a decade of Dickey criticism are also represented. Dickey presents a wide spectrum of attitudes toward acceptance of the physical body, communion with nature, and transcendence of the human condition, but the poems exhibit sufficient uniformity to allow thematic generalizations to be made.
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Sensuality, nature, transcendence—these are James Dickey's poetic concerns. Amid the fertile diversity of ten years' work, these overarching themes mark the continuity and development of Dickey's art. His preoccupation with these great themes places him foursquare in the Romantic tradition, yet his radical sense of self in relation to the body, the natural world, and the spirit sets him apart from older Romantic writers.

In the study that follows, Dickey's concerns with physical life, external nature, and the need for transcendence are examined through the analysis of representative poems. The poems chosen span Dickey's career as a publishing poet, from *Into the Stone* (1957-1960) to his most recent volume, *The Eye-Beaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy* (1970).

Chapter I deals with poems in which sensual existence is celebrated and physical life is presented in its positive aspects, linking sexual energy to the primal creative forces. Chapter II continues to examine Dickey's poems of sensuality, but here the emphasis is on the "darker" facets of life as a physical creature—sickness, decline, and death. Chapter III deals with Dickey's non-mystical nature poems, while Chapter IV assesses the poems of transcendence, the culmination of Dickey's
creative work to date.

Throughout the thesis, an effort is made to show the constancy with which Dickey has returned to these themes, and to suggest some of the sources of inspiration for Dickey's poetry. As Dickey is habitually an autobiographical poet, no attempt has been made to conceal the highly personal sources of many of the poems. Finally, the study attempts to foresee the direction of Dickey's future creative efforts.
CHAPTER I

POEMS OF SENSUAL EXPERIENCE

As poet and novelist, as well as in his private life, James Dickey has been deeply involved in the experience of physical being. A former star college athlete, fighter pilot in two wars, hunter and ardent woodsman, he is far removed from the stereotype of the wan, overly cerebral poet. His interest in the richness of physical experience has led him to explore in his verse aspects of human existence that many writers, even in this "liberated" age, have chosen to ignore. Dickey places the life of the body in general and sexuality in particular on a plane of importance with the more abstract attributes of man, those traditionally labeled "spiritual." Indeed, as will be discussed, Dickey is above all the poet of unity and integration, acknowledging no dichotomy between body and soul, mind and matter. For Dickey, poetic and philosophic honesty require that all ethereal flights of mind and spirit be firmly rooted in physical being, and that these roots be kept constantly in view.

For convenience, Dickey's poems of sensuality may be divided into two groups. The first group celebrates the physical body and explores the role of passion and desire in human life, while the second and slightly smaller group presents poems of mortality, decline, age, and death. As a poet Dickey seems
highly aware that "he who drinks the wine must take the dregs," and he investigates both sweet and bitter aspects of life as a physical creature.

Into the Stone (1960), Dickey's first published volume of poems, begins a cumulative process in his work that has issued in the poet's own unique view of human sexuality. In these early poems, libidinal energy is often identified with the essential energies of the universe, and sexual intercourse is glorified as the avenue toward higher levels of awareness. The passions are celebrated as a means of achieving transcendence and renewal. The title poem, "Into the Stone," is a powerful and explicit statement of the "holy sensuality" found in the volume.

On the way to a woman, I give
My heart all the way into moonlight.
Now down from all sides it is beating.
The moon turns round 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.¹

The suggestion of rebirth is a constant theme throughout Dickey, sought sometimes through sexual union, sometimes through a mystical absorption into the external world of nature, as shown in these lines from the same poem:

No thing that shall die as I step
May fall, or not sing of rebirth.
I see by the dark side of light,
I am he who I should have become.

A bird that has died overhead
Sings a song to sustain him forever. ²

Images of dark and light, especially light from the moon and
sun, recur often in Dickey’s poetry and are usually associated
with intense passionate experience or moments of mystical in-
sight and transcendence.

Elsewhere, I have dreamed of my birth,
And come from my death as I dreamed;
Each time, and moon has burned backward.
Each time, my heart has gone from me
And shaken the sun from the moonlight. ³

The images of renewal through sensuality become more explicit
as the poem continues:

Each time, a woman has called,
And my breath come to life in her singing.
Once more I come home from my ghost.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ⁴...
My own love has raised up my limbs.

The final stanza is reminiscent of Whitman (a poet with
whom Dickey has many affinities) both in its assured cadence
and its emphasis on continuity between the living and the dead.

The road like a woman is singing.
It sings with what makes my heart beat
In the air, and the moon turn around.
The dead have their chance in my body.

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.⁵

²Poems, p. 47.
³Ibid., p. 48
⁴Ibid.
⁵Poems, p. 48
A later poem, "Cherrylog Road," continues the theme of renewal through sensual experience, though in a much different context. In this poem, from the collection called *Helmets*, the speaker is a younger man, probably a teenager, and the setting is a junkyard filled with the rusting hulks of hundreds of cars. Gone now is the messianic language and certain tone of "Into the Stone." Instead, naturalistic language in almost conversational patterns is employed. Rebirth may be achieved, but as the poem begins nothing could be less certain.

"... Doris Holbrook / Would escape from her father at noon," but mortal danger lurks in the form of the father, who casts a cold eye on the "dishonorable" intentions of eager young men:

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Praying for Doris Holbrook
To come from her father's farm

And to get back there
With no trace of me on her face
To be seen by her red-haired father
Who would change in the squalling barn
Her back's pale skin with a strop,
Than lay for me

With a string-triggered 12-gauge shotgun.7
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The speaker makes his way toward the appointed meeting-place, an ancient Pierce-Arrow placed (symbolically) in the "weedy heart" of the junkyard. Though Dickey's occasional humor indicates a refreshing lack of zealotry, there are constant reminders that the junkyard is indeed a dead place, a wasteland of sorts. Moving through car after car on his way

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6 *Poems*, p. 134.
to the trysting place, the boy pauses in an image at once ludicrous and grim:

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

In the parking-lot of the dead. 8

Doris Holbrook comes, "not cut by the jagged windshields / In the acres of wrecks. . . ." 9

Through dust where the blacksnake dies
Of boredom, and the beetle knows
The compost has no more life. 10

This process of atrophy is reversed as the young couple makes love in the deserted junkyard. Life stirs again, the acres of waste are animated once more as the young man and woman join at "the heart of the yard."

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. 11

Both the persona and his surroundings have been revivified by this intense experience. Though rendered in language far less exalted than the paean to sensuality of "Into the Stone," the poem nonetheless describes a feeling of renewal equally inspiring to the speaker. The imagery in "Cherrylog Road"

8 Poems, p. 134.
9 Ibid., p. 135.
10 Ibid., p. 136.
11 Poems, p. 136.
provides a highly realistic description of an adolescent experience at once bathetic and sublime, wherein a speaker who feels

the hooks of the seat springs
Work through to catch us red-handed
Amidst the grey, breathless batting . . .

12 can afterwards leap to his motorcycle, "parked like the soul of the junkyard / Restored,"13 and speed away from the rendezvous, "wringing the handlebar for speed / Wild to be wreckage forever."14 The fact that the theme of rebirth through passionate experience may be traced in two poems so utterly different underscores its importance in Dickey's work.15

"The Enclosure," a war poem from Into the Stone, is Dickey's negative testimony to the power of sexuality in human life. The setting for the poem is an air base in the Pacific, on which of course the men and women are separated. The women are by day "nurses from sick tents," dedicated to the nurturing and sustenance of life. The men are night fighter pilots (as was Dickey himself) bent on the destruction of life. The scene is one of tension and unfulfillment due to the unnatural separation of male and female. The women are lodged at night

12 Poems, p. 136  
13 Ibid.  
14 Ibid.  
15 Dickey's own comment on "Cherrylog Road" shows that he intended the poem to describe a modern rite de passage: "I attempted to show . . . that magical moment when you realize that this year you can do a lot of things you couldn't do last year." James Dickey, Self-Interviews, (New York, 1970), p. 130.
inside a "trembling compound" where "the nailed wire sang like a jew's-harp / And the women like prisoners paced." Climbing from the airstrip on his mission of destruction, the speaker has a curious vision in which he is "suspended above them / Outcrying the engines with lust." 

I thought I could see
Through the dark and the heart-pulsing wire,
Their dungarees float to the floor,
And their light-worthy hair shake down
In curls and remarkable shapes
That the heads of men cannot grow,
And women stand deep in a ring
Of light, and whisper in panic unto us
To deliver them out
Of the circle of impotence, formed
As moonlight spins round a propeller,
Delicate, eternal, though roaring.

It is important to note the many images of confinement and enclosure operative in the poem, for it is against such symbols as these that the vital principles of male and female must struggle for union. The wired compound that holds the women is paralleled by the moonlight spinning "round a propeller." As the men are held in thrall by the machinery of war and its dark purpose, so are the women kept incomplete and sterile apart from the men. Both the men and the women are trapped in circles of impotence, their vital energies devoured by war. Further confinement imagery may be seen in the mosquito netting under which the nurses sleep in forced chastity:

16 Poems, p. 136.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
And the women, inviolate, woke
In a cloud of gauze,
Overhearing the engines' matched thunder. 19

The cry of desire from the pilot above the island is drowned
by the engines and is lost in the wind from the beach,

All making the nets to be trembling
Purely around them,
And fading the desperate sound

To the whine of mosquitoes, turned back
By the powdery cloth that they sleep in. . . . 20

The language here is carefully chosen to reinforce the general
aura of barrenness in "The Enclosure." The "cloud of gauze"
has associations with bandages, sickness, and death, while the
"powdery cloth" suggests the cerement or shroud in which the
dead are wrapped.

The persona discovers that the circle of sterility cannot
be broken during wartime. When the creative energies of the
male are given over to destruction, the women who "whisper in
panic" may not be heeded. The speaker, powerless in the grip
of events, is "... carried off like a child / To the west,
and the thunderstruck mainland." 21 However, the "circle of
impotence" remains in his memory, and after the war he re-
leases his pent-up sexual energy with the women of the con-
quered Japanese. In a final cataloging of all the poem's
images of enclosure, the speaker explains his motives:

19 Poems, p. 27. 20 Ibid.
21 Poems, p. 27.
It may have been the notion of a circle
Of light, or the sigh of the never-thumbed wire,
Or a cry with the shape of a propeller,
Or the untouched and breath-trembling nets,
That led me later, at peace,
To shuck off my clothes,
In a sickness of moonlight and patience,

To pray to a skylight of paper, and fall
On the enemy's women
With intact and incredible love. 22

"The Enclosure" is Dickey's portrayal of the disharmony
caused when male and female energies are not allowed to take
their natural outlets. The forces must out eventually, but the
unleashed powers may take obsessive and predatory forms that
cause social or personal imbalance.

"The Being" reiterates the theme of rebirth through pas-
sion that has concerned Dickey throughout his career. The
poem also echoes the "sacred marriage" motif common to so many
myths and legends, in which a divine being (a god, goddess, or
other spirit) is sexually united with a mortal man or woman.
Often, new powers are transferred to the mortal as a result of
the union, or the mortal may become the vehicle through which
some hybrid god-man is born.

In Dickey's version of the sacred marriage, an unnamed
spirit comes to a sleeping man, awakens him, and through an
amazing process brings him to peaks of unbearable pleasure.
The being is always referred to as "it," but is apparently a
legendary succubus, the carnal spirit or demoness that offered
herself to sleeping men.

22 Poems, p. 27.
It is there, above him, beyond, behind,
Through his eyelids he sees it
Drop off its wings or its clothes.
Something fills the bed he has been
Able only to half-fill.23

The coming seduction is invested with all the solemnity
of religious ritual, a process not uncommon in Dickey's verse.
In Dickey's world-view, the spirit and the body are but two
manifestations of the same energy, and the path to spiritual
illumination in his poetry must lead through the flesh.

Something over him
Is praying.
   It reaches down under
   His eyelids and gently lifts them . .

The praying of prayer
Is not in the words but the breath. 24

In a perfect and ineffable orgasm, the man is overcome
by pleasure. The voluptuous onslaught is directed toward no
particular part of his body, but comes from every side and
angle at once. When he takes the succubus, it is unlike in-
tercourse with any mortal woman.

He enters--enters with
What? His tongue? A word?
His own breath? Some part of his body?
All.
None.

He lies laughing silently
In the dark of utter delight. 25

24 Ibid.
As in the ancient legends, the visited mortal is given new powers. His gift is typical of Dickey, a bestowal of greater vitality and potency: "He blazes back with his eyes closed / Given, also, renewed / Fertility."26

The suggestion is strong that a new step in the evolution of consciousness may be taken by those willing to integrate fully the libidinal energies represented by the succubus. The speaker is given power

. . . to raise
Dead plants and half-dead beasts,
Out of their thawing holes,
And children up,
From mortal women, or angels
As true to themselves as he
Is only in visited darkness
For only one night out of the year. . . . 27

Another poem that bears eloquent witness to the power of sexuality in Dickey's verse is the lengthy and difficult "May Day Sermon." The poem, running in excess of ten pages in Poems 1957-1967, is a rambling and impassioned monologue chanted, not spoken, to the women of a Southern Baptist Church.28 Beginning with a highly unlikely subject, Dickey constructs a poem that virtually sweeps the reader along, compelling emotional if not rational assent through the relentless surge of

26Poems, p. 158. 27Ibid. 28"May Day Sermon," in Poems, pp. 3-13. The full title is "May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Georgia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church."
its rhetoric.\(^{29}\)

The "plot" of the poem is the very stuff of backwoods melodrama, smacking of the tabloid and seeming to support a host of Southern stereotypes. A young girl is seduced, not at all against her will, by a one-eyed mechanic and motorcyclist. Evidence in the form of a telltale condom is produced against her by her enraged father, a religious fanatic. He proceeds to chain her, naked, to a pole in his barn and attempts to whip her into repentance, all the while shouting "scripture, chapter and verse."\(^{30}\) Defiant, she refuses to repent, and taunts her father into fury by recalling aloud the details of her seduction. He beats her bloody, frees her, and leaves. Later the daughter comes upon him still quoting the Bible, murders him with an axe, and drives an ice pick through his eye. Still naked and bleeding, she frees all the farm animals and joins her lover waiting nearby. The two then vanish into the local mythology.

Hardly the stuff, it would seem, from which great poetry is made. In the hands of a lesser artist than Dickey, potentially a lurid, shallow banality. The finished poem, "May Day

\(^{29}\)Dickey's capacity for making poetry of the unlikely has not escaped his critics. As John W. Corrington has said, Dickey "finds ways to transmute the unlikely into the ideal. The less tractable a piece of material seems, the more likely Dickey will make it shimmer and take on a new and charmed life of its own." John W. Corrington, "James Dickey's Poems 1957-1967," Georgia Review, XX (Summer, 1968), 18.

\(^{30}\)Poems, p. 4.
"Sermon," is perhaps the supreme testament to Dickey's talent, a superb hymn to the vital forces of life and one of the best indices of Dickey's shaping artistry. Beginning with a subject so mean and hackneyed, Dickey goes on to address himself to matters of the highest importance, exploring the age-old tensions between what might be called the pantheistic and monotheistic mind. Though it is many other things as well, the poem is primarily an attempt to answer the question: Who or what is God? As Dickey puts it, the poem presents "Jehovah searching for what to be,"\(^3\) which may be read: Man searching for what to be, for what is right, for his essential nature. From the answers to these questions, all else follows.

The clash between these two very basic ways of seeing the world, the pantheistic and the monotheistic, begins in the very title of the poem, "May Day Sermon." "May Day" has associations with pagan fertility rites, phallic symbols, and hedonistic abandon. The ancient May Day practices were part of a consciousness that saw divinity as everywhere present in nature, and recognized no dichotomies between man and nature, or between the soul of man and his body. The word "sermon" has close connections with the Bible, and belongs to a worldview that demands restraint in sexual matters, values the "spirit" over the flesh, sees man as a distinct and separate creature set apart from the rest of nature, and exalts an

\(^3\) Poems, p. 5.
anthropomorphic deity as equally apart from his creation.

This simple schema becomes more complex as Dickey proceeds to confound and deepen his symbols. After lashing his daughter to the centerpole in the barn (an inverted and life-denying "maypole" of pain rather than pleasure), the father begins

. . . 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. . . .

Quickly, Dickey has outlined the tortuous route he will take in presenting "Jehovah searching for what to be." God is called Jehovah deliberately, to invoke visions of the all-too-human God of the Old Testament, the god of wrath and swift revenge. God is then identified with the snake, an animal having symbolic value both as the legendary tempter of Adam and Eve and as a major phallic symbol in modern psychiatric parlance. Finally, this "snake-God" is invested with the power of creation, able to "breathe the breath of Adam." God has "blown out his legs" and become part of nature, but for what purpose? God is further identified with the natural world as the woman preacher begins her final sermon:

Each year at this time I shall be telling you of the Lord--

\textsuperscript{32} Poems, p. 3.
Fog, gamecock, snake, and neighbor--giving men
all the help they need
To drag their daughters into barns. 33

And the masks of Jehovah are further multiplied in these lines:

. . . the Lord's own man has found the limp
Rubber that lies in the gully. the penis-skin
like a snake
Under the weaving willow... . .34

The image of the snake, already associated with deity,
is now connected with the discarded condom worn by the girl's
lover. The "Lord's own man" exacts his vengeance in the Old
Testament tradition, and the daughter through her pain hears
"the book speak like a father / Gone mad." 35 His is the phil-
osophy that would "change all things / For good, by pain." 36

The preacher continues to complicate the scenario by associating
the zealous father with deity, in contrast to the nature-god
revealed thus far.

--each May you hear her father scream
like God
And King James as he flails

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . and he cries something: the Lord cries
Words! Words! 37

Polar opposites are in conflict here, with two "Gods" strug-
gling for the minds (and bodies) of men. The nature-God of
sensual experience and the Old Testament God of rock-ribbed
denial cannot both dominate the stage of Dickey's poem, just

33 Poems, p. 3.
34 Ibid.
35 Poems, p. 4.
36 Poems, p. 5.
37 Ibid.
as these contrary philosophies must conflict in the real world. As the tyrannical father-God screams out "Scripture, Chapter and verse," his unregenerate daughter shouts a litany of her own, born of frenzied pride in her own flesh and sensual knowledge:

. . . as flesh and the Devil twist and turn
Her body to love cram her mouth with defiance
give her words
To battle with the Bible's in the air: she shrieks
sweet Jesus and God
I'm glad O God-darling O lover O angel-stud
dear heart
Of life put it in me give you're killing KILLING!!

The woman preacher's chant becomes more intense as she exhorts her audience to participate in the yearly ceremony of the May. Calling the congregation to stir from their lethargy and understand the daughter's ordeal, she continues her fiery oration.

. . . O sisters it is time you cannot sleep
with Jehovah
Searching for what to be, on ground that has
called Him from His Book:
Shall he be the pain in the willow, or the
copperhead's kingly riding in kudzu
Or the frenzied face
working over
A virgin, swarming like gnats. . . .

Though she seems to waver between the incompatible "masters" of hedonism and restraint, the woman preacher indicates which

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38 Poems, p. 4.

39 Poems, p. 5. The unusual line arrangement of "May Day Sermon" has been noticed by critics. Laurence Lieberman says that "the enjambments . . . are consciously functional, whether they interrupt a single breath unit . . . or connect breath units." In "Notes on James Dickey's Style," The Far Point, II (Fall / Winter, 1968), 61.
she will serve in the future when she welcomes the virgin's deflowering as a perfectly natural process:

... Children, each year at this time you will have
Back-pain, but also heaven but also also
this lovely other life-
pain between the thighs ...

... get up in your socks and take
the pain you were meant for: that rose through
her body straight
Up from the earth like a plant....

The snake, a primary symbol connecting God and nature in "May Day Sermon," also comes to stand for the vital, pulsing forces of desire and fecundity. The discarded condom, already linked with the serpent-God of pagan sensuality, now becomes the subject of the woman preacher's increasingly provocative sermon.

Sisters, who is your lover? Has he done nothing but come
and go? Has your father nailed his cast skin to the wall as evidence
Of Sin? Is it flying like a serpent in the darkness dripping pure
radiant venom
Of manhood?

And, lest there be doubt in the minds of her congregation as to the religion she will henceforth follow, the speaker admonishes her listeners to realize the holiness of the body and the sacral nature of fertility:

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40 Poems, p. 7.

41 Ibid.
... Sisters, understand about men and sheaths:
About nakedness: understand how butterflies, amazed, pass out
Of their natal silks how the tight snake takes a great breath
Bursts through himself and leaves himself behind how a man casts finally
Off everything that shields him from another beholds his loins
Shine with his children forever burn with the very juice Of resurrection...

In these passages, Dickey reverses the ancient stigma attached to the serpent, discarding its earlier symbolic import as tempter into evil and bringer of ruin to Adam and Eve. In phrases like "pure / radiant venom of manhood" and in the passage comparing male nakedness to the snake's shedding of its old skin, Dickey invests the snake with a positive symbolic value as the bringer of life, even eternal life, through the fertility which it represents.

Man, in Dickey's unified vision, is totally integrated within the universe. "... his loins / Shine with his children forever," in sharp contrast to the alienated, rootless image of man found in much of modern literature. The wasteland is overcome, renewed through the "juice of resurrection" hailed in Dickey's unique sermon. Even the lover's motorcycle is drawn into the natural world, transvalued, becoming "noise in the bushes past reason ungodly squealing reverting / Like a hog turned loose in the woods..." 

42 Poems, p. 8.  
43 Ibid.
With the Old Testament patriarch dead, the daughter begins the destruction of all he has stood for as well, ending the artificial dominion of man over nature that was so much a part of the father-God's dispensation:

... Children, in May, often a girl in the country
Will find herself lifting wood her arms
like hair rise up
To undo locks raise latches set gates
aside turn all things
Loose shoo them out shove kick and hogs
are leaping ten
Million years back through fog... 44

The farm is slowly reclaimed by nature after the death or departure of all the humans involved:

... the horse floats, smoking with flies,
To the water-trough, coming back less often
learning to make
Do with the flowing drink of deer... 45

The woman preacher brings her hypnotic eulogy to a close in language that passes final judgment on the religion of denial, pain, and austerity embraced by the old man. Dickey presses Biblical imagery into the service of a pantheistic vision as the preacher continues

Telling on May Day, children: telling
That the animals are saved without rain
that the barn falls in

44 Poems, p. 8.
45 Ibid. This "stanza" in particular exemplifies what Laurence Lieberman calls "... an astonishing variety of rhythms... mainly induced by balancing caesuras within the line, and varying the patterns of balance in successive lines." Lieberman, op. cit., p. 14.
Like Jericho at the bull's voice  at the weasel's dance  at the hog's Primeval squeal  the uncut hay walks when the wind prophesies in the west Pasture  the animals move, with kudzu creating all the earth East of the hayfield.  

In this final twilight of the monotheistic father-God, it is instructive to note the imagery employed in the overwhelming of the farm by nature. The bull, symbol of virility in such cultures as the Spanish and Minoan, is a key figure in this "last judgment." The weasel is mentioned earlier in "May Day Sermon" and is also associated with physicality:

> ... mad in the middle of human space he dances blue-eyed dances with Venus rising Like blood-lust over the road.

The hog, discussed above as a symbol of primal sensuality, also takes part in the destruction of the barn, the last bastion of the old order and scene of the daughter's torment. Kudzu, a creeping plant common to the South, has long captured Dickey's imagination with its capacity for rapid and inexorable expansion. With the fanatical father dead, the task of prophecy falls to the wind sweeping over his land, an ironic answer to the old ruler who once paraphrased Obadiah:

> ... the pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou That dwelleth in the clefts of the rock, whose

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46 Poems, p. 9  
47 Ibid.
The father and all his works have been brought "down to the ground," and "May Day Sermon" is Dickey's answer to the life-denying forces that militate against the free expression of sexuality, that would deny the instinctual bases of the human psyche. To the puritan, the prude, and the spiritualist, "May Day Sermon" stands as Dickey's masterful caveat: Do not forget that man, for all his godlike powers, is not a bloodless, disembodied spirit, but a natural being, a creature possessed of all the strengths and weaknesses of the flesh. To deny the valid needs of the body in service to an abstraction, however ennobling, is to risk the inevitable outbreak of long-dammed passion, when "the pride of the heart" must yield to the surging demands of the blood.

48 Poems, p. 9.
Thus far, only the positive side of Dickey's poems of physical life has been examined. Dickey is by and large an affirmative voice in contemporary literature, but it must be noted that his vision of unity is based on a deeply felt, existential knowledge of those aspects of life which war against any harmonious interpretation of the cosmos. If Dickey as a poet is inclined to yea-saying, it is only after a long and careful look at the reasons for saying nay. His is no Pollyanna's view of reality, but a vision that encompasses both joy and despair, stares down the void, and forges a unique integration of contrary elements. Dickey's view of life draws strength and added validity from that which would negate. Richard C. Calhoun, describing a "new poetics" he finds especially in Dickey's later work, has commented on the poetic as well as philosophic merits of this holistic view of life:

... the poet must describe encounters with the most basic life experiences, including destructive as well as life-giving forces. ... The reality of death must be confronted through the poet's persona ... a confrontation with death and its associated destructive forces (aging, disease, violence, madness) may lead to fear but it may also lead to a realization of and appreciation of the value of life.¹

As Calhoun indicates, no survey of Dickey's "physical" poems would be complete without their dark side—those poems in which the poet accepts or transcends the limitations of declining physical vitality, age, and death, turning these grim specters into allies for his cause.

Like many of his contemporaries, James Dickey is a highly autobiographical writer. He has publicly disagreed with T. S. Eliot's theory of autotelic art, calling such ideas "absolute rubbish" and declaring himself "unable to dissociate the poet from the poem." It is possible to trace much of Dickey's published verse to its source in a handful of his actual experiences. His early job as a lifeguard, his wartime duty, the deaths of his older brother and father, his hunting trips in fog and snow have all provided inspiration for numerous Dickey poems. To an extraordinary extent, what Dickey has lived has found its way into print. Therefore, it is to be expected that he would write of the coming of middle age and the slow physical deterioration that heralds the approach of death. Nor is it surprising that middle age has been the subject of many of Dickey's poems, as he came relatively late in life to his vocation as a poet.

"False Youth: Two Seasons," found in Dickey's Poems 1957-1967, presents the attempt of a middle-aged man to recapture his youth, and his eventual coming to terms with mortality.

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Like many of Dickey's longer poems, "False Youth" is divided into two lengthy sections for the purpose of presenting two related experiences that reflect upon one another. When Dickey employs this form, the first section usually presents the persona in a state of relative ignorance, lacking insight into a particular situation. The second section presents the narrator moving toward some understanding of his dilemma, which results in his reconciliation with the given conditions of existence.  

Section I of "False Youth" concerns the visit of the middle-aged speaker to a woman much younger than himself. ("I thought of children / Of mine almost her age. . . .") Dressed in his old Air Force uniform, the man has come to his former military base seeking to push time backward, to force "more now than then" into his life. In the first stanza, however, it is apparent that the speaker is skeptical of his ability to maintain such an illusion:

I have had my time dressed up as something else,
Have thrown time off my track by my disguise.
This can happen when one puts on a hunter's cap,
An unearned cowboy hat, a buckskin coat, or something
From outer space that a child you have got has got
For Christmas.  

Already, then, the speaker acknowledges that his search for lost

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3 This "exposition-reconciliation" structure is found in "On the Coosawattee" from Poems and "Diabetes," "Apollo," and "Two Poems of Going Home" from The Eye-Beaters.

4 Poems, p. 290.

5 Ibid.
time is a masquerade, a deliberately created illusion with
which he hopes temporarily to regain his youth. He finds the
most satisfactory "disguise" to be his old military uniform,

... long laid in boxes and now let out
To hold the self-betrayed form in the
intolerant shape
Of its youth. 6

He talks with the girl, Phyllis Huntley, and is changed some-
what even by this conscious play-acting, "hearing mosquitoes
without / The irritation middle age puts on their wings." 7

They are left alone in an ancient porch swing, she talkative
and nervous, he uncertain whether seriously to pursue the
role of youthful suitor:

I have had my time doing such

Sitting with Phyllis Huntley as though
I were my own
Son surrounded by wisteria

I might have just come down from the
black sky alone
With an ancient war dead with twenty
million twenty
Years ago when my belt cried aloud for
more holes. ... 8

Though the mask draws him toward the past, he is simultan-
eously aware of the irrevocable nature of mortal life, of
the door that opens only to the future:

I have had my time in that swing,
The double chair that moves at the edge
of dark
Where the years stood just out of range

8Ibid.
The craftsmanship in this passage is striking, for in a single vivid stanza Dickey lays bare the essence of "False Youth." The "double chair" that the aging speaker shares with the young girl moves at "the edge of dark," i.e., poised on the perimeter of age and physical decline, suspended for a moment as the speaker seeks to move backward into lost time. Time has indeed stopped for a cruel moment, as if the persona had been granted a short waiver of its power, an instant in which to discover for himself the absurdity and hopelessness of his quest.

Still the speaker persists, and will not totally renounce his desire to "throw time off his track." He argues with himself, common sense warring against the irrational but human urge to live again:

The uniform tightened as I sat
Debating with a family man away from home.
I would not listen
To him, for what these boys want is to taste
a little life
Before they die.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

And the beery breath of a fierce boy demands
of the fat man
He's dying of more air more air through the tight belt
Of time more life more now . . . more now
Than then more now.10

In Part II of "False Youth," the scene shifts from summertime in Memphis to winter in Nashville, but the persona again undergoes an experience that concerns aging and illusion. The speaker is again with a woman much younger than himself, but this time there is no deliberate pretense, no Quixotic search for lost vigor. The relationship between the older man and the girl is clearly understood by both parties, and there is no romantic allure as in Part I of the poem.

Through an ice storm in Nashville I took a student home,
Sliding off the road twice or three times;
for this
She asked me in.\textsuperscript{11}

In Part I the speaker posed as a much younger man, and the season was summer, traditionally associated with youth, vigor, and fecundity. Now, he comes in no disguise, and the setting is winter, barren and forlorn:

She broke off
An icicle, and bit through its blank bone:
brought me
Into another life in the shining-skinned clapboard house
Surrounded by a world whose creatures could not stand,
Where people broke hip after hip.\textsuperscript{12}

Inside the house, he meets the student's grandmother, a blind woman with a remarkable sense of touch. She has spent her blind years in an unceasing attempt to know the world through her sensitive fingers:

\textsuperscript{11}Poems, p. 291. \textsuperscript{12}Ibid.
... long tassels hanging from lamps
curtains
Of beads a shawl on the mantel
all endless things
To touch untangle all things
intended to be
Inexhaustible to hands.\(^\text{13}\)

The speaker feels comfortable with the blind woman and speaks intimately to her of his past, especially of his childhood and his parents. "... my mother whistling in her heartsick bed, my father grooming his gamecocks."\(^\text{14}\) As he rises to leave, the old woman asks that he bend down so she might explore his face and come to know him fully. He fears, of course, that her omniscient hands will merely reinforce what he already knows too well, that his youth is forever behind him. ("An icicle stiffened / Inside my stomach."\(^\text{15}\)) Then, as her fingers delicately probe his features, knowing him for what he really is, the woman transmits to him her own insight that "unravels" the conundrum of age:

I closed my eyes as she put her fingertips lightly
On them and saw, behind sight something
in me fire
Swirl in a great shape like a fingerprint
like none other
In the history of the earth looping holding
its wild lines
Of human force.\(^\text{16}\)

The image of the fingerprint is telling indeed, for the fingerprint is the supreme mark of personal identity, the one constant

\(^{13}\text{Poems, p. 291.}\)
\(^{15}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{16}\text{Ibid.}\)
emblem of individuality carried throughout the life cycle. In Part I of the poem, Phyllis Huntley is apparently unable to penetrate the persona's "disguise," but the old woman quickly fathoms what he is:

Her forefinger then her keen nail
Went all the way along the deep middle
line of my brow
Not guessing but knowing quivering
deepening
Whatever I showed by it.\(^17\)

If the woman in her blindness can tell his age merely by feeling the wrinkles in his brow, there can be no denying the fact that he is growing old. With this thought in mind, he is stunned by her next words:

She said, you must laugh a lot
Or be in the sun, and I began to laugh
quietly against
The truth, so she might feel what the
line she followed
Did then.\(^18\)

The speaker is further taken aback as the woman murmurs half-aloud, half to herself: "My God / To have a growing boy."\(^19\)

The ending of "False Youth" is marred by an ambiguity of intent on the part of the author. The narrator gives no hint that he believes the old woman has been fooled, and there is no reason to believe that she speaks as she does in order to spare his feelings.\(^20\) They have just met, and she knows nothing of his fear of advancing age. The speaker himself knows that she

\(^{17}\) Poems, p. 291.  \(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.  \(^{20}\) Ibid. Dickey's public utterances about the poem have done little to clear this ambiguity. Example: "There's a tradition in the South that what a blind person tells you is
has read the truth in his wrinkled countenance. Why, then, does she speak of him as a "growing boy" and attribute the unalterable marks of age to mere sunshine and laughter? The best answer lies in the speaker's response to the oracle's words, and in the use he vows to make of her message:

... I battled for air standing
laughing a lot
As she said I must do squinting also
as in the brightest sun
In Georgia.

My face froze with the vast world of time
in a smile
That has never left me since my thirty-eighth year. 21

The speaker interprets her cryptic words, along with his vision of the blazing fingerprint, as advice on facing the coming of age. He goes forth to live as if the visible signs of age were indeed the results of sun and mirth alone. With the memory of the fingerprint, he can accept his destiny as a unique human being who was once young, is growing old, and must one day die. He vows to remember

... that time when age was caught
by a thaw in a raveling room when I
conceived of my finger-
Print as a shape of fire and of youth
as a lifetime search
For the blind. 22

true; that a blind person can feel your face and tell you what your character is like. All my life I've heard that you can't fool blind people."  Self-Interviews, p. 174.

21 Poems, p. 291  
22 Ibid.
Laurence Lieberman, who has written extensively about Dickey’s poetry, believes that "False Youth" is at least partly autobiographical. Lieberman calls the poem "... an experience which taught him [Dickey] to see deeply into the shifting sands of his own personality as he slid, imperceptibly, from youth into middle age." Lieberman summarizes the lessons of "False Youth":

Youth is a "lifetime search" for the human role, or roles, which, when acted out, will serve as a spiritual passport of entry into middle age... He must learn his life, as his art, and each stage of existence... concludes with a search for the blueprint to the next stage... It is contained as a deeply true, hidden map of possibility within his developing self.

Though not all of Dickey’s explorations of mortal life are as compelling as "False Youth: Two Seasons," on balance these poems seem deeply felt and are brilliantly crafted. However, Dickey’s examination of life as a mortal creature

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24 Ibid.
25 For other poems dealing with middle life, see Dickey’s "Mercy" and "In the Pocket" from The Eye-Beaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy (New York, 1970), and "The Bee" in Poems. Two poems concerning middle age that do not succeed are "The Birthday Dream" from Poems and "Two Poems of Going Home" from The Eye-Beaters. In the former, Dickey’s dreamer wanders through a nightmare sequence of macho experiences only to awaken to this paltry revelation: "I was entangled with my wife, who labored pled screamed / To bring me forth. The room was full of mildness. I was forty." In "Two Poems of Going Home," Dickey becomes too autobiographical for an outsider to penetrate. Non-members of the 1939 North Fulton High School class may have trouble in determining just who Dickey’s "Keeper" is and what his function in the poem is intended to be.
does not cease with middle age, but pushes on to confront
death itself. As a poet Dickey is not bound, as is the phil-
osopher, to hold any consistent "view" of death, and at least
three distinct attitudes toward the subject find expression
in his poetry:

1) Death seen as a horror to be met with Promethean de-
fiance, as in "Gamecock."

2) Death seen as an unfathomable mystery, the finality
of which allows no possibility of transcendent communion with
the dead, as in "The Driver."

3) Death seen as a glorious culmination of life, to be
embraced and met without fear. Paradoxically, dying is seen as
an experience to be **lived** as creatively as possible, as in the
poem "Falling."

"Gamecock," a short poem from Buckdancer's Choice (1965),
sets forth an attitude toward death similar to that found in
Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." The poem
is an extended simile comparing a feisty gamecock with a "fierce
old man in a terminal ward." For the first three stanzas the
poem seems to have as its subject the rooster alone, slowly
gathering strength for its morning call:

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. . . he waits for the sun's only cry
all night building up in his throat
To leap out and turn the day red. . . . 26
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The fourth stanza makes clear that the real subject of the poem
is a dying man who has chosen to "rage against the dying of the
light" rather than passively accept his death. As with the
gamecock, the "enraged, surviving- / Another-day blood" will
not allow the man to loose his grim purchase on life. As the

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26 Poems, p. 220.
rooster wakes the creatures of the farm, so the old man's rebellious shout awakens the hospital each day:

And from him at dawn comes the same
Cry, that the world cannot stop.
In all the great building's blue windows
The sun gains strength; on all floors, women
Awaken—wives, nurses, sisters, and daughters. 27

The speaker welcomes the old man's tenacious show of strength. For him, as for the speaker in Thomas' poem, any strong feeling is preferable to acquiescence in death. Dickey further compares the man and the gamecock in their effect on those around them. The rooster's bold cry will "tumble his hens from the pine tree," 28 gaining their attention and intimidating any would-be rivals. After the old man's shout awakens the hospital workers, he too becomes the center of attention, assured that he will not be forgotten while he lives:

And he lies back, his eyes filmed, unappeased,
As all of them, clucking, pillow-patting,
Come to help his best savagery blaze, doomed, dead-game, demanding unreasonably,
Battling to the death for what is his. 29

Again, the comparison to "Do Not Go Gentle" is readily made: As Thomas urged his father to "burn and rave at close of day," so the unruly old man is said to "blaze" as he resists extinction. The attitude toward death expressed in "Gamecock" would seem to advocate resistance to the very end, quite the

27 Poems, p. 220.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
opposite of the viewpoint to be found in the later poem "Falling."

Another war poem from *Helmets*, "The Driver," is one of the few poems in which Dickey addresses the problem of evil in the world. One critic, noting the infrequency with which Dickey explores the darker side of existence, has said that "Dickey at his best is a poetic celebrant of the life force and . . . cannot handle darker themes as successfully."\(^3\)

Certainly many writers have built a career out of indicting the universe for its shortcomings, cursing with Housman "whatever brute and blackguard made the world." Dickey, as already noted, is generally an optimistic poet, and has but a handful of poems in which the nature of things is called into question. "The Driver," certainly the most eloquent of the lot, is Dickey's closest approach to the nihilism that is one of the hallmarks of modern literature.

The poem has as its setting an island in the Pacific, the scene of a fierce battle during the war. Peace has just been declared, hostilities have ended, and the threat of death under which the speaker has lived is vanished now. More introspective than his fellows, he wanders off alone to meditate upon his war experience:

\[^3\]Calhoun, op. cit., p. 12. Calhoun's analysis of Dickey's "affirmative" nature is incisive at points, but seems to ignore the poems in which Dickey, at least implicitly, sets forth a more negative view of existence. These poems provide a steady counterpoint to the more dominant note of acceptance and joyous affirmation in Dickey's work.
... I arose
From my bed in the tent and walked
Where the island fell through white stones
Until it became the green sea.
Into light that dazzled my brain
Like the new thought of peace, I walked
Until I was swimming and singing. 31

The persona swims into the ocean until he is floating above
some military equipment lost during the attempt to take the
island. Looking down, he sees the "foundered landing craft /
That took the island." 32 Poised thus above the watery graves
of the men who died in battle, he seeks to understand the
meaning of their deaths, why some have died and others remain
to know "the new thought of peace." He attempts to penetrate
the enigma of death through a mystical identification with
those who have died. Seeing a rusted halftrack below him, he
floats downward to join the dead:

... slowly I sank
And slid into the driver's shattered seat.

Driving through the country of the drowned
On a sealed secret-keeping breath,
Ten feet under water, I sat still,
Getting used to the burning stare
Of the wide-eyed dead after battle. 33

H. L. Weatherby finds in such poems as "The Driver" a
"key to the central pattern of all Dickey's poetry" which he
interprets as being a "way of exchange" between a man and
his "opposites"—other men, animals, machinery, or, as in this
case, the dead. 34 There can be little doubt that the persona

31 Poems, p. 169
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 H. L. Weatherby, "The Way of Exchange in James
Dickey's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LXXIV (Fall, 1966), 673.
in "The Driver" intends such an exchange, for he has now "exchanged" places with a dead man, and tries to accustom himself to staring like the dead under water. Gazing up through the clear water, "the uneasy lyrical skin that lies / Between death and life," he sees an airplane overhead, and continues his query:

I saw an airplane come over, perfectly
Soundless, but could not tell
Why I lived, or why I was sitting
With my lungs being shaped like two bells
At the wheel of a craft in a wave
Of attack that broke upon coral.

Here is the first hint that the driver's attempt to transcend himself, to go beyond his station as a living mortal, must fail. He can see an airplane, a tangible, observable fact in the continuum of nature, but he cannot know why he has been left alive while others have died, for such knowledge is not open to creatures in a closed, naturalistic universe such as that presented in "The Driver." If the matter is still in doubt, Dickey removes all uncertainty in the following stanza:

"I become pure spirit" I tried
To say, in a bright smoke of bubbles,
But I was becoming no more
Than haunted.

The speaker has become "haunted" with the thought of becoming "pure spirit"—escaping the flesh that binds him to a world in which men die and pain is everywhere. This is the dream that is rejected in Dickey's poetry—the stultifying belief that man

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35 Poems, p. 169.  
36 Ibid.  
37 Ibid.
can become more than man by ignoring the physical self and concentrating on the spiritual. Such a bifurcation of man is anathema in Dickey's poetic universe, as the driver discovers. To be so "haunted" by the spirit, he learns, is to

\[ \ldots \text{sink out of sight, and to lose} \]
\[ \text{The power of speech in the presence} \]
\[ \text{Of the dead, with the eyes turning green,} \]
\[ \text{And to leap at last for the sky,} \]
\[ \text{Very nearly too late.} \ldots \]

Fittingly, it is the sudden burning of his lungs for air that reminds the driver he has not become "pure spirit" and can never do so. The aching in his chest recalls him to his life as a physical being, a burden that can never be put off until it is put off forever. The "sealed secret-keeping breath," a puzzling line, may now be deciphered. The "secret" is the fact of mortality, of life in a body sustained by oxygen, a life impermanent and uncertain but all that can be known. This reading of the "secret" is reinforced as the driver bursts gasping to the surface, coming at last to the vital oxygen

\[ \ldots \text{where another} \]
\[ \text{Leapt and could not break into} \]
\[ \text{His breath, where it lay, in battle} \]
\[ \text{As in peace, available, secret,} \]
\[ \text{Dazzling and huge, filled with sunlight} \]
\[ \text{For thousands of miles on the water.} \]

The driver has his secret, his answer such as it is. Nature has spoken to him out of the whirlwind, answering his indictment with his own mortality, proving that there is no

\[ ^{39} \text{Ibid.} \]
\[ ^{40} \text{Poems, p. 170} \]
"pure spirit" detachable from the body. The vital air and sunlight remain indifferent to the living and the dead alike, beautiful now to the speaker, who has forgotten his interest in the dead and is content to be among the living.

In "Falling," possibly Dickey's best-known poem, all the disparate yet intertwined themes so far discussed--acceptance of the body, rebirth through sensuality, and the search for the meaning of death--are drawn together and blended in a poem one critic called "... a feat of technical virtuosity unparalleled in modern verse."\(^41\) In few other poems does Dickey so exalt the dignity of man as a free and creative being. At the same time, however, Dickey will not blink the darker aspects of existence. The brutal workings of chance and the inevitable finality of death are fully acknowledged, and it is in spite of these palpable realities that "Falling" achieves its triumphant end.

It is curious that Ralph J. Mills has seen in "Falling" ". . . a regrettable straining after material and effect--perhaps really after novelty . . .\(^42\)" for Dickey's subject matter in the poem comes from the 1955 death of a young airline stewardess. A brief newspaper report of the accident serves as the epigram for the poem:

\(^41\) Corrington, op. cit.

A 29-year-old stewardess fell... to her death tonight when she was swept through an emergency door that suddenly sprang open... The body... was found... three hours after the accident.

--New York Times

The anonymous stewardess, called only "she," becomes in the poem Dickey's supreme figure of unity, his finest representative of the integrated sensibility he has so often proclaimed. He transforms the girl's gratuitous death into a parable, an epistle to a century burdened by its perception of reality as fragmented and of existence as absurd.

The poem opens with a stanza in which the stewardess hangs a blanket over a door to muffle "the vast beast-whistle of space." From then on, after she is sucked out through the faulty emergency door, the poem outlines her acceptance and transcendence of death through mystical and sensual experience. She is not only falling to her death, but "... falling living beginning to be / Something that no one has ever been and lived through." As Laurence Lieberman has written, "the shifts in her body-cycle--falling, floating, flying, falling--stand for consecutive stages in a being-cycle, rising, as she falls to her death, to a pinnacle of total self-realization." As soon as she realizes what has happened to her, the stewardess begins to explore the creative potential inherent

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43 Poems, p. 293.  
44 Poems, p. 293.  
45 Ibid.  
46 Lieberman, op. cit.
in this utterly new experience. There is no precedent to be followed, and the experience is entirely hers, almost infinitely malleable. In phrases reminiscent of the "sacred marriage" motif employed in "The Being," Dickey begins to associate the falling stewardess with the natural world, overcoming the separation between alienated man and the cosmos:

Coming down from a marvelous leap with the delaying, dumbfounding ease
Of a dream of being drawn, like endless moonlight
to the harvest soil
Of a central state of one's country with a great gradual warmth

\[
\text{...... she clasps it all}
\]
To her, and can hang her hands and feet in peculiar ways and
Her eyes opened wide by wind, can open her mouth as wide wide
And suck all the heat from the cornfields. ... 47

This process of identification with the natural order is carried further as the stewardess, a creature of earth bound for doom on the earth, has visions of sensual union with the clouds that surround her:

\[
\text{...... can go down on her back with a}
\text{feeling}
\text{Of stupendous pillows stacked under her and can}
\text{turn turn as to someone}
\text{In bed smile, understood in darkness can go away}
\text{slant slide}
\]

\[
\text{...... My God}
\text{It is good}
\text{And evil lying in one after another of all the positions for love.} 48
\]

Realizing that nothing is left to her but this fall, she

\[47\text{Poems, p. 294.}\]
\[48\text{Poems, p. 294.}\]
loses all inhibitions born of societal mores, and for a while loses her human identity. She merges imaginatively with the birds of the air, arranging her skirt "like a diagram of a bat."\(^49\) She finds that she has

- 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. \(\ldots\) \(^50\)

Knowing now that "there is time to live / In superhuman health,"\(^51\) she undergoes a momentary lapse in her quest for life-in-death; she begins to hope irrationally to survive the experience. In so doing, her pristine vision is sullied. She surrenders her sense of immediacy and begins to live again in the possible future.

\ldots and there are also those sky-divers on TV sailing in sunlight smiling under their goggles sweeping batons back and forth
And He who jumped without a chute and was handed one by a diving Buddy. She looks for her grinning companion white teeth nowhere.\(^52\)

She has for a moment abandoned her commitment to shaping this final experience into something unique and existentially authentic. For a moment she indulges in desperate fantasies, believing that she can somehow glide over the flat Midwest prairie until she reaches water. This could be her salvation,

\(^{49}\)Ibid. p. 295. \(^{50}\)Ibid., pp. 295-296. 

\(^{51}\)Ibid. \(^{52}\)Poems, p. 295.
Into water she might live like a diver cleaving
perfect plunge
into another heavy silver unbreathable slowing
saving
Element.

To insert her into water like a needle to come
out healthfully dripping
And be handed a Coca-Cola. 53

For a while she "flies," sailing by means of her bat-shaped
skirt in search of water. Dickey now switches to first-
person narration in order to render more vividly a sense of
the woman's mental state:

so let me begin

To plane across the night air of Kansas opening
my eyes superhumanly
Bright to the dammed moon opening the natural
wings of my jacket
By Don Loper, moving like a hunting owl toward
the glitter of water
One cannot just fall just tumble screaming all
that time one must
Use it. 54

"One must use it." This the stewardess set out to do, be-
beginning the fall determined to make death her greatest creative
moment, to squeeze every bit of variegated life and mystical
awareness from the experience of dying. Now for a moment she
has forgotten that noble purpose and clings to her hopes for
the old life.

She can see no water below; even her last desperate,
deluded hope begins to die. When it passes, she wholly accepts

53 Poems, p. 295. 54 Ibid.
her impending death, and "... remembers she still has time to die / Beyond explanation." 55

... she sheds the jacket
With its silver sad impotent wings sheds the bat's guiding tailpiece
Of her skirt the lightning-charged clinging of her blouse the Intimate
Inner flying-garment of her slip in which she rides like the holy ghost
Of a virgin. ... 56

As the woman prepares to meet death stripped to fundamental nakedness, Dickey weaves a non-rational connection between the falling stewardess and the sleeping farm people below:

"... under Chenille bedspreads / The farm girls are feeling the goddess in them struggle and rise." 57 As the naked girl performs impossible gyrations in the air, the sleepers know intuitively that she has

[shed the] absurd brassiere then feels the girdle required by regulation squirming
Off her: no longer monobuttocked she feels the girdle flutter shake
In her hand and float upward her clothes rising off her ascending. 58

She is close to death now, and in her last precious moments she knows no panic or fear, only a sensual exultation in her own body, in the uniqueness of the creature she has been:

she will come among them after
Her last superhuman act the last slow careful passing of her hands

55 Ibid., p. 296. 56 Ibid.
57 Poems, p. 296. 58 Ibid., p. 297.
All over her unharmed body desired by every sleeper in his dream.59

The sleeping males below are mystically joined in a sensuous harmony with the falling girl:

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
Her palms over her legs her small breasts and deeply between her thighs.60

At the final moment, the girl manages to turn on her back before striking the earth, her last living act. She has indeed managed to "die beyond understanding." Those who find her "... can tell nothing / But that she is there inexplicable unquestionable.61 She has achieved victory over death, has conquered it so far as is humanly possible. The embracing of her fate and her determination to control the experience and shape it to her will have won for her a last existential victory. As Laurence Lieberman so eloquently puts it,

... her erotic dream fantasy withstands a collision with intense rival counterimages of hard, cold reality. Her inner life of dream being attains, finally, a more impervious solidity and stability than the great ultimates of death and time we cling to in the real world.62

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Poems, p. 298.

CHAPTER III

THE NATURE POEMS

Even more intense than his concern for an integrated and creative human sexuality is Dickey's interest in man's relation to the world of external nature. Dickey's reputation as a poet will undoubtedly stand or fall on the basis of his nature poems, which comprise the bulk of his work and among which are to be found many of his most ambitious efforts.

A view of nature so complex as Dickey's cannot be reduced to one cut-and-dried "attitude" toward the natural world. As with most original minds, Dickey is not wedded dogmatically to an unvarying view of nature, but shifts, examines, and probes in making his unique contribution to American nature poetry. For the purposes of this analysis, however, a distinction may be made concerning the narrative stances to be found in the various poems. In many of these, the experiences with nature are undergone by the persona in ordinary waking consciousness; that is, the events of the poem are to be understood as being largely rational transcriptions of experience colored by nothing more than poetic fancy and imagination. In other nature poems, Dickey's protagonist transcends human limitations, sometimes briefly and sometimes (as understood in the context of the poem) forever. New levels of awareness are gained, most often in the form of intuitive
knowledge and contact with nonhuman consciousness. Sometimes a total absorption of the persona into the natural world occurs.

Within the nature poems, a variety of positions regarding the nonhuman universe may be discovered. Dickey's poems on nature contain most of the attitudes toward the subject to be found in literary tradition and in modern society. Alternately in the poems, man is

a) presented as dominant over and separate from nature, with results sometimes joyous and sometimes grim, as in "The Lord in the Air" and "The Summons,"

b) urged to learn from nature by understanding analogies with the human world drawn from natural mysteries, as in "The Change," "The Shark's Parlor," and "Victory," and

c) beseeched to give up the mind and will that separate him from the natural world, as in "The Salt Marsh," "Inside the River," and "Kudzu."

"The Lord in the Air," from Dickey's collection titled The Eye-Beaters, gives an idyllic picture of man's ascendancy over the animal kingdom. The poem is obviously autobiographical (Dickey's son Chris is mentioned by name), but Lieberman has suggested that the poem is autobiographical in a deeper sense than that indicated by the use of authentic detail. Writing of poems such as "Falling" and "The Lord in the Air," in which there is creative endeavor and rebirth in the air, Lieberman offers this intriguing hypothesis:

... since the gravest spiritual losses to [Dickey's] manhood were incurred in air--via the incineration of women and children in the napalm bombings of Japan--he could be expected to seek compensatory gains to redeem himself, paradoxically, through that medium. In fact,
he does achieve his most sustaining spiritual
and poetic gains through the vision of air-genesis.¹

The poem concerns the poet's son in his attempt to at-
tract crows by using a bird call. Even before he sounds the
irresistible call, the birds are ready to recognize the boy
as "the lord in the air."

They lurch and face in. O yes, they are all in
These very trees of the son-faced and fenced-
in backyard waiting for my boy and the Lord
in the air.²

Dickey exults in his son's ability to control nature and bend
the birds of the air to his will. "They don't know it but he
has them all in his palm, and now puts them / All in his
mouth."³ Through the rational intellect which sets him apart
from the crows, the boy has devised a way to control them.
The father, observing his son's power, imagines that the birds
are raised to an almost human awareness through the enchanting
sounds made by the "lord":

... sailing meeting the Lord
Of their stolen voice in the air...

... they wheel in blast after blast
In the child's lungs, as he speaks to them in the only
Word they understand the one the syllable that means
Everything to them. ... ⁴

Under the boy's influence, the father imagines, the crows
are endowed with knowledge of human realities, "fear grief good

²Eye-Beaters, p. 42.
³Ibid.
⁴Eye-Beaters, p. 42.
danger love and marriage,"\textsuperscript{5} and finally laughter. Amused by the swirling crows and delighted in his power over them, the boy "falls in stitches to the concrete."\textsuperscript{6} and as he does utters a spontaneous burst of laughter. The crows immediately imitate him, and thus bridge a gap between animal and human being:

\begin{verbatim}
Then a tone never struck in the egg in the million years
Of their voice the whole sky laughs with crows
they creak
And croak with hilarity black winged belly-
laughs they tell
Each other the great joke of flight. . . . \textsuperscript{7}
\end{verbatim}

The poet views the experience as indicative of the continuity and interconnection of man and beast, and a demonstration of "new / Power over birds and beasts" for his son.\textsuperscript{8} Above all the exchange between man and bird is a wholly gratuitous and creative act of love and sharing. As the changed birds return to their trees, the poet senses

\begin{verbatim}
. . . something that has come in
From all over come out but not for betrayal,
or to call
Up death or desire, but only to give give
what was never.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{verbatim}

The view of human dominance expressed in "The Lord in the Air" is almost diametrically opposed to the attitude found

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{5}Ibid. \textsuperscript{6}Ibid. \textsuperscript{7}Eye-Beaters, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid. This poem reverses the trend usually found in Dickey's nature poems, wherein a human gains new power or knowledge through contact with nonhuman nature.
\textsuperscript{9}Eye-Beaters, p. 43.
\end{verbatim}
in "The Summons," an earlier poem. Despite marked similarities in the two poems, their endings are strikingly dissimilar. In "The Summons," a hunter uses a grass-blade to call an unidentified animal from across a river. In lines that recall with bleak irony Frost's "The Aim was Song," the hunter asserts his mastery over the natural world:

I speak to the wind, and it lives.
No hunter has taught me this call;
It comes out of childhood and playgrounds.

The wind at my feet extends
Quickly out, across the lake,
Containing the sound I have made.\(^1\)

The wind as willingly obeys the would-be killer as the wind in Frost's poem obeyed the teacher of song. However, the "aim" in Frost's poem is not song but death, precisely the "betrayal" decried by the speaker of "The Lord in the Air."

The ruse is perfect; soon the enchanted animal approaches its death, "a beast that shall die of its love."\(^1\) As the creature swims the river toward its killer, the hunter recalls that he learned this particular call on a playground where he romped with his brothers. This image of childhood purity juxtaposed with the calculating hunter gives Dickey's last stanza particular impact.

He will 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

\(^{10}\text{Poems, p. 64} \quad ^{11}\text{Ibid.} \)
Who summons him forth, and now
Pulls wide the great, thoughtful arrow. 12

The two poems present opposing views of man's "power over
birds and beasts." 12a Sometimes the power is used to create
joy, at other times "to call up death or desire," 12b to destroy
a life lured by instincts it cannot resist. At such times the
human is an observer, not a harmonious part of the chain of
being. He stands aloof and manipulates, but does not feel with
the creature he destroys. Once, more abundant life is given;
next, it is taken away. Dickey, a hunter himself, can only
present the conflicting scenarios. He seems torn between the
two paths, unable to choose one and renounce the other.

In many of the nature poems, Dickey's treatment of the
subject follows the mainstream of American nature poetry—a
tradition which, after Longfellow, Bryant, Thoreau, and Frost,
seeks to draw symbolic meanings and moral lessons from the
natural world. These poems are never stiffly didactic or
overly anthropomorphic yet it is fair to say that Dickey
believes in nature's power to instruct. Though his "impulse"
comes as often from the shark or wolverine as from the "vernal
wood," he would doubtless agree with Wordsworth that moral
qualities are to be gleaned from nature.

"The Change" is one of Dickey's many poems dealing with
the shark, an animal that has consistently occupied the poet's

12 Poems, p. 65.
12a Eye-Beaters, p. 43.
12b Ibid.
mind. As the speaker and his friends drift languidly in a boat, a hammerhead shark glides by. "Blue, unstirrable, dream- ing," the shark seems to single out the speaker from his companions. With the blue gaze of the hammerhead burning in his brain, he becomes intensely conscious of his place in the evolutionary order: he, the human, stands in the middle of the cosmic process, somewhere between the shark's almost mechanical savagery and a higher form of life that will one day emerge. The persona knows that he bears traces of both in his present form.

The strength of creation sees through me:
The world is yet blind as beginning
The shark's brutal form never changes.
No millions of years shall yet turn him
From himself to a man in love,
Yet I feel that impossible man,
Hover near, emerging from darkness.13

As the man represents a step forward from the ferocity of the hammerhead, so the new man will look back on the present human as tainted by violence and hatred:

I would arise from my brute of a body
To a thing the world never thought of
In a place as apparent as heaven.14

The poem explores "ends and beginnings . . . sources and outcomes,"15 and finds in the shark's brute form a milestone on the road to more perfect forms of life.

13Poems, p. 64.  
14Ibid.  
15Poems, p. 65.
"Victory," from The Eye-Beaters, also draws symbols for human edification from the nonhuman world. A young soldier on Okinawa celebrates the Allied conquest on armistice morning, ready to "sail the island toward life / After death." He remembers a critical moment in the jungle two years ago, long before he had known he would survive the war:

What I saw was two birthdays
Back, in the jungle, before I sailed high on the rainbow
Waters of victory before the sun
Of armistice morning burned into my chest
The great V of Allied Conquest.

His mind returns to a night when, drunk on whisky sent as a birthday gift, he drove a jeep into the jungle until it stalled in the clinging brush. Drinking and daydreaming of future victories, he is interrupted by a large snake dangling from a limb above him. In the soldier's drunken state, the snake seems at first to portend disaster, but it makes no move to strike. Seeing this, the man begins to identify with the snake, and in his stupor treats him as a friend.

. . . I held up the last drop
In the bottle, and invited him
To sin to celebrate
The Allied victory to come.

The soldier perceives a cold reprimand in the serpent's glittering eyes, and believes the snake will not deign to celebrate a "victory" that by its very nature requires the suffering and

\[\text{16} \text{Eye-Beaters, p. 38.} \quad \text{17} \text{Ibid.} \quad \text{18} \text{Eye-Beaters, p. 39.}\]
death of fellow beings.

... He pulled back a little over
The evil of the thing I meant
To stand for brotherhood.\textsuperscript{19}

The intoxicated recruit interprets the message of the snake as one of universal brotherhood, abolishing the barriers between men that were erected by the war. He sees the snake as a sacred messenger of love and nonviolence, and is almost hypnotized by his beauty.

... Nightshining his scales on Detroit Glass, he stayed on and on
My mind. I found out the angel
Of peace is limbless, and the day will come
I said, when no difference is between
My skin and the great fleets
Delirious with survival.\textsuperscript{20}

During this revelation, the soldier becomes convinced he will survive the war, and manages to do so. Returning to the present and the armistice celebration, he finds he can no longer join in the revelry of his fellow soldiers.

After the war, the soldier finds himself assigned to "the Nothing of occupation / Duty,"\textsuperscript{21} and again seeks solace in drink. This time he visits a tattoo parlor in the land of the former enemy. He calls out for the snake, and the Japanese tattoo artists begin to embroider a huge snake coiling down his body.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid. Note again the use of the snake as a positive ethical symbol, as in "May Day Sermon."

\textsuperscript{20}Eye-Beaters, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid.
Before I knew it in Yokahama, it was at my throat
Beginning with its tail, cutting through the world-
wide Victory sign.\textsuperscript{22}

With its first "movement," then, the symbol of peace destroys
the symbolic \( \wedge \) sunburned into the soldier's chest, and con-
tinues to wend its way across his body

I knew that many-
colored sunshine was living with my heart our hearts
Beat as one.\textsuperscript{23}

Finally the snake completes its twisting mission, seeming to
erenter the speaker's prone body:

\ldots I felt myself opened
Just enough, where the serpent staggered on his last
Colors needles gasping for air jack-hammering
\ldots the snake shone on me complete escaping
Forever surviving crushing going home
To the bowels of the living,
His master, and the new prince of peace.\textsuperscript{24}

"The Shark's Parlor" is surely one of the most unusual
poems Dickey has yet written, at least in terms of subject
matter. The poem concerns the plan of two young men, roommates
in a summer beach cottage, to capture a shark. The men row
out into the sea and bait a shark hook with a dead collie pup,
dumping a bucket of entrails and blood to attract the sharks.
Then they tie the hawser to one of the columns supporting
their house (built boardwalk-style over the sea) and settle
back to wait. They are not to be disappointed.

\ldots then the house groaned the rope
Sprang out of the water splinters flew we leapt
from our chairs
And grabbed the rope. \ldots \textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{24}Eye-Beaters, p. 39. \\
\textsuperscript{25}Poems, p. 205.
Reinforcements from a nearby service station are summoned, and a tug-of-war with the great fish begins. The back porch of the cottage descends into the sea, so the line of straining men stretches up the steps from the ocean, through the vacation cottage, and finally out the front door of the house and into the street. As dozens of neighbors join the struggle, the narrator sees the huge shark drawn near the bottom of the steps, and to his horror, up the steps to the cottage door. He screams for the volunteers to stop their pulling, but it is too late: the shark is hauled onto the top step, where

he flapped 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 he was out of his element and in Our vacation paradise."

The shark gyrates wildly in its death throes, virtually destroying the cottage and spraying blood everywhere. His will to live astounds the awestruck men:

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 he dies forever, and is shoved back down the stairs to the sea. The persona is strangely moved by the experience and remains in awe of the shark's great vigor. In later years

he buys the house, viewing its blood-stained parlor as one "fragment shored against his ruin."

What could I do but buy
That house for the one black mark still there against death a forehead-toucher in the room he circles beneath and has been invited to wreck? 28

The spots of blood will keep green the memories of this unique experience and of this youth in general. Constant flux is the law of life everywhere, but in the shark's parlor time will be kinder, allowing a permanent link with the vanished past:

Blood hard as iron on the wall black with time still bloodlike
Can be touched whenever the brow is drunk enough: all changes:
Memory:
Something like 3-dimensional dancing in the limbs with age
Feeling more in two worlds than one in all worlds the growing encounters. 29

The nature poems discussed thus far have all posited the separation of man from the nonhuman world by virtue of his intellect and / or his will. Man has appeared as either student, observer, or manipulator of the natural world. In another sizeable group of nature poems, Dickey welcomes a subsuming of human will into nature and a cessation of those rational functions that set men apart from the animal kingdom. Often these poems reveal an ambiguity in Dickey's view of human

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
civilization itself, as in the case of "Kudzu" from the volume titled *Helmets*.

Kudzu, a trailing Asiatic vine used for fodder and for erosion control, has figured in Dickey's poetry mainly as a symbol of the boundless fertility of nature. The plant is noted for its extremely rapid growth, and can literally take over an area if unchecked. The poem "Kudzu" concerns one such takeover, in this case the pasture of a Southern farmer. The vines inundate the field, and the creeping menace begins to climb

Up telephone poles
Which rear, half out of leafage
As though they would shriek,
like things, smothered by their own
Green, mindless unkillable ghosts.30

The real danger of the kudzu is in the shelter it affords to poisonous snakes. The threat of snakebite is greatly increased when a two-foot blanket of kudzu covers the pasture.

For when the kudzu comes,
The snakes do, and weave themselves
Among its lengthening vines,
Their spade heads resting on leaves,
Growing, also, in earthly powers
And the huge circumstance of concealment.31

After several cows are bitten and die "drooling a hot green froth,"32 the alarmed farmer remembers the traditional tactics used to combat the engulfing tide of kudzu. He herds his hogs,

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30 Poems, p. 140.
31 Ibid.
32 Poems, p. 141.
natural enemies of the copperhead, into the pasture. There, the battle is joined.

The hogs disappear in the leaves. The sound is intense, subhuman, nearly human with purposive rage.

The snakes are soon destroyed, and the farmer knows he has but to wait for the first frost to be rid of the troublesome kudzu. He is free of the menace, and left to ponder "the surface of things and its terrors." He is of divided mind about what he has done, feeling torn between the exigencies of human civilization and a desire to merge with the vital "green fuse" that drove the kudzu to engulf everything in its path. The snakes too, though deadly, are representative of the life force, knowing no law save that of multiply and survive.

From them, though they killed your cattle, such energy also flowed
to you from the knee high meadows
(it was as though you had
a green sword twined among
the veins of your growing right arm.)

Alone, separate from the blind procreative urge of nature, the speaker knows he will not have access to such vital power.

His goals and purposes as a human being require that he set his will to some extend against nature, that he declare with Arnold that "Nature and man can never be fast friends." This he will do, but without Arnold's certainty and with lingering doubt.
that he has made the right choice. In the following poems, other options are explored, and the tensions between man and nature are resolved by other means.

"The Salt Marsh" finds Dickey's persona walking into a dense field of sawgrass, the stalks so thick and tall that once into the marsh, the speaker has no idea where he is. A primordial stillness hangs over the salt marsh, and the narrator as he walks has the illusion of not moving at all due to the utter sameness encountered at every step.

Wherever you come to is
The same as before,
With the same blades of oversized grass.  

Each blade of the sawgrass bends to touch him at the identical place on his forehead. The curious sensation calls up an image of a crane in the speaker's mind, "each flap of its wings creating / Its feathers anew." The analogy is precise, for as each movement of the crane's wings reveals the same arrangement of feathers, so each step into the marsh brings a different yet identical patch of sawgrass to the speaker. As place ceases to have meaning for the speaker, so too is his sense of time obliterated by the hypnotic uniformity of the marsh:

   . . . the sun destroys all points
   Of the compass, refusing to move
   From its chosen noon.  

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35 Ibid.
36 Poems, p. 108
37 Ibid.
With all bearing in time and space lost, the speaker feels himself yielding to the seductive tranquility of the marsh. The will and intellect that separate him from the insensate marshes begin to seem cumbersome and irrelevant as the man identifies himself with the swaying grass:

You cannot leap up to look out
Yet you do not sink,
But seem to grow, and the sound,
The oldest of sounds, is your breath
Singing like acres.38

As this loss of identity occurs, the persona's first reaction is one of fear as the comfortable boundaries of the ego are dissolved. Soon, however, "green panic . . . gives / Way to another sensation"39 and the narrator accepts the experience of union with nature. The wind sways the sawgrass gently, further mesmerizing the speaker as he realizes that

. . . nothing prevents your bending
With them, helping their wave
Upon wave upon wave upon wave
By not opposing
By willing your supple inclusion
In fields without promise of harvest.40

The emphasis on "not opposing" nature is found again in Dickey's "Inside the River." Again there is the longing to be free of the rational boundaries of human consciousness and the desire to merge with the natural world. A swimmer enters a river, described as "a garment of motion / Tremendous,

38 Ibid. 39 Poems, p. 108

40 Ibid. For Dickey, one of the primary distinctions between animal and human consciousness lies in the human capacity
immortal." He clings to a submerged root in order to resist the tug of the current, and the poem consists of the speaker's debate with himself as to the value of "opposing" his will to the urging of the river.

Wait for a coming
And swimming idea.
Live like the dead
In their flying feeling.

The "coming and swimming idea," of course, is the speaker's final decision to let go, to will his "supple inclusion" in the natural order. He longs to

Move with the world
As the deep dead move,
Opposed to nothing.
Release.

In these haunting lines, reminiscent of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the speaker seems to be resolved. He will yield to the insistent current and be carried along to the sea. Unlike the choice made in "The Salt Marsh," this absorption into nature would be total and irrevocable, costing the speaker his life as well as his human ego. Abruptly, he casts off the enchanting spell of the river:

Weight more changed
Than that of one

for orientation in time, an ability which Dickey (along with many scientists) believes is not possessed by animals. Dickey believes the power of time-binding to be absent in animals, thus causing them to live eternally in the present moment.

Poems, p. 105.

Ibid.

Ibid.
Now being born,
Let go the root.

Enter the sea
Like a winding wind.
Sing. See no one.

The poems discussed in this section have shown the poet straining at the limits of human awareness, but never fully transcending the human condition and gaining the mystical insight he so desires. "A Screened Porch in the Country" will serve as a final example of this longing for Dickey's *summum bonnum*, and provide a transition into the more mystical poems in which that highest good is actually achieved.

In the poem, a country family gathers each night on their screened porch in a faithfully observed ritual of conviviality. Ralph J. Mills believes that "Screened Porch" presents "a situation so ordinary . . . and the imaginative rendering of its implications [is] so extraordinary that the reader's habitual

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44 Poems, p. 106. Speaking of Dickey's many uses of the water archetype, whether Christian, mystical, or romantic, Daniel L. Guillory says this of "Inside the River": "It is a mark of his singular and original talent that he attempts to push this water image even further . . . "Inside the River" . . . uses water not as an emblem of some internal spiritual condition, but as a literal, physical medium valuable in and of itself." Guillory insists that in this poem "water is no longer presented as part of some metaphorical machinery." Guillory's point is well taken, but he ignores the continuing use of water as a "spiritual emblem," in this case an emblem of acquiescence to destruction and abdication of the will to exist. "Water Magic in the Poetry of James Dickey," English Language Notes, XIV, (December, 1970), 132.
way of looking at things . . . is shaken."\textsuperscript{45} Mills further contends that "the poem proceeds to describe a species of metempsychosis" that brings the souls of these people into "communion" with the night creatures.\textsuperscript{46} As the people talk on the porch, their shadows are cast outward into the darkness until

\begin{quote}
They come to rest out in the yard
In a kind of blurred golden country
In which they more deeply lie
Than if they were being created
Of Heavenly light.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

In the "blurred golden country" just beyond the pale of the light, small night creatures gather to watch the family "where they are floating beyond / Themselves, in peace."\textsuperscript{48} The animals

\begin{quote}
Come to the edge of them
And sing, if they can,
Or, if they can't, simply shine
Their eyes back, sitting on haunches.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

This nightly custom has developed a bond between the humans and the animals who mingle where the shadow meets the light. The family "continues / To be laid down in the midst of its nightly creatures,"\textsuperscript{50} and they are transformed in the poet's mind as a result of this contact. The lines that follow are perhaps the most explicit statement of the need for transcendence found anywhere in Dickey's work. Changed by the regular ceremony with the animals, the people become

\begin{itemize}
\item Mills, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 235.
\item Mills, p. 236.
\item Poems, p. 96.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\end{itemize}
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.51

This is the perfect state envisioned in so much of Dickey's
nature verse, a life lived close to the sources of being.
Dickey pictures animal consciousness as free of the arbitrary
boundaries of time and space, totally integrated in the physi-
cal body, and free of the fear of passing time and coming
death. As Ralph J. Mills says, "the reader finally gets the
haunting feeling of having shared deeply in the life of crea-
tion and so loosened the boundaries of the selfish ego."52
Dickey's animals inhabit a timeless realm that is purely Now,
and rejoice while they live. They cast no thought backward or
forward, but occupy the present with a joyous intensity. This
ideal state will be more perfectly realized in the mystical
poems to be discussed in the next section.

51 Poems, p. 97
52 Mills, p. 238.
CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTICAL POEMS

The poems to be discussed in this section may be described as the "mystical" or "transcendental" poems. The term "transcendental" is not intended in the full Emersonian sense, however, but should be taken in its root meaning of "going beyond" or "climbing over" a barrier of some kind. The term is appropriate, for in these poems Dickey achieves the breakthrough toward which so much of his verse strains: the final overcoming of human limitations and the achieving of new levels of awareness. These transformations or elevations of consciousness may take several forms in the poetry, depending primarily upon the narrative vehicle through which Dickey conveys his revelation. In some of the transcendental poems, the "speaker" is an animal, or, as in the case of the Reincarnation poems, an animal who was formerly a man. In other of the mystical poems, a man is granted new insights due to nonrational contact with the natural world, but remains human. In a very few of the poems, the "state of grace" has been reached prior to the poem's beginning and the narrator speaks from his achieved vision. Here there is no action as such, but instead a reportorial flow of images used to suggest the essence of what is essentially an ineffable experience.

Dickey has made no secret of nature's influence upon his
work, and has spoken at length on the subject of inspiration both in his autobiographical works and in his verse. Before beginning any discussion of the mystical element in the nature poems, it is instructive to examine two poems in which Dickey acknowledges his debt to nature and gives a poetic account of his most vital source of creative power.

"A Dog Sleeping on my Feet," originally collected in Drowning With Others, announces nature as a main theme in Dickey's work and frankly admits the poet's debt to the non-human world as a wellspring of inspiration. As the poem opens, the poet is seated in a chair, jotting down random associations in the hope that "emotion recollected in tranquility" will congeal miraculously into poetry. Instead, mystical communion with the sleeping dog will give birth to this newest poem.

H. L. Weatherby's thoughts on "the way of exchange" in Dickey, quoted above, are most helpful in the analysis of "A Dog Sleeping On My Feet":

... [the poem] provides a vehicle for most of Dickey's recurrent themes. The poem is one in which the light is sufficiently strong to see the world as it really is. The "light" seems to come from some rather mysterious process of exchange between a man and his opposites... The poem is a composite vision which is both human and animal at once."

The poet's mood as the poem begins makes it apparent that the expected revelation is not a new experience; indeed, it

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1 The autobiographical works are Self-Interviews and Sorties, (New York, 1970).

2 Weatherby, p. 671.
may be argued that his calm anticipation indicates a lengthy history of such intuitive visions. Surely there is no sign of surprise or shock as the speaker begins to slip the moorings of rational consciousness.

Being his resting place,
I do not even tense
The muscle of a leg
Or I would seem to be changing.  

Obviously the poet is familiar with the impending sensation of oneness with nature, as shown by his preparation for the coming change:

Instead, I turn the page
Of the notebook, carefully not
Remembering what I have written.  

What he has written so far is plainly uninspired, for he deliberately seeks to erase the lines from his memory. Again, the poet's familiarity with the mystical experience through nature is underscored: his unaided efforts, he knows, will seem paltry indeed beside the wealth of insights to be gleaned from the vision to follow. As he waits, he feels his inspiration at hand:

For now, with my feet beneath me
Dying like embers,
The poem is beginning to move
Up through my pine-prickling legs
Out of the night wood,
Taking hold of my pen by my fingers.

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3Poems, p. 55.

4Ibid.

5Poems, p. 55.
It must be emphasized that the poet views poetry written in such mystic states as being of a wholly different order from that written in everyday waking consciousness. He assigns this poem an existence of its own, and believes that the nascent verse is itself taking hold of the pen. Ostensibly the author of the poem-to-be, he will claim no credit for its conception. He sees himself in the role of midwife, merely the vehicle through which the poem comes to its life. He has in fact forgotten his role as would-be creator and mentally abandoned the chair and notebook in his comfortable home. Mystically joined with the dreaming dog in pursuit of game, he has moved far beyond the bounds of human consciousness. The mysterious "exchange" has taken place, a process in which "... the opposites, man and dog, must die to each other. The dog must give up his immediate perception to the man and the man must give up his powers of reflection ... so that in the giving and taking, the mutual surrender, a new and otherwise impossible point of view can be created."6

Before me the fox floats lightly,  
On fire with his holy scent,  
All, all are running.7

In the stanzas that follow, the speaker reiterates his belief that the best poetry flows to him almost unmediated by conscious reflection, not prompted by deliberate striving for ideas:

6Weatherby, op. cit., pp. 670-671.  
7Poems, p. 55.
My killed legs,
My legs of a dead thing, follow,
Quick as pins, through the forest,
And all rushes on into dark,
And ends on the brightness of paper. 8

The poet has now spoken of the end of his vision, an end which issues in the finished poem. Though the speaker knows that this peak of intensity cannot be maintained, he speaks without regret of his return to the rational human mind:

When my hand, which speaks in a daze
The hypnotized language of beasts,
Shall falter, and fail
Back into the human tongue. 9

Here there is further evidence that Dickey considers the animal mind in some ways superior to that of man, and certainly more in harmony with nature, an important source of his creative energy. The return to the everyday state of consciousness is regarded as a failure, a fall from grace, and it is not too much to say that for Dickey this "fall" has metaphysical as well as artistic overtones. As the later Reincarnation poems make plain, Dickey's vivid identification with other forms of life often leads him to denigrate the human condition and assign it a lower place in his poetic universe than that of the beasts.

In spite of his return to the confines of human mentality, the speaker is able to maintain his composure and remain of good cheer. He has known the blissful union with nature before,

8Poems, p. 55. 9Ibid.
and he is confident that he will know it again. Assured of future inspiration, he prepares to sleep. Like the returning hero in the mythic journey-motif, he has ventured out and come home with new strength and power, gifts which will be shared with fellow men in the form of poetry. He rests, reconciled to human limitations by the knowledge that he may occasionally transcend those boundaries.

I shall crawl to my human bed
And lie there sleeping at sunrise
Coming home to my wife and my sons
From the dream of an animal,
Assembling the self I must wake to,
Sleeping to grow back my legs. 10

A shorter poem on the subject of inspiration through nature is "A Birth," also originally printed in Drowning With Others. Again there is the explicit belief in the capacity of a work to "get away" from its author and develop almost independently, as it were. The poet is caught somewhat unawares by the seeming autonomy of his creation. He knows he began the poem, "a story with grass," but the subject of the lyric, a horse, has become real in ways the poet did not foresee.

Inventing a story with grass,
I find a young horse deep inside it.
I cannot nail wires around him;
My fence posts fail to be solid. 11

10 Poems, p. 55. It is interesting to note that in the original volume of Drowning With Others, this poem comes immediately after "Listening to Foxhounds," in which the speaker undergoes similar identification with an animal. This time, however, Dickey's "familiar" is a fox being pursued by a pack of hunting hounds. Dickey's sympathy with "all creatures great and small" sometimes enables him to rise above the predatory role of hunter.

11 Poems, p. 61.
Once created, or "found" as the poet would have it, the subject of the poem takes no further direction from its creator. Dickey approaches a Platonic conception of art and the role of the artist here, regarding himself more as the discoverer of the poem's potentials than as its sole creator.

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.\(^{12}\)

The poet comes to see his creature as existing in its own right, as many a novelist has spoken of a character as "coming alive" and exhibiting properties not originally intended by the author. He feels that his own life is paradoxically enlarged by the gentle rebellion of his mind's subject:

My mind freed of its own creature,
I find myself deep in my life
In a room with my child and mother,
When I feel the sun climbing my shoulder,
Change, to include a new horse.\(^{13}\)

In many of the mystical poems, the speaker enters the mind of an animal, as described in "A Dog Sleeping on my Feet."

He may undergo an ecstatic experience of sublime joy and well-being. In still other poems, the speaker may find answers to problems that vex him through consultation with the "oracle" of nature. Examples of these three strains in Dickey's mystical poems will be examined. It needs hardly be said that even should one accept these poems as actual reports of experiences

\(^{12}\)Ibid.

\(^{13}\)Poems, p. 55.
from Dickey's own life, it does not follow that their veracity or even their intelligibility will be self-evident. Luckily, Dickey's philosophy of life may stand separate from his poetry, and the sublime be viewed along with the mundane as grist for his poetic mill.

"In the Mountain Tent" is, in the orthodox sense of the word, the most "religious" of Dickey's nature poems. Owing partly to the Biblical language and Christian symbolism abounding in the poem, a solemn and dignified aura is lent to a mystical experience considerably more serene than others to be described in this section. Nothing is "done," no actions are performed by the persona. Instead, the poem presents pure perception and knowing on the part of the narrator as his ego is dissolved into the brooding omniscience of the forest.

I am hearing the shape of the rain
Take the shape of the tent and believe it,
Laying down all around where I lie,
A profound, unspeakable law.15

The "law" which the speaker obeys may be interpreted as the bond of commonality that draws all living things into brotherhood, be they human or animal. This binding law is symbolized by the pervading rain, employed as a figure of universality by

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14 This is of course the occupational hazard of any criticism of art that lays claim to inspiration through non-rational channels. In this respect, the problem differs little from that of the layman seeking to decipher the writings of religious mystics. Often a "so it appears to him" attitude must be adopted.

artists in all ages.\textsuperscript{16} As the rain falls, the persona allows his will to be subsumed into the general will of the forest:

\begin{enumerate}
\item I obey, and am free-falling slowly
\item Through the thought-out leaves of the wood
\item Into the minds of animals.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{enumerate}

The poem begins with this nonrational bond between the speaker and the elements, and proceeds to establish a similar connection between man and the animals. Obviously the mystical identification becomes increasingly universal, culminating in transcendence of the boundaries between the living and the dead.

\begin{enumerate}
\item I am there in the shining of water
\item Like dark, like light, out of Heaven
\item I am there like the dead, or the beast itself. . . .\textsuperscript{18}
\end{enumerate}

As in poems previously discussed, Dickey's admiration, almost envy of what he conceives to be animal consciousness is apparent. In the mystical state, the speaker describes himself as similar to an animal that "thinks of a poem / Green, plausible, living, and holy / And cannot speak, but hears."\textsuperscript{19} As in the earlier "May Day Sermon," Dickey again suggests a type of "natural holiness" possessed by animals, who are able to hear

\begin{enumerate}
\item A vast, proper, reinforced crying
\item With the sifted, harmonious pause,
\item The sustained intake of all breath
\item Before the first word of the Bible.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{enumerate}

\textsuperscript{16} Recall, for only two examples, Shakespeare's use of the elements as a leveling device in \textit{King Lear} and Joyce's use of rain in his story "The Dead."

\textsuperscript{17} Poems, p. 109

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Poems, p. 109.
The rebirth motif found in Dickey's poems of sensual experience is not unexpectedly present in many of the mystical nature poems. "In the Mountain Tent" identifies the speaker with Christ in its closing stanzas, an identification prepared for and enhanced by the earlier Biblical references.

As I wait as if recently killed,
Receptive, fragile, half-smiling,
My brow watermarked with the mark
On the wing of a moth. . . . 21

The word "receptive" is important here, for it harkens back to the "profound, unspeakable law" to which the speaker was glad to yield. It was this receptive spirit that led to his mystical vision, the "free-falling" state which now draws to a close:

And the tent taking shape on my body
Like ill-fitting, Heavenly clothes.
From holes in the ground comes my voice
In the God-silenced tongue of the beasts.
"I shall rise from the dead," I am saying. 22

The transcendental union with nature is complete. There is no more "I," the solitary speaker alone in a tent. Now, the voice belonging to "I" speaks from the countless burrows and lairs of the mountain creatures. They have risen from the symbolic death brought by the rain. They too "wait as if recently killed," and the speaker is returned to his conscious life through their renewed activity.

"Springer Mountain" combines a mystical experience in nature with Dickey's characteristic sensualism. The persona

22Poems, p. 110.
is again a hunter, but the poem casts his relationship to the prey in a new light. Gone now is the coldly exploitative hunter of "The Summons." Instead, it is the hunter who is "summoned" not to death, but to more abundant life.

The imagery of "Springer Mountain" is perfectly suited to Dickey's underlying conception, the transformation of a predatory being (the hunter) into a creature joyfully aware of his kinship with the former prey and of the sensual holiness that abounds in all being. The poem opens with the hunter waiting in a thicket for deer. He is in darkness still, but dawn has come to the upper mountain reaches where the deer sleep. At first light they will come down the hillside to drink, and the hunter will have his chance. Dickey is at pains to suggest the hunter's utter separation at this point from the totality of nature. Notice first the many layers of clothing that hamper the man's movement and block him off from his environment.

Four sweaters are woven upon me,
All black, all sweating and waiting,
And a sheepherder's coat's wool hood,
Buttoned strainingly, holds my eyes
With their sight deepfrozen outside them. 23

The imagery here has begun to suggest the speaker's spiritual and physical estrangement from the integrated life of a natural being. These sweaters are black, and his sight is "deepfrozen," words highly suggestive of spiritual darkness and stasis. Other elements in the poem's setting reinforce the

23 Poems, p. 130.
impression of inner as well as outer darkness. The speaker is "waiting for light to crawl, weakly / From leaf to dead leaf onto leaf" and bring the waking deer into his bowsights. The language and imagery employed create a clear distinction between the hunter and the hunted. Not only are the deer a different species, but Dickey presents their existence as qualitatively richer than that of the hunter:

Deer sleeping in light far above me
Have already woken, and moved,
In step with the sun moving strangely
Down toward the dark knit of my thicket.  

The deer, fully integrated into the natural cycle, are "sleeping in light," in sharp contrast to the man who waits in the dark thicket. When the deer move, they are "in step with the sun," totally a part of the universe.

When first light illuminates his hiding place, the hunter begins the startling transformation that will bring him into harmony with the world of nature. The experience that precipitates the change is largely a visual one, beginning when the speaker notices the spreading dawn.

My eyesight hangs partly between
Two twigs on the upslanting ground,
Then steps like a god from the dead
West of a leaf-rotted oak log
Steeply into the full of my brow. 

It is first the speaker's vision, rapidly increasing in scope,

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Poems, p. 130.
that "steps like a god from the dead" into new clarity. Suddenly the speaker begins to move up the mountain slope on "painfully reborn legs," his senses grown suddenly keener. With his ears "putting out vast hearing / Among the invisible animals," he has moved closer to the harmony of being possessed by animals:

The sun comes openly in
To my mouth, and is blown out white,
But no deer is anywhere near me.
I sit down and wait as in darkness. 28

His unaided efforts up the mountain and into spiritual awakening can take him only so far. He still seeks a deer, and still must wait, but now he waits "as if in darkness," not in his former benighted state. He has come up the mountain and is making an attempt at connection with nature, but as in Christian theology, salvation may not be seized by mere force of will. He waits, and in a moment

... a deer is created
Descending, then standing and looking.
The sun stands and waits for his horns
To move. 29

The second stage of the speaker's quest for harmony has begun. He identifies himself with the mysterious buck ("I may be there, also ... in head bones uplifted." 30) and conceives of an ideal relation between man and animal. The changing hunter has

27 Ibid.
28 Poems, p. 131.
29 Ibid.
30 Poems, p. 131.
A dream of the unfeared hunter
Who has formed in his brain in the dark
And rose with light into his horns...\textsuperscript{31}

The third stage of the mystic transformation begins with the speaker’s attempt to shed his predatory role and gain a new relation with the nonhuman world. As he hangs his longbow on a branch, the watching buck starts away, then stops abruptly.

And I step forward, stepping out
Of my shadow, and pulling over
My head dark heavy sweater
After another, my dungarees falling
Till they can be kicked away.\textsuperscript{32}

There are of course comic as well as serious aspects to this poem. As N. Michael Niflis has put it, "Dickey is...suggesting an experience that is a kind of cross between Bottom in \textit{Midsummer Night's Dream} and David in the worship of his God..."\textsuperscript{33} When the hunter is naked, he feels renewed and free from the spiritual darkness that had gripped him. "The world catches fire" as the changed man begins to "think like a beast loving / With the whole god bone of his horns."\textsuperscript{34} Together deer and man race down the slopes of Springer Mountain, moving toward the streams below.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{32}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33}N. Michael Niflis, "A Special Kind of Fantasy: James Dickey on the Razor's Edge," \textit{Southwest Review}, L (Autumn, 1972). His title comes from a comment of Dickey’s in Self-Interviews, concerning the comic elements in "Springer Mountain": "As Longinus points out, there's a razor's edge between sublimity and absurdity. And that's the edge I try to walk. Sometimes both sides are ludicrous! ... But I don't think you can get to sublimity without courting the ridiculous. Therefore, a good many of my poems deal with farfetched situations"(pp. 65-66).

\textsuperscript{34}Poems, p. 131.
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. 35

The "waters of life" are closed to man, cut off as he is from
the natural harmony of being, but they will open obediently for
the animals. So, on this day, do they open for the man who
has stripped away all the artificial barriers between self and
nature. In the following lines, the persona achieves a total
if temporary union with himself and with the natural world.

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. 36

The speaker has reached a state of joyous equilibrium wherein
he is content to be the human creature that he is. He knows
that a human life lived with such intensity is in no way inferior
to the life of the deer. He has penetrated to the very
core of being and has found perfect peace. Beyond society and
beyond the pale of a strictly rational world view, the hunter
has redefined himself in relation to his fellow creatures.

One striking facet of James Dickey's poetry, and an index
of his artistry, is to be found in the poems he has fashioned
from subject matter generally considered "unpoetic" and even
intractable to the processes of any art form. Not only has
Dickey declared such recalcitrant subjects as sawgrass, sharks,

35 Ibid.
36 Poems, p. 131.
and wolverines within the parameters of verse, he has forged poetry from aberrant behavior, crime, and even disease. John W. Corrington, speaking of Dickey's omnivorous appetite for subject matter, has written: "Dickey brings off poem after poem which has, technically, no business succeeding. He has no hesitation in attacking the banal, the inconsequential, the hackneyed, the sentimental."  

An example of Dickey's far-ranging eye for material is "Diabetes," from the recent volume called The Eye-Beaters. In the poem, a man discovers that he is diabetic, and seeks to come to terms with the restrictions such an illness must invariably require. In section 1 of the poem, "Sugar," a doctor prescribes "needles, moderation / And exercise" as the only alternatives to the speaker's physical ruin and early death. Avoiding the "gangrene in white"--sugar--is easier than following the strict regimen imposed by the doctor. As the speaker lifts weights or jogs, he counts "one death two death three death and resurrection," but in spite of the gains made in health, he is dissatisfied. Rankling under the spartan discipline, he comes to see the sugar as freighted with deep meaning, symbolic of more than a frivolous luxury:

I always knew it would have to be somewhere around
The house: the real
Symbol of Time I could eat
And live with, coming true when I opened my mouth.  

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37 Corrington, p. 17.
38 Eye-Beaters, p. 7
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
The speaker at first seems to welcome the news that sugar may be fatal to him: here at last, death has become a concrete reality, not a ghostly abstraction that arbitrarily strikes down other people. Such a knowledge could bring the quickening sense of life often reported by doomed men, a feeling that is experienced by Dickey's protagonist in *Deliverance* when he is battling for his life. However, the speaker's tone seems to belie any such laudatory effects from diabetes, and the last lines of Section I reinforce the suspicion that the disease has not contributed positively to the person's view of life. He speaks of the new knowledge as

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... helping sickness be fire-tongued, sleepless, and waterlogged but not bad, sweet sand
Of time, my friend, an everyday--
A liveable death at last.42
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To describe possible death through diabetes as "not bad," "everyday," and "liveable" raises serious doubts whether the disease can be an impetus toward a more intense life for the speaker. Richard C. Calhoun has singled out the stanza for criticism, saying that it epitomizes a weakness in the poem as a whole. According to Calhoun, Dickey "... seems to revert to the direct statements of his early poems and come up

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41 The enhancement of life through the presence of possible death is a recurrent concept in modern literature, finding perhaps its quintessential expression in the words of O'Connor's Misfit shortly after his murder of the grandmother: "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

42 *Eye-Beaters*, p. 8.
with something commonplace." Surely this is to misread the function of the stanza and attribute to sloth or miscalculation what is really intentional and vital to the success of the poem. Dickey intends that the reader suspect this too-rapid reconciliation with the disease. The speaker's casual words undermine belief in him. Equipped with insulin and needles, he has bought himself time. The cost of his "cure" and his rejection of it are examined in Section II of the poem, called "Under Buzzards."

Section I of the poem detailed the speaker's search for salvation through the Appolonion virtues of forethought, moderation, and rationality. This *via media* led him to a curious impasse which will be resolved in Section II. This latter section outlines the persona's rejection of the rationalist approach to his disease and the philosophy of life implicit in the doctor's regimen. The opening stanza of Section II plunges immediately into the nonrational with the speaker's invocation to soar in the air with buzzards, "flying with the birds of death."  

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... We are level
Exactly on this moment; exactly on the same bird-plane with those deaths. They are the salvation of our sense
Of glorious movement.
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43Calhoun, *op. cit.*  
44*Poems*, p. 8.  
The "sense of glorious movement," of freedom and latitude in the conduct of life, is precisely what has been lost by the speaker, in a spiritual as well as a physical sense. The buzzards are symbols in opposition to the doctors of Section I. Both the birds and the doctors are portents of death, harbingers of coming destruction. Section II presents the speaker's acceptance of the vultures and what they represent, a nonrational, Dionysian approach to living and dying. The doctor with his "needles moderation and exercise" offers life, but it is life on a shrunken scale, narrowed within the perimeters of an overweening caution that robs the speaker of self-determination.

Brother, it is right for us to face
Them every which way, and come to ourselves
and come
From every direction there is.⁴⁶

In creating civilization and later technology, man has gradually usurped many of the functions that once belonged to God or to nature. Once death was a mystery shrouded in ritual and myth; now it is too often a clinical process superintended by detached medical mechanics. The doctor symbolizes rational, civilized man in his attempt to "empty the haunted air" and claim conscious dominion over the mysteries of existence. It is this dispassionate, pragmatic approach to life that repels the speaker and makes him embrace the opposed symbol of the

⁴⁶ Eye-Beaters, p. 8
vultures. These birds with their unerring ability to seek out the dying are representative of the dark instinctual forces still operative in nature and not yet subject to rational control. The speaker feels himself more in sympathy with the buzzards, nature's prophets of doom, than with the doctor. Coming from them, the message of death is real, tangible, and indeed "liveable." When the buzzards swarm around him, the knowledge of possible death bursts upon him with painful clarity.

Whence cometh death, O Lord?
On the downwind, riding fire,
Of Hogback Ridge. But listen, what is dead here?
They are not falling, but waiting, but waiting,
Riding, and they may know the rotten,
nervous sweetness
Of my blood.  

The speaker acknowledges the benefits that accrue from the doctor's medically sound advice. The "city sugar / The doctors found in time" is under control. He has lost weight, his eyes are clear and alert.

One pocket nailed with needles and injection,
the other dragging
With sugar cubes to balance me in life
And hold my blood level, level.  

Repetition of the word "level" underscores the speaker's discontent with the moderation counseled by those who would rob him of his self-determination and "sense of glorious movement." Reason, abstinence, and the plodding "horses of instruction"

47 Eye-Beaters, p. 8.  
48 Ibid., p. 9.
may serve to prolong his life, but at what price? Distraught, he cries his complaints to the buzzards, entering a mystical colloquy with the swirling scavengers.

Tell me, black riders, does this do any good? Tell me what I need to know about my time In the world. O out of the fiery furnace of pine woods, Say when I'll die.49

He has rejected the rationally achieved knowledge of the doctors in favor of the instinctual epistemology symbolized by the vultures. He has addressed the ultimate questions to them, turning his back on the new god of science in favor of the ancient wisdom of nature. "When will the sugar rise boiling against me / And my brain be sweetened to death?"50 Then, in slow, prophetic tones, the speaker "hears" his answer: "In heavy summer, like this day."51 Not fully able to assimilate what he has heard, the speaker wavers momentarily between the rational and nonrational forces that clash in his mind. Unready for the descent into the instinctual world of nature, the speaker clings to "reason" and breaks the mystical contact with the buzzards:

All right! Physicians, witness! I will shoot my veins Full of insulin. Let the needle burn In. From your terrible heads The flight blood drains and you are falling back Back to the body-raising Fire.52

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Eye-Beaters, p. 7.
The insulin temporarily ends the speaker's quest for natural wisdom. Once again he finds himself in the calm, balanced world of human order. However, the drug brings no surcease from the existential questions that plague him, and he is still acutely aware of the sterility of a wholly rational view of life. His fiery vision gone, the persona raises a new lament:

My blood is clear
For a time. Is it too clear? Heat waves are rising
Without birds. But something is gone from me, Friend. This is too sensible.53

He has arrived at a paradox of human existence, the existential realization that true freedom must entail even the freedom to do oneself harm, freedom to go against the dictates of "common sense" in the service of a more vital sense of life. Committed at last to the intuitive wisdom of nature, he chooses to let his blood "stream with the death-wishes of birds."54

He calls on his companion to open a can of beer and drinks deep, announcing the new credo he has learned from the "Black riders":

How the body works how hard it works
For its medical books is not
Everything: everything is how
Much glory is in it: heavy summer is right
For a long drink of beer.55

The "glory" is what he will pursue henceforth, doctor's advice notwithstanding. He chooses to live free, and if the

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
life be a shorter one, it will be an intense and authentic existence. Immediately the speaker knows he has chosen wisely, for the vision of buzzards begins to return, the birds again sensing that he has moved closer to death. This time there will be no falling back to "needles moderation and exercise." He has chosen to seek the "glory" of life's "heavy summer." In the final stanza, the speaker re-enters his mystical state. The buzzards are coming back.

... Red sugar of my eyeballs
Feels them burn blindly
In the fire rising turning turning
Back to Hogback Ridge, and it is all
Delicious, brother: my body is turning is
flashing unbalanced
Sweetness everywhere, and I am calling my birds.  

Again a strong autobiographical element may be noted, as in other of Dickey's poems. Dickey, never one to shroud his poetic sources in enigma, has admitted to being a diabetic, and has discussed the difficulty he had in adjusting to the demands such a disease made on his life style. Naturally, for an active and vigorous man like Dickey, such sacrifices were painful. This poem may well be a chronicle of his ordeal.

The last poems to be discussed, "The Sheep Child" and "Reincarnation (1)" bring Dickey's mystical love affair with nature to its logical and inevitable outcome. In these poems the separation of man and animal is completely transcended.

56 Eye-Beaters, p. 9.
and the limitations of the anthropomorphic mind are at last put aside. The process by which alienated man joins nature is completed, and the solitary, manipulative human ego is dissolved into the all-encompassing whole.

"The Sheep Child," as the title implies, is a poem growing from the widespread rural legend concerning cross-fertility between men and sheep. It was Dickey's intent, in his words, to "... write a poem having to do with the enormous need for contact that runs through all of sentient nature, and has no regard whatever for boundaries of species." The poem is brief, but contains some of Dickey's most vivid imagery and intriguing ideas.

"The Sheep Child" opens with the persona, now an adult, recalling his adolescent years in a farming community. The presence of farm animals naturally made bestiality a common temptation to young males in adolescence, and the speaker ruminates upon the peculiar tale of the sheep child. He believes that the myth, a universal part of rural folklore, was developed subconsciously as a defense mechanism against the allure of unnatural sex:

Farm boys wild to couple
With anything with soft-wooded trees
With mounds of earth mounds
Of pinestraw will keep themselves off
Animals by legends of their own... 58

58 Poems, p. 252.
Grown now, the speaker can scoff at such illusions and see them for what they were, protective adaptations governing and channeling teenage lust. Yet there remains doubt in his mind as to the total falsity of the sheep child legend, and for a moment he indulges the thought of its possibility. "We who were born there / Still are not sure." In the mode of many of the mystical poems, the speaker's reverie gives way to spiritual communion with some natural being, in this case the sheep child.

... in a museum in Atlanta
Way back in a corner somewhere
There's this thing that's only half
Sheep like a woolly baby
Pickled in alcohol.

The speaker mulls the powerful impact this myth has had upon decades of farm boys, and as he does the sheep child becomes increasingly real to him. He wonders if he and the friends of his youth are "remembered in the terrible dust of museums." Then the familiar exchange occurs, and the sheep child speaks in his mind, saying

I am here, in my father's house
I who am half of your world, came deeply
To my mother in the long grass
Of the west pasture. ...

"Love from another world" took the gentle ewe in the field, and she carries her strange new offspring to its conception. When it is born, the sheep child knows for a moment what no

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Poems, p. 252.
creature has known before, and exemplifies the transcendent state so long sought in Dickey's nature poetry:

I woke with my eyes
Far more than human. I saw for a blazing moment
The great grassy world from both sides, 63
Man and beast in the round of their need.

As the legend has it, these hybrid creatures cannot live long after birth. When it is dead and embalmed in the museum jar, the sheep child stares through his "immortal waters" and contemplates the dancing motes of dust which "whirl up in the halls for no reason / When no one comes."64 As the speaker's musings have shown, he will not be forgotten.

Dead, I am most surely living
In the minds of farm boys.

. . . . . . . . . . . .
Dreaming of me,
They groan they wait they suffer
Themselves, they marry, the raise their kind.65

"The Sheep Child" is important in the Dickey corpus for at least two reasons. It provides a capsule glimpse of that complex visionary state toward which Dickey has labored to bring his poetry, in the words of the poem to a view of "the great grassy world from both sides," a unified perception of reality from animal and human perspectives. Second, "The Sheep Child" stands as a linking piece between the two main varieties of Dickey's nature poems. As mentioned above, a

63 Poems, p. 253. 64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
progression may be noted in the nature verse from poems in which the narrator speaks first as an alienated individual who then moves into mystical experience to poems in which the separate human identity is almost totally eradicated. In these latter poems an animal becomes the central consciousness, and the "great grassy world" is seen from its viewpoint. Here Dickey is uncanny in his descriptions of reality through non-human eyes. Nowhere is this intense sympathy with multiple views of life more apparent than in the unusual "Reincarnation (I)."

"Reincarnation (I)" is found in *Buckdancer's Choice*, the National Book Award winner for 1966. The poem carries forward Dickey's fascination with the snake to its logical conclusion, in which a man reincarnated as a snake describes his world of "descending creek-curving" sinuosity. As the poem opens the snake waits, lying "still, passed through the spokes of an old wheel." The snake, a diamondback rattler, is still "feeling his life as a man move slowly away," for the reincarnation has only recently taken place. In a flashback, Dickey shows how the snake came to its silent vigil.

Fallen from that state, 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.8

66 Poems, p. 196.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
The diamondback moves over the ground toward the rusted wheel, leaving behind "one long wavering step / In sand and none in grass." Eventually it comes to the wheel, coils itself in the spokes, and settles down to await a victim. This sets the stage of the poem, but this simple outline of the "plot" belies the complexity of "Reincarnation (I)." Close examination will reveal the poem as a key to Dickey's philosophy of nature and elucidate a curious paradox that runs through many of the nature poems.

The phrase "harmony with nature" is common in the writing and criticism of nature poetry, usually carrying connotations of beauty and serene co-existence among creatures a la Delderfield's Peaceable Kingdom. Dickey goes beyond this traditional conception, extending "harmony" not only to daffodils, beauteous evenings, and nightingales, but sharks, weasels, and diamondback rattlers as well. It is one thing to praise clouds and skylarks as integral parts of the great plan, but it is quite another to embrace killer whales, wolverines, and venomous snakes as equally vital links in the chain of being. This

69 Ibid.

70 One of the most curious critiques of this poem comes from Harry Morris, who cannot bring himself to believe Dickey's newly born snake could be long enough to arrange himself in the manner suggested, coiling itself in the spokes of the wheel. Having swallowed the camel of reincarnation, at least for the purposes of criticism, he attempts to strain the gnat of size. For a thoroughly jaundiced view of Dickey's work, see Morris' "A Formal View of the Poetry of Dickey, Garrigue, and Simpson," Sewanee Review, LXXVII, (Fall, 1969), 318-325. [Review of Poems 1957-1967.]
Dickey does in "Reincarnation (I)," both by direct statement and implicitly through the rhetoric of the poem.

Throughout "Reincarnation (I)" the snake is constantly identified with natural processes and presented as a creature totally in tune with the deepest workings of the cosmos. There is no external conflict between the serpent and his environment, nor is there any internal dichotomy between his intention and his action. He is a totally unified being.

The roots bulge quietly under the earth beneath him
With his tongue he can hear them in their concerted effort
To raise something, anything, out of the dark of the ground.71

The natural process works heedless of the creatures brought forth through its inexorable energy; it is enough that there is life, however deadly that form of life to its fellow creatures. But Dickey not only tolerates the snake, he positively welcomes it in language that cannot fail to enhance its standing with the reader:

He has come by gliding, by inserting the head between stems.
Everything follows that as naturally as the creation
Of the world . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Through flowing movements made to seem as inevitable as

71Poems, p. 196. 72Poems, p. 196.
wind or rain, the snake comes to the wheel. His camouflage within the spokes of the wheel is described as "a just administration of light and dark over the diamonds / Of the body." 73

Here, also naturally growing, is a flat leaf
To rest the new head upon. The stem bends but knows the weight
And does not touch the ground, holding the snub, patterned face
Swaying with the roots of things. 74

It is not merely the roots of one plant that the snake embraces. Dickey generalizes "the roots of things" to reinforce the snake's integration within nature. He is wholly natural, wholly deadly--yet, in Dickey's view, not to be condemned as evil. To do so would bespeak a narrowly anthropomorphic outlook on the balance of nature. Dickey does acknowledge that the waiting snake is "all the time a symbol of evil," 75 and even follows this line with words certain to recall the serpent of the Eden myth: "Waiting for the first man to walk by the gentle river." 76 He even emphasizes the obvious fact that the rattler does not seek to kill for sustenance, but will take a victim whose death can benefit him in no way. Having gone this far, however, Dickey will go no further toward condemnation of the snake, for such would logically require condemnation of the natural order that produced the snake, a patent absurdity in Dickey's metaphysics. For Dickey, as for

73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid
76 Poems, p. 196.
Condorcet, "Nature binds truth, happiness, and virtue together as by an indissoluble chain." To single out any link in this chain as somehow evil leads inevitably to a rejection of the entire chain as equally base, and from this to a denial of Dickey's cardinal tenet: Whatever is, (in nature) is right. So the rattler waits, as snakes must, but this time with a sinister difference. Having no desire to sound the ancient alarm of its species, the snake waits silently with another purpose,

... 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 transferred
In a sudden giving-withdrawing move, like a county judge striking a match.77

77 Poems, p. 197.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In concluding this brief study of James Dickey's poetry, it seems proper to make some prognostications as to Dickey's future as a producing poet. The work of fifteen years has been at least glanced at in this thesis, but what of the years to come? Will Dickey continue to be a modern "Voice From the Bush," a visionary apostle of what he called "the too-close world of sweat and sperm and yelling and drunkenness"?1

At the time of this writing, (July, 1975), it is perhaps too early to draw conclusions as to the course of Dickey's future labors. However, it must be noted that Dickey's last book of poems appeared in 1970, and that the intervening years have brought no new poetry, save "occasional" verse in the popular press. His now sizeable audience waits and wonders.

To be sure, Dickey's mind has not lain fallow. He has produced a best-selling novel, Deliverance, and had a considerable hand in the novel's transition to a modestly successful motion picture, even playing a minor part on the screen himself. In addition, he has published two semi-autobiographical works, Self-Interviews (1970) and the journals and essays that comprise Sorties (1971). Dickey has also collaborated on

1Sorties, p. 170
an elegant pictorial history of the modern South, called *Jericho: The South Beheld*, providing an eloquent text in support of Herbert Shuptrine's art work. These are accomplishments to be proud of, and mark a full and active five years. And yet, there has been no serious poetry to speak of, no significant advance over past achievements.

Explanations of Dickey's dearth of poetry in an otherwise fruitful period are at best speculative and fanciful. Perhaps he has nothing more to tell and feels his testament is at an end, or perhaps fame and financial security have brought complacency and a deadening of the sensibilities. Perhaps, as Hemingway believed of Fitzgerald, Dickey has become too conscious of his poetic method, too analytical of his gifts, and has thus lost the ability to produce poetry of his previous high quality. The seeds of such an over-analysis are certainly visible in both *Self-Interviews* and *Sorties*, books in which Dickey explains himself and his art ad infinitum. Dickey has more than once expressed the fear that he would become overly concerned with understanding how his art was produced, to the eventual detriment of that same art. But of course these hypotheses are designed for phantoms, stereotyped artists with stereotyped problems, and may bear little or no relation to the true complexity of Dickey's motives.

There are strong indications that Dickey's future efforts will take him away from poetry and into fiction. A second
novel, *Death's Baby Machine*, has long been in progress, and Dickey has already mused the possibility of bringing the new effort to the screen. But whatever his future as a poet may be, his past achievements are enough to secure his reputation as a unique poet with a fresh and startling view of life. At this uncertain pass in Dickey's career, it may be that his best work is behind him, or that the future will see a re-crudescence of his brilliance. The best estimate of Dickey's work to date may be found in his own words, intended originally for a fellow poet:

---Such clearness and passion---has not been heard in a long time, in our land and in our language. If the Lost Son with the Angel's tongue does not dwell in these pages, let us regret it doubly, for some of these lines hint how he might speak.²

²Ibid.
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