"Recurring in This Body": James Dickey and the Quest for Transcendence

Stephen R. Hawkins

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-ftje-wt23

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
"RECURRING IN THIS BODY":

James Dickey and the Quest for Transcendence

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Stephen R. Hawkins

1997
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

[Signature]
Stephen R. Hawkins

Approved, December 1997

[Signature]
Henry W. Hart

[Signature]
Christopher MacGowan

[Signature]
Monica B. Potkay
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the evolving theme of transcending death in James Dickey's poetry.

To this end, three poems from the early, middle, and late periods of the poet's career are analyzed. It is argued that "The Vegetable King" relies heavily on ancient myths and rituals to achieve transcendence, and insofar as it is confined to mere mimicry of the events surrounding Osiris' legend, the poem falls short of its goal.

The poem "Snakebite" is chosen as an intermediary example, as it plays the concept of religious ritual against the more physical concepts of violence and bloodshed. "Snakebite" foreshadows Dickey's later philosophy of transcendence, exemplified in "Last Hours," wherein the poet rejects all traditional rituals and advocates salvation through predatory violence.

It is concluded that all three modalities of transcendence are unsatisfactory in and of themselves, both to the reader and the poet, but may as a whole approximate Dickey's concept of perpetuity in that they represent a continually "resurrected" struggle for transcendence.
“RECURRING IN THIS BODY”
“I wanted to be a poet with strongly marked themes,” James Dickey declared in *Self-Interviews*, “so that people could connect the poems with each other.” Though he stopped short of spelling out those themes, readers have found little difficulty discerning the patterns of thought that preoccupied the poet’s work. War, hunting, family relationships, and an undying obsession with survival all permeate Dickey’s intense and deliberate verse. During the poet’s rise to prominence in the late sixties and early seventies, it was common practice for critics to isolate these themes and decry their undertones of violence, primitivism, and machismo. Martin Dodsworth, for example, complained that Dickey’s poems “subscribe heavily to the fantasy of the man’s world--war, savage nature, bloody sex--and don’t have much to do with people.” As Dickey’s poetic oeuvre comes to a close, however, it is increasingly apparent that these motifs are often circumstantial and inseparable, serving as collective conduits for a greater theme: the struggle to transcend death. Realizing that the ultimate form of survival is immortality,
Dickey used the backdrop of war, familial hardship, and the hunt to confront the idea of physical death and explore the methodology of attaining an eternal existence. It is this exploration that imbues Dickey's verse with an unpredictable and untiring sublimity, though the circumstances remain those of the poet's everyday life.

Yet to fully understand Dickey's poetry of transcendence, it is necessary to recognize that the poet's physical and intellectual maturation resulted in an evolving philosophy of rebirth that continually struggled for, yet continually eluded, certainty. Although he desired to be "a poet with strongly marked themes," Dickey also stated in Self-Interviews, "I would agree with Emerson that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." He added, "The larger consistency that the body of a poet's work should have, should come from the totality of the poet's personality, including all its contradictions." Therefore, while the poet may have discovered a viable formula for personal transcendence in one poem, the explorations of a later poem simultaneously nullified that formula and opened his mind to a more plausible, more immediate scenario. The quest for transcendence in Dickey's poetry, then, is a system of trial and error, made real by his own experiences and his own approaching death.
The seeds of this quest were sown early in Dickey's life. During his undergraduate studies at Vanderbilt, Dickey displayed a profound interest in the marginalized cultures that espoused reincarnation. "For some reason the last two years I was in school I was on an anthropology kick," he recalled. 4 This "kick" may be largely attributed to the reigning modernists' popularization of works such as Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough, which elucidated the myths and accompanying rituals of ancient and primitive societies. In an apparent reference to such studies, Dickey said,

What especially fascinated me...were the people who would go into so-called "primitive" areas and do what would be the equivalent of psychoanalyzing the natives. The difference between the natives' outlook and the outlook of the so-called "civilized" people was very instructive to me. 5

Remarks such as these may have contributed to Joyce Carol Oates' generalization that "Dickey's central theme is the frustration that characterizes modern man, confronted with an increasingly depersonalized and intellectualized society--the frustration and its necessary corollary, murderous rage." 6 Though not an inaccurate reading of many of Dickey's poems, Oates' assessment misses the larger point. Her portrait of Dickey reduces him to a threatened, impotent philistine who resorted to boar hunts and barroom brawls
in order to elevate or recapture his primal self. By failing to connect the “frustration” and “murderous rage” with the larger theme of transcendence, she has ironically aligned Dickey with the likes of Robert Bly (his most outspoken critic) and his backward-looking affirmations of primal masculinity. Dickey’s poetry, however, is no homage to prehistoric simplicity; the primal undertones or anthropological allusions serve, above all else, as vehicles for propelling the narrator into a new existence, above and apart from both primal man and modern man.

Revealing the inspiration for many of the themes in his *Poems 1957-1967*, Dickey noted, “I didn’t know how valuable this [study of anthropology] was to me until years later.” Indeed, the anthropological archetypes that captured his attention in college were probably the most enduring influences on his next two decades of writing. As Gordon Van Ness asserts, Dickey’s objective in *Poems* was “to depict his heightened understanding for others, to offer up some golden bough, which was his knowledge of what death means and how it might temporarily be transcended.” Monroe Spears, Dickey’s most influential teacher at Vanderbilt and longtime friend, contends that Dickey had a better claim to that “knowledge of what
death means" than most poets of the post-war era. In a retrospective article written for The Southern Review, Spears contrasts his own classical interests with those of the young James Dickey, who returned to college in 1946 after serving over three years in the war-torn Pacific: "Dickey was immersed in anthropological and mythological reading; rituals of initiation, rites of passage, myths of the hero, confrontation with fear and violent death were not mere academic terms, but his own experiences." 9 Thus, while Dickey drew his inspiration from ancient myths and rituals, he unabashedly transposed those motifs onto his own life in specific and American society in general. Poem by poem, he began to formulate his own mythology, to depict "his knowledge of what death means and how it might be temporarily transcended" [emphasis added].

In addition to the pagan influences he culled from anthropological texts, Dickey’s early poetry was shaped by parallel Biblical themes. Growing up in predominantly Christian North Georgia in the 1920s and ‘30s with a mother who frequently took him to Sunday morning services and a father who repeatedly read to him the trial of Jesus Christ, James Dickey could not avoid receiving a relatively comprehensive religious education. 10 Though claiming he had never
“been a believer since [he] was five years old,” Dickey came away from his youth with a writer’s admiration for scripture. 11 “I love the Bible,” he admitted in Self-Interviews; 12 and in God’s Images he asserted, “The Bible is buried and alive in us--not one of us can encounter it, and our tradition of the individual human being and the universe, who cannot have been affected by it.” 13 Still, Dickey was careful not to endorse Christianity: “the religious sense, which seems to me very strong in my work... is a very personal kind of stick-and-stone religion.” To this he added, “The notion of reincarnation really appeals to me very much.” 14 There is, of course, an inherent contradiction in Dickey’s embracing primitive reincarnation on the one hand and the Bible on the other; but the character of Christ, who transcended the first death and who appears in subtle forms throughout Dickey’s verse, serves as the bridge between these pagan and Christian influences. More correctly, Dickey may have seen himself as that bridge, as a Christ-like poet who, in his own Garden of Gethsemane, struggled between a love of life on earth and an instinctive desire to exchange that life for immortality. “[T]he ancient Biblical and Greek myths are always reclaimable,” Dickey assured us, “if you can bring something new to
them.” 15 Whether this blending of the two major theories of afterlife is the “something new” to which he referred, or whether it is the result of a poet’s philosophical desperation, remains for the poems to illuminate.

By examining individual poems from what are roughly the early, middle, and late periods of Dickey’s career, it is possible to trace the poet’s evolving attempts at transcending death. While an early poem like “The Vegetable King” might rely on classical paradigms of resurrection, later poems such as “Snakebite” and, more recently, “Last Hours” move us away from the boundaries of ritual and into something approaching a predatory dependence on bloodshed in order to attain transcendence. With each new “method” and each year closer to his own death, however, Dickey became more discontented with the results of his quest and more urgent in his approach to the poems.

Dickey’s early fascination with transcendence and the ancient myths that surround it is best exemplified in his poem “The Vegetable King.” The title itself clearly recalls the vegetation gods of Middle Eastern mythology. But for Dickey, this poem was to be a rewriting of those myths and a fleshing-out of what Eliot only
touched on in The Waste Land. Dickey explained, "In 'The Vegetable King' I try to mythologize my family; this, I guess, is my answer to Eliot's use of the Osiris myth." Though Osiris serves as the primary inspiration, the Sumerian vegetable god Tammuz and the Hittite god Telepinus are also represented. Like Osiris, these gods were resurrected from the underworld, restoring vegetation and vitality to their homelands. "The Vegetable King" was Dickey's attempt to identify with these gods, to make them relevant to suburban America.

In order to adequately examine "The Vegetable King," then, it is necessary to revisit the myth of Osiris' reincarnation. According to the late Samuel H. Hooke, Osiris' role as "vegetable king" arose more from the Egyptian rituals commemorating the myth than from the myth itself. The narrative of Osiris' death and rebirth, which comes to us from the ancient Pyramid Texts and Plutarch's De Iside, begins with Osiris' murder by his brother Seth. With the usurpation of the Egyptian throne as his motive, Seth shut King Osiris in a wooden coffin and floated it down the "life-giving" Nile. Thus, Hooke noted, "It is with reference to this element in the myth that Osiris is called 'the drowned one' in the Pyramid Texts." Osiris' coffin
eventually beached in a sycamore grove in the land of Byblos and a
sycamore tree grew up around the chest and enclosed it. The king of
Byblos, admiring the tree, had it carved into a pillar for his palace.
When Osiris’ wife Isis discovered the pillar and begged the king to
turn it over to her, he consented. Seth, however, learned of the
contents of the pillar and retrieved Osiris’ body. He proceeded to
hack the corpse into a hundred pieces and scatter them throughout
Egypt. After much searching, Isis recovered all the pieces except the
phallus and magically brought them to life, though they now existed
in another dimension. In the original account, therefore, Osiris is
peripheral—if not entirely unrelated—to the advent of spring and the
restoration of vegetation. In the yearly Osiris rituals, however,
Egyptian priests associated “the drowned one” with the Nile, which
“resurrected” the crops every year in spring. Thus twentieth-
century interpretations like Dickey’s regard his strewn body parts (in
no proximity to the Nile) as “seeds” and downplay the notion that
Osiris’ wife, not he, was responsible for the reincarnation. It is this
interpretation that we must carry into “The Vegetable King.”

Dickey, or rather, the narrator (there is no clear distinction in
Dickey’s verse between the two) attempts in this poem to recreate
the events surrounding the Osiris myth—the death, the watery burial, the resurrection—in the hope that mimicry will produce the same result of transcendence. As the poem progresses, however, the mimicry breaks down and leaves in its wake unsatisfactory results. At the poem’s end, the reader comes closer to Dickey’s eventual realization that transcendence begins not with a ritual performance of the events, but possibly with the urgency and emotion that initially drove them.

The poem opens at night, “Just after the sun/Has closed,” and the narrator exits the house to enter his own underworld. The philosophical and logistical problems that arise from this action will continue throughout the poem. Whereas Osiris, Tammuz, Telepinus, and even Christ were forced into the underworld—that is, murdered—the narrator must will the events leading to resurrection into existence. Since death is required for rebirth, he must metaphorically commit suicide. The urgency or severity of his death, then, is deflated. It becomes an arbitrary event. The narrator is reduced to acting out the life of a former god on his own time; he must “lay [himself] in ritual down” (line 5). Wanting to be a modern-day Osiris, but having little to work with, the narrator
begins the intriguing mental exercise of self-deification.

The “death” in this poem occurs in April, the beginning of spring vegetation and the celebrated month of a similar deicide—Christ’s crucifixion. Like Osiris, the narrator lies “in the unconsecrated grove,” but the trees this time are “small, suburban pines,” suggesting an absence of grandeur, virility, and freedom (12-13). “Beneath the gods and animals of Heaven,” the narrator concludes that he is “Mismade inspiringly, like them” (21-22), thus aligning himself with the gods, all of whom fall short of the ideal, all of whom are “mismade.” If he himself were not “mismade,” there would be no need for transcendence, for ressurection. But it is the mismaking that prompts him to search for a better existence, that inspires his quest.

“The Vegetable King” turns on the first line of the sixth stanza when the narrator confesses,

[I] begin to believe a dream,
I never once have had,
Of being part of the acclaimed rebirth
Of the ruined, calm world, in spring.

(26-29)

That the narrator’s belief in transcendence can only crystallize in a dream-state is indicative of the tenuousness of his quest. He
associates himself with "the drowned god" and "the chosen man/
Hacked apart" (30, 33-34). Here again, the narrator must create his
circumstance, he must believe his own martyrdom and divinity into
existence. He professes, "I believe I become that man, become/ As
bloodless as a god, within the water" (37-38). Yet his effort to
become Osiris is often simplistic and transparent. More like Seth
than Osiris, the narrator plays the role of usurper, claiming the
vegetable king's experiences as his own.

In The Golden Bough, with which Dickey was well acquainted, Frazer records that Osiris' name was often coupled with "the standing
epithet 'true of speech,' because true speech was characteristic of
Osiris." So the narrator contrives the lines, "my severed head has
prophesied [...] and now has told the truth" (54, 56). The act—or
rather, the ritual—of speaking truth, it seems, is more important than
the truth being spoken. Consequently, the reader never learns what
truth was uttered, and the narrator never mentions it again.

Another indicator of the dubiousness of the narrator's quest is his
failure to construct a metaphorical river, a suburban Nile, from which
he will emerge from his environment. His references to "the
undergloom of waters" and the "untroubled river" are strained and
the context indicates that it is Osiris’ water, not his own (36, 53). In order for the ritual to be effective and meaningful, all the symbolic, corollary elements must be present. The river, in Dickey’s writing and in the reincarnation myths, is often a central character. As Jim Varn points out, “Water for Dickey symbolizes the realm in which a synthesis between the physical and the spiritual can take place.”

The representation of this synthesis can be seen in Deliverance. “The Lifeguard,” “On the Coosawattee,” and several other of Dickey’s more popular writings. Water is the embodiment of both death (drowning and burial) and life (resurrection and sustenance); Osiris is buried in the river, yet the river brings vegetation to the living. The narrator in “The Vegetable King” has the mummy bag and the metaphorical death, but the river is conspicuously missing. Whereas the narrator’s “death” is spelled out in detail early in the poem, Dickey bypassed the account of his resurrection due to the absence of water. The god the narrator identifies with is already conveniently “assembled/
From the trembling, untroubled river” (35-36). Lacking the archetypal river and the power of self-resurrection, the narrator must content himself with a vicarious--therefore questionable--new existence. It is Osiris, “the chosen man,” not the narrator, who
"returns to walk a woman's rooms/ Where flowers on the mantelpiece are those/ Bought by his death" (39-41). The narrator simply imagines he is "that man"; he did not earn the flowers, the bowl of milk, or the smiles of the family which he claims await him.

Indeed, the suburban "vegetable king" relegates his family to an off-stage role. They are not allowed bodies or voices in the text. This relegation is necessary in order for the narrator to sustain the impression that he has truly experienced a mystical reincarnation: there is no one to contest or affirm his rendition. Here again, the bridge between ritual and reality is not completed; the corresponding characters who contributed to Osiris' resurrection show no interest in the resurrection of the narrator. In The Golden Bough Frazer translates the Egyptian account of Isis' and her sister Nephthyrus' mourning. Following Osiris' death, the two wandered the land, wailing,

Come to thy house. Come to thy house....Come to thy sister, come to thy wife, to thy wife, thou whose heart stands still. Come to thy housewife....Gods and men have turned their faces towards thee and weep for thee together....I call after thee and weep. 23

With his own family silenced, however, the narrator of "The Vegetable King" is free to interpret their words and emotions without
witnesses. He imagines that his "Mother, son, and wife" were troubled by his death, yet to them he was merely camping out in the backyard (65). He imagines he has been gone a long time, telling his family, "None knows why you have waited/ In the cold, thin house for winter/ To turn the inmost sunlight green" (68-70). But the family members themselves convey no consternation, no sorrow, no rejoicing. "The Vegetable King" is not, as the critic Robert Kirchsten describes it, "a ritual poem of protection for his family"; there is no suggestion in the text that the family was ever in danger or that the narrator even considered them imperiled. Rather, the narrator's abandonment of his family in his quest for a self-initiated death and rebirth, coupled with the omission of his family's reaction, reveals a profoundly solipsistic experience.

The ambiguity of the poem's conclusion reflects the uncertain success of the narrator's quest for transcendence. He is perplexed that his family has set out gifts "for him/ Who, recurring in this body, bears you home/ Magnificent pardon, and dread, impending crime" (74-75). Jim Varn argues that

The crime of this poem concerns man's turning from God, and the disintegration of their former unity. The pardon comes only after the speaker relived the experience God himself felt from
this break with man....he comes to have a deepened faith in and a heightened emotional response to his family as God must have toward man. 25

Dickey himself saw it differently. He explained, “The ‘dread, impending crime’ is his own ritual murder, and the ‘pardon’ is his resurrection. Or so I intended, anyway.” 26 Neither of these interpretations seems complete, however; the reader cannot easily discount the text’s suggestion that the “dread, impending crime” is a terror the narrator will “bear home,” an unnamed and imminent violence he intends to commit in the presence of his family, if not directly against them.

That crime follows pardon in the last line suggests that this attempt at resurrection is not the last--or the first. As the narrator states early in the poem, this ritual takes place “One night each April” (6). The cycle of suicide and regeneration, therefore, will continue, presumably because the current and preceding attempts were unsatisfactory. This sentiment underscores the narrator’s inability to convince himself and his audience that the myth has come true. Ultimately, when the “chosen one” chooses himself, the quest becomes more an intellectual exercise, a religion acted out, than a struggle to sustain existence.
"The Vegetable King" is representative of what one could call Dickey’s “contrived phase.” “Sleeping Out at Easter” and “The Poisoned Man,” among other poems, similarly resort to a formulaic script in which the characters lack motive and immediacy. The poet of “the early motion” (Dickey’s term for the first phase of his poetry) had not yet earned Michael James Faul’s appraisal of the poet of “the final motion.” Thirty years after “The Vegetable King” was published, Faul observed, “Transcendence, for Dickey, involves not merely beating death by living forever; rather it involves cherishing and participating more deeply in existence.” In the early 1960s, however, Dickey was still preoccupied with constructing idealized cycles of nature and human nature, with “beating death” for its own sake. He had yet to discover a necessity to defeat it. The limitations of poetic exercises like “The Vegetable King” led to his eventual abandonment of ritualistic mythology and, more importantly, to an exploration of more relevant, life-threatening paradigms.

In the poem “Snakebite” (1967), Dickey signalled his entrance into this new phase of poetry. The irregular line lengths and the sporadic spacing in “Snakebite” contrast with the formal, predetermined rhythms of “The Vegetable King” and reflect an
impromptu mental journey. "Snakebite" attempts to present a tone of "surprise," a word Dickey repeats early in the poem. It is as though Frost's maxim "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader" was at the forefront of his mind. 28 Frost maintained, "[The poem] must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader." 29 In "The Poisoned Man," Dickey's earlier attempt to explore the same subject matter, readers found merely a paraphrasing of Genesis 3: 6. But "Snakebite" offers an experience—to use Frost's phrase--"more felt than seen ahead." 30

The line "I am the one" begins the poem, and the reader is put in mind of "the chosen one" in "The Vegetable King." But the following lines-- "And there is no way not/ To be me"--suggest that it is a dubious honor this time (1-3). The narrator later repeats the sentiment: "I am the one chosen"; yet it is not himself but an indifferent agent of the natural world who is responsible for the choosing (20). On a solitary hike, the narrator is "flagged// Down" by the snake near "ten deadly and/ Dead pine logs" (3-6). The "unconsecrated grove" of "suburban pines" and Osiris' sycamore grove are here "Dead" and "deadly" as the ritual death to which Dickey was accustomed gives way to the realities of physical death.
The narrator is convincingly surprised “at the dosage [. . .] at what/ It can do and the ways/ Of giving” (9-13).

Like the River Nile, the snake here is both a killer and a giver. In describing the snake as a “long dusty arm,” and interspersing images of “fish scales” and its “Swimming against the current// Of pine straw,” Dickey approximated the elusive metaphorical river (13-18). By the poet’s own design the snake’s features and actions form a river in composite—an inversion of Conrad’s description of the Congo as “an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea . . and its tail lost in the depths of the land.” 31 The paradox of death as a route toward life, then, can now be fully explored. Indeed, the narrator’s observation that the snake has “licked my heel// Like a surgeon” (21-22) suggests not merely an antigenic injection, but also a protraction of life; he has finally been given the physician’s undivided attention. Much as the Israelites looked toward the caduceus to heal their snakebites, the narrator comes to regard the snake as both the toxic agent and the cure.

Unwittingly, the narrator has surrendered to a natural system of exchange: venom for blood and blood for venom. Though the snake attempts to kill him, the narrator recognizes the healing power of the
violent act and intimates that his life might ultimately be saved through bloodshed. His conclusion that “Unspilt blood// Will kill you” (38-39) echoes the doctrine set forth by St. Paul: “Without shedding of blood there is no remission [of sins]”—that is, no eternal life. The question for the narrator, however, is: whose blood? His first reaction is to kill the snake and complete the exchange. He states, “It is hard to think of dying/ But not of killing: hold the good/ Foot ready to put on his head” (25-27). In the role of Son of God, the narrator initially offers only a slight variation on the curse, “[Eve’s seed] shall bruise your head, and you [the serpent] shall bruise his heel.” This retaliation is tempting, “Except,” the narrator adds, “that it leaves me only// On a stage of pine logs// Something like an actor” (26-28). In a moment of epiphany, his foot poised above the snake’s head, the narrator confronts the reality that he is only an actor. The role of Christ will not work for him because the snake and the venom are more than props. Of this moment in the poem, Joyce Carol Oates writes, “The poet realizes he is confined in his living, breathing, existential body. . . . If he wants to survive, he will have to drain that poison out of his bloodstream.”

Turning from the world of the ritual to the physical, the narrator
states, "Let me sit down and draw// My tiny sword unfold it"
(29-30). With the snake pardoned and lost in the underbrush, he resolves to cut his foot open to bleed the venom. Unlike the "suicide" of the narrator of "The Vegetable King," this self-inflicted wound is a true act of urgency that leads to a literal repudiation of death. While the trope of role-playing and deity impersonation persists, the narrator passively concedes, "It is the role/ I have been cast in"
(32-33). He is a reluctant messiah who, like Christ, willingly sheds his own blood. Yet unlike Christ, he does so only to save himself. Again, the solipism that undermined the motives of "The Vegetable King" emerges here and Van Ness's assertion that Dickey is concerned with "offer[ing] up some golden bough" for others is called into question. Dickey may partially preempt this question by constructing a scene in which only one human is present, yet the narrator's continued dialogue with his other self, whom he refers to as "brother," calls attention to his egocentrism. "Cut deep, as a brother would," he advises himself in the final stanza, "Cut to save it. Me" (39-40).

Clearly, the most important principle established in "Snakebite" is Dickey's insistence that literal bloodshed is necessary for
transcendence of death to occur. The poem teeters between ritualism on one hand and violence on the other, much as the narrator balances on the log weighing his role as deity impersonator against his role as “a living, breathing, existential body” whose death is imminent. In the end Dickey opted for literal bloodshed over ritualistic, metaphorical death, but not before experimenting at length with each approach. The notion that “Unspilt blood// Will kill you” is explored in several of Dickey’s other poems, as well, including “The Scratch,” “Venom,” and “A Heaven of Animals.” In the latter, Dickey constructed an afterlife for the animal kingdom that turns out to be merely an exaggeration of their life on earth: “These hunt, as they have done./ But with claws and teeth grown perfect” (20-21). But this imagined afterlife, though governed by the cycles of nature, is not governed by the laws of physics and physiology. The prey, like the narrator of “Snakebite,” achieve a transcendence of death through their own shed blood:

At the cycle’s center,
They tremble, they walk
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,
They rise, they walk again.

(37-41)
Laurence Lieberman’s assessment of “A Heaven of Animals” could well apply to “Snakebite” or the myriad other poems in which Dickey embraced the hostile, yet purifying relationship between the hunter and the hunted: “The spilling of blood is a necessary condition of this idyllic state that ‘could not be the place/ It is without blood.’”

“Last Hours” (1994), a poem published two years after his definitive collection The Whole Motion, finds Dickey further engrossed with the notion that bloodshed is the key to transcendence. The delicate balance between necessary violence and eternal life explored in “The Vegetable King” and “Snakebite” succumbs in “Last Hours” to the allurement of unnecessary violence and predatoriness as a means of survival. Here all the well-worn Middle Eastern rituals are abandoned completely and replaced with a seemingly desperate and macabre fascination with murder. Oddly enough, the poem’s alternating images of war and serial killing are meant to console and inspire Dickey’s dying brother Tom and set him on a path toward perpetuity. In this sense, “Last Hours” can be read as the most prescriptive of the three poems. Unlike “The Vegetable King” and “Snakebite,” it represents— in tone if not in mood—a sincere attempt by Dickey to “offer up some golden bough” to
someone other than himself. At times rambling and disjointed, both in form and content, the poem is at bottom a sermon of advice—from one elderly man, himself nearing death, to another who is clearly in its throes.

Readers of Dickey’s earlier poetry remember his brother Tom from “Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek,” when he was then a middle-aged Civil War buff scavenging for “a mess tin or bullet” with a mine detector and a set of earphones (64). Accompanying Tom through the overgrown Georgia battlefield, James Dickey captured the rare—and arguably unnatural—satisfaction Tom achieved in his ritualistic communion with the slain soldiers:

...the dead have waited here
A hundred years to create
Only the look on the face
Of my one brother...
With a long-buried light on his lips. . . .

(51-54, 58)

Three decades later, with a cancer ward as its setting, “Last Hours” recalls the themes of this earlier poem by renouncing Tom’s lifelong devotion to history:

I have come to tell you, Tom,

That Longstreet has failed and, as well, Melville,
Who feared him has failed, even though he said
In repudiating the rejuvenating power of Tom’s beloved Civil War heroes, the sacred dead who once resurrected “the long-buried light on his lips,” Dickey implies not only that the answer to his brother’s illness lies elsewhere, but that he himself is privy to that answer. While negating his brother’s reliance on history (and possibly his own reliance on mythology) with the refrain “Longstreet does not/ know// How salvation for the doomed arrives,” Dickey hints at a new formula for transcendence: “Brother I can show you: this is my last shot” (12-14, 50). But what Dickey has to “show” is slow to come.

The text progresses from doubt (“Where should we go? The nurse// And the rest of us? Where? What should we do?”) to certainty (“Follow. He is helping. Go with him,// Brother; he will cross you over”), as though Dickey were extemporaneously formulating the entire philosophical antidote intended to relieve his brother (26-27, 107-108). In the modernist tradition, it can be argued, he shows us not only the final answer, but the means of getting there. Still, this thinking out loud ultimately betrays the panicked uncertainty of his journey and undermines his credibility as counselor.

Dickey’s prescription for transcendence in “Last Hours” is
ambiguous from the outset. "Take it where you find it," he repeats—a phrase wholly subjective, devoid of any shared spiritual enlightenment (16, 81). Then, perhaps by means of illustration or as an attempt at vicarious rebirth, Dickey "finds it" for his unresponsive brother in the confines of the hospital room. Though deities like Osiris and Christ are absent, Dickey introduces a new inspiration in the form of an ethereal agent of sorts. Observing Tom's expressionless daughter reading a paperback near the bed, Dickey seizes on the subject of the book: the serial-killer Ted Bundy. For a respected poet in his mid-seventies to devote one of his final poems to a brutal murderer of pop-culture fame may strike readers as disturbing at best, but it is a trend that Dickey's adherents have seen grow in proportion to his years. As he gradually advanced toward death himself, Dickey exhibited a curious fascination with violence that made the earlier Deliverance seem relatively peaceable. His last novel, To the White Sea, is a clear indication of this trend; in it he chronicled the savagery and subsequent satisfaction of an American tailgunner trapped on the Japanese mainland during World War II with sequences typical of the following:

...he came into my knife. I held it for him, just so. Even though
his jugular must have been cut, judging from the fire-out of his blood, he stayed on his feet, still making his moves. . . . Then, with the blood coming weaker, he went down, rolled, and I hit him through the back of the neck, cut the cord, and finished him. He was still from then on out, but for me he would always be the one who made that weave of steel. . . . that was the best. “You’re a good one,” I said. “You sure are. I can use you.” 37

“I can use you,” the tailgunner Muldrow says. But how? Though the old Japanese man is already dead, Muldrow appears to attain a psychological high from his murder, a sadistic titillation from fear and blood that somehow results in his assimilating the powers or talents of the victim. “He’s an American, and you pull for him,” Dickey said in a recent interview, “but he’s also a sociopath, the equivalent of Ted Bundy.” 38 Blending the hero and the sociopath once again, Dickey calls up the ghost of Bundy in “Last Hours” and portrays him as an improved, modern-day Longstreet, urging his brother to “Follow now: Follow/ The other murderer” (84-85).

The paradox of murderer as life-giver, as savior in a cancer victim’s struggle against death, is clearly a plausible image to Dickey. But how does Bundy, long dead as a result of his deterioration toward pure violence, manifest his designation as spiritual guide? As evidenced by his earlier experiments with metaphorical transcendence, Dickey came to believe that prolonged—if not eternal--life is
impossible without bloodshed, whether it was the suicide in “The Vegetable King” or the self-inflicted wound in “Snakebite.” In “Last Hours” he seems to be testing the boundaries of that theory by infusing the absurdly exaggerated ghost of Ted Bundy into the equation. Dickey devises Bundy’s contributions to Tom’s transcendence— or rather, the transcendence imagined by Dickey—in several ways. Initially, Bundy serves as merely a stimulus, breaking the tedium of Tom’s confined existence. Dickey rightly believes that Bundy represents a new and raw image of human experience, an image powerful enough to capture the fading attention of a dying old man and divert his thoughts from the illness. After calling Bundy’s spirit to his brother’s attention, Dickey observes, “he has caught the interest// Of your brain’s last blood. Last: the last of it” (90-91). In this brief instance, then, Dickey’s methodology proves effective, though it stands as a rather amoral testament to the revitalizing power of sexual violence.

In addition to stimulating Tom’s mind—and, by inference, his life—Bundy goes on to serve as an ominous spiritual guide. After circuitously arriving at and subsequently exhausting the mantra “Follow the murderer,” Dickey imagines Tom “disembodied,” hovering
over his daughter "in some form yet unknown,/ Bound to the killer" (97-98). Both Tom and Bundy, then, achieve a state of being that Dickey's previous poetic constructs were unable to bring about: a metaphysical existence, mystically attained by a communion with the intensely physical. Not only does the newly-disembodied Tom assume the identity of "the deliberate stranger" as he moves "through the hauntedness of Florida State," but he is called upon by Dickey to stalk his own daughter in the spirit of Ted Bundy (72-73). "Crouch in the last hedge/ Of Tallahassee," Dickey instructs Tom, "hover/ Over the reading girl" (92-94). Here Dickey advocates not an exchange of lives but an exchange of sensibilities with the Other. In "Snakebite" either the bitten man or the hostile snake was required to shed blood in order to complete the natural cycle of exchange, and the temptation clearly existed to destroy the poisonous predator. But in "Last Hours" Dickey proposes an entirely different theory: becoming the predator (whether Bundy or the serpent), assuming all the components of his character, is superior to neutralizing the predator. Or perhaps, becoming the predator does neutralize him, primarily by denying him an individual claim to his own powerful identity--in the spirit of Andre Gide's dictum: "One completely
overcomes only what one assimilates.” 39

In a way this brings the poet back to the problem of role-playing, a technique he consciously rejected in “Snakebite.” But the text here is silent about whether playing the role of death’s usher, as opposed to a deity struggling to gain power over death, improves Tom’s--or Dickey’s--chances of becoming an eternal survivor. While Dickey urges Tom to co-opt the predatoriness and psychosis of Bundy, Tom, like the family in “The Vegetable King,” is conspicuously unresponsive (save the aforementioned instance where the initial mention of Bundy catches “the interest of [his] brain’s last blood”). Dickey as narrator, on the other hand, comes across as too enthusiastic about his own ultimate advice, as too willing to personally finish out the grotesque sexual crime wave started by Bundy:

Listen: there is one more girl

Walking innocently home: home

To the sorority house

...she is the final

(85-89)

The reader is left to question which brother is actually acting out the part of Bundy. In one sense, then, Tom--speechless, defense-
less--becomes Dickey's victim, a casualty of his overzealous insistence on violence for the sake of reinvigoration. In this dynamic, Dickey gets away with mentally "stalking" Tom's daughter, whom he calls "the last/ Victim" (100-101), as if his unheeded instructions to Tom belie a veiled fantasy of his own.

The whole of Dickey's convoluted prescription is intended to lead to "the one good act," which is unspecified but presumably involves some metaphorical wounding or molestation of Tom's daughter, "the one girl/ Of your loins" (106, 976-97). But "the one good act" is never performed and that omission, coupled with Tom's unresponsiveness, denies the reader an opportunity to judge the ultimate success of Dickey's new-found methodology. The question remains, then, whether "Last Hours" represents a progression in Dickey's quest for transcendence. Its gratuitously disturbing images and lack of discernible logic suggest more a desperate grasp at transcendence than a ritualistic or even well-planned approach.

Finding it odd that "the man who believes in nature--in natural processes--should feel uneasy about the natural process of aging," Joyce Carol Oates touches on one of the more subversive undercurrents in "Last Hours." After all, it is Dickey, not Tom, who
expresses an anxiety about the terminal illness and frantically struggles to find a loophole in the natural cycle of life and death. It would be difficult to contend that "Last Hours" represents a resolution of Dickey's life-long search, a final formula for metaphorical transcendence. More likely, it symbolizes just one more link in an on-going chain of experiments. Dickey certainly explored new territory with this latest approach, but the poem leaves the reader with either unsatisfying or inconclusive internal evidence of its efficacy. Ultimately, "Last Hours" is a troubling and troubled prescription to live off the blood of others, drawing power and exhilaration from their deaths. What it lacks, however, is the crucial element of self-sacrifice, of crucifixion to purify the soul of the brother chosen by cancer.

Though he never arrived at a satisfactory formula for immortality, it is clear that the desire to propel the psychological self beyond the threshold of physical decay was a primary motivation behind Dickey's verse. Dickey's quest for this transcendence progressed from a poetry of ritualism to a hybridization of ritual and bloodshed, and finally ended in a determined celebration of raw violence. Yet no singular narrative poem offered a fully-crafted
“golden bough” to the reader. Indeed, only in an overview of all the poems does one find anything like the figurative reincarnation to which Dickey aspired: an evolution, from self to resurrected self, of a body of poems struggling toward apotheosis, insuring their own perpetuity in the process. Viewing the collective poems in these terms—as manifestations (rather than illustrations) of the reinvented self engaging and overcoming the exhausted former self—one is less compelled to label Dickey’s quest in terms of unfulfilled aspirations. What he failed to do (and undoubtedly knew he would fail to do) for himself, he achieved in his own creations—even if it was only, as Dickey writes in “Diabetes,” “resurrection/For a little while.” 41
NOTES


3. Dickey, *SI* 120.


[Note to pages 7-14]


15. Dickey, SI 132.


18. Hooke, 68.


[Notes to pages 15-21]

23. Frazer, 366.


25. Varn, 8.

26. Dickey, 81 90.


29. Frost, 19.

30. Frost, 19


32. Heb. 9: 22.

33. Gen. 3:15.


36. Dickey, “Last Hours,” The Southern Review, XXX (Fall, 1994): 693, lines 7-10. An independent-minded general, James Longstreet was blamed by many colleagues and historians for the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg. His indecisiveness in battle, resulting in untold deaths, may be behind Dickey’s epithet “the murderer.”


40. Oates, 95

41. Dickey, TWM 299.
Works Cited


VITA

Stephen Ray Hawkins


In August 1994, the author entered the College of William and Mary as a graduate assistant in the Department of English.