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## "Presentational Immediacy" in the Poetry of James Dickey

Lethiel C. Parson

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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

Graduate School

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"PRESENTATIONAL IMMEDIACY" IN THE POETRY OF JAMES DICKEY

by

Lethiel C. Parson

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A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in the Field of English

---

June, 1974

Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to the four professors who served on my thesis committee for without their special help, encouragement and interest this project would have remained incomplete.

## CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER I . . . . .	1
CHAPTER II . . . . .	3
CHAPTER III . . . . .	8
CHAPTER IV . . . . .	12
CHAPTER V . . . . .	19
CHAPTER VI . . . . .	38
CHAPTER VII - Conclusion . . . . .	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	53
APPENDIX . . . . .	55

## CHAPTER I

I first became interested in the poetry of James Dickey while taking a course in Advanced Composition during my junior year at college. There was something about the poetry which drew my attention and appealed to me in a special way. Later when faced with an assignment to make a study of one contemporary poet, I was immediately impelled to use Dickey as the subject of the term paper. It was while doing research for this paper that I decided to write my thesis on the poetry of James Dickey.

In the initial stage of my research for the thesis I endeavored to read all that was available in periodicals and books in these categories; material written about Dickey and his poetry; material written by Dickey about the work of other poets; and material written by Dickey about himself and about his own poetry. I was largely unsuccessful in finding material by Dickey about his own work, with the exception of a short article at the end of Babel to Byzantium in which he gives an account of his development as a poet and of his artistic purpose. Briefly, his purpose is, as he put it, "to find some way to incarnate my best moments-- those which in memory are most persistent and abessive (sic). I find that most of these moments have an element of danger, an element of repose, and an element of joy."<sup>1</sup>

In reading and re-reading Dickey's poems I found that these elements of danger, repose, and joy constituted the 'something' which had originally attracted me to his poetry. It seemed that the speaker in the poems was willing to put himself--or his emotions--out on a limb, so to speak. That

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<sup>1</sup>James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium, p. 292.

is, he was willing to expose his desires and problems with little or no reserve. Second, it seemed that for the most part the poems were pervaded by a tone of quiet strength, assurance, and dignity. Finally, it seemed that the speaker experienced a sense of fulfillment and joy as he related his experience. Altogether these elements serve to effect a body of poetry which is largely spontaneous and forthright in presenting the subject matter.

## CHAPTER II

The poetry of James Dickey makes an interesting body of writing, especially because of the way the experiences of the poems are presented. Through an effective use of imagery, vivid re-creations of the matter of the poems are provided, so that the reader is able to experience them fully. This thesis will provide a study of the effective use of imagery in Dickey's poetry. First, a general introduction to Dickey, who is a relatively new addition to the scene of contemporary American poetry, will provide an estimate of his standing as a poet.

In Nineteenth Century British Poets W. H. Auden suggests a useful guide for determining whether or not a poet is important: first, has he produced a considerable body of writing? second, has there been any development in his work? third, what distinguishes him from others of his generation? fourth, is the content broad in subject matter?<sup>2</sup> Let us assess the work of James Dickey using each of these criteria in turn.

First, Dickey has been publishing poetry since 1957 and has produced six slim volumes of poetry: Into the Stone, 24 poems; Drowning With Others, 36; Helmets, 24; Buckdancer's Choice, 21; and The Eyebeaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy, 17. This makes a total of 146 poems, published in book form and in separate volumes. Falling, the last collection (23 poems) in Poems 1957-1967, which includes a selection of poems from the first four volumes, did not appear as a separate volume. There are a number of other poems published only in periodicals. While this may not be an overwhelming amount of poetry, when one takes into

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Peter Davison, "The Difficulties of Being Major," Atlantic, CCXX (October, 1967), p. 116.



account the short period during which it was produced (about fourteen years), he can see that Dickey does merit some serious attention.

Second, we find that in the poetry produced during these fourteen years there is some discernible development. Dickey's poetry may be divided into early and mature work as follows: early work: Into the Stone, Drowning With Others, Helmets; mature work: Buckdancer's Choice, Falling, The Eyebeaters, . . . . Characteristic of the early work are the extensive use of myth, "a tense verse and concentrated stanza sequence,"<sup>3</sup> and frequent use of rather monotonous rhythms, with nine syllables of which three or four are stressed and five or six unstressed.<sup>4</sup> The mature work places more emphasis on the long narrative and involves a far more casual technique, in keeping with the poet's aim for "presentational immediacy."

Third, the quality which makes Dickey's poetry unique and which repeatedly stimulates comments about his work is the intensity of the experience presented in the poems. There is a predominant "joy in the sheer pleasure of being"<sup>5</sup> no matter what the situation at hand. Even in situations characterized by pain or guilt, there is an acute, total involvement which is at times almost ferocious in its forcefulness. In some poems the depiction of the experience is so intense that it appears

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Duncan, "Oriented by Instinct by Stars," Poetry, CV (November, 1964), p. 132.

<sup>4</sup>Wendell Berry, "James Dickey's New Book," Poetry, CV (November, 1964), pp. 130-31.

<sup>5</sup>Laurence Lieberman, The Achievement of James Dickey: A Comprehensive Selection of His Poetry With a Critical Introduction, p. 1.

distorted because of the overly concentrated effort to communicate something that defies precise communication. As a whole, the diction is simple, the syntax regular. In this Dickey is like his fellow contemporary poets. But it is with the use of imagery that his technique is most evidently his own.\*

Fourth, as far as themes or subject matter are concerned, Dickey's poetry deals with such matters as war and the individual, the desire or need to transcend the limitations of self and of everyday reality, family relations, love, man and the animal world, man and the physical world. As such the reader can identify with the emotions which are generated by the poem's experience. Thus the poetry of James Dickey does fulfill the four criteria suggested by Auden and is as such, the poetry does merit serious consideration. We turn now to a more specific survey of the characteristics of the poetry.

The poems are characterized by an autobiographical stance--a characteristic prevalent in much of today's poetry with its search for personal identity. Taken all together the poems reveal a person who is very sensitive and who seeks a new, more intense confrontation with the world. Though we should not equate the person in the poem with the poet, Dickey's background is reflected in the settings of many of the poems, the majority of which are set in Georgia where Dickey was born and grew

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\*This will be discussed in Chapters V and VI in the analysis of the poems.

up. In other poems the setting reflects his travels, and his experience as a fighter pilot in the Orient during World War II.\*

The poems also form a general outline of Dickey's life. He acknowledges this, asserting that if he were to arrange his poems in a chronological scheme they would form a story

leading from childhood in the north of Georgia through high school with its athletics and wild motorcycle riding, through a beginning attempt at education at an agricultural college, through World War II and the Korean War as a flyer in a night-fighter squadron, through another beginning at college, this time completed, through various attempts at a valid love affair culminating in the single successful one called "marriage," through two children, several deaths in the family, travels, reflections, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Although Dickey asserts that his poems reflect his life experiences, when referring to the speaker of the poems he uses expressions such as "the character" or "the man" which would imply that the speaker of the poem is not to be equated with Dickey himself.

We find that Dickey's poetry is not "confessional," for rather than probing the poet's inner self as a private person, it aims at depicting an experience as vividly and as intensely as possible. (Often involved is a relationship of some sort with the natural world.) Commenting on

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\*It is interesting to note that the poems have not only a general locale but also a specific place on the map. The setting of "On the Coosawattee" is a river in northwestern Georgia. During the course of the poem specific towns are mentioned. Also specific in locale are "Cherrylog Road" (North Georgia) "Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek," and "A Folk Singer of the Thirties," with its catalog of place names. Paul Carroll, author of The Poem In Its Skin, points out that it is the practice of many contemporary poets to "locate poems in specific localities on the map." p. 253. This, he maintains, adds to the projection of reality in the poem and gives it immediacy and genuineness.

<sup>6</sup>James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium, p. 281.

the office of the poet, Dickey speaks of a dichotomy of poets--those who "merely tell you of their experiences. . . and those who are able to relate you, the unknown but potentially human Other, to the world that all of us exist in."<sup>7</sup> By the phrase "unknown but potentially human Other," Dickey seems to be referring to the inner self of the reader. This inner self is submerged, but potentially may be stimulated and brought up to the surface of the individual's consciousness. In relating to the world of people and of physical nature as presented in a work of literature in a completely yielded manner the reader can find enrichment and meaning for his existence.

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<sup>7</sup>Dickey, "Theodore Roethke," Poetry, CV (November, 1964), p. 119.

### CHAPTER III

Before an examination of the poetry, a review of the related critical literature is necessary to provide a perspective for evaluating the poems.

The greater portion of critical comment on Dickey's work is limited to reviews in periodicals such as Life, The Nation, Time, and in literary journals such as Poetry and Sewanee Review. As book reviews, these critical comments tend to be quite general. They include brief characterizations of the volumes being reviewed, supported by quotations from the poems. Many writers limit their comments to generalizing statements about the rhythms, imagery, and general form of the poems. As far as critical comments in books are concerned, the longest treatments are: the chapter on Dickey in Alone With America Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950 by Richard Howard (about 24 pages), and The Achievement of James Dickey: A Comprehensive Selection of His Poems With a Critical Introduction by Laurence Lieberman (about 18 pages). Yet even these mainly provide only general overviews of Dickey's poetry and not scholarly analysis.

Thus the review of the literature on Dickey's poetry did not yield any full treatment on his use of language. However, representative comments on Dickey's imagery, form, and diction follow:

In his review of Poems 1957-1967 (the volume from which the poems to be discussed in this thesis are taken) R. Tillinghast asserts that Dickey's main fault is "his use of language which seems forced and artificially heightened."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>R. Tillinghast, "Pilot Into Poet," New Republic, CLVII (September 9, 1967), p. 28.

Henry Morris, in an article on Dickey and two other poets, gives a very stringent criticism of Dickey's technique, asserting that in his verse

. . . the observation (is) myopic, sometimes completely filmed over; form is adhered to but so meaninglessly or in- exactly as to suggest casual concern only or incredibly inept management. In addition to what seems a total inability to achieve conciseness within a single poem, Mr. Dicky (sic) appears unable also to conclude a poem in under 30 lines. . . Mr. Dickey writes verse so loosely that he may do anything in it, commit any dispersal, admit any discourse, follow any digression.<sup>9</sup>

However, Morris fails to recognize the necessity of such a technique-- ie., that the technique is an integral part of the experience of the poem to which the poet desires the reader to react. So Morris is condemning Dickey for doing what he must do, and what he set out to accomplish. Other critics recognize the validity of Dickey's technique.

In reviewing Poems 1957-1967 for Poetry magazine D. W. Baker acknowledges certain strong points.

(Dickey's) visionary ego approaches but does not engage the social dilemma, the unpleasant responsibilities of race, economics, or war. Yet in spite of recurrent slickness and sentimentality, he has the guts to try to transcend that ego, to rage toward a truth of his own that less daring poets shackle with pleading or technical preoccupation. The "timid poem" may need, after all, his "mindless explosion." His energies burst so blindingly into words, he chants in so confident and so successful a voice, and his illusions so closely resemble our own that a reader goes drunk on his work as he might on a strong, familiar music.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Henry Morris, "A Formal View of the Poetry of Dickey, Garrigue, and Simpson," Sewanee Review, LXXVII, No. 2 (Spring, 1969), pp. 319, 321.

<sup>10</sup>D. W. Baker, "Poetry of James Dickey," Poetry, CXI (March, 1968), pp. 400-01.

By "mindless explosion" may be understood the quality which Dickey feels would cause the reader to "suspend literary judgment entirely and simply experience," as was quoted above.

A similar viewpoint is held by Richard Howard regarding the forcefulness of Dickey's poetry:

Renewal, transcendence, ecstasy--he has sought these things in his own person, and by any means, at all costs. At all costs to the art as well as to the artist's life, Dickey seeks and speaks for a triumph over death, a transformation within the merely mortal body, praying somehow to live, convulsively, explosively, beyond the norms of utterance. . . . The poet has recast the entire process of poetry as he himself has practiced and proved it into an ecstasy without constants, a sublimity without negation.<sup>11</sup>

With the expression "beyond the norms of utterance" Howard recognizes the ineffability of the experience in many of the poems. In Chapter IV we will discuss ineffability in terms of the mystic experience.

Following are comments on the imagery of the poems by various critics:

In yet another review of Poems 1957-1967 Michael Goldman singles out the imagery as the most noteworthy feature of Dickey's work and makes the following generalizations about it:

Dickey's poems are remarkable for imagination in the most literal sense, for their power of making images. But these are not the "images" the tradition of poetry has taught us to expect. They are neither minute visual notations nor elaborately constructed symbols.

. . . For Dickey an image is like a special kind of clothing, a charged shape of the outside world that he puts on, in order to connect himself with the world's monstrous power.

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<sup>11</sup>Richard Howard, "Resurrection For a Little While," Nation, CCX (March 23, 1970), p. 240.

. . . His images are bodies within which he changes, moving toward a heart which is not his heart but a heart of experience--an animal center, usually dangerous.<sup>12</sup>

Louis Untermeyer provides the following summary statement on the effectiveness of Dickey's presentation.

His is, in short, a moving poetry, a poetry utterly unlike the fashionable unemotional flatness of statement. Always there is a direct confrontation with the human as well as the inhuman condition, always a new slant on the image, no mere feat of phrase but a provocative insight.<sup>13</sup>

So we see that several writers have assented that Dickey's technique is valid in that it proves an effective vehicle for presenting his material. Said differently, the form is part and parcel of the function of the poem. None of these writers, however, has undertaken a formal analysis of the poems in order to demonstrate the validity of their assertions. This thesis will be an attempt to provide such an analysis.

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<sup>12</sup>Michael Goldman, "Inventing the American Heart," Nation, CCIV (April 24, 1967), p. 529.

<sup>13</sup>Louis Untermeyer, "Way of Seeing and Saying," Saturday Review, L (May 6, 1967), p. 31.



## CHAPTER IV

As with other contemporary poets, Dickey's ideas are developed unfettered by traditional poetic devices, conventions, and diction. His use of language is often spontaneous and has a fair degree of smoothness and regular syntax. In many instances, however, there is a feeling of strain and even of self-consciousness. This is a necessary aspect of the experience of the poem. The images and general diction are effective as a probing approach to presenting an experience which is by nature extremely individualistic and therefore difficult to communicate in language. Virtually all of the poems published between 1957 and 1970 attempt to depict the ultimate in a human being's intense reaction to the world around him. Furthermore, though upon close examination or analysis the general diction, figures of speech, and images are often strained and even far-fetched at times, they are effective in communicating to the reader the intensity of the experience of the poem. In this connection is the following intriguing statement by Dickey on his technique:

I was interested most of all in getting an optimum "presentational immediacy," a compulsiveness in the presentation of the matter of the poem that would cause the reader to forget literary judgments entirely and simply experience.<sup>14</sup>

"Presentational immediacy" appears to mean a direct forceful representation of an idea or experience which is effective because the vehicle of expression so graphically reproduces the experience that the reader may participate in the experience with little or no intellectual reflection. This thesis will focus primarily on the presentational immediacy of six selected poems, showing what this quality is and how it is achieved

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<sup>14</sup>Dickey, Babel to Byzantium, p. 290.

through diction, simple sensory images, and figurative language.

Since many of Dickey's poems present their subject matter in a way that strongly resembles the mystic's approach to experience, this chapter will present a discussion of the principal features of mystical experience in an attempt to show that a mystical element serves as one way of achieving presentational immediacy in the poems.

A look at some of the characteristics of mystical experience will help in determining how the experiences in Dickey's poetry are similar to the mystical apprehension and, by extension, how his use of language mirrors that experience--how his choice of words serves as a vehicle for depicting an intense experience.

First a look at several descriptions of the mystic experience will aid in determining just how presentational immediacy partakes of some mystical elements.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines mysticism as "the immediate experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality." The relationship into which the mystic is inducted transcends the ordinary distinctions between subject and object or between I and Thou."<sup>15</sup>

Evelyn Underhill calls mysticism "a movement of the heart seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to Ultimate Reality," adding that by the word 'heart' is meant, "the inmost sanctuary of personal being, the deep root of its love and will, the very source of energy and life."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>"Mysticism," (Vol. XV, 1971), p. 1129.

<sup>16</sup>Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism, pp. 71, 72.

Elmer O'Brien points out that the mystic considers the "object confronted in the mystic experience. . .to be somehow ultimate."<sup>17</sup>

Each of these writers recognized that the mystic's experience involves a reaching out for something beyond the range of normal consciousness. William James points out that very slightly separated from our normal waking consciousness are "potential forms of consciousness entirely different," but which the individual may never once suspect or realize. However, once the requisite stimulus is applied these potential, but latent, forms of consciousness will be manifest "in all their completeness."<sup>18</sup>

Each of these writers stresses that the mystical experience is not an intellectual process. Underhill asserts that the aims of mysticism are "wholly transcendental and spiritual," and that in its true state it is "something which the whole self does; not something as to which the intellect holds an opinion."<sup>19</sup> O'Brien observes that the mystical confrontation is "always different from familiar exercise of either sense perception or reasoning."<sup>20</sup> And James points out that mystical states of consciousness "result in insight into the depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Elmer O'Brien, S. J., Varieties of Mystic Experience: An Anthology and Interpretation, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup>William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature, pp. 378, 379.

<sup>19</sup>Underhill, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup>O'Brien, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup>James, p. 371.

In general, then, mystical apprehension is characterized by a desire to link one's self with ultimate reality and by a form of insight that goes beyond the normal logical or rational categories of thought.

Many of the Dickey poems present experiences in ways which move in the direction of mysticism. In these the speaker seeks and achieves a confrontation with a force outside of himself, usually a force perceived while out of doors, related to some aspect of physical nature. The other poems, though not mystical, are equally heightened in tone and approach. Indeed, the experiences of both groups of poems fulfill and point to another characteristic of genuine mystical experience, one which James calls ineffability. The mystical experience is such that it cannot be communicated adequately. James further asserts that "mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else."<sup>22</sup>

If such is the case, if the experience is such an extremely personal, individual matter, then it follows that it is most difficult to communicate this experience even in poetry, a form which is effective in communicating an idea or experience in concrete and forceful terms. Again, we turn to James for a statement on the relative effectiveness of imagery in communicating mystical experience. He states that some sorts of sensorial images, "whether literal or symbolic, play an enormous part in mysticism," but with this qualification:

But in certain cases imagery may fall away entirely, and in the very highest raptures it tends to do so. The

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<sup>22</sup>James, pp. 371, 396.

state of consciousness becomes then insusceptible of any verbal description.<sup>23</sup>

Later James gives these examples of the writer's effort to communicate his acute experience: "In mystical literature such self-contradictory phrases as 'dazzling obscurity,' 'whispering silence,' 'teeming desert,' are continually met with."<sup>24</sup> This use of oxymoron and paradox is found also in the nonmystical poems where the decided effort of the speaker to communicate his very personal experience also necessitates a use of imagery which affects the presentational immediacy of the poem.

We might note at this point that in The Varieties of Religious Experience William James points out that mystical experience has a very wide range and that within "the mystical group" are several levels of experience, the lower levels of which involve "phenomena which claim no special religious significance," and the higher levels "of which the religious pretensions are extreme."<sup>25</sup> Dickey's poetry would seem to belong to one of the lower levels of mystical consciousness. It may well be called quasi-mystical experience.

Dickey's poetry exhibits this straining effort to communicate effectively an acute and ineffable personal experience. Because the experience of the poem is not based on the exercise of reasoning but rather on a direct confrontation of some sort, it is often presented by diction and images which are unusual or even incongruous. The diction

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<sup>23</sup>James, p. 396.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 373.

expresses the state of mind of the person in the poem and the urgency of the experience. Thus the presentation of the experience is made effectively immediate.

Both the experience and the manner of communicating that experience (the imagery, etc.) are heightened in quality. In each case the dimensions of reality are sufficiently distorted to warrant the assertion that the speaker considers the experience to be charged with significance for his inner being. Hence the following descriptions of mystical consciousness by O'Brien seem applicable to the experiences in Dickey's poems:

The manner of confrontation is immediate, direct.

It can be intuitive. . .

Or it may be insight, the unmediated perception of a higher coherence within the materials of one's more or less usual knowledge.

Or it may work entirely the other way around. It may be a 'received knowledge' in which the subject is wholly passive--an experienced invasion of the ultimate. . .<sup>26</sup>

These descriptions best apply in Dickey's poetry to the confrontation with some aspect of the physical world such as light, the current of a river, and so forth. Nonetheless, poems centering on other experiences also share these qualities as will be demonstrated in the analysis in Chapters V and VI of six representative poems from Poems 1957-1967. Chapter V will discuss the presentational immediacy of three poems. Chapter VII discusses three other poems which in addition to the devices found in the other three poems has the element of mystical experience.

Each poem will be examined showing how its diction, simple images, and figures of speech function in achieving presentational immediacy.

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<sup>26</sup>O'Brien, p. 6.

The poems have been selected from among the many which the writer of this thesis particularly enjoys reading and has read and re-read with pleasure and increased insight because of their presentational immediacy. They are selected from all five collections compiled in Poems 1957-1967.

Since a discussion of the development in Dickey's poetry does not seem relevant to the objective of the thesis, no attempt will be made to present the six poems in chronological order. Instead, they will be sequenced according to relatedness of subject matter.

## CHAPTER V

In this chapter and in Chapter VI, I will endeavor to show how James Dickey achieves a verbal equivalent of an intense experience using an approach or technique which he terms "presentational immediacy." Following a summary of the subject matter of each poem will be a study of the diction and imagery, meant to provide an understanding of how presentational immediacy is achieved. We must note at this point that the word "image" will be used in the sense suggested by Stephen Minot--"a unit of sense experience regardless of whether it is employed literally, figuratively, or symbolically."<sup>27</sup>

The expression "the speaker" will be used in referring to the main--and usually, only--individual in the poem, except in cases where his occupation may be used as a label, as in "The Firebombing" where the speaker is an ex-pilot and is thus referred to as "the ex-pilot" throughout the discussion of this poem in the thesis.

The first group of poems chosen for consideration involves confrontations which are different from the quasi-mystical experiences to be presented in Chapter VI. These confrontations are, nonetheless, just as forceful and intense and the individual in the poem is just as keenly involved in the experience as in the rituals of Chapter VI. Instead of a confrontation with nature, the speaker may confront an idea, an attitude, a past event and its significance, or perhaps some singular aspect of reality. For example, "The Firebombing" deals with guilt; "At Darien Bridge" with the idea of miracles out of hopelessness; "On the Coosawattee"

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<sup>27</sup>Stephen Minot, Three Genres The Writing of Fiction, Poetry, and Drama, p. 152.



with a relationship with nature. Through effective handling of diction and imagery the experiences are made presentationally immediate.

Involved in the confrontation of these experiences is a constant juxtaposition of past and present and of the inner and outer states of the speaker as he strives to explore all aspects of the experience. In writing about the speaker's flow of thoughts as revealed in the poem Dickey points out that he aims that there should be "no clear-cut distinction between what was actually happening and what was happening in the mind" for he wishes to effect a fusion of the inner and outer life that would create "a single impression."<sup>28</sup> This objective is accomplished especially in "The Firebombing." Two other features which make the presentation of the poems' experiences immediate are the images depicting the speaker's acute consciousness of light and motion and those which involve an element of paradox.

In this chapter, as in Chapter VI, the analysis of the diction and imagery is preceded by a summarizing discussion of the subject matter and meaning of the poem.

#### "At Darien Bridge"\*

Revisiting a bridge on the seacoast the speaker reminisces about how as a child he had watched convicts build the now abandoned and ruined bridge. At that time he noted what proved for him a singular and unexpected event:

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<sup>28</sup>Dickey, Babel to Byzantium, p. 287.

\*All poems discussed in the thesis are presented in the Appendix in the order in which they are discussed.

I thought I saw the still sun  
Strike the side of a hammer in flight  
And from it a sea bird be born  
To take off over the marshes. (ll. 9-12)

These four lines with their images of sight, sound and motion result in a very graphic description of the speaker's view of a bird taking off in flight, seen from the perspective of the upraised hammer of a convict, the hammer brightly reflecting the rays of the sun.

There is a shift to the present as now again at the scene of that event, the speaker wishes he could see another such bird. To him the springing forth of the bird, as it were from the flashing metal of the hammer, symbolizes the freedom the convicts longed for as they plied away at their forced labor. He wishes for another such miracle, the birth of a bird springing perhaps from the scratched wedding band on his finger. Apparently the wedding band symbolizes his own lack of freedom-- he is bound to his wife and possibly a family, just as surely as the convicts were bound in their ankle chains to their labor. If the sun's striking the hammer (the tool used by the convicts in their forced labor) produced freedom, perhaps if it strikes the wedding band it would once more be productive of some sort of freedom.

Thus the last eight lines of the poem present the view which the speaker has gained from the experience: as the bird's flight occurred against the background of the convicts working near the grey salt water-- itself perhaps a symbol or mirror of their despair--so a hopeless situation may be productive of a life-giving miracle.

Here is simple diction and direct narrative statement. The reader is put into the poem's experience by the truthful simplicity of this

narrative. In the first eight lines the words "built," "chains," "smites," "break," and "drive," all help to convey an impression of the unrelenting drudgery of the daily life of the convicts. The verbs of the poem are mainly active ones; yet they do not detract from the serenity of the reminiscence: strike, take off, climbs, cuts, spring, etc. In each case they serve to give the recalled event immediacy for they effect a graphic recapturing of the recalled event.

As a result, the imagery of the poem is on a whole comprised of active images of sight, sound and motion. They are active in the sense that in each case the impression given is one of an active process rather than a static or passive state. They make the experience so vivid that the reader is able to "experience," to recapture the sense impressions and the emotions experienced by the speaker.

A good example of this is found in the four lines quoted above which include visual, aural, and kinetic images which give a vivid and graphic view of the recalled event. We see the sunlight beaming strongly on the hammer as it is brought up through the air by the convict's hand, and from the gleaming metal of this sun-struck hammer, a bird soar across the grasses. The verb "take off" expresses the freedom and power of the bird whose movement is self-determined and purposeful and a sharp contrast to the image of the chained ankles of the convicts, as it were planted in water as "they were all working all day/ To drive the pilings down."  
(11. 3, 4, 7, 8)

These images are not only literal but also figurative. The sun is personified as perhaps a workman striking the hammer even as the convicts "smite the land and break it down to salt." (11. 4, 5)

So the sun is an image of power.

The upraised hammer is compared by metaphor to a bird in flight. This image is especially effective when one considers that, as a result of its brief link with the powerful sun, the flying hammer produces a genuine bird of flight--one which has both the freedom and the power to "Take off over the marshes"--unlike the hammer whose range of flight is limited by the hand and arm of the chained prisoner.

The element of movement or action is evident in lines 9 and 10 where a paradox occurs in an image involving an acute observation of light--the still sun striking the upraised hammer.

I thought I saw the still sun  
Strike the side of a hammer in flight.

This paradoxical image is a result of his observing sunlight sharply reflected off the hammer and of his linking this effect with the (seemingly) stationary sun overhead. The heightened consciousness of the child gives this event its singularity and forcefulness.

Another image in keeping with the active though serene atmosphere of the poem is one in which the word "gray," is substituted for "gray hair" by metonymy of the adjunct:

As the gray climbs the side of my head  
And cuts my brain off from the world, (ll. 13, 14)

Thus the process of aging is described using an image of the natural upward progression of the gray color at the sides of the head. The use of the verb 'climbs' is one more example of the 'activeness' of the images of this poem. The image of the climbing gray hair seems to depict a process which is relentless and perhaps even a bit insidious, for this gray "cuts his brain off from the world." Getting old, he is no longer

able to see and to appreciate the world in the fullness with which he experienced it as a child.

In the first twelve lines we see an imaginative child to whom the sea seemed as if built by convicts (ll. 1, 2) and who, through his creative imagination ("I thought I saw," l. 9), witnesses the miraculous 'birth' of the sea bird.

Juxtaposed against past childhood with its freshness of outlook and faith in the world is the present with its loss of these qualities and with its longing ("I walk and wish;" I stand. . . and long," ll. 15, 21, 24) for something of the past--freedom, or escape through death or for at least a return of the simple childlike belief which is now being cut off by incipient old age. The verb "cuts off" gives an impression of the finality of the aging process which forever bars him from the freedom of childhood and all it entailed.

"At Darien Bridge" gains its immediacy from the quiet, confident, personal authority of the speaker in retelling and reflecting on the event. Through effective diction and imagery the reader is able to sense the despair of the chained work gang; he is also able to perceive the longing of the speaker, but more still, his need to recapture the security of lost faith.

### "The Firebombing"

In this poem there is a comparison between the past with its sense of power and individual satisfaction and the present with its "undistinguished reality" characterized by a meaningless routine of bills, dieting, property ownership and other middle-class suburban concerns. The

speaker recalls a firebombing mission in which a Japanese town was destroyed by his napalm missiles twenty years before. He assumes a critical distance from himself ("some technical-minded stranger with my hands/ Is sitting in a glass treasure hole of blue light.") and so comes to realize, astonishingly, that his only guilt is that he does not feel guilty for his wartime actions. He asserts, "My hat should crawl on my head/ In streetcars, thinking of it/ The fat on my body should pale."

But it doesn't. In fact, he sees the napalm raid as something aesthetic and as a drama in which he participated as supreme controller.

I still have charge--secret charge--  
Of the fire developed to cling  
To everything. . .

He has very keen powers of observation and his aesthetic sense of power is revealed in the descriptions he gives. He calls the cockpit of his plane "a glass treasure house of blue light;" he observes that he sails "artistically over" the doomed town; he notices that the napalm-and-gasoline-filled tanks are "tear-drop-shaped;" he follows the movement of the fire as it "shuttles from pond to pond," "till hundreds flash with one death."

It is the flash of the fire that captivates him. He does not picture the misery which his firebombs are causing in the town. (Notice the metaphor in which he equates the death of the enemy children with "ponds shutter-flashing.") Death to him in this case is of interest only in terms of the spectacle of color and light it provides for his view. Yet he cannot dissociate the beauty of the fire from its destructive power: he calls it a "red, costly blast."

The past and present, his inner and outer states are effectively fused in the following lines where he links the flashing of the advancing fire with the flickering reflections of the mirrors of the bar where he is doing his reminiscing.

The death of children is ponds  
 Shutter-flashing; responding mirrors; it climbs  
 The terraces of hills  
 Smaller and smaller, a mote of red dust  
 At a hundred feet: . . .

He is not satisfied with just seeing the conflagration below. He also wants to view the low tables inside the houses "catch fire from the floor mats" and blaze up around the heads of the sleeping enemy. Even twenty years later he still hungers to see "what really happened."

He explicitly admits his aesthetic pleasure in the result of his firebombing raid:

One is cool and enthralled in the cockpit,  
 Turned blue by the power of beauty,  
 In a pale treasure-hole of soft light  
 Deep in aesthetic contemplation,  
 Seeing the ponds catch fire.

And this pleasure is not diminished in vividness over the years.

Still, the ex-pilot senses that he should feel guilt and not "this detachment,/ The honored aesthetic evil." He feels impelled to rid himself of the "greatest sense of power in one's life" by drinking and by starvation. Nevertheless his attempt at penance is not successful for he cannot really conceive the pain and suffering and destruction which his bombs inflicted on the enemy. He cannot really visualize the bombed townspeople with their "ears crackling off? Like powdery leaves," or children burned to ashes.

Thus the poem ends with his shrugging off any judgment of himself.

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

He realizes that his very constant need of being sentenced or of being absolved of his guilt is truly his absolution as well as his sentence.

In general, the diction of the poem is the basis of the presentational immediacy for it vividly portrays the intensity of the firebomber's involvement in his mission as well as his remembrance of it.

In his reminiscence he often attributes to inanimate objects his own intense involvement with his mission: The palm trees willingly leap into the flashlights (ll. 6, 7); the blades of the engines of his plane sigh "for the moment when the roofs will connect/ Their flames." (ll. ) This reveals the pilot's own intense interest in the effect of his firebomb on the town below. He is so wrapped up in what he considers the power and beauty of the fire that he imagines that his war machine also shares his interest.

In line 14 he observes that "a bulb is tricked on in the cockpit" of the plane. Here the choice of the word "tricked" seems meant to give the impression that the bulb was itself startled when it was switched on. It actually connotes the suddenness with which the pilot switched on the bulb.

A look at a selection of images from the poem will also show how immediacy is effected for they are a good index of the ex-pilot's intense involvement and represent a straining effort to mirror that involvement. As mentioned above, the pilot is very observant and keenly aware of all aspects of his surroundings. For example, the view of the



landscape below his plane is described as "enemy rivers/ Sliding off me like a snakeskin." Such an image at first glance would seem to give a distorted idea of the action it is intended to make graphic--the view of a landscape beneath a moving plane. But considering the position of the pilot in his plane, itself a long, rounded body, we can see how the view of the landscape below might yield the impression that the landscape is "sliding off" him.

Further on in the poem another view of the landscape is provided.

Rivers circling behind me around  
Come to the fore, and bring  
A town with everyone darkened

Here again is an instance of his attributing the result of his own action--here maneuvering his aircraft--to a non-human object. The rivers are personified as if following and preceding him and finally directing him to the darkened town. The phrase "town with everyone darkened" is effective in connotating the all-inclusiveness of the darkness which covers the town of sleeping people. No lights have been left on. It is even more effective when contrasted with the brilliant spectacle which will result from his 'lighting' the town with his firebombs.

The effect of the liquor he is most likely drinking is seen in the following lines in which, after a brief shift to the present to comment on his lack of information about the outcome of the firebombing--despite the passage of time--he resumes his description of his airplane's movement.

Twenty years in the suburbs have not shown me  
which ones were hit and which not.  
Haul on the wheel racking slowly  
The aircraft blackly around

In a dark dream that that is  
That is like flying inside someone's head

Think of this think of this

An idea of his disconnected thought as he gropes for the right expression is seen in lines 5 to 7 with the repetition, "that that is/ That is like. . ."

His description of how he maneuvers the aircraft reveals his sense of power and control over his machine. "Haul" implies his pulling at the wheel, while "racking slowly" implies a steady, sure control of the machine. The use of "blackly" to modify the action of turning the plane reinforces an impression of the blackness which surrounds the aircraft in the dark night sky. The metaphor "in a dark dream" describing his slow steady control of the plane connotes a feeling of unreality. The simile used in lines 5 and 6 operates to make more concrete this feeling of unreality: "like flying inside someone's head."

Once the firebombs are dropped on the sleeping town the fires provide a brilliant spectacle for the pilot circling above. The image of "ponds/ Shutter-flashing," portraying the movement of the fire as it moves from one pond to the next, reveals the aesthetic pleasure which the pilot experiences as he views the scene of the bombed town. He sees the town as if from the perspective of a photographer whose camera emits constant, rapid flashes as he takes a series of 'action' shots.

In this poem we have again a preoccupation with the movement of light. The ex-pilot describes the flashing, flickering flames in such a way that it is made vivid for the reader.

Reflections of houses catch;  
Fire shuttles from pond to pond  
In every direction, till hundreds flash with one death.

In this case the fire is compared by metaphor to a train or other vehicle of travel used to traverse back and forth over a short route.

So throughout the poem we follow the mind of the ex-pilot as he recreates the scenes of the firebombing and as he shifts to a consciousness of his present suburban life. Presentational immediacy in "The Firebombing" is fully effective in having the reader experience what the pilot saw and sees as he makes this shift from recollecting and recapturing the fascinating experience of the past to being conscious of the present. This is made possible by the vivid imagery with which the poem's lines are packed.

#### "On the Coosawattee"

One of the most striking characteristics of Dickey's poetry is the intense reactions to light. There is frequent reference to moonlight and sunlight and the effects of their reflection. In "The Lifeguard" the moonlight shining on water is called the "skin of the sky." In "Walking on Water" the sunlit water of the bay is called "the shining topsoil of the bay" and "the mirror carpet." In "The Performance" the sunlight on water is described as follows: "the sun poured up from the sea," giving an impression of a flood of light being reflected up and off the water. In "The Jewel" the light cast by the speaker's flashlight is referred to as "a third drifting leg." This example also points to a second characteristic of the imagery in Dickey's poetry--the preoccupation with light is often linked with a consciousness of movement.

In "Slave Quarters" the boxing rings are called "rings of battling light." Thus is depicted the reflection of light off the bodies of the battling boxers in the ring. It connotes both the motion of the boxers as they maneuver around the boxing enclosure, and the changing reflected light as it is altered by the movement of the fighters.

This aspect of the poetry, already treated partly in the discussions of "The Firebombing" and "At Darien Bridge " and which will be discussed further with "Inside the River" in Chapter VI, accounts for a major part of the imagery and provides much of the immediacy in tone of many other poems. This takes many forms: the glint of metal in sunlight, sunlight falling through trees, the blaze of fire, and so forth. All these views of light take on special significance for the speaker as he seeks to recreate the sensory experience with images which give the experience immediacy. Part I of "On the Coosawattee" provides a fine example of the involved reaction to light.

This long poem in three parts is a description of a canoe trip down the river (the Coosawattee). Part I, "By Canoe Through the Fir Forest," records the portion of the journey which took the two men through a beautiful fir forest where the speaker is intensely attracted by the patterns of sunlight cast by the trees onto the water. In Part II, "Below Ellijay," a heightened response to the beautiful scenery, is sharply interrupted as the canoe passes through waters which have been polluted by the refuse thrown into the river by the town's poultry-processing plant. In Part III, "The Inundation," the journey ends in the rapids where their canoe is destroyed and the men barely escape with their lives.

Again in this poem we have simple diction and syntax with only an occasional shift in the normal ordering of the words. It is on the images of light that the immediacy of the poem depends primarily.

Lines 10 and 11 give a vivid portrayal of the patterns cast by the sunlight coming through the fir trees and onto the surface of the river: "The nerves in the patches of tree-light/ On the ripples. . . ." The image of the branches as nerves brings to mind an irregular branching design. The phrase "patches of tree-light" gives the impression that the tree itself is producing the light which is in fact only 'trapped' between its branches. This type of analogy, a frequent one in Dickey's poems as pointed out in the treatment of "The Firebombing," attributes the cause to the effect.

Line 12 compares the tree branches to angel wings by use of simile. The analogy is carried through the next two lines where the leaves of the trees are depicted as feathers. We get a picture of the tree branches shaking in the wind, each leaf touched by sunlight and momentarily reflecting the rays as they (the leaves) move about:

The nerves in the patches of tree-light  
On the ripples can feel no death,  
But shake like the wings of angels

With light hard-pressed to keep up  
Though it is in place on each feather. (ll. 10-14)

The wings-and-feather analogy recurs again in lines 20, 21 and 30. In lines 20 to 21 the shadow of the trees on the water is described as "glittering, surfacing wingbeats/ Cast from above." Here again both the vision of sunlight on the water (glittering) and the motion of the

shaking branches (surfacing) are conveyed. In line 30, "the wing-balancing floor," is an image of the tree branches cast on the bottom of the boat.

In another image for light coming through the trees, "fretted light," in line 34, the adjective emphasizes both the agitated shadows cast by the shaking trees and the interlacing or pierced pattern made by light coming through the tree branches.

All these images of the effect of the sunlight cast on the trees and river reveal the keen observation of the speaker. But it is in the last three paragraphs of Part I that his intense reaction to the light is depicted. He notes the path of sunlight as it falls on the hair of the man in front of him, then on the bottom of the boat, before it is cast back on the speaker, on one of his eyes, and into his mouth where he tastes it. (ll. 28-34) The sight of the falling light is a deep and thrilling experience for him. The fretted light which is cast by the trees into his mouth is compared by simile to a word he can "feed on forever." (ll. 34-36)

The speaker is conscious of their controlled muscular tension as he and his companion row their canoe. In describing this an element of paradox is seen in lines 25 and 26: "Our rowing muscles, our wings,/ Are still and tremble. . . ." This image expresses a consciousness of movement, suspended temporarily and then initiated once more. As such it is another example of his keen powers of observation as revealed in his reaction to the patterns of light. A look at a selection of other uses of imagery will further point out how Dickey makes the poem's experience vivid and immediate.

As in his other poems Dickey's use of metaphor and simile and other figures of speech is often fresh, original, and vivid. Part I of "On the Coosawattee" is a good example of this beginning in the very first line with the image of the "slain tons of needles." The needles are personified to depict their lifelessness, for they have fallen off the trees on the river bank, even as the slain soldier falls in battle. In contrast to the "slain" needles on the banks of the river are the "living" ones on the trees through which the sunlight falls in lines 33 and 34.

The simile in lines 2 and 3, "on something like time and dark knowledge that cannot be told" is a good one, for it presents an analogy between the passage of time and the flow of the river. It also presents an analogy between the obscurity of some knowledge and the darkness of the water as a result of its great depth which cannot be "told" or fathomed.

Lines 7 to 9 personify the trees graphically. The trees "climb from the edge of the water/ . . . turn on the banks . . . stand growing."

In Part II, "Below Ellijay," the beautiful response to nature of Part I is interrupted. In stanza 1 the river is described as "a green/ Idling freeway," a change in color of the water where earlier the stones on the river bed were readily visible. The metaphor is an effective one in that it connotes the movement (slow and idling) as well as the size (wide or broad) and use of the river as a means of transportation.

Lines 4 to 7 have vivid visual images: stores backed down red clay banks, "blue flash of bottleglass," "rippled tin heat haze of sheds/ Where country mechanics were frying." All these are commonplace,

unattractive images which are continued through the next two stanzas:

The canoe riders hear the bridge clatter as they pass under it; the wind has died in the tool sheds"--there is no longer the fresh breeze shaking the trees as in Part I; the river is choked with refuse, the logs in it are "bedraggled in plumage," instead of the smooth stones on the river bottom of Part I, there are boulders covered with feathers, each log "becoming a lewd, setting hen."

All this is a description of the pollution caused by the refuse thrown into the river by the town's poultry-processing plant. The river is leaden with the floating plumage and cut-off chicken heads. The slowing down of the river as a result of all this refuse is metaphorically described as a "sick, buried wind." (l. 24)

Very vivid is the description of the floating "drawn heads" of the chickens as they bob up and down on the water's surface:

Following, dipping, returning,  
Turning frankly round to eye us,  
To eye something else, to eye  
Us again-- (ll. 28-31)

The vision of the river is so degrading that the men in the boat believe themselves "doomed/ And the planet corrupted forever." (st. 5) In Part I the river, as was noted above, was so clear that they could see the round stones turning on the river bottom. Now in Part II, the stones have "turned to pullets." They, like the logs in line 19, are covered with feathers and so are metaphorically compared to the birds from which the feathers were plucked.

Finally, they are free of the polluted waters:



. . . we felt  
 The quickening pulse of the rapids  
 And entered upon it like men  
 Who sense that the world can be cleansed (st. 7)

The choice of the phrase, "quickenning pulse" is a good one. It can be related to the fact that in the polluted waters all was dead or dying while in the fresh rapids all is "quick," alive. The phrase is also related to the speeding up of pace in the flow of the river, since it is no longer impeded by the refuse of Part II, as well as the elation felt by the men in the canoe.

In Part III, "The Inundation," the men are faced with a terrible struggle for their lives as their canoe enters the violent, churning rapids. Here the verbs work to make their plight vivid for the reader: they cling to a boulder and fight with their canoe which has flung them into the rapids and filled with "a ton of mountain water," swinging and bearing down upon them, threatening to pin them to the large boulder. After their canoe "leapt and fell/ Into the afterfall" the two men whirled themselves away into calm water once more. In each case the verb serves to intensify a sense of their danger.

Another feature of this part of the poem which helps to make the experience of the men vivid is the recurring references to the rushing water. In line 7 is an effective metaphor for the churning waters as it dashes against the boulder. The boulder is said to be "boiled with white," effectively portraying the white foam of the violent rapids. The choice of the word "ton" in the image "a ton of mountain water" (l. 12) is effective in connotating the force of the water which floods the canoe. Another view of the water dashing against the boulder is

given in lines 13 and 14: "the flying cloud/ Of foam." The word "cloud" effectively depicts the white color of the foaming rapids and "flying" its relentless movement. Thus is reinforced an estimate of the forcefulness of the rushing waters.

Finally, when the wild river calms down, "its white water lapses green" (l. 41). Thus the word green, in contrast to the violent white, signifies calm, a usage found in other lines of the poem. In line 3 it is a "green, skinny lake" which the speaker visualizes in his sleep and in line 38, a "green and silver cloud" above which stands Lucas Gentry, the boy who saved their lives by waking them from their "profoundest sleep" as they lay on the shore, exhausted from their ordeal with the rapids.

Thus the poem "On the Coosawattee" gives the reader a vivid recreation of the trip on the river and through the rich accumulation of images stimulates a recapturing of the emotions of sheer delight (Part I), disgust (Part II), and relieved elation (Part III) which the speaker experiences.

## CHAPTER VI

Many of Dickey's poems which describe a confrontation with a force or element outside of the individual do so in a way that the reader is made aware of the steps necessary to the achievement of such an experience. The following excerpt from "In A Child's Night"\* is a good expression of the idea of relinquishing one's self in order to experience a new dimension of consciousness.

You must be made for it,  
And tune your quiet body like a fish  
To the stars of the Milky Way

To pass into the star-sea, into sleep.  
By means of the heart of the current,  
The holy secret of flowing. (st. 2 and 3)

Here is simple diction used as simple declarative and producing a quiet, serene mood. The necessity of ritual preparation is declared in the fact that one must be "made for it" and "tune" one's "quiet body" for the experience. The choice of the word "tune" implies a desire to come into harmony with another level of consciousness, here called sleep. The modifier "quiet" connotes a struggle-free readiness for the experience.

The simile "like a fish" brings to mind a flowing gracefulness, and further emphasizes an attitude of quiet submission.

The metaphor "star-sea" comparing the star-studded Milky Way Galaxy with a sea is effective because it enhances the idea of a flowing, rhythmic, tuning introduced with the reference to fish in line 2. The water image is continued in lines 5 and 6 "current" and "flowing."

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\*In Helmets, but not included in Poems 1957-1967.

These lines provide an example of what the individual must do in order to move from one level of consciousness to another. This example, of course, refers to falling asleep and not to a mystical or quasi-mystical experience. A more definite ritual and one which is more mystical in approach is presented in the first of the three poems to be described in this section, "The Vegetable King."

In the poems where the speaker seeks confrontation or conjunction with some aspect of the physical world, he reaches beyond the limits of ordinary experience and of one's consciousness of it, to arrive at an intuitive knowledge of the elemental forces of the physical world. As with the genuine mystical experience, this is usually accomplished by a ritual of some sort, whether acted out physically or only mentally.

The experiences of the poems are mystical in approach for they are apparently based on the assumption that the individual may acquire direct and intuitive knowledge and power as a result of communion with something outside of himself and outside of the range of ordinary experience. The pursuit of this experience, the ritual act, is immediate, direct. The individual in the poem is involved in an acutely concentrated effort. In some poems we are not given a clear representation of the result of the experience. Indeed it appears that the experience itself is the object. Then, too, the goal of the experience is often simply a feeling of "oneness" with a force or element outside of the self.

In the three poems to be discussed in this chapter, "The Vegetable King," "Inside the River," and "The Flash," the images are also based on a consciousness of light and movement and an element of paradox which makes the experiences of the poems immediate. In addition, an element

of mysticism in the nature of these experiences helps to accentuate this immediacy.

"The Vegetable King"

In his early work, especially in Into the Stone, Dickey made extensive use of myth. "The Vegetable King" exhibits one such usage. The poem tells of how one night each April the speaker leaves his house and goes to spend the night outside in his sleeping bag.

In stanza 6 he identifies with the cycle of rebirth initiated in the spring and with the Fisher King of the folk myths concerning the cycle of the seasons. Note the references to the "drowned god" and the "dreame of sun" in line 30. The drowned god, the Fisher King, was believed to arise from the river in the spring, bringing new life to the plant world and, by extension, to the animal world and the human world.

This theme is continued in stanzas 7 and 8 with a description of the life-out-of-death ritual by which the drowned god emerges from the river (ll. 36-38), bringing fertility evidenced by the "flowers on the mantle-piece" of line 38.

The sun was also a symbol of fertility and regeneration in the folk myths since its life-giving rays were necessary for the growth of plant life. Also hinted at in the title of the poem with the word "vegetable" and in the poem itself with the references to flowers (ll. 31-32, 38, 53), is the Greek myth of Persephone, the maiden whose passing from the underworld brought the return of spring and the flowers, and of Adonis who also arose from the world of the dead in the spring. Demeter, the mother of Persephone and the Greek goddess of agriculture, showed her

pleasure at the return of her daughter by initiating the rebirth of plant life. Nevertheless, the major imagery of the poem is based on the drowned-god myth, for there are frequent references to river and water (ll. 34, 36, 51, 59).

The last seven stanzas depict the reluctance of the man to give up his ritual experience so as to resume daily routine:

I would not think to move,  
Nor cry, "I live" just yet, (ll. 46, 47)

Morning has come and he must begin his usual existence even as the reborn god must again carry on a life of regenerative acts.

The last two stanzas are apparently addressed to his wife who has breakfast ready, waiting for him. She and the rest of the family have remained in the wintry, "cold, thin house" and so have not shared his rebirth experience. Nonetheless they do benefit from his rebirth, and, as he returns to the house, he bears "magnificent pardon" for the crime of his sacrificial death.

What is his rebirth experience? He identifies with the archetypal element revealed in the revitalization of the outdoor world in the spring. As a result, he is made aware of and gains a new supply of spiritual power to sustain him in carrying on his daily life with renewed vigor. As a result of his ritual he is stirred to the depth of his being and there is aroused in him a power akin to the force which renews the plant life in the spring. As the things of the plant world have a life power within them which is dormant during the winter months, so has he in his innermost self a vitality which needs to be revived, or recharged, periodically. He sees to this on one night each April.

As mentioned earlier, a frequently recurring feature of Dickey's poetry is the fascination with light, and especially light in motion. This is often the basis of much of the poem's imagery as for example, Part I of "On the Coosawattee" which was discussed in Chapter V. This quality is also seen in the following lines from "The Vegetable King" which shows the speaker's awareness of the light cast from the windows onto the grass outside.

I leave the house, which leaves  
Its window-light on the ground  
In gold frames picturing grass, (ll. 9-11)

This image of "gold frames picturing grass" is an effective one because the reader can thus visualize the golden squares of light on the grass outside the window. They have this square shape, of course, because of the shape of the window panes.

The speaker is aware of moving light even when he cannot see it. Notice the reference in line 48 to "the twinkling horsehair of my head," an image which portrays both the movement of light and the color and texture (thick brown strands) of his hair.

Another frequent feature of many of Dickey's images is an element of paradox. These also reveal the heightened consciousness of the person in the poem. Lines 15 and 16 provide an example of this.

As a part of his ritual the speaker must be sure to remember "to feel/ The still earth turn" his house around the sun. This involves two levels of awareness: in one he is conscious of the stationary ground upon which he lies; in the other he is conscious of its movement around the life-giving sun.

But why should he find this awareness a necessary part of his ritual? His experience involves his seeking to identify with the invisible forces which govern the physical world, specifically, with the process of regeneration evidenced in the spring. Thus it is appropriate that he should seek to be aware of the rotation of the earth which would bring the return of the fertility-yielding sun.

The poem uses a wealth of other graphic images and figures of speech which help to make the setting vivid and the experience real. Several of these show an awareness of color as well as light, as presented earlier above. An example of this is in line 2, "the fresh paint of the door." The door image was first introduced in lines 2 and 3, where the setting of the sun is compared by metaphor to a closing action.

"The new green dark" (l. 3) gives a somewhat mysterious atmosphere as if all outdoors is pervaded by the dark greenery. The color green appears again in another image which adds to the mysterious tone of the poem--"the slant, green, mummied light" of dawn. A closer look at these two images, which use the color green, will show how the presentation is made immediate by the undertones of meaning they convey. The fact that the green dark is new (ostensibly because of the setting sun) is related to the rebirth theme in which green is a symbol of renewal in the plant world. As morning arrives the light is "mummied," probably a reference to the drowned god who is brought up from the river in the spring with the return of the sun in all its power.

So the contrast between the green dark of the dusk and the slant, green light of dawn is a vehicle of the meaning of the poem, as well as a means of presenting the experience vividly for the reader.



It might be pointed out that such allusiveness might hinder the immediacy of the poem for the reader unacquainted with the myths and this is probably true to a certain extent. However, because the imagery is effective in presenting the experience vividly, even without a knowledge of the background of the allusions, the reader is yet able to 'tune in' to the serene and beautiful atmosphere of the poem and to somehow identify with the speaker in his desire to identify with the physical world and its source of vitality. Also, with the exception of "Sleeping Out at Easter," which deals with the same ritual theme, Dickey generally avoids allusions and strives for the simple, direct experience. The other five poems to be discussed below will show how this is true.

This analysis of a poem emphasize the mystical element above all others. Immediacy is mentioned once in a negative way.

NOTE: I feel that the immediacy of the poem is effected by the fact that the quasi-mystical experience is made vivid for the reader.

### "Inside the River"

This poem prescribes a ritual for a quasi-mystical experience. It provides a series of instructions on yielding to the current, the outer, visible evidence of vitality and motion of a river. The instruction is to break the surface and step down into the water, finding an anchor on a root so as to stay in contact with the flowing motion of the current, then finally letting go and allowing the current to have full control.

The last two lines apparently refer to the withdrawal from the water--"Rise/ Draw breath." The recommendation to "Sing" implies the elation one would feel after the experience and "See no one," a reluctance to participate again too suddenly in the everyday world.

The poem exhibits one characteristic of contemporary poetry--a predilection toward the plain statement, a statement which gains its forcefulness from its very simplicity and directness. The first seven lines of the poem, for example, are made up of short, concise groups of words:

Dark, deeply. A red.  
 All levels moving  
 A given surface.  
 Break this. Step down.  
 Follow your right  
 Foot nakedly in  
 To another body.

The use of predominantly monosyllabic words in small segments gives the lines a cadence which is somewhat hypnotic in its measured pace. This is appropriate, of course, since flowing water--which moves in short wave-like breaks--is hypnotic and soothing to the person who is in the water.

There are few figures of speech in "Inside the River;" however, an effective use of simile for the river is found in lines 8 to 11:

Put on the river  
 Like a fleeing coat,  
 A garment of motion,  
 Tremendous, immortal.

The image, "a fleeing coat" and "garment of motion," aptly portrays the surging elusiveness of a flowing body of water as a person enters it. Earlier, in lines 6 and 7, entering the water is described as going into "another body." The speaker sees the river as a living, immortal organism with which he aspires to be united. An alternate interpretation, is that "another body" refers to the body of the speaker as it will be transformed by his experience. This view is supported by the counsel in lines 13 and 14 to "Let flowing create/ A new inner being."

The experience is controlled, in terms of sensation. Instruction is given to gain a foothold on a root on the bed of the river so that this "new, inner being might be created as a result of giving in to the sensation of the flowing current. The importance of sensation to the experience is seen in lines 23 and 24 with the image of the "freed hair floating/ Out of your brain" (rather than from "your hair roots"), used to connote the sensation of the hair as it flows with the stream. This image shows a heightened awareness which is itself due to the stimulation of the senses. The very next two lines ("Wait for a coming/ And swimming idea") show, in the use of the second of the two verbs as modifier, how caught up the speaker is by the sensation of the river's motion. By personifying the idea he implies that the idea itself is in motion, vital as is the current of the river which stimulates the coming of the idea.

The individual need only wait now, passively surrendering himself to the surging water which will cause him to "loom like a ghost"--to be effortlessly lifted up, giving a sensation similar to flying ("flying feeling").

Live like the dead  
 In their flying feeling.  
 Loom as a ghost  
 When life pours through it. (ll. 27-30)

In lines 33 to 37 the sand in the water which has been washed down from the river banks is compared to "dust/ In a holy hallway." This image reveals the acute perception of the speaker and also conveys something of the emotional effect the sight of the floating grains has on him--a feeling of awe such as one might have in a church.

Much of the imagery of "Inside the River" is founded on adjectives or participles which function to depict action or movement. A look at some of these modifiers will help to show how the presentation of the poem's experience is effectively immediate.

These adjectives serve mostly to depict the surge of the current and its effect on the one in the water. One example of this touched on earlier, "fleeing coat," describes both the enfolding effect as the body is surrounded by the water and its constant flowing motion. Also, the recommendation to "Live like the dead/ In their flying feeling" depicts the anti-gravity, upward motion of the body when in water.

In line 21 the effect of the river's motion is again portrayed with the image "one wandering step." This depicts the inability to fully control or direct one's steps in the water.

Lines 45 and 46 direct, "Enter the sea/ Like a winding wind," yielding so fully to the current that its winding properties are taken on by the body. The reference to wind is appropriate since, as in the case of the current, the effects of the wind are visible as well as felt, but the wind itself is not visible.

All these images serve to present with sensory vividness the quasi-mystical experience which the speaker recommends. The reader is able to experience the matter of the poem. Thus it is presentationally immediate.

### "The Flash"

This poem deals with preparation for an encounter with a force or power "buried deep and free/ In the country." (11.1, 2). The force or power takes the form of a striking flash.

As with any mystical experience, there is a certain amount of preparation necessary for the encounter. It requires stopping whatever one is doing; it is "worth stopping the car," and getting out, standing alone (ll. 10, 11). The stance described in lines 12 and 13, "arranging the body/ For light to score off you," implies an attitude of being ready, of being fully receptive to the stirrings of an extraordinary consciousness. "For light to score off you" yields a dramatic metaphorical image of the confrontation with the flash--an event which is not recorded since it is "beyond speech." The poem deals with preparation for experiencing the flash and with one's response to it and not with the actual event.

The poem employs simple statement in three sentences with a minimum of punctuation and little use of imagery and figures of speech.

In "The Flash" Dickey uses his "split line" technique, a technique first used by him in Buckdancer's Choice, the volume which precedes the collection from which "The Flash" is taken (Falling). It involves putting two or more short lines together with spaces between the words to take the place of punctuation. In the case of the poem under consideration, this spacing, coming as it does in conjunction with extensive alliteration, tends to slow down the lines and emphasizes the tension of the waiting period.

The image of the swarming air in line 6 helps build up a momentum in expectancy for the actual confrontation, the reaching of the light mentioned in stanza 3. There is a sense of paradox in the contrast between "swarms" and "waits," implying both agitation and some degree of suspended animation. The tension hereby created gives an idea of the speaker's

attitude of expectancy since he attributes to the swarming air his own waiting stance.

The third stanza has an interesting image of the physical effect which will be the result of the flash, called "day-lightning."

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

Reading the first and third lines in succession presents no difficulty as far as meaning is concerned. But the interjection of the second line certainly does present some difficulty at first. A possible interpretation of this second line when linked with the other two is found in considering each object, a hoe blade, a buckle (perhaps a belt buckle), and bifocal lens, as a reflector of the day-lightning. The blade and the buckle are metal, and the bifocal lenses are glass; thus each would reflect light. This reflected light would eventually "reach" the individual waiting for the flash-like encounter.

As he waits for the encounter he is keenly aware of the three objects and they take on a singular aspect in his heightened consciousness. This is especially noteworthy since the flash will apparently not be something visible (cf. lines 3 and 4, "There is never anything/ It could be. . ."), but will be something apprehended with a level of consciousness distinct from the normal everyday consciousness. In that case, then, his consciousness of the reflecting objects is an indication of the heightened mental state of the speaker.

The combination of alliterative b's with compound words in the last stanza serves to intensify the idea of the "answer" given in reply to the flash-like event:

. . . and send  
Across the what the broad silent  
Blue valley, your long-awaited,  
Blinding, blood-brotherly  
Beyond-speach answer.

The alliteration also slows down the lines considerably thus effecting a felling of consummation as the poem cones to a close.

(This section is not so closely tied to mysticism but it could be more explicitly tied to other features of Dickey's poetry).

## CHAPTER VII

### Conclusion

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the desire to achieve presentational immediacy serves as a guiding motive in Dickey's choice of words. An understanding of this principle which runs throughout his poetry, is fundamental in seeking to understand and to experience the meaning and emotion of the poetry.

As has been pointed out by many literary commentators, the imagery is an important feature of Dickey's poetry. Dickey is himself explicit in pointing out that his aim is to effect a spontaneity and reader involvement which he terms "presentational immediacy."<sup>34</sup> He urges, "make it immediate. Put the reader and yourself in medias res, in the middle of the action."<sup>35</sup> This is, of course, a relatively difficult objective to accomplish and yet, as was shown in the study of the poems in Chapter III, the way Dickey handles the general diction and imagery of the poems does fulfill the objective of presenting an experience in a vivid and forceful manner. As quoted in Chapter IV above, Dickey aims at a "compulsiveness" in the presentation of the poem's experience which will cause the reader "to suspend literary judgment entirely and simply experience."

This desire for a compulsive presentation seems related to the fact that many of the poems present situations which move in the direction of mystical experience. We have discussed in Chapter IV the elements of

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<sup>34</sup>Dickey, Self-Interviews, p. 47.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 86.



mystical experience and the difficulty faced by the mystic in communicating his experience. This difficulty is essentially the same as the one faced by Dickey in his aim for presentational immediacy. Frequent in mystical writings are the use of oxymora and paradox and references to light in the description of the mystical experience. These features are also found in Dickey's poems which share elements of mysticism--the quasi-mystical poems, three of which were discussed in Chapter VI A. The imagery of the poems is frequently based on a consciousness of light and motion, an element of paradox, and at times, a transferral of the intense attitude of the speaker to an object.

We have shown in Chapter V that these characteristics are also found in the non-mystical poems. The presentational immediacy of these non-mystical poems involves the same elements as the experiences which are quasi-mystical, for in both there is a vivid re-creation of an intense experience--the experience is made presentationally immediate. And so Dickey's aim is achieved in his poetry.

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AT DARIEN BRIDGE

55

The sea here used to look  
As if many convicts had built it,

Standing deep in their ankle chains,  
Ankle-deep in the water, to smite

5 The land and break it down to salt.  
I was in this bog as a child

When they were all working all day  
To drive the pilings down.

10 I thought I saw the still sun  
Strike the side of a hammer in flight

And from it a sea bird be born  
To take off over the marshes.

As the gray climbs the side of my head  
And cuts my brain off from the world,

15 I walk and wish mainly for birds,  
For the one bird no one has looked for

To spring again from a flash  
Of metal, perhaps from the scratched

20 Wedding band on my ring finger.  
Recalling the chains of their feet,

I stand and look out over grasses  
At the bridge they built, long abandoned,

Breaking down into water at last,  
And long, like them, for freedom

25 Or death, or to believe again  
That they worked on the ocean to give it

The unchanging, hopeless look  
Out of which all miracles leap.

## The Firebombing

56

Denke daran, dass nach den grossen Zerstörungen  
Jedermann beweisen wird, dass er unschuldig war.

—Günter Eich

Or hast thou an arm like God?

—*The Book of Job*

Homeowners unite.

All families lie together, though some are burned alive.  
The others try to feel  
For them. Some can, it is often said.

Starve and take off

Twenty years in the suburbs, and the palm trees willingly leap  
Into the flashlights,  
And there is beneath them also  
A booted crackling of snailshells and coral sticks.  
There are cowl flaps and the tilt cross of propellers,  
The shovel-marked clouds' far sides against the moon,  
The enemy filling up the hills  
With ceremonial graves. At my somewhere among these,

Snap, a bulb is tricked on in the cockpit

And some technical-minded stranger with my hands  
Is sitting in a glass treasure-hole of blue light,  
Having potential fire under the undeodorized arms

Of his wings, on thin bomb-shackles,  
The "tear-drop-shaped" 300-gallon drop-tanks  
Filled with napalm and gasoline.

Thinking forward ten minutes  
From that, there is also the burst straight out  
Of the overcast into the moon; there is now  
The moon-metal-shine of propellers, the quarter-  
moonstone, aimed at the waves,  
Stopped on the cumulus.

There is then this re-entry  
Into cloud, for the engines to ponder their sound.  
In white dark the aircraft shrinks; Japan

Dilates around it like a thought.  
Coming out, the one who is here is over  
Land, passing over the all-night grainfields,  
In dark paint over  
The woods with one silver side,  
Rice-water calm at all levels  
Of the terraced hill.

Enemy rivers and trees

57

Sliding off me like snakeskin,  
Strips of vapor spooled from the wingtips  
Going invisible passing over on  
Over bridges roads for nightwalkers  
Sunday night in the enemy's country absolute  
Calm the moon's face coming slowly  
About

the inland sea  
Slants is woven with wire thread  
Levels out holds together like a quilt  
Off the starboard wing cloud flickers

At my glassed-off forehead the moon's now and again  
Uninterrupted face going forward  
Over the waves in a glide-path  
Lost into land.

Going: going with it

Combat booze by my side in a cratered canteen,  
Bourbon frighteningly mixed  
With GI pineapple juice,  
Dogs trembling under me for hundreds of miles, on many  
Islands, sleep-smelling that ungodly mixture  
Of napalm and high-octane fuel,  
Good bourbon and GI juice:

Rivers circling behind me around  
Come to the fore, and bring  
A town with everyone darkened.  
Five thousand people are sleeping off  
An all-day American drone.  
Twenty years in the suburbs have not shown me  
Which ones were hit and which not.

Haul on the wheel racking slowly  
The aircraft blackly around  
In a dark dream that that is  
That is like flying inside someone's head

Think of this think of this

I did not think of my house  
But think of my house now

Where the lawn mower rests on its laurels  
Where the diet exists

For my own good where I try to drop  
 Twenty years, eating figs in the pantry  
 Blinded by each and all  
 Of the eye-catching cans that gladly have caught my wife's eye  
 Until I cannot say  
 Where the screwdriver is where the children  
 Get off the bus where the new  
 Scoutmaster lives where the fly  
 Honed his front legs where the hammock folds  
 Its erotic daydreams where the Sunday  
 School text for the day has been put where the fire  
 Wood is where the payments  
 For everything under the sun  
 Pile peacefully up,

But in this half-paid-for pantry  
 Among the red lids that screw off  
 With an easy half-twist to the left  
 And the long drawers crammed with dim spoons,  
 I still have charge—secret charge—  
 Of the fire developed to cling  
 To everything: to golf carts and fingernail  
 Scissors as yet unborn tennis shoes  
 Grocery baskets toy fire engines  
 New Buicks stalled by the half-moon  
 Shining at midnight on crossroads green paint  
 Of jolly garden tools red Christmas ribbons:

Not atoms, these, but glue inspired  
 By love of country to burn,  
 The apotheosis of gelatin.

**Behind me having risen the Southern Cross  
 Set up by chaplains in the Ryukyus—**

Orion, Scorpio, the immortal silver  
 Like the myths of king-  
 insects at swarming time—  
 One mosquito, dead drunk  
 On altitude, drones on, far under the engines,  
 And bites between  
 The oxygen mask and the eye.  
 The enemy-colored skin of families  
 Determines to hold its color  
 In sleep, as my hand turns whiter  
 Than ever, clutching the toggle—  
 The ship shakes bucks  
 Fire hangs not yet fire  
 In the air above Beppu  
 For I am fulfilling





And shown the insides of houses, the low tables  
 Catch fire from the floor mats,  
 Blaze up in gas around their heads  
 Like a dream of suddenly growing

Too intense for war. Ah, under one's dark arms  
 Something strange-scented falls – when those on earth  
 Die, there is not even sound;  
 One is cool and enthralled in the cockpit,  
 Turned blue by the power of beauty,  
 In a pale treasure-hole of soft light  
 Deep in aesthetic contemplation,  
 Seeing the ponds catch fire  
 And cast it through ring after ring  
 Of land. O death in the middle  
 Of acres of inch-deep water! Useless

Firing small arms  
 Speckles from the river  
 Bank one ninety-millimeter  
 Misses far down wrong petals gone

It is this detachment,  
 The honored aesthetic evil,  
 The greatest sense of power in one's life,  
 That must be shed in bars, or by whatever  
 Means, by starvation  
 Visions in well-stocked pantries:  
 The moment when the moon sails in between  
 The tail-booms the rudders nod I swing  
 Over directly over the heart  
 The *heart* of the fire. A mosquito burns out on my cheek  
 With the cold of my face there are the eyes  
 In blue light bar light  
 All masked but them the moon  
 Crossing from left to right in the streams below  
 Oriental fish form quickly  
 In the chemical shine,  
 In their eyes one tiny seed

Of deranged, Old Testament light.

Letting go letting go  
 The plane rises gently dark forms  
 Glide off me long water pales  
 In safe zones a new cry enters  
 The voice box of chained family dogs

We buck    leap over something  
 Not there    settle back  
 Leave it    leave it clinging and crying  
 It consumes them in a hot  
 Body-flash, old age or menopause  
 Of children, clings and burns

   eating through  
 And when a reed mat catches fire  
 From me, it explodes through field after field  
 Bearing its sleeper    another

Bomb finds a home  
 And clings to it like a child. And so

Goodbye to the grassy mountains  
 To cloud streaming from the night engines  
 Flags    pennons    curved silks  
 Of air    myself streaming also  
 My body covered  
 With flags, the air of flags  
 Between the engines.  
 Forever I do sleep in that position,  
 Forever in a turn  
 For home that breaks out streaming banners  
 From my wingtips,  
 Wholly in position to admire.

O then I knock it off  
 And turn for home over the black complex thread worked through  
 The silver night-sea,  
 Following the huge, moon-washed steppingstones  
 Of the Ryukyus south,  
 The nightgrass of mountains billowing softly  
 In my rising heat.

   Turn and tread down  
 The yellow stones of the islands  
 To where Okinawa burns,  
 Pure gold, on the radar screen,  
 Beholding, beneath, the actual island form  
 In the vast water-silver poured just above solid ground,  
 An inch of water extending for thousands of miles  
 Above flat ploughland. Say "down," and it is done.

All this, and I am still hungry,  
 Still twenty years overweight, still unable  
 To get down there or see  
 What really happened.

If I tried, say to any  
Who lived there, deep in my flames: say, in cold  
Grinning sweat, as to another  
As these homeowners who are always curving  
Near me down the different-grassed street: say  
As though to the neighbor  
I borrowed the hedge-clippers from  
On the darker-grassed side of the two,  
Come in, my house is yours, come in  
If you can, if you  
Can pass this unfired door. It is that I can imagine  
At the threshold nothing  
With its ears crackling off

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

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

## ON THE COOSAWATTEE

63

### 1. *By Canoe Through the Fir Forest*

Into the slain tons of needles,  
On something like time and dark knowledge  
That cannot be told, we are riding  
Over white stones forward through fir trees,  
5 To follow whatever the river  
Through the clasping of roots follows deeply.

As we go inward, more trunks  
Climb from the edge of the water  
And turn on the banks and stand growing.  
10 The nerves in the patches of tree-light  
On the ripples can feel no death,  
But shake like the wings of angels

With light hard-pressed to keep up  
Though it is in place on each feather.  
15 Heavy woods in one movement around us  
Flow back along either side  
Bringing in more essential curves;  
Small stones in their thousands turn corners

Under water and bear us on  
20 Through the glittering, surfacing wingbeats  
Cast from above. As we pass over,  
As we pass through each hover of gold,  
We lift up our blades from the water  
And the blades of our shoulders,

25 Our rowing-muscles, our wings,  
Are still and tremble, undying.

Drifting deeper into the forest.  
Each light comes into our life  
Past the man in front's changed hair  
30 Then along the wing-balancing floor

And then onto me and one eye  
And into my mouth for an instant.  
The stones beneath us grow rounder  
As I taste the fretted light fall  
35 Through living needles to be here  
Like a word I can feed on forever

Or believe like a vision I have  
 Or want to conceive out of greenness.  
 While the world fades, it is *becoming*.  
 40 As the trees shut away all seeing,  
 In my mouth I mix it with sunlight.  
 Here, in the dark, it is *being*.

ii. *Below Ellijay*

Coming into Ellijay on the green  
 Idling freeway of the broad river  
 From the hill farms and pine woods,  
 We saw first the little stores  
 5 That backed down the red clay banks,  
 The blue flash of bottleglass  
 And the rippled tin heat haze of sheds  
  
 Where country mechanics were frying.  
 A poultry-processing plant  
 10 Smoked in the late morning air:  
  
 The bridge we rode under clattered  
 As we wound back out into fields.  
 But the water that held us had changed;  
 The town had slowed it and used it;  
  
 15 The wind had died in the tool sheds.  
 When we looked overboard, we knew.  
 Each thing was mistakenly feathered,  
 Muffled thickly in cast-off whiteness:  
 Each log was bedraggled in plumage  
 20 And accepting more feathers from water;  
 Each boulder under the green  
  
 Was becoming a lewd, setting hen  
 Moultingly under us brooding  
 In the sick, buried wind of the river,  
 25 Wavering, dying, increasing  
 From the plucked refuse of the plant,  
 And beside us uselessly floated —  
 Following, dipping, returning,  
  
 Turning frankly around to eye us,  
 30 To eye something else, to eye  
 Us again — a skinned chicken head,  
 Its gaze unperturbed and abiding.  
 All morning we floated on feathers  
 Among the drawn heads which appeared  
 35 Everywhere, from under the logs

Of feathers, from upstream behind us,  
 Lounging back to us from ahead,  
 Until we believed ourselves doomed  
 And the planet corrupted forever,

40 With stones turned to pullets, not struggling  
 But into more monstrousness shed,  
 Our canoe trailing more and more feathers

And the eye of the devil upon us  
 Closing drunkenly in from all sides,  
 45 And could have been on the Styx  
 In the blaze of noon, till we felt  
 The quickening pulse of the rapids  
 And entered upon it like men  
 Who sense that the world can be cleansed

50 Among rocks pallid only with water,  
 And plunged there like the unborn  
 Who see earthly streams without taint  
 Flow beneath them, while their wing feathers  
 Slough off behind them in Heaven  
 55 As they dress in the blinding clothes  
 Of nakedness for their fall.

### III. *The Inundation*

Down there is a stone that holds my deepest sleep  
 And buries it deeper and deeper  
 Under the green, skinny lake  
 That is going back into the Georgia hills  
 5 And climbing them day and night  
 Behind the new dam.

And there is another stone, that boiled with white,  
 Where Braselton and I clung and fought  
 With our own canoe

10 That flung us in the rapids we had ridden  
 So that it might turn and take on  
 A ton of mountain water

And swing and bear down through the flying cloud  
 Of foam upon our violent rock  
 15 And pin us there.  
 With our backs to the wall of that boulder,  
 We yelled and kept it off us as we could,  
 Broke both paddles,

Then wedged it with the paddle stumps up over  
20 The rock till the hull split, and it leapt and fell  
Into the afterfall.  
In life preservers we whirled ourselves away  
And floated aimlessly down into calm water,  
Turning like objects,

25 Then crawled upon shore and were found in the afternoon  
By Lucas Gentry and his hunting dog, asleep  
On a vast, gentle stone.  
At a touch we woke, and followed the strange woods boy  
Up the bluff, looking down on the roaring river's  
30 Last day in its bed.

And now I cannot sleep at all, until I think  
Of the Coosa, out of a clear blue sky  
Overswelling its banks,  
Its great stones falling through it into dark,  
35 Its creeks becoming inlets, where water  
Skiers already poise.

Over me it rises, too, but breathable, like cloud,  
A green and silver cloud above which quiet  
Lucas Gentry stands.  
40 His dog whines, as the last rock of the wild river  
Goes under, its white water lapses green,  
And the leaping stone

Where we almost died takes on the settled repose  
Of that other where we lay down and met  
45 Our profoundest sleep  
Rising from it to us, as the battered sides  
Of the canoe gave deeper and deeper shade,  
And Lucas Gentry,

Who may have been the accepting spirit of the place  
50 Come to call us to higher ground,  
Bent to raise  
Us from the sleep of the yet-to-be-drowned,  
There, with the black dream of the dead canoe  
Over our faces.

Just after the sun  
 Has closed, I swing the fresh paint of the door  
 And have opened the new, green dark.  
 From my house and my silent folk  
 5 I step, and lay me in ritual down.

One night each April  
 I unroll the musty sleeping-bag  
 And beat from it a cloud of sleeping moths.  
 I leave the house, which leaves  
 10 Its window-light on the ground

In gold frames picturing grass,  
 And lie in the unconsecrated grove  
 Of small, suburban pines,  
 And never move, as the ground not ever shall move,  
 15 Remembering, remembering to feel

The still earth turn my house around the sun  
 Where all is dark, un hoped-for, and undone.  
 I cannot sleep until the lights are out,  
 And the lights of the house of grass, also,  
 20 Snap off, from underground.

Beneath the gods and animals of Heaven,  
 Mismade inspiringly, like them,  
 I fall to a colored sleep  
 Enveloping the house, or coming out  
 25 Of the dark side of the sun,

And begin to believe a dream  
 I never once have had,  
 Of being part of the acclaimed rebirth  
 Of the ruined, calm world, in spring,  
 30 When the drowned god and the dreamed-of sun

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

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



Bought by his death. A warm wind springs  
 From the curtains. Blue china and milk on the table  
 Are mild, convincing, and strange.  
 At that time it is light,  
 45 And, as my eyelid lifts  
  
 An instant before the other, the last star is withdrawn  
 Alive, from its fiery fable.  
 I would not think to move,  
 Nor cry, "I live," just yet,  
 50 Nor shake the twinkling horsehair of my head,  
  
 Nor rise, nor shine, nor live  
 With any but the slant, green, mummied light  
 And wintry, bell-swung undergloom of waters  
 Wherethrough my severed head has prophesied  
 55 For the silent daffodil and righteous  
  
 Leaf, and now has told the truth.  
 This is the time foresaid, when I must enter  
 The waking house, and return to a human love  
 Cherished on faith through winter:  
 60 That time when I in the night  
  
 Of water lay, with sparkling animals of light  
 And distance made, with gods  
 Which move through Heaven only as the spheres  
 Are moved: by music, music.  
 65 Mother, son, and wife  
  
 Who live with me: I am in death  
 And waking. Give me the looks that recall me.  
 None knows why you have waited  
 In the cold, thin house for winter  
 70 To turn the inmost sunlight green  
  
 And blue and red with life,  
 But it must be so, since you have set  
 These flowers upon the table, and milk for him  
 Who, recurring in this body, bears you home  
 75 Magnificent pardon, and dread, impending crime.

Dark, deeply. A red.  
All levels moving  
A given surface.  
Break this. Step down.  
5 Follow your right  
Foot nakedly in  
To another body.  
Put on the river  
Like a fleeing coat,  
10 A garment of motion,  
Tremendous, immortal.  
Find a still root

To hold you in it.  
Let flowing create  
15 A new, inner being:  
As the source in the mountain  
Gives water in pulses,  
These can be felt at  
The heart of the current.  
20 And here it is only  
One wandering step  
Forth, to the sea.  
Your freed hair floating  
Out of your brain,

25 Wait for a coming  
And swimming idea.  
Live like the dead  
In their flying feeling.  
Loom as a ghost  
30 When life pours through it.  
Crouch in the secret  
Released underground  
With the earth of the fields  
All around you, gone  
35 Into purposeful grains  
That stream like dust

In a holy hallway.  
Weight more changed  
Than that of one  
40 Now being born,  
Let go the root.  
Move with the world  
As the deep dead move,  
Opposed to nothing.  
45 Release. Enter the sea  
Like a winding wind.  
No. Rise. Draw breath.  
Sing. See no one.

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

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

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

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

15 For light to score off you  
In its own way, and send  
Across the wheat the broad silent

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

LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

Graduate School

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"PRESENTATIONAL IMMEDIACY" IN THE POETRY OF JAMES DICKEY

by

Lethiel C. Parson

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A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in the Field of English

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The thesis explores the "presentational immediacy" of the poetry of James Dickey. "Presentational immediacy" is a phrase used by the poet, himself, to describe his attempt to provide a verbal equivalent of an intense experience. He also defines the phrase in stating that his aim is to effect spontaneity and reader involvement in the experience of the poems. This is a relatively difficult objective to accomplish. However, as is shown in the study of the poems in Chapter V, Dickey's handling of the general diction and imagery of the poems does fulfill his objective of presenting an experience in a vivid, forceful manner.

The desire for a compulsive presentation seems related to the fact that many poems present situations which move in the direction of mystical experience. Chapter IV discusses the elements of mystical experience and the difficulty faced by the mystic in communicating his experience. This difficulty is essentially the same as that faced by Dickey in his aim for presentational immediacy. Frequent in mystical writings are the use of oxymora and paradox and references to light in the description of mystical experience. These features are also found in Dickey's poems which share elements of mysticism--the quasi-mystical poems discussed in Chapter VI. The imagery of the poems is frequently based on a consciousness of light and motion, an element of paradox, and at times, a transferral of the intense attitude of the speaker to an object.

In Chapter V it is shown that these characteristics are also found in the non-mystical poems. The presentational immediacy of these poems involves the same elements as the quasi-mystical poems, for in both there is a vivid re-creation of an intense experience--the experience is made presentationally immediate. Thus the study of the poems in Chapters V and VI demonstrates that Dickey's aim is achieved in his poetry. The

thesis concludes that the desire to achieve presentational immediacy serves as a guiding motive in Dickey's choice of words and that an understanding of this principle is fundamental in seeking to understand and to experience the meaning and emotion of the poetry.

During the initial stage of research all materials available in books and periodicals were read in three categories: material written about James Dickey and his poetry; material written by Dickey about the work of other poets; material written by Dickey about himself and about his own poetry. With the exception of one short article at the end of Babel to Byzantium in which Dickey gives an account of his development as a poet, there were no materials available in the last three categories.

In reading and rereading the poems published between 1957 and 1970, I found a body of poetry which is largely spontaneous and forthright in presenting the subject matter. I found, in addition, that the quality which makes Dickey's poetry unique and which repeatedly stimulates comments about his work is the intensity of the experience presented in the poems. It is with the use of imagery that his technique is most evidently his own.

The review of the critical literature on Dickey's poetry did not yield any complete treatment on his use of language. Several writers assented that Dickey's technique is valid in that it proves effective in presenting his material. However, the greater portion of the critical comment on Dickey's work is limited to generalizing reviews in periodicals and two books. No writer has undertaken a formal analysis of the poems in order to demonstrate the validity of their assertions. This thesis provides such an analysis of the poetry of James Dickey.