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An American myth : James Dickey's "The Zodiac"

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AN AMERICAN MYTH:
JAMES DICKEY'S "THE ZODIAC"

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A. Whitman, Dickey, and the American Mythic Tradition

All American poetry that has been written in the mythic tradition has had Walt Whitman as its spiritual ancestor. Indeed, it was Whitman, following his own instincts and conscience, who opened up the form of poetry - large narratives, rangy styles - in order to encompass the fullness of the national experience. In his preface to Leaves of Grass Whitman had declared: "The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. . . . [He] says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson . . . he places himself where the future becomes present." [1] Whitman of course was seeking to celebrate modern man by creating a myth [2] of America, a myth of democratic comradeship. If toward the end of his life Whitman became an old man who, in the words of biographer Justin Kaplan, "rode contentedly at anchor on the waters of the past," [3] it in no way diminished the youthful glow of his vision. His myth stood apart, emblazoned, and the perspective he reached and which he sought to impart was both romantic and decidedly American.

James Dickey has acknowledged his indebtedness to Whitman both as a man who provided the fullest and most vivid portrait of an American character and as one who saw the compass of human potential. In Sorties Dickey had declared that the only good state of mind for a poet was one of perpetual possibility, and he continued:

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[1] Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, and Selected Prose (New York, 1949), p. 460. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

[2] C.G. Jung, The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung (New York, 1959), p. 289. The terms "myth" and "mythic" are to be understood in this thesis as being based on Jung's definition.

[3] Justin Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life (New York, 1980), p. 372.

> The longer I live, the longer and better the whole perspective of possibility becomes, and the more I see how necessary it is to throw one's self open to the least chance impulse or stimulus coming from anywhere. Who knows where that "anywhere" comes from, or is. . . . No wonder Whitman is the poet who opened up America for us; he was open to all kinds of possibilities. A man sawing a plank was a great man to Whitman and imminently [sic] worth watching and learning from. [4]

Whitman's unusual receptivity to all experience permitted him to glean a vision that was previously unseen, and he embodied that vision in his myth. Published more than a century later, a lengthy poem entitled "The Zodiac" is James Dickey's American myth. Dickey portrays the evolution of a drunken poet from his initial gropings for vision, through his internal mythic wanderings, to his final re-emergence into external reality. In the course of his anguish, observes critic Francis Skipp, "he struggles through poetry to transcend his mortality by connecting the experience of his past with the eternity symbolized by the zodiac." [5] Though one does not discover within the limits of the poem itself the extent to which the Zodiac poet succeeds in finding the bravura sufficient to this great song, the drunken poet does, nevertheless, attain a heightened stature, almost Christ-like, to become what one critic has called "a heroic messenger to his kind." [6] His problem has been, as it has been in much of Dickey's earlier poetry, "to contact the power circuit of the universe." [7] Laurence Lieberman has elaborated on this theme and asserted that the poet's task is "to make life-saving connections -- all those connections which create the free interchange of spirit between being and being. The word connect is the central one in

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[4] James Dickey, Sorties (Garden City, New York, 1971), p. 53.

[5] Francis Skipp, "James Dickey's The Zodiac: The Heart of the Matter" in Concerning Poetry, 14, i (Spring 1981), 7.

[6] Dave Smith, "The Strength of James Dickey" in Poetry, 137, March 1981, 349.

[7] Ibid.

Dickey's new poetry." [8] Wherever being is trapped, either in oneself or in others, the poet's existential self must work, both in his art and more directly in his life, to render those connections. He must be, as it were, "a perfect conductor" [9] between the inner and outer worlds. Though at times the drunken poet is confused and disoriented, dazed by the very huge ideas he seeks to unify, though he is even comic in his endeavors, the seriousness of what is required of him by the nature of his quest is not mitigated or reduced. He seeks nothing less than the poetic unity of the cosmos, art written large on a heavenly scale, and as such he is preoccupied, as Dickey says elsewhere and in another regard, "with the search for a (or perhaps 'the') realm of 'timelessness,' where all kinds of communication in depth are possible: communion with our own dead, with the great minds of the past, with each other, and, finally, with ourselves." [10]

B. The American Myth

In the brief explanatory preface of "The Zodiac" Dickey says: "Its twelve sections are the story of a drunken and perhaps dying Dutch poet who returns to his home in Amsterdam after years of travel and tries desperately to relate himself, by means of stars, to the universe." [11] The question immediately arises as to how a Dutch poet, and particularly one living in the Old World city of Amsterdam, relates to an American myth. What, in other words, does a Dutchman returning to his home in Holland have to do with the New World? The question assumes added significance when the poet thinks to himself in the course of the poem:

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[8] Laurence Lieberman, Unassigned Frequencies (Urbanna, Chicago, London, 1977), p. 75.

[9] Ibid., p. 74.

[10] James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now (New York, 1973), p. 85.

[11] James Dickey, The Zodiac (Garden City, New York, 1976), Preface. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

I can't get it. Ah,

But now he can think about his grave. It's not so bad;
It will be better than this. There's something there for him -
At least it'll be in Europe, and he won't be sick
For the impossible: with the other-world nostalgia,
With the countries of the earth. Holland is good enough
To die in. That's the place to lay down
His screwed-up body-meat. That's it.
This is it.
It's that thing you might call home.
(p. 40)

It is a statement that quite explicitly declares the poet's intent to concern himself with his native country. America is not to be his "home," his principal focus and consideration, and "the other-world nostalgia" will no longer trouble him. Such a bald declaration makes it difficult to discern how "The Zodiac" is a distinctly American myth or why, it might be added, it is a myth at all.

This latter question can be primarily answered by the fact that "The Zodiac" at its heart is the story of a quest, a long established mythic form. It is a search for the single, redeeming poem that unites the poet with the constellations, with the star-beasts of "God's scrambled zoo." (p. 29) To find this ultimate poem the drunken poet must glean from the external world the vision necessary to make his words "fly." Within this vision the boundaries between the poet's inner world and the outer world of natural phenomena are effaced, and the poem that ensues redeems the readers by allowing them to participate in the captured poetic vision. The narrative of "The Zodiac" then consists of the drunken poet's wanderings, both physically and imaginatively, in search of this redeeming vision and for the poem that will then resurrect his audience.

It is the great irony of "The Zodiac" that the poet achieves his piercing vision and yet fails in the final object of his quest. He is unable to pen the vision of truth that he has perceived. Despite this, however, the poet does realize a personal epiphany. Over the course of "The Zodiac" the drunken Dutchman matures in his understanding and comprehends at last the true nature of the poetic quest. What Dickey says and what the Zodiac poet learns in that

quest is that through the lens of the poetic imagination, one can discover not simply a new and revitalized world but one that is constantly so, a world "All changed all the same." (p. 59) It is a world too that must be imaginatively shared if the role of the poet is to be meaningful.

The question remains then as to why "The Zodiac" is a particularly American myth, especially when it concerns a drunken Dutch poet who finally senses that Amsterdam is his home. The answer lies in part with the fact that the poem contains certain qualities inherent in the American mythic experience, qualities such as the notes of awe and wonder and the belief in man's essential divinity. This is nowhere more apparent than in Whitman's Leaves of Grass, and these characteristics are quite readily visible in "The Zodiac." In part the answer lies too in the very fact that the drunken poet is seeking a rootedness after years of travel. Though the subject is European, the spirit manifested by the poet's search for a home is distinctly American. America itself was founded by political, economic, and religious refugees who sought for themselves a sense of belonging, a place where they felt endemic. Their hopeful, optimistic search for a home, a new rootedness to which they could relate, constitutes in large measure the fiber of the American spirit. It is a willingness to go beyond conventions, to shatter or transcend boundaries in order to arrive at a place where the individual can fulfill his potential and accomplish his goals.

The drunken Dutch poet is just such a refugee. He despairs at the chaos of European civilization, but unlike the Puritan divines he does not flee physically. His is an imaginative flight, a search for a new home after years spent journeying among the varied places of earth. He now pursues a vision in which he can find himself, to which he can relate and then unite his own self with that of "the strange, silent words / Of God." (p. 29) Then, he reasons, he will find his poetic destiny, and he scans the stars nightly seeking to repattern them. The fervency with which he seeks this rootedness, the sense of religious righteousness which characterizes his obsession, and finally the underlying feeling of his quest as a new beginning is quite decidedly American.

One need only compare Marsman's European poem and Dickey's American version to note the difference in what might be called the tone of the poet's quest, the spirit of his search. Both stories are concerned with the Dutchman's quest for the ultimate, redeeming poem, but the optimistic tone of Dickey's American version is quite apparent. In Section Ten the poet is visited by a young woman with whom he spends the night. She is young, alive, a marked contrast to this worn-out man who has come to hate everything. He is quiet, his thoughts enervated by despair. Yet the light of the dawning new day finds

> their souls
> Fallen from them, left in the night
> Of patterns the night that's just finished
> Overwhelming the earth. (p. 57)

Section Ten ends with daybreak, the darkness of night

> Fading fading faded . . .
> They lie like the expanding universe.
> Too much light. Too much love.
> (p. 57)

Their physical encounter has freed him from the engulfing madness of his isolation, from his consuming desire to repattern the universe after his own images. His isolation has been shattered, and his sense of what it means to be human has been redefined. The universe had previously been fixed, Edenic and pristine, needing only to be deciphered, and now it is "expanding." There is "Too much light" and "Too much love." One need only contrast this with the translation of Marsman's European poem to see the extent to which Dickey has changed the original intent:

> He was silent, his arm around her waist.
> It grew darker still in his heart.
> He knew that not even love
> Could assuage this solitude.
>
> The evening passed and the night.
> When their bodies were found by the dawn,

Their souls had fallen a prey
To the night that engulfed the world. [12]

In Marsman's work the encounter with the young woman leaves the poet only deeper in an existential despair of self, a pessimism that seems part of some larger cosmic blackness that envelops the world.

Dickey seems to have adopted Marsman's poem and infused it with his own vision, retaining the basic narrative and the Dutch poet as persona. The decaying Old World atmosphere of the original poem, the sights and sounds of Amsterdam, as well as the poem's tone, the spirit of the poet's quest, have been transplanted or transcended. A new quality is present in Dickey's version. In the course of Dickey's American myth he has given his audience what might be called a New Amsterdam connection. Europe lies in pieces about the drunken Dutchman's feet and he seeks to redeem "the morning / Land that sleeps in the universe on all horizons." (p. 61) His concern is not so much with a particular country as it is with an horizon of space. It is there that he will know "Identities." His act of the mind is to connect with this endless horizon in order to become energized, and as the Dutch poet is an extension of Dickey, this desire accounts for the spatial quality in much of Dickey's poetry. The shifting margins, truncated lines, and gap-punctuated sentences are as reflective of this spatial preoccupation as the constellations blazing out at the Dutch poet.

In the American myth space is the commanding presence. Indeed it is the metaphor of the American imagination, the means by which the outer world of phenomena and the poet's inner realm unite in ecstatic recognition. So integral is this idea of space to the American mythic tradition that it enabled Whitman to construct in his Leaves of Grass an almost stateless fraternity, an enclave of companions in quest of experience. America was space itself, a quality of perception whereby humanity had been given a new beginning. Man had never fallen; all things existed in this pristine

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[12] Hendrick Marsman, "The Zodiac", Sewanee Review, LV (Spring 1947), 249.

vastness as equals. Yet precisely because America was space, it was also an object of perception, a virgin ground unbelievably fertile. Whitman viewed this spaciousness of America at times as a quality of perception and at other times as an object, that is, as the land itself. Dickey, however, because he is using Marsman's original poem as a narrative foundation, Dutch poet et al., sees this space primarily as a quality of perception. Each writer, however, views space as the commanding metaphor of America, and struggling with their myths, both Whitman and Dickey forge a new literary language and a new form to convey it. The vastness of America's space required no less.

C. Notes of Wonder

Both Whitman and Dickey then belong to that small select pantheon of American myth writers, to a mythic tradition that in a sense began with the discovery and awakening of America. A new literary voice was emerging, a voice which in later years continued to echo the same wonder and amazement. At the breathless dawning of this new nation, man did not stand, as Fitzgerald had observed, "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." [13] Whitman gazes in awe at the America that streams around him, and his myth catalogues in glowing terms everything about the country, its people and professions, its expectations and desires. "Song of Myself" is awash with cultural America, and Whitman lists with obvious delight all that he sees and hears. "Clear and sweet is my soul," he says, "and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul." (Section 3) Again, he declares: "I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy, / To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand." (Section 27) One need read only a little of the poem to sense not just the cries of carpenters, seamen, farmers, runaway slaves, and prostitutes, though they are everywhere, but the simple, childlike wonder

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[13] F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (New York, 1925), p. 159.

of Whitman as his persona observes it all. So taken is he by what is before him that he aptly declares: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." (Preface, p. 453)

This unremitting wonder and possibility of life is part of the American mythic experience, and though it is proclaimed differently, both Whitman and Dickey feel it. The America that Dickey sees in "The Zodiac" is the endless horizon of space and sky. Just as ecstatically as Whitman, the drunken Dutch poet from his barren writing cell "looks sideways, out and up and there it is: / The perpetual Eden of space / there when you want it." (p. 18) He thinks back on his travels and remembers with amazement the ineffable blue of a Greek sky, so indescribable as to be almost beyond words: "A poet has got to do better . . . That blue / Jesus, look at that in your memory! There there that blue that blue / Over some Demetrian island." (p. 38) Even the graceful arcing of birds in their flight astonishes him:

> They're things that are closer to you, too. Look
> at that!
> Don't cringe: look right out over town.
> Real birds. There they are in their curves, moving
> in their great element
> That causes our planet to be blue and causes us all
> To breathe. Ah, long ghostly drift
> Of wings.
> Well, son of a bitch.
> (pp. 19-20)

Each writer of American myth has pronounced his vision in his own way, but each has struck this cord of ecstasy, of child-like awe at his sheer good fortune, his sense of chosenness at being where he is. It is a note of wonder, of rapture even. In a spontaneous burst of expression, Dickey asserted in Self-Interviews: "I think a river the most beautiful thing in nature. Any river. Some are more beautiful than others, but any river is more beautiful than anything else I know." [14] Again, in a recorded interview Dickey declares: "Anything that has been created, especially anything

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[14] James Dickey, Self-Interviews (Garden City, New York, 1970), p. 69.

alive, . . . a leaf of a tree or a pine needle is awesome to me. The life force is fascinating to me, and the number and variety of life forms that there are . . . all of that is interesting to me." [15] One clearly feels in these words Dickey's deep sense of marvel and surprise. Francis Skipp quite correctly says of Dickey: "It is plain that he has one characteristic that visionary and mystical poets must have: rapture." [16] If Dickey then seems to dwell on "The perpetual Eden of space," it need only be remembered that he writes in the language of myth, with an American voice that can only be full of notes of wonder.

D. The Sacred Emptiness of Space

Glowing with expectation and awed by sheer wonder, the writers of American myth took as the commanding presence and metaphor of their experience and imagination what the critic Irving Howe calls "the sacred emptiness of space." [17] It is everywhere, and in the writings of Whitman and Dickey it is the inner man who undertakes his quest in an intimate communion with those vast spaces who is always extolled, the essential man in deep relation with the tangible world that seems limitless. In the myths of American writers, Howe asserts, "every man declares himself a pioneer of spirit. Every man makes and remakes himself, defining his character in an endless series of second chances. It's as if Eve never bit nor Adam fell." [18] There is, as there must be, a spatial quality to their writings, a sense of dealing intimately with the macrocosm, for in their myths the poet's arena is cosmic. Their explorations are restricted only by their imaginations. They are free to stretch themselves across the earth or to sail the heavens. Whitman boasts:

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[15] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1962.

[16] Skipp, pp. 9-10.

[17] Irving Howe, "The American Voice - It Begins on a Note of Wonder" in New York Times Book Review, July 4, 1976, p. 1.

[18] Ibid.

Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I
guess'd at,
What I guess'd when I loaf'd on the grass,
What I guess'd while I lay alone in my bed,
And again as I walk'd the beach under the paling
stars of the morning.

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in
sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
I am afloat with my vision.

(Section 33)

Whitman is himself a "kosmos" (Section 24) who has "the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured." (Section 46) He travels through space with boisterous certainty.

Speeding through space, speeding through heaven
and the stars,
Speeding with tail'd meteors, throwing fire-balls
like the rest,
Carrying the crescent child that carries its own
mother in its belly,
Storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning,
Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,
I tread day and night such roads.

(Section 33)

Here the poet wanders the cosmos; he is concerned with and indeed assumes a heightened consciousness and his spiritual perspective is expanded. He becomes in a sense infinite and all-encompassing, soaring effortlessly among the stars. The poet is larger, more inclusive, as befits the fullness of the American experience and the newness of the American character. Owing to the feral forests, the oceanic plains, the teeming abundance of wildlife, the American poet no longer had to grope and sift among the desiccated bones of his English past, but rather could now seek out and explore this unbelievably fertile, new scene, the space of America, and the promise it contained. With such a panorama now available to him in the American vision, the poet could allow his poem to "soar into that further beyond with a sense of effortlessness and inevitability." [19] Potential was

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[19] Laurence Lieberman, p.80.

everywhere.

Dickey too has recognized the potential for endless poetic growth that the spaciousness of the American experience continues to offer. He has quite explicitly declared that he wants more than anything else to possess "a feeling of wholeness." [29] Within this he may realize that part of him that is fundamentally primitive, that part which "gives us a personal relationship to the sun and the moon, the flow of rivers, the growth of natural forms, and the cycles of death and rebirth." [21] It is the sheer size of America, the vast breadth of its borders, and the overwhelming plentitude of everything within those spaces that permit just such a feeling. Dickey also believes that the persona of the poet is being created within a poem as the poem itself is being fashioned. He asserts in "The Self as Agent" that "From poem to poem the invented self is metamorphosed into whatever it is to become in the poem." [22] The personality of the persona is fluid, free to expand indefinitely or congeal to a particular identity as new conditions dictate, so that the poem is "a window opening not on truth but on possibility." [23] The poet then has "a new or insufficiently known part of him released by these means. He is set free, for he is more inclusive than before; he is greater than he was." [24] Both the poet and his persona therefore are pioneers, seeking the fullest of experiences within the boundless, untrod spaces of the American experience. One can almost see Whitman's ethereal presence nodding approval and saying, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

Dickey's persona in the poem, the drunken Dutch poet, likewise scans the inspiring magnitude of America through its metaphor, the boundless depths of space. He is "star-crazed, mad / . . . with connecting and joining things that lay their meanings / Over

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[20] James Dickey, Self-Interviews, p. 68.

[21] Ibid., p. 69,

[22] James Dickey, Sorties, p. 156.

[23] Ibid., p. 161.

[24] Ibid., p. 164.

billions of light years / eons of time - Ah, / Years of light: billions of them: they are pictures / Of some sort of meaning. He thinks the secret / Can be read." (p. 12) "The stars are mine," he emphatically asserts, "and so is / The imagination to work them - / To create." (p. 22) He will travel in his creative mind among the constellations to discover their meaning, for it is only by so doing that he can then write the ultimate poem that unifies existence. There is still the time necessary to do it, he thinks to himself.

> When I look west I know
> Everything's not over yet. I can always come back
> to earth.
>
> But I want to come back with the secret
> with the poem
> That links up my balls and the strange, silent words
> Of God his scrambled zoo and my own words
> and includes the earth
> Among the symbols.
>
> (p. 29)

The drunken poet travels in and through time and space until at the end of the poem he declares memorably:

> Oh my own soul, put me in a solar boat
> Come into one of these hands
> Bringing quietness and the rare belief
> That I can steer this strange craft to the morning
> Land that sleeps in the universe on all horizons.
>
> (p. 61)

The ecstatic expectation, says one critic, comes from "apprehensions of nature and a linked metaphysics of the self." [25] The designs of the poet are large, even grandiose, given spatially to encompass the universal, for the poet is himself large. He stares at the stars and declares:

> But by God we've got a universe
> Here.
> Those designs of time are saying something.
>
> (p. 17)

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[25] Irving Howe, p. 2.

Dickey in "The Zodiac" is writing a metaphysical poem, as myth must inevitably be, as his persona seeks to do. Robert Penn Warren observes that the poem is "one that with passion, rage, eloquence, and occasional yammer asks a metaphysical question as a form of poetry." [26] As with other writers of American myth, Whitman and Crane included, poetry is the enunciation of universality. [27]

E. The Divinity of Man

Dickey has long believed that there is within each individual a poetic spirit, a poet of sorts which lies buried or constrained, unable to find adequate means of release. Those people who are actually called poets are the ones who have found the way or devised the manner by which this spirit can be freed. A poet then in a very real sense is of men, someone who, though he may know little of poetic technique, of metrics, prosody and stanzaic construction, has nevertheless managed to release his poetic self or spirit and who possesses qualities of imagination and vision. Such qualities for Dickey are superior to the other, more technical, aspects of the poetic art. The poet is then, as it were, an intensified man, a man both of and for all seasons, whose intuition is really that of every individual.

It has been asserted that the principal thing intuited by the drunken Dutchman in his madness is "a passionate certainty of the divinity of man." [28] This, too, is frequently one component in the American mythic experience. In weaving his song of himself Whitman had outspokenly declared: "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from." (Section 24) With the twirl of his tongue he would "encompass worlds and volumes of worlds," (Section 25) taking on the exact dimensions of all other mythic gods, magnifying himself, until he can say:

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[26] Robert Penn Warren, "The Zodiac" in New York Times Book Review, N 14 '76, p. 8.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Skipp, p. 5.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,
and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my
own face in the glass.

(Section 48)

Having learned from Emerson that spirit pervades all matter and that all men and women therefore partake of divinity, Whitman seeks "a knit of identity," (Section 3) a common recognition of a shared heritage. Irving Howe has correctly noted that the "American writers of the 19th century begin with the notion that if you are an American you can leap past, or out of, the chaos of European history. More radically, that you need not suppose civilization your necessary home. Edenic visions posit an end to history, but the American one goes farther: it posits an end to the memory of history." [29] Such an ability is God-like in capacity, but nevertheless attainable to the hero of American myth.

The drunken Dutch poet also claims a divinity, an intensification, even in his alcoholic reveries.

Man.
God-damn it,
you're one <u>too</u>! Man MAN listen to me
Like God listened when he went mad
Over drunk lobsters . . .

The Gods are in pieces -
All over Europe.
But, by God, not <u>God</u> -

He sees himself standing up -
Dawn-rights.

(p. 37)

Francis Skipp has aptly stated that here "a Promethean assertion lays claim to 'Dawn-rights,' to some unrelinquished prerogative, some yet unabrogated covenant with the still-living God, which reserves to man a portion of autonomous divinity." [30] Throughout

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[29] Howe, p. 1.

[30] Skipp, p. 6.

the inchoate visions of the drunken poet, it is obvious that he thinks of himself in his creative aspect as God. In his endeavor to write the ultimate poem that unifies creation, he recognizes that "Every poet wants / To change those stars around."

> Look: here's what I'm going to do
>
> For you. I'm going to swirl the constellation Cancer
> Around like rice in a bucket, and out of that'll come
> a new beast
> For the Zodiac!
> I say right now, under the crashing
> clock, like a man
> Bartending for God,
> What'll it be?
> Do you want me to decide? The stars are mine as well
> as yours
> And don't forget it.
>
> (p. 34)

Sustained by the strong bond he feels with the rest of creation, the poet seeks to give form to his vision, but he is instead plunged into waking nightmares caused partly by his mounting frustrations and partly by his deep drunkenness. He stands nevertheless upon his claim to divinity, upon his "Dawn-rights" and by so doing momentarily sees a vision "thorn-blue." (p. 37) His ecstasy is short-lived, however, for in his creative endeavor to unify existence poetically, he must suffer: "He feels it. The thing hurts. Time hurts. Jesus does it. / Man, God-damn it, / you're one <u>too</u>!" (p. 37) The poet, this intensified man, is crucified by time, by the "smash-bongs" (p. 31) of the town clock that achingly pass through him and he thinks, "Our lives have been told, as long as we've had them, / that the Father / Must be torn apart in the son." (p. 32) The piercing of "thorn-spiked Time" (p. 33) ends everything. Like all redeemers his poetic endeavors are sacrificial; they

> shall vibrate through the western world
> So long as the hand can hold its island
> Of blazing paper, and bleed for its images;
> Make what it can of what is.
>
> (p. 62)

The poet becomes a suffering servant, pierced by the hard reality of time as he attempts to redeem all others of his kind by means of the ultimate poem.

In the fullness of the American experience, all was possible. Whitman could champion the goodness of the national character, its unlimited potential, and exhort others to strive for the divinity that he knew was attainable with poetic guidance. His was a vision of personal possibility. Yet there were moments of anguish and doubt also, as in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" and "Facing West from California's Shores," when the poet felt himself overcome by personal, economic, and poetic burdens. He concluded the latter poem with the troubling questions, "(But where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?)." (p. 96) In the untainted plenitude of America, an America of relatively uncompromised promise, not even Whitman could keep Huck and Jim floating on their raft forever. The regional tensions that were shortly to splinter the nation and produce war, the growth of large, soul-breaking cities fostered by the beginnings of industrial capitalism, and the spread of corruption were becoming ever more apparent. These social and political realities were making Whitman's optimism and unflagging hurrahing appear like toothless evasions. A century later Dickey's drunken Dutch poet, still asserting a share of the Godhead, is nevertheless also oppressed, overwhelmed and pierced by the harsh realities of time, by the onslaught of the present. He too has his burdens and must suffer.

F. The Quest

The drunken poet then, like the crucified Christ, like Whitman himself, has a mission. His search is hindered by this onrush of time, by "that thing you might call death." (p. 38) For the poet and for mankind the cancer of time hurries inexorably toward the world's final day. The galaxy is expanding and, the drunken voyager declares, "the astronomers are singing Dies Irae to the Day of Judgement's horn."

the stars are gasping
For understanding. They've had Ptolemy
They've had Babylon
but now they want Hubbell
They want Fred Hoyle and the steady-state.
But what they really want need
Is a poet and
I'm going to have to be it.
(pp. 27-28)

Truth is not to be discerned, as he declares later in the poem, by gazing "Through the wrong end of his telescope," (p. 61) that is, by objectively observing the phenomena of the tangible world, but rather by the use of the poet's intuitive imagination. As one critic has noted, "Dickey's space voyager declares that ultimate answers are not to be found in phenomena, that essential truths are not quantifiable but are to be discovered only by intuition developed and validated by the intellect - to be formulated, that is, by the imagination." [31] The poet's quest resides in bringing the inner world of the poetic imagination to bear upon the realities of the external world. Whitman knew this also and declared:

Hurran for positive science! Long live exact demonstrations!
Gentlemen, to you the first honors always!
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.
(Section 23)

What then is specifically necessitated by the mythic quest of this traveller, this space gazer who is mad with his stars and who seeks like God a personal creation, a poem that redeems existence? He is certainly conscious of his time-bound condition, of the physical pain that time can cause, and of the need to transcend that situation in some manner. He is cognizant too of the immensity of space, of the

eternal blackness
studded with creatures.

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[31] Ibid., p. 5.

Stars.
Beasts. Nothing left but the void
Deep-hammering its creatures with
light-years.
Years made of light.
Only light.
Yes.
(p. 19)

Such a quest, to be successful, must obviously come to some transcendent or elevated understanding of the concepts, for without it the poet remains rigidly bound to his ephemeral existence. When asked if the quest of the drunken Dutchman was that of his own, Dickey declared:

> Well, I think so, sure. What the poet is trying to do, I think, at least it certainly is true in my case, is really trying to write the impossible poem, the ultimate poem. You know in your sober moments that such a thing is not possible to do. Even God when He wrote the poem of the universe did not . . . it's not ultimate really. I mean it's all there is, but it's still subject to change. It's not final; it's not static. But the poet feels in his periods of afflatus, maybe, or aided and abetted by alcohol, that he's going to make a try to write the poem that'll explain everything, that will get the inner and outer worlds into some congruency. [32]

The drunken poet obviously fails to write his poem, at least within the confines of the narrative that Dickey provides, but this does not mean necessarily that his quest has been a complete failure. Robert Penn Warren suggests that "The Zodiac" "in one sense . . . can be said to be about the over-ambitiousness of poetry - even as it celebrates its ambitiousness." [33] In one sense it certainly is, but to just as large a degree the poem is about the success or failure of the Zodiac poet to achieve a personal epiphany, a revelatory vision that transcends time and space and that permits

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[32] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1982.

[33] Warren, p. 8.

him a sort of spiritual passport into the unseen, and what that passage reveals to him. If he does not then yield up his revelation in some ultimate poem, perhaps that is because the very epiphany which he sought to embody poetically declares such a thing impossible. Dave Smith seems off the mark then when he states: "His act of the mind then is to know 'Identities! Identities!' as a kind of horizon he will never reach." [34] The search for experiential reality, Smith concludes, for the energizing Truth, must always prove unavailing. The poet has only "the grandeur of failure always exhibited by the monomythical Hero." [35] The poet, however, does indeed reach that horizon, but what he learns is that that horizon is forever changing, forever shifting and expanding, as the universe itself is, as those identities are, and therefore it can never be poetically expressed with any final authority. If he cannot definitively extend to others the hidden fullness of life's resources, a fullness that is nevertheless accessible to any who unite, however briefly, the inner and the outer worlds, he has at least found "a rhythm of experience that can sweep away all obstacles to realizing the fullest of human potential." [36] As Dickey so marvellously says in "Falling": "One cannot just fall just tumble screaming all that time one must use / It." [37] How the drunken poet will use such spiritual acumen is another question, a question which Dickey does not address directly. One suspects, however, that the poet in his freedom is condemned to continue his efforts to write "the music / That poetry has never really found," (p. 62) just as Dickey himself must. In presenting this attempt, however, Dickey gives the reader not only the mythic quest of the poet and the answers he found along the way, but also the means,

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[34] Smith, p. 350.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Lieberman, p. 81.

[37] James Dickey, Poems: 1957-1967 (Middletown, Connecticut, 1967), p. 295.

tne form, of uttering them. If then the Zodiac poet does not present those spiritual truths he has found, Dickey does. He tells his tale reflexively, and in the course of doing so, his consciousness by subtle transitions becomes, in alterations with his own, that of the Zodiac poet, the Dutchman's inner reality. [38] By this means the quest of the drunken poet becomes Dickey's quest as well.

G. Critical Views of "The Zodiac"

Dave Smith has come nearer the mark in viewing "The Zodiac" when he states: "Because the search for the energizing Truth was always doomed, as Dickey's poems know, he has been a poet for whom 'the embodiment of that Truth,' or style, was nearly all there could be." [39] Smith feels that if the poet's quest is to be closed, then the form or structure of his poem need not be. To be sure, the search for and the subsequent expression of "the energizing Truth" is doomed, if only because the truths of the universe are changing, and no final expression of the reality of the universe is therefore possible. The presentation of momentary truths, truths recognized by the connection of the inner world of the poet and the outer world of physical existence, is all there is. To declare, however, as Dave Smith does, that "Dickey's oscillating journey, in the poet's 'story,' is now between the failure of everything on earth (history, time, love, home - all betrayals) and whatever, if anything, stars are saying," [40] seems errant of the poem's narrative. "In this sense," he continues, "The Zodiac is entirely self-referential and everything to which the poet responds leaves him aware that he is only a prisoner of illusion. Darkness reigns." [41] Since the stars offer little hope for redemption, Smith feels, The Zodiac turns spatial organization into spatial occupation, for nowhere does the poem coalesce around

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[38] Skipp, p. 9.

[39] Smith, p. 350.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

the secret sought by the drunken poet. He declares: "Why this apparently diseased and world-bruised symbolic man should particularly constitute a window into some universal reality, or how, is never quite clear." [42] The poem is simply "an impressive failure." [43]

Such an evaluation is not uncommon, a fact that offers little solace for a poet who has remarked that he would stand or fall on this major work. [44] Harold Bloom observes that "The Zodiac is obsessive and perhaps even hysterical verse, and after a number of readings I am helpless to say whether, for me, it works or fails." [45] Turner Cassity sarcastically remarks: "My own feeling is that if you wanted to invent a method to get the least out of the most talent, you could hardly do better," [46] and even such a noted poet as Robert Penn Warren can only "hazard" [47] a statement that the poem is a major achievement. Dickey's problem here, or rather that of his persona, is the same as the one in "The Strength of Fields:"

> how
> To withdraw how to penetrate and find the source
> Of the power you always had. [48]

As one critic has suggested, "Dickey's vision of heroic glory remains intact, but the Melville-like dark abysm against which the powerless man contends has come . . . closer to the living place." [49] At the age of sixty Dickey must find Whitman's "knit of identity"

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Skipp, p. 1.

[45] Harold Bloom, "The Year's Books: Part I", in New Republic, V 175, N 20 '76, p. 22.

[46] Turner Cassity, "Double Dutch" in Parnassus: Poetry in Review, Spring / Summer 1981, p. 193.

[47] Warren, p. 8.

[48] James Dickey, The Strength of Fields (Garden City, New York, 1979), p. 16.

[49] Smith, p. 353.

if he is to avoid that abysm. The extent to which he succeeds must admittedly determine one's interpretation of "The Zodiac." These words spoken by Dickey seem important then in this regard:

> What we want, again, is to achieve a kind of state in which we can function in the world, not only barely making it, the debits and the credits sort of balancing out so that we may just barely hang in there, but to burst through to some magnificent region of the human personality and the creative mind which will no longer have any debits but which will be beyond anything that has been yet. . . . If we can unite the joyous man and the absolutely uninhibited imagination we will have done something for our generation, I think. [50]

Such a bursting through is the main objective in Dickey's poetry, its raison d'etre.

H. The Role of the Poet in America

Not even the poet acting under his "Dawn-rights," however, acting as God with his creative imagination, can render static and fixed what by nature is forever changing. Any fusion of inner and outer states, any linked metaphysics, must be transitory. Recognizing this, the drunken Dutch poet achieves his personal epiphany, and he makes his poetic plea:

> But now, now
> Oh God you rocky landscape give me, Give
> Me drop by drop
> desert water at least.
> I want now to write about deserts
>
> And in the dark the sand begins to cry
> For living water that not a sun or star
> Can kill, and for the splay camel-prints that bring men,
> And the ocean with its enormous crooning, begs
>
> For haunted sailors for refugees putting back
> Flesh on their ever-tumbling bones

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[50] Carolyn Kizer and James Boatwright, "A Conversation with James Dickey" in James Dickey: The Expansive Imagination (Delano, Florida, 1973), p. 33.

To man that fleet,
for in its ships
Only, the sea becomes the sea.
(pp. 60-61)

In his attempts to create a redeemed universe through poetry, the poet had become barren and desiccated, devoid of living humanity. He finally realizes the futility of such an endeavor and now wants to write not about any constellation but about deserts and the "living water that not a sun or star / Can kill." (p. 61) It is the fluidity of human experience, the ebb and flow of life, of people and events, that is of ultimate significance, and it is important to note that Dickey couches this realization in images of water, the mythic symbol of rebirth. He no longer desires "the empty road" that "no footstep has scrambled" (p. 54) but rather the fulfilling presence of mankind. Without those who use it the ocean is not really an ocean; it loses its purpose and therefore in a sense the identity which gives it its meaning. It needs ships and sailors and refugees to give it being, or the sea simply ceases to be the sea. Without other men the poet is similarly no longer a poet. He has no "knit of identity" to render purpose to his poetic endeavors and to his sufferings. With this realization comes the poet's prayer:

Oh my own soul, put me in a solar boat.
Come into one of these hands
Bringing quietness and the rare belief
That I can steer this strange craft to the morning
Land that sleeps in the universe on all horizons.
(p. 61)

It is America with all the vastness of its space which for Dickey is "the morning / Land that sleeps." Whether "in the universe on all horizons" repeats this idea, space as the metaphor for America, the punctuation gap serving to emphasize it, or whether the phrase simply connotes the image of America on the rim of the galaxy, is debatable. Yet like the poet's father, the amateur astronomer, who was

Drawn at the speed of light to Heaven

> Through the wrong end of his telescope, expanding
> the universe,
> (p. 61)

America needs awakening to the fact that fulfillment does not really reside in the rarefied air of constellations and dreams but in the knowledge that it is but a complement to the whole of existence. One expands the universe by intuitively realizing the "knit of identity" which links all life. Indeed, Dickey has long been angered at the callousness with which America has treated itself. He declared in an interview that when he saw "this country, the New World, which is such a beautiful place, with such beautiful places in it, now overrun by the rat-like portion and the greedy, self-aggrandizing builders and real estate people," he felt like Henry James, "the sensation of seeing some fine wild animal wounded with a poisoned arrow."[51] Far from being beautiful America in her own preoccupations and with her own preconceptions has been spiritually barren, no longer a great, good place, but rather now only a desert. Certainly she has placed too much emphasis on a science and technology that in the final analysis are misleading and rapacious. In Self-Interviews Dickey had observed:

> The parts of the universe we can investigate by means of machinery and scientific empirical techniques we may understand better than our predecessors did, but we no longer know the universe emotionally. It's a great deal easier to relate to the moon emotionally if the moon figures in a kind of mythology which we have inherited, or maybe invented, than it is to relate to it as a collocation of chemical properties. There's no moon goddess now. But when man believed there was, then the moon was more important, maybe not scientifically, but more important emotionally. It was something a man had a personal relationship to, instead of its being simply a dead stone, a great ruined stone in the sky.[52]

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[51] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1982.

[52] James Dickey, Self-Interviews, p. 67.

It is the role of the poet to lead man to this understanding and to the knowledge that any vision, no matter how encompassing, must value the fluidity of existence. Without it "expanding the universe" is impossible. Technology and science are of little value in this regard. They belong to another realm that if not antithetical to that of the poet is at least inhospitable to it without a proper understanding of its place. The instrument of the poet then is not the telescope but the pen, his "tuning fork" that

> shall vibrate through the western world
> So long as the hand can hold its island
> Of blazing paper, and bleed for its images:
> Make what it can of what is.
> (p. 62)

It is his pen that must seek to reveal "the time-loaded European music / That poetry has never really found." (p. 62) The poet and his poem must reveal not the timeless music of the spheres, but the rhythm of human experience, loaded as it is with life and time and the bounty of flux. He must write and represent and lead

> So long as the spirit hurls on space
> The star-beasts of intellect and madness.
> (p. 62)

In his essay entitled "The Poet Turns On Himself" Dickey had stated his suspicion "that there is a poet - or a kind of poet - buried in every human being like Ariel in his tree, and that the people whom we are pleased to call poets are only those who have felt the need and contrived the means to release the spirit from its prison." [53] Dickey was asked much more recently whether the Zodiac poet was representative of all men. He said: "I think so. Yes, I do. He's maybe rather more self-consciously a poet than would be true of most men, but, yes, I would think he would represent that." [54] The poet then is a spiritual leader, an

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[53] James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now, p. 279.

[54] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1979.

intensified man who is representative of all men because each individual possesses the potential to become just such a leader. His quest is that of each and every person - to relate himself to the universe. "You must feel like you have a mission," Dickey declared, "if not to do it at least to try to do it." [55] One must endeavor to form, as Whitman had said, "the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is." If the poet is to succeed in this endeavor, he must reveal the music of human experience to his audience. He must not just make his readers sense the "knit of identity" but he must also make them recognize this human communion as an emotional truth.

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[55] Ibid.

Chapter 1

Thematic Concerns

A. A Short Overview

Shortly after the opening section of "The Zodiac" begins, Dickey, whose consciousness has by subtle transitions alternated with that of the Dutch poet, says to the reader:

> He's sick seasick with his own stars,
> seasick and airsick sick
> With the Zodiac.
> Even drunk
> Even in the white, whisky-struck, splintered star of
> a bottle-room dancing,
> He knows he's not fooling himself he knows
>
> Not a damn thing of stars of God of space
> Of time love night death sex fire numbers signs words,
> Not much of poetry. But by God, we've got a <u>universe</u>
> Here.
>
> (pp. 16-17)

It is a remarkable passage really, not so much for its poetic puissance as its ability to capture and encapsulate the principle thematic concerns of the myth. Here in just a relatively few lines are the same motifs so familiar to Whitman: nature, space, time, love and sex, as well as others that permeate the poem to one degree or another. Here too, starkly presented, is the primary problem of the Zodiac poet. He is sick with his stars, with his endeavors to write the one grandiose poem that unifies himself and the constellations that nightly torment him, that ties everything into one neat bundle. Yet there all around and above him <u>is</u> the universe. Its presence is overpowering and undeniable and must be confronted and resolved. He is presented with a <u>fait accompli</u>, and as a poet he must deal with it as best he can.

Before concentrating on the Zodiac poet, however, it would be heuristic to examine the concerns and beliefs that hauntingly pervade his visions and his world. Understanding the personal Weltanschuuang of the drunken Dutchman will go a long way toward discerning the means by which Dickey's poetic agent is metamorphosed in the course of the poem's development.

B. Nature

In an article entitled "Why I Live Where I Live" Dickey related the reasons he decided to come and teach at the University of South Carolina after his term as consultant to the Library of Congress was completed. Meditating upon the depressed economic nature of the area and upon the generally illiterate and overlooked surroundings, he admitted:

> So now, as far as I knew, South Carolina was soybeans, illiteracy, and maybe even pellegra and hookworm, and my chief mental image of it was of a dilapidated outhouse and a rusty '34 Ford with the number 13 painted on it, both covered by kudzu. Why should I become part of such an environment? President Tom Jones looked at me with sincere friendliness and said, If you like two things, you would like to live in South Carolina. What two things? I asked suspiciously. Flowers and birds, he replied. Talk on, I said. [1]

It is a humorous passage, insightful and revealing in certain ways, though not particularly surprising, for Dickey's intense love and passionate concern for nature, for the awesome vitality of the life-force, has been well noted. It is not simply nature's shamelessness that attracts Dickey, its essential boldness; it is the immense and changing variety of form that so interests him. Nature is never static, never fixed or passive, but rather vigorous and endlessly varied, so a trek into the South Carolina woods assumes the aspect of a vision, so intense and new an

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[1] James Dickey, "Why I Live Where I Live" in Esquire, April 1981, p. 63

experience is it. It is a vision precisely because man has so removed himself from nature, from an intimacy with the creative process, and it is this schism that Dickey seeks to mend, if only briefly. For a critic therefore to declare: "Nature, in The Zodiac, is either the meaning of stars or their deadness" [2] shows not just an irksomely shallow reading of the poem but also displays an incorrect analysis of nature as a thematic concern.

To be sure, the Zodiac poet views nature initially as little more than simple objective reality, meaningful only insofar as it provides a stimulus for his visions, as literary food for thought.

> Trees, all right. No leaves. All right,
> Trees, stand
> and deliver. They stand and deliver
> Not much: stand
> Wobble-rooted, in the crumbling docks.
> So what?
> (p. 10)

If the immediate visual presentiments of nature yield nothing to his visionary quest, he has little use for them and quickly proceeds to some other aspect. Such a view is quite utilitarian and pragmatic, though it is doubtful that he is conscious of the means and manner of his search. His will in that regard is too monomaniacal, too like that of Ahab to be that rational, and the effects of his excessive drinking do nothing to alleviate the imbalance. When Dickey declares that the Zodiac poet moves among stars, that he is in fact, "star-crazed," (p. 12) it is not that the Dutchman is in some mystic union with the constellations, but that he moves purposefully among the stars as a general might among those troops under his command, to inspect them with a critical eye, scrutinizing, to reposition and repattern in order to provide best just such a union. If one repatterns long enough, he seems to say, he will finally achieve a unified field theory of poetry.

> Maybe one day I'll get something

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[2] Smith, p. 352.

Bigger than ants maybe something from the sea.
  Keep knocking back the aquavit. By the way, my man,
                get that aqua!
There's a time acoming when the life of the sea when
    The stars and their creatures get together.
Light
      is another way.

(p. 15)

Surely, he reasons, in one pattern or another, in one combination of aspects or another, nature will yield up a unified vision that links the inner world of the poet with that of external reality.

At times, however, he is not at all certain of this. He gazes intently at the constellations, so alluring, so tormenting, and in a passage of genuine poetic power, thinks:

Night -
  Night tells us. It's coming -
Venus shades it and breaks it. Will the animals come back
Gently, creatively open,
Like they were?
            Yes.
The great, burning Beings melt into place
A few billion-lighted inept beasts
Of God -
        What else is there? What other signs what
                other symbols
    Are anything beside these? If the thing hasn't
                been said
This way, then God can't say it.

(pp. 17-18)

There is a sense of incompleteness here, of something slipping quietly into the past as one rushes onward into some personal visionary future, and one gleans here too a sense of Emersonian transcendence that has been lost. Given Dickey's romantic tendencies, it would have to have been Emerson. Throughout the American literary experience Emerson has been everywhere. As Irving Howe has declared, "Over and over again one hears echoes of Emerson's ethicized romanticism asserting man's share in the

godhead, providing a semi-religious sanction for democratic largesse, indeed, for individualist overreaching." [3] If the Zodiac poet's ambitious project is anything, it is "over-reaching." The animals he so fervently wants to reappear, to yield themselves up creatively, are both the animals in nature and the Zodiacal configurations, the star-beasts. There is in this passage then a sense of wistfulness, of nostalgia even, for a more innocent time when Emerson could assert that the phenomena of nature are "the present expositor of the divine mind" and that man had only to "inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth" to learn that he had "access to the entire mind of the Creator." [4] Yet despite this melancholy, there is also an emphatic affirmation that such unity will again return. "Will the animals come back . . . Like they were?" the poetic agent wonders, and he then declares in a response that says much by saying little: "Yes." His answer is as quietly forceful as it is simple. If God is saying anything, it is through nature, and the drunken Dutchman realizes even in his alcoholic haze that there really are no other symbols, no other signs, besides those in nature. He would agree with Emerson that every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. There is always "The perpetual Eden of space," (p. 18) forever open like some newly discovered great, good place, forever full of star-beasts, which for Dickey and his poetic agent is "there when you want it." (p, 18)

It is important to remember that if Dickey can be labeled at all, he must be considered a poet of affirmation. When Dickey asserts, "More and more I see myself as a poet of survival," [5] he does not mean merely that he only perseveres, making the most of whatever situation in which he finds himself. Rather, he believes that if one persists and endures long enough, he will in the end achieve the unity of vision necessary for a fuller humanity, even if such a vision is transient and fleeting.

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[3] Howe, p. 2.

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" in The Literature of the United States (Glenview, Illinois, 1966), Vol. I, p. 1063.

[5] James Dickey, Sorties, p. 83.

In an interview published in 1973, Dickey asserted:

> I don't want anybody telling me that the only fashionability as a writer is to be miserable. I've been miserable enough in my time. But it's like Roethke said somewhere toward the end of his life: "In spite of everything I seek to establish some kind of condition of joy." Because I am that way essentially myself, and I mean essentially. That may sound sententious, but it is something that I do very profoundly feel. Joy, by God! . . . I haven't had it but a few times but I'm willing to wait for it to come again. And nobody is going to tell me that it's square to put any faith in this sort of thing. Because it's the only thing that makes existence worth anything at all to me. [6]

It is the exhilarating, indescribable condition of experiencing life in the fullest manner possible, creatively, imaginatively, openly, that Dickey feels should be each individual's goal, and it is nature which can assist and sustain in this endeavor. Nature in a sense has its own "presentational immediacy;" [7] it is its own poem which compels the observer into the phenomena around him and permits him to experience what he sees, to participate without exercising any critical or moral judgements. The drunken Dutchman is himself drawn towards the night sky.

> All space is being bolted
> Together: eternal blackness
>
> studded with creatures.
> Stars.
> Beasts.
>
> (p. 19)

Then a short while later he exclaims:

> Look, stupid, get your nose out of the sky for once.
> There're things that are close to you, too. Look at that!
> Don't cringe: look right out over town.

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[6] Kizer and Boatwright, pp. 30-31.

[7] James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now, p. 290.

Real birds. There they are in their curves, moving in
their great element
That causes our planet to be blue and causes us all
To breathe. Ah, long ghostly drift
Of wings.
Well, son of a bitch.
(pp. 19-20)

It is this belief in the awesomeness of life that sustains both Dickey and his persona in "The Zodiac." When near the end of the first section the Zodiac poet contemplates suicide, it is a bird that overwnelms him and returns him to his quest.

Why not die,
and breathe Heaven,
But not to have to look at it, not kill yourself
trying to read it?
Except that there's relief except
that there are birds.
There's one, a real creature, out there in a human city.
(p. 28)

The bird's reality recalls him from his existential despair, and he finds renewed hope and strength for his undertaking:

He's in my main, starved winter tree,
He's the best thing I've got to my west.
When I look west I know
Everything's not over yet. I can always come back
to earth.
(p. 29)

The idea of nature's redemptive qualities is reinforced in Section Six, the most pivotal of the poem. The poet is dreaming; images cross his body, images of

Monsters. Nothing else. Monsters of stars.
The moon dies like a beast. Not a stone beast or a statue:

A beast. But it can't fall: it's in a gully of clouds,
A shameless place, like the rest of nature is.

At this idea, one part of his brain goes soft
As cloud, so the Lobster can come.
(p. 45)

The moon is not viewed here in any scientific, empirical sense, but rather as if it were alive, as if it were part of some native mythology, something to which one responds emotionally and with which he can have a personal relationship. It is not some great, ruined stone but instead an interrelated part of the whole of nature, of what Whitman called the "kosmos," and it is cradled by clouds which to the poet's eye act as a sort of panoply. The clouds in their gully-like formation are also a natural aspect of that "kosmos" and provide for the poet the means to penetrate into Reality, some truth of existence. Indeed, the moon, the clouds, all of nature, are shameless in Dickey's mind, above suspicion and morality itself, and it is this idea that initially begins the release of the poetic agent from his interstellar isolation. The Lobster, the Zodiac poet's replacement for the cancerous, time-devouring Crab, is designed to heal, to be therapeutic to a poet nodding.

> I want <u>big</u> stars: some red some white some blue-white dwarves -
> I want <u>everybody</u> to see my lobster! This'll be a healing lobster:
> Not Cancer. People will pray to him. He'll have a good effect
> On Time.
>
> (p. 23)

Implicit in this too is the idea that man himself participates in this realm, is in fact a part of nature, for the poet's brain seems to be sheltered by its ability to assume the protective softness of clouds. It is as if nature possesses some inherent concern for each and every one of its aspects.

This image of a gully of clouds reappears in Section Seven, though it is given a fuller, more richly suggestive meaning. The poet is once again scanning the stars, seeking some redemptive, unifying pattern. He despairs and thinks that God is "a rotten artist," (p. 48) not having drawn the stars very well. He then declares:

> Ah, but the key <u>image</u>

Tonight tonight
is the gully gullies:
Clouds make them, and other Realities
Are revealed in Heaven, as clouds drift across,
Mysterious sperm-colored:
Yes.

There, the world is original, and the Zodiac shines anew
After every night-cloud.
(p. 48)

That these gullies of clouds reveal "other Realities" and are "sperm-colored" intimates that they assist in the creative process, are indeed a necessary part of it, because they are capable of communicating certain truths. This aspect of nature, the gully of clouds, can serve to provoke those life-providing and life-sustaining epiphanies that are fundamental to the poet's task and are reflective of it, if only the poet and nature can "connect." The ending of this passage is quite reminiscent of the earlier line, "The perpetual Eden of space" (p. 18) and serves to emphasize once again nature as a pristine realm capable in some mysterious way of instilling life, of infusing a fuller humanity.

In the same section the Zodiac poet thinks that God "can't say what He should / To men He can't say speak with with / Stars what you want Him to." (p. 48) It is an interesting statement when examined by itself. Dickey has declared that he does not believe in a personal God, but rather one that is deistic.[8] In Self-Interviews he asserted:

> I've always felt that God and I have a very good understanding, and the more the ritualistic services go on, the more God and I stand by and laugh. I don't really believe that the God that created the universe has any real interest in the dreadful kind of self-abasement that men go through in religious ceremonies. . . . God is so much more than God. Whatever made the universe, even if it's nothing but blind force, should be worshipped. But whether It acknowledges that worship, or even is aware of it, is very un-

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[8] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1982.

likely, in my opinion. [9]

Religion for Dickey is an intensely personal affair, involving only himself and admitting no intermediary. In many ways he is happier, perhaps he would even say more honest with himself, with what he calls a "stick-and-stone religion," [10] a primitive mythology where spirits inhabit all things. This appeals to him emotionally and quite easily lends itself to his deep respect and intense awe for the life-force. The important thing here, however, is that God is not personally involved with man nor is He an active participant in history itself. It is man, on the contrary, who is or must be actively involved, not with the creator in the traditional Christian sense but with His creation. Man must respond openly and passionately to the life-force that manifests itself in the universe, and it is the poet as a sort of spiritual leader who must continually attempt to further this process, to effect a fusion of inner and outer states in others through his poetic technique. He must make his words "fly." Art for Dickey must permit the reader to see the truth or even to make truth better than it is. "This," says Dickey, "is what the poet wants to do; this should be his sovereign privilege, because the province of the poem is the poet's, and in it he is God." [11]

Such a poetic privilege, however, to act as God within the confines of the poem, is not spiritually possible without the creative liberality and awesome bounty of nature. It is through nature that the poet is enabled to discern certain "Realities," the nature of nature for example, the idea of the "kosmos" as standing quite outside morality, unabashedly and impudently in and of itself. The poet must do the same, must show and allow such truths to be revealed through his poems.

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[9] James Dickey, Self-Interviews, p. 78.

[10] Ibid., p. 79.

[11] Ibid., p. 32.

Nature, moreover, possesses in its creative manifestations the ability to redeem, to permit a fuller understanding, and it is this ability that serves as the basis for Dickey's belief in the poet as "a perfect conductor." [12] He must render for his audience those connections necessary to link the inner and the outer worlds, connections that are life-saving, becoming as he does so a heroic messenger.

C. Time

Early in the opening section of "The Zodiac" the drunken Dutchman, inspecting the constellations as usual, thinks to himself:

> Those designs of time are saying something
> Or maybe something or other,
>
> (p. 17)

and thus begins, as he weaves in and out of the consciousness of the Zodiac poet, Dickey's treatment of time. What is it? he wants to know, and he catalogues the possibilities:

> Listen: you're talking to yourself
> About Time: about clocks spires wheels:
> there are times
> There is time
> Which the time-bell can't hold back
> but gives
> GIVES
> Gives like vomit or diarrhea.
>
> (p. 29)

The physicalness of the description is powerful, but it nevertheless carries the passage, indicating as it does the uncontrollable and unchecked onrush of time, of time as a process that cannot be governed or managed. In a passage that ends Section One and which is more subtle but just as dramatic, Dickey portrays the effects of time on a man, and the tone of the verse is touching and compassionate. The Zodiac poet has

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[12] Laurence Lieberman, Unassigned Frequencies, p. 74.

wandered to the window of his writing cell and is preparing for a day of writing,

> for the pale - cell - game
> He plays with the outside, when he turns his eyes down
> Into trees, into human life,
> into the human-hair gray,
> Man's aging-hair-gray
> Impenetrably thin catching-up-with-and-passing the never-all-there,
> Going-toward-blackness thornless
> Thicket of twilight.
>
> (p. 30)

Here is time as it sweeps man towards a greater fragility and eventual death, prematurely ending the quest, leaving him "thornless," without the poetic resurrection of a fuller, more meaningful humanity.

Time receives its fullest treatment in Section Two of the poem. The striking of the hour on the town clock sends the vibrations riveting through the Dutch poet, and he declares:

> God, I'm going to ask you one question:
> What do <u>wheels</u> and <u>machinery</u> have to do with Time?
> With stars? You know damn well I've never been able to master
> A watch-maker's laugh.
>
> (p. 31)

Questions of like kind continue to overwhelm and frustrate him as he searches for an idea that emotionally explains time. He thinks:

> It's simple enough, this town clock,
> The whole time-thing: afterall
> There's only this rosette of a great golden stylized asshole:
> In human towns in this one in all of them - Ha! this is <u>our</u> symbol
> of eternity?
>
> (p. 32)

Turner Cassity has observed: "The level of diction in this section, throughout, is the uneasiest in the poem, and owes nothing to

Barnouw. To credit its force I shall say I can never look at the rose-window of a cathedral in quite the same way again." [13] The poet, however, decides that the image is not enough. The clock strokes continue to pass through him, "aching like tooth-nerves." (p. 32) His stupefied mind reels under the alcohol and the endless process of images - "Water-pressure smoke crabs / Lobsters." (p. 32) He thinks:

> Men caught that wild creature minute
> By shitty minute and smashed it down
> Into a rickety music box.
> Stun. Stun. Stun.
> The new hour's here. He stares, aging, at new Time.
> (p. 33)

Time seems to be crucifying him; it is "thorn-spiked" (p. 32) and continues to overwhelm him. He realizes that it is not what most people think it to be: "Clockhands heart-rhythm moon-pulses blood-flow of women." (p. 33) No, the Zodiac poet decides, it is something else, something more destructive that manifests itself in all aspects of existence.

> The thing most like it is Cancer both in and out
> Of the Zodiac: everywhere existing in some form:
> In the stars in works of art in
> your belly,
> In the terrified breast of a woman,
> In your fate, or another's:
> the thing that eats.
> If Cancer dies overhead,
> It dies everywhere.
> (p. 33)

The Zodiacal constellation of Cancer then is Dickey's metonym for time, [14] the slow, destructive accretion of the disease that debilitates and finally overcomes. More accurately perhaps, it is the metonym of Dickey's poetic agent. If he can kill the constellation, the drunken poet reasons, he will simultaneously

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[13] Cassity, p. 188.

[14] Skipp, p. 4.

destroy a beast that only serves to devour life, to consume all that is vital and meaningful. From its elements he would fashion a new beast, repatterning the stars to create for the Zodiac a lobster that heals. Francis Skipp has asserted at this point:

> The artist is thus a redeemer of time-bound men because he supplants the cancer of time with a "healing" lobster (p. 23), fanciful emblem of his god-like power to create. He redeems us from death if he can find the right form for his connections his imagination can intuit between "things that lay their meanings / Over billions of light-years eons of time," and thereby enable us all to experience Einfühling and know ourselves to be immortal. [15]

Judging by Dickey's own literary criticism, this seems an overstatement. It is difficult to imagine any poet, and Dickey especially, declaring that he can "redeem us from death" by enabling his readers to participate in the much proclaimed fusion of inner and outer states, if only he can discern the right poetic form. Dickey would not, moreover, assert that even having compelled his readers into the poem, they would then be able to recognize their own immortality. It is questionable whether Dickey's romantic strain or his tendency to be what Laurence Lieberman calls a "worldly mystic" [16] would permit him such an extreme view. More likely, and obviously more to the point, is the idea that through his poetry, Dickey, or as in "The Zodiac," his poetic agent as poet, can release the reader from the confines of time by momentarily drawing him into his own view of truth. The reader can briefly escape time's limitations and imaginatively fly by means of the poet's words to behold truth from his own unique perspective. The release from time is not simply to obtain the poet's own perspective but to experience truth in one's own manner.

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Laurence Lieberman, Unassigned Frequencies, p. 74.

Ironically, though the poet is crucified by time and attempts to transcend it, it is the divine or poetic imagination that seems to permit time's very existence.

> Without the axis and the poet's image God's image
> No turning stars no Zodiac without God's conceiving
> Of Heaven as beast-infested Of Heaven in terms of beasts
> There'd be no calenders dates seasons.
> (p. 42)

It is as if the poet, Dickey seems to say, allows time to endure, to eat away at external reality, in order that he may labor through it to achieve some elevated sense of being.

To be released from time, to transcend it, the poet must engage both the present and the past. He must exist in time first if he is then to be free of it, and in Section Nine of "The Zodiac" the drunken Dutch poet endeavors to comprehend the reality of time, not simply time as a philosophical concept but as an actuality, a process. He visits his boyhood home, drawn by chance on one of his walks, and in the course of doing so, he is confronted by his past.

> Again, his stepping stops him. No reason. Just does.
> He's right here. Then he's drawn, wavering into the fort
> Where the old house stands.
> On the vine-stalking hill.
> (p. 51)

In the morning light the Zodiac poet sees where his mother died of cancer and the place where

> His father hauled, each night the Beasts had their one-eyes,
> His telescope across the galleried desert-night of Heaven.
> (p. 51)

He thinks the garden was here, now "Bald a few sparse elephant-head hairs" (p. 52) where in his youth he had strolled "grumbling like a ghost / In tulip shadows / The light humid cool / Of the family maze." (p. 52) He remembers too the girl for whom he filled

his diary with abominable poetic verses, the same girl who filled his head with masturbatory fantasies and who passed by him in the street witnout a word. It is all over he realizes: "All that's left of her is the dark of a home / She never visited." (p. 53) The house is empty now, and he understands "he's in the business / Of doublecrossing his dreams." (p. 53)

> The grave of youth? HA! I told you: there's
> nobody in it!
> (p. 53)

He wonders why he came out here and ritualistically lays his head on the stone wall.

> It stills stills
> With his mother's voice. He grinds his hearing
> Into the masonry it is it is it says
> "Never come back here.
> Don't wander around your own youth.
> Time is too painful here. Nothing stays with you.
> But what you remember. The memory-animal crouched
> Head-down a huge lizard in these vines, sleeping
> like winter,
> Wrapped in dead leaves, lifts its eyes and pulls its
> lips back
> Only at reunion.
> (pp. 53-54)

Admonished by his mother's voice that redemption does not lie in the past, the poet realizes that he must leave his memories, must abandon the painfulness of his former days. The prehistoric lizard is symbolic of the degree to which the past is a dead end. He declares:

> You're goddamned right, goodbye: this is the
> goodbye.
> "You must leave here in every way," she'd said.
> "When you feel the past draw you by the small
> intestine
> You've got to go somewhere else. Anywhere.
> Somewhere no footstep has scrambled. Go for the
> empty road."
> (p. 55)

His mother directs him toward the present, toward the living, but the drunken poet seems unable to abandon the past, unwilling to embrace the vitality his time offers.

> "There's not any road," he says to the ivy
> Massing with darkness behind him ["]that doesn't have
> tracks,
> Most of them men's. They've always been there."
> (p. 55)

The vision of his mother appears and points to the moon.

> "That thing," she says,
> "Puts man-tracks out like candles."
> (p. 55)

She, of course, should know, for it was the heavens that drew the drunken poet's father away from the company of family whenever the star-beasts made their appearance,

He finally manages to leave his boyhood house, struggling with weeds when in his alcoholic stupor he winds somewhat more than the garden path. He passes the old stable, senses its still sharp odors, acute in their reality, and reads a new name on the door where once had been his father's,

> a new
> Designation of somebody once human and here,
> Now also moved away, dead, forgotten around too,
> His long name harder than time.
> (p. 55)

The concrete, physical reality of the passing of ownership strikes through to the drunken poet, and he finally realizes that, in truth, the identity of an individual, "His long name," can exist beyond time. He has recognized time's ongoing flux and knows then that the past is empty for him. What remains is the present; if redemption exists, it must do so there, and it is interesting to note that in the very next section, the tenth in the poem, the drunken Dutchman comes to experience the vitality of the present in his encounter with "a real face" whose "vital shimmer"

(p. 56) eliminates the sterility of his room. In Section Eleven the socialization of the poet goes even further when he attends a party, immersing him to an even greater degree in humanity and in the present. If before he had been icy and interstellar, he now thaws, warms to the people around him, and partakes once more of human feelings, a fact symbolized by the rich colors of Kandinsky's paintings. [17] From wondering about time as it is manifested in clocks and spires, that is to say, in a very pragmatic, commonplace manner, to contemplating time quite imaginatively, to a final confrontation with the reality of the past, the Zodiac poet, and through him both Dickey and the reader, moves to a newer, more profound understanding. Having encountered the many and varied aspects of time, he at last moves beyond it with the realization that the self is greater than the cancerous process that brings about its physical end, even if only through the rememberance of its passing. It continues to exist in the memory of others.

D. Space

In his article entitled "Why I Live Where I Live" and published in 1981, Dickey wrote:

> There is a dock in my back yard, and I sit there and calculate, for this is the place the stars in their courses tell me I most am at this moment in Time: on the west bank of Lake Katherine in Columbia, South Carolina, 34° - 00.2' N, 80° - 58.5' W, nailed down by the numbers, by post-dated Pythagorean calculations, though the master's famous spherical space-time harmonics are not heard; the music here is blue-grass. [18]

The quotation says much about the qualities of James Dickey the man, not the least of which is his seeming need to know exactly where he is in space, the precise cosmic position where he undertakes the

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[17] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1982.

[18] James Dickey, "Why I Live Where I Live", p. 63.

creative act of writing his poetry. It is as if Dickey feels that that special sense of rootedness is only possible if one knows where he stands in relation to the stars. By positioning himself a man can know that he exists. This is precisely what the Zodiac poet has failed to do and which in the course of the poem he seeks to do with an almost maniacal obsession. Endeavoring to unite the creative act and cosmic harmony, he declares:

> the stars are beaten down by drunks
> Into the page.
> By GOD the poem is <u>in</u> there out there
> Somewhere the lines that will change
> Everything, like your squares and square roots
> Creating the heavenly music.
> It's somewhere,
> Old great crazy thinker
> ah
> farther down
> In the abyss. It takes triangular eyes
> To see heaven. I got 'em from you.
> (p. 25)

The "triangular eyes" see the cosmos in Pythagorean terms as being composed of harmonious mathematical relationships that conform to an ideal. Like Pythagorus, the "Old great crazy thinker," the drunken poet seeks to relate himself to the stars. He gazes "sideways, out and up and there it is: / The perpetual Eden of space." (p. 18) This is one of Dickey's favorite lines; [19] such a declaration is really not surprising given his fascination with astronomy, an interest that dates to his days at Vanderbilt. It was through Carl Siefert, his astrophysics teacher, that Dickey obtained his feeling of intimacy with the cosmos, the idea that the silence of space was not frightening and that universal law was comforting. [20] Siefert liked to quote E.A. Robinson's line, "The world is a hell of a place, but the universe is a fine thing," and his association with Dickey was important to the poet. [21] The drunken Dutchman would relish

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[19] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1982.

[20] James Dickey, <u>Self-Interviews</u>, pp. 36-37.

[21] Ibid., p. 37.

Robinson's line, probably immensely so, or at least he would early in "The Zodiac." Isolated from human company, alone with his stars, he looks at the Eden of space for his visions and withdraws from the company of men.

Dave Smith has declared that Dickey works "less with narrative than with spatial suspensions of states of being." [22] To a great extent this is true of Dickey's early poetry, and even in such a later poem as "Falling" the truth of such a statement is evident. In "The Zodiac," however, a narrative does emerge and the spatial qualities are less prominent, in part because these are not Dickey's principle concern here and in part because of his occasional use of the first person point of view. The reader becomes quite involved with the poet, with "what happens next," and therefore he lacks the perspective necessary to glean the spatial suspension of states of being that would otherwise be discerned, for instance, in the fall of the airline stewardess. The point here is that in "The Zodiac" space becomes the means by which the drunken Dutch poet seeks to establish his identity. He has not found it among the spaces of earth, in the various places he has lived and visited: "He's traveled everywhere / But no place has ever done any good." (p. 56) It would not be too far amiss to state that his life up until this point can be accurately summarized with his own statement:

> I've misused myself I've fucked up I haven't worked -
> I've traveled and screwed too much.
> (p. 20)

He has spent his life seeking to relate himself to the universe, to the external reality of physical existence, and to position himself, ironically, in the here and now by constantly traveling to experience the world. He has searched for the rootedness of a home but has always failed.

> What home? You call this white sty a <u>home</u>?
> Yes, but <u>look</u> . . .

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[22] Smith, p. 353.

The vision's thorn-blue
between a slope
And the hot sky.
(p. 37)

Again, the drunken Dutchman is afoot with his visions, but here, instead of wandering among the stars, he is drawn to the places of his travels, not the spaces in which Whitman voyages, the "kosmos" in, say, "A Passage to India," but the spaces of earth. He is overcome by the sheer beauty of what he has seen.

My eyes are full of it, of the pale blue fumes
Of Mediterranean distance. Isn't that enough?
(p. 38)

It is not sufficient and he vaguely knows it, but the forgetfulness brought on by alcohol prevents him from determining exactly what is. His mind then begins losing its grip on external reality; he has become too immersed in his own subjectivity: "he's been there / Among the columns: / among Europe. He can't tell Europe / From his own death." (p. 39) As images tumble in rapid-fire before him, Dickey himself intercedes and directly addresses the readers:

ALL RIGHT, reader, that's enough. Let him go,
Let him go back to traveling let him go on in
onward backward -
(p. 39)

The drunken Dutchman's frustration has almost overcome him. Waking nightmares, brought on by his intense passion and deep drunkenness, have quite thwarted his creative endeavors. Dickey's interruption slips the reader out of the poetic agent's inner world and back into external reality.

But - listen to me - how can he rise
When he's digging? Digging through the smoke
Of distance, throwing columns around to find throwing
To find throwing distance swaying swaying into
his head . . .
He's drunk again. Maybe that's all.
(p. 40)

The memories of his travels have not elevated him, nor have the spaces themselves that he has visited in his life. From the Greek isles to the Tetuan Market, the places of this world have left him empty and unfulfilled. He has looked upward to cosmic spaces, even ventured there in his imagination, but these too have been unyielding. "The walled, infinite / Peaceful-sea-beast-blue" that lies "Bewildered, all competent everlasting sure it will last forever" (p. 39) has proven just as unproductive as any place in Europe or elsewhere. Having realized that his travels have meant nothing, he is free to think about his own death.

> It's not so bad;
> It will be better than this. There's something there
> for him -
> At least it'll be in Europe, and he won't be sick
> For the impossible: with other-world nostalgia,
> With the countries of the earth. Holland is good
> enough
> To die in. That's the place to lay down
> His screwed-up body-meat.
>
> (p. 40)

The going-beyond poet has surrendered to the limitations that existence places on each individual, but the anguish is greater for him precisely because by nature he is a boundary-breaking poet. His despair seems complete, but at that moment he realizes something that he either had not known or had overlooked.

> That's it.
> <u>This</u> is it.
> It's that thing you might call home.
>
> (p. 40)

Home is where one chooses it to be. It is not simply some place that awaits discovery, some space that lies like a promised land at the end of a long, arduous trek. Home is rather the place where one elects to be at any given time, where he can relate himself to others. For the drunken Dutch poet it is Amsterdam, his present position under the wheeling cosmos and as good a place as any to search for the poem that resides in the stars. That is one reason why he is able in the eleventh section of the poem to thaw from his

stellar coldness: he "shakes free of two years of wandering / Like melting off European snows." (p. 58) Like Dickey situated by Lake Katherine in Columbia, South Carolina, he knows he is living in a place where he feels most himself. The difference is everything, and his attitude and actions at the party show it. Residing in the space "over the banker's peaceful / Open-bay office at the corner of two canals" (p. 9) and recognizing it as home frees the drunken poet from the confines of distance.

> He tells.
>
> He polar-bears through the room.
> When he turns, a great grin breaks out.
> The bottle pops its cork, and talk rushes over rushes
> into
> Cheese and gin women politics
> All changed all the same . . .
>
> (pp. 58-59)

He has learned finally that what he traveled the world to discover could be found, or at least attempted, at a place where he sensed a rootedness, where he felt himself endemic, some spot where an emotional truth declared that he belonged. Living a fuller humanity was only possible in the present, the attendant moment, and in a space where the poet felt anchored, where distance had lost its allure except as it related to home. The here and now become the truths of life.

> He feels his last year, and his back
> To the foreign wall. He turns page after page
> Of the world the post-cards he's sent,
> Eagerly, desperately, looking for himself,
> Tired, yellow with jaundice as an old portrait,
> and something -
> That's it. He's just heard an accordion:
> Two squeezed-lung, last-ditch
> First-ditch Dutch cords
>
> And he's back home.
>
> (p. 59)

Ironically, it is the music of an accordion that completes his understanding. The music of the spheres he had endeavored to discover in his redeemed Zodiac, the poetic music that would have

helped to relate him to the universe, was not found among the constellations but rather right around him, right at home. If the music of the spheres had traditionally signified the unity of the "kpsmos" and, by extension, of man's place in it, then the accordion music now heard by Dickey's Dutch poet similarly denotes a certain rootedness, his "place" among the various other places, places that unlike the spheres seem quite disjointed. The drunken poet will still struggle to find just the right form to express that music, to write the one poem that unifies existence, but a necessary precondition to that is his own understanding that in the space and time of the here and now, he is himself inextricably tied to others of his kind. That relationship is explored in Dickey's thematic treatment of love and sex.

E. Love and Sex

That treatment begins, significantly enough, exactly halfway through the poem in Section Six. The drunken Dutchman is in the midst of his delirium tremens, and his waking nightmares bring him images of monsters: "Nothing else. Monsters of stars." (p. 45) An idea comes to him, that nature is "a shameless place," (p. 45) and his brain softens, as if the impression reveals some rational truth that is therapeutic. His spirit, however, rejects the idea and becomes inflamed, becomes "Pure cosmic tetanus." (p. 45) The poet's brain, soft as sponge from the idea of nature's shamelessness, soaks up the infection and begins to seethe.

> The sweat of thought breaks out.
> It crowns him like a fungus:
> Idea of love.
> Love?
> Yes, but who'll put a washrag on him?
> It wouldn't matter; his whole skull's broken out with it.
> There's no sponge, no rag -
> Poet's lockjaw: he can't speak: there's nothing
> Nothing for his mouth.
>
> (pp. 45-46)

As he searches for the words to give form to his poetic utterance, he receives, in the midst of his anguish, a new idea, the idea of love. He is surprised by it, as if it represents for him some radically new concept. It is a concept too and not an emotionally recognized truth, but given the withdrawal and isolation that has characterized his life, such surprise is not unexpected. For the drunken Dutchman the reality of love has not yet manifested itself as truth. His realm has been the icy regions of the intellect. Love for him, one suspects, has been reduced to the merely physical, sex for its own sake and not as the deepest form of sharing, of communication between two people.

Perhaps not surprisingly too, the Zodiac poet sees the poetic and the sexual act as being similar. Both have as their intended sequent, or at the very least a possible outcome, the creation of an extension of the individual. Not every poetic or sexual act has this as its effect, but the possibility is always present, and for the drunken poet, such creativity is his goal.

> Words fade before his eyes
> Like water-vapor, and the seed he thinks he's got available
> to give
> Some woman, fades back
> Deep into his balls, like a solar
> Phenomenon, like cloud
> Crossing the Goat -
>
> (pp. 46-47)

What is significant in this passage is the failure in the poet's mind of his creative efforts in both of these areas. Not only has he not found the right poetic form to express eternity, but he has also not achieved a satisfactory sexual relationship. Sex for him has always been casual, offhanded, and meaningless, but behind these encounters, one feels, has always been the desire, the hope, even the expectation, of finding the creative encounter that is the fulfillment of love. In his despair, however, he thinks that his projected children are already dead, already murdered:

> they'll never <u>be</u> until the Goat
> Shines blindingly, and Time ends. Then, no,

Either. Nothing will ever be.
(p. 47)

There seems to be no hope as well for his imaginative poetic quest, nothing to redeem his shattered existence. A union with his rational faculties or with his emotions does not seem capable of creating a poem that harmonizes the universe.

He says from his terrible star-sleep,
Don't shack up with the intellect:
Don't put your prick in a cold womb.
Nothing but walking snakes would come of <u>that</u> -
But if you conceive with meat
Alone,
that child, too, is doomed.
(p. 47)

To wed himself to his intellect, to unite with that part of himself which is most fertile with creative promise would yield only "walking snakes," offspring which are at best generally loathed and which allude to another myth, the myth of the fall of man. If one seeks to conceive with the emotions alone, however, that union too would produce only a doomed child, barren of promise.

What has generally been absent in the drunken poet's meandering and sporadic thoughts on love and sex is that which most characteristically should have been at the very center, namely, the idea of another human being. Given the cold abstractions that have been indicative of his creative process, this is perhaps not unexpected, such profound yet nevertheless removed conceptions as "The secret is that on whiteness you can release / The blackness, / The night sky." (p. 21) On the other hand, however, such an obvious omission <u>is</u> surprising, for the romantic poet, such as this Dutchman is, is not a poet of restriction and restraint. Indeed he is supposed to be open to every possibility, supposed to be a poet who moves beyond traditional boundaries and traditional modes of thought to encompass and transcend every potentiality. For whatever reason, such is obviously not the situation, and the entire matter may be perhaps attributed either to the poet's unmitigated drunkenness

and his inability to move beyond himself or to his transferral of love from the arena of sex to the arena of poetic procreation.

F. The Poet's Revelation

The drunken Dutchman is rather unexpectedly and even abruptly confronted by the reality of his oversight when, in Section Ten of the poem, a young woman visits his room. This scene is a pivotal one in the development of the poet, for it marks a real turning point in his understanding of himself and of his quest. If he has realized that to be fully human one must be vitally alive in the here and now, he has yet to recognize that to be "vitally alive" means responding to the warmth, sexual and otherwise, of another human being. It is precisely this lesson that the "real face" (p. 56) of this young woman provides, a lesson at once simple and yet infinitely true.

To be sure, the poet is ready to receive this lesson in communicating. He knows, if he knows anything, that he is painfully incomplete, achingly withdrawn and isolated. In a deeply felt address, he implores and pleads for affection to touch him.

> Tenderness, ache on me, and lay your neck
> On the slight shoulder-breathing of my arm . . .
> There's nobody to be tender with -
> This man has given up
> On anything stronger than he is.
> (p. 56)

His travels have been meaningless, and his life has been empty. Nothing, in short, has redeemed his quest. He realizes that his life, no matter how productive, would be barren if that which he serves, the world, is itself dying.

> He's traveled everywhere
> But no place has ever done any good.
> But what does his soul matter, served like a Caesar-
> headed goldpiece,
> When the world's dying?
> (p. 56)

Going to the window, despising all that he sees, he gazes "into

the shook heart / Of the city," (p. 56) and it is then that he hears the sound of footsteps on the stairwell. It is a young woman whom he knows, a friend whom, if one adheres to Marsman's original poem, he has not seen for some time. Her visit is purposeful.

> "I have always felt," said her voice,
> While she took his hands into hers,
> "That one day I would have to come back
> When despair should paralyze thought." [23]

In Dickey's version the young woman whose step is "nimble as fox-fire" (p. 56) does not speak. The reader's attention is focused all the while on the drunken poet and what he says.

> He closes his eyes, for the voice.
> "My head is paralyzed with longing -"
> He is quiet, but his arm is with her around
> Her belly and tailbone.
>
> (p. 57)

It is interesting to note here that so starved for human companionship is the Dutchman, so lacking in even the most basic forms of social intercourse, that he is almost overwhelmed by just her presence. Indeed, her visit represents the first human contact he has had since the reader has been introduced to him. Their touching continues, despite a certain diffidence on the poet's part and his belief "that nothing, / Even love, can kill off his lonesomeness," (p. 57) and their lovemaking lasts throughout the night. The section then concludes:

> Their bodies are found by the dawn, their souls
> Fallen from them, left in the night
> Of patterns the night that's just finished
> Overwhelming the earth.
>
> Fading fading faded . . .
>
> They lie like the expanding universe.
>
> Too much light. Too much love.
>
> (p. 57)

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[23] Marsman, p. 249.

If previously the drunken poet had questioned the relevancy of his soul when the world itself was passing away, it now seems of less concern to him. His thoughts are elsewhere, for his insatiable desire to find the poetic words to unify the universe has been assuaged, if only momentarily. The mania itself fades with the dawning light of the new morning. The physicalness of the young woman, the warmth of their union, has removed him from the icy and interstellar stars that tauntingly call him, challenging him to read and reproduce for eternity their music. He will no longer himself be a creature of the night, as cold and removed as the Zodiacal constellations he seeks to interpret and repattern. He has known light and love, the warmth of humanity, and the experience has changed him. It is he and not the stars who has been refashioned. In a very real sense he has been reborn into a new world, a world of light, a human world after a lifetime of empty pursuits and extraneous endeavors. He has visited the various places of earth without comprehending where they were, without understanding their inherent centrality, and he has searched the dark spaces of the constellations in search of the beasts that dwell there. Both have failed to provide him with the proper grasp, the necessary revelation, that leads to the poetic epiphany that is to follow. Indeed, it is this comprehension of the poet's vital need for human communication that results in his discerning at last the true nature of his quest.

Chapter 2

The Poetic Quest

A. Critical Concerns

At the center of each of the poem's thematic concerns stands Dickey's poetic agent, the drunken Dutch poet. He is everywhere in "The Zodiac," shouting, cursing, despairing, streaming with his visions, and calling defiantly to God. Intently following it all is the reader, whom Dickey has drawn into the experience and who in the shifting margins and open spaces comes to know the twists, turns, and leaps of a man larger than life. Through the disjointed cascade of words that Dickey presents, the reader is given a sort of poetic autobiography, the development of a man who is drunk on aquavit and the universe.

In commenting upon the framework of "The Zodiac," Robert Penn Warren has declared:

> I can think of no poem since Hart Crane's "The Bridge" that is so stylistically ambitious and has aimed to stir such depths of emotion. Like "The Bridge" (and most works of man's hand) this poem has certain limitations and defects that may provoke quarrel: for instance, the structured principle of progression for the first seven or eight sections is not always clear, and there is again some sort of structural blockage in the last two sections - defects in, we may say, the dramatic pivots. [1]

Such concerns must be examined and critically scrutinized, and this despite Mr. Warren's contention that "the audacity of imagery, assemblage of rhythms, the power of language redeems all." [2] Robert Penn Warren's stature among modern American poets would require no less. He is, however, not alone in suggesting certain defects in the mechanics of the poem. Dave Smith, in labeling Dickey's poem

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[1] Warren, p. 8.

[2] Ibid.

as "an impressive failure," has asserted that its failure is caused "partly by the absence of narrative and hence by the absence of event which might generate the storm of emotional rhetoric, and partly by the artificial organization of zodiacal panels which remain static and shed little if any of the Pythagorean aura of divine immanence." [3] He has declared, too, that there is no real sense that the emotional development of the drunken Dutch poet comes to any defined end, except perhaps that he sits writing a prayer for "the music / That poetry has never really found." (p. 62) Turner Cassity has spoken against Dickey's lack of originality in re-working the first poem by Marsman, arguing that Dickey adhered much too closely to the first "Zodiac" when no purpose was served by his doing so. "If it stuck in his mind for thirty years," Cassity asserts, "and had enough force to make him compromise what is clearly intended as his artistic testament with the hint of plagiarism, it must have seemed to him a text brought down on stone tablets, but a text to be elaborated in art and lived out in life." [4] What Dickey has presented in his "Zodiac," however, is simply what Cassity calls an "unconsidered utterance." [5]

To say the least then, serious doubts and concerns have been raised regarding Dickey's poem, both as to its structure and to its purpose. The latter of these has been dealt with to a degree, but both issues require thorough critical attention. It would be best to begin with the central character in "The Zodiac," the drunken Dutch poet himself, for it is around him that Dickey has fashioned his narrative and his themes. If the structure and purpose are indeed there and discernible in the poem, they must be gleaned from just such an examination, a study that endeavors to depict more thoroughly than before the development of the drunken Dutchman as he undertakes his mythic quest.

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[3] Smith, p. 352.

[4] Cassity, p. 192.

[5] Ibid., p. 193.

B. The Monomythical Hero

Much has been written about Dickey's portrayal of the poetic agent in his poems as a sort of monomythical hero, a worldly mystic who seeks life-saving connections between his inner, existential self and the external or real world, and the degree to which this hero succeeds. In a very real sense it is a question of identity that is being considered here. Just who is this drunken poet and to what extent, if any, does Dickey permit his persona to abrogate his identity and become someone new as he attempts to achieve his vision? Was or is he now this heralded worldly mystic, an efficacious shaman, or simply a type of sorcerer's apprentice? Quite a bit of what the Dutchman says is maundering and foolish and self-delusionary, but the knowledge that "It takes triangular eyes / To see Heaven" would not have occurred to either a sober man or a sane one, only to a poet who is daring, who is himself

> the going beyond poet, not the poet of restriction and measure and restraint, the classical or neo-classical poet, but the boundary-breaking poet, the Hart Crane or the Rimbaud type of poet such as this guy is, the ecstatic type of poet, [who] lives off his highs, his high moments, his moments of insight, of exultation, ecstasy, or what James Joyce called "epiphanies," that is, moments of blinding insight into a subject or part of a subject. [6]

One most certainly gets the impression in reading "The Zodiac" that Dickey's poetic agent <u>wants</u> to deliver up some alternative myth, God and Pythagoras not having done particularly well, but that he does not succeed, and this notwithstanding the vengeful Lobster from On High that appears rather early in the poem.

Does the drunken and perhaps dying Dutch poet succeed in his quest? The question is straightforward, but the correct answer depends upon the reader's own perspective. Dave Smith has written that in Dickey's best poems the monomythical hero has achieved "not merely grandeur, but the grandeur of failure" [7] and that the

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[6] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1982.

[7] Smith, p. 350.

poems themselves "imply comedic and courageous resolution but end before the tragic dominance of the indifferent universe," [8] all of which is perhaps an elaborate and slightly qualified but nevertheless resounding No. The poet does not succeed in his quest. Francis Skipp, in his essay entitled "James Dickey's The Zodiac: The Heart of the Matter," has declared that the principal thing that the Dutchman intuits in the course of his drunken madness is "a passionate certainty of the divinity of man," although he contends also that "within the confines of James Dickey's poetic narrative we never discover to what extent the Zodiac poet succeeds in finding the bravura adequate to this great hymn." [9] Is this then a meek assent to the question, a sort of weak-willed Yes that is anything but resounding?

One must in the final analysis return to "The Zodiac" itself and specifically to the drunken poet for any successful resolution to the wide-reaching and yet interrelated questions that have been stated here. It is only in so doing that one can first achieve a sense of the poem's narrative progression and of the unity within which the Dutchman pursues his vision. Having done that, one can then more fruitfully examine not only what the drunken poet has and has not done, but also what Dickey himself has done or attempted to do.

C. The Fallen Man

If on the one hand the drunken poet is a hero of mythic proportions, he is also in many ways a fallen man. Not only is he no longer an integral part of the natural and social worlds to which he properly belongs, but he is also divided himself, his rational and intuitive selves lacking the integration necessary for a whole personality. Early in "The Zodiac" any possible reintegration of his divided being seems quite distant. When Dickey declares of the Dutchman in the first section: "he can't get rid of himself enough To write poetry" (p. 20) the division within the drunken poet is made manifest. One is not likely to achieve a fusion of inner and

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Skipp, p. 7.

outer states when the inner realm is itself not unified. Dickey's poetic agent is simply too much caught up both in himself and in the poetic process to effect the aesthetic distance necessary to write his visionary poem.

Yet Dickey believes that the poet must assume the pivotal role in man's redemptive process; in the province of the poem, the poet is God, and it is precisely through poetry that Dickey seeks not to tell the truth but to make it, to achieve a feeling of wholeness. If he is successful, if he "concretizes and conveys this sensation of emotional truth, a humanly dramatic and formally satisfying truth, then the literal truth has given birth to a thing more lasting than itself, and by which it will inevitably come to be remembered and judged." [10] The exceptional receptivity of the poetic sensibilities permits the poet to fuse the mundane with the divine and through the medium of his art to assist others in freeing their own poetic spirit. That Dickey's drunken Dutch poet cannot himself read the stars, cannot discern "a depth / Of field" but rather recognizes only "an oblivion with no bottom / To it, ever, or never" (p. 49) shows just how far the poet has fallen and how far he has to go in order to fulfill his poetic role. He is simply too far removed from it all to fulfill his quest as the poem opens.

D. The Structure and Unity of "The Zodiac"

The distance he must travel then is great, but at the very least the parameters are recognized. If he is to write his visionary myth, if he is himself to approach the light of truth so that he may then open the way to others, he must first rise above the personal pain of his own creative failures. There must be, in other words, a resurrection. It is quite appropriate therefore that "The Zodiac," the story of a poet's final journey, occurs over a three day period, his resurrection and redemption occurring on the final day. It is a point missed by critics. Francis Skipp declares quite baldly but also quite

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[10] James Dickey, Sorties, p. 161.

incorrectly: "The poem records one day in his ongoing obsession with converting such Einfuhling to art on the grand scale of the heavens." [11] Dave Smith just as erroneously notes that "The Zodiac" is "organized into twelve zodiacal and seasonal panels, occurring within twenty-four hours," [12] though to his credit he also points out that the poem is "an approximation of the dying poet's mind-flow mediated through Dickey, with intrusive commentary by Dickey." [13] Dickey's introduction by subtle degrees of his own consciousness into that of the Dutchman is important in this regard but will be dealt with later. The three day time period is but one of the many references and allusions within the poem itself to the idea of the poet as a Christ-figure. In the opening section of the poem, for example, the Dutch poet declares, "Light / is another way," (p. 15) one means to strike through the dark sterility of his nightly existence and intuit "other Realities." The line is a possible reference to Christ's remark: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) Later, in Section Eight, Dickey makes the allusion even clearer when he says of the drunken poet: "Now he walks over water." (p. 49) If "The Zodiac" is, in the words of Turner Cassity, Dickey's "magnum opus, if not his masterpiece," [14] it is not surprising that he would revolve it around the idea of a poet who, he feels, is a contemporary Christ-figure devoted to redeeming or transforming mankind. Dickey has always felt that the poet in his creative mission becomes enlarged and inclusive, greater than he previously was, dedicated to releasing the imprisoned poetic spirit or soul within each individual.

The opening day in the poem's three day time scheme encompasses the first seven sections. Within these sections the drunken Dutch poet ponders the means by which to achieve his quest and flails at the human condition. In his haphazard and chaotic mental and physical meanderings he wonders too about history, the poetic role, language,

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[11] Skipp, p. 1.

[12] Smith, p. 352.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Cassity, p. 165.

time, and space. Dickey presents the reader with a man who is all too human in his questionings but whose efforts to reclaim and deliver up a redeemed universe make him painfully susceptible to the consequences of time. Crucified by the riveting sounds of the town clock striking, he is a man bruised and divided, as isolated and removed as the stars themselves. Though the idea of love finally breaks upon him in the midst of his sacrificial sufferings, the dawning of the second day finds a man essentially broken who talks of life and light and who yet remains withdrawn from their healing effects.

The allusions to Christ form an integral part of the structure of "The Zodiac." They recur throughout each of the three days, occasionally being deflated by Dickey in order that the drunken poet remain recognizably human and not excessively ethereal. To permit otherwise would hinder the emotional involvement of the readers. The allusions do continue to recur, however, building more forcefully and more convincingly with the poet's development on each day.

The notion of the poet as a Christ-figure is implicitly alluded to in the very first line of the poem. "The man I'm telling you about," Dickey begins, "brought himself back alive / A couple of years ago." (p. 9) Here is a man who has in some manner been physically resurrected but who, as the opening section makes abundantly clear, is nevertheless spiritually unfulfilled. His spiritual redemption occurs later, on the last of three days which constitute the poem's time frame. He presently lives rather peacefully in a writing room above a broker's office at the corner of two canals. It is the description of that room that is interesting to note here: "Somebody's lugged a priest's failed prison-cell / Swaybacked up the broker's cut-rate stairs. He rents it on credit." (p. 10) For the drunken Dutch poet, and one suspects Dickey as well, organized religion, the religion of dogma and creed and a ritual that debases, does not provide much succor to the existentially empty individual. Dickey declared in Self-Interviews:

> In the sense of being an orthodox Christian, I don't think I've been a believer since I was five years old.

> Church always seemed to me to be very much beside the point. Religion to me involves myself and the universe, and it does not admit of any kind of intermediary, such as Jesus or the Bible. [15]

Certainly, organized religion is no panacea, and the language Dickey uses in describing his writing cell reinforces this by inference.

> A flower couldn't make it in this place.
> It couldn't live, or couldn't get here at all.
> No flower could get up these stairs,
> It'd wither at the hollowness
> Of these foot-stomping
> failed creative-man's board -
> There's nothing to bring love or death.
> (p. 11)

It is from such a barren place, this priest's "failed prison-cell," that the drunken poet reaches out to move among the stars. He seeks a new religion, a religion of life, for as he says later, "The gods are in pieces / All over Europe." (p. 37) In his creative poetic endeavors, sparked as they are by an imagination that partakes of the divine, the poet is the intermediary, not Jesus.

From his cell he sees the fall of evening, the first in the time scheme of the poem.

> The trees night-pale
> Out Vacuum.
> Absolute living-space-white.
> (p. 13)

It will be a long night, for he recognizes that the Zodiac is the only way beyond the sterility of his room. He thinks of history and of his deep desire to repattern all that he encounters.

> Maybe one day I'll get something
> Bigger than ants maybe something from the sea.
> Keep knocking back the aquavit. By the way, my man,
> get that <u>aqua</u>!
> There's a time acoming when the life of the sea when

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[15] James Dickey, <u>Self-Interviews</u>, p. 78.

The stars and their creatures get together.
(p. 15)

In the final analysis he is drawn to the stars for the meaning of existence. "Light / is another way," (p. 15) he says in a phrase full of religious overtones, and he knows his quest is a terrifyingly lonely one, as Jesus himself must have known. "I'll never make it to land. I am alone: I am my brother." (pp. 15-16) The Zodiac poet is his own keeper; he must make the trek alone. The mobile above his head, made from the smashed, green bits of his liquor bottle, is his "man-made universe" (p. 18) but the animals that it outlines are only "art-shadows" (p. 19) and not "the perpetual Eden of space." (p. 18) He senses

Something coming through-coming down-coming up
To me ME!
His hand reaches, dazzling with drink half alive
for the half-dead vision,
(p. 20)

and though the vision, like all the others he has had, fails, he still knows intuitively that "The stars are mine, and so is / The imagination to work them - / To create." (p. 22) His creative imagination will finally succeed, will ultimately repattern the constellations in his redeemed Zodiac. Then it will be

like something
He dreamed of finding
In a cave, where the wellspring of creative blood
Bubbles without death.
(p. 26)

Yet he despairs. The mystic origin of life and creation seems denied him; he feels forsaken. "Where the hell is the light / Of the universe?" he wonders. Though he is unaware of it, ironically it is the poet himself who is that light. Such a realization has not yet occurred to him; he is still a hunter himself, searching for the "triangular eyes" (p. 20) necessary to see Heaven. It is only appropriate then that his favorite constellation is Orion, a hunter like himself.

There it is
Your favorite constellation

the hurdling-deep Hunter
Orion
With dim Alnilam sputtering in the middle
Well, but quiet why?
Why that one? Why do you even remember
The name? The star's no good: not pretty,
Not a good navigational aid.
Ah, but secret.
Ah, but central.
Let me explain it to you: that strange, overlooked, barely
existing star
Is essential to the belt
Of the great, great Hunter.
Look.
Just look. The sword
hangs down
The dog star travels on on like European Christian soldiers
going on
Before.

(pp. 26-27)

It is Orion, the big boxkite of a constellation, that he most prefers, for he too is a hunter, and it is Alnilam, a small, dim star in the middle of Orion's belt, that particularly intrigues him. Like some Star of Bethlehem it draws him on, focuses him. It is Alnilam's position in the middle that makes this star so important. Without it "Orion / Would have no center the Hunter / Could not hunt, in the winter clouds." (pp. 12-13) If on a larger scale the poet himself is Orion, the hunter in search of the ultimate poem, on a smaller scale he is also Alnilam. He is the quiet center, claiming a share of the Godhead, a divine perogative, yet dimly living among men at the corner of two canals.

Section One, the longest of "The Zodiac," claiming as it does almost half the pages of the poem, ends with night descending, "Going-toward-blackness thornless / Thicket of twilight." (p. 30) The poet with remarkable clarity and simplicity declares the nature of his quest: "Words. / How?" (p. 30) They call to mind immediately the opening passage in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1: 1-2) To Dickey the words for the perfect poem lie between sublimity and

bullshit.[16] Between these extremities in "humanity's garbage-can / Of language" (p. 38) lies a middle ground that is the arena for the poet's imagination. It is here that the poet's quest for the right language must take him. In his God-like capacity to fashion and create the poet's use of words and the divine imagination which reaches and grasps them offer the only possibility, the only source of light, by which men can arrive at the truth of this world, or as the Zodiac poet says, by which men can link up

> my balls and the strange, silent words
> Of God his scrambled zoo and my own words
> and includes the earth
> Among the symbols.
> (p. 29)

Dawn does not arrive until the beginning of Section Eight. After walking the city most of the night, gesturing at the stars, philosophizing on time and space, and challenging God until he finally returns to his bed and sleeps, the poet awakes in the morning and senses

> Sun. Hand-steadying brightness Time
> To city-drift leg after leg, looking Peace
> In its empty eyes as things are beginning
> Already to go twelve hours
> Toward the other side of the clock, the old twilight
> When God's crazy beasts will come back.
> (p. 49)

In those dark pre-dawn hours, however, before the sun commences the poem's second day, the drunken Dutchman says and does a number of things that must be commented upon in the present regard. In a familiar but reverential tone the poet addresses God as "the water of life" (p. 34) and as the striking of the town's cathedral clock rivets painfully through him, he thinks:

> Our lives have been told, as long as we've had them,
> that the Father
> Must be torn apart in the son.
> Why?
> (p. 32)

The poet is crucified by "thorn-spiked Time" (p. 33) and he suffers.

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16 In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, June 22, 1982

This is the most direct reference in the poem thus far of Dickey's association of the poet as a Christ-figure. The Zodiac poet wants to reclaim and deliver up a universe that has been repatterned, a universe that contains a healing Lobster and not a devouring Crab.

> With a snap of two right fingers
> Cancer will swirl like an anthill people will rise
> Singing from their beds and take their wheaten children
> in their arms,
>
> Who thought their parents were departing
> For the hammer-clawed stars of death. They'll live
> And live.
>
> (p. 35)

This drunken Dutch poet, this man who asserts his divinity while struggling for the words to express his vision poetically, wants in effect to redeem the universe for the sake of others and not simply for himself. He wants resurrection for all.

When he has finally returned to his bed and restlessly attempted to sleep, the drunken poet thinks:

> The faster I sleep
> The faster the universe sleeps
> And the deeper I breathe
> The higher the night can climb
> and the higher the singing will be.
> (p. 43)

It is the first hint of reconciliation, containing as it does the idea that the poet and the universe he has created are, if not synonymous, then at the very inextricably linked. It was an idea with which Emerson would have agreed: the immanence of God within nature, the spirit that pervades all matter. His dreams and visions, however, still taunt him. The poet is world-wearied, bruised, crucified, and when before sunrise the idea of love first occurs to him, it is couched in language and images that allude to Golgotha.

> Love?
> Yes, but who'll put a washrag on him?
> It wouldn't matter; his whole skull's broken out with it.

There's no sponge, no rag -
Poet's lockjaw: he can't speak: there's nothing
Nothing for his mouth.
(p. 46)

The day finally ends with the poet still in search of the words he needs to embody poetically his images. The vision he holds is itself imperfect, and though he thinks he is closer to its realization, he in fact only vaguely comprehends the nature of his quest at the end of the first day.

When the sun does rise, the poet remembers that it is his birthday, but he also realizes that he will again be walking by himself around the city.

Death is twenty-eight years old
Today. Somewhere in between sunrise
And dusk he'll be bumming around.
Now he walks over water.
He's on a bridge. He feels truly rejected
but as he passes,
Vacancy puts on his head
The claw-hammer hair of terror.
(p. 49)

The passage is an interesting one in that it serves to heighten what might be considered a certain dramatic weakness at a pivotal point in the poem. Having spent the first day contemplating the concepts of time and space and, more directly, love and sex, the poet is now about to visit his boyhood home and experience the reality of these ideas. He will as well, before the second night ends and the third day dawns, experience the fulfilling sexual aspect of love. The allusion then to Christ's walking on water, so recognizable and undisguised and purposeful, represents an ongoing layering of images that in their totality form the divine side of the poet's personality. In other words, Dickey is endeavoring to build as "The Zodiac" unfolds both the divine and the human aspects of the drunken Dutchman so that the reader senses the fullness of his being. For Dickey to portray the poet as the perfect conductor who by plugging into the power circuit of the universe can effect the fusion of inner and outer states, it could be no other way. Why then does Dickey so

quickly explode the allusion to Christ by declaring that the poet is on a bridge? Why does he analyze the illusion and thus deflate or negate the image of divinity? By rendering the fact so baldly as if he wisnes to emphasize the futility of the image, Dickey lends a certain comic pretension to the aspirations of the drunken Dutchman and serves to undermine his own efforts at legitimizing his belief in the poet as God within the confines of his poem. He had done much the same thing earlier in the poem when he described the terrifying hallucination of the Zodiac poet in which he is attacked by a gigantic lobster. It becomes all very comic but to what purpose?

Dickey has expressed an intense liking for this allusion to Christ. [17] The passage is entirely his own; nowhere in Marsman's original poem does the idea of the poet walking on water appear. Dickey, however, has used this image previously in an earlier poem entitled "The Lifeguard." In it the water becomes a metaphorical bridge leading down or across to the center of his creative vision.

> I set my broad sole upon silver,
> On the skin of the sky, on the moonlight,
> Stepping outward from earth onto water
> In quest of the miracle. [18]

Yet there are differences between the two poems in the use of this image. In "The Lifeguard" the bridge is a metaphor only, and the persona's walking on water occurs as a part of his imaginative vision in which he resurrects a child whom he had previously been unable to save from drowning. The persona in "The Zodiac" does indeed cross over an actual bridge, and it is Dickey's intrusive comment that informs the reader afterwards that the walking over is not occurring within some creative vision. Some explanation seems necessary then, for it is difficult otherwise to understand why Dickey would expose this patterning of images in "The Zodiac" with an explanation that in its objectivity and juxtaposition imparts comic overtones to the divine nature of the poetic endeavor.

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[17] In conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, January 17, 1982.

[18] James Dickey, Poems: 1957-1967, p. 51.

Perhaps the answer lies in part in the personality of the Zodiac poet and in part in the nature of the poet's task. The drunken Dutchman is alone, isolated, and in a sense as interstellar as the stars he seeks to repattern. He is throughout most of the poem as removed from humanity as one might imagine it possible to be. Indeed, Turner Cassity, commenting upon Section Eleven of "The Zodiac," notes that it is the first intrusion of social life into the poem. "The protagonist goes to a party," he observes, and then declares sarcastically in a comment that nevertheless contains some truth, "How he secured an invitation I find the most stimulating problem the work poses." [19] The drunken Dutchman is remote and withdrawn. From a poetic point of view there is an inherent danger in making him even more remote if the allusions to Christ are rendered in too serious a manner. He would become that much more removed, that much more separated from objective reality if either he or the reader views him as being overly ethereal. He is and must continue to be firmly rooted in this life if he is too remain credible.

Then too Dickey has said that "a poet is not anything more or less than an intensified man anyway." [20] He must remain among men even though he attempts his elevated mission, a quest that has as its intended purpose drawing others into the experience so that they can glean their own perspectives of truth. For the poet then to hallucinate that he is being attacked by a gigantic lobster makes him that much more believable, that much more human. The incident, though comic, dissipates the cold of the stars in which he dwells, adding a touch of warmth to his character. Indeed, it is the comic overtones that assist in drawing the reader into the poem as an experience without passing critical judgement on it. For Dickey the poet's task is and has always been

> for the poem to be an experience - that is, a physical experience - for the reader. It must be a completed action, and the plunging in of the reader into this action is the most difficult and the most desirable feat that the poet can

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[19] Cassity, p. 191.

[20] Kizer and Boatwright, p. 9.

> perform. Nothing can be more important than this: it is the difference between poetry of reflection and the poetry of participation. I go all-out for participation. It may not restore the soul, but it restores the body. [21]

If the Zodiac poet were to take himself seriously, if Dickey had portrayed him in too rarefied a light, then the reader would have been unable to plunge into the experience. By deflating the images and allusions to Christ, by lending a comic pretension to them, Dickey makes the comparison and continues to reinforce and enlarge it, but he simultaneously makes the poet more human and leaves intact his ability to reach the reader.

If during the first day of the poem's narrative the Zodiac poet had reflected on the ideas of time and space, love and sex, if he had viewed them in their abstractness, had known them only as concepts, he very much comes to understand their reality during the course of the second day. The visit to his boyhood home brings to him a deep awareness of the factuality of time and space and offers an insight into the manner in which Dickey altered Marsman's original poem through the subtle transition of certain words. Marsman ended Section Nine of his European poem in this manner:

> He left at last
> Down by the garden path.
> A moisture oozed out of the weathered wall,
> And as he passed he read upon the door
> Where once his father's name had stood
> A hard, dead name.
>
> (p. 248)

There is a dominant sense of despair here, an acceptance at best among decay and ruin of the passing of time. Marsman's protagonist seems resigned to the effects of time, a tolerance but not an approval of its consequences. He is conscious only of time as a cancer. One need only contrast this with the manner in which Dickey ends this section in his poem to discern an immediate difference.

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[21] James Dickey, Sorties, p. 50.

. . . (He) reads on the first and last door,
Where his father's live
Starry letters had stood, a new

Designation of somebody once human and here,
Now also moved away, dead, forgotten around too,
His long name harder than time.
(p. 55)

To be sure, there is an awareness of time's passage, of its effects in human terms, but the sense of despair, the feeling of hopelessness is curiously absent. It is as if the protagonist in Dickey's poem has come to the understanding that the finality of death is not absolute. An individual lives on in the rememberance of others and in his name. "His long name harder than time" rather than "A hard dead name" - the transposition of words is subtle but the difference in tone and meaning is everything.

If the Zodiac poet has come to grasp the reality of time, he has likewise during this second day achieved a higher understanding of space. Previously he had recognized that home is not some as yet undiscovered or unvisited space that lies in his travels nor is the space of the stars the place finally to dwell. What he has learned instead is that he need not

be sick
For the impossible: with other-world nostalgia,
With the countries of the earth. Holland is good enough
To die in. That's the place to lay down
His screwed-up body-meat. That's it.
<u>This</u> is it.
It's that thing you might call home.
(p. 40)

The visit to his boyhood home on the second day not only deepens this understanding but furthers it as well, adding a new intuitive perception that goes a long way toward bringing him close to redemption. It is the vision of his mother that precipitates his discovery.

"You must leave here in every way," she'd said.
"When you feel the past draw you by the small intestine
You've got to go somewhere else. Anywhere.
Somewhere no footstep has scrambled. Go for the empty road."
(p. 54)

If his far-flung travels throughout the world have not brought him to redemption, neither will a trek into the spaces of the past. Those distances too will yield nothing. The poet recognizes the truth of that, but his mother's advice to "Go for the empty road" is questionable.

> "There's not any road," he says to the ivy
> Massing with darkness behind him ["]that doesn't have
> tracks,
> Most of them men's. They've always been there."
> He sees his mother laid-out in space,
> Point to the moon. "That thing," she says,
> "Puts man-tracks out like candles."
> (p. 55)

His father had pursued that path, visiting the heavens with his telescope each night the stars were out and absenting himself from his family. The Zodiac poet realizes that following such a road, one empty of "man-tracks," would be meaningless. It would be travel of another kind, but travel nonetheless, and unlikely to yield the vision he so passionately desires, a vision that will tie the universe together in one all-encompassing but understandable ball. "Holland is good enough," to be sure, and the poet now realizes that the space he needs to visit is the very space in which he is presently living. It is the here and now that he must understand, since previously his thoughts had always been on other places and on other times. As if to note this new direction, Dickey says of the Dutchman after his mother's advice: "He gets all the way away." (p. 55) It is significant too that nowhere in the remaining sections of "The Zodiac" does the drunken poet again attempt to achieve his fulfilling vision. He is now firmly grounded in this world.

Much has already been said regarding Section Ten, the section in which the poet is visited by the young woman, but a few additional comments are required. This section follows immediately the scene in which the poet has come to understand time and space, that is to say, to experience these concepts as a reality, and to know the value of living in the here and now. The juxtaposition is important because the lovemaking between the poet and this woman fractures the poet's cold isolation, recovers some of his humanity, and broadens his overall

understanding of what his mission entails. He cannot remain interstellar and hope to redeem mankind. The opening apostrophe is deeply felt.

> Tenderness, ache on me, and lay your neck
> On the slight shoulder-breathing of my arm.
> (p. 56)

It shows to just how large a degree the poet has become isolated and lacking in the warmth of human physical contact. By his own declaration "He's traveled everywhere / But no place has ever done any good." (p. 56) Yet he recognizes that he is himself not as important as the world he seeks to redeem through his messianic quest.

> What does his soul matter, saved like a Caesar-headed goldpiece,
> When the world's dying?
> (p. 56)

Both the poet and western civilization, however, appear to be dying, and it is not at all certain of their eventual rescue until the young woman appears. Night falls, and the dawn of the third day finds their bodies lying together.

> Twilight passes, then night.
> Their bodies are found by the dawn, their souls
> Fallen from them, left in the night
> Of patterns the night that's just finished
> Overwhelming the earth.
> Fading fading faded. . .
> They lie like the expanding universe.
> Too much light. Too much love.
> (p. 57)

This passage seems possessed of both a dynamism and a placidity, two conflicting emotions, and one is not quite certain where one begins and the other ends or why the two should even be there together. Dickey, however, wants powerful emotions to intertwine. In Sorties he noted: "I want a fever, in poetry: a fever, and tranquillity." [22] It is interesting to note as well the juxtaposition

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[22] Ibid.

of the last two phrases: "Too much light" and "Too much love." Both are associated with Christ and may refer to the passage in 1 John 2:10 which states: "He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling," or they may simply represent the combination of qualities traditionally associated with Christ. One wonders why there is "too much" of light and love for the poet. Perhaps there is simply too much to be expressed, thus forcing him into a metonym mode, so that he is content only to intimate the ineffable. It may be that the qualities of this shared sexual experience quite overwhelm him, as if he never quite imagined there could be such depths in a human encounter. Coming as they do, however, in the same poetic line, these qualities only serve to render the allusion that much more potent. By the beginning of the third day the poet's identification with Christ is firmly established. Though his redemption is not quite complete, he remains a far cry from the manic, drunken Dutchman who bellowed at God like some modern Ahab at the beginning of the poem.

E. The Resurrection of the Poet

It is on the third and last day of the poem's narrative that the poet finds redemption, when he achieves the spiritual resurrection necessary to complete the evolutionary pattern of his development. Such a climax is effected through an epiphany that permits the poet to comprehend finally the true nature of the quest he has undertaken. The poetic epiphany shatters forever the icy withdrawal of the poet from intercourse with others of humankind and compels him to communicate in a kind of sacrificial bloodletting with the words of his poetry. Separate attention should be given then to this last day, comprising as it does the final two sections of "The Zodiac."

Considerable comment has been made regarding the party attended by the Dutch poet in Section Eleven. It occurs during the early evening and reflects the continuing humanization of the poet. More and more he finds meaning in flux, in the ebb and flow of people and events and not in the cold stillness of those strange stars that have nightly tormented him. It is ongoing change, the inevitable rush of experience, that is the truth of this world. Dickey concludes this

section:

> He turns page after page
> Of the world the post-cards he's sent,
> Eagerly, desperately, looking for himself,
> Tired, yellow with jaundice as an old portrait,
> and something -
> That's it. He's just heard an accordion:
> Two squeezed-lung, last-ditch
> First-ditch Dutch cords
>
> And he's back home.
>
> (p. 59)

Again, the juxtaposition between the old photographs and postcards derived from the previous years of his travels and the life and gaiety associated with the accordion emphasizes just how far the poet has come in comprehending the nature of existence and its central truth.

It is in Section Twelve, however, during the night of the third day, that the poet achieves his redemptive vision and subsequent spiritual resurrection. It is the great irony of the poem that the vision the poet receives does not in fact finally result in the unification of existence. What the drunken poet has only apprehended previously now becomes painfully comprehended in the failure of his vision.

> A day like that. But afterwards the fire
> Comes straight down through the roof, white-lightning
> nightfall,
> A face-up flash. Poetry. Triangular eyesight. It draws his
> fingers together at the edge
> Around a pencil. He crouches bestially,
> The darkness stretched out on the waters
> Pulls back, humming Genesis. From wave-stars lifts
> A single island wild with sunlight,
> The white sheet of paper in the room.
>
> He's far out and far in, his hands in a field of snow.
> He's making a black horizon with all the moves
> Of his defeated body. The virgin sheet becomes
> More and more his, more and more another mistake.
>
> (p. 60)

That this is the vision he has been so fervently seeking is incontrovertible, and as the poet begins to write the images again depict

him as being God-like. The poet will create a universe of his own making out of the darkness of the void, the chaos that presently envelopes everything. This is the new beginning, the age of the healing lobster and the end of the ravenous cancer of time. The poet's redeemed universe will itself be redeeming; humankind will be resurrected through his sacrificial efforts.

Yet as he attempts to concretize his vision, to render it poetically and thus complete his quest, the poet comprehends what before he has not, that what he has been seeking to do is inherently impossible. The myth he writes is receding before him even as he rushes to pen it. God's ultimate poem, the universe, is itself not fixed and stable but is constantly changing. To render it otherwise is therefore futile. It is not surprising then that even when the poet finally receives his true redeeming vision, the very one he has spent the entire poem in quest of, it quickly becomes "more and more another mistake." Truth must reside in flux, and the failure of this vision at last brings that realization to him.

> But now, <u>now</u>
> Oh God you rocky landscape give me, Give
> Me drop by drop
> desert water at least.
> I want now to write about deserts.
> (pp. 60-61)

The poet's emotional plea shows his newly discovered knowledge of what has been the sterility of his life, its desiccated barrenness. He seeks now the mythic symbol of rebirth in order that he might write a new poetry. Dickey's consciousness, however, surfaces, and he describes the ongoing realization of his persona as it develops in the midst of his continuing revelation.

> And in the dark the sand begins to cry
> For living water that not a sun or star
> Can kill, and for the splay camel-prints that bring men,
> And the ocean with its enormous crooning, begs
> For haunted sailors for refugees putting back
> Flesh on their ever-tumbling bones
> To man that fleet,
> for in its ships
> Only, the sea becomes the sea.
> (p. 61)

The "living water" necessary for the poet's resurrection and rebirth must be inexhaustible and everlasting. Such an allusion to Christian mythology is obviously intentional, but the needs of the poet do not end with it alone. The myth that the poet seeks to write is the consequent of finally plugging into the power circuit of the universe, of uniting the inner and outer states. Now at last the spiritual flash has registered itself. The revelatory moment is brilliant and dazzling, and the Dutchman is locked into it. It is a guarantee of the poet's inner life, but its presence also reveals the demanding, insistent nature of the mystic origin of all life. There is, in other words, no way for the poet to escape or elude the experience he is having, or as Dickey says in "Snakebite," for "The one chosen" "there is no way not / To be me." [23] The poet must perform his role; he must in the bloodletting of his poetry reach out and capture his readers, inviting them to pursue their own perception of truth through the words of his poems.

Dickey has dramatically explored the relationship between the poet and his audience in a poem entitled "Power and Light," a story that deals with the secret life of a pole climber, a technician working for the power company. As one critic has observed about the poem, "Through the disguise of the persona, Dickey explores symbolically the ideal relationship between the artist and his audience, the poet and his readers." [24]

> . . . I feel the wires running
> Like the life-force along the limed rafters and all
> connection
> With poles with the tarred naked belly-buckled black
> Trees I hook to my heels with the shrill phone calls leaping
> Long distance long distances through my hands all con-
> nections
>
> Even the one
> With my wife, turn good . . . Never think I don't know my
> profession
> Will lift me: why, all over hell the lights burn in your
> eyes,

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[23] James Dickey, Poems: 1957-1967, p. 263.

[24] Lieberman, Unassigned Frequencies, p. 75.

People are calling each other weeping with a hundred thousand
Volts making deals pleading laughing like fate,
Far off, invulnerable or with the right word pierced
To the heart
By wires I held, shooting off their ghostly mouths,
In my gloves. [25]

It is the role of the poet not simply to make connections but to make ones that are life-enhancing and possibly life-saving. While this implies that the reader is dependent upon the poet, it likewise means that the poet must have an audience if he is to fulfill his role. Without others the poet has no mission, no messianic quest, and in a certain sense he ceases to be, or as Dickey puts it here, "in its ships / Only, the sea becomes the sea." This is why the drunken poet now wants "the splay camel-prints that bring men." It is not merely the transitoriness of experience that the presence of men implies that is important here but the very fact of their presence. If the poet is to be Lieberman's "perfect conductor" then he must make connections not only with the power circuit of the universe but also with the very readers he endeavors to serve. He must connect with his audience.

The poetic prayer that ends "The Zodiac" is the embodiment of this idea. The poet asks for the power to guide his poetic endeavors "to the morning / Land that sleeps in the universe on all horizons." (p. 61) In the vastness of her space America needs redemption. The brightness of her promise that was present at her awakening and discovery lies untapped and unutilized. Twentieth century man has forgotten how to tap the inexhaustible reservoir of her vision. She sleeps, not only in the sense of not fulfilling her potential, though that from the poet's point of view is tragic enough, but also because men have not listened to the voices of her prophets. The words of her poets are going unheeded, and this is the real misfortune. In what must surely be one of Dickey's more somber moments, he stated in Sorties: "All this agony, all these endless decisions about words, all this time spent, is going to end up as nothing but books on a

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[25] James Dickey, Poems: 1957-1967, pp. 256-257.

shelf. It may very well be that no one will ever touch them. They may stand there forever, upright and dead." [26] Such a statement implies that the poet might fail in his role. He may not make his life-saving connections, and this for Dickey is calamitous.

Dickey's own consciousness has become merged with that of the drunken Dutchman at the end of the poem, and this is one of the reasons the poetic prayer is so commanding and potent. The supplication initially was that of the Zodiac poet alone, followed by Dickey's intrusive commentary into the nature of the vision. However, beginning with these lines, the voices of Dickey and his persona have become one:

> Oh my own soul, put me in a solar boat.
> Come into one of these hands
> Bringing quietness and the rare belief
> That I can steer this strange craft . . .
> (p. 61)

The final allusion to Christ occurs in this passage, thereby identifying not simply Dickey and the drunken poet with Christ but really all poets as well. In its largest and most inclusive sense this fervent prayer is spoken in "The Zodiac" by all poets and by the poet that Dickey believes lies hidden within each individual.

> The instrument the tuning-fork -
> He'll flick it with his bandless wedding-finger -
> Which at a touch reveals the form
> Of the time-loaded European music
> That poetry has never really found,
> Undecipherable as God's bad, Heavenly sketches,
> Involving fortress and flower, vine and wine and bone,
> And shall vibrate through the western world
> So long as the hand can hold its island
> Of blazing paper, and bleed for its images:
> Make what it can of what is.
>
> So long as the spirit hurls on space
> The star-beasts of intellect and madness.
> (p. 62)

The poet will continue to strive for the poem that will unify all

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[26] James Dickey, Sorties, p. 89.

existence, and this in spite of the impossibility of ever fully achieving it. In the ongoing process of this quest he will "bleed for its images," and the allusion to the crucifixion of Christ is readily apparent. The bloodletting of the poet and Christ are related, for both must suffer and bleed if they are to redeem mankind.

F. Dickey and the Quest

In this sense of course the Zodiac poet fails in his quest. By the end of the poem he has not written a unified field theory that poetically links up "God's scrambled zoo" and this world. He will in fact never pen such a poem, though he will forever be attempting to do so. Yet in his endeavor to complete his quest, several other consequences are made manifest, consequences that are at least as important if not more so than if he had written his perfect poem. At the very least the Zodiac poet has come to an understanding of the reality of time and space in this world, not simply as philosophical concepts that in their abstractness offer little of practical value. The poet has experienced them, and in the process he has transcended them. Time and space can no longer ensnare him, can no longer cause him to meander meaninglessly in pursuit of some Other. The actualization of one's humanity, the meaning of life as it were, is to be discerned in the here and now. More than this, however, one's humanity, or at least its fulfillment, lies in concert with other individuals. In the final analysis, the basis of man's potentiality lies in his interdependence.

As the Zodiac poet comes to these understandings over the course of the poem, so too does the reader, because Dickey manages through his narrative to compel his audience into what is happening. The reader quite simply lives the poem and thereby comes as well to some understandings of his own. They are perhaps not the same perceptions as those of the poem's protagonist, but for Dickey this does not render them any the less valid. The reader gains his own emotionally satisfying truth.

Finally, some comment must be made regarding Dickey's own role in writing "The Zodiac." His presence is felt throughout the poem

and in that sense at least is one consequence derived from the drunken Dutchman's quest. As noted earlier, Dave Smith has observed that the mind-flow of the dying poet is mediated through Dickey, with intensive commentary also coming from Dickey himself. The narrative as a result has a sense of story to it, of necessity, so that if as Dickey has said he wants his poem "to devour the reader, so that he cannot possibly put it down as he reads it, or forget about it when he finishes," [27] then his commentary enhances this effect. More than this, however, it seems to make "The Zodiac" Dickey's own story. By allowing his consciousness to alternate with that of the Zodiac poet, Dickey has, intentionally or not, permitted his persona to become indistinguishable from himself. The sacrifice of the dying Dutchman then, his bloodletting to redeem man, becomes Dickey's own, and one is reminded of the words in "Snakebite:"

> . . . It is the role
> I have been cast in;
>
> It calls for blood.
>
> Act it out before the wind
> Blows: unspilt blood
>
> Will kill you. Open
> The new-footed tingling. Cut.
> Cut deep, as a brother would.
> Cut to save it. [28]

As Laurence Lieberman has observed, "Art is a strange kind of intimacy, a blood brotherhood, between the artist and himself." [29] Its intent is to resurrect the imagination, the inner spiritual life of an age, and Dickey in "The Zodiac" seeks through sacrifice just such a purpose.

Perhaps if this is true, it might admit a partial explanation to Turner Cassity's question as to why Dickey adhered to Barnouw's translation of Marsman's original poem so closely. Dickey, after all, had claimed in his preface that his was in no sense a translation, inferring that he had completely reworked the original. Cassity asks:

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[27] Ibid., p. 48.

[28] James Dickey, Poems: 1957-1967, p. 264.

[29] Lieberman, Unassigned Frequencies, p. 77.

> What, finally, did the Barnouw mean to Dickey? If it stuck in his mind for thirty years, and had enough force to make him compromise what is clearly intended as his artistic testament with the hint of plagiarism, it must have seemed to him a text brought down on stone tablets, but a text to be elaborated in art and lived out in life. I can think of no more convincing argument for keeping romance poems out of the hands of the young, and for discharging agrarians who would put them there. [30]

What, in other words, was the original relationship between Barnouw's translation and Dickey's own version? It is an interesting question since Dickey did not hesitate to appropriate certain ideas and enlarge and enrich others. After three decades of remaining more or less dormant in Dickey's consciousness, one might suspect that Dickey felt the translation sacrosanct, as unchangeable as the tablets brought down by Moses.

Cassity clearly overstates his case on plagiarism, but while the two versions are light years apart in all important aspects, [31] many of the details of the narrative are indeed quite similar. One should note, for instance, the beginnings of the two poems.

> The man I'm telling you about brought himself back alive
> A couple of years ago. He's here,
> Making no trouble
> over the broker's peaceful
> Open-bay office at the corner of two canals
> That square off and starfish into four streets
> Stumbling like mine-tunnels all over town.
> (Dickey, p. 9)

> The man of whom I tell this narrative
> Returned, some time ago, to his native land.
> He has since lived, for nearly a full year,
> Over the peaceful broker's offices
> Which, at the corner between two canals,
> Front on the square that, starfish-shaped, ejects
> Its corridors into the city's mine.
> (Marsman, p. 238)

Yet such similarity pales in importance when viewed against the

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[30] Cassity, p. 192.

[31] A letter to the author, July 28, 1982.

difference in treatment given the major thematic concerns of the poem, and even here in the opening, though the language is parallel, the intensity is not. More importantly, however, is the fact that while both Dickey and Marsman are concerned with the poet's trying to write the ultimate poem, what Dickey does goes far beyond anything in the original. Dickey has used the narrative foundation of Marsman's poem to portray the efforts of the Zodiac poet, and by extension every boundary-breaking poet, "to die and fly, by words." [32] As he observed in "The Self as Agent:"

> So the poem becomes not so much a matter of the poet's employing a familiar kind of understanding but rather a matter of aesthetic and personal curiosity: the placing of a part of himself into certain conditions to see what will come of it in terms of the kind of interaction between personality and situation he has envisioned from the beginning. He must of course then empathize, he must think himself into the character, but he must realize that his character also possesses the power to think itself into him and to some extent to dictate what he writes. [33]

Though the mechanics of the transposition are perhaps enigmatic, Dickey's consciousness does alternate in subtle degrees with that of the Dutchman, until at the very end of "The Zodiac" the prayer becomes that of every poet who attempts to go beyond restriction and boundary. The transformation results in the surrender of Dickey's own poetic ego in order that his audience will be redeemed and finally resurrected.

If Dickey's persona then sees a gigantic lobster attacking him, its feelers waving and its "saw-hands" (p. 36) praying to the town clock, if his actions are pretentious and comic, it should be noted, as Dickey himself has, that "there's a razor's edge between sublimity and absurdity. And that's the edge I try to walk . . . You have to risk people saying, 'That's the silliest goddamn thing I ever read!' But I don't think you can get to sublimity without courting the ridiculous." [34] "The Zodiac" is as much a story of Dickey's attempt

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[32] James Dickey, Self-Interviews, p. 79.

[33] James Dickey, Sorties, p. 158.

[34] James Dickey, Self-Interviews, p. 65.

to achieve that sublimity as it is of the dying Dutchman to relate himself to the universe by means of the stars. It is Dickey's treatment of the poet's passionate and vital attempt to reach out and discover himself, but also to discover others in the newness of imaginatively shared experience. It is, as it were, a poem about connecting. Dickey perhaps said it most succinctly in another poem entitled "A Letter."

> But words light up in the head
> To take their deep place in the darkness,
> Arcing quickly from image to image
> Like mica catching the sun:
> The words of a love letter,
> Of a letter to a long-dead father,
>
> To an unborn son, to a woman
> Long another man's wife, to her children,
> To anyone out of reach, not born,
> Or dead, who lives again,
> Is born, is young, is the same:
> Anyone who can wait no longer
>
> Beneath the huge blackness of time
> Which lies concealing, concealing
> What must gleam forth in the end,
> Glimpsed, unchanging, and gone
> When memory stands without sleep
> And gets its spark from the world. [35]

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[35] James Dickey, Poems: 1957-1967, pp. 269-270.

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