James Dickey at 70: A Tribute

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JAMES DICKENY
at 70 A Tribute
September 17-November 29, 1993

An Exhibition at the Thomas Cooper Library
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina
The photograph of James Dickey has been reproduced with the permission of the photographer, Professor Eugene J. Crediford from the University of South Carolina Department of Media Arts. For the original portrait Mr. Dickey held the life mask with one hand, and later Professor Crediford created the double image with the aid of computer. See the explanation of the mask included in the introductory exhibit.
INTRODUCTION

James Dickey at 70: A Tribute, mounted by the University of South Carolina Libraries' Division of Special Collections in recognition of James Dickey's seventieth birthday, of his 25 years at the University, and of the publication of his third novel, To the White Sea, is an aspect of the larger September 1993 celebration organized by the Libraries' support group, the Thomas Cooper Society, and co-sponsored by a host of University and departments and programs. NationsBank contributed not only financial support, but also the enthusiasm of Scott Derks in planning the event. The exhibition, ably prepared by Amy Fuqua, contains distinguished and significant items from the University's collections and from the collections of the private individuals acknowledged in this catalogue.

On behalf of the University I would like to express our deep appreciation and thanks to James Dickey for his 25-year contribution to the cultural advancement of the University, of the Columbia region and of the state of South Carolina. We owe a particular debt of gratitude to him for his recent statement of intended generosity to the University Libraries. On July 27 he wrote to me: "I intend to donate my personal and working library to the University of South Carolina Library, upon my death. This decision obviously reflects my commitment to the institution to which I have devoted the major part of my teaching career."

I would also like to thank the many individuals and organizations whose contributions made possible the success of James Dickey at 70: A Tribute. Principal sponsoring groups are named above. Many individuals, too numerous to recognize individually, worked long and hard to make the tribute an outstanding success. Special recognition is owed to Rick Layman, who envisioned, organized, and brought to fruition the tribute. He deserves full credit for the success of the occasion. On behalf of the University and of the Thomas Cooper Society, I would like to express our gratitude for and acknowledgment of his magnificent contribution.

George D. Terry
Vice-Provost and Dean for Libraries and Information Systems
PREFACE

This exhibition of James Dickey's work was designed to complement the weekend's activities, to please the eye and also to provide a sense of the development of the artist's oeuvre. It is with great appreciation for James Dickey as teacher and with deep admiration for his work that we present this exhibition. Special thanks go to Dr. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Dr. Donald Greiner for their suggestions and especially for the generous contributions they have made for the exhibit from their private collections.

Amy Fuqua

NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION AND CATALOGUE

In the foyer is a small display case intended as an introduction to the main exhibit on the mezzanine level of the library. There the books are arranged thematically in five sets of glass cases. The first of the five islands houses fiction; the next two are devoted to poetry, presented more-or-less chronologically but with attention to the relationship of various books. The fourth island contains essays and interviews, and the final one is devoted to Dickey's two books for children, for his grandson "Tucky" and daughter Bronwen, and to other poetry inspired by family and friends.

This order seems much less logical, however, in a written document; therefore, in the following catalogue the books will simply appear in four groups: introductory exhibit, poetry (including books for children), fiction and prose, and interviews and criticism. A few works from the exhibition have been excluded from the catalogue and some have been added for a more complete overview of Dickey's work. Collector's names are given for items lent to the library for the purpose of the exhibition.
INTRODUCTORY EXHIBIT

- Life mask made by William Dunlap, artist-in-residence for Appalachian State University. *Brucoli Collection.*


The cover of this issue is a picture of Dickey wearing a cowboy hat, his face covered by the mask. Inside is an excerpt from Dickey's work-in-progress, which would later become part of the novel *Alnilam.* The introduction includes this brief story about the mask: while Dunlap was making the plaster cast from which the aluminum mask would be made, calcium seeped into Dickey's eyes. Though medical attention saved him from permanent eye damage, he was blind for several hours. *Esquire* says that the experience gave Dickey the idea for his main character, but Carhill's inception was probably more complex than that; his blindness results from the disease he has in common with the speaker in the poem "Diabetes," first published in 1969.

POETRY

The poetry section begins with an introduction to the body of Dickey's poetry. The three collections of poems are *The Early Motion, The Central Motion,* and *The Whole Motion.* Broadside editions (large single sheets) of three poems are displayed in an adjacent case, as examples from Dickey's early, middle, and present periods of writing.


James Dickey explains in the preface to this volume that the poems collected here from his two earliest books "represent my attitudes toward the subjects, and toward imagery, rhythm, and form" from approximately 1959 to 1965. He argues that the sound of the writing is "more or less dictated by the blood, by the nerves' hunger for unassailable rhythmic authority." *The Early Motion* contains some of Dickey's
most highly praised poems, among them “The Lifeguard,” “Cherrylog Road,” “Springer Mountain,” and “Drinking from a Helmet.”


This early poem appeared in *The Sewanee Review* in 1951. It is the only one from Dickey’s Vanderbilt years to be published in a journal other than *The Gadfly,* Vanderbilt’s student magazine. The poem does not have the distinctive rhythm associated with *Drowning with Others* (1962) or *Helmets* (1964), perhaps because it was written long before these two first volumes, and it is not included in *The Early Motion.* *One of 100 copies, signed by the author.*


This collection brings together poems from *The Eye-Beaters, The Zodiac,* and *The Strength of Fields,* volumes representing the middle period of Dickey’s canon. “The Eye-Beaters” is the last and, he says, possibly the best, of the so-called block poems like “Falling,” “The Fiend,” and “May Day Sermon.” *The Eye-Beaters* marks the beginning of what he names a “verbal experimentalism” that continues through *Puella.*

**Knock.** Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1977. *Facsimile of author’s autograph manuscript.* *One of 1,000 copies.*

This poem is included in *The Central Motion,* having appeared previously in *The Eye-Beaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy.* “Knock” is characteristic of the many poems in this volume, for which silences between words and abrupt rhythms reinforce the startling images.

**The Whole Motion** traces the development of his work from its beginning. It includes poems from **The Early Motion** and **The Central Motion**, important poems, such as “May Day Sermon,” not in either of the two earlier collections, and approximately 20 “apprentice” pieces under the heading “Summons.” This volume does not include all of Dickey’s published poems, though. For example, only six of the 19 poems in **Puella** appear in **The Whole Motion**.

**The Eagle’s Mile.** Bloomfield Hills, MI: Bruccoli Clark, 1981.  
*One of 250 copies, signed by the author.* First published in **Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly** in 1980 and collected in **Night Hurdling** and **The Whole Motion**.  
As indicated by its epigraph, this poem to William O. Douglas takes its title from “The Emmet’s Inch and Eagle’s Mile,” a line from William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence,” in which Blake describes the worlds of nature and humanity so completely entwined that each has a profound effect on the other. Dickey’s poem celebrates the vision of the late Justice Douglas, who was known for his advocacy of environmental conservation. The poem calls for Douglas’s spirit to rise up into, not beyond, the motion of the natural world.

These poems were originally published between 1947 and 1949 in **The Gadfly**, the student literary magazine at Vanderbilt University. They are beautifully bound in a small volume, which has a marbled-paper dust jacket. This book offers a sampling of Dickey’s earliest work that is not included in **The Whole Motion**. *Number 92 of 230 copies*, signed by the author.

In 1960 Dickey published **Into the Stone and Other Poems** with works by two other poets, Paris Leary and Jon Swan, in **Poets of Today VII**, Wesleyan University Press. But this is Dickey’s first volume of poetry in which he is sole author. **Drowning with Others** incorporates poems from the earlier book with others not previously published and includes some of his most famous war poems, such as “A View of Fujiyama After the War.” This and many poems not about war, like “A Dog Sleeping on My Feet,” describe what critics of Dickey’s work often call an “exchange”—an imaginative bond the speaker makes with some other human being or animal.
Dickey’s second volume of poetry develops themes presented in his previous work. In the poem “Drinking from a Helmet,” Dickey describes war from the point of view of an infantryman, who drinks water from a dead soldier’s helmet to avoid the risk of taking off his own. He thinks about the graves being carefully measured and dug behind the trenches during the battle. They approach from one side, while the enemy comes from the other. The experience of death is more immediate here than for the pilot in the famous earlier poem “Performance” (from Into the Stone), but in both poems the speaker makes an “exchange” with a dead colleague.

Dickey’s third volume of poetry won the National Book Award in 1966, and many critics considered the book to be proof that his work had reached full maturity. Rhythmically, the poems are similar to ones published in the previous volumes, but here family and domestic life are his main subjects. The volume does contain “The Firebombing,” which is one of Dickey’s most controversial war poems, but in this one, the narrator must contend, not with violence of the immediate experience, but with the numbness that comes from forgetting.

“Falling” and “May Day Sermon” denote a shift from the technique of many of Dickey’s early poems, though both were published first in 1967. In the preface to this volume, Dickey describes his initial effort to create “the shape of a solid bank, an on-end block or wall of words, solid or almost solid, black with massed ink, through which a little light from behind would come at intermittent places.” The aim, he explains, is “to give each cluster of words its own fierce integrity . . . to make manifest the characteristics of thought when it associates rapidly, and in detail, in regard to a specific subject, an action, an event, a theme.”

The poem, whose full title is “May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Georgia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church,” was recently staged and directed by John Gallogly and performed by Bridget Hanley in Los Angeles at the Theater West.
When you come off the beach, son, when you leave the sea

I shall appear, without your knowing.
As you learn why and where
We are going, with no words we shall willow

Through naked tourists,
Passive nothing bodies stogged in sand
From where I watched you glory in your body
And gloried with you but are leaving
To move across the highway

And into woods: shall pass through, on
Into the open, walking in step
And out of step, into the churchyard, going where she is:
Where she lies on a silk pillow
Under moss the color of her eyes, and like them
Full of the drift-spell. Moss, son, is the grey part of silver,
Moving as though found in air

By other air, the half-alive, the half-life
Of tree-breath: precious, perilous, marking time

Over her. Your mother is here, son, with the others, amongst
The tree-hanging, wandering dead, the stomach-sway
Of swaying moss. These dead and no others are around us,
Not falling, not dying, not one of them sick, in the mild
Wilderness of the cemetery. It may be an owl
Will fly. No; there is only one, descended
Ascended into rock. It is part of your mother: it was

It is her bird, now
New on the upright of the grave
Graven, and will be here as long as stone

Will hold an image. Without words, we shall know
That we have her forever: are learning to the full
What we have: death, and the day's light,

The three of us in love. Moss,
Your mother's eyes, and an owl in stone.

Love, and the day's light?

No, she is honest with us
Anywhere, son. Death and the day's light

With us here, full of the drift-spell.

-JAMES Dickey
© 1993

The poem contains three parts: “The Call,” “The Owl King,” and “The Blind Child’s Story,” first published together in *Poems 1957-1967.* In this volume each page is divided into three panels, one for each of the sections of the poem. **The Owl King** is a story in three voices (father, child, and owl), and like many of Dickey’s early poems, explores an imaginative leap that re-unites the human and animal worlds. *Number 68 of 100 copies, signed by the author and illustrator.*


In this volume Dickey moves from the smooth rhythmical flow of his first three books to a more abrupt language in which sets of words between wide spaces sometimes create jolts of energy followed by silences. Dickey explains the striking cover in an interview with John Logue, found in *The Voiced Connections of James Dickey: Interviews and Conversations,* which was edited by USC professor Ronald Baughman and published by the University of South Carolina Press. As Dickey tells Logue, for this book he rejected the idea of a “serene blue sky thing” presented to him by Doubleday’s art director Alex Gotfryd. He wanted the cover to convey “something with abstract properties that give the effect of chaos, turbulence, violence,” so Gotfryd made final design from a photograph of a “whole whirling mass” of indissoluble dyes in a solution.


The poem was written for the Phi Beta Kappa lecture at the Harvard Commencement in 1970. In the introduction Dickey explains that “Exchanges” is a dialogue with the poet Joseph Trumbull Stickney, a Harvard graduate and teacher, who died of a brain tumor in 1904. In this imagined conversation, the exchange requires a psychological leap into art, whereas in many of Dickey’s poems, the speaker relates himself to something in nature. Exchanges with fellow artists also occur in *The Zodiac* and, in a different form, in *Head-Deep in Strange Sounds.* *Number 117 of 200 copies, numbered and signed by the author. This book was not included in the exhibit.*

This long poem is based on a poem of the same title written by Hendrick Marsman, who was killed in World War II. Dickey does not translate the original text but uses Marsman’s work as a springboard for his own. As Dickey explains in a short introduction, *The Zodiac* is the story of a drunk poet, who, upon returning home to Amsterdam after many years, “tries desperately to relate himself, by means of stars, to the universe.” The artist harnesses all of his imaginative abilities, including DT’s, hallucinations, and whiskey to transform himself into a god of the stars who plans a new sign for the zodiac.

• **The Zodiac.** Bloomfield Hills, MI/Columbia, SC: Bruccoli Clark, 1976. *Special edition of 100 copies.*

The special edition is printed with one page of a typescript draft bound in, and the copious changes made in several different colors of ink on this sheet show the care with which Dickey revises his work. The first edition includes revisions made here as well as other subsequent ones. Such later alterations include the addition of many wide spaces and split lines that change the timing of the piece and seem to create the illusion on the page of vastness that suits the subject matter. The book was designed by Robert L. Nance. It is printed on handmade paper and includes figures from the zodiac on the inside covers and on pages of text. *Number 16 of 61.*


This extremely rare, privately printed volume, in a plain white cover, contains “Mexican Valley,” “Undersea Fragment in Colons,” “When,” and “Low Voice, Out Loud.” *Edition limited to 25 copies for distribution by the poet.*


The set commemorates Copland’s seventy-eighth birthday and consists of poems by James Dickey, Robert Penn Warren, and Reynolds Price, and a woodcut portrait of Copland by Ann Carter Pollard, printed on Japanese tissue. The poems and portrait are placed inside a folio-sized marble cover with green cloth ties. Dickey’s contribution to the collection is “Mexican Valley,” which was later published in *Head-Deep in Strange Sounds.* *Number 18 of 78 sets printed “for the use of Mr. Copland, the poets, the artist and the publisher.”*

Like *Zodiac*, these poems come from Dickey's re-imagining poems originally written by other poets in other languages. Poems from this volume were previously unpublished except for "Mexican Valley." All of *Head-Deep* appeared later in *The Strength of Fields*. *Number xv of 35 numbered copies for private distribution, signed by the author.*


The first page is marked at the top in pencil "Galleys—1st set (printer)" and has, written in red ink, some corrections regarding spacing.


The collection has two parts. "The Strength of Fields" includes the title poem, composed for the inauguration of Jimmy Carter, and other celebrated poems such as "Root-light, or the Lawyer's Daughter" and "The Rain Guitar," which involves an imaginative flight into the narrator's own guitar music. The volume also contains "Exchanges," and the poems from *Head-Deep in Strange Sounds*.


The two poems from this volume, "With Rose, at Cemetery" and "In Lace and Whalebone," were later published in *Puella*. *One of 300 copies signed by the author.*


Dickey dedicated this book "to Deborah—her girlhood, male imagined." Together the 19 poems represent her journey toward womanhood, although some of them describe more than just her childhood experience. They are poems in which there is a double exchange; the male speaker tries to imagine what the woman herself once imagined. Such a poem is "Tapestry and Sail," in which the girl sees herself in two figures, one painted on a sail and the other woven into tapestry. *Puella* was published first by Doubleday in 1982, and six of its poems appear in *The Whole Motion. Number 27 of 150.*
Following the precedents set in Head-Deep in Strange Sounds, the five poems published here “for Robert Penn Warren” are rewritings of poems by other authors. They were all republished in The Whole Motion under the heading “Double-Tongue: Collaborations and Rewrites.” This small, beautifully bound book has a marbled paper dust jacket and is number 100 of 150 copies. It is probable that approximately 50 were issued and the remainder destroyed (c.f. Bruccoli/Bauman).


Two hundred twenty-six copies were printed in the year of his sixtieth birthday and are signed by the author. Four of the five poems were previously published; “Summer: Porch-Wings” and “Winter: ThumbFire” were collected in Poems, 1957-1967 under slightly different titles. Copy V of 26 copies lettered A-Z for the use of the author and publisher.


This poem was published for the inauguration of Richard W. Riley for his second term as governor. It is, in part, a celebration of life in the South and nature indigenous to South Carolina.

Some Lines from Samuel Johnson, Slightly Re-written

The typescript of an original unpublished poem was written to commemorate the tradition of eating lunch with Dr. Benjamin Franklin and Dr. Don Greiner every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon at the USC Faculty Club. It is signed “Samu’l Johnson, Esq. J. Dickey, scribe.” Greiner Collection.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN


Tucky is the first of Dickey's two books for children. It was written for his grandson, James Bayard Tuckerman Dickey, and tells the story of a boy who, armed with a pop gun and his imagination, kills many exotic animals.

Dickey wrote this long poem for his daughter Bronwen. With her traw, a sort of a trowel especially designed by her father, Bronwen must leave her safe bed to save a kingdom of gentle, flying squirrels who live in fear of the All-Dark and the nightseeing beasts it brings to their land.


One of twenty copies privately printed for James and Deborah Dickey on the occasion of the birth of their daughter Bronwen.


Five thousand copies were distributed preceding the publication of the book. The broadside includes sixteen lines from the poem and a large illustration by Richard Jesse Watson.

FICTION

Dickey has published three novels: Deliverance, 1970; Alnilam, 1987; and To the White Sea, 1993. His most famous is Deliverance, which has been translated into many languages, including French, German, Spanish, and Danish.


In Self Interviews Dickey says, “I think a river is the most beautiful thing in nature. . . It excites me more to write about a river than to write about violence in the streets.” Deliverance continues to be an immensely popular adventure story that takes place on a white-water river in the North Georgia mountains; however, the novel has also earned the respect of literary scholars and critics, who often point out that Dickey’s novel extends themes deeply rooted in literary tradition. As is true of many American authors before him, Mark Twain and Herman Melville for example, Dickey uses water as a central image and symbol in a story that deliberately challenges its own characters’ assumptions about civilization.

This is Dickey's third and most recent novel. It is the story of Muldrow, a tail gunner of a B-29, who is shot down over Tokyo shortly before the firebombing of the city. Muldrow's survival instincts save him many times, even during a match with an expert, though blind, swordsman in the warrior's own house. Muldrow decides to go north where the skills he has learned from his boyhood in Alaska can keep him alive and allow him to blend into the whiteness of the snow. Gradually the reader begins to wonder whether or not Muldrow's drive for the "white sea" does not have some of the madness of Ahab's search for the white whale in Melville's Moby Dick.

To the White Sea. Typescript.

Some significant changes were made between this draft and the final one. Dickey's editor insisted that he modify one scene in particular because it was too violent. In the typescript, Muldrow decapitates a young girl and puts her head in a water wheel; in the final version, an old woman suffers this fate instead. Greiner Collection.


In an interview with Dickey in 1987 (published in Voiced Connections), William W. Starr calls AInilam "a massive, ambitious, seriously focused novel that at times soars with the majesty and power of Dickey's imaginative writing." AInilam is set in World War II. Its main character is Cahill, the estranged father of a boy who has died in a training accident at an Air Force base in North Carolina. The blind father, with his ferocious dog, goes to the base without clear reasons but begins to piece together facts from his son's life and explores the strange power the son has over his peers even after death. One of 150 copies signed by the author.

BOOKS WITH OTHER ARTISTS


James Dickey's poetic prose and Marvin Hayes's drawings are what Dickey calls in his foreword "our images of God's Images."

Dickey’s prose accompanies Herbert Shuptrine’s portraits and scenes from the rural South. On the front flap of the dust jacket, Robert Penn Warren’s comments, “Mark Twain once said of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer that it was "simply a hymn, put into prose to give it a worldly air." Jericho is such a 'hymn,' put into prose for, no doubt, the same reason—and from the same complex and tormented love of a place and people... It is superfluous to say, I suppose, that nobody else could have written this. But it is true.”

CRITICISM AND INTERVIEWS

  In this essay, delivered at the Library of Congress on December 4, 1967, Dickey explains how metaphor, and thus poetry, “is not so much a way of understanding the world but a perpetually exciting way of recreating it from its own parts, as though God—who admittedly did it right the first time—had by no means exhausted the possibilities.” This poetic recreation often involves making imaginative leaps: toward the animal world in early poems like “Springer Hill,” into the artistic realm of old poets, as in Zodiac, and back into childhood as in Bronwen and “The Owl King.”

  This important work contains essays on a variety of poets, including some of Dickey’s contemporaries. In the preface Dickey writes, “I am... very much in favor of any kind of reading that will make living the poem—at a definite time and in a definite place—possible. I am for the individual’s reaction, whatever extraneous material it includes, and against all critical officialdoms.” While each poet must find his or her own Byzantium (a utopia of art, memorably described in several poems by W.B. Yeats), part of the quest must be for a balance between craftsmanship and imagination.

  This is an essential book for those studying Dickey’s early poetry. The interviewers acted as a silent audience while Dickey spoke from an outline. The result is perhaps
a fuller discussion of his work than would be provided by a more traditional interview. Dickey discusses a number of his poems, including poems from Drowning with Others, In the Stone, Helmets, and Buckdancer’s Choice.

This interview for the program “Firing Line” was recorded in New Orleans, April 22, 1971 and telecast on PBS on August 25, 1971. The transcript of the interview was later collected in Night Hurdling under the title “Firing Line.” William F. Buckley, Jr. asks questions concerning Dickey’s vision of American life, especially with regard to the political and social turmoil of the time. Dickey explains that as a poet he is not interested in responding to the details of international or domestic policy. Instead he wishes to celebrate action over excessive intellectualization, in part because he laments the fact that Americans suffer from too much introspection.

The first three quarters of this book is devoted to the journals in which Dickey often thinks through ideas for his own work and describes poetry and novels by other writers. Essays in this volume include “Metaphor as Pure Adventure,” which he delivered at the Library of Congress in 1968, and short pieces on two other poets, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Theodore Roethke.

This collection brings together 56 previously uncollected pieces written over a 20-year period. While not obviously unified by a common theme, as are the essays in Babel to Byzantium, these selections provide insight into Dickey’s vision of the world, his work, and poetry in general. One of 250 copies; signed by the author.