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### The Clamor of James Dickey

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## CURRENT BOOKS IN REVIEW

up there with my favorites—Emily Dickinson, Ernest Hemingway, and Elizabeth Bishop. In my book, that's the top.

—George Monteiro

### THE CLAMOR OF JAMES DICKEY

*The Complete Poems of James Dickey*  
edited by Ward Briggs  
(University of South Carolina Press,  
2013. 960 pages. \$85)

After I published a biography of James Dickey in 2000, a photographer from a Virginia magazine asked me to come up with the one word that best summed up James Dickey's career. He planned to take a picture of me and the word for an article about my biography. At first I resisted. How could I or anyone encapsulate Dickey's prolific, multifaceted career in one word? The photographer, however, insisted, and I complied, although I tried to find a word that would at least do some justice to Dickey's expansive personality and career, and that would also suggest that he could not be reduced to a single word. In the end, I wrote **BIG** on the blackboard, and the photographer took his picture.

Reading over *The Complete Poems of James Dickey*, edited by his friend Ward Briggs, University of South Carolina professor of classics emeritus, I was reminded of my uncomfortable session with the magazine photographer. Briggs's book is not only big (close to 1,000 pages with

the introductory material and notes), but there are numerous references to Dickey's big ambition and personality. In the foreword, Richard Howard calls *The Complete Poems* "a copious, clamorous amassment" and remarks: "There is a sense (or folly) in which James Dickey grew too big for mere poetry; the energy and intensity of his powers spilled (surely the right word) into fiction, into criticism, as well as into a curious form of prose commentary packed into several volumes of self-interviews."

Following Howard's lead, Briggs emphasizes Dickey's determination to spill—like a river over dams—into new territory. When the confessional style of poetry practiced by Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton was in vogue, Dickey went his own way toward something "larger, more inclusive," and more mythical. "The main thing the poet must remember," he is quoted as saying, was "never to be bound by facts." In his drive toward bigger, more stimulating, and more universal forms, Dickey in the 1960s lengthened his lines until they filled the page like "a shimmering wall of words." The fame he enjoyed after the success of his novel *Deliverance* and after President Jimmy Carter invited him to read a poem at an inauguration ceremony in 1977 only increased Dickey's desire to expand into new styles and new genres. As Briggs notes, Dickey was a "larger-than-life poet" who was always determined to take on new challenges.

One of the premises of my biography was that Dickey's large talent and large personality deserved a large biography. Briggs, who contributed

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substantially to my understanding of Dickey's "outsized personality," works from a similar premise in *The Complete Poems*. He begins with Dickey's first poems published in the *Gadfly* (a Vanderbilt student magazine) and the *Sewanee Review* during the late 1940s. Hundreds of pages later, he ends with Dickey's elegy for F. Scott Fitzgerald, "poems of uncertain date," and two children's poems. "Christmas Shopping, 1947," the opening poem in the collection, gives glimpses of Dickey's remarkable craftsmanship as an undergraduate and of the obsessions that would define his career. In alliterative lines that echo Gerard Manley Hopkins and the *Beowulf* poet ("grave glitter of guilt and gift"), Dickey announces his opposition to the horde of shoppers who seem oblivious to the God that the Christmas holiday is supposed to commemorate. He also announces the origin of his gift as a poet. Although Briggs argues that early in Dickey's career, "tribal ritual" led him "to seek the truths of the world by means of communion with the darker mysteries of nature," many of Dickey's early poems communed with wounded people and sacrificial gods who reminded him of his own wounds. Having survived thirty-eight missions as a radar observer in the 418th Night Fighter Squadron in the Pacific during World War II, Dickey found in Christ and those who resembled Him examples of the way wounds could be redemptive. Edmund Wilson's essay "The Wound and the Bow," anthropological studies of fertility gods, as well as modernist accounts of mystery cults no doubt taught Dickey something about how wounds could spur creativity and

quests for salvation. The glittering gifts Dickey sees around him in "Christmas Shopping, 1947" are parodies of the original gifts of Christ and the Magi, but for Dickey they "bear single witness to the bartered birth, recall // the lip, the sponge, the God-swung temple-lash" and Christ's "five wounds" on the cross. They remind Dickey of mythical heroes who deliver spiritual gifts after suffering exemplary ordeals.

As a war veteran fascinated by religion and mythology, Dickey gravitated toward Christ as a symbol of lost innocence and transfiguring ordeals. Many of his poems over the next five decades would attempt to redress the situation he addressed in his first published poem. If "the current of the five wounds [of Christ] fails" to connect with the masses and "the igneous cross no longer lights the mesh / and marrow of the hugely living," Dickey would try to open the circuit between personal wounds, the wounds of others, and the wounds of godlike heroes who deliver redemption. In his elegy for Fitzgerald, "Entering Scott's Night," he communes with yet another wounded artist-god capable of redemptive healing. Observing himself "in the looking glass" as an emaciated figure wracked by illness, Dickey asks: "Am I my other" in a "dark-glowing field of folk" among "the dead"? On the verge of death, he imagines entering a dream-vision, like Piers Plowman in William Langland's alliterative poem, and mingling with other wounded heroes at a Gatsby-like party.

Dickey based many of his memorable narratives on the three-stage journey of the mythical hero (departure, initiation, return) as elucidated

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by Arnold van Gennep and Joseph Campbell. Like modernists before him, he employed "the mythical method" to repair the broken circuit between himself, his heroes, and his audience. The challenge for Dickey's priestly narrators and for Dickey himself was to keep delivering the boon—the current of sublime, uplifting energy—and to avoid the natural tendency to grow insulated from it with creature comforts. Although some critics believe that Dickey moved from strength to strength throughout his fifty-year career, the consensus is that his numerous stylistic experiments during the second half of his career failed to produce poems as consistently engaging as those written between 1947 and 1970.

Reactions to Briggs's *Complete Poems* have illustrated the ongoing debate about Dickey's career. Dickey's admirers welcomed the capacious volume as evidence of the poet's consistent level of accomplishment. Calling for "a reversion to sanity" after some of the cultic celebrations of Dickey's genius in the past, the poet Michael Robbins in a review published in *Poetry* magazine praised Dickey's *Poems 1957–1967*, but disparaged much of what followed. In fact Robbins's opposition to Dickey's later poems inspired what he admitted was a "rant" against the sort of volume Briggs has edited. Once again, size was the issue. Briggs's collection, according to Robbins, was not only big, it was "gigantic," "enormous," and "overpriced." He argued: "You should not be able to stun a moose with anyone's Complete Poems." Disagreeing with Howard's comment that "Dickey grew too

big for poetry," Robbins declared: "Poetry, even at its merest, is big enough for anything James Dickey could have thrown at it. It's rather that his own poetry grew too small for its unruly grandiloquence" and too small for Dickey's desire to give "full-throated vent to an oracular windiness."

The poet and editor Peter Davison may have set Dickey up for this sort of attack when he wrote in a 1967 *Atlantic Monthly* article (quoted by both Briggs and Robbins) that Dickey and his rival Robert Lowell were the only two major poets of their generation. Both Dickey and Lowell were hugely ambitious and, like the tragic heroes that populated their writings, both poets suffered reversals. Perhaps prompted by Lowell's restless cultivation of different styles, Dickey also refused to settle into a fixed style. Briggs quotes a statement Dickey made about one of his later volumes, *Puella*, that could stand as the motto for his ever-evolving career. "When the exploratory sense dies out of it," Dickey said about his writing, then "the sense of adventure, the excitement" dies, and writing in a particular style becomes "just a routine and that's the last thing it should be. . . . You have got to be prepared to fail or to take a chance, to gamble." Although the poetry Dickey wrote after *Poems 1957–1967* (about half of *The Complete Poems*) may be less successful than what he called—with unfair self-deprecation—his "poetry of the versified anecdote," his willingness to take risks and make it new during the last three decades of his life was courageous. Briggs takes risks, too, in his effort to give us Dickey's complete poetic oeuvre and

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to elucidate it with scholarly notes. Although some readers will complain that Dickey left too much low-grade ore in his poetry (he liked to compare poetry-writing to refining ore into gold), many readers should treasure the rich seam of gold running through *The Complete Poems*.

—Henry Hart

### MEHIGAN RETURNS

*Accepting the Disaster*  
by Joshua Mehigan  
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.  
81 pages. \$23 pb)

Joshua Mehigan is a deliberate poet. "I'm the least prolific writer I know," he once said in an article for *Poetry*. The ten-year gap between his first collection, *The Optimist*, and this second collection, *Accepting the Disaster*, however, seems wholly justified. The craftsmanship in each poem is exceptional, and it's apparent how much Mehigan has grown as a poet. While *The Optimist* can feel imitative as well as brilliant, Mehigan's voice in *Accepting the Disaster* is sure and possesses a disarming restraint.

Mehigan's use of form in *Accepting the Disaster* is, to say the least, extraordinary. His subtlety in rhyme and meter is unparalleled; though he often writes with end-stopped lines and exact, often monosyllabic, rhymes, his verse never sounds forced. Instead the forms Mehigan employs—sonnets, triolets, ballads etc.—complement and enliven his distinctly low-key register, rather than

usurp it. Take the second quatrain of "Here," the first poem in the collection and a perfect Petrarchan sonnet:

It is the same no matter where  
you go,  
and downtown you will find no  
big surprises.  
Each fall the dew point falls until  
it rises.  
White snow, green buds, green  
lawn, red leaves, white snow.

The understated music of these rhymes is exquisite, despite the strict adherence to formal constraints. The rhyme of "surprises" and "rises" is delightful, and the return to "white snow" at the end of the last line is a stroke of genius. It is Mehigan's fidelity to common speech patterns that allows him to speak in strict and musical meter without his verses sounding elevated. A line like "Each fall the dew point falls until it rises" is entirely conversational, yet contains a sublime music that is all the more potent for its subtlety.

One of Mehigan's greatest assets in this collection is his mastery of the single line. He is as deeply engaged with the music and logic of a line as Frost or Larkin, and his interplay with line and sentence is always purposeful. This is evident in the triolet, "The Crossroads," which is entirely end-stopped with periods.

This is the place it happened. It  
was here.  
You might not know it was unless  
you knew.  
All day the cars blow past and  
disappear.  
This is the place it happened. It  
was here.

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