James Dickey: The Bee

I spent a long time thinking about what to send out after a long hiatus. It having been spring—I'm echoing a poem I don't like, although it is immensely quotable, ee cummings' "In Just-/spring when the world is mud-/luscious" – I decided to send two diametrically opposite spring poems, one by Emily Dickinson and one by William Wordsworth.

As I wrote then, I was on a sabbatical leave, working on revising letters I had earlier sent out by email.

I enjoyed the work. I revisited what I had written, revised, revised some more, and added introductions to each essay. I thought I was done, but in adding the introduction to a chapter on a poem by Elizabeth Bishop I reread the Bishop essay, and thought 'Ouch. There are more typographical errors than I knew, and there are still stylistic infelicities.' So I revised once more.

Through this period of revision and elucidation, I often considered which poem I should send out next. At first it was a poem by Friedrich Hölderlin called "Hyperion's Song of Destiny," but the more I read Hölderlin the more I realized that the poem was not typical of his voice and style[1]. I read a lot of Hölderlin, as I had done in the first year I was in Washington. He is for me a very strange poet: None of his poems come into the tight focus I like to bring to poems, and yet, the more I read Hölderlin (and fail to understand the individual poems) the more I think I know what he is about. And that has led me to consider him along with Wordsworth, his exact contemporary in writing poems. as the greatest of Romantic poets. Maybe someday I will tackle a Hölderlin poem. But I am not ready to do so yet. ….

I also, so as not to become enmeshed solely in revisiting poems I had dealt with in the past, embarked on a reading program that pushed me onward. Poems can be hard to read. Even when they remain not only difficult but opaque, the experience of trying to understand them can be rewarding. I sometimes think that the idea that we can read a poem and understand it immediately – and if we don't,

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[1] Johannes Brahms also loved this poem of Hölderlin's. He set it to music; it is his Opus 54. You can listen to my searching YouTube for 'Brahms song of destiny.' . It was a great discovery to me, for I came upon it and was transfixed. It is one of the great masterpieces of Western music, and I, though I had listened to a lot of Brahms, ahd never heard it before turning my attention to Hölderlin's poems.

we are stupid or insensitive or unlearned – is a dangerous idea. Just as baseball is a hard game to master, just as cooking well takes practice and even failure, so reading poems can be difficult work. What comes easily is, sometimes, a visit to what we already know. Yet poems, as I keep repeating in these mailings, are important vehicles for understanding what we do not know, or do not know we know[2].

I re-read Paul Celan, the strongest German language poet of the Holocaust. The more I re-read him, the less I understand his poems. He aimed at a radical strangeness, and he achieved that. I greatly admire his work, but feel I understood it better ten years ago than I do today. Great poems can do that, move from familiarity into strangeness.

I read a lot of Osip Mandelstam, a poet I have struggled with over the years. A relatively new translation by Christian Wiman opened my eyes. Remarkable. Yet I found I liked, after my eyes were opened, the older translations by W.S. Merwin and Clarence Brown. Still, did I understand enough to send out a poem? I think so, but wasn't sure.

I thought of addressing a poem by Robert Lowell. Every time I return to his poems I understand why he was thought to be such a significant poet of later twentieth century America. But I didn't fully get beyond rereading some of his best poems, although I did start to write about two.

I thought of Rainer Maria Rilke, another poet who challenges to me. I had earlier promised to send out one of his poems, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," one of the most dramatic poems of the twentieth century. But I was not ready to write about Rilke.

Nor, maybe, Akhmatova, Yeats, Stevens, Hass, Apollinaire.

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[2] Alexander Pope wrote, "True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,/What oft was said but ne'er so well express'd." I have also been reading a lot of Pope. I had forgotten how mellifluous rhymed couplets can be – before re-reading them, my recollection was that they were too controlled and old fashioned to make sense in our era of free verse – and how deep the truths and perspectives Pope articulates, even though he is regarded as a rather trite thinker. So much of what is best in our values and aspirations dates from the 18th century, yet we are – most of us – unprepared to encounter that age of rationality with anything but superciliousness and disdain. To our loss, I think. I have been surprised by how much I have enjoyed and appreciated Alexander Pope. In the midst of the strangeness in poems I discuss above, here is this strangeness of re-encountering as stunning what I had thought, well, not worthy of my notice.

Instead, I sent out a poem by James Dickey. He was not the greatest of poets, though he was a very fine one. And few but me would think this poem one of his finest. And it is, despite what I wrote above, not enormously difficult.

But I love the poem and love what it tells the reader. So here is James Dickey's "The Bee."

The Bee

James Dickey

to the football coaches of
Clemson College, 1942

One dot
Grainily shifting   we at roadside and
The smallest wings coming   along the rail fence out
Of the woods   one dot   of all that green. It now
Becomes flesh-crawling   then the quite still
Of stinging. I must live faster for my terrified
Small son   it is on him. Has come. Clings.

Old wingback, come
To life. If your knee action is high
Enough, the fat may fall in time   God damn
You, Dickey, *dig*   this is your last time to cut
And run   but you must give it everything you have
Left, for screaming near your screaming child is the sheer
Murder of California traffic: some bee hangs driving

Your child
Blindly onto the highway. Get there however
Is still possible. Long live what I badly did
At Clemson   and all of my clumsiest drives
For the ball   all of my trying to turn
The corner downfield   and my spindling explosions
Through the five-hole over tackle. O backfield

Coach Shag Norton,
Tell me as you never yet have told me

To get the lead out scream   whatever will get
The slow-motion of middle age off me   I cannot
Make it this way   I will have to leave
My feet   they are gone   I have him where
He lives   and down we go singing with screams into

The dirt,
Son-screams of fathers   screams of dead coaches turning
To approval   and from between us the bee rises screaming
With flight   grainily shifting   riding the rail fence
Back into the woods   traffic blasting past us
Unchanged, nothing heard through the air-
conditioning glass   we lying at roadside full

Of the forearm prints
Of roadrocks   strawberries on our elbows as from
Scrimmage with the varsity   now we can get
Up   stand   turn away from the highway   look straight
Into trees. See, there is nothing coming out   no
Smallest wing   no shift of a flight-grain   nothing
Nothing. Let us go in, son, and listen

For some tobacco-
mumbling voice in the branches   to say “That’s
a little better,”   to our lives still hanging
By a hair. There is nothing to stop us   we can go
Deep   deeper   into elms, and listen to traffic die
Roaring, like a football crowd from which we have
Vanished. Dead coaches live in the air, son   live

In the ear
Like fathers, and *urge*   and *urge.* They want you better
Than you are. When needed, they rise and curse you   they scream
When something must be saved. Here, under this tree,
We can sit down. You can sleep, and I can try
To give back what I have earned by keeping us
Alive, and safe from bees: the smile of some kind

Of savior—
Of touchdowns, of fumbles, battles,
Lives. Let me sit here with you, son

As on the bench, while the first string takes back
Over, far away   and say with my silentest tongue, with the man-
creating bruises of my arms   with a live leaf a quick
Dead hand on my shoulder, “Coach Norton, I am your boy.”

I returned to teaching after leaving Washington. If asked what I do, that is how I would define myself. This poem is about teaching. It is also about fatherhood, and that also is part of who I am.

Let me preface this poem with some lines about teaching from Whitman, lines which appear near the close of “Song of Myself.” Whitman was not a teacher, although his poems have provided me with some of the greatest lessons in my life, and he (as you who have been reading these essays from the start will recognize) is always over my shoulder, always whispering in my ear[3].

He begins section 47 of “Song of Myself,” with profound words about teaching. I think they are exactly right, deeply and profoundly illuminating about one of the strangest and most necessary of human activities :

I am the teacher of athletes,
He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my own,
He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.

Dickey’s “The Bee” is quite literally about a “teacher of athletes.”

But before we begin on the poem, perhaps some works about James Dickey are in order.

Dickey was born in Atlanta, where he lived until he enrolled at Clemson College in 1942. He was a tailback on the football team there, an experience of central importance to “The Bee.” When America entered World War II. he dropped out of Clemson after one semester to join the Air Corps. He served as a navigator in the Pacific Theater.

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[3] Damn! Whitman, wiser than we know, already knew that. In lines of section 47, not long after the lines I am about to quote, he wrote:

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?
I follow you whoever you are from the present hour,
My words itch at your ears till you understand them

After the war he enrolled at Vanderbilt University, taught English at Rice and Florida. Canned at Florida because of a poem he read that was thought to be scandalous, he decided to make money and so he worked for an advertising agency in Atlanta, doing work on the Coca-Cola account. He wrote poems at night[4].

Success followed. A Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Book Award for *Buckdancer's Choice* in 1965, selection as Poet in Residence at the Library of Congress[5].

What characterized much of Dickey's poetry, it seems to me, was not its highly-praised Southern-ness but its embrace of narrative. Most poetry of the twentieth century has been lyric poetry, singing of the poet's emotions, of his or her take on the world, of the tension between an individual and the wrong-ness of society. The narrative impulse, which drove Homer and thereafter so many other poets, declined as poems grew both shorter and more personal.

I can't stress that narrative armature strongly enough. The poem we are about to embark on tells a story. Actually, two stories: the primary one is a man's drive to save a son stung by a bee, but there is also that man's recollection of how his college experience stayed with him even though he had not recognized that fact[6].

One dot
Grainily shifting   we at roadside and
The smallest wings coming   along the rail fence out
Of the woods   one dot   of all that green. It now
Becomes flesh-crawling   then the quite still
Of stinging. I must live faster for my terrified
Small son   it is on him. Has come. Clings.

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[4] Similarly, Joseph Heller worked at an advertising agency in New York and wrote a novel at night, *Catch-22*. After it was published to critical acclaim, he quit his advertising job.

[5] Today the position is called the Poet Laureate.

[6] Before embarking on the poem, I will acknowledge it is very 'male." It is about football, fathers and sons, coaches, manhood. Nothing wrong with any of that, unless we pretend that such a poem covers the entirety of human experience. So, having paired two poems in my previous mailing, I decided I should – let I me too 'male' in my choices and readings – send out a complementary poem. You will receive it within a day. It is Maxine Kumin's wonderful "How It Is," a poem by a woman about, well, the deepest sort of sisterhood.

A word on personal connections. Maes Dickey was a teacher of my wife's. Maxine Kumin, in a brief seminar, was a teacher of mine.

The opening stanza sets the scene and initiates the action. A man and his small son are near a road when a bee – that 'one dot" with which the poem begins – comes out of the woods and, landing on his son's arm or neck stings the young boy. The boy of course is "terrified: and panics.

The shape of the lines is unlike anything we have seen in previous poets we have read. The first line is two words[7]; the next two lines, like early English poetry, are divided in the middle but without the alliteration that served in lieu of rhyme to bind the line together. The third line, as the bee is identified in contradistinction to the green woods, has three pauses; then a divided line; then, as the speaker becomes aware what is happening and realizes he might have to spring into action, a line is not only undivided (despite the presence of a period, which should be a full stop) and in fact spills over into the succeeding line. Then a pause as the bee settles on the young boy – "Small son   it is on him. Has come. Clings." – and the father observes the semi-finality of the bee, stinging.

The shaping of each line, then, has to do with both the rhythm of language and the pattern of events that the poetic consciousness is describing. Dickey's use of these internal line breaks mimics, I think, the rush and hesitations of speech; it also allows the words to speed up and slow down as the action does likewise. It's an idiosyncratic device, allowing Dickey to use free verse, to vary line lengths, and yet to control the ways in which his words and phrases move onward in the poem's progress.

The line which is prophetic for the poem is that second part of the long unbroken line: "I must live faster for my terrified/Small son." The story the poem will recount in in one sense simple: a young boy gets stung by a bee and, terrified, starts to run away from whatever has hurt him. As he runs, he heads straight for a busy highway. His father must rescue him from darting into the traffic and being hit by a car. The father runs, finds there is not sufficient time to catch his son by running, and so tackles him just short of the highway.

The rest is denouement: the father comforts his frightened son, walks him into the peacefulness of the woods, and thinks back on what has just happened.

Almost immediately the need to run, to run fast, to 'save' the day, is connected to lessons the narrator learned on the football field:

Old wingback, come

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[7] This very brief first line reproduces, structurally, the bee's small but significant appearance on that summer day. That "one dot" will be the cause of all the action between father and son which ensues.

To life. If your knee action is high
Enough, the fat may fall in time   God damn
You, Dickey, *dig*   this is your last time to cut
And run   but you must give it everything you have
Left, for screaming near your screaming child is the sheer
Murder of California traffic: some bee hangs driving

Your child
Blindly onto the highway.

He hears – the whole poem is here, although the poet will not recognize the importance of the words he hears echoing in his head until the end of the poem – the voice of his college coach urging him to run fast, to lift his knees and "God damn/ You, Dickey, dig[8]." He, middle-aged, must call on the speed he had as a college freshman, because great danger looms: "for screaming near your screaming child is the sheer/ Murder of California traffic: some bee hangs driving// Your child/ Blindly onto the highway"

Get there however
Is still possible. Long live what I badly did
At Clemson   and all of my clumsiest drives
For the ball   all of my trying to turn
The corner downfield   and my spindling explosions
Through the five-hole over tackle. O backfield

Coach Shag Norton,
Tell me as you never yet have told me
To get the lead out scream   whatever will get
The slow-motion of middle age off me

Again, or rather continuing, the recollection of his college football practices, the voice of his backfield coach, comes to mind.

Among athletes and coaches, there is much talk of 'muscle memory,' of training the muscles and reflexes to do what must be done without thinking. Whether it is ski racing or tennis, making a cut as a runner in football or putting the proper spin on a pool ball, too much consciousness is the enemy of performance. The body must react without the temporal lag of thought, without the self-consciousness that can interfere with reflexes.

[8] Though many of you will know this, not all will, so let me gloss this athletic jargon. 'Dig' in sports vernacular means 'drive yourself.'

But this poem is not about sport, but about a different sort of memory, of words embedded so deeply in the mind that they can, as automatically as a reflex, condition our actions. Dickey was, as he tells us, not a very good running back ("what I badly did…clumsiest…trying to turn…spindling explosions"). His coach, Shaf Norton, was always exhorting him to do better, to run faster (the colloquial, "get the lead out.") Now, in 'the slow-motion of middle age" Dickey needs the exhortations even more. His young son is headed toward to careening traffic of the busy highway.

The football memory is appropriate, for the poet/protagonist realizes that he does not have the time to catch up to his son, to grab his shoulder or stand before him. The running back of Clemson days is now a defensive back, not trying to break free but having to make a 'game-saving' tackle:

> I cannot
> Make it this way   I will have to leave
> My feet   they are gone   I have him where
> He lives   and down we go singing with screams into
>
> The dirt,
> Son-screams of fathers   screams of dead coaches turning
> To approval

A semi-identity is postulated in the last lines above, "Son-screams of fathers screams of dead coaches." Fathers and coaches, coaches and fathers. We will see Dickey build on this.

> and from between us the bee rises screaming
> With flight   grainily shifting   riding the rail fence
> Back into the woods   traffic blasting past us
> Unchanged, nothing heard through the air-
> conditioning glass   we lying at roadside full
>
> Of the forearm prints
> Of roadrocks   strawberries on our elbows as from
> Scrimmage with the varsity   now we can get
> Up   stand   turn away from the highway   look straight
> Into trees. See, there is nothing coming out   no
> Smallest wing   no shift of a flight-grain   nothing
> Nothing. Let us go in, son, and listen

In the lines above the leaves off stinging and flies back into the woods, the 'grainily shifting' of its exit resounding with the opening lines when a 'grainily shifting' announced its entrance, both connected to the "rail fence" and "the woods." The reality of what he had intuited is now borne home, "traffic blasting past us," a world of potential destruction averted, a world that was totally unaware of the danger of this son, the drivers in a cocoon of driving, "nothing heard through the air/conditioning glass."

It *is* like the aftermath of a football practice, "strawberries on our elbows" (i.e., reddish bruises). Now that the event, saving his son from the "sheer murder of California traffic," is over, they can "turn away" and look at the trees. The father reassures the son: no more bee, "nothing/ Nothing" but trees. And so they enter the woods, no longer the source of the bee but a saving and salving force, far from the murderous traffic.

Here, as they head deeper into the woods, he still hears the words that impelled him to run as fast as he could, to run with great urgency to save his one. He listens

> For some tobacco-
> mumbling voice in the branches   to say "That's
> a little better,"   to our lives still hanging
> By a hair. There is nothing to stop us   we can go
> Deep   deeper   into elms, and listen to traffic die
> Roaring, like a football crowd from which we have
> Vanished.

The football fields of his youth have vanished, but not that voice. It continues to resound. Shag Norton now rewards him – no great kudos over the rescue and the effort he made to save his son – but a reward nonetheless. "that's little better." You did what you had to do, better than might have been expected.

Dickey approaches his conclusion, which will take two stanzas. The last line of the stanza above inaugurates this conclusion, introducing it and summing it up:

> Dead coaches live in the air, son   live

And then the lines following, echoing (it seems to me) Walt Whitman[9]

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[9] "Urge and urge and urge/ Always the procreant urge of the world," he says in section three of "Song of Myself." Whitman is speaking of growth as a principle of all existence, of the entire universe. Dickey's focus is narrower: he

In the ear
Like fathers, and *urge*   and *urge.* They want you better
Than you are. When needed, they rise and curse you   they scream
When something must be saved.

Wonderful lines, the voice of the father – well, "like fathers" he says, since it is the coach speaking into his inner ear – urging the son to be "better/ than you are." Urging, modest compliments (we recall that praise, "that's a little better, son" from the previous stanza), shouting, cursing, screaming. Whatever is needed to propel the young to exceed their modest expectations for themselves. Then, mid-stanza, the father sits down with his son and gives a different kind of paternal love[10]:

Here, under this tree,
We can sit down. You can sleep, and I can try
To give back what I have earned by keeping us
Alive, and safe from bees: the smile of some kind

Of savior—
Of touchdowns, of fumbles, battles,
Lives. Let me sit here with you, son
As on the bench . . .

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is speaking of the relations between fathers and sons, the intergenerational imperative to surpass what could be done without the urging.

[10] Also from "Song of Myself:"

Sit a while dear son,
Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink.

It is worthwhile to cite the following lines, not only because they are a wonderful statement of Emersonian 'self-reliance,' but because this supportive paternal stance is, at base, what has formed the speaker of rthe poem into the man he has become:

But as soon as you sleep and renew yourself in sweet clothes, I
    kiss you with a good-by kiss and open the gate for your egress hence.

Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life.

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

This is the protagonist as caring, nurturant father. For that is what fatherhood is, caring, nurturing, wanting the son "to be better than you are." For males, and this is as I said a very male poem full of football and the competitive need to excel, nurturing often takes the shape of a demanding exhortation from fathers.

But that bench is not a bench in the woods, but the bench beside the football field. The father is for one last time taken back in time, into his emergent adulthood, having been in the game or scrimmage until better players re-enter the game:

> As on the bench while the first string takes back
> Over, far away   and say with my silentest tongue, with the man-
> creating bruises of my arms   with a live leaf a quick
> Dead hand on my shoulder, "Coach Norton, I am your boy."

As the words he has heard are silent, resounding in his consciousness, audible only to the inner ear of his imagination, so the man – now bruised by the tackle beside the roadside, bruises similar to those suffered on the gridiron long ago—can recite silently the wonderful moving tribute which ends the poem: "Coach Norton, I am your boy."

He has learned fatherhood from his long-ago coach; he has become a man, been created as a man, by the battle he has learned to fight from his coach. The live leaves of the sheltering wood are also the hand which touches him still, the impress of that coach of long ago.

The poem tells us that fathers live on in their sons, that fatherhood is not so much biological as the caring counsel of the elder who wants to urge the young to be "better/ than you are." The actual life of the son, in this poem, is owing to the counsels of the coach/grandfather: the boy has been saved because his father learned to strive and succeed under the ministrations of his long-dead coach. Of course, of course, we recognize, the father – the poet – will say in his "silentest tongue…. 'Coach Norton, I am your boy,'"