

ASPECTS OF INVENTION IN JAMES DICKEY'S POEMS

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In "For the Last Wolverine," James Dickey has created a dramatic, even startling poetic rendering of the poet's task, and of the meaning and power of poetry in the present age. Although he begins "Wolverine" as a poem about species extinction, Dickey soon makes it a poem about writing poems, and eventually makes the wolverine a symbol of the poet. After a few lines about the last wolverine's vicious activities, including "tearing the guts / From an elk" (273-74), the poet says,

that is not enough  
For me. I would have him eat  
  
The heart, and, from it, have an idea  
Stream into his gnawing head [...] (274)

In fact, the poet soon says, "I would have it all / My way," at which point, invoking assistance from the "Dear God of the wildness of poetry," he creates a fiction in which the last wolverine and the last eagle mate in the top of a tree, blend into a monster that takes revenge against the road builders, railroad builders, and fur trappers who cause its extinction by destroying wolverines and their habitat (274-75). Near the end, the poet describes poetry in terms of the wolverine's characteristics: "How much the timid poem needs // The mindless explosion of your rage, / The glutton's internal fire"; declares his power over characters: "I take you as you are // And make of you what I will"; and then he prays that the "species" called poet, as well as the wolverine, be saved from extinction: "*Lord, let me die but not die / Out*" (275).

No other poet of our time has depicted invention in such a vivid, dramatic way and has returned so often to its meaning of creating original characters and situations. There exists nothing in recent poetry like the wolverine/eagle, or the stewardess who falls to her death and becomes a goddess, or the peeping-tom "fiend" who possesses godlike powers, or the man who becomes a bird migrating across a hemisphere, or the girl Deborah of *Puella* struggling with aspects of maturing. What other elderly male poet would presume to invent the emotions of a young girl? No modern poet writes so boldly.

Nevertheless, while Dickey sometimes assumes the role of the self-conscious maker of fictions, at other times he assumes the role of the passive medium through whom inspiration flows. He depicts this kind of invention in two relatively early poems, "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet" and "A Birth," and in several later ones in *Puella*. All of these show the invention process as partly mysterious, a matter of "literary grace," which M. H. Abrams defines as the "spontaneous stroke of invention totally beyond the reach of deliberate intention, method, or rule" (186)—and even beyond consciousness itself (187), elements appearing without the poet's conscious choice or control.

Considering Dickey's reputation as a rough-and-tumble man and poet of action, readers may feel surprised by the number of poems in which he considers so abstract and

subjective a topic as the working of the human imagination, in particular the inventing of new images; these poems about invention, furthermore, help explain the origin of those other poems which contain bizarre, even grotesque fictions, like “The Fiend” and “The Vegetable King.” When discussing “The Vegetable King,” based on an ancient fiction of death and resurrection, Dickey says that “the most important ability a poet can have is the capacity to commit himself to his own inventions” (*Self-Interviews* 90). At first, he apparently thought ridiculous the depiction of a modern suburbanite who experiences ritual dismemberment and resurrection, then returns to his house, but then, he says, “I thought, suppose I take this idea seriously and make it part dream, part reality” (90). He mentions the origin of this poem in order to assert “this absolute belief I have in the poet really *giving* himself to his invention which, with luck, is also his vision” of truth (91).

In “A Dog Sleeping on My Feet,” the poet has been writing in a notebook when he becomes aware that because his dog sleeps on them his feet have gone to sleep. The tingling in his feet the poet thinks of as the dog’s dream of hunting foxes, so the tingling represents the dog’s dream entering the poet’s body and consciousness. As the tingling rises into his legs, the poet says, “I turn the page / Of the notebook” to a fresh blank page, “carefully not // Remembering what I have written” (76). This tingling force “Tak[es] hold of the pen by my fingers,” the poet says, takes hold of his mind, too, and causes him to participate in the fox-hunt from the dog’s point of view: “Before me the fox floats lightly, / On fire with his holy scent, [...] all rushes on into dark / And ends on the brightness of paper” (76). During this part of the poem, the dog’s-dream part, the poet says that he “speaks in a daze / The hypnotized language of beasts” which “Shall falter and fail // Back into the human tongue” (77). The poet then goes to bed, an action that he describes as “Coming home” to his wife and children, although he has been in the house all along (77).

In “A Birth,” the poet says that while making up a poem, he sees an image in his mind that he did not plan, and he says that this image assumes its own life, and goes about its own business. “Inventing a story with grass,” that is, beginning, apparently, with only grass as the important image already imagined and/or written down, the poet “find[s] a young horse deep inside it” (80), the pronoun “it” referring to both “story” and “grass.” Having appeared spontaneously the horse continues to act on its own volition: “He walks slowly out of the pasture / To enter the sun of his story” (80). His mind now “freed of its own creature,” the poet discovers himself “deep in my life / In a room with my child and my mother” (80).

As Richard J. Calhoun and Robert W. Hill say, “A Birth” “shows how the poet makes life within his own imagination and then gives it free rein [nice pun]. Art is thus an illusion in the service of preserving the most independent, vital conditions, the most natural” (39). “A Dog Sleeping on My Feet” also demonstrates this principle, as the fundamental natural conditions show imagined animals acting independently of the poet’s control.

We might call the initial situation in both poems a frame-story within which the poet tells another story. The stories within the frame appear as interruptions of other writing already begun. In “A Dog Sleeping on My Feet,” the poet has already begun writing (writing *what* he does not say) when the tingling begins and so interrupts the original writing. When the tingling-dream begins, the poet consciously suspends the original writing; as he puts it, he is “carefully not // Remembering what I have written”—doing so provides the

new writing a mental space within which to run its course unencumbered by the previous thoughts / writing. Although "A Birth" does not show exactly the same process, it does show something similar. The poet has already begun writing the "story with grass" when the young horse appears, somewhat like the dog's dream appears. As Calhoun and Hill say, this poem shows that art "has a reality that lies beyond the conscious control of the artist" (40).

The interruptions and the poet's willingness to suspend attention to the original writing suggest the importance of constantly maintaining a writing attitude, for they suggest that writing leads to more writing, the imagination sometimes swerving into unexpected regions. In an illuminating study, Romy Heylen declares that the poet-protagonist of Dickey's *Zodiac* "construes poetry as a provisional art" (6). The poet, therefore, at any stage in the composing process, must remain open to as-yet-unrealized possibilities. As the writer says in "A Birth," "I cannot nail wires around" the horse, "My fence posts fail to be solid" (80). In these poems, the poet receives imaginative, creative rewards for his openness: he gets to experience the dog's exciting chase, and he gets to experience the young horse's independent freedom. Presumably, had he failed to suspend his attention to the original writing, he could not have received the new images into his imagination.

Interestingly, and very importantly, the poet does not end these poems with these rewards; instead, he ends them with what seem at first rather prosaic, unimportant situations, both involving his family. In "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet," he returns to his wife and sons, and in "A Birth" he realizes that he remains "In a room with my child and my mother" (80). These images imply that during the writing process the poet has existed in some strange mental and emotional other-world. The spontaneous appearances of images themselves indicate so. The feeling of "daze" and being "hypnotized" indicate so. The sense of being captured by one's own creations indicates so, as suggested by the images of the young horse leaving the pasture, and of the poet's "mind" thereby being "*freed* of its own creature" ("A Birth" 80, my emphasis). These returns suggest that the poet cannot, must not remain immersed in the imagination's alluring other-world. Having become a dog, in a sense, for a time, the poet speaks of the return as both intentional and naturally inevitable, of "Assembling the self that I must wake to" (77). When the brief horse-story ends, the poet "find[s]" himself again, having apparently lost himself for a time.

In his consideration of "A Birth," Neal Bowers says that the return to human life necessarily concludes Dickey's depiction of the writing process in these early poems, for "Dickey has a sense of mission" which makes him "responsible not simply for seeking out meaning in life for himself but also for communicating some sense of the meaning he discovers" (65). Although these two poems do not show the poet communicating meaning to his family, presumably we should think that he does. Perhaps he will communicate the dog's dream to them after they all wake up. Perhaps he will communicate the young horse story to his child and mother after the other-world feeling dissipates. Be that as it may, the family gives the poet security at home after his wild imagined forays into forest and pasture. In fact, the young horse story shows *him* an important truth about the birth of an individual into the world—which he realizes apparently only after his return; this realization indicates another kind of birth to which the title possibly refers. Not only does he find himself "deep" in his life among his mother, the preceding generation who bore him, and his child, the succeeding generation whom he gave life, but he also realizes that

just as the horse changes the universe by having to include something new, so does every individual born into the world:

My mind freed of its own creature,  
I find myself deep in my life  
In a room with my child and my mother,  
When I feel the sun climbing my shoulder

Change, to include a new horse. (80)

Birth, both real and imagined, brings newness into existence—conceiving and writing poems proves it. As Dickey himself says about the conclusion, the poet “sits there, not saying anything, and feels the nature of reality changing, because the horse that he imagined has now been added to the totality of living existence” (*Self-Interviews* 110).

The idea of spontaneous, uncontrolled invention and the birth metaphor for it appear also in the last poem of *Puella*, a book which tells, through a series of lyrics, the story of a girl’s maturation, her progression, if not birth, into adulthood. In “Summons,” the image of the half-born child evidently represents not only the end of girlhood and the beginning of womanhood, but also the moment of eternal creation: “*unending / invention / go for it / unending*” (48). Invention occurs eternally, even if birth does not; “go for it” would not seem necessary to say to a woman giving birth, except as an expression of encouragement, for she has no choice in the matter, so surely the poet speaks of invention as the goal. Considered as writing-philosophy, the mellow command in the refrain, “*Have someone be nearing*” (47-48) suggests that the poet simultaneously assumes the writing attitude and stays open to the image which remains eternally *there*, moving closer. The poet not only commands, he also invites, as if the principle of spontaneous invention which comes to the poet as the interrupting surprise in “A Birth” has paradoxically now become completely accepted, even expected.

Throughout *Puella*, in fact, Dickey makes invention a very important natural aspect of growing up. Although often difficult to comprehend in its details, this series of poems is an especially important work of modern letters generally because it shows in those very details a skillful mature poet’s observations about the development of the creative imagination. Because these are not *per se* poems about writing poetry, and because the main character Deborah is not a poet, the invention theme here finds expression as Deborah uses common imaginative methods while striving to understand a variety of new situations in which she finds herself, and a variety of new thoughts and emotions that come into her mind. In several poems, she imagines relationships between herself and external natural phenomena, such as plants, crows, and rain, among which she stands. In other poems, she creates fantasies. For example, to understand generation and her relationship with other girls, she imagines herself a “Winged Seed, Descending with Others” to which she speaks (27-28). To understand her place in time and heredity, she holds imaginary conversations with her deceased kin; in one of these poems, during a monologue to a dead grandmother whom she never met, Deborah imagines in great detail old-fashioned whale-hunting and the rendering of whale-oil (32-34). In a moment, we will look at this poem in more detail. To understand her place in history, “She Imagines Herself a Figure”

on a tapestry and a sail (43-44). Near the end of the book, her adult self-confidence fully developed, as the epigraph to “The Surround” puts it, she is even “Imagining Herself as the Environment” itself (45-46).

In several *Puella* poems, Dickey employs apostrophe; that is, he makes Deborah speak to entities, like the dead and inanimate objects and phenomena, which cannot respond, but whom she addresses as if they could. Poets have traditionally used apostrophe as a technique to initiate invention; with apostrophe, poets begin to receive “inspiration,” but apostrophe does not bring forth the poem’s specific images and themes. In his discussion of apostrophe, Jonathan Culler considers lines from “Sleep and Poetry” by John Keats:

The charioteer with wondrous gesture talks  
To the trees and mountains; and there soon appear  
Shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear. (140)

The “wondrous gesture” of speaking to the inanimate objects causes poetic images to appear in the poet’s imagination. Apostrophe, Culler says, has been especially important to poets who want to develop themselves into visionaries:

The object is treated as a subject, an *I* which implies a certain type of *you* in turn. One who successfully invokes nature is one to whom nature might, in its turn, speak. He makes himself poet, visionary. Thus, invocation is a figure of vocation [...]. [With his voice the poet hopes] to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetical and prophetic voice. (142)

By speaking to the object, the poet presumes that the object will answer and mystically tell him ultimate truths, which he can pass on to his listeners (or readers). Deborah, of course, is not a poet who wants to discover truths as such, but she is a girl struggling to become a woman, and so wants to discover some truths about her identity and her place in the world. Although she receives no directly-presented answers from the dead kin, objects, and phenomena to which she speaks, the very act of speaking to them implies her feeling of unity with them. Her apostrophes help her create for herself something like the mental space created by the writers in “A Dog Sleeping on My Feet” and “A Birth”—and, on occasion, something like answers do seem to appear; at least, Deborah seems satisfied, as if she had received some kind of answer.

Of the *Puella* poems, “In Lace and Whalebone” might best illustrate the way that apostrophe serves as an invention device. In a cemetery where family members lie, Deborah directly addresses a grandmother whom she never met. Deborah wears a dress first worn by the grandmother. The dress contains stays made of whalebone. Deborah naturally mentions the dress and its stays (and perhaps figuratively, the bones that she inherited genetically from the grandmother): “I stand now in your closed bones, / Sucked-in, in your magic tackle” (32). The word “tackle” suggesting fishing gear, and the fact that she speaks to a person buried in the ground, lead Deborah to think of “the stark freedom under the land, / [...] under the sea,” a thought that immediately leads her to think of whales and their bones, “the bones of the deepest beast,” and to realize an association with whales, whalebone in her dress “Shaped now entirely by me, by whatever / Breath I

draw" (32). Deborah soon experiences, she tells the grandmother, a "feeling," "something ripped-up and boiled-down, / Plundered and rendered, come over me" (33), a feeling like the poet experiences in "A Dog Sleeping on My Feet," and then she describes in detail the way that whale-oil was once rendered, mentioning, among other things, blubber, ovens, rope, butchery, "the crammed wake blazing with fat / And phosphor" (33-34). Such imagery leads Deborah at the end to see a relationship among all women, they who bear all human life into the world; the bloody butchering of whales produced both the stays of her dress and the oil for lamps, and she draws a general principle from this: "*Blood into light / Is possible: lamp, lace and tackle paired bones of the deep / Rapture / surviving reviving, and wearing well*" (34). In the context of the poem, all of this detail, forcefully imagined, all of the passion, all of the meaning, the understanding, originate in the seemingly irrational act of speaking directly to a dead person. The device leads to powerful invention, and eventually to an important truth for Deborah, and through her direct speech, for us readers.

We may find it difficult to say to what extent Deborah consciously employs apostrophe as an invention device, as the poet John Keats apparently did. She uses it as ordinary people do when they speak to the dead, to the absent, to nature, as a means of expressing perhaps rarely expressed emotions, and of establishing unions. Because she is an ordinary person unconcerned with such profound ideas as the origin of creativity, she never mentions any reasons, any motives; she just does something that seems natural to her. She certainly seems unaware that she employs a "device."

In his poems of conscious invention, however—for example, "For the Last Wolverine," "The Eye-Beaters," and *The Zodiac*—Dickey's sophisticated poet-speakers are aware that they use devices, and they reveal the reasons they do so. In these poems, the poet intentionally invents images in order to combat anger and despair.

In "Wolverine," as we have already noted, the near-extinction of an animal angers the poet, causes him to despair, and inspires him to respond by creating something new in the world, the vengeful wolverine/eagle, which attacks the poet's own species. Such a fantastic monster taking such awful revenge, and the poet's direct indications of will, cause us readers to understand how powerfully the poet feels, how seriously he takes the matter. He clearly feels no embarrassment about judging actions, nor about wanting people to act ethically by changing their destructive behavior.

"Meat and illusion," the "Eye-Beaters" poet says, "the race hangs on"—"nothing / But a magical art" (335)—body and art—body/brain which contains mind—that-imagines: the human race depends upon that. And so he "*invent[s] a fiction to save his mind*" (332), to maintain his sanity as he watches children who have gone blind beat their own eyes with their fists, trying to see again the images that they saw before they went blind.

"The Eye-Beaters" goes round and round structurally and thematically; we might easily find it difficult to keep straight which character, the Visitor / Stranger or the Therapist, says what. For example, an early gloss says "*A therapist explains why the children strike their eyes*":

They *know* they should see  
But *what*, now? When their fists smash their eyeballs, they behold no  
Stranger giving light from his palms. What they glimpse has flared

In mankind from the beginning. In the asylum, children turn to go back  
 Into the race: turn their heads without comment into the black magic  
 Migraine of caves. (332)

It appears that the Therapist, not the Visitor, therefore, first mentions the fiction that the Visitor will develop in detail, not only for the children, but also for himself:

Yes, indeed I know it is not  
 So I am trying to make it make something make them make me  
 Re-invent the vision of the race knowing the blind must see  
 By magic or nothing. Therapists, I admit it; it helps me to think  
 That they can give themselves, like God from their scabby fists, the original  
 Images of mankind: that when they beat their eyes, I witness how  
 I survive, in my sun-blinded mind: that the beasts are calling to God  
 And man for art. (334)

As the syntax of “make them make me” might also suggest, perhaps we must think that all of the minds represented in the poem, the Visitor’s, the Therapist’s, the children’s, function similarly, and invent in a similar manner, an idea which would fit the theme of “original images of mankind” upon which the entire human race depends for sanity.

The Visitor suspects his sanity for two reasons: he cannot bear seeing the children suffer, and he cannot bear the even worse thought that when they beat their eyes, they see *nothing*, an image that might imply that we live an utterly absurd life, completely without significance. He even realizes that he, too, is blind, possessing a “sun-blinded mind,” and so thinks of himself as being like the children, and worrying that he, too, sees nothing, in the existential sense of seeing no truth, no ultimate meaning in existence. If our existence means nothing, this poem says, our only hope rests in our imagination, which we must use to our advantage by intentionally inventing the images of art and poetry. At the end of the poem, Dickey calls the matter and process “the sheer / Despair of invention” (335).

Even in this poem of intentional invention we find elements of creativity as provisional process. The “original images” are brought to the Visitor’s mind in response to a developing situation and its attendant emotions. First, as we noted, the Therapist gives the Visitor the general idea of prehistoric cave paintings as the images, a number of which the Visitor then ponders in his own imagination (333). Then, as he considers his role as the children’s representative (and savior?), he worries that he is imposing his own views upon them: “*But why is it this they have made up / In your mind?*” (333). Then, he admits to himself that the images are merely his own “therapy” and mean “nothing” to the children (334). Finally, so he can live with himself, he says that the children “must be thought to see by what has caused” humanity to “survive” (335), those painted images that through magic insured success in the hunt. He cannot save the children, but he can perhaps in some way help someone—or, at least, himself—by assuming the role of visionary: “*Stranger, you may as well take your own life / Blood brain-blood, as vision*” (335). Now, having completely given himself to his invention, he can make a unified, conclusive statement of it, and he presents it as a scene in which his tribe prepares for a hunt, the tribal children nearby wearing “animal skins,” the Visitor himself a hunter stepping forth

with a spear to take deer “still wet with creation” (335). This scene of character and action might, in another, less circumstantial, uncertain situation, have been the poem.

When an interviewer asks Dickey if *The Zodiac* is his “*ars poetica*,” he says, “I don’t think so. I don’t know,” and then changes the subject (Baughman 179). In the same interview, Dickey says that the poet in *The Zodiac* “believes that he can write the ultimate poem,” then “vacillates” (the interviewer’s word 178), then ends up deciding to “go on trying to write the impossible poem” (179). In another interview, Dickey says that “poems which attempt to set forth eternal verities are foredoomed because that cancels out the fluid, the protean” (Baughman 254). When the interviewer asks if such cancellation causes *The Zodiac* poet to fail, Dickey says, “Yes. That’s more or less right” (252), but he does not elaborate. If *The Zodiac* poet is trying to write the ultimate, impossible poem, he may fail because he tries too hard to make something new instead of remaining passive as the personae in “A Dog Sleeping on My Feet” and “A Birth” do; this passivity and the images which spontaneously appear in it possibly constitute what Dickey refers to as “the fluid, the protean.” Nevertheless, the poem does contain several instances of provisionality, of remaining open to creative possibility. If not his *ars poetica*, *The Zodiac* certainly presents Dickey’s longest, most detailed and complicated depiction of the poet at work.

The book tells of a Dutch poet trying over several days to understand the creative process and to determine subjects for his own poetry. Invention, therefore, concerns *The Zodiac* poet the most. In perhaps his most emotional moment, struggling mightily to find a theme to write about, he rages at “Heaven”:

You’ve got to remember that my old man  
Was an astronomer, of sorts, and didn’t he say the whole night sky’s *invented*?  
Well, I am now *inventing*. (359)

For some time, this poet continues to try to invent, but nothing new appears to him, so that at the end he says sadly that he will strive with his all-too-human “hand” to “Make what it can of what is” (373).

Early in his career, Dickey considered the dichotomy between striving for sublimity and remaining content with objective presentation. In “For Richard Wilbur,” Dickey apparently paraphrases something that the poet Richard Wilbur told him,

That the great wild thing is not seeing  
All the way in to the center,  
But holding yourself at the edge,  
Alive, where one can get a look. (44)

Trying to see “all the way in to the center” seems analogous to trying to write the ultimate poem. The center might stand for the same place for which *The Zodiac* poet longs, the place like the circling sky where the Creator has invented the zodiac’s eternal constellation-creatures. To go *all the way in* to the center seems to cause some kind of death, as if the center rests in some kind of hole which swallows the poet, whereas by remaining at the edge the poet stays alive where he can continue to observe the world. Perhaps the center represents those “eternal verities” which “foredoom” poets. Apparently, this statement

means that to perform the important poetic task, the poet must observe the world, maybe somewhat like Imagist poets do, and, perhaps, to represent those observations indirectly, objectively, impersonally, invention involving the ability to present the world with such precise images that readers can see it more precisely.

*The Zodiac* poet makes for himself three main tasks: transform the external world, create in a manner similar to that of God, and bring meaning to himself and his readers. He does not present these themes in a logical way, however, because despair and liquor often overcome him.

Drunkenness frees him from the restraints of conscience and reason, and so allows him to do two very difficult things: challenge God the Artist and experiment with imagery which morality and logic would likely recognize as utterly ridiculous:

God is a rotten artist: he can't draw  
 With stars worth a shit He can't say what He should  
                   To man He can't say speak with with  
 Stars what you want Him to [...] (366)

The poet comes to this startling blasphemous conclusion during one of the occasions when he questions his self-imposed tasks of representing the external world and of assuming the role of Creator.

The theme of the poet as one who transforms the external world appears most directly in these lines: "Every poet wants / To change those stars around" (358). Obviously to be taken figuratively, this statement seems to suggest the desire of every poet to manipulate the external world, symbolized by the stars, and so to represent the unique personal perspective through the things of the universe which, of course, in the context of this poem, do not themselves change.

Because the stars, at least as they form the constellation "pictures," constitute the art made by God, the "change" image could also reflect something of Harold Bloom's "misprision" principle, by which "really strong poets can read only themselves" because to them "to be judicious is to be weak" (19). In fact, we perhaps could say that this poet not only tries to transform the external world but also wants to "rewrite" the "poem" of the ultimate precursor, as he indicates by his effort to substitute his own lobster image for the evil, destructive cancer-crab that God made (358-59). This lobster represents the poet's prideful effort to invent something unique, something that even God had not made up: "A *Lobster!* What an idea! An idea God never had" (359), never had for a constellation, that is. Earlier, he had brashly put himself on the same level as the Inventor: "This is a poet talking to You / Like you talked to yourself, when you made all this up while you conceived / *The Zodiac*" (353). Although God himself has already created the *Zodiac*, this strong poet believes that he has the right to revise that "poem" as he pleases, to bend the stars to his will: "The stars are mine, and so is / The imagination to work them— / To create" (352).

The poet believes that poets can best explain the universe. The poet believes that God obviously has not explained the stars very well, else we would not need poems, nor astronomers, for, according to the poet, "the stars are gasping / For understanding" still (355). He says what the stars "really want need / Is a poet" (355), for the poet connects the human mind with the external world.

Besides the kind of invention which attempts to transform the world, the poet considers another kind; having realized the difficulty of godlike transformation, he considers giving up the role of creator and thinks about just representing the ordinary world about him: "Go back to the life of a man, / Leave the stars" (366). This kind of invention, however, seems trite and derivative because the ordinary drab world contrasts badly with the sky where "the world is original, and the Zodiac shines anew / After every night-cloud" (366).

These two kinds of invention, seeking out and solving secrets of the universe and observing the ordinary world, appear the same as the two kinds that Dickey mentions in "For Richard Wilbur." Reading the secret of Heaven seems similar to diving into the center—and the poet does suffer terribly because of his efforts to invent something new. Coming back to "the life of a man" seems similar to staying on the edge and looking. The poet does not, probably cannot choose between them, and so he chooses what sounds perhaps like a middle way: his hand will "Make what it can of what is," which *The Zodiac* from beginning to end shows him doing.

As Romy Heylen shows in great detail, Dickey's *Zodiac* depicts poetry writing as a "provisional" act—and this is a prominent difference between Dickey's poem and his model / intertext, for while Marsman's persona is "polished," "cerebral, ponderous, and portentous, Dickey's "continually confronts his work in terms of what else it might be" (6), continually swerving from one aspect of the theme to another, demonstrating in the poem itself the ways that the poem came to be written. In a memorable phrase, Heylen says that Dickey employs the "strategy of volatility" (4).

We can observe this volatility in the sections about the lobster. Whereas Marsman presents images discursively, Dickey presents them dramatically, the free-verse, spatial arrangement, and several fragmentary images better representing stark personal emotions than Marsman's modified blank verse.

In Marsman's poem, the lobster appears as a synonym for the constellation Cancer, or crab. The protagonist has heard the striking of a tower clock which causes him to meditate on time and eternity. As he looks up, he apparently becomes dizzy, physically and philosophically, and as he watches the clock's hands move, he thinks that the certainties and salvation of religion have been replaced in the modern world by violence and destruction:

The while he watches the dial hands creep,  
His pride is aware, with a rebellious scorn,  
That even that uncreated vertigo,  
Broken and barred,  
Is represented to men's eyes  
In the act of Cancer on the tapestry,  
And where once God in the arena stood  
And came to grips with a defiant man  
Under the banners of a reddening dawn,  
The lobster now kneels round the passion's path  
And prays the dial's stations of the cross. (241)

Dickey's lobster appears twice, in Section I and again at the end of Section II, the basic situation, and even several expressions, appearing in both places. This overt, inten-

tional repetition reveals the provisionality and volatility of the poet's writing process. This repetition, as well as that within the sections, also functions as an element of the situation's realism, suggesting the poet's drunken obsessiveness:

He's huge he's a religious fanatic  
 He's gone wild because he can't go to Heaven  
 He's waving his feelers his saw-hands  
 He's praying to the town clock to minutes millennia  
 He's praying the dial's stations of the Cross he sees me  
 Imagination and dissipation both fire at me  
 Point-blank O God, no NO I was playing I didn't mean it  
 He'll never write it, I swear CLAWS claws CLAWS

He's going to kill me. (359)

He will not write it, he says, but of course he does, already has. Invention cannot be reined in.

Finally, my observations of the invention theme in Dickey's poetry hardly suggest that he takes a programmatic approach to poetics. While some early poems show a "mystical," psychologically natural kind of creativity, many others—mostly from the middle and later years—show the poet struggling to impose his will upon reality, sometimes out of sheer despair at ever overcoming its sorrows, but finding in that creative imposition some consolation, some measure of happiness, and in poems like *Puella*, "The Eye-Beaters," and *The Zodiac*, some measure of satisfying unity with others and with the universe. When a great poet shows us, in poems, the variety of ways that he conceives poems, he shows us in powerful yet human language how we, too, might imagine—how we, too, might "engender," "conceive," and "give birth" to forms of beauty and truth—or at least how we might struggle in our own despair to do so. Though we will all die, while we live we may avoid dying out emotionally, aesthetically, and perhaps even morally through the imaginative force of creative invention.

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**PETER ROBERTS**

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**MODERN LIFE, SANS SERIF**

it's better  
to be  
alive than to  
let go, drift into the  
ether / or  
disappear altogether.

it's better  
to be  
alive, to suffer  
the lesions of love,  
of meaning-infested life  
(or meaningless, as may be).

it's bitter  
to be  
alive yet  
better  
than not to be.

**THE UNSEEN**

discussing  
music  
is like  
whistling  
words:

what is  
essential  
is left out.