JAMES DICKEY'S 'CLAWS'

The Zodiac, by James Dickey (Doubleday & Co., 1976)

by Bob Herz

1

James Dickey at prayer: "Listen, you universal son-of-a-bitch, / You're talking to a poet now, so don't give me a lot of shit." James Dickey writing: "Oh my God / You've got to look up / again: you've *got* to do it you're committed / To it look up UP you failed son of a bitch MORE." James Dickey on the relation of the cosmos to the poet: "But what they (stars) really want need / Is a poet and / I'm going to have to be it." James Dickey on the charms of clocks in European towns: "It's simple enough, this town clock / The whole time-thing: after all / There's only this rosette of a great golden stylized asshole." James Dickey on the thematic relationships of the poet's art and craft: "Religion, Europe, death and the stars: / I'm holding them all in my balls, right now. / And the old *aquavit* is mixing them up — they're getting to know — / They're *crazy* about each other!"

Get it? Well, yes (you get an "A"), the poem is about writing and poetry and the attempt to find oneself in a universe which does not, unless you have the DT's, talk back to you. The poem is divided into 12 sections, one for each of the signs of the zodiac, and is, Dickey says in the brief introduction, the story of a drunken and perhaps dying Dutch poet who returns to his home in Amsterdam after years of travel and tries desperately to relate himself, by means of stars, to the universe. The poem is also based on a poem of the same title, written by Hendrick Marsman, who was — can Dickey mean this? — "killed by a torpedo in the North Atlantic in 1940." (Tell that to your kids the next time they ask if they can go swimming in the North Atlantic). The poem is described as a "homage" to Marsman, but not a translation: "The liberties I have taken with Marsman's original poem are such that the poem I publish here, with the exception of a few lines, is completely my own." Hmmmm . . .

2

Plot: The hero of the poem, the Dutch poet, has come back to his native town and lives quietly in a little room above the spot where two canals converge, a second-floor flat over a broker's office. As the poem opens, he's got a hangover and is looking, a little wobbly, out his window at trees, canals, the town square, which here become a form of Childe Roland's wasteland. He's trying to write a poem, thinking about stars and light, his past, the universe. He also thinks about the zodiac, which he must solve, believe, learn to read and wallow in, "like poetry." But he has the DT's: ants crawl across his hand; he feels utterly alone. Suddenly he has a vision — of the possibility of the poem, of words related to light and stars. He gets high on aquavit, invents new stars that want to express themselves through him. He thinks about time also; and about the lobster he'd like to make part of the zodiac. He tries to talk to God about this, but the lobster attacks him.

Eventually the hallucination fades, and the narrator talks to him about his vision. When he's steadier, the narrator talks to us about the vision, describing it, explaining problems with the poet's technique and so forth. Then the narrator tries to convince the readers to back out of the poem, to stop torturing the poet, but only for a second: "Ah, to hell with it," he says, "he can't quit. / Neither can you, reader."

The poet goes on, thinking about death, thinking it will be better than living where he's living now. Then he sees a black church. The narrator doesn't quite believe he sees it. The poet-hero wonders if it's universal. Later, the poet's outside in the town square and considers having an affair with Venus. Finally, he comes back inside and starts dreaming again, until the lobster comes back and he gets (so help me, reader, I swear it) "poet's lockjaw."

In the next part we get a few words of wisdom: "Don't shack up with the intellect . . . God is a rotten artist, . . ." and so forth. When the poet wakes (he's been sleeping again), he goes out walking, over a bridge, along the canal, thinking about the death of the entire race. He eventually arrives at his old house, thinks about the death of his parents, his father who looked at stars, his mother, a girl he'd been in love with but was too shy ever to talk to. He gets mad and sad, decides to abandon the place, but falls down in the weeds. He has another vision, a dream of comfort, very sentimental, with a woman. At the end of this dream, their two bodies are found expired from "too much light" and "too much love." He goes to see an old friend, looks at some postcards and remembers places he's sailed to. In the last section of the poem, he's trying to write his poem again. We and the narrator leave him there, and the narrator completes *his* poem with a prayer that the poet will complete his.

3

The ending of the poem, then, is intended to be an act of generosity, a function, first, of the sympathy any writer

feels for the work of another, and second, of the sympathy any human being feels for the problems of another — the wish that the difficulties will be smoothed away, that the writing, or the life, will continue its steady course into the blue. We are invited to partake of this communion of generosity and sympathy; but can't. I want to focus on this failure because I think it illuminates the failure of the entire poem.

One problem has to do with what may be considered one of Dickey's major virtures: his style. Dickey has a profound sense of rhythm and the technique he has invented for himself, through seven books of poetry, still startles, confounds, suprises, amazes — and overwhelms. An extremely powerful machine, it is intended to control absolutely the motion of breath through the poem. It gives, as precisely as musical notation, the exact pauses, enjambments, rhythms, melodies of the voice. Better: It locates the voice. The poem — indeed, any of Dickey's later poems — is meant to be read aloud, but even silently the voice breaks through, so that you finally find yourself lip-syncing the words.

The problem is that at a certain point, say the second line, the style takes over: Everything is given over to the drive-shaft momentum of the split lines, the carbuerator of the syntax — but the accelerator sticks. Once put into motion, the machine cannot be geared down. As in the movie *Jaws,* the ultimate hero becomes not the scared villagers nor the dangerous shark, but the machine that, on the screen, is the shark. Only here the machine becomes the poem. The poem's style — the poem itself — is the shark machine, successful. In this poem, the machine creates its own figure. It is a lobster:

> That thing'll be great! He's coming into my head —
> Is he inside or out? No, I can *see* him!
> The DT's aren't failing me: The light of Time shines on

him
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, I was playing I
didn't mean it I'll never write it, I swear CLAWS
claws CLAWS

In short, no Dickey, no Dutch poet, no possum, no sop, no taters. Although the style, like a powerful drill, can sometimes seem to chug through anything, even the bedrock of the grade-B movie passage above, and still strike some paydirt, it cannot allow another voice to break into it. That final generosity is outlawed by the very momentum of the machine. The Dutch poet cannot write his poem *precisely because Dickey has chosen to write a poem about him.*

There are other reasons also why we are prevented from partaking of that final communion. The Dutch poet hero of the poem himself is not very interesting. He has little sympathy or time for the objects or people around him. They function rather as stations on his journey to the poem he will never complete. He is obsessed with himself, with what hurts him, with the affect of landscape on him. He throws away the memory of his parents like a scrap of paper on which some rejected lines were contained, not even stopping long enough to give us a physical description of them or a sense of their bond or lack of it. One has the sense that everything in the poem exists, like the Venus-image, to be violated.

These points are crucial to understanding why the poem fails. If we cannot feel generous toward the poet-

hero, or at least toward his quest, if we cannot want him to succeed, we cannot honor his attempt. Worse: if we cannot believe he will succeed even despite our desires to the contrary, we are removed also from the pale pleasures of emotional voyeurism.

All we're left with, finally, is that great engine of style, chuff, chuff. Or, as Dickey would say, CHUFF chuff / CHUFF. How much sympathy or credence can we give to that?

4

I want to include here a few notes about friction. All writers use it and need it to some extent. It gives the final product a special sheen, makes it into a personal triumph, so that what's done on the page is not just a poem, but an overcoming, a going beyond what one was when one started writing the poem. Some poets, the extremists, the shallow ones, which Dickey is not, use it as a kind of badge, a means of making even the most banal sentiments acts of courage and heroism in a terrible world. They do it by depicting the world as a place which allows no room for generosity, but in which (just look at their poem!) they have managed to be generous anyway. A boy scout helping an old lady across the street, in this light, takes on the heroic proportions of the marines putting the flag up on Iwo Jima.

Reading poems by poets who subscribe to this formula is like — to return to an image I used earlier — seeing *Jaws,* where it is not our deep emotions or humanness that is engaged, but our paranoia. That part of us that has always suspected the worst is suddenly confronted with a forty-foot tall celluloid proof that says: SEE! I TOLD YOU SO: THINGS REALLY ARE JUST LIKE YOUR WORST NIGHTMARES! THE BESTIAL WORLD WILL GET YOU YET . . .

But it is a fiction. *Jaws'* setting, theme and characters were arbitrary; the movie was a fabricated situation. To

be sure, a fabrication pushed to the limit of what our disbelief will bear, but still a fabrication.

In many of Dickey's recent poems, the fabrication has also been pushed to the limit. I think particularly of "Falling," in which the stewardess falls out of an airplane, does a strip tease in mid-air and is ultimately raped by the entire countryside under her. Or "The Sheep Child," a poem which I liked, in which what is human is what is spoken out of the utterly impossible fabricated circumstances of the thing.

Dickey's problem in "The Zodiac" is a product of this kind of personal ambition to go beyond. Striving for that ultimate overcoming, he pushes the friction of the poem so far that whatever he does is doomed to failure. He writes lines such as those quoted at the beginning of this essay that would break another man's poem. He creates a character we cannot care about, makes him, through the fabrication of his style, effectively mute, surrounds him with objects we never have a chance to ponder, scenes that actively engage our disbelief, then skates out of the poem on a prayer. In that final prayer he leaves behind him so many gears and cogs that not even the best Heath Kit instructions could help him or us put them together.

It is not that a less ambitious poet would have achieved more. Rather, that a poet of so much ambition and so much technical energy and skill has achieved so little in this outing is saddening. One wants to feel toward Dickey's poem as he would have us feel toward the poem of the Dutch poet; but all that abandoned wreckage makes it impossible to do so.

The poem's a phoney.