

## Advancing the Work: A Celebration of James Dickey at Clemson University

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It is not uncommon that, at some point, a university-sponsored memorial to an artist's life and work may become haunted by the unfortunate, yet powerful, specters of nostalgia and sentimentality, subjective phenomena that afford a strong measure of biographical remembrance and emotional connection among the participants but inevitably cloud or ignore the achievement of the artist in question. Too often such functions—especially when they include among their presenters the artist's family, friends, former students, and admirers—do little to advance our collective understanding of a deserving body of work. Having attended "A Celebration of James Dickey" at Clemson University (September 15-16, 2004), I am happy to report that the event, adeptly orchestrated by Clemson's Center for Electronic and Digital Publishing and The Strom Thurmond Institute, did not succumb to these pitfalls. On the contrary, it managed to walk the narrow path between personalized biographical recollection and critical consideration with a rare agility that ultimately afforded the participants a greater appreciation of Dickey "the father, teacher, and colleague," as well as Dickey "the writer," whose works must now stand alone, minus the considerable color and charisma of the man behind them.

It seemed altogether appropriate that the event's first speaker, Dickey's daughter Bronwen, should begin the proceedings with a consideration of the connection between Dickey's life and work. In "The Truth as 'Lie': James Dickey and the Spirit of Poetic Revelation" Bronwen adroitly bridges the gap between her father's personality and his literary achievement, only to burn that bridge in favor of the latter item. Asserting that Dickey's biographer Henry Hart had a "forest/trees problem," Bronwen laments the biographer's conceptual decision to neglect Dickey's literary concerns in favor of "petty, lifeless" episodic minutiae. Bronwen asserts that Hart's error is all the more glaring since it flies in the face of her father's philosophy of life. As Bronwen explains, "He subordinated clinical facts to spiritual truths." When he lied, he lied "to make the story better," a concession of biographical event to aesthetic value that was necessary to his creative process, albeit sometimes costly in his personal relationships. Following Bronwen at the podium, I tried to make a similar point at the end of my consideration of Dickey's novels, "Elements of Dickey's Fiction": "Time finally extinguishes the personalities, strengths, faults, lies, loves, and excuses of all writers. These phenomena may very well haunt us for a time but ultimately we are left only with what has been written. The superficialities are peeled away and the achievement necessarily laid bare against the works of others and the long, continuous march of literary history." One of the things that encouraged me at Clemson as a scholar of Dickey's work was the

unmistakable interest of the undergraduates and graduate students in Dickey's books and poems, as opposed to his life. This was evinced most powerfully in their enthusiastic reactions to readings of Dickey's poems by his sons, Kevin and Christopher. The audience was moved deeply by Kevin's rendition of "The Bee" and amazed by his reading of "The Sheep Child," as well as Christopher's use of "The Shark's Parlor" in his keynote address.

Christopher's speech, the central event of the occasion, entitled "Fact, Fiction, and Foreign Policy," moves prodigiously from a discussion of metaphor in his father's surreal poem to the potential role of the creative imagination in United States foreign policy and its connection to terrorism. An acknowledged authority on terrorism with extensive experience as a journalist in the Middle East, Christopher asserts that terrorists with minimal resources are forced to be more enterprising and creative, whereas the United States government employs excessive quantification on the one hand and extravagant generalization on the other. Christopher believes United States officials must do a better job of imagining the mind of the terrorist, a partially aesthetic representational articulation of the other, which also functions as the conceptual premise for Christopher's novels, *Innocent Blood* and *The Sleeper*.

Christopher's address reminds us that current events and seemingly disparate disciplines are not so far from us or each other as we would like to imagine, which brings us back to his father's work. Reviewers occasionally have argued that James Dickey's output is not political or relevant enough, yet Christopher admits that both of his novels are influenced by *To the White Sea* and he convincingly employs the poem "The Shark's Parlor" as a clever means of foregrounding American foreign policy. The point here is that much remains to be said about James Dickey's work, both in its own context and in its promising applications to other disciplines and arenas of experience. Fortunately, as the other event participants demonstrated, this is an undertaking that is already beginning to take place. In her presentation, "The Chaistic Deep Ecology of James Dickey: Self and World," an excerpt from a book-length critical manuscript on Dickey's work, Sue Walker, Alabama Poet Laureate and chair of the English Department at the University of South Alabama, skillfully traces the commonality of Dickey's work with themes and disciplines of which he was not readily aware—his conflation of ecology, psychology, and gender "in attempting to achieve a kind of representational transcendence." Walker's consideration of Dickey's work in new contexts was complimented by John Lane's informative account of the impact of *Deliverance* on the real Chattooga River—the subject of his recent book, *Chattooga: Descending into the Myth of Deliverance River*—a story that is by turns strange, moving, unfortunate, and hopeful in its embodiment of the impact art may have on regional environments and communities. In fact, this theme was pursued on a visceral level at the end of the celebration when Lane led the Dickeyes and several other participants on a trip to the Chattooga, some forty miles away.

Walker and Lane are also poets and along with a number of other skilled versifiers—Skip Eisminger, Robert and Jane Hill, and Ronald Moran—spoke to

and/or demonstrated the enduring legacy of Dickey's work as an influential muse and aesthetic model. Eisminger, a veteran of several of Dickey's classes now teaching at Clemson, shared a number of Dickey's innovative teaching techniques while also celebrating the art of storytelling and drawing a number of laughs with his graduate school poems about the teacher who in one poem appears as "Jimbo Dickens." Likewise, Robert Hill, co-author with the late Richard Calhoun of a Twayne book on Dickey and professor at Kennesaw State University, prefaced several of his poems with the imaginative and/or real role Dickey played as motivator and editor in his lyrical endeavors. Offering an important feminist perspective on Dickey's influence, Jane Hill, a respected scholar and writer who is chair of the English Department at the University of West Georgia, performed her own entertaining interpretation of "Cherrylog Road" while lamenting that much of Dickey's work has been pigeonholed as sexist or violent without sufficient allowance given to the fact that artists and their bodies of work change over the courses of their careers.

Just as Dickey's work went through a number of transitions over the years, so, eventually, there must take place a changing of the guard in terms of the people who write about it. On a panel entitled "James Dickey's Legacy as a Research Subject" Wayne Chapman, Clemson professor and editor of *The South Carolina Review*, and graduate students from his contemporary literature class presented a rich assortment of information they had gathered during a summer trip to the James Dickey Collection at Emory University. While Chapman took as his subject an historical account of Dickey's colorful readings at Clemson, his students employed a technique Chapman termed "genetic reconstruction of texts" in demonstrating how three Dickey poems had been constructed through a consideration of their various drafts (Allison Kellar took as her subject "Exchanges," Janice Standridge discussed "Falling," and Jessica Stender took us through the composition of "The Eagle's Mile").

Beyond the groundbreaking new information it afforded in revealing how these three Dickey poems had reached their final forms, the work of Professor Chapman and his students demonstrated the rich potential for additional primary research using the Dickey collections at Emory University and Washington University in St. Louis, as well as the untapped Dickey library collection at the University of South Carolina. Indeed, having extensively examined the Emory collection before composing my own scholarly book on Dickey's fiction, I can attest to the deep and largely unprobed mine of thesis, dissertation, essay, and book topics that lie buried in those numerous boxes. Clearly then, the fundamental conditions exist for a rich, ongoing scholarly dialogue on Dickey's work. In fact, this was the very topic of discussion among Dickey family members and participants as the celebration came to a close: how best to help Dickey's work prosper and endure. Among the ideas broached were a new website and improved electronic access to both his obscure recorded readings and primary documents at Emory and Washington. However, also worthy of note, a number of people pointed out that a significant amount of important work already is unfolding, including the ongoing

significance of *The James Dickey Newsletter* and its annual panel on Dickey's work at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association. To this list may be added the forthcoming publication of the celebration proceedings in the Spring 2005 issue of *The South Carolina Review*. As these promising developments reveal, Dickey's work, while possessing the clear potential for increased scholarship and greater availability, remains far from neglected. More than a remembrance of Dickey's life and achievement, the event at Clemson University functioned as an important think-tank for the appearance that Dickey's work and scholarship about it may take as they continue to progress into the twenty-first century.