

## E S S A Y

## JAMES DICKEY: THE CLEMSON EPISODE

by Richard Calhoun

**A**t a time when there is conspicuous interest in the act of lying by celebrities and public figures it is not surprising that the first biography of James Dickey would explore his extensive lying about his personal life—in particular, the misrepresentations of his manly accomplishments in football and in war. Henry Hart even reports that it was Dickey himself who suggested “the world as a lie” as a subtitle for his biography.<sup>1</sup> Dickey may have had in mind having to invent his own personae in a 1950s literary world of post-modernism; but he also was literate enough to be aware of a concern about art as fictive, as ancient as Plato’s mistrust of the poet’s lies or as contemporary as Robert Scholes’s view of the artist as fabulator.<sup>2</sup> When Dickey turned to teaching and writing poetry full time, modernist impersonality with its objective correlatives was no longer in vogue, and the poet could return to his poem. The age of Auden was over, and the time of Robert Lowell’s autobiographical *Life Studies* had come. Moreover, poetry had to be made suitable for a performance on the lecture circuit, an activity Dickey described as “barnstorming for poetry.” Dickey, in effect, had to invent himself as poet and as performer. He chose to appear as a Southern version of what Whitman called the “roughs” rather than as the teacher and academician he was for most of his career.

Everyone who knew James Dickey was to some degree aware that he played many roles. When he became a poet he found himself to be a nearly middle-aged newcomer on the poetry circuit or temporary as a visiting poet, selling himself to largely student audiences. To sell himself Dickey had to invent himself, in part, by borrowing from his immediate predecessors, including the drunken poet Dylan Thomas and the virile writer Ernest Hemingway. Those of us who taught Dickey’s poetry were gratified by student responses to both the poetry and the poet. We also helped to promote him, passing on both the good news: here was arguably the best reader of his own poetry since Thomas or Frost, and the bad: incidents reported of increasingly drunken behavior. By the 1970s there were stories to be told about Dickey’s behavior, as there had been about Thomas’s stories passed back and forth on the lecture circuit. James Dickey both played and lived the role of the drunken creative writer as well as anyone of his generation. If I were asked to name notable drunks I had seen, Charlie Chaplin on the screen and Dickey would come to mind; one was not drunk but acting, the other drunk and yet acting, even inventing.

When Dickey began serious efforts in poetry and criticism from his catbird seat at the *Senanee Review*, back in the transitional fifties, he found the decade full of academic and “garden variety poetry.” Robert Lowell with *Life Studies* and Dickey with *Buckdancer’s Choice* were among those looked to for new directions. The legend that Dickey helped create, for his part, was that of a dedicated poet who had surrendered a lucrative job in advertising copywriting to hit the road for poetry. We read the poetry and seldom questioned the publisher’s blurbs about the WWII combat pilot, flying missions over the Philippines and fire-bombing Japan. It seemed that few poets had told us about themselves as Dickey had, in a credible rejection of modernist impersonality. That he had reinvented himself did not require much comment because we were busy inventing James Dickey ourselves. For a

brief time before his decline everyone wanted to contribute to the myth of the vibrant poet. In hindsight, I can say now that there were two Dickey's barnstorming the poetry circuit, the destructive poet who became increasingly alcoholic and the seriously competitive poet, a late arrival on the scene who wanted very much to succeed as poet and performer. His main rivals, as he sized up the situation, were Robert Lowell and John Berryman.

In April 1966, Dickey's first reading at Clemson, where he had played football in 1942, was sponsored by the English Department. It was a roaring success. I had never heard a poet better at involving a student audience. But at his second Clemson visit in 1971 Dickey appeared for his afternoon reading as a colossal drunk! Hart does not get everything quite right. First of all, this was a very public affair, sponsored this time not by the English Department but by Clemson University. A student/faculty committee was responsible for managing Dickey's appearance, not the English Department. Dr. Bill Hunter, Clemson general practitioner and former football teammate, had agreed to throw a party the night before the reading, intended "to relax him." The mission was accomplished. Dickey seemed to enjoy the talk about poetry, football, and old Clemson days, and he went back to his room early and reasonably sober.

But good intentions went awry. I did not realize then that Dickey might be alcoholic. Nor did his host, who suggested he take an unfinished bottle of bourbon back to his room for a nightcap. I remembered to tell Dickey that his freshman football coach, Rock Norman, featured in "The Bee" as the voice of a dead coach, was alive and well in Clemson. I did not suspect that Norman had any father figure charisma for Dickey as Hart suggests. We made mistakes unbeknowningly. Dickey left the party saying aloud his thoughts: "Your friends kill with kindness." None of us knew the scale of the reading, in large part due to the storied success of his performance at Clemson in 1966. Invitations had been sent to English classes throughout the area stressing the football player, combat pilot legend. Students were to be bussed in, filling the parking lot across from the Clemson House.

The next morning the students who came to escort Dickey found him boisterous and drunk with Rock Norman present, but not drinking. No one else joined in the festivities as Hart believed. We were all too busy trying to figure out how to sober our drunken poet up. Dickey mumbled melodramatically: "Coach said I might have been an All-American if I had stuck with football." I replied: "That's all right, Jim. You are a famous poet. That's better." I thought that this was some sort of act Dickey was trying out on us. He was inventing a new role, no longer just a football player but a potential All-American. He could see the blurbs. I thought I saw a solution. I asked my colleague Barry Hannah to call Bill Hunter to come and administer oxygen or do whatever physicians could do. He came and administered the oxygen with modest success. He also strongly stated Dickey's obligation to give his reading.

Dickey had two appearances that day—a morning informal appearance before a creative writing class and the public lecture. With support he was able to walk to the class. And he made it through the class—sort of. He was obviously drunk and the class was shortened. Dickey's attention was directed towards expressing how it felt to be drunk in the morning. We gave him little encouragement. We were worried about how he would feel in the afternoon. As he lurched drunkenly across the Clemson campus Dickey gave the impression of wanting to convince himself that being drunk would give his reading bacchant power. He said he felt glorious. He was lying.

Having navigated Dickey through his morning class without total disaster, we

began to entertain some hope for salvaging the afternoon. But Dickey was merciless, demanding, "Let's go have a beer." I lied that there was no time, but Dickey knew better. As he ordered his beer I urged him not to undo the little we had been able to do. Dickey replied in his best John Wayne voice, "Don't ride herd on me!" I gave up. If Dickey insisted on being the drunken poet, I couldn't stop him. He had a desperate need to prove that alcohol would help him perform. His student sponsors took him away for the big event as the yellow school buses continued to roll in.

The event was very brief. As Dickey approached the lectern he staggered slightly; but he did not fall flat on his face as the story has been told. He was able to read only three poems. Alcohol was no enhancer. The comedy was over. A dinner at my house had the feel of a wake. Dickey returned to Clemson for two more occasions: five years later for a successful reading and, the climax, back a final time to receive an honorary degree. Both times, as at an MLA reading I chaired for him, he was on his good behavior, limiting himself to a six-pack of beer. All was forgiven, but not forgotten.

#### NOTES

1. Henry Hart, *James Dickey: the World as a Lie* (New York: Picador USA, 2000).
2. Robert E. Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).