

James Dickey

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO A READING
Eighth Annual Walt Whitman Festival
Camden, New Jersey, 4 May 1977

Well now, isn't this somethin'.

What I would like to do I think is to read some poems from various times of my writing life, say a little bit about Walt Whitman since he's very much a presence here. I was just going through his house. Remarkable memorial to a very great American poet, and uh, just kind of not have any set formula about reading but just read some things of mine and um tell you what I think about Walt Whitman. It's really not a lecture on Whitman. There are other people better qualified to do that than I am. Um, but I think a person's relationship to, say a poet's relationship to a poet, is conditioned by uh his particula' beginning association with a poet and the first time he ever read him and the effect reading the poet's work had on him under conditions that are peculiar to the person who is reading the poem and the poetry.

Oh, I was a night fighter pilot trainee in 1942 and I was interested in poetry in a kind of an off-hand way and I remember bein' on a trainin' mission. First time I ever read Walt Whitman I was on a trainin' mission. Well, one airplane is supposed to chase the other one around with radar and then you change around the latter part of the mission and uh the other one chases the first plane and I was the target aircraft and I was supposed to fly straight and level and that there other airplane try to find me where, you know where I was and shoot me down with gun cameras. So what I did was I had a paperback copy of *Leaves of Grass* with me that somebody 'ad given me an' I turned on the cockpit light an' I put the airplane on automatic pilot an' sat down in the cockpit and read Walt Whitman.

An' I thought man this is some sort of strange dude. I ain't never read anything like it before. What little, what little I had known about modern poetry or poetry since his times, say 100 years ago, had to do with received opinions of poetry such that there were supposed to be according to my schooling intrinsically poetic subject matters say like love and death and beauty & ships and sunsets and sunrises and all the things you see on calendars and that sort of thing and that it was supposed to be poetry. This is a guy I was readin' up there in the night cockpit that uh had to do with none o' that at all. He had to do with uh people workin' in the streets, and um workin' at jobs sailin' the oceans and gettin' around the general business of humanity every day. He showed the beauty of that and I thought Lordy, why haven't I ever seen that before. And what I was doing in the night cockpit was participatin' in what Whitman wrote for all of all of us for our imaginations because he cut us loose from received poetic subject matter and threw quite literally the whole universe open to the human imagination. Now isn't that a good statement on my part? (clapping and laughter) But true it is. That's exactly what he did do. Whitman can show you what people had kind of, what would you say, surreptitiously thought probably was true but no one had ever voiced it maybe since the times of Homer or the Old Testament that there is just as much beauty say like you were thinking 'bout writing a poem like Tennyson, a beautiful Tennysonian poem 'bout rose gardens, thangs of that sort. There's just as much beauty as there is in a rose garden in a man sawin' a plank in two as Whitman saw him. He would stand and watch him. Or diggin' a ditch, or even a sewer, or something like that. There's something marvelous about it, just to stand there and look at the marvelousness of ordinary existence as we live it from day to day. That's where Walt Whitman comes in. He's also the great poet of the body. And literature comin' out of the Tennysonian era and the Browning

era and so on had a terrible squeamishness about that. This bumptious American said uh "okay enough of that. I've got a body myself which I kind o' like in certain times and certain places, certain occasions and so have you." So let's uh get her right on out there and talk about it a bit. The most beautiful poetry in the world is in *Song of Solomon* in the Bible. We can't do better than that but we got our American version of it. Let's talk about that a little bit. So, when you're up in the airplane and you read such things, you come down and you land the aircraft and you make out your report and you go off and you think about it a little bit. What it is you've learned, because it's not an ordinary experience you have gone through. I don't think anybody realizes how outrageous Whitman really is and what he accomplished. Uhh as far as setting free the human imagination, the poetic imagination to do things that it would never have dreamed of doing. He said it when he says in his rather awkward way knowing but little of foreign languages "no dainty dolce ifatuso I." It's funny! No dainty sweet eh what is ifatuso would be uh poselle. Ha ha ---- poor son of a bitch. (laughter) He's trying to impress me and he doesn't even know the other language. But that's what so loveable about him. Uh Whitman was a man who created himself. But the image that he created of himself as the American poet who was gonna open the new way for the coming man and open up the coming man sensibility and so on was the right one that we shoulda had and it was him. "I celebrate myself and sing myself and what I assume, you shall assume. For every atom belonging to me is good belongs to you. I loaf and invite my soul. I lean and loaf at my ease. Observing the spear of summer grass." And I would say parenthetically and why the hell not. "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd this soil, this air, born here of parents here from parents the same and their parents the same. I, now 37 years old in perfect health begin, hoping to cease not 'til death." Now that's very simple, plain speakin' language. But it's plain speaking imaginative language that nobody

before him had spoken. Many since, but none before and none so well. "Creeds and schools in abeyance, retiring back a while sufficed at what they are but never forgotten, I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard, every chance, anything that comes into my mind. Nature without check, with original image." so on. This goes on and on. There's no reason why Whitman poems should ever end. And so good is most of each one of 'em that there's not any sense in talking about economy of image, metaphor, rhythm, --- it doesn't matter. You wish it would go on forever. You could take you could take parts of one poem and put it in another poem and it wouldn't make any difference. It would still be all part of the great poem, the long poem that was Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and was, he kept working on it until the day he died and it was all just one book. One poem. Saying the same thing. Which is this.

He continues to read from "Song of Myself."

That really is what he was and I think that from that one night ride in an airplane on a training mission that I myself was born as a writer because I had begun to write some rather puerile schoolboy verses myself in the manner of people that I had been taught were masters of the English language and so on but they were not really for me. I couldn't do it very well. I thought it was just something wrong with me. But when I read Whitman, said "I cain't do what Tennyson can do I'm no master of language like that guy, but what this guy Whitman did I could do something like that." And so I have been doin' ever since. I think he's my great father as a writer and uh with that I'll acknowledge my debt to Camden's Walt Whitman. Personal debt and pass on. Okay? And read some of the things that more or less resulted from it.