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JAMES DICKEY: LIMITATIONS AND INFINITIES

HANK NUWER /1985

NUWER: Is your vision of the world the same as or different from what it was twenty years ago?

DICKEY: I don't know. History changes and we change with it. I really don't know my vision of the world then any more than I do now. I'm more confirmed now in what I thought then, I think, about the basic sanctity of the inner life and the necessity for having a good one.

NUWER: Do you enjoy the good life here in Columbia, South Carolina?

DICKEY: Yes, it's good. In many ways, it's good. Any writer's life has a good deal of frustration. I wouldn't be doing anything else.

NUWER: Have your midlife years and experiences made you a better poet?

DICKEY: By far. I was raised in two sorts of milieus: athletics and war. Those were especially formative, especially warfare, but I give athletics plenty of credit, as well. Or discredit—or, at least influence. I have two grown children, and a newborn, and a grandchild. My wife, Maxine, of nearly thirty years died years ago; I've been through the long, slow part of sorrow, instead of the fast and sudden part. You learn both limitations and the unlimited things—limitations and infinities.

NUWER: Do all the experinces that you've amassed go into the creation of your poetry?

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DICKEY: Sure. That would be true of any poet or any writer or any human being. Everything that happens, even from second to second, adds to your experiences. Some of it you don't understand yourself; it's subconscious or unconscious.

NUWER: Do you think one has to be ruthless to succeed?

DICKEY: Yes—especially on yourself. You've got to have the personal quality that will preclude fooling yourself about what you're doing—maintaining something that you've written is good simply because *you* wrote it. This is a common failing among writers, especially among student writers, but not limited to them.

NUWER: Have you sent something out that you regretted when it reached print?

DICKEY: Well, sure. But I don't believe in being cautious. I believe in saying what you believe at the time. I don't mind if I contradict myself at all—neither did Whitman. . . . The main thing is to bring out something forthright. All my books are being reissued now, and I just brought out a book of criticism of mine.⁶³ I repudiated about half the opinions that were earlier expressed. You change your opinions. Any critic that nails himself into a position and feels that he has to hold on to it, whether he still believes it or not, is stultifying himself. You must allow for change. I don't have the same opinion of *any* writer, much less myself, from year to year. Sometimes you like one, and then you like somebody else. That is necessary, I think. You must keep it fluid. You must allow for the momentary, spontaneous reaction to anything, even in something that you've read many times and are familiar with. You mustn't say, "Well, in 1968, I said *this* about this guy; so if I say anything about him again I gotta say something to approximate *this*." I don't believe in that. You might think the guy was good then, and you don't think he's so good now. You should be free to say it! You should keep your sensibilities subject to change.

NUWER: Will you revise your early poems—the way W. H. Auden did, let's say?

DICKEY: No. You must protect the integrity of the person you were at the time. I know some people who revised their work,

and their best work was what they did when they were young and didn't know so much about poetry and were not so cautious. They should have let it stand. Unfortunately, Auden was one of these people. Although he was good in some later things, the early Auden was by far the best. When you go back as a middle-aged or old man and dissect the young man, it's a form of betrayal. Aside from a few typographical errors, I don't change anything.

NUWER: Like Hemingway, your personal life is the source of much intrigue for *non*readers of your work.

DICKEY: This is a mistake. If I have made a mistake, it is encouraging and allowing too much of that. My life is not at all that spectacular, nothing like his. I didn't go around killing elephants and lions and that sort of thing. I like to handle guns, and I like to hunt, but my success has not been spectacular. And the more the ecological balance goes against the wild things, the less inclined I feel to hunt.

NUWER: Does a writer lose something if he's not been in a war?

DICKEY: Hemingway thought so, said it was the one truly indispensable thing. Most writers, all writers, needed that if they were going to be great. I can say with the rest of the veterans—the people of my generation—I wouldn't have missed it. *But*, I wouldn't want to do it again.

NUWER: Athletics?

DICKEY: I like sports very much: all of them. I've done most—although not the ones where you have to fasten things to your feet—skating, ice hockey, skiing. Southerners are usually not very good at those. I was in collision sports like football. Football and track were the two best for me.

NUWER: Was there any identification with you with the narrator in the Vince Lombardi poem?⁶⁴ "I never played for you. You'd have thrown / Me off the team on my best day— / No guts, maybe."

DICKEY: I think so. I was afraid of being passed over. Any athlete has that. You don't know what another person's, a coach's, opinion is going to be. You have to have a special kind of guts to play for somebody like Lombardi. As I said some-

where in that poem, "love-hate is stronger / Than either love or hate." He's the kind of coach who inspired that feeling; and it's true, too, of human affairs, I think.

NUWER: Do you agree with Lombardi that winning is everything?

DICKEY: It's hard. Too many unpleasant people like General Patton and Hitler have had that extremist kind of attitude. In this country where competition is fierce, the guy who believes that and can bring it about is going to be the top guy. Everybody else is going to be an also-ran to him.

NUWER: Is there such a thing as a good loser?

DICKEY: Was it Leo Durocher who said those guys finish last?

NUWER: Was there a time when the media version of James Dickey took over your life?

DICKEY: I don't know. You can't really say *what* determines *when* it takes over. It's more an irritation than anything else. I'm a writer; I begin and end there.

NUWER: In *John Barleycorn*, Jack London wrote that he was "inspired" by drink. Have you lost any creative edge by easing up on your drinking?

DICKEY: No. I don't know how Jack approached writing; it's possible that his drinking destroyed it. American writers seem to have a vested interest in alcohol, but I don't. I enjoyed it, but it's time to leave it behind. You get dependent on it. Everybody now is taking uppers and downers—all these basketball players and weight lifters and javelin throwers. What's the drug—?

NUWER: Steroids?

DICKEY: Steroids. All those things weren't around to be frowned upon when I was doing these kinds of activities.

NUWER: You never got into drugs?

DICKEY: I couldn't smoke a Chesterfield, much less marijuana. I've seen a lot of it, but I—I remember what André Gide said to Jean Cocteau. Cocteau was, early on, big on the narcotics back at the turn of the century. Cocteau was trying to get the straitlaced Gide to join in some of these revelations, but

Gide said, "No, I wouldn't be interested in that. Lucidity is my drug."

NUWER: Anything else you feel like saying right now?

DICKEY: I *like* to write; I'm a compulsive writer. My trouble is keeping away from it—far more than drink or sex or anything else. It's got a permanent interest for me; it does not fluctuate.

NUWER: Are you the kind of person who writes anywhere, anytime?

DICKEY: I learned to write on a troop train; if you can write on a troop train, you can write anywhere. I like to have a sense of life going on around me. I don't like to be in a box. I like to see people at least part of every day. Solitude is all right, but I'm not that much addicted to it.

NUWER: You're not what Henry David Thoreau claimed to be?

DICKEY: No, but I admire him greatly. He's one of the very good people in American literature. He had a profound relationship to the world, the natural world, that I like. I always admire anybody of whom it would be true, as it was true of him, that you could chloroform him and put him in the wilderness anywhere around Concord, and when he awakened, he would be able to tell from the state of the vegetation and wildlife, within three days, what day of the year it was. That's something I admire; nobody could do that now.

NUWER: Vladimir Nabokov did know his butterflies—

DICKEY: I like *Lolita*; I think it's by far the best thing of his I ever read. Nabokov strikes me as rather clever and supercilious, but *that* is a real story, a love story, really. The protagonist really does love that awful little girl. She doesn't care anything about him, but he really does love her. It's not just a sexual thing. He loves her, which is quite different.

NUWER: Have you read Nabokov's *Pale Fire*?

DICKEY: I have. Think of it: a whole novel written in footnotes. It's all footnotes and *awful* poems.

NUWER: About you—do you think you've achieved the goals that you've set?

DICKEY: I don't think art has anything to do with winning out over somebody else. It's one field where athletic criteria don't apply in the slightest. . . .

NUWER: Do you see things in your mind in movie frames when you write?

DICKEY: No, but making movies is another thing that's helped any sort of writing I do. I did the screenplay for *Deliverance*, and I did another television movie, my particular and personal version of Jack London's story of atavism, *Call of the Wild*. I enjoy it. My imagination is very visual anyway, and visualizing scenes and sequences in film is extremely advantageous for the poetry I've been writing.

NUWER: It hasn't had an adverse effect?

DICKEY: Not at all. Everything goes together. I think if you're essentially a creative person, anything you do adds to your creative effort. *Anything!* I draw on my advertising experience all the time. You learn the right things for you no matter where you are or what you're doing.

NUWER: Even in your teaching? There's no sapping of creative juices?

DICKEY: Not in the slightest; it has exactly the opposite effect. Those kids love poetry, and it's gratifying to be in a milieu in which what you love is what the people you're dealing with also love. There's no need to persuade anybody of anything or coerce somebody into something, as is true of the business world: none of that sort of friction! Everybody wins. And *you* learn a great deal. I agree very much with Bernard Shaw, who said, "If you want to learn a subject, teach it." Teaching forces you to come to terms with your own conception of things, and you get your own ideas straight. When you get up in front of a class, you can't do a soft shoe dance or string tricks—although if I could do them, I would.

NUWER: Do you have any problem with students being intimidated by you?

DICKEY: I get them over that fast with my downhome manner—which is totally authentic.

NUWER: In your classes do you recommend any particular poets?

DICKEY: Oh, yes. We read an awful lot of them. I like a lot of bad poetry. I get tired of sublimity, even my own. Especially my own!

NUWER: You look like you have a ball out of everything you do—that you *really* do enjoy yourself.

DICKEY: Why live if you don't? You're the same way. I like that. I'm a natural-born gambler. I want to try something new: to see if it works or if I can work something out that I haven't done before. So that's what I'm doing with the new book,⁶⁵ and will do with the work beyond that.

NUWER: Speaking of experiences before—was it terrifying when you were blinded?

DICKEY: In a way, it was. I got a very good intuition of what it feels like not to *be* blind, but to *go* blind. The plaster for the life-mask the guy was making broke, and I sustained some eye damage. But it all turned out all right.⁶⁶

NUWER: What was your attitude toward the sculptor, William Dunlap?

DICKEY: Very fraternal. He's a nice fellow. That, too, is an experience that got exaggerated. It really wasn't all that bad. But there were some moments of uncertainty. Actually, the stuff burned the cornea, so for a while, I had eyes, following hours of temporary blindness, like a newborn. I had been wearing glasses, but for several years after I didn't have to wear any. I do wear them now, but for a while I didn't have to.

NUWER: Do you wear glasses to shoot a bow?

DICKEY: No.

NUWER: Have you ever considered buying a word processor?

DICKEY: I don't care for those. It makes the words too intimidating. I'd like to think I have a certain mastery over myself instead of them coming at me from a machine. I've never worked one; I might not have that opinion now if I was to. I think I don't want to feel what I write is intimidated.

NUWER: Do you work first drafts in pen or pencil?

DICKEY: I work catch-as-catch-can. I work with typewriters, pen, pencils, knees, elbows, eyelashes, toenails, eyebrows—anything I can get hold of.

NUWER: Your book *Puella* is dedicated to your second wife, Deborah, in “the new life.” Did “new life” lead to revitalization in your poetry?

DICKEY: In a way. There was a change in technical approach because I felt at the time I didn’t want to repeat myself. . . . The business of a creative person is to work out there on the edge of things, to risk being wrong, to take a chance, to gamble.

NUWER: Don’t you consider whether something you write is also commercial?

DICKEY: No. You, as a writer, can’t second-guess what people are going to respond to. That’s death. That’s the death of creativity. . . .

NUWER: This may be because of faulty reading, but I don’t think a *typical* James Dickey poem exists.

DICKEY: I think that is true; I believe you’re the only person I’ve met who’s read a lot of poetry who is of that opinion. A lot of times I can read something of mine in an anthology, and I don’t remember exactly that I’ve written it.

NUWER: Do you have any particular educational theories that you’ve formed over the years?

DICKEY: Yes, I do. I try to go with each student, to the heart of what concerns him most deeply in his own life, his own past, his own experience, his own temperament and his own psychology, to try to find some way to objectify that and get it down in words by some sort of formal means.

NUWER: I understand that you are an advocate of students’ learning fundamentals about their language before they try to write creatively.

DICKEY: I think it is necessary to do. You take a field like music. There are some extraordinary musicians who don’t read music, but they do what is *written* on the music whether they read it or not. Some students kick a little about funda-

mentals. They think they are a little too mundane for poets to fool with. They don't understand that it is structure that makes the very flights that they want to attempt. You're not able to do it without a knowledge—either implicit or instinctive, but more or less intrinsic—of your efforts. You have to gain that knowledge whether you have it by rote or learning it in school or by some other means—you still have to have it.

NUWER: Is it difficult for you to assess another person's writing, particularly a young person's?

DICKEY: It is difficult. It requires a certain amount of tact which I'm not always able to evince. You do have to be careful. I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. So much of the individual ego is involved in the writing of poetry. A certain type of person feels that if you say his work is no good, it's tantamount to saying he's no good, or she's no good. You work to avoid that confrontation, or what someone might consider a brutal put-down.

NUWER: Did you ever have a thin shell?

DICKEY: No, not really. I wanted to learn. Just like if a fellow knew how to do a guitar piece, I would want to see how he did it. If he could do it and I couldn't do it, I would want to find out from him. I've always been an avid learner all my life. I like that attitude in other people.

NUWER: Are there any poets you learn from today?

DICKEY: You learn from everybody. It comes from a process of osmosis. I read a lot—all writers do. It's our medium: poetry, prose, plays, screenplays, even advertising. You're using words to produce an effect of some sort, and you like to see how other people do it. You just like words generally. You like to listen to words—yours or someone else's. You just like being in the medium. You read a lot, and what influences that come to you are due to the process of absorption. You don't do that consciously, or at least I don't.

NUWER: The South of the high-tech Eighties certainly differs from the tragic South that produced the likes of Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, Harry Crews, and yourself. Do you think the South has lost its tragic sense?

DICKEY: I think the tragedy is changing. We've been living off the Civil War and its aftermath for a mighty long time now. If there is tragedy in the South now, it's in the conversion from a rural, farming economy to an industrialized one. The South is industrializing very heavily, and it might be argued—as it was eloquently argued by Warren and some others in the twenties and thirties—that this is wrong for our part of the country, that we should stay on the land and we should not industrialize. We should try to keep the old ways, particularly the family together—and the cousins and the bloodlines and so on. We should try to keep a way of life that has some very good things about it. Slavery was a part of it a hundred, hundred-fifty years ago, but that was part of the Southern ethos. The fact that slavery was a part of the way of life in the antebellum South does not mean that everything about the South is thereby eviscerated, or is made evil and wrong. It's like other things in human history and human motivation. The South has some very good things about it and some unfortunate things. . . .

NUWER: You have a sense of fascination for the Appalachian region, don't you?

DICKEY: Yes. My father and his family come from there, and I have lots of relatives back up in there. I love those people. They are a unique people, and their culture's unique. But those places, too, will go and become like Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and Helen, Georgia, which is like a reconverted Alpine Village, of all things. When you see these things you know that the end is in sight for Appalachia, too.

NUWER: You think that's all doomed?

DICKEY: Yes.

NUWER: Many of your poems depend upon a strong narrative thrust. Do you see yourself allied with Southern storytellers?

DICKEY: No. I like narrative; I like stories. But in the latest poems that I've written I've tried to bypass that or transcend that element. In my last book, I've tried deliberately to avoid versified anecdotes, although I don't entirely avoid it. It's too easy, fatally easy, for me to make that kind of poem and turn out a lifetime of versified anecdotes like "Cherrylog Road" and

so on, which I like, but I want to get off that track. That's enough of that. Try to do something else, I said.

NUWER: You never stay still. You don't have any affinity for any particular movement.

DICKEY: No, I don't. I would avoid that any way I could. I don't like that sort of literary cliquism. No. I'm essentially a loner.

NUWER: Old bullfighters used to shave the horns of their bulls to give themselves an edge. Are there tricks that old poets have to get them by?

DICKEY: I don't know. I don't talk about what other people do that much. If somebody's good I like to read him. If he's not good or if I don't think he's good, I don't read him.

NUWER: In your poem "Gamecock," you seem to have some borrowings from Dylan Thomas—

DICKEY: I don't think it has anything at all to do with Dylan Thomas. If it has any affinities at all it's with the writer Randall Jarrell, whom I greatly admire. I like Thomas's work, but . . . I would not have any affinity stylistically with him at all. If I found anything at all of him in my work, I would ruthlessly scrub it out. . . .

NUWER: Do you have any poets that you feel are blood brothers or blood sisters?

DICKEY: Yes, I think so. I think Laurence Lieberman is working in the same vein that I am. Dave Smith is very good. I have high hopes for Betty Adcock of Raleigh, who's had a book . . . that's good. There's a woman out of Provincetown named Mary Oliver whom I think everybody ought to read. She's outstandingly good and doing some of the same things as I. We're all of us different from the role emphasis on personality and personal conflicts and agony and that sort of thing. People are worn out listening to somebody else's weeping and sackcloth-and-ashes attitudes, breastbeating, and gnashing of teeth, frustration, and tearing of hair and personal grievances. That wears out fast. People like Theodore Roethke, Dave Smith, and, I hope, myself are trying to do something different from that in throwing experiences open to the possibilities in a reader's own life, instead of limiting experiences in a poem to

my life, and *my* ancestry, and *my* upbringing, and *my* suicidal drive. . . . No poet should be so egotistical as to ask the reader to fasten onto his own personality and his own confessions, that sort of thing. Experience is capable of far larger things than that.

NUWER: Any plans to retire to the high country of South Carolina?

DICKEY: It's my particular job as I see it to drive the thing on through to the end, to write as well as I can to the last breath. I want to write the ultimate poem; we all want to do that.

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The Voiced Connections of James Dickey

South Carolina

**The Voiced
Connections of**



James Dickey

Interviews and Conversations

edited by Ronald Baughman

From James Dickey's Preface:

"In the course of these interviews I became increasingly aware of the fact that one will say things that one would hesitate to write, or would not write at all. The interview 'form,' if such it may be called, not only makes possible but in a sense creates another self, and in my opinion this self should be allowed its say."

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