

THE TRUTH AS A “LIE”:
JAMES DICKEY AND THE SPIRIT OF POETIC REVELATION

by *Bronwen Dickey*

The eternal has absorbed him while he lived, and when he is dead his influence brings others the same absorption, making them, through that ideal identity with the best in him, reincarnations and perennial seats of all in him which he could rationally hope to rescue from destruction. He can say, without any subterfuge of desire to delude himself, that he shall not wholly die; for he will have a better notion than the vulgar of what constitutes his being.

—George Santayana¹

As I am sure it is clear by now, my father, James Dickey, was a very complicated, contradictory man. I always believed, and still do, that his contradictions were precisely what made him a fascinating person to know. So in the years since his death, I have been dismayed and discouraged by the myopic and narrow picture of him cobbled together by his detractors, some of whom were people my father knew well and trusted greatly. It is, as Jean-Luc Godard said, “not a just image, just an image.” If you had never met him and you read the bulk of what is now available to you in terms of biographical analysis, you would come away with three impressions: James Dickey was a liar, a drunk, a real bastard to the bone. And yes, sometimes he could be all three, but he was not *only* or even predominantly that way. It is the first of these narrow characterizations - that he was a liar - that puzzles me the most, and it is the subject of my remarks here today. Of the other two, I can merely shrug and say that I knew a very, very different James Dickey, and so did many other people, but, unfortunately, we aren't the ones writing the biographies. I desperately hope that this will change in the coming years, but, even if it never does and I die thinking that no one understood my father as I did, I want to make one thing clear while I have the opportunity: my father was a poet - not a journalist, not a scientist, not a legalist, and not a moralist. He subordinated clinical facts to spiritual truths, and so did every other poet who ever lived.

That's because poems *are* lies.

We don't read poetry in order to be fed lifeless data about the happenings of everyday existence; we read it because its illusions resonate with something at the very core of what we know ourselves to be, or perhaps it illuminates what, at our best or worst moments, we dimly sense ourselves to be. Either way, it reveals to us what we *did not* know we knew. Poetry, then, is the very inverse of journalism. Journalists present a sequence of facts about a given situation and allow their reader to interpret their own meaning. Poets begin with meaning, and facts are only incidental to their poetic purpose. The poem is the vessel by which poets create (and recreate) the world as they want it, as they think it ought to be, and as they believe it essentially is. Dad liked to say that the poet shows God a few things He may not have thought of.

Lies - metaphors, myths, symbols, archetypes - are means to the end of poetic truth. It is simultaneously amazing and appalling to me that some people have painstakingly catalogued every "lie" my father ever told, or every story he embellished, and that none of them understands what German filmmaker Werner Herzog observed so incisively: "There is an enormous difference," he said, "between ecstatic truths and the truths of accountants." I would add that all art hinges on these ecstatic truths, and if it has to rip through the flesh of factual reality to feast on the spiritual heart of human experience, then I say, so be it.

Now, if we accept that poems are lies, then we have to expect that poets are liars. Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*: "The poet considers the liar a foster brother whose milk he has drunk up. Hence his brother has remained stunted and miserable and has not even gotten as far as having a good conscience."² Criticizing a poet for not being honest in all matters is like, as a friend of mine says, "blaming a car for not being a boat." Dad explains the phenomenon of the lie, and his experience of it, in 1970's *Self-Interviews*:

I think I really began to develop as a poet, at least according to my own particular way of looking at things, when I saw the creative possibilities of the lie. My parents were very much against lying in any form. But I think lying, with luck sublimely, is what the creative man does. You never saw anything like Picasso's women; there's never been a storm at sea such as musicians like Ralph Vaughn Williams 'describe.' If you look out the window, chances are you will not see those angels Blake writes about. It's an illusion: that is, a lie...but it took me an awfully long time to realize this. I was constrained by fact. I thought that if I put into a poem something I hadn't actually experienced or seen, then it was in essence lying or cheating and was therefore immoral. When I kicked that straw dummy down the stairs, I began to write stuff that satisfied me.³

Speaking of straw dummies, my father's biographer, Henry Hart, would fiercely disagree with the above statement, and with everything I have said here up to this point. For those of you who don't know, his mind-numbingly dull doorstop of a book is entitled *James Dickey: The World As a Lie*. When I read it several years ago, my eyebrows got quite a workout; the entire time they were either raised in skepticism or lowered in disgust. At my father's memorial service, Pat Conroy memorably said, "James Dickey made Ernest Hemingway look like a florist from the Midwest." How could a biographer, when presented with what very well may have been the most colorful and multi-faceted personality of American letters, make *James Dickey* into such a petty, lifeless, bore? I often like to joke that Hart has shown such a relentless desire to willfully misrepresent his subject that he has created his own genre: the lie-ography. Not only did he laboriously compile a compendium of all the "lies" my father allegedly told, he went so far as to include every snippet of gossip he could choke out of my father's friends and colleagues, much of which, I can assure you, was flagrantly false. For an author so ready to hang the value of a man on his factual fidelity, Hart didn't do very fastidious research. Jeffrey Meyers, a man whom I respect greatly, wrote a wonderful counterpoint to Hart's book in the May 2000 issue of *The New Criterion*, and, if the topic piques your interest, I really encourage you to read it. To

get into my own series of point-by-point refutations would be to lawyer-ize when I seek to make a more concise thematic point. Suffice it to say, Henry Hart has a bit of a forest/trees problem, and he is no James Boswell.

The aspect of the book that really gets to me though, the thing that *bores my blood*, is not that Hart caught my father misbehaving. It is that his tiresome, moralistic laundry list makes no attempt at insight. Does it really *matter* that my father said he was a pilot when he wasn't? He was an intercept officer, a sort of radar operator, which still means that he was in the plane, and therefore, as much as the pilot, risked being shot out of the sky. It's just a matter of seating arrangements. Dad's version may have been more dramatically concise, but even though his story was streamlined for better, easier telling, does it make any real spiritual difference? To be sure, sometimes Dad *just made shit up*. He did it for fun, or for convenience, but most of all, he did it because it made the story better. And he would have had no problem with a biographer pointing this out. Dad would be the *first* to dismiss anyone who attempted to sanitize his personality. But all the explanation for his behavior is there - Dad even *wrote* much of it himself in his journals and essays, which makes it doubly baffling that Hart deduced a picture that was so laughably off target.

My father believed that a biographer should be a sort of "journalist of the soul," which is to say, not really a journalist at all. The poet's biographer has the most daunting of tasks before him, because the nature of poetry, and what forms a poetic sensibility, are such elusive beasts. In the case of a novelist, one can often discern with transparent ease the meeting point of his life and work. But what, in life, makes a poet a poet? If one chooses to pursue the thankless task of answering that question, it seems to me that the only person truly qualified to do so is one who loves and understands - above all - the poet's *work*. Such a biographer should be able to see something essential in the poet that he also sees in himself. If he can relate to the poet deeply, then he will experience the poems as a spontaneous melding of spirits (his and the poet's), which will render the biographical data nearly superfluous. If he can relate to him only partially, then he can use the life, perhaps, to understand the poetry more profoundly. The two can then be reciprocally reinforcing. But if he cannot relate at all to either the poet or his work, then...well, then you have Henry Hart. The smug, gloating subtext coursing through Hart's tome is "I may not be a poet, but at least I'm truthful," which is mere inches away from saying, "I may not be deep, but at least I'm shallow."

I should admit, though, that there was a long stretch of Dad's life during which he believed that nothing really *counted* but his Great Poetic Project. He was very self-absorbed and insensitive to the needs of other people in his life. Many times, he was aggressive and hurtful. I can't imagine how hard it must have been to be married to him, or to have been raised by him during those years. He had a way of making life difficult when it didn't need to be. But he *also* had the capacity to make life *fun* when you thought it couldn't be. He made the world *interesting*. He either took the facts of a situation and buffed them to a high gloss, or he completely fabricated entirely absurd stories, as Jeffrey Meyers wrote, "to hoodwink and to entertain." Dad hated nothing more than being bored. Sometimes he would do or say the worst possible thing at any given moment just for the sheer delight of stirring things up. Many people, unfortunately, only remember this aspect of him, and it was by far the least interesting part of who he really was as a person and as an artist. He did harbor a seething contempt for individuals he observed to be stiff and humorless,



absolutely. But so do I. So do most people, except, of course, the stiff and humorless. And the one truth that Hart really nailed is that the contempt is mutual.

My father was a great example, perhaps the best, of the poet as provocateur and performance artist. There is one statement I can make about him with which *no one* can argue, and that is: he refused to play by any rules that were not his own. This was sometimes what made him impossible, but it was always what made him great. He was an elitist in the best sense of the word: he believed all art should be held to the highest of standards, and he believed in different strata of meaning, that is, higher and lower strata of truth. If someone were to tell me today that nothing my father *ever* said was factually true, and that, hell, my father wasn't even my father, I don't think it would make one damned bit of difference to me. He would still have been my father in spirit, and no less real to me as such. This speaks volumes about the essential nature of James Dickey: his ability to relate to people, to encourage them, and to inspire them.

There are worse things to be than a liar who does so beautifully and insightfully. James Dickey left us far more than the quotidian fact-mongers, the "accountants" of the world, will ever see. By use of his profound and vast imagination, he made poetry accessible to people who formerly believed the poem to be esoteric and beyond their grasp. He took poetry out of the halls of academia and brought it back into people's *lives* again, which is the only truly suitable place for it to exist at all. Unlike the Beats, who preceded him, he showed his readers a world full of magic and myth, hope and possibility. Instead of making the world look dark and ugly, his work affirmed the abundance and mystery of life.

There were certain of my father's poems that could not have been written by anyone other than a great liar. "Approaching Prayer" from his collection *Helmets* may be the most vivid example. In it, the narrator enters the house of his father, recently dead. Searching through his father's belongings, he finds a sweater, some gamecock gaffs, and—believe it or not—the head of a large boar that the narrator himself once helped to kill. You don't *dare* think he's going to put on that boar's head, but that is exactly what he does, along with donning the sweater and the gaffs. These items form a magical or mystical combination, and they enable the narrator to attain a kind of clairvoyant identification with the boar at the moment of its death. As Dad himself would have said, "Come on buddy. How ridiculous can you *get*?" And it *is* ridiculous. It is *ludicrous*. But it is also great, and its ridiculousness is central to its greatness. That's what makes it a world-class lie, the kind that transforms the world. I would read the entire poem in its entirety had I the time, but the last stanza most clearly distills and articulates everything I have said here today:

Where I can say only, and truly,
That my stillness was violent enough,
That my brain had blood enough,
That my right hand was steady enough,
That the warmth of my father's wool grave
Imparted love enough
And the keen heels of feathery slaughter
Provided lift enough,
That reason was dead enough
For something important to be:



That, if not heard,
It may have been somehow said.

Of course, we can all only hope for the same.

Notes

1. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998) 296-297.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 144.
3. James Dickey, *Self-Interviews* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 32.