GAIL MCDONALD ORAL HISTORY COLLETION

INTERVIEWEES: Robert Watson and Betty Watson

INTERVIEWER: Gail McDonald

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[Begin CD 1]

GM: —great.

RW: When I went to college, at Williams College, it's a little college in Western Massachusetts. All Freshman had to take a course called "Understanding Literature." And it began with understanding poetry, and then understanding fiction, and I can't remember the rest of it very well. But the textbook that was used was [Cleanth] Brooks and [Robert Penn] Warren—

GM: Right.

RW: *Understanding*—It was not their omnibus *Understanding Literature*, it was *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*.

GM: Okay.

RW: As far as I know, as textbooks, these were first used, this is very rough, in the late '30s, maybe 1939, at Yale [University]. This spread to Williams within a year or two. And this is the way we were taught. We were taught close analysis—

GM: Right.

RW: —of poetry without regard to author's lives or to historical circumstances.

GM: So essentially the new critical approach.

RW: The new criticism.

GM: Right.

RW: And the most popular journals, even the students read them. One called *The Explicator*—

GM: Yes, right.

RW: —and another *The Kenyon Review*.

GM: Right.

RW: And to a little lesser extent there's one, a British one, edited by F.R. Leverson and Elsie Knight. What was the name of that? But it was sort of the British new criticism, but that was married with something else, which I can't—At the same time at Williams there was a splinter group, and they followed what was called the Parrington method, which was sociological.

GM: Vernon Parrington [American literary historian and writer]?

RW: Yeah, so that was a little splinter group, in American lit.

GM: That was the American lit, okay. [laughs]

RW: That was American literature. At that time, I also took, I guess it was in my sophomore year, an elective course in modern poetry, which included—And again it was close reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins [English poet and Jesuit priest]. He'd just been discovered, really in the '30s, he was considered kind of a modern poet.

GM: Right.

RW: And [William Butler] Yeats [Irish poet] and [T.S] Eliot [American/British essayist, playwright, poet, publisher, literary and social critic]. These were the three main figures. And to a smaller extent we read, maybe we just wrote papers on them, E.E. Cummings [American poet, painter, essayist, author, and playwright], Wallace Stevens [American poet], John Crowe Ransom [American educator, scholar, literary critic, poet, essayist, and editor].

GM: Yes.

RW: I had discovered Wallace Stevens in the library. I found a book called *The Blue Guitar*, and I just took it down and I looked at it and I took it out and I was hooked, for a while anyway, on Wallace Stevens.

GM: And you were undergraduate at the time.

RW: This was all undergraduate.

GM: So, you just wandered into the library to find.

RW: I'm a sophomore.

GM: So, you're like nineteen years old or something like that? Twenty years old?

RW: I'm seventeen or eighteen.

GM: Oh, you're really young then. Okay.

RW: And then I—there was a little group of faculty and students that met. It was arranged by the faculty, people who were sort of interested in poetry. I think there were eight or ten of us. And it was people who brought in poems that we were so fascinated with, but they didn't really quite understand. One of them was a poet by the name of Jose Garcia Villa [Filipino poet, literary critic, short story writer, and painter]. I don't know if you've heard it.

GM: No, I don't. Sorry.

RW: He wrote a poem called, "A Sky Wrote Me Upside Down Blackbirds."

GM: Okay.

RW: No, "Sky Wrote Me Black Birds." I'm sorry.

GM: Okay.

RW: It doesn't really—Many years later he wrote a book where every word had a comma after it.

GM: Yes.

RW: And I finally met him through one of my students here. Anyway.

GM: Oh, my. No, but this group that you were in, this was just for fun?

RW: Just for fun.

GM: I mean you guys would get together.

RW: We'd hang out with beer and one night a week at some faculty member's house.

GM: It was at a faculty member's house?

RW: Yes.

GM: Okay.

RW: Then, at that time the Navy came up and I was whisked away. But I arrived in—I ended up in Saint Albans [Naval] Hospital in New York where, of all things, several of the people in the ward that I was in were interested in poetry, including the head nurse.

GM: Wow!

RW: And we got [Louis] Untermeyer's anthology—

GM: [laughs]

RW: —and talked about it. Okay. Then I'd be doing skipping some—The years I went to graduate school at John's Hopkins where the faculty, on the whole, was opposed to close analysis. It really wasn't doing your work. Your work was philology—

GM: Okay.

RW: —or your work was historical study, history of ideas. Oh, I've forgotten what all. Oh, by the way, this is also going back to Williams, there's a little tinge at times of Freudian analysis.

GM: Oh, yes, okay.

RW: It was sort of on the very edge.

GM: So, you were on the cutting edge then.

RW: Sort of on the edge. Well there's a man at the Bennington College who wrote a—Oh, I can't remember. Bennington was twenty-six miles away. He wrote a book of criticisms in which he outlined, the [unclear] vision by Stanley [unclear].

GM: Oh, sure, sure.

RW: And that seemed to come out around then. Sort of different kinds of criticism were available. People really knew that, knew that book. Also, as background too, I think that we were out to read, this was really I guess at Williams. I.A.—If you were maybe a junior/senior major, you might read I.A. Richards [English educator, literary, critic, and rhetorician]. And oh, I've forgotten a couple of the other British sort of mathematician critics.

GM: Yeah. And you found out, probably, sort of as titillating and exciting as the poetry in some ways or not?

RW: Well, I thought it was a total bore.

GM: [laughs]

RW: See, he couldn't write. See, the trouble with a lot of the critics was that they couldn't write. They couldn't write an interesting sentence. And he was one of them.

GM: Okay.

RW: Then at Hopkins, the whole, it changed completely. And they did have a living poet there by the name of Karl Shapiro, who at that time we're talking very late '40s, early '50s. He was considered one of the five or six. No, one of the ten finest living American poets. And he was really ranked with Randall [Jarrell] and Robert Lowell and Elizabeth. I can't remember when Elizabeth Bishop [American poet and short story writer] came along. Fairly early in the '50s.

GM: Delmore Schwartz [American poet and short story writer] was gaining a bit of record.

RW: Delmore Schwartz was in that area.

GM: Berryman.

RW: Berryman. But we weren't so much aware of them. Maybe in the Midwest.

GM: Okay.

RW: Okay. Now, I lost my bearing just for a minute here. So anyway, at Hopkins, it was decidedly high bounded. They weren't open to [Sigmund] Freud or [Carl] Jung although there was a man in the Romance language department by the name of Leo Spitzer, who was a marvelous, marvelous critic.

GM: Yes.

RW: And he also explicated texts line by line, as we'd learned at Williams. But he knew so many languages and so many traditions. Sometimes it would take him two class meetings to do a line. He knew so much about words in the line, or if it's the pastoral tradition. Spitzer was really one of the greatest critics I've ever heard, but nobody else could do it. In other words, he did not have any heirs as far as I know because nobody knew what he knew in terms of philology and who knows Dalmatian. I always thought Dalmatian was a dog, but he knew it for a language is that I'd never heard of.

GM: [laughs] Now how do you count the difference between Hopkins and Williams? Is it just that one's a graduate program and one's an undergraduate? Or why do you think?

RW: Well, I think you said something. I think maybe it was about more it was graduate and undergraduate, that's very definite. I think people at Williams thought they earned their money if they taught Eliot or maybe something with a lot of footnotes. At Hopkins, they're interested really in footnotes on footnotes.

GM: Right, right.

RW: So, there we are.

GM: Okay.

RW: So, when I was at Hopkins I had a friend and my roommate. Now we used to play what was called, we invented it, it was called the "New, New Critic System at Hopkins."

GM: [laughs]

RW: And it goes like this. How do you like T.S. Eliot? I think T.S. Eliot sucks. Well, now, T.S. Eliot what do you think of [Ezra] Pound? Oh, he's for the birds. That was the "New, New Critic." Anyway, it didn't last long as a movement.

GM: Right.

RW: About three days.

GM: [laughs] Very short books as well. So, when did you come to Greensboro, in '53?

RW: I came in 1953.

GM: Okay.

BW: You taught at Williams too.

GM: You taught at Williams too?

RW: I taught at Williams.

GM: Oh, you went back at that point?

RW: I went back and taught at Williams also. And I also went to school in Switzerland, which is where the approaches to literature were different. And you don't even want to hear about those.

GM: How did they do it?

RW: Well, it was all mixed up with, as you might expect, with psychology. I had a course, I think it was called, "Basic Psychology," I think is what it was. But it was in the Jungian interpretation of dreams in literature.

GM: Okay, wow!

RW: So, this man, I can't remember his name. He was six-foot-six. He had a mistress and they kissed every time he started his lectures.

GM: That is quite different from the average American.

RW: But I know lots, several of the dreams were in *Faust.* Were in [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe, in German dreams rather than—and some French dreams. I don't recall any American dreams. No, [Edgar Allan] Poe. I guess Poe was in it.

GM: Oh, Poe?

RW: Anyway, this is 1946-47.

GM: That you were there?

RW: That I was at university in Switzerland. And I met Thomas Mann [German writer], he was there. And Jung was busy at the Jungian Institute.

GM: Were they interested in modern poetry or not? Was somebody like Thomas Mann interested in somebody like Eliot?

RW: He had only one interest—

GM: Thomas Mann?

RW: —and that was Thomas Mann.

GM: Okay. So, then you went to Williams?

RW: So, I came back and then I came here. And I think that, it was called Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina] in those days. And it was kind of a literary offshoot of Vanderbilt [University] and Kenyon in the late '30s. Well, I guess—Was it before Allen Tate [English professor, American poet, essayist and social commentator] and Caroline Gordon [English professor, novelist, and short story writer] were here. It was also the someone called Hiram Haydn [American author and editor]. He was a real literary power. Have you ever heard of him? Well, he started here, and he got a PhD from Columbia with Margery Nicholson, who gotten in, wrote a book about the 17th century. He published, taught here, published novels, went to New York, became the editor of *The American Scholar*. At the same time, he was editor of *The American Scholar* he was editor-in-chief at Random House and he taught at the New School for Social Research [Brentwood, New York].

GM: Good grief, Hiram Haydn?

RW: Hiram Haydn.

GM: H-A-Y-D-E-N?

RW: And he was for years there at *The American Scholar* and he with someone else from Williams College. And [unclear] Simon Michael Bessie [American writer, editor, and publisher]. I can't remember.

GM: I don't know Bob.

RW: Founded Atheneum [Books] publishers. And Atheneum published me and they published Randall and they published— This is Hiram Haydn.

GM: That's wonderful.

RW: Anyway, when I came, Randall had been on a leave of absence for two years.

GM: Right.

RW: And Peter Taylor [English professor, American novelist, short story writer, and playwright] had left to come back later. And [unclear] was here, although Robie [Mayhew Macauley, English professor, novelist, and short story writer] wasn't here. Do you know who he is?

GM: Yes.

RW: He, by the way, is alive and well is Massachusetts. He retired as one of the editors [unclear]. He's married Anne Draper. But anyway [unclear] of course, came from Kenyon [College].

GM: Right.

RW: As did Peter, as did Randall. And there was Mr. Ransom, you know, another father of the new criticism standing in the wings. And of course, there had been Allen Tate. And so—It was a great place to be because—Well, the reason Woman's College had, to me it was the best place in the whole country to go. I couldn't think of any place better to go. In those days it was very, very difficult for writers to get a job. People did not want [unclear]. They did not want Faulkner. They didn't want these people when I was at Williams. Who wrote *Arrowsmith*?

GM: Sinclair Louis.

RW: Sinclair Louis, Nobel Prize winner, moves to Williamstown. They were scared silly that he was going to teach, would want to teach a class.

GM: What do you think the reason for that was? Fear?

RW: Keep him away from our students.

GM: Fear of artists.

RW: Yeah. Also, to—When I was at Williams, they didn't, the English department—they were kind of horrified if any of their students wanted to be a novelist. [unclear] I think

I'm the only poet who ever graduated from all of Williams. The whole thing since 1792, when it started.

GM: [laughs]

RW: So, anyway, here the atmosphere, and this was true at Hopkins. We had—Here's Karl Shapiro, he's off to the side, we don't let him do very much. And he's—He was from Baltimore and he's a graduate of Hopkins, so he's just a safe alumnus. And he had a good war record.

GM: Right. [laughs]

RW: So, here it was vibrant and lively. And because this was such a poor college, they couldn't hire PhDs. They had to hire people like Randall and Peter Taylor, and, you know, Allen Tate, and Caroline Gordon, and so forth and so on.

GM: That's just amazing to me. You mean you could get them for less money than they could?

RW: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure.

GM: That's just incredible.

RW: It was hard for writers. Well, see there's a big change the generation before. Wallace Stevens was a lawyer and insurance executive. Eliot was a very successful editor. William Carlos Williams [Puerto Rican-American poet] practiced medicine.

GM: Right.

RW: And let's see.

GM: You had to have a day job in other words?

RW: Oh, yeah. In his autobiography Williams—I knew, see he went to University of Pennsylvania.

GM: Right.

RW: He knew—He became friends with [Ezra] Pound [American expatriate, poet, and critic], and he became friends with [unclear]. Williams just knew that he had to have a way to earn a living beside that. That he'd be a doctor, that doctoring and writing would go together. As have many men.

BW: He was my doctor.

GM: He was?

BW: As a baby I guess.

GM: I have one person who was delivered by him.

BW: No, I don't [unclear].

GM: It was a woman. She seemed fine to me. [laughs]

RW: His son was William William Williams. And he also, as I did, went to Williams college.

GM: Oh, gee.

RW: And he lived in Williams Hall. So, he was William William Williams, Williams Hall, Williams College, Williams doctor. His father should not have done that.

GM: That's silly. That does seem odd.

RW: But he's a pediatrician. Practicing at 7 or is it 9 Ridge Road, in Rutherford, New Jersey, at the same house that his father practiced in.

GM: Oh, my goodness. But the folks who didn't want to have other careers would just wander from school to school? Or how did they live? Pick up writing criticism? Things like that?

RW: Criticism wasn't.

GM: No. What's a hot journalism?

RW: Oh, you mean journalism? Journalism was the great. If you look at early writers like Walt Whitman [American poet, essayist, and journalist].

GM: Right. Well, Stephen Crane [American poet, novelist, and short story writer].

RW: Stephen Crane, yeah. So, you did have journalism. I've forgotten what other occupations. Who was the subway toll collector on Staten [Island]?

GM: I don't know that one.

BW: Nathaniel Hawthorne [American novelist, dark romantic, and short story writer] was a customs collector.

RW: No, no, a poet. He writes these dismal art poems. People who have bad ends. People who commit suicide.

GM: Edwin Arlington Robinson [American poet].

RW: Yes. But he worked, I think,

GM: I didn't know he worked as a subway toll collector.

RW: As a toll collector in the New York subways.

GM: Oh, my goodness.

RW: And then we have a friend of ours. What is Hillary's—?

GM: [unclear]

RW: [unclear] His father's a lawyer and then he's a sponge according to Hillary. Or [Ernest] Hemingway American journalist, novelist, and short story writer]. What Hemingway did [unclear]. He married successfully richer women. One wife was richer, except for one.

BW: Never a bad idea.

GM: Yeah.

BW: Pound found that to work as well.

RW: Yes, he did. So, come from back here, this is the situation.

GM: So, the vibrancy here. So, it was vital because—

RW: And what happened here. It was something very different than I had experienced. That is people like Randall and Peter and so forth expected their students to turn out to be famous writers. I mean it was the natural thing to do. Not to be a story writer, novelist, a poet. And so, it became, it wasn't something special and different that you were doing. I mean it was special and it was different for you but there were many other people doing it who made it their lives.

GM: Yes.

RW: Of course, it became increasingly clear though that so many members of the Jarrell generation were praising. There was another—That there was later on, I realized, another side to this truth that was probably.

GM: But it didn't feel that way in the '50s probably? Didn't feel that way until the '60s?

RW: Well when Lowell came down here you knew that you got to be very careful because he might go off his rocker and do something horrible.

GM: Yeah.

BW: A lot of people came to visit too, that these people knew.

GM: So that created.

RW: Oh, Elizabeth Bowen [Irish novelist and short story writer] and we had all kinds of people. Endora Welty [American short story writer and novelist], Flannery O'Connor [American novelist, short story writer, and essayist].

BW: Oh, also, who's the old one that was the teacher, just for a second?

RW: Andrew [unclear]. John Crowe Ransom.

BW: John Crowe Ransom, excuse me.

RW: John Crowe Ransom.

BW: Robert Lowell [American poet], of course. Jean Stafford [American short story writer and novelist].

RW: Adrienne Rich [American poet, essayist, and feminist]. It's a long list.

GM: And did they all come for the Arts Forum?

RW: Yes, or something like that or reading.

GM: Or for reading.

RW: But usually they didn't stay. They were usually [unclear].

GM: Right. And they were really there to see their friends.

RW: Yes, it was interesting.

BW: And they read the students' work.

GM: Wonderful.

RW: And they read the students' work.

BW: And went over it with them.

GM: So, it almost sounds like a happy, sort of serendipity, that just came together in that way.

RW: It was, it was. I have a feeling it may be in the early days at Kenyon that this warming feeling too. You think of all the writers at Kenyon. Randall didn't go to Kenyon, but the group of Peter and Carol Lowell really were lots of others, but their names just allude me.

GM: That's okay.

RW: What's Eleanor's [Ross Taylor] sister's husband—?

BW: Donald Justice [American poet and teacher of writing].

RW: Oh, yes, Donald Justice. He also came here.

GM: So, did the students notice this or the undergraduates?

BW: Oh, yeah!

GM: Were they just really, really excited about it? What was their attitude?

RW: Yes, yes.

GM: That's a very big part.

BW: Well, Robert Frost [American poet] came.

RW: What?

BW: Robert Frost came.

RW: Well, he came every year, yeah.

GM: Wow! Jarrell really liked him, didn't he?

RW: What?

GM: Frost. Jarrell really liked Frost's poetry. From his teaching notes.

RW: Loved his poetry, yes.

GM: Yes, I can tell that.

RW: I don't know how well he loved Frost.

GM: Oh, well, I'm only talking about the poetry. I'm only talking about the poetry.

RW: Yes. Oh, he loved it, yeah.

BW: We had these tremendous Arts Festivals, which—

RW: We'd have a reading. You'd have—The whole Cone Ballroom would be filled up.

BW: For the big ones. And then they always filled—

RW: The Alumni House, yeah.

BW: And also, there was another room there in Elliott Hall that would be packed, alongside there.

RW: Yes, we'd have panel discussions.

GM: Do you think the students had any idea that they were there?

BW: Yeah. Sure.

RW: I got a picture her—I thought I'd—

GM: One of my students told me last night that John Dos Passos [American novelist] had been here in that same period.

BW: That was probably before John Dos Passos.

RW: John Dos Passos was here.

BW: I don't remember it.

RW: Well, he was not in such good shape.

GM: Oh, dear.

BW: Oh, Hannah Arendt [American philosopher and political theorist] came. I don't know if she came as part of that.

GM: That's Adrienne Rich.

RW: [shows photograph] Adrienne Rich, Randall, Peter, X.I., Kennedy, myself.

GM: Wow!

RW: I want to tell you who else came.

BW: Who's the other one who won—That won the Pulitzer? Not [unclear].

RW: Oh, [William DeWitt] Snodgrass [American poet] you mean.

BW: Snodgrass was here?

RW: He's been here several times.

BW: And this continued on through the ’60s.

RW: I’ll tell you who stayed for a while. Gave a series of lecturers. Susanne Langer [American philosopher, writer, and educator]. Do you know her work?

GM: Yes, oh, yes, yeah.

RW: She was someone who writes. I know I was very interested, and I know Randall was interested in her work. I did feel like I thought she was great on literature but as she moved further from literature into other arts she wasn’t as good.

GM: What was it you like about her work?

RW: Well, it’s what she said poetry was. I don’t want to repeat what she said.

GM: Yeah. But just tell me.

RW: It’s really kind of a form for feeling.

BW: What was it? “Form and feeling” or *Feeling and Form*? Was that the name of one of its—?

RW: Or “Form and Function?” *Feeling and Form* or was it “Form and Feeling?” That was her book that came after—

BW: And then she did the art too, painting too.

GM: I should know the art book more than I know the poetry book.

RW: And so, anyway in that atmosphere, I’ve been a closet writer all these years. I showed my work when I was an undergraduate, I think, I must have been as a graduate too, to one of my English teachers at Williams. He kept them for two weeks [unclear]. He kept them for two or three weeks and then he came back, and he said I read these very carefully and I showed them to two or three other people in the English department who all think they’re very good, but you’ll never be a poet. They’re not really—

[laughter]

BW: That kept him going.

GM: That’s a good spur. That would keep me going too, I think. So, you came here to be a regular English teacher, but you came out of the—

RW: Well, I never really. I was always in disguise because that really was not what I wanted.

GM: So, you really were in the perfect place then, for what you were interested in?

RW: For me, yes. Or anyone in my situation.

GM: Tell me about the students in the ’50s.

RW: The students here, maybe Betty could do a better job than I can. They tended to be from small towns. They tended to be very countrified. But they all seemed to have, well the ones that were interested in literature or art, they all seemed to have somebody in the family who played the piano or wrote for the local newspaper or what. And they tended to be very ambitious. They wanted to go to New York.

GM: Okay.

BW: And I think they seemed to be more open and adventurous than perhaps a group of young ladies that you’d find in the Northern—

RW: Betty went to Wellesley [College].

BW: You know one of the big colleges.

GM: Right.

BW: There was just kind of innocence that made them very receptive, I think, to the arts and excited by it. And by these things like the Arts Festival, which some girls might have been bored with, so you know. But it was a big event—

GM: Right.

BW: —and the one thing—

RW: It was like movie stars.

BW: Yes. So, that was wonderful.

RW: And it was in the days when it was very glamorous to be a writer. And these girls thought, you know, I’ll be a novelist or poet. To them it was a big glamour job. They knew they weren’t going to make any money but—

GM: And some of them do, do it too?

RW: Oh, yes, a lot of them—

BW: A lot of them did.

GM: How did you conduct your classroom in those days? Did you teach modern poetry?

RW: Yes,

GM: In the classroom?

RW: Yes.

GM: And did you use new critical methods, or did you use a combination of things? Or, how did you?

RW: It was eclectic, but it was basically, first a line by line. In other words, I thought I had two jobs, was to teach them to read in a sophisticated way. And you weren't really teaching writers because, you know, so few people become writers. You're teaching readers is what I thought I was doing. And readers who would like poetry. In other words, I didn't want giving the assignments and so forth be medicine. Here this is something that's good for you. And I wanted it to be an enjoyable experience but not at the expense of their being dumb and not working. And I think there's a way in teaching where you must combine those two. Where you can't lose the pleasure. On the other hand, you don't want people taking dope. So, there's a real difference.

GM: Right. It's a hard problem.

RW: Well, I guess you have to teach them that, as a reader, you earn the pleasure. In other words, it's not necessarily—It's not a given.

GM: Right. We talked about teaching a lot in the department now, even now. In fact, that's one of the things my husband and I really like about it because where we had been before at Rochester, everybody treated students as if they were a necessary evil. And we just really didn't like that, it didn't suit our temperaments. And I find myself talking to people a lot now. And when we talk about teaching poetry, what I find and what I found in my classroom, is that students are very frightened of poetry now.

RW: Oh, they're terrified of it.

GM: Very frightened of it. Were they frightened of it in the '50s too?

BW: They've been that way since the beginning.

RW: What?

BW: Go ahead.

RW: Go ahead Betty. Tell me what?

BW: I don't want to interrupt what you were going to say but I—

RW: Well, nerves that never flinched at slaughter something at the shorter poems of John Donne [English poet and cleric]. It's a line by the W.H. Auden [English/American poet] in a poem called, what is the name of it? He wrote it right after the war. Have you ever read it?

GM: I feel like I have.

RW: It's about people coming home from war, "Nerves that students, and nerves that never flinch at slaughter are something by the shorter poem of John Donne." [Editor's note: the poem reads, "…And nerves that steeled themselves to slaughter Are shot to pieces by the shorter Poems of Donne."]

GM: Slaughter, shorter, what?

RW: Yes, so, I think that's been a given for maybe centuries. I am not sure.

GM: So, even though they were very excited by the idea of these movie stars coming in and the general atmosphere and so forth, when push came to shove it was still hard going in the classroom sometimes for them?

RW: Yes, oh, yes!

GM: Okay. And when they wrote papers, was that also the case? Did you find they knew how to go about writing a poem or no?

RW: No, they didn't. No.

GM: So, you had to start from square one?

RW: Had to start from square one.

GM: So, do we. And you don't think that was because it was a woman's college, or do you?

RW: Well, no I don't. I think that in some ways, the fact that it was a woman's college, all women, made the classes more receptive. However, it had one bad quality to it. They never said much of anything.

GM: Yes.

RW: And it was so hard to get them to talk. And I know I took a year and went to teach in California, in L.A. [Los Angeles]. And the classes, you know, they talk, and they argue all the time. They didn't like each other particularly. And here it was—And at Williams they talked. But here it was very difficult, and it was because of the sort of—I noticed, the position of women in society.

BW: I think it was true. This was true at Wellesley too. The professors complained about it continually. And I was one of the ones that didn't say anything. So, I understand from the female point of view.

GM: What do you think the reason was?

BW: I think that must've been just culturally built in.

GM: Yeah.

BW: I really do.

GM: Yeah.

BW: Because women certainly have plenty to say now.

GM: Yeah. That's true.

BW: I mean, it's not in the genes.

GM: Also, the situation may have been made worse too by the girls being from the country. I mean, if I was from the country in the South. The thought of being taught by a poet would be very frightening in some ways.

RW: But they were frightened [unclear].

GM: No, not frightened of you personally but—

BW: But it's not completely because they're girls. If you were to divide it up into, I would say, that the Southern girls who of a certain personality were more adventurous. More open than the Northern girls even. I mean a lot of them. And you notice in government and business, a lot of people in New York are people who were girls from the South. And if they have that personality and strength of character, nothing stops them.

GM: Interesting.

BW: I'm sure that's right.

RW: Well, a lot of them were sort of like skyrockets waiting to go off. They were very repressed. They came from these—

GM: Oh, I am so thrilled to hear you say that.

RW: They came from these Baptist, hard-shell Baptist towns. And boy what they really wanted was a bottle of booze, a cigarette, and to get laid or something.

BW: And to read T.S. Eliot, too.

RW: Oh, yeah.

[laughter]

GM: That's part of the whole thing, right? That's what I thought.

RW: Do it to Eliot—

BW: There were so many like that. Look at Bertha. I mean there were so many. But out of the whole group though, if you tend to think of what it was like, there was a lot of repression in the college, I think, in the deans. For example—

RW: Tell her about what happened to you in the library.

BW: Well, they had a rule against blue jeans. And one day, this is when I had a couple little kids. And I was in a hurry, and I went through the library in my blue jeans and I was stopped and told to leave.

GM: What year was this?

BW: About 1958 or 9. There were a group of girls who were the radicals. It wasn't very radical. But they, of all the girls in those years wore bobby socks and nice little skirts, and white blouses. And our group, this group, wanted to wear black stockings and not socks. And this was frowned upon. These girls were really, don't you think Bob?

RW: Oh, yeah.

BW: That the dean was—were after them.

RW: Tell her the rain coat man.

BW: Well, you tell her.

GM: The rain coat? [laughs]

RW: Yeah. The girls were not allowed to wear slacks or shorts. And if one was wearing a rain coat and it wasn't pouring, it meant that she had slacks or shorts on. And that was their—So you knew.

GM: I see. It's very interesting sort of coding, isn't it? It's like I'm going against the rules but I'm wearing a rain coat over it.

RW: Oh, they couldn't do anything without having demerits. I was amazed.

GM: I had no idea about this.

RW: It was much worse than that.

BW: This was true at Wellesley too. I graduated in 1949, they had all kinds of rules and regulations. It was unbelievable. You had to sign in, sign out. No men in the dormitories. Of course, you knew that.

GM: Right, I knew that.

BW: But, I mean it was really—the called it in loco parentis.

GM: Right.

BS: Of course, that in a way, it sort of added to the pleasure of these girls.

GM: Yes, yes. I can see how that would do it.

BW: There was a little codery, there was always a codery. And these girls were usually connected with the arts and the writing. Or with the *Coraddi* magazine. It was a magazine and there were artists and—

RW: Tell her about the *Coraddi* magazine, what they did once a year.

BW: You mean the festival?

RW: Yes.

BW: I know just what you're going to say.

RW: What they had—It started in the late '30s I guess. They had what they called an Arts Festival issue of the college undergraduate literary magazine. And people all over the country could submit their work. And the jury, which was the faculty here, would choose the pieces to be printed in that Arts Festival issue. And then they would be discussed in the spring by the literary panel—

GM: Oh, I see.

RW: —and there'd been so many, almost all the people. Flannery O'Connor was one of the student submissions. Both the Hecht poets, Anthony Hecht and Roger Hecht. And James Dickey [American poet and novelist] and Donald Hall [American poet, writer, editor, and literary citric].

GM: All those people were student submitters?

RW: Yes, years, yes.

GM: Wow!

RW: But then after a number of years it died because we got imitated. In other words, they had more [unclear].

BW: And also, it began in the late ’60s when everything got upset with the Vietnam War and all the protests. Some of the student editors didn’t like any faculty control and they began to have a big blow up.

GM: I see, yeah.

BW: And I don’t know that it ended it, but it changed.

RW: I don’t know whether this is quite out of order in terms of chronology but when I first came, many of the members of the English department had only MAs. And they were kind of high school teachers who’d moved up.

GM: Right.

RW: And they didn’t—They were very good, I think, at freshman composition and so forth. But they were really bewildered by young instructors who came from Yale or whatever who did know how to explicate poems. And just knew a lot more than they did. And it was very difficult. And they were offered very—They didn’t like their situation.

BW: Or your situation.

RW: Or my situation.

GM: Right, right.

BW: Because they were older.

GM: Sure. Do you think they were even teaching new critical reading?

RW: No.

GM: What do you think they were doing when they taught?

BW: They weren’t sure.

RW: Well, before the new criticism came in at Yale, they had, what was his name Billy something. There was an inspirational reading of poems.

GM: Okay. Sure.

RW: What was his name? William Lyon Phelps [American author, critic, and scholar], he was very famous.

GM: Oh, sure, yeah.

RW: You don't question the wine that the poet pours to drink. You just enjoy it.

GM: Enjoy it. Right.

RW: And then, there was the lives of the poets, where you went into their lives. But that, you read the poems as sort of biographical documents.

GM: Right.

RW: Or documents of their idea systems of ideas or what have you. So, in the graduate schools, at Hopkins I know, it was mostly, as I said earlier, was philology. And what else did they do? I can't remember. [chuckles] Anyway, I just thought I'd come back. So, the English department was kind of divided.

GM: Yes.

RW: And it made it—It wasn't all big happy family because of this.

GM: There must have been a feeling of you Young Turks coming in and Bohemians and so on.

RW: Oh, yeah.

GM: Okay. So now, of course, in new criticism in people who practice it are portrayed as fascists?

RW: Are old fashioned.

BW: It's turned around.

GM: And portrayed as if they're terrible—Thank you. Oh, I'm sorry.

BW: Have a cookie or cookies.

GM: Thank you. As if they're stodgy. And of course, it's quite the opposite.

RW: Must be bored too—It's insane to think that all this is in anyway new. Somebody will discover the new criticism sometime.

GM: Oh, yes, I predict at some point in the next ten years actually. But, I think you're absolutely right that it keeps coming back around too. Did anybody ever teach Pound or was he just too troublesome to teach?

RW: Well, no. I don't think. Well, I'll tell you about Pound.

BW: Have some [cookies]. Take two or three.

GM: Thank you. I will just hold them in my hand. Thank you very much.

BW: Do you want another?

RW: What? No thanks. Personally, here's the way I feel about Pound.

GM: Thank you.

RW: I feel that he's a poet who never really had his own voice. Like many of the writers of his period is a great parodist. The way Joyce and obviously Eliot and others are. And so, his great poems are really imitations. The most obvious one [unclear]. What is it?

GM: Oh, yes, the "Winter—"

RW: The "Winter is icumin in." Well I do love the, what is it called, the letter.

GM: "Exile's Letter."

RW: What?

GM: "Exile's Letter," no.

RW: Yeah, I think the river wide letter?

GM: "The [River]-Merchant's Wife: A Letter."

RW: "The [River]-Merchant's Wife: A Letter."

GM: Those are wonderful.

RW: And then I think you begin "The Cantos," which begin very and wonderful way, then they just become, to me, mannerisms, pretentiousness.

GM: Yes.

RW: I once asked William Carlos Williams, "Here is Pound in Saint Elizabeth's, what does he pray for?" And Williams said—

[vacuum cleaner background noise]

RW: Should we move?

BW: No, I think we're all right here. I said to just stay here until she gets down to there. I've got these Maids of Honor [cleaning service] and they sort of do everything at once.

RW: So, I felt that you begin writing only for yourself. That's what to me, it was. With the Chinese [unclear]. Even with the things you can say about the Chinese [unclear]. The visual. And I feel that way too when you get to—I think *Ulysses* is grand, it's a marvelous book. But then you take that next step to [pause] to—

GM: *Finnegans Wake*.

RW: *Finnegans Wake*. And you've had it. And you can take passages from *Finnegans Wake* and they're simply gorgeous.

RW: You can take passages or fragments from "The Cantos." And this is my very personal opinion. I've never read anything, any poem, with that much criticism in all of my life. But I just don't think they're successful poems? That's it and I liked it. I like his letters a lot.

GM: I do too.

RW: And there, I think I just love those letters.

GM: Except it's very bad to read them for long periods of time because then you start to write letters that sound like him and it's a terrible thing. [laughs]

RW: Well, I guess I have this collection that came out of his letters to William Carlos Williams and that's something marvelous.

GM: They are. They really are.

RW: But anyway, that's what—But I never really. I taught a few what you might call easy Pound poems. But they were so many in that one semester that I had to teach modern poetry. I later taught a course in contemporary poetry. That—He wasn't at the top of my list nor was William Carlos Williams at the top of my list.

GM: Who was?

RW: What?

GM: Who was?

RW: Frost, Eliot, Stevens—

GM: Right.

RW: —were my three picks.

GM: Okay.

RW: And I think that. And it's silly to rank. I can see why you could say no, it would be Pound, Williams, and so forth. I can accept any kind of ranking within that. But I wouldn't put E.E. Cummings blank-blank [American poet, painter, essayist, author, and play wright], or John Crowe Ransom blank-blank, or Allen Tate blank-blank.

GM; Yes, yes.

RW: So, you have to make some distinctions.

GM: Right.

RW: So, now, when you get to Randall. Randall, he didn't care for Pound. I never knew exactly why. Neither did Peter Taylor. They never said, they just would screw up their faces.

GM: He says—

RW: We have to remember there are feelings about the [Second World] War and Jews.

GM: Yeah.

RW: It's very difficult for many people to forgive things that Pound said and did.

GM: Sure, sure.

RW: I remember when Pound received the Bollingen Prize [literary honor given to an American poet].

GM: Great prize.

RW: That Karl Shapiro, who was at Hopkins, just couldn't believe.

GM: I write about him in my book because I thought he was the most eloquent person to speak against his being awarded the prize. And he was not only saying interesting things about Pound but interesting things about the nature of poetry. Because when Tate and others tried to defend the prize, they were essentially asking everyone to ignore the content of "The Cantos" and only pay attention to the form, but Shapiro pointed out that poems do have content.

RW: This is one thing Randall had to say too, about Pound and about other writers too. There's things you simply can't ignore. And this is true, I think, in E.E. Cummings too. [unclear]

GM: Yes.

RW: While Stevens' letters [unclear].

GM: It's pretty pervasive. You know it is even Eliot.

RW: Even Eliot too. It's a puzzle to me why.

GM: It is a puzzle. How so many smart people got so confused on that question is amazing. And whenever you work in a modern—

[End CD 1—Begin CD 2]

[vacuum cleaner background noise]

RW: That, I just am not going to use literary references, name-dropping literary references, foreign languages, intellectual show-off stuff and then I began to realize what Williams was saying. I began to realize—Well, when you take John Crowe Ransom. I think when you read a poem, the poet has to show you how to look at something in more than one way at once. And with John Crowe Ransom, it's kind of easy because he goes into Old English, and you look at this situation like [unclear]. You see this sort of this foolish Southern lady who's dying of fits and fevers and so forth. Then, he ends up in [unclear] et cetera, et cetera, and he uses Middle English. He wants you to see this scene as she would be seen from that foreign view.

GM: Right.

RW: And so, then Frost, when he wants you to see something—I am much over simplifying from another point of view, he will do it in word ambiguities.

GM: Yes.

RW: Like, "I have miles to go before I sleep."

GM: Right.

RW: You look at the word "dark" or "My long-pointed ladder, my ladder is pointed to heaven yet" in Frost he gives us. [Editor's note: Frost's poem reads, "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree Toward heaven still…"]. Eliot tries to do it by layering

civilizations. And I—Williams wanted, which may be a little simple, this pure American poetry where it's the thing in itself.

GM: Yeah, right.

RW: That's so important, and I felt that the literary tradition that Pound and Joyce and Eliot were working in was just dead and for a living writer, not for their regions obviously.

GM: Right, right. But you couldn't continue doing that.

RW: But you couldn't continue doing that. It seems to me that in Jarrell's work, you get a lot of that continued a great deal of it. But more and more as I think Jarrell moved through his career, he did less and less of that.

GM: Yes.

RW: You take the "The Woman at the Washington Zoo." It's very pure as a thought.

GM: Yet, he admired Eliot, obviously.

RW: What?

GM: He admired Eliot, obviously.

RW: Yes. Now Eliot, I think in the courses that he taught in modern poetry—I think he taught Hopkins, Yeats, Frost, and Eliot. Now, whether he ever got to anybody else, I don't know. Very often, he didn't get through practically anybody, you know, the way a course goes.

GM: Sure.

RW: But I think those were his influences.

GM: His four.

RW: He—About what he has to say about—And how he approached Frost, you've got it in his essay.

GM: Sure.

RW: In the essay, "On 'Home Burial'" and then the two which is [unclear].

GM: Right, I've got that.

RW: Then, here you might be able to help me. He was writing either, and sometimes it was an essay and sometimes it was a book—

GM: On psychoanalysis?

RW: What?

GM: On psychoanalysis on Eliot, or not.

RW: Yes. It was Eliot and analysis.

GM: I went to the library, and said, "Where are the notes for this book?"

RW: There aren't any. I don't think it exists. I think it's a non-existent book that he was writing. See, at the end of his life, he went mad.

GM: You really think he did, then? He was mad, truly mad.

RW: Oh, he was mad. I mean—

BW: He was manic-depressive, right?

RW: Well, yeah some of the things he did, he didn't hurt anybody, but [unclear].

BW: No, his mind was not the way it ordinarily was, right? He was always all wound up.

RW: Well, he got into this jag about riding jet planes. He'd get on a jet plane and—

GM: Yeah, I read about that. That's—

RW: But there were many ways he exhibited he was not the way he mostly was. He would be saying, "You know, I wrote two poems today. I've been writing two or three poems a day." Well, if he did, he threw them away because they weren't anything. He still was writing.

GM: Yeah.

RW: He [unclear] Pancake House and a few others. But what he was going to do, he was going to take a year off and study with a psychiatrist and work on this book on Eliot. His approach to Eliot was a kind of, I think, a class—A lot of it was Freudian because [unclear].

BW: It was. I know that.

RW: He did not like four-letter words in reference to sexual organs, except he himself in class would talk about [unclear], this and that, and in front of these young girls. He'd completely [unclear].

BW: I remember now. [unclear] told me about how he described the back of the horses and one as looking like female rears.

GM: That's not exactly Freudian. I can just imagine—

BW: He wasn't at all that way in conversations.

GM: No, I've read many times at how—He was offended by so-called dirty jokes or that kind of thing.

RW: Well, I had his daughter in class, his step-daughter, whatever. It bothered me because the day after class [unclear] what I taught. But one day, he came up and he said, "You know, I've got to hand it to you. You've taught [Geoffrey] Chaucer [English poet and author], very delicate [unclear]."

GM: [laughs]

RW: I didn't teach Chaucer. She reported it.

GM: She reported it.

RW: Right, knowing how—

GM: Anyway, that's about all I can tell you.

RW: He's now vacuuming. We're probably not going to get a lot on the tape at this point.

[vacuum cleaner background noise]

GM: Do you want to move to the other room?

BW: Yeah, let's go in the back room. Okay, turn it off?

GM: Okay, I will because I don't think I am getting—

[recording paused]

GM: [unclear] but I didn't realize.

BW: You could tell Mary [Jarrell] is extremely articulate, and she has a wonderful memory.

GM: Okay.

BW: A very precise, and detailed memory, so that's just wonderful.

GM: Well, in the Pritchard biography, there's a reference to hundreds of pages of notes on Eliot's psychoanalysis—the psychoanalytical approach to Eliot. I thought, "Gee, that's interesting. I'd love to see that." But Emmy [Mills, head of Special Collections and University Archives] said she's not—

RW: They're not in the Berg Collection or Texas? She'd know.

GM: I asked her, and she said she didn't think so. But I'm going to hunt it down, though, because of course that's exactly what everybody's doing now. They're ignoring completely the idea of this public Eliot, and everybody's really interested in his private life.

RW: I know it—

GM: Exactly. He's very prescient in realizing that that was going to happen. The letters probably had a lot to do with it, but Valerie Eliot said he'd done those letters. But I'm not going to let up on this.

RW: Yeah. I saw Eliot once. He gave a lecture at the Library of Congress, and I was in Baltimore at the time. The lecture was about three French 19th Century writers. I can't remember who they were. But the whole lecture was, "Here's what they did, and how I'm sure they did not influence me."

GM: [laughs]

BW: Which is included [unclear].

RW: At the end of his lecture, W.H. Auden [English-American poet], who was a noted slack, arrived. He came to the lecture wearing a white tie and tails. He got up from his seat and clapped and yelled, "Bravo!"

GM: [laughs] That's great. Well, I'm very interested about those notes. I'm going to try to find those notes if they exist. Why did Jarrell call Greensboro [Woman's] College the "Sleeping Beauty?" You write about that in your essay, remember.

RW: Well, I think it's all these quiet women students here. It was like a fairy tale world he felt. Isn't that what you're impression?

BW: Yes, yeah.

GM: [unclear] fairy tales were so important to him, it seems to have—

RW: Oh, yes, oh, yes. They're essential to his poems [unclear].

BW: His imagination. Yeah, yeah.

RW: Also, he would make a little mistake and he'd say, "Oops, another Freudy." He would say.

GM: "Another Freudy!"

RW: Yeah, "Another Freudy in there." Or, "You've made a Freudy."

BW: Have you heard, at the library, they have him on records [unclear]? It's going to be a shock. It's going to be a powerful shock. He's wonderful. He seems, when you hear him, he's more himself almost than any—I just can't [unclear].

RW: He has a very peculiar voice and style of delivery. But you get used to it.

GM: Oh, I will do that.

BW: He's just full of enthusiasm. He's wonderful.

GM: Now, if the girls are "Sleeping Beauty" or the cause was "Sleeping Beauty" was he "Prince Charming" then?

RW: Oh, don't ask me that.

GM: [laughs] I mean metaphorically, of course. Did he see himself as waking them up?

RW: I think maybe so.

BW: Oh, I think so. Oh, yeah.

RW: He thought so. I thought. Maybe I didn't say that.

GM: Okay. Well, I'm asking about it because of "A Girl in a Library."

RW: Yes.

GM: Sort of mixed quality of his attitude toward that girl. The same essay, you say, "What are the students like here?" He says, "You read my 'A Girl in a Library'?"

RW: Yes, yes.

GM: Obviously, he was thinking of students at the college.

RW: Oh, yes, yes. Well, you just see this ambiguity that you doubt the way he feels about them. Then he's also off [unclear].

GM: Right.

[vacuum cleaner background noise]

RW: That's the way he pulls it together in the end. I don't know whether that really pulls it together or not, but [unclear].

GM: See, I'm not sure either. I feel as if there's still some unresolved—

RW: Yeah, I don't know whether it needs to be resolved either. But—

GM: But I don't sense in anything I've read that he had contempt for his students.

RW: Oh, no.

BW: He loved his students.

RW: He loved them. He loved them. He didn't like the girls who cut class [unclear].

BW: No, he wasn't crazy about scholarly people.

RW: Oh, he couldn't stand scholarly people. When he taught at Princeton [University], and honestly, he said, "Oh, I hated that. It was just awful. I'm so glad to be back." He said, "All these people asking questions." All the students he said," Show me, or I'm going show you. I'm bright. I'm very bright. I may be brighter than you are. [unclear] much richer than you, or more powerful."

BW: No, oh! Yeah, let's [unclear].

[vacuum cleaner background noise, recording paused]

BW: I'm sorry.

GM: I just want to make sure that I covered—Yeah, let's hope so. I like this sort of comedy of errors. [laughs] Let's see—Okay, this is the one. I think maybe even the one question I haven't—Two questions that I haven't gotten to yet. In a 1939 letter, Jarrell says—I'm sure you've seen this quotation many times, "A semi-feminine and poetic mind." A very interesting way to put it. It must have been in a letter. It was 1939. I think it was a letter to Mackie [Langham who was Randall Jarrell's first wife], I think—I'd have to go back and absolutely check.

RW: He says he has a semi-feminine—

GM: A semi-feminine mind. Do you have any guesses what he might have meant by that?

RW: Well, yeah. I think I do. But it seems to me that if—That most writers, male writers, a lot of them do. It seems to me to write—I write dramatic monologues.

GM: Yes.

RW: I think you have to have—Well, of course, the test would be what someone says about it, but I think Jarrell had that empathy and understanding what moved—

BW: Yeah.

GM: An empathy for women. The understanding.

RW: Oh, yes, yeah, yeah. Very, very much so.

BW: He wasn't, you know, a man's man like maybe James Dickey [American poet and novelist] was a man's man, for example. Or Hemingway.

GM: Right, yeah.

BW: I mean, I'm taking very obvious ones. But he wasn't like that. Women—He was very sympathetic for a woman to be with.

RW: Although, he liked to be the one who does the talking.

BW: Yes. Well, I don't know. That's not true. He liked all kinds of women.

RW: Did you read my book? Did you read *Pictures of an Institution*?

GM: Yes.

RW: It was Gertrude [character in Jarrell's novel *Pictures of an Institution*]. He didn't like Gertrude. People thought that was Mary McCarthy [American novelist, critic and political activist].

GM: Right.

RW: But he said it was a composite of a certain kind of an academic woman. But once, when we had the Arts Festival panel discussion—was a Paul Butler discussion and Karl Shapiro was one of the panel students with Randall. It was Karl Shapiro's turn to talk about one of the poems, which was by a woman. And Shapiro said, "This poem is just oblique. It just shuts the reader out." And so, Randall said, "No, no." He analyzed it line by line and made the poem perfectly clear. And Shapiro said, "Randall, your problem is that you just know too much about living."

GM: That's interesting.

RW: I thought Shapiro's comment was [unclear].

GM: Well, the reason I'm interested by him saying that is he spent most of his life teaching at a women's college. Surely, teaching all women is a different thing from teaching co-ed, I would think, if for no other reason than the dynamics in the classrooms were different. But also, if you're male faculty and all your students are female, there must have been some difference there that it's Prince Charming-esque. You surely have felt it yourself.

RW: It makes a difference.

GM: How would you describe the difference it makes?

RW: I don't know. I'd have to write a book.

GM: Okay, you're on. [laughs]

RW: One thing, around 1964 when—Let's see, when did Randall die? '64, '65. I'm terrible at dates.

GM: I am, too. '65.

RW: Anyway, you started in the [unclear] program a couple of years earlier. You know he struggled with Angie Davis.

BW: Well, yeah. It must have been about 1963, I think.

RW: Randall was not one who had to be included in [unclear].

GM: He didn't—

BW: I don't think that it was because there were men.

RW: You don't think it was because there were men?

BW: No.

RW: I don't know. He wanted to only teach undergraduates. He didn't want to teach graduate students. But I can see that. It's much more fun to teach undergraduates.

GM: We're finding that.

RW: Graduate students aren't so much fun to teach. You can't see them learning.

GM: That's right. No, that's really true. I enjoy undergraduate students.

RW: I really don't know—

GM: No, I don't have any particular answer in mind. I was just sort of curious by the comment.

RW: Randall always said when the moment came [unclear].

GM: Oh, I'm sure. Actually, I found a letter in the files from the chairman that I used to work under ages ago at Rochester [University], George Ford. He recently died. He's a Dickens scholar.

RW: He's got a PhD from [unclear].

GM: Quoting Jarrell's name. When did you come to Rochester? I thought that was interesting.

RW: Yeah.

GM: Let me see. There were just one or two more things and I'll let you all have your life back. This is a very broad question. How aware were you that you were creating taste and creating [unclear] when you were teaching his poetry?

RW: [unclear]

GM: Not at all? You were just teaching what you liked?

RW: I mean it was just what I wanted to do.

GM: You didn't see yourself as part of this huge enterprise, and snobs creating snobs as Terry Melton[?] said.

RW: I was teaching these students poems or stories or novels or the "Odyssey" or whatever it might be, what I really liked, and I wanted them to like it and really understand it.

GM: Do you think that Jarrell shared your—?

RW: Oh, yes. I think that—

GM: Do you think that was what he liked, too?

RW: Oh, yeah. That's what he wanted to do. Didn't you think that?

GM: Oh, yeah. They got a lot of satisfaction out of seeing them share the pleasure.

BM: He was very excited if a young person wrote something that was good. So, if a young person would write something that was good, you'd know it.

RW: Oh, he was so excited.

BW: He was wonderful. Enthusiasm from Randall was just heavenly. I mean, he was absolutely wonderful—

RW: Randall—

BW: —and because he understood things so clearly and saw into things. And he could really go on about something that he liked.

RW: But he could do the opposite.

BW: But he could be devastating if he didn't like something. I don't know that he was cruel with the students, though.

RW: No, no.

BW: That, I don't think. I think he'd be cruel about if he didn't like something of some writer, one of the other writers that we all know [unclear]. But he was not at all cruel to the students, I'm sure.

RW: No, what he would do to a student, he would just sort of shake his head and say, "Oh, dear." It was all his mess. Betty was right to correct me. He wasn't cruel to his students. He really wasn't. If you add up his criticisms, he was much kinder to [unclear].

GM: His essay on Whitman, I still think is one of the very best essays [unclear]. Because it's so appreciative, because it's appreciated in a really intelligent way. He's making fun of certain things, but he's also loving certain things. That balance there that when he sees a girl in the library, realizing that there's not high intelligence here, but also feeling a kind of sympathy and compassion for the person and maybe pleasure in them. That's the sense I have about how he felt about teaching, too. Do you think that's right?

RW: Well, he said—There's a remark. I can't quote it, but you're probably right. That he'd pay to teach.

GM: Right.

BW: But he liked—There were other activities in life as well that he loved, too.

RW: Tennis.

BW: He loved tennis. He loved music. I think it was easy to get into a conversation with Randall if you had a shared interest.

GM: Yes.

BW: It would be hard to get into a conversation with Randall at a cocktail party where there was nothing left to say.

GM: Right.

BW: He didn't gossip about ordinary people. Literary gossip, maybe. I don't know about that. But I'm trying to say I think he was a person who really did have a lot of gusto. The thing is his mind was so fine that whatever he did like, he knew all about.

GM: Yes.

BW: You might be, you could easily be wading in too deep if you were talking with him about yourself, what you thought was your subject. It wasn't hard to find out that you really didn't know much about it because—

GM: Wow! That must have been intimidating.

BW: No, he wasn't trying to intimidate you.

RW: But he was.

BW: But he did intimidate because of this marvelous mind that he had. I really felt that Randall was very, very bright.

RW: John Crowe Ransom said, "Randall's mind, he had the velocity of an angel."

GM: Yeah, that's wonderful.

RW: What I found, I think he's a much better poet. He is ranked as high as [unclear]. I think he's better than all, for example, of his generation. But in his criticism, he writes just the best sentences.

GM: Absolutely.

RW: I learned the difference between writing and not writing after—Really, I'd never thought of it much until I read Randall's prose. I thought, "Gee!"

GM: Yeah. It's wonderful. It really is. It just sings. Plus, his evaluations of people just have such staying power.

RW: Yeah.

GM: I was reading *50 Years of Modern Poetry*, that thing he gave in Washington, it was a talk he gave in Washington at a National Poetry Festival.

RW: Yes, it was the 100th or 50th anniversary of *Poetry Magazine*, and he said that he had to cover fifty years of it or something.

GM: Right. I re-read it. I've just been teaching a graduate seminar in modern poetry, and I just re-read [it] the other night. I was just startled by how wonderful the perceptions are. He might only do one or two paragraphs [unclear], and it's just excellent.

RW: But how do you do that?

GM: I don't know, but he does it, and he does it in a way that both seems prescient in terms of understanding them way ahead of the criticism in some ways, and real emotions all the time. Just perfect. I love him as a critic.

BW: Also, Randall was not a person in talking with you, or in talking with young people who used long words. He made things very clear and very simple.

RW: Utter clarity.

BW: Utter clarity. He used everyday language.

RW: He never used to say specialized language.

BW: He didn't use specialized, he never threw out some term that you wouldn't know, or literary term. He made it clear.

GM: Yes, that's clear in his poetry, too.

BW: He was wonderful talking to children, too. He read his children stories sometimes. Maybe you've heard that over at the school

GM: No, I haven't.

BW: He gave readings of his books, and there were lots of little kids who came.

GM: I'll have to go listen to these records. I think it will give me a really good sense of—

BW: I think I would because don't you think you'll get a feeling for—

RW: His personality.

BW: His personality.

RW: Yes, yeah.

GM: Were you ever on a committee with him to restructure the freshmen and sophomore curricula?

RW: Yeah.

GM: I noticed there were notes. I just couldn't believe so late in his career that he was on a committee to restructure the freshmen—

RW: Well, this is what was interesting about Randall. He taught about a full load. I think instead of twelve hours, he taught nine hours, and he was on committees.

GM: Wow!

BW: He was very dutiful about them.

RW: He was very dutiful. [unclear] that committee, he didn't let them do all the talking. But I was never on a committee with him.

GM: You weren't ever on one?

RW: No.

BW: He tended to be very kind about these older members of the department that we were talking about. It's awful to say, but the dead wood—He was wonderful about those people, but the ones who upset him were—

RW: PhDs.

BW: —the young PhDs coming in.

GM: Oh, I see. Now why is that? Because they were too technical and jargony?

RW: I think so.

BW: I don't know. I think he kind of felt a lot of sympathy for the old head of the department and some of the—Don't you think so?

RW: Yeah. It's sort of like a [Anton] Chekhov [Russian playwright and short story writer] play. We're living in a Chekhov play, and we don't like the guy who's going to cut down the forest and build [unclear].

GM: [*The*] *Cherry Orchard*?

RW: [*The*] *Cherry Orchard*. Of course, he did do this translation of the *Three Sisters*. Well, he sort of translated it.

BW: They would have known.

RW: But I think that was it. He didn't like the young entrepreneurial PhDs, I guess.

GM: You obviously didn't really talk about it.

RW: No, we never talked about it.

GM: You talked about poetry, did you?

RW: Movies. He loved [Swedish director Ingmar] Bergman's movies. He talked about—

BW: And restaurants.

GM: Dates and [unclear].

BW: Football, art—He was very interested in art.

RW: Oh, art. Betty was his friend [unclear]. Betty did two portraits of him. But anyway, he loved to talk with Betty about art. He did not like those record specialists.

GM: No?

BW: I wasn't very fond of it at that point, either. What about you? You've got to give us a couple minutes about you? We know you're going to be hilarious.

GM: Where are you from?

RW: Oh, here.

GM: I'll turn this off and—

[End of Interview]