

GAIL MCDONALD ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Mary Jarrell

INTERVIEWER: Gail McDonald

DATE: May 10, 1995

[Begin CD 1]

GM: I'm testing a tape for an interview with Mary Jarrell on May 10, 1995.

[recording paused]

GM: And I sent her a whole bunch of questions and she's written out responses to them and is sending them to me UPS. I said, "Please let me know—I know you're writing a book, I think you're writing a book, and please let me know if this is poaching in any way." She said, "Oh no, I think if I eventually write it, it doesn't sound like it'll be—" She said, "I've been working on this thing for so long."

MJ: She's had it in her mind about—for years.

GM: Exactly. She understood. What I explained to her and what I probably should explain to you too, is that although I'm using Randall Jarrell as a sort of focal point for the paper. Part of what I'm trying to accomplish is to describe the atmosphere in which modernist poetry was taught in the '50s and '60s. Because, and there's a little history for this—I don't know whether you're aware of this or not, but Fred Chappell [English professor and poet] certainly is. There's a kind of demonization of [T.S.] Eliot [American/British essayist, playwright, poet, publisher, literary, and social critic] that has happened. You probably are vaguely aware of it.

MJ: I'm not. Tell me about this.

GM: It's an odd thing. Well, I guess the water shed was probably the beginning of the '70s. People began to talk about, it was like after all the student unrest, seeing Eliot in his enterprise in bringing modernism into academic respectability as just an elitist, snobbism—It all began to be described in very negative terms. The first book I wrote is, in part, a response to that because I don't really believe that that's an accurate description of how modernism entered the university. In fact, on the contrary, I think it was all considered kind of glamorous and subversive.

MJ: I agree with you, yeah.

GM: What I'm looking for and what interests me particularly about Randall Jarrell's teaching is that he was teaching in this women's college where his students were not likely to be elitist snobs at all. And Betty [Watson, American artist] talked to me about, for example, Betty and Bob [Watson, English professor], the excitement of these country girls for example who were coming from these tiny North Carolina towns. Betty used the phrase they were like rockets ready to go off. And you know that they weren't, they weren't just simply extending the snobbism and the elitism of their own families. And as always, with every work you do, there's a biographical element. Because for me, I grew up in a family, neither of my parents were college educated or wealthy. I was the first member of my family to go to college. I remember, in the '60s, going to school and feeling so excited by poetry, and not thinking of it as becoming a snob. So, part of what I'm trying to do is recapture or understand the quality of Randall Jarrell's teaching. Because when I read about him as a teacher, what I hear over and over is a kind of excitement that the students had.

MJ: Yeah, yeah.

GM: I'm trying to flesh out that picture, both of the school in the '40s, '50s, and '60s, before the student unrest started. I'm trying to flesh out that picture. I'm trying to flesh out the picture of Randall Jarrell as a teacher. Which [William H.J.] Pritchard only gives about three pages to. Which I think is just amazing given the number of years he committed to the project.

MJ: Yeah.

GM: And the importance he obviously placed on it. Those are the things I'm trying to accomplish. Does that all make sense to you?

MJ: Yes. I'm just trying to—Are we on or not?

GM: Yes, we're on.

MJ: Well, as you're talking, I remember the year, you probably have this too, when he started teaching Eliot. Something like February in his poetry review course, you know, a survey course. And that he got so involved himself that he just came to class one day and he said, "Do you all mind if we just finish the semester with Eliot." And everybody was overjoyed, and they did.

GM: They spend the whole semester on Eliot.

MJ: Yes, and far from teaching Eliot or emphasizing the elitism of coffee spoons and Michelangelo ladies and that kind of thing, he presented them as one would present Shakespeare or [Thomas] Hardy [English novelist and poet] or Marianne Moore

[American modernist poet, critic, translator, and editor] and her animals. I mean they were like the painting. They were in the painting, the Eliot vision.

GM: Okay.

MJ: And that they happened to come right straight out of his own life. Which was an upper-class St. Louis social position.

GM: Right.

MJ: His grandfather was president and founder practically of the Washington University—

GM: Right.

MJ: —in St. Louis, and his mother was Bostonian. And so, what else could he write about? Could he write about coal miners? Well, no.

GM: No, not believably probably.

MJ: He never did even though he lived close to them in England for years. He couldn't help his approach. I think it's like Edith Wharton [American novelist, short story writer, playwright, and designer]. Wharton couldn't write like, what is her name, Danielle somebody—?

GM: Steel [American romance novelist].

[laughter]

MJ: I mean everybody says that, that you have to write out of what you know and feel in your experiences. That was simply Eliot's.

GM: Right.

MJ: Williams was Williams. William Carlos Williams [Puerto Rican-American poet and physician]. [Walt] Whitman [American poet, essayist, and journalist] was Whitman. I don't sympathize with the idea to destroy another person's work by this pejorative term of elitism.

GM: Right, right. One of the things that I've found really interesting about Jarrell's written prose on Eliot, is that, when everyone else was accepting his theory of impersonality and sort of swallowing that hook, line, and sinker, Jarrell seems to have gone—this guy had a private life, he had a personal life that [unclear] as the same thing. He saw the personal life in the poetry—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —and talked about it in that wonderful talk that he gave called “Fifty Years of American Poetry.”

MJ: Yes.

GM: He talks about this in such a prescient way. In a way, he is talking about Eliot in a way that people didn’t begin to talk about Eliot globally until about 1980, when Gabriella[?] published those letters.

MJ: Yes.

GM: It’s really interesting to me that he saw that. One of the things I’ve run across, and I can’t even now remember where, is something about Jarrell investigating the, sort of being interested in the psychoanalytical investigation of Eliot and making notes about that. I asked Emmy Mills [head of Special Collections and University Archives] and she said she’s not aware of a manuscript.

MJ: I don’t know. There was nothing but notes. Did you talk to Emmy Mills?

GM: I did, I did.

MJ: Because I turned over a lot of notes and pages. The other place, of course, is the [New York Public Library’s] Berg Collection. They were just what you’re talking about. They were rough notes with Freudian parallels and parables and examples.

GM: Yes.

MJ: He felt, Randall felt, things like the candle lights in one of the poems, I am not sure which, that came out of the Irish nurse who took care of him as a child, taking him to the Catholic church in St. Louis.

GM: Yes.

MJ: Things of that kind of symbolic—

GM: I would love to see these notes.

MJ: Wish you could.

GM: I asked Emmy. She said no, she doesn’t have them. I said, does the Berg have them because they have a microfilm of—

MJ: Yes, yes.

GM: She said she didn't think so. I'm going to have to ask around some more.

MJ: Why don't you phone them?

GM: She does know there were notes.

MJ: They were awfully prompt about sending me things when I wanted them.

GM: Okay.

[telephone ringing]

MJ: Oh, dear. Excuse me.

GM: That's all right. I'll use this opportunity to make sure we're taping well, thanks.

[recording paused]

GM: This tape is—This makes work so much better than I thought it would.

MJ: Well, good.

GM: Okay. So, we were talking about the psycho-analytic notes. I will call the Berg at this point. Boy, I would love to see those notes.

MJ: Yes.

GM: I bet they're fascinating.

MJ: I remember Randall talked about the sexuality or sexual overtones in, was it the hyacinth smells that he talked is in—

GM: "In the Wasteland" [poem by T.S. Eliot]?

MJ: "Gerontion" is it [poem by T.S. Eliot]?

GM: Oh, in "Gerontion" too. He talks about the hyacinths often. The one I remember is, "You brought me hyacinths a year ago; they call me the hyacinth girl." [Editor's note: the line reads, "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; They call me the hyacinth girl."] That one talks about the smell but just the appearance of the hyacinths and the girl with the red hair.

MJ: Well, Randall was taking that as a Freudian symbol of some kind.

GM: Okay. I will definitely investigate. That'll be another paper. [laughs]

MJ: Yes, I wish I could think of more. They're in some notebooks and I believe I turned all those notebooks over to the Berg.

GM: Okay, I will write to them actually.

MJ: Yes, there's man in charge. [unclear] Francis Mattson [Curator of the Berg Collection] is retired, but Melita, M-E-L-I-T-A, I'm not sure of the first name, is the president in the interim. And very pleasant and helpful.

GM: Oh, good, okay.

MJ: Tell him hello from me.

GM: I will.

MJ: All right.

GM: I will indeed, thank you.

MJ: It never hurts.

GM: In your own essay, in the collective, those collected essays about Randall Jarrell and your own essay, "Group of Two."

MJ: Yes.

GM: I love that essay.

MJ: Do you?

GM: Oh, yes, it's so charming. You're a wonderful writer. I also wanted to tell you, I love the way you've edited those letters.

MJ: The way I what?

GM: The way you edited the letters.

MJ: Some people did. I got some good reports.

GM: Oh, I should say. They're wonderfully done. They really are a—

MJ: Thank you.

GM: —model of their kind I think. In that essay, you talk about going to his classes with him. Now that's what I want to hear about more than anything because you were actually there.

MJ: Yes.

GM: And you can tell me what it looked like, what it sounded like, and so on.

MJ: Yes.

GM: I want you to just talk at will about that.

MJ: All right. Well, the time I knew him, he'd been teaching for twenty years.

GM: Right.

MJ: So, he didn't have to have a printed page of his own lecture.

GM: Right.

MJ: But he always had the book of whomever he was talking about. [Anton] Chekhov [Russian playwright and short story writer] or Eliot or whomever. And often did this marvelous line by line exegesis.

GM: Very close kind of reading.

MJ: Yes, very close and he told, I was taken with, and I am with any kind of teaching, when the teacher is just full of his subject and enthusiastic about it. After we were married, he said, "I'm just going to wash out the poets that I can't stand. I'm not going to teach them anymore."

GM: Yes.

MJ: And he did. He began to do that in his criticism too. He said I want to praise. Robert Lowell [American poet] has said that he's one of the great praisers of the critical scene.

GM: He is. It means something because he was so capable of dispraise.

MJ: Yes, oh, yes. He once said, I'm sure you're familiar with this, that in criticism, one bee sting is felt more than a dozen jars of honey. I think that in class too. If you're negative about a poet, finally the audience is feeling sorry for the underdog.

GM: [laughs]

MJ: So, he did just emphasize over and over, until I think you wanted to be part of that. You thought I want to see what he is seeing in this. And he never neglected the Freudian side.

One of the very few books were required to buy because the students were not a wealthy class here, but he did want them to buy the paper edition of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which is Freud's. In it, of course, dreams are dealt with, but Freudian slips, Freudian symbols, Freudian system of reference.

GM: Right.

MJ: Because those were in many people's poems, but especially in Eliot. Especially in Eliot. I don't remember him emphasizing them more in any other poet than Eliot. The enthusiasm was great, the audience participation. He occasionally—He did the Socratic thing. You know, am I the only person in the room that thinks this line is really speaking about the birth of his first child. And then people would get time. Oh, I don't think so or I think. But, they were thinking in front of him and alive in the class.

GM: Right.

MJ: Which I think a class likes.

GM: My students certainly do.

MJ: Yes.

GM: They don't want to just listen to me the whole time, no.

MJ: Yes. He did say, and I don't know if this is useful to you, but I think it was about in 1960 perhaps, he had been teaching here since '48, and around about 1960, the end of the '50s, the men students came in. They were a great bother to him. They challenged everything. He didn't like it. He knew that he could guide these girls in the way he wanted them to love poetry.

GM: Right. Well, how did the men challenge him were you there?

MJ: Yes, I was there now and then. I'm trying to think of the kind of questions. I think it was kind of this deconstructionism and aren't you implying to much here Mr. Jarrell, actually blah, blah. Then Randall would have to take up valuable time from the poem, from reading it, to answer these challenges and he did not like that. When the girls asked a question, it was immediately answered. And they would move on. You would get back to the poetry on the page. One of the things he was particularly fond of in the girls, that was very useful in Eliot and some of the other poets, was their knowledge of the *Bible*. Every *Bible* reference that came through, those girls knew chapter and verse.

GM: Right.

MJ: He said he never had an audience that was so informed.

GM: I have found that here too.

MJ: Is that so? Still?

GM: It's probably just Southern upbringing.

MJ: They go to Sunday school.

GM: They go to church. They go to Sunday school.

MJ: Yes, Yes.

GM: I'm constantly, especially in American literature.

MJ: Is it?

GM: You can't get away from it.

MJ: Well, it had so much to them, to know who Judith [Biblical figure who beheaded Holofernes] and Holofernes [Biblical general sent by Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Israel and surrounding nations] were.

GM: Right, right, does help.

MJ: Yes, yes.

GM: Does help. So, he would mostly do—He would often talk at some length—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —about delineating the poem and whatever. Then he would ask Socratic kinds of questions.

MJ: If you would look in, if you have time.

GM: Sure.

MJ: His essay on "Home Burial" and other—the Frost. His teaching method is just all through that.

GM: It's right in there.

MJ: Those are just right out of the way he taught a class.

GM: Right, right, and those are wonderful essays. I haven't—I've read them, using them to understand Frost.

MJ: Yes.

GM: I'll look at them again—

MJ: As a teacher. Yes, I think you'll get a lot of ideas there.

GM: Okay, okay. He hated [Ezra] Pound [expatriate American poet and critic] to teach? He didn't like to teach Pound?

MJ: No, he didn't teach Pound.

GM: Do you know why? Just didn't care for the poetry or found it unteachable or—?

MJ: I think there's just a little bit of Pound that he's written about in the *Fifty Years of American Poetry*. I don't believe he could escape mentioning Pound.

GM: Right.

MJ: But it was a kind of fragmented praise about fragments.

GM: Yes, that's right.

MJ: That Pound didn't seem to be dense enough and continuous enough.

GM: Continuous enough to teach.

MK: Yes.

GM: Okay. Now, in Bob Watson's essay [English professor], he remembers that one day Randall said to him, I'm going to call him Randall.

MJ: Please do, please do.

GM: That Randall called him and said, Bob Watson was married. They met at registration. You know this of course.

MJ: Yes.

GM: He said that the school was his Sleeping Beauty. That strikes me as an extremely interesting comment in lots of different ways because I know he was interested in fairy tales.

MJ: Notes of his what?

GM: Fairy tales. I know he was interested in fairy tales.

MJ: Oh, yes, yes.

GM: For him to use that allusion to a fairy tale.

MJ: I think that's semi-Freudian.

GM: You think it is? Tell me about that.

MJ: Because he's written, I think, two poems about Sleeping Beauty. And he liked women and girls. I mean, certain people have—Richard Strauss [German opera composer], the composer I think, just he loved and understood women. Chekhov was pretty good with women and Randall was in sympathy with women.

GM: Why?

MJ: I think he felt they were fragile, that they were delicate, they were sensitive, they were approachable with poetry. I mean, poetry and religion, women are pretty open to.

GM: Right.

MJ: And so, to liken this girl's school that he had come to, to Sleeping Beauty. I think in his heart, he didn't want anybody to wake her up.

GM: [laughs]

MJ: That she was just perfect the way she was.

GM: I see.

MJ: In letters to people about this place when he first came to, he said this is a pastoral college, or pastoral campus. He liked that. He actually taught some classes out under the trees, [William] Wordsworth [English romantic poet] especially, yes, when he could.

GM: Did—if the school is Sleeping Beauty, was he Prince Charming then? To the extent that if they were going to be waked up, he would wake them, or no?

MJ: I think he felt he was in the prince capacity.

[laughter]

GM: Oh, that's a quotable quote.

MJ: I think. It seems to me. We'll qualify that.

GM: Okay. So, what was he waking them up from? Because he didn't want the world to come [and] wake them up and come in into his castle. That's clear.

MJ: No, I think from a passivity. “In a Girl in a library,” it talks about just to study, if only you were not. And that this, what is it, the soul something—

GM: I don’t have a copy of the poem with me. But I know the poem.

MJ: He felt that—

GM: Do you want me to get it down?

MJ: Yes, it’s up there behind Poseidon, I think.

GM: I see it.

MJ: Or up above Poseidon. Is it over to the right? That’s it, yes. When he began teaching here, these girls were phys. ed. and home ec. [majors]. That was disappointing to him. He felt that they were better than that.

GM: Good.

MJ: That’s what he wanted to awaken them to.

GM: All right, that’s lovely because you probably know that some people see the poem as being—

MJ: Feminist or anti-feminist.

GM: Anti-feminist.

MJ: Yes.

GM: And some people think it’s condescending.

MJ: They think he’s putting her down?

GM: Putting her down—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —and that he’s being condescending to her. But that’s not the way you think he meant it?

MJ: Well, he was here fresh from Sarah Lawrence [College], fresh from Sarah Lawrence, fresh from New York. And I think that he was perhaps stunned by the innocence of these students.

GM: Yes.

MJ: And that marriage with the corn king was the only game in town for them.

GM: Right, but he didn't want that to be the case.

MJ: No, no. He thought they were better than all this. "[But] my mind [gone] out in tenderness. Shrinks from its object with a thoughtful sigh. This is a waste the spirit breaks its arm on." I mean this is—it is satirical.

GM: Yes.

MJ: But it is in tenderness.

GM: Yes, it's like I love you—

MJ: Yes.

Gm: —and yet—

MJ: And yet, that's right.

GM: I love you, but I think—I see tenderness there.

MJ: I do, too.

GM: I see a sense of possibility.

MJ: Yes.

GM: Wendy Lesser [American critic, writer, and editor], for example, reads the poem just as being very condescending to women.

MJ: Yes.

GM: I thought my instinct was right, that that's not what he intended.

MJ: Because when we were married, my older girl was eleven and she was in the fifth or sixth, whatever the eleven-year-old grade is. Randall was writing this marvelous lecture of his. I think it was the "Taste of the Age" in which he refers to a girl that knows how to be a babysitter and to make some kind of a satchel and to make some kind of cookie, but and yet, she didn't know who Charlemagne [Holy Roman Emperor] was and some other things. That in his mind, he wanted the girl, the woman to know. He didn't want this isolated just to the men.

GM: So, if he was Prince Charming, that's what it was. That he was going wake her up—

MJ: It was to wake them up to the great world and not the domestic world.

GM: Right, the world of ideas.

MJ: Yes.

GM: That comes through in some of the correspondents that's in the library with some of his students—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —a select few.

MJ: Does it?

GM: I think so, I do.

MJ: Good, he always had extremely high expectations.

GM: Of everybody.

MJ: Of everyone [unclear].

GM: What was that like for you? Did you like it?

MJ: It brought out the very best in me. It changed my life. But, it is crushing when you fall short of that. The students have said that and I knew that. That when I fell short of his expectations, it was just crushing to me. And I can remember we had this cat that he loved, Kitten.

GM: Oh, yeah, I've heard.

MJ: Kitten was dearly beloved of Randall and was a highly intelligent cat. Plus, this fact that the two of them had this great bond. I can remember times when I had disappointed Randall, not in major things, but in trifling things, sometimes my language or tone of voice even, would fall short and he would frown and say, "Don't make your voice like that." Well, then I would be crushed, and I would think to myself, "If only I could be like Kitten." I would study Kitten, you must be like Kitten. That's how it was to be on the other side of his approval.

GM: Right, right.

MJ: But, with students and with judging students, when they came in for their conferences, he over and over again was so careful about the errors. Just saying, now here, I don't think this comes through quite the way you want it and if you so and so and so. But then in the notes of helping Eleanor Taylor [poet and wife of Peter Taylor], he would say a poem that wasn't coming together, I would just wash that out of our view. But you say it in a nice way and it gave her leave to just turn loose of that and go work on something else.

GM: Right, right. It was never—He was not condescending.

MJ: He was not, nor was he brutal or heavy. I've sat in on the *Coraddi*, what was it, Arts Forums in the spring.

GM: Right.

MJ: Big league professors from Duke [University] and [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Northeast would be invited down if they said one critical sentence or implied one about one of Randall's students, he was furious. His face would get very angry and he would right away defend everything that student had done or said and just make a dunce out of this other person. He really did. I mean that's how loyal he was and devoted to these students. He was not making fun of them. The poem sounds satirical. Often you have to be satirical to mask your sentimentality. Of which he's been brutally accused.

GM: I know, I know. This is sort of related. In a letter, I think to Allen Tate [American poet, essayist, social commentator, and United States Poet Laureate], and I think before you married him, well before. He said, "I have a semi-feminine mind."

MJ: Yes, yes.

GM: What do you think he meant by that?

MJ: Well, we have to think of what is the feminine mind?

GM: I know, that's the hard part. I'm not sure what he meant.

MJ: I mean, they're all variations. Like what is a Christian? There's just so many variations. But the feminine mind, I think, seeks approval and I think that Randall very much wanted approval from his school but, also from the world. And that's the approval side. I think the romantic side, are women considered more romantic than men. Seeing the romantic possibilities of all kinds of things, of works of art. He wrote so well about Donatello [Italian Renaissance sculptor], for instance.

GM: Right.

MJ: I don't think he wrote about Richard Strauss, but he was crazy about [*Der*] *Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne [auf Naxos]* and *The Woman without a Shadow*, what was that?

GM: *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

MJ: Yes. All these women characters and figures in music and history he was just crazy about. I think that he, I mean being a poet, isn't the most masculine career.

GM: Yes.

MJ: The novelist is more masculine.

GM: Yes. So, it's not only whatever emotional life he might have—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —but, also his social position. In the whole, American culture—

MJ: Yes, yes.

GM: —feminizes the poet. To be a poet, you're lumped together with the girls anyway.

MJ: Yes, he was a brilliant tennis player—

GM: Yes.

MJ: —and won lots. Then on the other hand he was an avid football fan. We lived in Washington, we had season tickets to the Redskins [professional American football team] and nearly every weekend was spent watching professional football.

GM: Oh, really.

MJ: Which isn't the sissiest of occupations.

GM: No, no.

MJ: Then of course, sports cars.

GM: Yes.

MJ: I don't know if women would be into sports cars, but he was very seriously into. Anything he took up, he went all the way with. He loved clothes, and women often love clothes, but plenty of women can't be bothered.

GM: Right.

MJ: So, that I don't know if that's effeminate.

GM: Right, I think there's a difference. In my mind, there's a difference between seeing yourself as having the semi-feminine mind—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —and being effeminate. I think there's a difference.

MJ: Yes, that's it. Because I mean, even chromosome-wise, science says a lot of people are a nice mix of the masculine and the feminine.

GM: Right, right. Can you—? We can come back to this if you think of something else.

MJ: Good.

GM: One of the things that I'm interested in is the sort of atmosphere around the Arts Forum business because I looked at the list, I have a list of everybody who participated, and it's—There were some very major, major people.

MJ: Big names.

GM: Yes, and I'm sure, Randall must have been a major drawing card for most of those names. That he's the reason for that.

MJ: Yes, in those early days of when he was here, it was an open secret that any friend got invited to whatever was going on at your college.

GM: Okay.

MJ: Tate was instrumental in getting Randall here, but Peter Taylor [American novelist, short story writer, playwright, and English professor at the college] was too. And then before Randall's time, but after Randall's time too, Tate and Warren and Hiram Haydn [American author and editor] and Taylor and—Who's the lovely lady that had lupus and died?

GM: Oh, Flannery O'Connor [American novelist, short story writer, and essayist]?

MJ: Yes, Flannery. I'm thinking of all the Southern writers that were invited, of course.

GM: And Robert Lowell came.

MJ: Robert Lowell was just keenly invited because he and Randall had long been friends. But speaking of the atmosphere, I think it was a little bit alien when the Bostonians showed up, and Karl Shapiro [American poet and United States Poet Laureate] came, also a good friend of Randall's. That it was homier when it was the Southern bunch that all knew each other.

GM: Right.

MJ: The Southern club.

GM: How do you think the girls felt about it when the poets would come?

MJ: They were dazzled. Especially if, and Randall always tended to this, if they had studied the person's poetry just two weeks before. And Randall, in some of the letters to Lowell, and I think one and two have said, oh the girls are all just ready for you to come. We've been studying so and so.

GM: Right. But, how thrilling to produce the person when you've just studied them.

MJ: Exactly.

GM: I can't quite figure out, looking at Greensboro now, how in heaven's name they managed to do all this, they managed to get Randall Jarrell on the faculty at all.

MJ: Apparently, things were more literary, and humanities oriented.

GM: The school, you mean.

MJ: Yes, and this school was for teachers, very heavily. We didn't have athletics.

GM: Right.

MJ: Did you see the other day that the retiring coach was getting \$67,000?

GM: I know.

MJ: I mean that's what athletics does.

GM: I make less than half that as a teacher.

MJ: Of course. It shouldn't be that way.

GM: No.

MJ: No, it should not be that way.

GM: Why were they hiring, one of the things that seems puzzling to me is why was Greensboro hiring, or Woman's College then, hiring poets rather than say PhDs from this, that, and the other place?

MJ: I think some of that is a hangover from Victorian Southern standards.

GM: Okay.

MJ: The poet in the South and the writer in the South was a kind of automatic. You can think of all kinds of poets in the South, not necessarily contemporary or before, but it was respected. I think, though genteel.

GM: Okay, okay. That's interesting. The genteel thing.

MJ: Because I'm thinking of the head of the English department there, Leonard Hurley. He was the gentlemen of gentlemen and it wasn't put on. He was raised that way.

GM: Right, right.

MJ: There was a person, Miss [Nettie Sue] Tillett [English professor], on the faculty, that would disrupt every single faculty meeting with attacks on him. She had known him, gone to kindergarten with him. He would defer and apologize and hold up the meeting. At one point, I wish that—Anyway, Randall just attacked her, which of course a Southern gentleman never would do.

GM: [laughs]

MJ: But he just went after her, not by name, I was not there, naturally it was the faculty meeting. The phone was ringing that day before Randall got home from all the faculty members saying what a fine thing to have done and it was time somebody went after this dragon lady. I did hear, from him, I said, "What did you say, what did you say?" He never could tell you actually when he had these tantrums. He could never tell you what he said, but he would often write about it in the war letters.

He told some sergeant off once and he wrote his first—Well, I've just had enough of this. He never told you what he said to the sergeant. But, anyway, he couldn't tell me exactly what he said, but he did say, there is a certain person on the faculty that—And then he just outlined all these things. It must have been terrible because at some big faculty gathering like the Christmas party we were there, and Miss Tillett was there, and we were with some other people and we're going past her. She looked at Randall with the hatred of hell in her eyes, and she said, "Monster."

GM: Right at the party?

MJ: Yes, yes. She said, "Monster." She didn't say it loudly, but enough. I mean, it had crushed her. He was vitriolic when he got started.

GM: Right.

MJ: But he got more and more above it. Mind me, I think he just decided he wasn't going to give his energy to it.

GM: Right, right. He did seem to take a fairly, again according to the file in the library, a fairly strong interest in the freshman and sophomore curriculum.

MJ: Very much, very much.

GM: He was on that committee. Why do you think that interested him so much?

MJ: Well, it was under challenge. You see, that was the time of the [Chancellor Edward Kidder] Graham battle. Graham and Marc Friedlaender [English professor], especially Marc Friedlaender who had been Randall's best friend. They had gone out to California and they had seen what the—What is it called? The general education was, and they thought that's what we ought to have here. They were ready to destroy all the fine literary standards. They challenged the Classics department, who needs Greek and Latin. They even thought that foreign languages of any kind, forget them. They really were just knifing here and there. All of the—Well, people in the humanities were just horrified.

GM: Yes.

MJ: They really did do battle. The campus was divided in just terrible, two terrible camps. The only person that escaped was Charles Adams [College Librarian] and his wife Ellen, in the library.

GM: Why was that?

MJ: They determined not to take sides. They just smiled sweetly at everybody and they just didn't take sides, but where the chips really fell was at Christmas, the Adams gave a traditional Christmas gathering with eggnog flavored with vanilla. But, everyone looked beyond that and would go to the Adams' Christmas party and they invited both sides and it was very difficult. People were trying to get there before Marc Friedlaender or after, and the others, by that time it was said, and I guess it was true, that Graham was loading all the departments with "Young Turks" that would support general education.

GM: So, what was general education then? You tell me what it wasn't. What was the—?

MJ: It was—I think the emphasis was on practical, what you could go out into the world and earn a living with.

GM: At a women's college?

MJ: Yeah, yeah.

GM: That seems odd doesn't it?

MJ: Yes, yes.

GM: In other words, Randall saw something that he valued—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —being potentially destroyed.

MJ: Yes.

GM: Okay.

MJ: And I think, again, it challenged his idealization of womanhood. He wanted the women to get the best educations they could, and this was not.

GM: That's interesting. What am I not asking you that I should be asking you? What am I not asking?

MJ: I'm having such a marvelous time.

GM: This is a great, I'm just hoping against hope that all this is on tape because this is a great interview, Mary. I'm so happy.

MJ: Is it?

GM: Oh, yes! It's wonderful, wonderful.

MJ: Good, good. It's interesting to me because I've always thought when people set up interviews with me that I'd like to know the questions they're going to ask, and I get some thinking done. Then it seems hard for me, I want to stick to my own agenda some way, and then I forget some of it. This has been so easy, Gail.

GM: Oh, thank you.

MJ: I have just felt I've been talking to a person that's talking about something I'm interested in.

[laughter]

GM: Well, I think we're both interested.

MJ: Yes, yes.

GM: Well, I hope it's because I read a lot before I came.

MJ: Of course.

GM: That helps me to know what you—

MJ: There was a big change in things. You know, Noel Perrin [English professor and essayist] was here for a year or so?

GM: Oh, right, I did notice that.

MJ: There were the advance guard of the feminists. Bertha Harris [Class of 1959, novelist, essayist, editor, literary feminist, and teacher] and in some ways, Heather was aligned with them. But, she was crazy about Randall always. But she—Bertha Harris and a couple of other, oh, the woman that wrote *Fear of Flying*.

GM: Erica Jong [American novelist, satirist, and poet]?

MJ: Yeah, I think she was here.

GM: Oh, wow!

MJ: Either she came here for half a semester or came to the Arts Forum or something like that.

GM: Oh, my word!

MJ: I think.

GM: I have to check into that.

MJ: Yeah, check into it. I could be wrong. But it was someone of that, pretty much that. These girls wore black cotton stockings and flat shoes. He used to call them, in private, “The Little Scorpions.”

GM: Oh, “The Little Scorpions.”

MJ: Yes, they made him mad. They were out to really destroy everything that he was—I mean, if you think women love poetry and ought to have poetry, is that demeaning the person’s mind? They kind of took it that way.

GM: Why? Do you understand why?

MJ: They wanted harsher writing. Less lyricism in thought and line. More sexuality and facing up and four-letter words. Randall was not a four-letter word person.

GM: I’ve read over and over that he—

MJ: I mean, some people say that he was prim. But, partly, it was elitism. You cannot express yourself very well if you’ve used up all the four-letter words of which there might be twelve, over and over and over. If there were other ways of excoriating.

GM: So, a feminist, which it would not be fair for me to describe myself as a feminist. For one thing, I don’t, I really resent it when people assume I’m interested in women’s literature because I’m a woman, for example. It’s probably not helped my career any that I have taken that stance. But a feminist might say, “Well, Randall didn’t like these women because he felt threatened by them in some way. He felt threatened—”

MJ: Oh, the feminist women?

GM: Yes, yes, I would you react to that.

MJ: I don't know if he felt threatened, but I think he felt an enmity that he would never agree with them.

GM: Can you articulate why that—?

MJ: Well, again it was the tearing down, the destroying of lyricism and romanticism and it was getting very political with—

[recording paused]

MJ: One that was so political a woman poet that she was of the Northeast group and studied with Lowell and she just wrote polemics—Well, I think about Vietnam and that kind of thing. I'd know it if I saw it.

GM: Gosh, I don't—

MJ: I don't think she figures in the index of the letters.

GM: It's a younger woman, a woman of—

MJ: Adrienne, she was a friend of Adrienne's. And they were writing both for lesbians and women and attacks on Washington, attacks on the war.

GM: It's funny though I'm drawing a blank, I'm sure I'll think of it though. It's fine.

MJ: You don't hear much from her anymore.

GM: I was going to say, maybe she didn't.

MJ: That was the kind of poetry that he didn't like.

GM: Right.

MJ: I mean, it was not a poetic subject to him.

GM: Okay. That's interesting.

MJ: Although he was rather political in his war poems. But he had surrounded it with emotion and person emphasis on the personal soldier and the dying and the unfortunate, all that kind of thing.

GM: When you were talking about his fear that they were destroying lyricism and romanticism; would it be fair to say that he maybe also feared they were destroying pleasure? Taking pleasure in poetry, by making it—

MJ: I think you could say that, yes.

GM: Okay. But, it also does sound like he had a very idealized idea about women.

MJ: Yes, yes and poetry.

GM: That he wanted to be the protectors of that which was soft, that which was lyrical, that which was emotional.

MJ: Yes.

GM: That that was nice that somebody still cared about—

MJ: Yes, and that's the sentimentality that he has been, you know, scorned for.

GM: Well, defend that, will you? Defend his, can you—I'm sure you've thought about it a lot.

MJ: I don't feel that it is sentimental.

GM: Okay. What would you call it?

MJ: The poems that got the worst were in *The Lost World*, by that man from the *Hudson Review*.

GM: Oh, yes.

MJ: Whose name I'm Freudianly forgetting.

GM: Yes, I know the one you're talking about.

MJ: Yes, Hayden Carruth [American poet, literary critic, and anthologist]?

GM: Carruth.

MJ: Carruthers? Yeah, I think he wrote the review in the *New York Times* and just oh, well, anyway. But for instance, there's a poem like "The Lost Children."

GM: Right.

MJ: That would be pathos to some. He never read that to an audience that both sides, mothers and daughters, didn't come up afterwards and the mother would say, "I want to get your book, I want to send my daughter that poem." And the daughter would come up and say,

“I want to send my mother” and everybody be misty eyed. Now perhaps that is sentimental, but I mean is Whitman sentimental? Whitman has a lot of very emotional, deep, feelings in his poetry. And I think Randall thought you know this is lovely that the women feel this way and that the daughters feel this way.

GM: Yes, yes. It’s always been interesting to me that given that he’s often accused of sentimentality, that he—quite a few of the speakers of his poems are women.

MJ: Yes, oh, yes.

GM: Maybe one reason people think it’s sentimental is because the speakers are women. And it may be the fault of the critic for assuming that women always have sentimental emotions.

MJ: That’s a different angle than I had thought about Gail, because I thought of the persona article.

GM: Idea.

MJ: Idea, yes. And that over again the woman is herself speaking.

GM: Right

MJ: In “Next Day” definitely.

GM: Definitely.

MJ: And “Aging” and “The face.” All of those are persona poems. And of course, back to the feminine side of the end perhaps, he saw a way of using that feeling more effectively with women than with men.

GJ: I think so. If a man expressed that idea in a poem it just might not be.

MJ: Well, [unclear] has come the closest. And to me I can’t stand it. Don’t you think? That whether you can stand him or not doesn’t apply to the point, but he has come the closest. And [Richard] Everhart [American poet] to some extent.

GM: Right.

MJ: And it gets kind of mushy. And I don’t know whether I don’t see the mush in Jarrell, I only see it in them, but that’s what comes to—

GM: Well, I was thinking as you’ve been talking, I was thinking about *Der Rosenkavalier*, which as an opera I love. And Marcellin, you know, that’s a wonderful character for dealing with losing your looks.

MJ: Oh, yeah, her scene in front of the mirror.

GM: Oh, wonderful. And that last few moments when the two young people get together.

MJ: And she kind of gives them her blessing.

GM: Yeah. It's a wonderfully poignant moment, and it seems to me it's a mixed moment. Roughly the same way "The Girl in a Library" is a mixed moment, in that, you know, that she's aching.

MJ: Yes!

GM: And you also know that in fact she's truly pleased.

MJ: Yes.

GM: So, maybe what we're dealing with partly is that Randall was interested in very complex emotions. And that it's a failure in his readers not to hear that ambiguity. One of the things that Fred said to me is that, at his most sentimental, you can always detect—at his most quasi-sentimental you can always detect a self-mockery also.

MJ: Yes, yes.

GM: And I think that's closer to accurate—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —about the tone. Do you agree?

MJ: I do too. And I mean, just like as in the "A Girl in a Library," I mean he qualifies it, he says, with tenderness, but then there's the mockery that comes in.

GM: That's right.

MJ: I felt too the longer I knew him. I met him in '50 or '51, and we were married in '51 or '52, and then we were married about fourteen years to '65. That he was conscious very much of his own aging, and these poems—that it comes up in the poems over and over again is that it was on his mind.

GM: Yes, yes.

MJ: Then of course the other thing was, he was living with a woman whose daughters were getting married, and I was aging, and the grandchild even came, and I was still in my forties when the grandchild came. And but, Randall's grandchild too by marriage, you know.

GM: Right

MJ: And so, he was observing things that—Well, it's no longer youth, it's another chapter.

GM: Right.

MJ: The "Next Day" was written after all these changes.

GM: That's interesting.

MJ: Yeah.

GM: That's very interesting.

MJ: And the woman says, if only he would see me that the man sees the car or the dog or whatever the, yeah.

GM: Yeah, it's very poignant, very poignant.

MJ: Yeah and looking in the mirror with the eyes I hate, he says in "Next Day." [Editor's note: the quote is, "From the rear-view mirror, with eyes I hate—"] And I was conscious that he was troubled by all those things. But I just tossed them off because you know you just got to deal with those like a "funny voice" says.

GM: Well, he was a very attractive man.

MJ: He was.

GM: And you know he certainly didn't look elderly in the—

MJ: No, nor act elderly.

GM: No.

MJ: And he was used to the admiration and easy adulation from women.

GM: Do you think girls in his classes had crushes on him?

MJ: Oh, by all means. Oh, yes, yes, yes!

GM: Did he talk about that little bit? Did he use it to make himself more effective as a teacher? Was he aware of it?

MJ: I don't think he—I don't know. If any of us are feeling particularly successful in a group of the other sex don't we know that or not?

GM: Yeah, I think we do.

MJ: Yes.

GM: We may not be preening ourselves—

MJ: No, or intending to, but suddenly you get with a group and they're waking up and they're looking at you with real interest, and you know that.

GM: Like Sleeping Beauty.

MJ: Yes, and you talk better, I think, and more easily.

GM: Right.

MJ: And he knew what all of that was like. I feel his chief disappointment in aging was that he hadn't won more prizes. That the Pulitzer had gone to other people.

GM: Right.

MJ: And he very much had wanted that. And a question of—He had turned, he was fifty-one when he was killed and when he—Before that when he had his ghastly nervous breakdown. And he had been depressed quite a little while and it was very much brought on by these people that—the younger people were getting. And he thought, "I'm passed over and Karl Shapiro—Peter didn't get his until much later." And this was a cross to him, he wanted approval and achievement. He never played a tennis game that he didn't want to win.

GM: Right.

MJ: He was never out there, no matter who he was playing with.

GM: So, he felt rejected by his own peers?

MJ: Yes, of course as I said in the [*Randall Jarrell's*] *Letters* he made a loyal following of enemies. That was early on when he blasted so many people, including proteges of Malcolm Cowley [American writer, editor, historian, poet, and literary critic]. Well, it's hard to win anything after you've done that.

GM: Sure, sure, I'm sure that's true.

MJ: And I know that it was [W.D.] Snodgrass [American poet and Pulitzer Prize winner] that held out for the National Book Award for Randall. And Snodgrass had gotten it himself, much earlier. And Snodgrass had been a student of Randall's. And it was one of those terrible things like jealousy, a form of jealousy, that's hard to talk about, but that if you

live alongside of it you begin to see it, and I was jealous for him. I felt he deserved all this and I, you know, resented.

GM: Yeah, yeah. But you're not saying, or are you, that you think his breakdown was brought on by these disappointments?

MJ: It was a combination of aging and disappointment, very much so.

GM: Okay.

MJ: I mean what happens when you're not appreciated is you can't perform, and he did get a heavy severe writer's block. And he thought it was far worse than it was. He was still writing, but he was translating mainly, and that you know is not the same as writing your own poem.

GM: Right, Right. If I can return to the students for just one minute.

MJ: Certainly

GM: My sense is that faculty members used to have students to their homes—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —more often than they do now, and so you got to know his students a bit more maybe than the average faculty wife would now, or is that true? Did you see a lot of students?

MJ: Oh, yes, I think so, because we did do that. And usually we would ask the whole class.

GM: Right.

MJ: We wouldn't single anybody out, but the students like Heather and Emily Herring Wilson [Class of 1961, writer, poet, and community activist]—Have you talked to her?

GM: I know that—I've met her, actually, yeah.

MJ: I would think she would give because she is a feminist and she would give an interesting, her interesting angle would be something you might want. Because she was smart. And then she married a dean.

GM: Right. I've met her, she's a friend of my neighbor's, yeah.

MJ: You have? Is that right?

GM: I've also seen her at a couple of poetry readings. But I didn't realize that she was somebody I needed to talk to, but I will.

MJ: Because I sense that she's emotional, but I sense also that she's cold.

GM: Tough.

MJ: Do you think, feel that?

GM: I've just met her once or twice.

MJ: Maybe it's all just seething there inside of her. But the manner she gives and if I were talking about someone with a feminine side, I would think that she has a masculine side.

GM: Okay.

MJ: Without being a lesbian at all, but she sees things with—pretty objectively. But she's very—and I like her. She's not anybody I don't like.

GM: How would you describe say, the majority of the young women that you met from Randall's classes?

MJ: Well, just as you and I have spoken of, in the beginning they were these teacher-bound girls.

GM: Teacher-bound?

MJ: Yes, teacher tracks. And the grade meant so much to them. Then they began to change. And I suppose it was the emerging, just the natural emerging slowly of feminine equality. The way racial equality was trying to emerge here too. And that changed the women, they kind of well, groups like that, you want to dictate the policies and be free of your elders to, and some were like "The Scorpions," the girls that he just didn't really felt he would never agree with and they would never understand him, and he would never understand them. And he probably wasn't teaching the kind of poetry they wanted to hear and read.

GM: What kind of poetry do you think they did want to read? Other than the kind that he was teaching? They didn't want to read Eliot anymore?

MJ: Well, the "Beats" [the Beat Generation was a literary movement started by a group of authors whose work explored and influenced American culture and politics after World War II] had a little, had a few followers. And of course, the "Beats" had the men a lot, the men students were crazy about the "Beats."

GM: Yes, that's interesting.

MJ: I'm trying to think who else was writing, that kind of poetry. I think some of the women too were very proud of Adrienne Rich [American poet, essayist, and feminist] and they wanted her kind of poetry.

GM: Right, Right. Do you think the first set of girls, before the girls changed—? It's the first set I'm a little, actually more interested in, but they weren't, were they? One could argue, or it appears they were sheep-like, when you say that they were teacher-bound.

MJ: Yes.

GM: Would that be right to say? That they weren't questioning or—

MJ: I wouldn't like to go on record as saying those girls were sheep-like but, they were accepting.

GM: Accepting?

MJ: And they apart from what other English literature they were being taught, they enjoyed Randall showing them, leading them, to a deeper, more romantic entertaining level of literature.

GM: Well, one way of thinking about this I think is a willingness to be led—

MJ: Yes.

GM: —is fairly basic to the teacher-student relationship.

MJ: You are right.

GM: And if you don't allow yourself to be led, then you're immediately in a kind of rancorous struggle.

MJ: If you know it all you're not going to learn a lot.

GM: And that seems to be what you're saying happened in a way, not—

MJ: Yeah, these people said we are the new generation and we—Williams they liked a lot. [E.E.] Cummings [American poet, painter, essayist, author, and playwright] they were crazy about.

GM: Oh, Cummings, right, sure.

MJ: Randall didn't care that much about Cummings.

GM: I can imagine.

[laughter]

MJ: I've read some Cummings lately and thought, "Oh, well, Cummings I mean—"

GM: He's all right, it's not intellectually demanding though.

MJ: No, it's not, it's not profound, it doesn't really touch you, but I can see where it's entertaining.

GM: Sure, sure.

MJ: Something I was going to say a minute ago, apropos of the sheep. Oh, not only was the poetry class interesting, but I think he brought out a lot of writers that wouldn't have been brought out before, see he taught, he was the teacher for creative writing, and those classes were very—I didn't go to them naturally, but they were very well attended. And there were writers there that didn't even know they were writers, that he developed.

Silvia Wilkinson [Class of 1961 and author] is very definitely one. She was an arts major and she was doing painting more, and he encouraged her to write, he encouraged Heather, Heather was candidate for Woodrow Wilson [Fellowship], I'm not sure whether she got it or not, but she had a sudden pregnancy and had to get married to the guy she married. But she was in complete disgrace, I mean disgrace with her family, and he and, I mean her family was Peter Taylor's family. She was Peter Taylor's niece.

GM: I didn't realize that.

MJ: And Peter Taylor were our best friend's when we were here, for years. And they never said a good word about Heather, and Heather was quite alone, and Randall befriended her. He saw this writing possibility and he, so that—I think we're talking more about teaching, and how you teach, than just leading somebody a puppet on a string.

GM: That's right.

MJ: They were not puppets on a string, they were being guided and encouraged.

GM: That's a difference.

MJ: For those who would take it.

GM: Because in one, it's possible to characterize a leader as a villain.

MJ: Yes!

GM: But there is a kind of leadership, a kind of benevolent leadership, that I think is different from being a fascist pig.

MJ: Yes! Yes, and I think the fascist pig wants imitation. He wants you to write it just the way he would write it, and Randall never did that.

GM: Good.

MJ: There are some contemporary poets that have picked up a certain rhythm, a certain vocabulary, Bob Watson in his wonderful book, I just love that pendulum.

GM: He just gave me a copy.

MJ: Yes, perhaps lines, but they're just reminiscent.

[telephone ringing]

MJ: Hello? Yes, yes, Terry! [talking on the telephone]

[recording paused]

MJ: I think Randall in some letters said something about the followers of William Carlos Williams, that the, or I think Richard Wilbur [American poet and literary translator], that these people turned out little, he had just the right word for it, you know, like ducklings or something. That he never wanted to do that, and people have written, you know, that he has taught, they are individuals. They, the students, Emily Herring is one, and Snodgrass studied with Randall, and a lot of others, and they're their own people.

GM: Yes, yes, that's interesting.

MJ: That's a nice distinction you're making, I think between the leadership and teaching and leading. Leadership is one thing and leading by the nose is another.

GM: Right, because I just don't think—Well, be a very good teacher if one isn't willing to lead to a certain extent, because where would you, what would you be doing?

MJ: And I mean Randall helped Lowell so much, that those two people didn't write alike.

GM: Right.

MJ: They didn't write alike at all.

GM: Right.

MJ: But Lowell continually submitted poems to Randall, and Randall you know would find the line that just didn't sound like Lowell. I mean Randall would get an idea of what Lowell was trying to say and then, I don't think you're saying it the way you want to say

it, and sometimes Lowell—I liked Lowell a lot—thank God I never fell in love with him, but I really did like him a great deal, and I loved his poetry.

GM: I do too.

MJ: It's entirely different than Randall's and I liked it a lot. The later poetry when he was so upset, that poetry writing back and forth excerpts from letters from Elizabeth [Bishop, American poet and short story writer] are hard to take, but early ones, ["The] Quaker Graveyard [in Nantucket" by Robert Lowell]. Poems like that, I just went crazy about "For the Union Dead." And he would get just kind of almost demonic and Randall would say, "I don't think you need to go so far with this line." There's one, I think it's in "The Quaker Graveyard—" or it's the "Death of Arthur Winslow," where he says something about, the tumbles are creaking along, and you hear rhetoric there and out that went.

GM: He didn't like that?

MJ: I mean he didn't, Randall didn't like that, and he made it almost funny, so that Lowell saw he was going too far with that.

GM: Over dramatic, that's his fatal flaw, Lowell, that he gets over dramatic at times.

MJ: Yeah, and Randall tried to make him aware of that, but I mean it wasn't saying, "I would do it this way."

GM: No, no.

MJ: And the same with the students, he never would suggest what they were to say.

GM: Somebody else says this, that he made people be more themselves.

MJ: Lowell said it.

GM: That's what it was.

MJ: Yeah, he said he never met anybody that could look at your poetry with more interest than his own.

GM: Right, that's it. That's exactly—And that applies to his teaching too is what you're saying?

MJ: Yes, he was quite objective about what a person was trying to say.

GM: Right. Well, Mary I've got plenty and I—

MJ: Have you?

GM: Yes.

MJ: Oh, yay, oh, wonderful!

GM: You're just great. You're a wonderful interview, I must say. You are.

[End of Interview]