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Interview no. 120

Howard McCord

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Howard McCord
INTERVIEWER: Lester Standiford
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Poet, graduate of Texas Western College (UTEP).

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; influences on his poetry.

Dr. Standiford, the interviewer, has requested that credit be given if this interview is quoted, orally or in print.

19 pages.

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Interview With

HOWARD McCORD

*S: The people down here are interested in how you feel coming back home. I understand you haven't made a visit to El Paso for four or five years.

*M: Yes.

S: Does anything strike you as immediately changed or different?

M: Certainly. The freeway system has a big inlay on the town that changes my sense of direction at times and gets me a little confused, but it feels very good to be in my home country. The time I spent in The Organs and the time that I have now to look at the Franklins and desert have all been reassuring. I got over to Cd. Juárez this morning sort of checking things out; it's still El Paso despite the differences.

S: How about the school itself? Have you been on campus since you came?

M: No. I was here in 1969 when the new library was up and the Liberal Arts Building was up. There were many new buildings since my days in the mid 1950's and my memories of it go back to the '30's and '40's. Since then you've built the Physical Science Building and there's a big tower up the hill; I still haven't found out what it is.

S: It must be the Education Building.

M: That's new to me.

S: How about the old connections; you know, Thomas Wolfe talks about not being able to go home again, and everyone is familiar with that kind of a phrase. Do you get the sense that you can, in a way, or is it impossible ever to come back to the same place, see the same things, as you remember?

M: Home for me is so much a matter of landscape and it's hard to do too many terrible things to the landscape except in a city. My landscape has never been the city itself. I have lovely memories of walking downtown El Paso as a young boy. I used to do that fairly often. We lived on Montana Street during WW II on the 1200 block. I'd walk down to the public library, to the plaza and down to south El Paso, and just really wander all over the city. I don't really associate the landscape with home. I like the Franklin Mountains, Organ Mountains, Hueco Tanks, and the deserts where I spent very happy times.

*S = Dr. Lester Standiford

*M = Mr. Howard McCord

- S: Were the mountains sort of communication outposts with all the antennas and so forth when you were here as a boy?
- M: Yes, they were very important to me. I think I was probably rather shy and I know certainly I was uneasy with many people as a youngster. As soon as I learned about the lovely way you can get away from people in the mountains, I headed out for them. I had two or three friends that also loved to walk in the mountains and so we did that very, very much. I got into mountain climbing and simply going out in the deserts. In fact, I've covered most of the deserts from here over to Sierra Diablo. I like being out in that kind of country. The Tularosa Basin north and south is really my home. Over in the Sacramento Mountains, I have relatives in that area. So it's the physical land rather than the city as an urban place that to me is home.
- S: I see. Do you actually miss living in the Southwest? You are in Ohio; that's quite far removed from the Southwest.
- M: Yes, I do miss it. I miss the mountains, and I miss the deserts. I missed them when I was living up in Washington. In Washington I had an opportunity to get into some very good mountains, the Bitter Roots, which is a gorgeous range and I love the Snake River up there, and its deep deep canyons. But it was not as easy access as when I lived in El Paso. As a youngster I'd get on my bicycle, be up to McKelligon Canyon in thirty minutes, and then hike up to either Sugar Loaf or strike up further. You know, I could get up to the mountains very easily and that was important. I liked it.
- S: Well it sure is different country once you come West of the Mississippi, no doubt about it; the land is more dramatic past that point. I'm wondering if there is anything for you to appreciate in the Midwestern land form.
- M: The area of Ohio that I live in is very flat; it's farm land, but there are these small woods, ten to fifty acres. Sometimes when I first moved there, we were very close to one, just about a walk across the street and I could enter the woods. It was a deciduous forest. I had spent my years in Pullman in coniferous forests, so I learned the names of all the trees there. Suddenly, I had all these eastern deciduous trees to learn names of and identify. So I enjoyed those little pocket woods of Ohio. I find that they are really my equivalent of wilderness. Nobody goes there much, a few kids occasionally, if it's near a school, but you can find many around Bowling Green. You can go for a walk and you can walk into an area where nobody has bothered to walk through in ten or fifteen years probably; there's no sign of anybody's passage. That gives me a good feeling, it's a little bit like walking in the mountains--not quite as good, but it's all right.
- S: You talk in a poem "Spanish Dark" about the early Spaniards who came here without the eye of the Indians. I sense that you felt they did not see much beauty in this land. I suppose it could strike many people as arid and rather barren and unbeautiful. I'm curious, do you feel that there are many neo-blind Spaniards in this area today?

- M: Well, I wouldn't be surprised. There certainly were enough around who were natives of the region and who certainly loved it in a funny way, but also couldn't really see anything really interesting in walking out among the mesquite and the sand or climbing upon the mountains. They were always telling you, "You'll get bitten by a rattlesnake" or "You'll get stuck in a cactus" or "You'll fall off a cliff." The Spaniard came here for the wrong reason. They were looking for wealth and power; they came with the wrong equipment really. Though the Spanish armor and horses were to some degree effective military mechanisms and instruments, still it's not the best way to meet the desert. When you've got a steel crescent across your chest and a hollow helmet on your head, you really don't know where you are going, and you're always running out of water. You never find the riches that everybody keeps telling you about. "Oh yes, just go a little bit further up north," they say just to get you out of their hair. To come to this land in a right fashion you have to accept the desert as the desert is, like and love it for itself as with the mountains. That means you adapt yourself to their demand and act as a guest. It's just a different attitude towards the land, toward the country. So in that poem my intention was really to make a comment on the wrong end, predicating the wrong means, searching for the wrong thing; they came ill prepared for what they met. So while they were able to conquer and to keep the northern march under some control for many many years--and certainly a great many Spaniards settled in New Mexico and hispanos are still an important part of New Mexico and its culture--those who settled and stayed adapted to the land. They were no longer conquistadores.
- S: You have a sort of modern counterpart in El Paso I suppose. As you were talking, I remember running across soldiers who were stationed in El Paso during the war. They somehow always have terrible things to say about El Paso. I wonder if perhaps they are blinded in the same way; coming here perhaps against their will and for the wrong reason.
- M: I think that was often the case. You know, I lived in Ft. Bliss immediately after the war when my father was in the fire department out there. I had lived earlier during the war with him in an army hospital and so I knew a lot of the servicemen. I used to sell Saturday Evening Post, Colliers, and Liberty magazines all over William Beaumont Army Hospital. There were people here against their will who were bewildered by the fact of deserts and mountains. They were people from places where grass grows, and things are green, and the hills are covered by trees, as any decent hill ought to be; that was their attitude. A few really came to love the place and others certainly went away feeling that they had been stationed for eighteen ungodly months, or how ever long it might be, in some desolate wasteland and were completely unwilling to try and look at that wasteland and see what was really there.
- S: On the other hand there does seem to be a lot of retired military people in El Paso. What has happened? Can you perceive?
- M: Oh well, people after all are pretty intelligent. If you give the desert a chance, if you don't approach it with iron clad prejudices that this is an awful place, and if you start getting curious about it and walk out, and start noticing things, start looking at books, and start finding out about the desert, then it can become an extraordinarily fascinating place.

Many of the people come back--after all, the weather is still more beautiful here compared to many places in the U. S. I think with good weather, sunshine, and desert, they come at least to admire its beauty, perhaps in a superficial way--I don't know--but they come to admire it.

S: Ed Abbey is a writer often associated with the Southwest whose book, Desert Solitaire, which in a more than simple minded way sings praises and understands the desert, was once asked to go back to the Appalachian Mountains to write the text for a Sierra Club publication of the area. He had an interesting observation; the mountains and the undergrowth he found there were so lush that he felt closed in and pinched upon. He could hardly stand to be in that environment after living so long in the desert and seeing things much more discreetly. Have you ever experienced this?

M: I felt a little bit of that when I first went to Pullman and immediately lit out to the forest or mountains. They have forests-- The Bitter Roots. I lived there about 11 years and really got to love the Rocky Mountain forest. I've been in, to some extent, the Olympic Peninsula--what you have is a northern rain forest. It's extremely dense saddle thickets. Over in eastern Washington where I lived, the forests are like the forests in northern New Mexico. Instead of Ponderosa Pine, they have an openness to them that you can walk through easily and come to a clearness and you can see a long ways. But I agree with Ed's feeling; you can get into those eastern forests, and they just close in around you. I feel I want to be able to see where I'm at.

S: Are you able to perceive any difference in attitude say between the residents south of the border? Is the Mexican attitude towards this land any different, do you suppose, among the inhabitants of Juarez compared to that of inhabitants of El Paso?

M: The norteños of México are, from the Mexican point of view, (i.e. from México City) rather distinctive regional people. The Spanish that is spoken in the northern tier of Mexican states has a lot of archaic phrases in it. Leon Portillo has a very interesting essay on the Southwest or what he calls the Mexican-American Southwest, and he talks about the character of the norteños, as they are called by the other people in México. It was a place where you had to be extremely hardy to survive, in which you did not have, as in southern México, Indian allies that you could draw on. We often think back in the '60's and '70's of the conflicts between the white settlers coming in and the Indians in the Southwest and West in general. We were able to push them back because we had greater armament. We had the U. S. Cavalry, a fond memory here in Ft. Bliss. But where did we push them to? We pushed them into México. Up to the latter part of the 19th Century, México--i. e. Chihuahua, Sonora, Coahuila--had really difficult problems with Indians. There was the old U. S. frontiersman, coming in and really conquering the land, taking away from the people who lived there, so he was in conflict with them. That's even stronger, I think, in México. Until the last few years, these northern Mexican states had been essentially cattle ranches, the great haciendas, those of the 19th Century, that were finally broken up in the '20's of this century; still, it was cattle country, small towns, the little cities. There would be like Chihuahua, essentially a mining city; Cd. Juarez, a trading city (being on the border), but the cities were comparatively unimportant, little dots on a mince landscape. So I think, inasmuch as I know, the norteño looks on the land

with perhaps a much harsher view than we have here. Things were harder, longer there, and I think a little bit of that still carries over.

S: You say in the "Spanish Dark" that the land here only belongs to the true Indian. Are there any true Indians around?

M: Oh sure, there're a lot of them--a lot of good Indians; and some of us are Chicanos, some of us are Anglos, some of us are Pueblos, Navajos, and Chiricahua Apaches. Being an Indian is taking on an attitude, in the way that I'm using the word in the book, because I think roughly the way the poem runs is this: the Spanish came and became a Mexican, and the Mexican who was able to stay had to become an Indian, because he had to become them, take on that sense of respect for the land. You know, it's a fragile environment. The deserts are extraordinarily fragile--start overgrazing them and they go very quickly. Start plowing them up and they'll blow away in front of your eyes. You have to learn how to get the water to the corn. You've got to be careful, you've got to be alert. There's a lovely Laguna Pueblo poet, a young lady named Leslie Silco, she has a poem where she talks about taking care of the mountain. That attitude of taking care--my goodness--it's hard enough to take care of your own farm land much less a mountain. But to her, the care must be given not only in the house and out in the pueblo and out in the fields. It extends beyond that to the mountain itself, for which a care like reverence has to be maintained. I think that is what I always hope that people come to wherever they are; and that awareness sends itself down the line.

S: Well, going on with the poem, "Spanish Dark," you hinted the reward, the ultimate reward, was to become a source, to become geographical. It seems a good part of your poetry deals with man's relation to his geography. Can you explain or talk a bit more about what you mean, exactly?

M: Well, I use landscapes in my poetry, particularly wilderness landscapes, a great deal. They serve really two functions. One, they are the stage on which whatever activity, whatever objects, whatever intellectual concepts the poem brings forth--it is the stage on which they appear. They're seen in that context of the wilderness in the land. Then it also serves as a metaphor for man's inner condition. There's much more wilderness inside ourselves than most of us suspect. D. H. Lawrence has the essay, Ben Franklin, where he talks about Ben Franklin clearing out a tiny little plot in this deep forest and trying to restrict all his life to watching after that little plot where he's built a house and tilled the soil. I think, what Lawrence calls "the dark gods" that live in the forest and surround that little plot, to me, is the wilderness. I have a mind which is a tidy plot--on somedays anyway--and that's my conscious mind. But I also know that there are parts of my mind that I have to go into, the way I go into the mountains. I have to really struggle rather hard. Sometimes I'm quite frightened, other times I'm delighted by the surprises. Like yesterday, climbing (in the Organs), we went up over this one path. We'd been climbing in a very bad wind all morning, suddenly we not only came up over a pass where we could look down over on the eastern slope of the Organs down toward Sugar Loaf, but also we hit a spot of sunlight--like walking into Shangri-la. I think that also happens in your mind. Writing poetry for me is a way of trying to tell people that they have a wilderness even while sitting in their living room, protected, it seems, on all sides.

There is this beautiful, strange, dangerous, lovely, loving wilderness that is theirs. They I hope, will be the richer for it if they explore it. There is that interplay you might say--the actual geography and then the interior geography.

- S: Do you feel that despite what you may have read as a young person, that the fact that you grew up where you did, had something to do with you coming to perceive these connections? That is, had you been born, lets say, in Bowling Green, would your outlook on the land have been different?
- M: I think so. It's really impossible to answer that kind of hypothetical question. To me the Southwest, the physical landscape is such a striking part of every waking hour. Sometimes you are closed in a room, but then you walk outdoors and you can always see mountains. Certainly as a child growing up, I was out playing and I was always conscious of the mountains, good old Mount Franklin. In Ohio, where I live, I don't see any mountains. All I see are the streets in a rather nice small town, farmland, and then these little woods. I don't know that, as a child, I would be struck with perhaps closer things; perhaps the woods, the trees, the smaller things in nature might have attracted me and become as strong an influence on me as, say, the whole mountain ranges do now. While I love the flowers and small things, really I tend, you might say to think in mountain ranges rather than the smaller woods.
- S: That may well be fortunate for us as readers. You like to climb, camp out --you travel to México, Iceland, and India. I assume that you do this for more than a surface knowledge, that while you do enjoy it, it's more than a simple pleasure. What do you expect to find? Do you have anything in mind, do you have expectations, or are you open-ended when you go out?
- M: Well, I just know that there are places I haven't seen, that I would like to walk into or get to some way or another. I'll ride if I can get a ride, or if I have to, I'll walk. There is always the anticipation of some new beauty revealed; with that new beauty, perhaps a little bit greater understanding. When I went to Iceland, I prepared by reading about it and doing my homework before I went. It was so much more incredibly beautiful than even I, as a kind of Icelandic on principle, imagined it would be. The response I got from that landscape was more intense than I had expected. To me that was one reason to go there, I had a sneaky hunch that something like that might happen. It has happened wherever I travel. I feel, I have been very lucky that fate has been such that I have gotten to move around the world a fair amount, and I want to keep moving. I love to travel; I love to see new things; I like to go back to places that I've already seen and see them one more time. You miss so much and you can always go back and find something new.
- S: Can you bring back those kinds of initial responses in any fashion?
- M: I hope to, because a poem to me is like a celebration, a joyful celebration. It's an awareness, it's an insight, it's a bit of knowledge--it takes on all those characteristics. Somehow the joy of perceiving these new landscapes, I hope, is carried into the poem. The poem then becomes a vehicle by which the reader can touch or be touched by that joy of discovery. The reader makes the transference very quickly from having gone someplace,

then maybe writing about it, telling about my feelings--then they go inside their own minds, perhaps even into their own landscapes, their local landscapes and receive something fresh and new.

S: Open up?

M: Yes.

S: You hinted before that the wilderness can be a dangerous place. Certainly there are the wilder areas of the land around here. Have you had experiences that are other than joyful?

M: Oh I've been frightened a good number of times rock climbing--I've been down right scared. You do learn something by getting yourself into a position where, very likely, you're the only one that's going to get you out. I've had times when I perhaps moved foolishly and wished I had done something else, but it put me to a kind of test. OK, I had made a mistake, now before that mistake could in a sense culminate, I had to figure out a way to get back to safety. I felt those were...well, I felt two things. I felt silly because I'd gotten myself into this fix. Then afterwards, after I had figured a way to get out, I felt much better because I'd met a challenge; I'd learned things about my own responses that I really hadn't known before. I remember one time Danny Vickers and I walked up Fillmore Canyon and we camped at a spring. We were looking at it and it showed that there was another spring a few miles further on. So the next day we wanted to go climbing up on the Organ slopes of that canyon, toward Organ Peak. Then we thought, well we'd drop down at this spring and we could have water. We were lazy and we decided we wouldn't take any water; sure enough as things like that always happen, after we had spent a long morning climbing and were full of honest thirst, we got to this spring or where it was suppose to be, and found at most a kind of soggy bit of earth. Even yesterday, climbing with Dick in that storm, it was really cold. We had both come with only the expectation that November in the Organs is usually pretty nice. You take along gloves, a hat, and something to keep you warm, but you're not expecting anything really terrible. I think we both got colder than we really wanted to and wished we had brought something else.

S: Do you experience the feeling of truly getting away, of breaking with wherever you've left when you're out? Let's say in México. Are you able to shut off those worries or the working-day pressures when you're away?

M: Oh, very much so. I mean, I get totally engrossed in the land. When we were traveling in Iceland this past summer, we were out in the interior two weeks camping and the news would come over the short-wave radio in Icelandic. Our Icelandic driver would utter a couple of laconic remarks about the Cod War and that was the extent of any kind of news. I didn't dream that Watergate was going on and it didn't bother me the least bit that I didn't know what was going on. When I got back, the world was in pretty much the same condition as when I left it. For me, being freed from that is no problem. I don't worry about being cut off; I like it.

S: In your poem, "The Toad Man," you describe a hermetic kind of existence, where a man attempts to isolate himself from the world. He builds a cabin in the shoulder of a mountain somewhere, and the narrator says,

"They kill out there. I paint, read books, hear the toads call from the spring." Are you suggesting such a withdrawal as long-term strategy or more as a temporary, or necessary, respite?

- M: Well, the next line is, "And wait, my heart like the locust." I was thinking of the cicada--go underground, seven years cicada, eleven years cicada--so it's not a permanent withdrawal. I think of it really in two ways. It is a temporary respite, but it's a way of getting the perspective on what's happening in that world out there that can be so horrifying. When you are caught up in it, it is very hard to get the long view, to see the events which seem so terribly important momentarily in the longer context of years or centuries or geological time. Obviously, as human beings with a limited life span we have to be concerned with that particular span of years, but what's going on in the world is...there are all different kinds of times; so that stepping out of one's culture for a little while, perhaps for a long while, can enable you to know more surely what is really important about your culture, about what you can do in terms of the given cultural situation. I see it as a way of gaining vision, taking it away from the trivialities so that you can really focus on important things like watching water running in a stream or watching the seasons come and go from a place.
- S: I sense that this is something that many poets feel they must do. I think specifically of Gary Snyder, spending time atop forest lookouts, going to Japan and closeting himself away from the world. Do you also see this as a common thing for a person who writes to have to do?
- M: Well, I don't know how common it is. I know a good many writers are very content living in a busy city, not taking any vacations. They're engrossed in their work, they don't feel the need to get away; then I also know a number of writers who do. I couldn't generalize here. I think certainly for me, solitude, or comparative solitude anyway (which is a very deep feeling about family and a good friend or two), out in the woods, in mountains, or out in the desert, wherever we may be--turning off the babble of the world for a while--is a very healthy thing. I come back much refreshed. We spent a summer, two summers ago, living on the Lawrence Ranch north of Taos and we had a fine summer there. It was important for me as a writer to have that time, but it was more important perhaps for me and my family to have that time together--not being in a situation I often find. Everybody is going someplace different just after supper or just coming in and everybody has an active life. The children are going and coming, and so it was very good to have a summer where we ~~were~~ all together and not bothered by the outside world.
- S: Let's take a different tack. We've talked about the land for a long time. How about the relationship of your poetry to an audience? You say in your prologue to "The Spanish Dark" and Other Poems" that during the day men may choose to dissemble and be politic of appearance, but "in the night hours of memory they walk the mountains of their past. I would have my poems chart those mountains." Are you consciously attempting that kind of communication to this day?
- M: Well, the preface was written eight years ago, but I wouldn't take it back for anything. I agree; yes, that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to

evoke in the reader an awareness of the immense worlds that lie within his own consciousness, to free him through that object, the instrument, the poem--to free him from his ordinary perceptions, for just long enough a time that he becomes aware of those marvelous, mysterious things in his mind.

S: How about the size of that audience, or is there an audience out there these days?

M: Oh, there's an audience. I'll give you a number of statistics if you want.

S: I'd love to have them.

M: For example, the total circulation of all the little magazines, the literary magazines, is right about a million copies. This doesn't mean that there are a million readers, because most people who are into that read several little magazines. You have a readership who are fairly seriously interested in poetry, modern fiction, and the literature that is being written right now; I would say a quarter of a million people, maybe half a million people, I don't know. Obviously, they are all not going to run out and buy every poet's book. But in Gayland? (check name in Lib.) In Williams' Directory of American Poets, there are some 1200 poets. These are people who have had at least one book published, and it was not by any means a complete gathering, so say of those 1200 you've got at least 500 pretty serious poets who are working at it all the time. I think that's a good number of people. I'd say about 500 come out with a book every two or years, some of them a book a year. The books are printed in editions from about 100 to maybe 3500 for the bigger presses. They're small editions in terms of best sellers, but they get out, they get read. Then you always have the kind of captive audience of poetry which exists in colleges and universities, and students in classes where they read.

S: Does anyone make a living through poetry anymore?

M: Yes, a few people do; Diane Wakoski has made her living the past seven or eight years from her poetry and she does it mostly by giving readings. That is the place where the poet gets money. You don't make much money off books. I would say a really quite successful poet will be lucky to pull in \$2,000 a year from royalties, from anthology sales, and from publication sales. But he can, if he's going to work full time reading or at least do two big tours in spring and fall, probably pull in another \$5,000 to \$7,000, which makes a poet able to make from poetry say about 8 or \$9,000 a year. Well, I think that's probably close to poverty level in terms of today's prices, but it is possible to do that. Of course many poets are attached one way or another to a university or some academic institution, and I'm thankful for that. I think it's proper for poets to be in academies. They tend to liven the place up a bit anyway. There are of course, those poets who have pulled every imaginable kind of job, and some who have inherited wealth.

S: A nice way to be, eh. But how do you characterize this quarter of a million or half a million people? Where is this readership as you perceive it? Are they around the universities themselves? Are they other poets or people who try to be poets?

- M: A lot of them are, of course, other poets; then there are only, as I said, about 1200 listed. There are, of course, a lot more poets than that writing, but I find at least from my experience--and I've given readings in a good many states at a good many universities along with people, who take advantage of the university's presence in their community though they may not have any particular attachment to it--they are people who go to the theatre and then come out to poetry readings. They are a little different from the public who are interested in these other things, but they are not necessarily academicians themselves nor are they students. I feel students are an important audience because so many of them are interested in writing. They do read poetry and get excited by poetry; if anything, I really generally expect a reader of one of my books to be under twenty five years more often than not, and more often than not be a university student or someone very close to a university.
- S: It has been charged in the past that poetry has become academic, that it has gotten away from the average man, that there's no longer a poetry of the people. How do you feel about that?
- M: Well, I don't know that I believe that there ever was a poetry of the people. I think we have always--well, each generation has its versifier who strikes popular fancy. Depending on the temper of the age, he will either be, say narrative poet, Robert Service might be a good example there; or a sentimental poet--you would have Edgar Guest or Rod McKuen, in either case; or a quasi-devotional poet, someone like Kahil Gibran; or a love poet like Walter Vinton; or a funny half-way between serious and non-serious poet like (Brahil?). All these people sell, not 1500 copies of a book, but editions of 30, 40, and 100 thousand. I'm happy for them, but I think that simply the difference is that poetry, after all, is a rather difficult art form. It requires some awareness on the part of the audience of what the poet is trying to do and what the means are he has to do it with--a certain level of sophistication. I don't think you will ever have a really broad audience for poetry in our culture as I see it, as it now, as it has been in the past, and as I might predict how it will be. We have many other media that engross us more than the written word. There are other art forms that can be as illuminating as poetry and which are sometimes maybe more approachable by mass audiences. Certainly, I think music is an example here. Doubtless the greater the awareness or sophistication of the listener, the more he will get out of the given musical work. Still, there is a quality in music that is more immediate and requires less training to at least get the gist of it.
- S: How about yourself? Are there poets that you continue to read and admire that you'd like to mention?
- M: I really have some favorite poets. I tend to be one of those people, I think...who had a rather nasty remark about people who are eclectic. I can't recall it at the moment. I have eclectic and catholic tastes; I like a lot of different kinds of poetry. I am not easily offended by poetry which I couldn't write myself and wouldn't want to write myself and can enjoy. But if you want to know my favorite poets, I have to start with William Blake, Christopher Smart, and a lot of Yeats; and then always the Chinese poets, and Greek poets. But then the list becomes too broad too quickly. I'm trying to keep it down fairly tight. I come then to my contemporaries,

who are writing, that I always look forward to their books; I read them with care. I think those people...Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, of course he doesn't write anymore books--Galway Kinnell very often, and W. S. Merwin is very rich for me. It kind of comes and goes, sometimes I won't be as excited as I think I ought to be and I wonder why, but certainly once there I read them. I have close personal friends who are very good poets, so I read their poems with a kind of double vision; the vision of friendship and then the vision of, simply as though it were signed anonymous. I might be interested in this work. They would include poets like Ted Ensalen, Keith Wilson, and a young Swedish poet who writes in English, (Setering Fox?); he just has books out this year, but his poems have been in magazines for a number of years. I'm always excited by what they do, perhaps it's because they're friends, but I think it's also because they write good poetry.

- S: You said in a preface to "Spanish Dark" that the poem is the one personal secular act that enables us to survive the death by pollution which we suffer. Do you still see the poem as the only talisman for yourself?
- M: For me, yes, because I'm not a painter and I'm not a musician. I think as I wrote, I was using the "poem" in the broadest sense; a work of art is the one secular act that can have a kind of redemptive value.
- S: What are the pollutions that you have in mind here?
- M: Well, I think that the crossness, the materialism, the immorality, the bloodthirstiness, the greed: the usual array of sins that set us apart as human beings and that seem to flower regularly. They're perennials.
- S: Would you characterize yourself as a poet solely?
- M: No, I think, you know, if somebody asked me what I am; I'd say a poet, but I also wear many hats. I'm a teacher; I'm a husband; I'm a father; sometimes I'm an auto mechanic, a plumber, a mountain climber, and a walker. So I think in terms of my art, yes, I write prose too. But I've used part here as an artist whose medium is language. Whether it's what we call prose or what we call poetry, it's using language to create an artistic object. To that extent then, I'm a poet.
- S: And involved as much as you can in the effort towards redemption, then?
- M: Yes, I think we need all the help we can get. I think that it's our responsibility as human beings to aid other human beings through means which lie in our particular confidences. That for me, the art that I can practice, is one way that I can give something to the people around me. The people who are to listen as a painter gives me visions by his painting and a musician by his music. Other people, of course, give by different kinds of art; it's simply our task as human beings to give these things to one another.
- S: James Dickey, speaking in a recent interview says that American poets, most of them at any rate, are truly tormented men; adding that the occupational hazards of a poet are alcoholism and suicide. Do you think this is a fashionable statement? Do you sense some similar potential hazard yourself?

- M: Oh no, I think he's full of bullshit. I think that is the kind of remark that's made in order to get picked up and printed, and to cause a little arching of an eyebrow somewhere. It's an old remark about poets and about artists, you know: Bohemian life, suicides, drinking, dope, and women--all of which I heartily approve of, but I don't think the incidence of say alcoholism among poets, is really much higher than the incidents of alcoholism among any other group of professionals. By fact, there are some studies that the Universities of California have done that puts us down about thirteenth on the list and so we come off pretty well. Writers work very hard, I believe, if they're serious, you know. You have to sit at that typewriter and you can't do it when you're drunk out of your head. There are a lot of people perhaps who think they would like to be poets, writers or artists who end up just getting drunk out of their heads. I know a lot of poets who drink a great deal, some who have drinking problems, and some who are women chasers. I know a lot of people in other professions who have the same problems. I don't think it's anything particular to the poet's tormented life.
- S: Their lot is the lot of the general public?
- M: There's nothing special about the calling that would--perhaps what Dickey is aiming at is again kind of commonplace. Pound says that poets are the animosity of the race. They're supposed to be out at the cutting edge of things. They're supposed to feel things a little before anybody else and report back, so they are supposed to have, and I think do have, a perhaps greater range of sensitivities than people who are not poets or other artists. Sometimes this sensitivity can bring with it a certain amount of pain and that kind of a person may respond to a situation with deeper anguish than someone who is not so sensitive. But I think, again, the image of the tormented poet is a false one. So you have a little bit of greater anguish. Say you are super sensitive and you are quick to sense hurt out in the world, also with sensitivity comes strength. If not you're just going to become a neurotic and then you're not going to be able to write very well or very much; you'll be, you know, moping around in your own melancholy. No, I think that sensitivity brings with it strength. This isn't to say again that there are not human tragedies among writers as there are among all sorts of professionals.
- S: Well in "Spanish Dark" you make use of the Apache drug *cofradike*.
- M: That's not really a drug. It's the *cofrania*. That's a very funny part of the poem. I was talking, I suppose, about any kind of drug that has been used by native Americans in the past to bring upon visions--peyote, (*datura*) *imson* weed, the like, the mushroom. In this case it's not a drug. It's a little town in México that was drowned under a dam and that's just a footnote of some sort. What did you want to mention about the drug?
- S: The point at that part of the poem where the narrator goes into a trance, seeming a drug induced state. That's a gateway to a kind of understanding: the ultimate reward is to become geographical, to become a source. It's what happens it seems to the narrator there. It made me think of Carlos Castaneda and his work with Don Juan who seems to want to teach Castaneda things. Castaneda thinks at first that the only gateway to this knowledge for him is the taking of the drugs that Don Juan introduces to him. Later

on, however, Castaneda feels that the drugs were not necessary, and would not have been used in fact, had he not been such a stubborn pupil. I'm wondering if you have any comment on that.

- M: No, I think that's pretty accurate. I think for certain people at certain times drugs, here particularly hallucinogens, either LSD, (psilocybin), mescaline, can be teaching devices. While approached with care, with understanding, and with a kind of reverence, they can be quite valuable teaching devices, but only devices. They, I don't believe, should become an end in themselves. I think they can simply give you a kind of quick shorthand account of the world that lies within you and reveal to you some of the immensities of it. Then you have to come back, and you have to take the longer more difficult task of exploring.
- S: You are saying that they could be used as teaching devices, but then you'd have to go back. Once having seen the depths, go back and take the long slow road down.
- M: Yes. This is in a way the vision that begins a quest rather than the vision which is the culmination of a quest. As I said, for some people or sometimes, these can be very valuable. The real hard work is the quest itself; that has to be taken in with one's total mind, with the conscious and the unconscious.
- S: In the poem Jab...?
- M: Oh, I kind of made up the word...
- S: Well, you suggested that the Indian's claim is now no more than a whim: what is stolen is gone and likewise the white man's claim on the past--that history is the last refuge of the defeated. I'm wondering from a very practical "here and now" standpoint, how you view the current attempts at raising the Indian consciousness and awareness of the past. I think specifically of the occupation of Alcatraz, of the occupation of the BIA offices in Washington or similar incidents. Are these only futile exercises or do they play some positive role?
- M: They may have some local tactical value. That is, you may get a bigger budget out of the BIA. You may get a little more autonomy. You may shake up a few bureaucrats somewhere so that you're not being hassled so much. I think in the long term, they are not terribly significant. In the unconsciousness rising, as we say, after all there are, at least among the western Indians here in the southwest, there are more southwestern Indians now than there were in 1900. While their conditions are often still miserable, they are not disappearing; they are not dying out. Perhaps a few particular arts and crafts are in danger of disappearing; they simply cost too much to produce. They require such long training it may be that we will see the end of the Navajo rug in another generation. I think we will not see the end of the Navajos at all, nor the Pueblos. I don't think that they have assimilated--have not been assimilated as much as homogenized by our culture. I think they will maintain their culture as they have maintained it in spite of the forty years of attempts on the part of the BIA to educate their children to become middle class WASPS. They are not. They're still living in pueblos.

- S: Well, I'm thinking too, of any tactical value in such instances that might again bring the mind back to the heritage, to the cultural geography, as well as to the physical geography.
- M: This has happened with black poets, with women poets, and American Indian poets, who are in a very favorable position in terms of getting books published, getting grants. They've awakened the publishing foundation establishments, so that it's really possible for a young Chicano, or Black, or Indian, or Women writers to have attention paid to them. I think this is great, because it was very hard before. As more of the Chicano and southwestern Indians are published, this creates a real feedback into the particular cultural milieu from which they come, whether it's one little pueblo, or perhaps maybe just a barrio in Albuquerque. This is good.
- S: Let me ask you another question concerned with the possible excesses of such a movement. In a poem for George Elliot " Women" there is an affectionate tribute to the writer and at the same time, a kind of compassionate warning, as I see it: "to give embodiment to words as well as souls is an excess. The Greeks understood that more meant pride and temptation and ruin. They wrote plays that we call tragedies." I'm curious to know, with that in mind if you see any real dangers in certain aspects of the Women's Liberation Movement.
- M: No, because I was using women there in a very figurative way, perhaps slightly there's a put-down. More seriously, I was trying to talk about people who do have a profound gift, analogous, in this case, to the gift of being able to bear a child. They then seek out after other kinds of gifts to which they are not so well suited. In this case, I used women as a metaphor for a larger class. Then, of course, it might be a slightly anti-feminist poem. I might have been feeling off on women that day.
- S: How about the movement itself?
- M: I think with all movements there are silly things going on; I'm sure I've done a number of silly things in my lifetime. I think one problem with movements is that people get more involved in the movement, than they get involved in what the movement is seeking to bring about. They are like universities that find themselves deeper and deeper and deeper in administration and in the running of the university. Somehow all that takes on more importance than the process of education, which is supposed to be going on in the university; it's a kind of Parkinson's Law operating. I think we saw this in the radical student movement of the '60's where people simply got into the movement, and that was the important thing, rather than what the movement was trying to do.
- S: Since you bring up the student unrest of the mid'60's, and since you're around and involved with the university today, how about student unrest? Are those demonstrations a thing of the past? Are we headed for another kind of neo-Eisenhower era?
- M: I think students are pretty sharp. They saw that there were better tactics to use. I think that in a particular situation where a student strike might be effective, there are student leaders at most universities who would, perhaps, try that. We went through an era in which nearly any kind

of complaint and most of them were justified complaints--were responded to by mass media; strikes, walk-outs, sit-ins, what have you. I think those days are probably gone for another generation or two. They were productive in part, for the ends that they sought, but they were also very expensive to the student. I think now, in most universities that have any knowledge, student participation is sought after by the administration and by the faculty. The old paternalist institutions are pretty much a thing of the past. There are probably a few still around, but they're a dying source. We are entering an era in which students seem, I would say more drawn inward. While they are still concerned with the world they live in, the society they live in, they are also very deeply concerned about their own personal roles that they play in society. So they spend more time thinking about themselves.

S: How about your own relationship to students and teaching? You're directing the Master of Fine Arts Program at Bowling Green; can you teach anyone to be a poet or a fiction writer? Do you attempt to...

M: Well, you can provide a student training in some basic techniques, and attempt to provide him with tools by which he can analyze his own writing and see if there are any typical faults. There may be a lot of atypical faults, which no rule covers, as well as maybe some atypical virtues to which critical schools are not quick to respond to. But you can teach him, you can give him those kind of tools; then most important you can provide him with an audience that is receptive, sympathetic, and critical. That is, you can provide him with serious readers; a workshop is essentially that. We're not teaching anybody how to write, so much as, we're responding to what the person has brought in that evening. We're concerned because we're writers too. We want to read that piece seriously, and then respond seriously to the writer and get a dialogue going. We'll say "I don't know what you were trying to do here, I kind of get confused." Then they'll say, "I was trying to do such and such." I'll say, "What if you..." and then offer an alternative. By getting that kind of feedback from his readers, he's receiving about the most an academic institution can provide in terms of making a writer out of him. You don't teach creative writing, but you help creative writing happen or you help writing. I don't like the word "creating" sometimes. You can't teach somebody to be a poet who doesn't have any sense of vocational calling to be a poet and that particular temperament and set talents. If he has that, you can teach him a lot about poetry, and you can respond to his poems so that he will get an idea whether what he's trying to do, the effect he is trying to elicit through his poems, are really the effects which are elicited.

S: So you're saying that you can ward him away from grievous errors that he comes in making, and in a more positive way you can provide a beneficial environment in which to grow. In another sense, there's not too much you can do about instilling creativity in the person.

M: No. There's some sort of games you can play to get people to break stereotype patterns of thinking and that may help them become a little bit more creative, but I think that the creative urge comes from somewhere else. I don't know where it comes from. I don't think it's public schools.

- S: How about the university itself? We're all faced with the reduction in staff and mainly with the reduction in student body numbers. Will the university itself survive as a place to provide that kind of beneficial environment for the liberal arts?
- M: There's no doubt that the university as an institution in our society is in a quandary right now. Particularly if one looks ahead, the quandary deepens. We grew too fast and now must grow too slowly, which will bring about a strange effect in 10 or 15 years. Right now we have too many teachers, too many Ph. D's. In 10 or 15 years, I don't think we'll have nearly enough. This is even based on the student population remaining rather stable, because what we're getting all over the country are more and more institutions where the percentage of tenured faculty members is rising. The turnover has lessened. There's no room for the young instructor and the young assistant professor. People are bright enough to see that--why should I spend four years getting a Ph. D. in a subject when I can tell very well that it's extremely difficult to get a job in that: so perhaps I'll go in another direction. We're going to have a funny period when suddenly all of us tenured people start retiring and find that there are no young men coming along. The answer doesn't seem to be anywhere around us. It's a pity that the universities were not more foresighted, but that is always the gift that hindsight bestows on us--is to make wishes like that.
- S: Let me ask you perhaps, one final question, revolving around the response to a frequent criticism, that the poet is harmed somehow by associating himself with the university. Do you have any feelings on that? Is it a damaging or potentially damaging place to be? Is there any other place he could be these days in America?
- M: From my own personal point of view I enjoy university life. When I finally got out of the Navy and came back to the university, I found it very exciting and I've enjoyed being around universities ever since--which is not to say that universities are a Utopia; it can be very dull at times. I like universities; I like being around people who read books; I like being around big collections of books; I like being around people who have laboratories; I like being around young people. I can't see that it would harm most poets. I think, in fact, a good many poets, even those who don't teach in universities, enjoy giving readings at universities because these are places where the mind is engaged and there's joy in that kind of activity and it just comes out. I suppose there are a few particular poets, who just don't feel comfortable around the university; I think there are a few universities that don't go out of their way at all to make poets feel comfortable there. I've been very lucky in the two universities in which I've taught because I felt as a poet I was an accepted member of the academic community. I was respected for my art as much as an engineer or biologist or Shakespearean scholar is respected for his art. I think that if a university offers that kind of respect to writers in their midst, the writer can be very happy.
- S: Assuming that things went from bad to worse and you could no longer be a poet in residence at a university, is there anything else that you could do, or that you would do?

- M: I sold vacuum cleaners one time. I'm particularly unsuited to life in the modern world. What I would do, I would imagine it would be to attempt to make a living as a feature writer. I can write. I've written many strange things over the years for money--college entrance exams, technical manuals, and other things like that--I probably would find some way of making a living in either writing or publishing or editing. I have a fair amount of experience as an editor. I would stay probably in that world. Aside from that, I have no other particular marketable skills that I would want to market. I never really cared for working in factories...I've done it a little bit and didn't like it. I do like libraries; I've worked in libraries.
- S: One thing comes to mind before we stop and that is the recent Supreme Court censorship decision. Do you think they will stand as long-term deterrents of any sort to future writing?
- M: They certainly might. I think it was a stupid decision. We've recently had in Ohio, one more time, some little school district that banned Winesberg, Ohio. Then just this past week, I looked at a clipping that a friend brought me from a Tucson newspaper. There was a student of mine, now a teacher in Drake, North Dakota, Bruce Severe. The school board there had burned three dozen copies of Kurt Vonegut's latest novel along with a treasury of modern short stories with Hemingway, Faulkner, and the like, because one girl had complained of profanity in the books. There are still people like that; there are still school boards like that. To the extent that this Supreme Court decision may increase the likelihood by which such acts would be sustained. I think again it was silly and very short-sighted decision. I don't know what's going to happen in North Dakota. I know the ACLU is active. I happened to talk to my wife on the telephone the next day and she said Bruce had been on the Today Show. Walter Cronkite had mentioned it, so that there was an immediate response from the media. But as Bruce was telling me last year, that school board wants to know the color of socks in the class. The thing is that I am opposed to censorship of any and all sorts; I see no use for it. I see no harm that has come to any society which has done away with any kind of censorship. I think if you want to have any restrictions on pornographic stores, you might have them not particularly display out on the sidewalk because a person shouldn't have to be confronted with things that are perhaps disturbing to him. But I think that if somebody gets his kicks from pornographic books, well that's the way he gets his kicks, and it's a totally regrettable and infantile thing, but some people are that way. There is amoral question lying in this area, and there are some truly obscene things in the world, things that people can do to one another. But I don't think that this latest decree is a proper exercise of a court or a legal system.
- S: Do you feel any changing direction in yourself now, in your work?
- M: Well, one thing I have noticed over the past eight years is I went through a period of say five years, 1965-1970, essentially developing one voice in my poetry that was fairly constant, and it's pretty much my natural voice. It's the voice of books like Maps, Fables and Transfigurations, and even of a book like Long extensively spoken by another character.

After 1970, I got very interested in trying to use other voices, so I have books like, The Diary of a Young Girl, which is spoken by a very spoofy little fourteen year old girl, perhaps, I don't know. But it's in a woman's voice, and it's coming really from me out of left field somewhere. Then I have a book called, The Old Beast, which will be coming out, I hope, this winter, and that's a very different voice. I've gotten interested in trying to develop different voices, then letting those grow so that I can get a whole book of poems. Working with maybe just a small book of poems, with a given voice, I don't know which way that's going to go, maybe I'll finish doing that. Right now I'm working on, Desert, that happens to be prose and it's back in my own voice of some sort.

S: You don't sense any of the wellsprings of creativity or the urge to write, drying up at all?

M: Oh no, I've come to know myself over the years. I go through periods within a year which I may not write very much for a few months. But I always know, for example, late December, January, and February are always very, very active months for me, for some reason, I don't know; maybe it's just my metabolism. I slack off when the spring comes, and then maybe pick up, depends on what I'm doing in the summer. Sometimes I can write a lot, and sometimes I'm too busy traveling and wandering around. I'll pick up toward the end of the summer month of August. Then just before school starts, I get the sense of impending doom; I know I won't have time to work, so I work like mad in late August-early September. So I have those two periods in the year that I know I'm going to be writing, always have. In the other times: if I write, great; if I don't, I'm not worried.

S: Are you concerned sometimes that what you want to say does not make the translation, that it does not come across?

M: I write poems that are sort of dense, but I'm not really satisfied with them; I think it's because I believe that they really don't have that luminous quality that I'm looking for so that the light shines out and somebody sees it. They may sit there in muffled glow. There are poems that I think are frankly failures or at least I wouldn't want to be reminded every day that I had written them. Then again, I think you're right about the reason because I feel the reader, that includes me at this point in time, isn't getting everything that is attempted in that poem. The poem simply couldn't contain it--it let something go.

S: Do you ever consciously write poems that you know will be more accessible--and do you ever consciously write poems that you know will be more difficult to unlock for the reader?

M: I guess a little bit, if that makes any sense. Sometimes I get engrossed in a poem, I kind of play with it, and put some surprises in it that I don't think very many people will notice. I will hope that it is not necessary to know these little things in order for it to work. At other times I try to be rather careful about thinking clear. I'd say more often I think to have some little hard parts in the poem that are harder than they appear to be, just for fun.

S: Would you characterize yourself when you're working, as a very disciplined hour-a-day or three-hour-a-day man, or are you more a quarterhorse?

M: I have a large correspondence. I love to write letters, so I sit at the typewriter, and I write everyday. That puts me in the right spot to write; I'm in front of the typewriter, it's turned on, and there's paper. I very often am writing a letter and I come across a phrase or an idea, some play of words, some flow of words that I'm attracted by and they stimulate me. I'll pull the letter out and start working on the poem or jot it over on one side. When I finish the letter, I get into the poem. I don't really sit down to write poems or anything.

S: Do your friends often accuse you of sending them manuscripts in progress?

M: No. These are often such little things.

S: But the poems seldom seem that way.

M: I hope so.

S: It's our pleasure.