

An Interview with

TURNER CASSITY

June 4, 1980

Interviewed by

John Jones

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JONES: This is John Jones with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. I am about to interview Mr. Turner Cassity. We are in the overcrowded meeting room of the Archives Building in Jackson, and today is Wednesday, June 4, 1980. Why don't we just start if you could give us a little of your early background, tell us when and where you were born.

CASSITY: I was born in January, 1929 at the Baptist Hospital here. My family moved to Forest, Mississippi when I was four. I went to elementary school there. We moved back to Jackson and I entered the ninth grade at Bailey High School. I graduated from high school here in 1947 and went to Millsaps here.

JONES: What did your father do?

CASSITY: My family on both sides were sawmill people for generations, and we still think that stumps are prettier than trees. I am not a nature poet.

JONES: Was your father from Mississippi?

CASSITY: From Louisiana, originally.

JONES: And your mother, I understand, was a violinist.

CASSITY: She was, and is, a violinist. She's a charter member of the Jackson Symphony. She was concert mistress for several years.

JONES: Is she still involved?

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CASSITY: She's still playing. Both my mother and grandmother were musicians in silent movie theatres. My grandmother was a pianist and my mother, as I said, is a violinist. With the coming of the sound film they claimed to be the first victims of technological unemployment. Al Jolson is a dirty word at our house.

JONES: Was your mother or father either one a strong influence on you as far as your sensibilities?

CASSITY: My father died when I was four. I grew up, so to say, in the orchestra pit. I think that that was a very strong influence. I am not a musician myself. I play only the phonograph. I was not forced to take violin lessons, fortunately. I was odd enough as it was. Nevertheless I think growing up among musicians was an influence because they all appreciated music as a universal language. That old cliché is true, at least to the extent that music is not a local language. From the first I think that my interests were turned outward to the great world. You cannot be among musicians and not have the sense of an international fraternity.

JONES: So your elders did influence you.

CASSITY: Not consciously. For example, my mother does not care at all for opera. As a pit musician she finds the accompaniments uninteresting, and I suppose I myself enjoy the word-setting rather than the music as music.

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JONES: You graduated at Millsaps. You went straight from high school, four years, to Millsaps?

CASSITY: Yes. I then went to Stanford for a year. I was then drafted. I thought certainly that it would be off to Korea and farewell cruel world. But, as a matter of fact, after basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina - that dump - I was sent to Puerto Rico for nineteen months and I spent my service lying on the beach under a palm tree. It was marvelous.

JONES: Was that the first time you had been out of the country?

CASSITY: No, I had been in Mexico, and after that in Cuba. Well before Castro, I might add.

JONES: Well, I was just trying to establish something because certainly your travels have been a big influence on your poetry. When you went to Stanford, is that where you took your Master's Degree?

CASSITY: Yes. I have a Master's in English from Stanford. I was a student of Yvor Winters. Musical influence may have been at work here too: the training given in the writers programs there was analogous to the strict technical training a musician would get at a good conservatory.

JONES: I was going to touch on that later on in the interview.

CASSITY: Conservatory technique is very useful. You may or may not want to use it in every poem, but if you need it there.

JONES: I've heard you say that the strictness--the strict meter and the rigid form--is necessary; that you have to have it

or you cannot begin.

CASSITY: People ask me why I write in meter and rhyme and I can give only one answer: without it nothing comes into my head.

JONES: Is poetry a structure in itself? Does it have to be structured according to formal rules? Is structure, the structure itself, part of the art?

CASSITY: You can write in any manner you please if you are not particular what the result sounds like. In the most successful poetry it seems to me that the structure is the art; just as in successful engineering. Not that I have any theoretical objection to free verse, although I myself could not possibly write it. Many free verse poems are interesting and beautiful. Many more are not, of course, and in any event the reason free verse is popular is that it is easier. That is, it is perceived as being easier. In actuality it is harder. It is much more difficult to write really good free verse than it is to write good metrical verse. The temptation to looseness is too strong. One can remain moral in a bordello, but it is likely to be a struggle.

JONES: In your mind free verse is a lazier approach?

CASSITY: Yes. The easiest way to let it all hang out.

JONES: Let's go back to the chronology of your life when you were at Puerto Rico in the army. In the 1950's?

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CASSITY: I was drafted in September, 1952 and I was separated from the Service in August of 1954. I then took my G. I. Bill and went to the School of Library Service at Columbia University, where I got a degree in 1965. I worked a couple of years at what was then the Jackson Public Library, where I had worked as a student assistant when I was at Millsaps. At the end of the 1950's I went to South Africa and worked for three years on a South African government contract for the Transvaal Provincial Library. That's a library system very much like those large regional libraries in North Carolina. It's a central facility with which local public libraries are affiliated.

JONES: How did you get something offered from South Africa?

CASSITY: No one ever believes my story. I was sitting at my desk at Jackson Public and this gentleman came in and said "Would you like to work in the Union of South Africa?" And I said "Yes." It had been that sort of day. He offered me a contract on the spot and I went.

JONES: Did you have any prior knowledge of the situation in South Africa or what your life there might be like?

CASSITY: I knew if one happened to be the right color one could live rather well there, which turned out to be true. I suspect that in Johannesburg, if you happen to be the right color, you can still live better for less money than anywhere else in the world.

JONES: And you lived in Johannesburg?

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CASSITY: I was in Pretoria for ten months and in Johannesburg for nineteen months.

JONES: When did you first feel the pangs of wanderlust? It's pretty obvious that you were willing to get up and go.

CASSITY: In high school I was very happy here. I had dozens of friends and a non-stop good time. I went to Central High. Central was then the only high school in the city-- pardon me; the only white high school in the city--and the biggest high school in the state. One had a sense of being very much at the center of things; as we should now say, of being where the action is. I did not feel that at Millsaps. One felt very out of things at Millsaps. It may be a commentary that any environment in the least intellectual will make you feel out of things in Mississippi. Or, more probably, I was ready to move on. Very soon I was pawing the ground to get to California, as I should think any young man in his right mind would be. As I should think any middle-aged man in his right mind would be. As soon as this interview is over I am leaving for Palo Alto for eight weeks. Do not misunderstand me. I have no quarrel with the education I received at Millsaps. When I arrived at Stanford there were no shocking gaps in my preparation. Still, if I had the choice to make again I'm not sure that is the choice I would make.

JONES: Millsaps?

CASSITY: Yes.

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JONES: Right. Me too. I felt the same.

CASSITY: I think I simply would have enjoyed a bigger school.

JONES: I certainly enjoyed Ole Miss better than Millsaps.

CASSITY: That's generally known to be a fun campus.

JONES: Did you come back from South Africa to Atlanta?

CASSITY: No. I came back from South Africa and worked another year at Jackson Public Library. I then...

JONES: In the 1960s?

CASSITY: Yes. The beginning of the 1960s. I then took off to spend six months in Europe, which I hated so much I abandoned it after four and came home without a job. There was a job open at Emory in Atlanta, which I interviewed for and accepted. I went with the thought that I would be there until something more exotic turned up. I'm now completing my eighteenth year there. I would certainly hate to leave. The University has been good to me. I have a very congenial life there.

JONES: Do you ever get to take off in the summers, or a month a year?

CASSITY: I have a month vacation, and other paid holidays.

JONES: Well, that's good.

CASSITY: I wish that when I was younger it had been possible for me to spend eighteen months or so in the fantasy world of business. I would have then had all of the occupational experiences. I would have had the civil service, the military, the academic. If I had just covered business I

JONES: would have covered all the possibilities. I suspect there are things that go on in business that I would not put up with in my office for fifteen minutes. Business appears to me to be the least business-like of all the entities.

JONES: When you were growing up, and from your experience at Millsaps, Mississippi was something you wanted to get away from? As an influence on your poetry.

CASSITY: Yes, although I can't say it was because I felt terribly uncomfortable with the then prevailing injustices, or whatever. I cannot give myself that much credit. I simply wanted a less sleepy environment.

JONES: Growing up here and majoring in English here, you must have been at least conscious of the Mississippi literary tradition, even if it didn't go as far as poetry.

CASSITY: Yes, I certainly assumed that it was possible to become a writer. Writers, for better or for worse, were blossoming all around one. I can remember when reviewers thought Speed Lamkin, Eugene Walter, and Calder Willingham were America's most promising novelists.

JONES: I heard you say in that interview you did with ETV that there are only two great novels about the South. One is War and Peace and what is the other?

CASSITY: Buddenbrooks. When I was in Europe on that trip which I otherwise disliked so much I went to Lübeck, Thomas Mann's home town. When I got there I knew exactly where I was:

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I was in Jackson. Jackson as a better climate and Lübeck has more interesting architecture but there are no other differences.

JONES: You mean they are one in their single-mindedness.

CASSITY: In being each a closed, closed world. I am speaking in the past tense. So far as I am able to judge, Jackson today is an extension of Oklahoma City.

JONES: You weren't influenced at all by Faulkner and what he said about the rise of the redneck in Mississippi?

CASSITY: To the extent that Jackson is a city, I am a city boy. I'm sorry, I have never found rural Mississippi or rural anywhere else the least bit interesting. The worldwide influx to the cities suggests that the rural themselves are in full agreement with me. I also have my reservations about Marse Will. I take a simplistic view of these things. I don't think you can have a great novelist who writes bad prose, and a great deal of that prose is flat out awful. You can have a great novelist who writes indifferent prose; after all, we presumably have to read Tolstoy in translation. Out and out bad prose I can't take. The prolixity of it! It is the determination of people who ordinarily have no one to converse with to make the telling of the tale take as long as possible. If you want to experience the phase 'captive audience' in its root meaning go to the courthouse square on a Saturday afternoon. I am speaking of Faulkner's novels. Some of the short stories I admire very much.

"Red Leaves" is a wonderful story--the one about the Indian tribe corrupted by slave owning. That's an extraordinary piece, and it is written in something much closer to textbook prose than those novels that go hundred of pages with no punctuation. I've often suspected he invented the tape recorder years before anyone else and simply mouthed the things into a microphone.

JONES: What about any of the other Mississippi writers? What do you think about--it may be premature to ask this--the work of such writers as Walker Percy or Ellen Douglas.

CASSITY: I find all that very discouraging. Whatever the South was or was not, it was eighty years ago. The latest census shows that less than five per cent of the American population now lives "on the land," as those people like to say. Whom are they writing for? There's nobody out there, Massa. The next--dare one hope, the last?--great Southern novel surely will be written about Detroit or Los Angeles or Dayton; Bakersfield, perhaps. Places full of White Southerners who have uprooted themselves and made another life. That's where the interesting South is these days. Bakersfield, for example, is Nashville West. It's a great center for the performance and recording of Country and Western music. Beyond doubt there's a Southern novel to be written there.

JONES: Don't you agree that at least in the South there's a consciousness of living closer to the heart?

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CASSITY: Heart of what?

JONES: Closer to an individual's own feelings, because of the family tradition here.

CASSITY: No, I don't think that for a moment. The interesting thing about the South, and the one that makes it useful for literary purposes, is true of a middle-class community anywhere. It is the sense of perpetuity, and you can find that in Cincinnati or Milwaukee as easily as you can in Jackson. The middle class is frequently accused of having no ideas, but the middle class has one great idea which makes up for all the others. It is continuity. When you cannot recognize your own life in the life of your grandparents or imagine it in the life of your children, the society is in real trouble. We may be in trouble now. I don't know.

JONES: Your work does reflect an interest in and consciousness of that peculiar Southern phenomenon Huey Long. I enjoyed your poem.

CASSITY: I had a great-uncle in the Long regime. I remember when the Watergate scandals broke all I could think was how very much more interesting Huey and his crooks were than Nixon and his. It is not easy to bring real inspiration to anything as dull as white collar crime, but Louisiana usually manages to.

JONES: When did you first become aware that you wanted to write poetry? When did you first have the poetic impulse, if there is one?

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CASSITY: I began by writing verse. I was an anything but introverted adolescent, into all sorts of publications and contests and performances, and I learned early-on to write verse. Later, when I began to think about saying more serious things, the medium was there. I've been writing since I was fifteen. If I haven't learned by now I don't think I will, so far as the versification goes.

JONES: What would you point to--a question everybody asks you--as the biggest influence in those early years? What made you write? Was it another writer?

CASSITY: For me the great breakthrough came with the realization I was not interested in writing about myself, which, believe me, sets me apart from most other poets, who do not write about anything except themselves. Once I realized that, it was painfully apparent that the great body of English verse consists of poems written in the first person about personal emotions. That is exactly the sort of poetry I am uninterested in writing. There are, need I say, great and beautiful poems written in that way, but it is only a way to write. It seems to me so incredibly narrow. It leaves so much out. How often did you ever read a poem about a bank? Yet think how large a part of our lives economics is. I have written poems about banks, and, though I say it, they are rather good poems. If you cannot make money interesting you had better give up. However, once you turn away from the first person lyric, you have

to look rather far for models. I found Wallace Stevens a very useful model, in that his poems are full of devices for keeping the poet out of the poem. The poet as narrator, that is. I try to cover maximum ground in minimum space. The poet as narrator occupies a great many lines and contributes nothing.

JONES: That's an interesting parallel. You are a full-time librarian. Wallace Stevens was an insurance salesman, wasn't he?

CASSITY: He was not an insurance salesman. He was vice-president of Hartford Accident and Indemnity. I believe bonds were his specialty.

JONES: Both of you, you and Wallace Stevens, represent full-time professions. In your case is it because you needed another profession in order to be a poet?

CASSITY: Of course, and not only for financial reason. Even when I was young it was obvious to me that the worst poets are those who devote all their time to it. What sort of life have they? What is their contact with the real world? They socialize only with other writers, most of whom certainly are not real, and have in consequence no subject matter. It is true that Wallace Stevens did not write about that insurance company, although, for all I know, some of those poems may be about the Hartford A&I cleverly disguised. I'm sure he could have said some hair raising things about it. Insofar as his style could not accommodate that sort of thing, it was defective.

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JONES: I think what we have to say about today's poets, or about the traditional notion of today's poets, is that they are longhairs playing with coeds on college campuses. I think it is probably true that the best thing you can do if you are a writer is to get the work that is farthest away from writing.

CASSITY: That is my feeling, in spite of the fact that there are poets who live rather well. Not on their sales, of course. It is on the teaching and the lecturing, which I am spared. I do not really like to give readings. I do not mind it the least bit, and I do it on occasion, but as far filling some emotional need that way, I don't.

JONES: What makes you sit down and write? Is it just a hobby for you, or something you can do well, so you do it?

CASSITY: Hobbies are for children and for mental defectives. Poetry is an art. It is what I do. I produce poems as a fruit tree produces fruit. Not every year will be vintage, and individual specimens may fail. Nevertheless the crop can be depended on. I pick a subject and see what I can do with it. Obviously some subjects will be more congenial than others, and will result in better poems. On the other hand one should not pick a subject because it is easy to do in the way one writes. That is the way that styles become inbred. I think that is what happened to Wallace Stevens. He wrote about the manner of thing he could write about. I usually try to write happy poems

when I am depressed and depressed poems when I am happy.

I hope I bring to the writing more detachment that way.

JONES: Is it like a recreation for you, or is it something you have to discipline yourself to do every day?

CASSITY: I make no effort to write every day. It's too difficult to crank down at five o'clock and crank back up. I try to reserve my weekends for writing. Fortunately, I never lack for subject matter. You could not explain to me what a writer's block is. If I encountered one I would sit and wait for it to pass. Writers have writer's blocks for one reason only: they have nothing to say.

JONES: Your poetry seems to have a strong sense of history, of this century's power struggles.

CASSITY: I spent the most exhilarating years of my life in the West Indies and South Africa, both of which encompass a great deal of history on a geographical scale that can be managed.

JONES: You said in an ETV interview that those things were not history when you were coming up.

CASSITY: I do not date all the way back to the Boer War, but, as I said, I predate Castro.

JONES: Why do you pick seemingly remote things for a writer in the South? Why "Manchuria 1931"?

CASSITY: I suppose I wrote that somewhat as I might write a science fiction poem. Something exotic and self-contained. What suggested it to me was the von Sternberg film, of which I am very fond. The Shanghai Express.

JONES: Have you been there?

CASSITY: No, and have no particular desire to go. I might have to make revisions. Ordinarily my research does not let me down. Not a librarian for nothing.

JONES: But in your foreign settings do you see something that reflects your condition or the condition of people around you? Why foreign settings at all?

CASSITY: You are not going to get me to say something about "the human condition." It is a phrase I do not allow to pass my lips. I shall say instead that we all of us find the exotic attractive. What else accounts for the success of William Faulkner? Being turgid as well as exotic, he appeals especially to Germans. If you think that in my youth I was a devoted fan of trashy exotica, you are right.

JONES: Is your art attempting to say something about the world in general, the world as you see it...

CASSITY: How can the general exist except through the particular? It may not exist at all.

JONES: Faulkner (again) said that the most an artist can hope to do is to reflect certain home truths; certain things that he knows personally, visually.

CASSITY: My poetry is full of home truths: avarice, vice, treachery, incompetence...Good things like that. As for the visual, I should hate to think that as a landscape artist I had to confine myself to Cherokee Heights. Purple azalea against red brick is not my favorite combination.

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JONES: What do you see as your function as an artist? What would you hope that the reader would appreciate in your work?

CASSITY: I would hope that the reader would come away with an informed notion of the subject. The poems exist to convey information. May I assume that you know more about Manchuria than you did? Or at least know more about movies about Manchuria.

JONES: I do indeed.

CASSITY: I should like to be a disappearing poet. I should hope that after reading my poems through, a reader would not have the least idea what sort of person I am, but would have derived very clear ideas on the places and people I have written about. People ask me if I would like to be famous. I say that I should like for the poems to be very famous, but that I as a person should hate to give up my privacy. I suppose that is asking to have it both ways.

JONES: Have you brought out anything since Steeplejacks in Babel?

CASSITY: Yes, Yellow for Peril, Black for Beautiful came out from Braziller in 1975, and I have a collection just out in Los Angeles called The Defense of the Sugar Islands. It's about being in the military in the West Indies. It is from Symposium Press, and was published as a luxury item. Symposium is a press devoted to fine printing. The number of people interested in fine printing is small, but is probably larger than the number interested in poetry.

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JONES: You have written about the Black and White situation in South Africa and the Caribbean. Did it ever occur to you to write about it in Jackson? I know you were here in those hard days of the 1950's and early 1960's. Sit-ins took place even at the Jackson Public Library.

CASSITY: Especially at the Jackson Public Library. A library presents a much more intellectual image than a lunch counter, and people who are perfectly willing to deny food on a basis of color may be uncomfortable at the thought of denying "access to knowledge." I was in fact working at JPL when the first sit-in took place.

JONES: Then why not write about it?

CASSITY: Like much else here, it was genteel and low key to the point of being a non-event. Jackson really lets itself go only for crimes of passion. Poverty and deprivation and the ghetto have their place, but for a truly squalid crime, pick a good North Jackson family every time. The Civils Rights ambience demands not von Sternberg but a thirties documentary style, and that has been done to death.

JONES: Have you ever used the people that you knew and know in Mississippi in your work.

CASSITY: Not without changing names to protect the innocent, if any, I would be the last to deny that the people you grow up with absolutely form your notions of what people are. There is no point in pretending I do not view things from

a viewpoint completely Mississippi. Nevertheless I see no reason to hang my characters over with cornpones like yellow roofing tiles.

JONES: Have you gotten any critical feedback?

CASSITY: Reviews have been more favorable than I have any real right to expect, although I would settle for a less favorable review if it gave a more accurate indication of what the poems are actually like. No one knows better than I do that those are difficult and complicated poems, but then poetry is a difficult and complicated art.

JONES: What about your responsibility as an artist? Do you want the poems to be edifying to the reader's character? To change their lives?

CASSITY: Only as all knowledge and vicarious experiences edify. I do not try to improve people. I was raised a Calvinist, and have the great advantage of never being surprised by the wickedness of the world. Do not allow them to put on my tombstone that I worked for a better world, because I didn't. There is not going to be a better world. Unless we are careful there is not going to be one this good.

JONES: It seems to me there has to be something more back there, something to give you the energy to write, other than just to give a small glimpse into certain locations around the world. Most of the reading public doesn't care what Manchuria in 1931 was like.

CASSITY: More provincial they. What you say is true, of course.

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It is one of many things that one simply has to live with. In the last analysis I regard my art as the most effective way of telling it like it is, as the phrase now goes, and I live with the knowledge that people who think they want it told like it is don't. It amused me in the 60's that the now generation was so uncomfortable with Brecht. That is telling it like it is. At the risk of vanity, I shall say I think of myself as a capitalist Brecht. As you know, the Master himself said there is not that much to choose. Among other things, he was a very great lyric poet.

JONES: Besides Brecht whom do you enjoy?

CASSITY: Writing in English? Thom Gunn is the best British poet in fifty years. The great loss to American poetry was the death of Louise Bogan. What a hoot to see the feminists taking her up. Better than to have her remain obscure, but I hardly think that her feminism is the point.

JONES: Back to Mississippi. This state is the home of lots of novelists, yet it is hard to remember if there are any poets from Mississippi, unless you count William Alexander Percy. Why is that?

CASSITY: I can give very cogent reasons. In the first place, the indigenous tradition is absolutely no help. If there are worse poems than Robert Burns' and Protestant hymns, I don't know them. I like the music of Protestant hymns; it's the text that's bad news. The other point is that the tradition of the garrulous, of the tall tale--which is grist in the mill of any novelist--is no help whatever

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in poetry. Poetry has to be more succinct than that. You can write very long novels out of the dread Southern urge to use eight words where one will do, and you could write very long poems, but they would be unreadable. Local idioms and local color, if you overdo them, make for instant unreadability, and in the long run make for unreadability even if you use them sparingly. I think I can say that in fifty years my poems will be no more obscure than a good deal of currently popular Southern prose. Just try to give some of it to a student at Pasadena High School and see what he makes of it. Pasadena is as highly specialized a place in its way as Jackson in its, but it speaks a beautifully standardized American English without identifiable regional characteristics. I hasten to say that even I will hate to see regional speech disappear, but I remind you that Babel is correctly regarded as a curse. Depending on your bias, you can say that sub-cultures are entitled to their own language, or that the best way to condemn people is out of their own mouths.

JONES: Isn't there a basic American affection for the old home, the folkways, and all that?

CASSITY: Yes, and it's why European literature is better than American. There is high art and there is folk art. They are two very different things.

JONES: Have you read Jim Whitehead's Local Men?

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CASSITY: I know Jim. I enjoyed his first book. I have not read Local Men yet. I did read a couple of the poems when they appeared in periodicals.

JONES: It seems he's using the old knee-slapping tales in a poetic form.

CASSITY: Yes, he needs it. In The Cossacks Tolstoy gave us Uncle Eroshka, but he had better sense than to devote the whole book to him.

JONES: Do you know your fellow Atlantan John Stone?

CASSITY: Sure.

JONES: Do you like his work?

CASSITY: Yes, I do. I think it means something very special to John himself. It's a way of ordering his experience. My observation is that people who do not respect one profession will not respect another. I have no use for people who come up to me and say, "I'm running a filling station but really I'm a poet." I suspect that what you have there is a not-very-well-run filling station and not-very-well-written poems. John is a very good doctor and a very good poet, and I don't think the relationship is any accident; professionalism is professionalism.

JONES: Do you have anything in the can now?

CASSITY: I hate to say it, but when I'm not working eight to five in the office my mind goes utterly blank. I am now going on leave for ten weeks, and I doubt that I will have a poetic thought. However, I have a great many poems written.

up that need to be revised and typed, so the time will not be wasted. I find that what I hurt for is clerical time. I have no difficulty in finding or making the time to write. On the other hand, typing, revising, and stuffing envelopes... That sort of thing I find depressing. Perhaps I'm too prolific.

JONES: Do you have a secretary?

CASSITY: Yes, and that's very helpful. I hate to think what my life would be without my job, and, for that matter, what my poetry would be without my job. I can't imagine a person not wanting to have another profession than writing, if the writing is poetry. I don't see how anyone can write even a very bad novel who cannot bring sustained blocks of time to it, five or six hours a day. That is going to make your economic life very difficult. I think always for a novelist there must be the feeling that, really, you should be able to make a living at it. I certainly never had that delusion about poetry. As I say, working in a library all my life I know exactly how little poetry is read. It is not possible to be self-deceived.

JONES: Do you gather all the details of your past around you when you write? I hate all these writer's questions, but do you have a routine?

CASSITY: No, I sit in a chair in front of the TV set. I am always amused at people who have to have this or that particular arrangement in order to write. If it's that difficult

for them, perhaps they're in the wrong art. I really can't say anything very illuminating about my writing simply because it does come so naturally. I've done it so long and so much, and I suppose to spontaneously -- though I'm sure to most readers those poems seem anything but spontaneous. I can assure them that when I'm writing I think in meter. It is at least that spontaneous. I'm always amused when the complaint is made that people do not speak in meter. They do! I sit in public places and listen for snatches of metric conversation. You hear them all the time. "The bus is fifteen minutes late today." That scans perfectly. If people did not speak in something very close to meter it would not be possible to write metric verse at all. The basic mechanical stress of the language is iambic. With the least tinkering, if you have the basic competence, you can turn ordinary conversation into meter that scans perfectly. If it is monotonous it is not the fault of the meter, it is the fault of the metrist.

JONES: That's true. This is interesting. You're the first poet I've talked with, and it's interesting to observe the terseness with which you talk. Talking with some of the writers it is interesting to see how their art form shows in their speech. Sometimes it's hard to...

CASSITY: Shut them up.

JONES: Yes, or get them to talk to the point.

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CASSITY: They have difficult lives, and not much opportunity to express themselves. They just love to beat their gums.

JONES: Well, I do know you've got to get on your way to the Promised Land.

CASSITY: Yes. As I said, thirty years ago I was a young man pawing the ground to get to California, and now I'm a fifty-one-year-old man pawing the ground to get to California. And when I get there I will be right at home. The last time I was on Santa Monica Boulevard I noticed that the filling stations, the branch post offices, the street front businesses are all owned by Southerners, white and black.

JONES: Really?

CASSITY: Certainly.

JONES: This is in Palo Alto?

CASSITY: In Los Angeles.

JONES: Yes.

CASSITY: I assume if you had Southerners in Palo Alto they would be agrarians.

JONES: Yes.

CASSITY: When people ask if I consider myself a Southern writer I always say I was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi; I don't have to go through a charade of being Southern. I am the genuine article. If other people do not consider me a Southern writer that's their problem, not mine. I must speak very cruelly. I am afraid that what we have in

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Southern writing now and have had for at least thirty years is the playing out of a purely literary tradition. It's exactly the situation that you had when people were writing mystery stories about English house parties thirty years after there had ceased to be English house parties. It is a purely literary convention that has been prolonged beyond its normal life span. Very soon it will collapse of its own weight. The sort of life it is centered on is, for better or worse, gone.

JONES: But so many Mississippi writers today are turning away from that.

CASSITY: Good!

JONES: I can't think of one that still writes about that.

CASSITY: Encourage them.

JONES: I really can't think of two more different writers than Walker Percy, who comes from a traditional Greenville, Mississippi aristocratic background, and Mr. Faulkner. Percy deals with alienation and despair in a modern culture. I think with him and others it is a new day.

CASSITY: My feeling about alienation is, how do you get it? I could probably use more. To the extent that it is artistic detachment I think is very good.

JONES: Yes.

CASSITY: I must not be sanctimonious about Mississippi and the South. I have money here. The political corruption is bottomless, but the standard of financial probity is rather high.

JONES: I'm trying to think of a new novel I've read over the last five years that really upholds that old tradition.

CASSITY: I'll stick with what I said. If these people had any imagination they would go to Dayton and Detroit and Bakersfield and look around and see what those Southerners are doing. I must tell you that in thirty years of visiting Los Angeles I have never met an Okie who wanted to go back to Oklahoma. For good or for ill we live in an urban time. It's foolish to turn your back on it.

JONES: What are you going to do in Palo Alto?

CASSITY: Type and revise. I must go. I enjoyed talking to you.

JONES: I thank you for coming, Mr. Cassity. I hope we'll have a chance to talk again.

CASSITY: Good.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by John Jones)

(Final Copy typed by Kathleen Smith)

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