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Schakel, Peter J Oral History Interview: History of the Hope College English Department

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CM: You came in September of 1969. What was initial impression of the department? What made you decide to come to Hope?

PS: I guess I came to Hope because of the church connection. I went to Central College in Iowa. I was an undergraduate there, which is another of the Reformed Church schools. I always sort of liked Hope, but couldn't go here. So once I decided to go into college teaching, I had sort of in the back of my mind that it might be nice to try teaching at Hope. When I finished grad school I contacted them, and when there was an opening I decided to come. So I came more for the nature of the school than just for the department. But my impression of the department had always been very good. Hope had the reputation and the tradition of a very strong department, both from the teachers who had been here for a long time, and from the students they would send on to graduate school, and graduate schools accepted. So my impression was that it was a strong department and a strong school. But, I came not on the strength of the reputation of the department or the school.

CM: What do you think it was about the department that gave them its reputation?

PS: Two things, part within the college the strength of the teaching. There were many teachers who were very strong, very popular. That whole group of De Graaf, Prins, and ten Hoor and a few other people who have left since then were very good teachers. They had oodles of students partly because some of the departments that now have huge numbers of majors weren't around then or weren't very strong. Psych in particular in the '60s was not strong at all, it wasn't that big of a department. The
big department was English, largely on the strength of the teaching. I think its recognition came internally from the teachers that were teaching the courses, externally from the graduate students, the students who went on to Chicago, New York, or wherever, and did very well. That showed the quality of the teaching and the strength of the department.

CM: Do you think that has changed over the years since you've been here?

PS: I guess in degrees. I think my impression is that internally we are still regarded as a strong teaching department. We still get large numbers of students. They seem to be happy with the quality. We've had a lot of people who were exceptionally good teachers. We have been having fewer students going to grad school than were going to grad school in the '60s, therefore, I think the reputation hasn't been able to ride as much on that. I think that's been replaced by the scholarly activity that started picking up in the '70s. I think what outside reputation that we gained as a department has come now through publication and scholarship rather than graduate students. That may be shifting back as more people seem to be going to grad school again. So that may get back.

CM: Why do you think so many fewer people have chosen to go to graduate school?

PS: Largely because of the job market. Through the '70s, the prospects were not very good for getting college teaching jobs if you went to grad school. I think people, therefore, swung away from English majors, period. The number of majors went down. The numbers for grad school went down, and they shifted over to more practical things like business. It was just the difficulty, the uncertainty that there
would be jobs if you went through all of that. It's still not all that certain, but it looks
more promising now than it did a decade ago. It seems that more people are willing
to say it doesn't matter all that much, I'm going to grad school anyway, and then
worry about getting a job.

CM: What do you tell you students who are thinking about going to graduate school?

PS: It depends on which student it is, of course, and it depends on who they are. Right
now, schools want to hire women and minorities. They are desperately looking for
them. It seems to be very difficult to get a job if you are a white male. When I talk
to white males who want to go on to grad school, I say it will probably be difficult to
get a job. It's risky just because...they are going to have to be really outstanding and
lucky to be able to get a job when people really need to hire women and minorities.
So they better be very good, do very well and hope things will work out. The sharp,
really bright, young women seem to have a very good prospect of getting a teaching
job. So I encourage them if that is what they want to do. Give it a try. It is still not
certainty just because the job market is still as unsteady and tight, but they have a
better chance.

CM: How many students have been going on to graduate school every year since 1980?

PS: You mean just graduate school in English, not law school and that sort of thing? I
was talking graduate school in English. Maybe an average of two a year. Two to
three.

CM: And what percentage of the department majors are going into education, elementary or
secondary? Half?
PS: I don't think it's that high anymore. My guess would be more like a third. More of them go into writing now than used to, and there is always a whole bunch of them who don't seem to have a clear professional direction in line when they leave. I think it's more then half going into education. It used to be higher but then when the grade school/high school markets got tight those numbers fell back. They are probably increasing now, but still I doubt that it's more than that.

CM: Does having a significant portion of English majors going into elementary/secondary education affect the teaching in the department? Is it changed?

PS: I guess we have always had those numbers, that kind of percentage, so it probably hasn't changed. It probably makes a difference. Our philosophy within the English department has been as long, at least as I can remember, and I think probably longer than that, that we have a wide diversity of majors and accommodate a lot of different kind of people. From people who want to go to grad school in English to elementary ed teachers, although a lot of those are language arts, but they are still taking English department courses--so I guess that still has its effect, to the people who can't make it or can't find their way in other majors and sort of settle on English as less undesirable than a lot of other things. It probably has a significant effect on the way we handle things. The courses can't be as rigorous and demanding, these courses for majors, if we've got to accommodate the elementary ed people and the general English majors who just want to have a major so they can graduate as well as the ones going to grad school. So the history department, by contrast, has a fairly narrow range of majors. They have very deliberately tried to weed out the people who would be general
majors, so elementary ed people aren't as likely to go in that direction. So the people they have left is a much smaller group, but they're very sharp, they're very good. Their courses are more rigorous than our courses I think because they've got a more selective group, a group that is more dedicated to the discipline. They don't take a history major if they aren't serious about it, really wanting to be a history major. So I think that has made a difference in the way the English department has handled itself. In one sense, externally, it probably hurts us. It may hurt us in terms of the best majors, the ones that do end up going to grad school who don't get quite as much rigor. We are trying to work around that and to find ways to solve that problem, but I think it is probably not going to be solved completely. In a sense it is also a deliberate decision that we have made not to cut out these other people. So it has been there, it's been that tradition for years.

CM: What sort of things are you doing to accommodate your graduate school students?

PS: We started two years ago with an honors program that would get good students to do more reading. People in the honors program come to colloquiums where the faculty are discussing their own work, to have students see what faculty do professionally as a part of our discipline when we are not doing it for students. We require honor students to take a seminar within the discipline (not just the senior seminar), to show them the kind of thing that they will be exposed to in graduate school. If the whole program gets off the ground, we might work out some sort of discussion sections or some courses just for the honor students, might try to find some places where there is a little more rigor and more high powered approach to things than they get in the classes.
CM: How many students are participating, last time I checked there were maybe five?

PS: Sounds about right. I think one person has completed it and there's a few others at various stages. And it's not surprising. We never expected to have large numbers and I suspect what numbers we have will grow slowly as people hear more about it and see other people doing it. I think once it's publicized, people will be more aware of what's going on.

CM: Do you have any recollections of John Hollenbach as the chair of the department?

PS: Some. I was fairly new when he was chairman and didn't pay a whole lot of attention to what chairpeople did. My recollection is John seemed to be a very good chairman and a very good administrator. Organized, knew what he was up to, knew what the department ought to be doing. He was involved in a lot of hiring decisions and the shaping of the department in that sense. It seemed that he had that under very good command and did a very nice job at that. He had a sense of where he thought we ought to be going, and I think worked on that through the hirings, through the way he encouraged people, and so on. A wonderful gentleman, just a marvelous way with people. He had traveled so much in Europe and the Middle East that he was able to deal with all sorts of people in gracious ways all the time. I thought that he provided a very nice setting, very nice background. I don't remember all that clearly, I don't remember decisions, I don't remember department meetings that well, partly because at that point in my career I just wasn't paying attention to the administrative kinds of things at all. He was chair through some fairly difficult times because that was the late '60s and early '70s, especially the late '60s where there was unrest. People
wanted to be innovative, wanted to do different kinds of things, there was a tendency for some teachers and for students to be very dissatisfied with the way things were, and he had to work through that--walk tight ropes, make accommodations, give people a chance to do things that they wanted to do without letting things fall apart. I think he handled all that quite successfully.

CM: I wonder about the vision of the department...did he have one, what did you think it was?

PS: I think that he wanted it to move in the direction that we have gone. To have more sense of scholarship, to pay more attention to scholarship than we had been able to do before that. Previously, the teaching loads, the nature of the department, the nature of its direction, had not been conducive to publishing. We just didn't have time to do it. It had not been an expectation before within the English department. You were hired to teach students, to teach lots of students. Several were hired without Ph.Ds, without doctorates. They worked on their doctorates in the summers. That was the expectation, to complete a doctorate. Many of them were doctors of education rather than Ph.Ds. The department at that point didn't have the background, the kind of research-oriented background and expectations and directions that the chemistry department had already at that point, for example. I think Hollenbach had already in the '60s, or was at least getting, a vision that we could move in this other direction. In hiring people like Charles Huttar and Francis Fike, I think he was seeing the potential there for people who would be publishing in our field as well as teaching. I think we have moved in that direction. To keep up the teaching, but also more
scholarship. I think that he had that vision already then and was trying to get us to go in that direction, although a number of the people he hired also were dedicated teachers and some were good teachers. So I think he was keeping that balanced.

CM: Is it hard to keep your balance, in your own teaching and scholarship?

PS: Yes, it is very hard. It's hard to simply have time to do both. Within the humanities and the social sciences, we have normally 12 hour teaching loads. Four courses a semester. That is at least the college norm for the English department, though it is modified a little bit through the teaching of freshman comp. But without freshman comp, we are at 12 hours and four courses. That's the same teaching load that we had in the humanities and social sciences twenty to twenty-five years ago, when there was very little expectation of doing publication. But now there is a very clear expectation that you will be doing scholarship publication and so on. So that the expectations of us have increased considerably over the past twenty years, over the 20 years that I have been here, without any additional time, without reduction in the teaching load. The one concession, the one help, is that very few people now teach summer school. When I came, many people taught courses in summers. There was a pretty large summer school program and a lot of people taught in it. It was partly because salaries were low enough that one simply needed supplementary income. Now salaries have gotten better. There are summer grants to help people do research, so hardly anybody teaches summer school now. So we do have at least more opportunity to use those three, three and a half months, for research and writing, although some of that time is supposed to also go towards working on courses. But to
your question, I sense a lot of tension between the need to do scholarship and the need to keep up one's teaching in that it just takes more time than we have available to do a rigorous scholarly program. It is very easy to let the scholarship slide. I guess there is no way one can accomplish here what one would accomplish at a university, but it's easy just to do less each year, and keep up the teaching. Or to let the teaching slide, but that is more difficult. It's easy to put off working on an article, but it is hard to walk into a classroom not prepared and embarrass yourself in front of people that you will see every week.

CM: Does scholarship have an impact on your teaching?

PS: I think it does. It works both ways. A lot of times, things that I publish come out of things that I have been teaching. So there is a direct relation there. In other cases, things that I work on in order to publish get me reading things, considering things that I wasn't using in my classes, and then I will draw them into classes. It keeps me more on top of where things are going than I would be if I didn't pay attention. If I didn't have the pressure of having to stay on top of things for the people outside the college who may read what I'm writing. People out there will know if I am behind on scholarly reading or not behind, and that is some motivation and pressure.

CM: What are the classes that you have taught over the years at Hope?

PS: Freshmen comp, both semesters of world literature, the nature of poetry, the 18th century course which is now Dryden to Austen, Shakespeare, I have done seminars in Swift and in C. S. Lewis. That would be about all of them. Oh, I taught the English novel course just before it was deleted from the curriculum. I tend not to want to
teach lots of courses. To work up new courses takes a great deal of energy and time.

There is one of those tensions between teaching and research. I'd rather keep teaching
the same courses and spend the time on writing, instead of taking the time away from
writing to work up new courses. So I don't have a long list of classes I have taught.

CM: How have you seen the changes in English 113 over the years? You are in charge of
that program now, is that right? How has it evolved since you came?

PS: When I came, there was a double-level offering, English 13 and 15. English 13 was
pretty much the standard composition course that was being taught everywhere using a
rhetoric and a reader and fairly much a common syllabus. Everybody was doing
pretty much the same thing. English 15 was the alternative, sort of an innovative
alternative for students who wanted to try something different. It was an integrative,
multi-discipline course with discussion groups and a "common experience" session
once a week and discussions of it, with papers growing out of those discussions. It
was one of those late '60s kinds of things where people wanted to do something
innovative and experimental. I taught in that side of it; I don't think I ever taught
English 13. Early in the '70s, after a few years of that double-level approach, we
went back to one course but eliminated the common syllabus. We went to the kind of
thing that we have now where the courses have in common only the kinds of papers
and number of papers. The approaches to writing and the textbooks and so on would
all be individualized. People would do things that were of interest to them and the
hope was that students would choose amongst those various topics things that were of
interest to them. That way students and teachers would be able to deal with subject
matter that was meaningful. Students would write about things that they really cared about. Teachers would be more excited about the course because they cared about the content, which is a problem when you do those courses with an anthology and a common syllabus. I can't remember back to '69, you're probably on top of this more than I am, as to whether we still had a two-semester course in '69 and in '70.

CM: I thought that 15 was two semesters.

PS: That was a two-semester.

CM: And 13 was just one.

PS: I think that's right. There had been a switch during the '60s from a two-semester course to one. But that was before I got here, so I never did the two-semester course. So I think it has stayed essentially the same since then. Very little difference, just tinkering with numbers and papers and how to handle research papers and things like that. It seems to me to have been an approach that has worked fairly well in that students seem pretty happy with the course most of the time, depending usually on what instructor they get. Some of them are very happy and like the course an awful lot, while some end up with somebody that they don't like at all. But I think on the whole, it works out pretty well. From the faculty point of view, I think it is sort of a career saver in a way. We've had to keep teaching freshmen comp on through the years, unlike university pros who, at least by the time they are associate professors, never would teach a freshmen comp course again. If you have to keep teaching the old rhetoric kind of approach, using an anthology and common syllabus, for 20 or 30 years, I think you just go crazy. The thing that has let us keep doing freshmen comp
and retain some enthusiasm about it, is that we have been able to do the individualized courses, doing something that is of interest to us, having students who will be interested to some extent in what we're doing. I think it has been a very happy solution to a problem both from the student point of view and the faculty point of view.

CM: What do you think about the role of literature in a composition course?

PS: I had a professor who argued that literature is the only way to learn to write. You should read literature. Don't let them talk you into this composition theory. And I guess I go along with some of that. I think the reading is there to provide models, and I think it is hard to teach writing to kids who don't read or can't read well. There is such a close connection between the two of them. You can walk into a classroom and get one piece of writing from students and you know which ones have parents who were reading to them at ages two, and three, and four, and started reading themselves at four or five. It's from reading that one learns to write. By the time you get to college, the days in which that can really be influenced, I think, are past. I guess my theory would still be that by reading good writing, something can rub off. Especially if you can get students to look at the writing style and the handling of things fairly closely and deliberately. Something rubs off and can affect and help their writing. In our courses, there is a real tension between the amount of attention we can give to the things the students read and to their writing. There is always the temptation to want to give lots of attention to the subject matter, the content, and not as much attention to the writing and style, which isn't as interesting.
to work with. That is a tension. We keep encouraging each other to give attention to
the writing, and that is supposed to be the focal point of the course.

CM: What about your own scholarly interests? I know Jonathan Swift is one and C. S.
Lewis is another.

PS: I worked on Swift in graduate school. That was the subject of my dissertation. When
I came to Hope, I worked on a series of articles that sort of spun off from my
dissertation. I did articles because there were a lot of people working on Swift's
poetry, and I figured they were closer to having a book done then I was and there
wasn't much use for me to aim at that. But none of those books came out, and so by
the late '70s, I guess by the time I went on my first sabbatical, I had decided that I
would try to get beyond essays. I decided to draw some of the essays that I had
worked on together and fill it out with other materials and do a book on Swift's
poetry. Most of that last work was done during the sabbatical in 1976, and the book
was published in '78 from the University of Wisconsin Press. I still think of 18th-
century studies as my primary area of work, and still do book reviews and articles on
Swift and on other writers in that area. Several essays are just out or coming out in
that area. Around the mid-70's I started teaching C. S. Lewis in a freshmen comp
course. From that, out of things I was doing in the classroom, I found things that I
liked to write about and present to others. In a sense, it is another form of teaching,
teaching a wider span of people. Before I started writing on Lewis, I organized
several seminars on Lewis for the Modern Language Association's convention. That
lead to a collection of essays on Lewis, that came out before the Swift book in 1977.
Then I started writing on Lewis myself. Much of the work I have done since then has been on Lewis. Although I still like to regard Lewis as an avocation, the less more serious works I like goes into 18th century.

CM: Is there a philosophical connection between the two for you, or are they pretty well separate?

PS: Actually there is not that much philosophical connection between the two I think. Although they are both Irish, both put an emphasis on reason, both have a strong emphasis on a moral emphasis in literature, and even a religious emphasis to some extent, although Swift is very indirect. There is some similarity of mindset and so on. The essay I wrote earlier this summer is on Lewis as a satirist, and he clearly was influenced by Swift in some of his writings. So there may well be more links and more attraction even in my own mind than I am conscious of. But I didn't set out with that in mind. I started teaching Lewis just because I wanted something that students would get interested in, more than the subject I was using before. So I wasn't really conscious of connections between them. And some of the things that Lewis likes most Swift wouldn't care about at all. The emphasis on myth and romanticism and fantasy, although Gulliver's Travels is a fantasy too. Swift, had he known Lewis's writings, would probably not be keen on them.

CM: What about the Münster Symposia? You've been there twice?

PS: Twice, yes. The first one was in 1984. There is a German scholar, actually it is a pair of scholars, Hermann Real and Heinz Vienken, who were working on Swift and 18th century studies, but especially Swift in Germany. They became acquainted with
and close friends with Irvin Ehrenpreis, who was one of the leading Swift scholars in the United States, someone I had met in 1973, and someone who had been very helpful to me and stayed close to me, and has been very helpful and influential over the years, writing me letters of recommendation, and things like that. Hermann and Heinz decided to hold a symposium on Swift, it may even have been Ehrenpreis’s suggestion, and to bring together a lot of Swift scholars from around the world to Münster. I guess partly for their own benefit, and partly for the benefit of their students, and other Swift scholars in Germany. So they sent out invitations to a variety of people, and invited me I think on the basis of my book on Swift’s poetry and on Ehrenpreis’s suggestion because he liked my book better than the other two or three books on Swift’s poetry that had also come out. So I was invited there in ’84 and went. It’s was a three-day conference with a lot of papers, one right after the other, and times in the evenings for people to get together and talk and so on. It did bring together a very impressive group of scholars. They decided to do a second one after five years and are tentatively planning a third one five years from now. Ehrenpreis has died, died a couple of years ago, so he wasn’t there. They are trying now to develop a center of Swift studies in Münster, with a large Swift library, which is called the Ehrenpreis Center.

CM: It seems unusual to have it in Germany. Is there some sort of connection besides these professor’s interest in Swift?

PS: Not really. It appears that most of the German universities have 18th-century scholars within their English departments. It must be that a great many of them have interests
in Swift, maybe there is a particular appeal there of Swift more than some of the other figures. Or maybe there are just more 18th-century scholars there than I am aware of and other authors get covered just as well. There seems to be a good deal of interest in Swift in Germany, but the connection really is just the two of them and their particular interest in Swift, and their drive to collect materials on Swift, and to build up their university’s library collection on Swiftian materials, and probably their own reputations in the process as they become known as the organizers of the symposiums.

CM: Is anyone in Ireland doing similar things with Swift?

PS: Ireland puts on Swift things periodically, so in terms of a symposium, no, I don't think that bothers them at all. I don't know of a Swift collection that is comparable, but there isn't a Swift collection like that anywhere else, maybe because it is in Germany and you don't have the sort of general library that would be available in Ireland, or in England, or in the US. There are a number of research libraries in each of those places as well as in Australia where one could work very well. You expect it there because it is in the English language. In Dublin, for example, you could go to two or three different libraries and work very productively on Swift. It is simply Swift as part of their general collection. In Germany they don't have a similar general collection in English literature; therefore, collecting Swift in that particular way meets their needs I guess. I doubt that anyone else would want to do exactly the same thing that they did, so it probably doesn't bother the Irish or virtually anyone else.

Although the Münster people may get ahold of a few items that other people would like to have, but usually they are available.
CM: What about your research on the epigram that you did several years ago? That had to be interesting.

PS: I started working that in 1979-80 when I had a year-long seminar at the University of Virginia under Professor Ralph Cohen. We had assigned readings and we worked through things that he wanted us to work on, but we also had individual projects to work on. I went there looking for a new area to work on because I felt at that point I had done what I wanted to do with Swift and wanted to move on. Part of what Cohen was interested in was genre and the way genres interact with each other and affect each other; for example the way letters get incorporated within a novel. The letter has an individual form, but then that will get absorbed into the novel and you will have novelists writing letters, and then even have novels that are completely made of letters, epistolary novels. His interest is in the way that kind of thing happens. I guess that got me interested in looking at the way the poetry of Swift that I had been looking at, and Swift's contemporaries worked in similar ways. What kind of interactions of types and genres was there? The most basic of those forms it seemed to me was the epigram that virtually everybody at the time wrote, and then became removed from individual, just separate individual poems that people tossed off in odd moments to be witty began getting absorbed into the structure of larger poems. So I worked on that for that year, '79-'80. I think at that point I had in mind writing history of the epigram during the restoration of the 18th century. There were histories in the epigram up to 1640, but no one had done anything with it after 1640. My original intent was to write a fairly straight history of the epigram. I worked in that
direction for awhile and was advised that nobody would want to read the straight history of the epigram if I ever wrote it. So I turned off in some different directions from that to look at the way poems appear to be shaped and fashioned. I guess I still sort of have in the back of my mind doing a work that would bring out the history of the epigram, but I think it has to be done in a different way then just straight history. What people enjoy reading about is seeing the way poems are put together and if you look at them different ways you understand them better and you understand how poets work on account of the way things get put together and that sort of thing. What I am interested in now is to keep working at that kind of thing, and then I guess would sort of like to be able to slip history or development or whatever in along the way as I am talking about that. Do a history, but not as just a straight history, chronological type of stuff. The epigram type work, at least spinning off from that, is still what I am most involved in, and I guess want to try to do more with in the next few years.

CM: What about your only two trips to the Aston Magna Academy? Has that been two or three?

PS: No, just one.

CM: I must have had it written down wrong.

PS: I spent one summer at a different thing, an NEH seminar on 18th-century philosophy in 1981. But the Aston Magna Academy I only went to once. That was two years ago at Rutgers University, summer of '87. The Aston Magna Academy is an interdisciplinary symposium in which they try to integrate music which is where they start from. Aston Magma is a music organization first of all. The people associated
with it came up with the idea of starting with music, but then bringing the other arts and other disciplines to bear on their understanding of music. Every other year they do a symposium either on a musician or a musical period, and then look at all the other things that were going on at the same time in connection with the music or as it comes to bear on the music. Two years ago they did one on the Restoration period in England, from 1660 to about 1700. Studying the musicians of the times, especially Purcell and his contemporaries, and they also brought into the symposium experts on the architecture of the time, the art of the time, dance, theater, history, politics. They were trying to build a whole context in which the arts, especially music, developed. They gather a faculty of experts and then bring in Fellows who can learn from them but also participate in discussion. I think there were about 40 Fellows. About half of them in music, and half of them from other disciplines. I saw an advertisement for the thing and it struck an interest because I had long had an interest in trying to incorporate other forms of art and to connect them with literature; and I had done some of that sort of thing already in my classes. It struck me as something that would be interesting to pursue. I applied for it and got a grant that paid my tuition and room and board for being there. It was exhilarating; a very interesting, very stimulating environment and way of handling things, an interesting group of people. I had never associated with musicians in the way that I was able to there. I got a little bit of understanding what musicians are like.

CM: Has that enhanced your 18th-century class?

PS: I think it has. When I came back, I incorporated a lot more music into it. I haven't
gotten done yet some of the things that I wanted to do with art and architecture when I got back. It may take going back to England and taking more slides to be fully ready to do it. But some of it has been included. Mostly I think I do more with music, and I think better things with music than I was before. I think it was helpful.

CM: Is putting things in context part of your interest in New Historicism?

PS: Probably not. I think that connects more with my interest in old historicism. Traditional study of a historical approach to literature was to put literature into context. I would regard myself primarily as a historical critic, especially within 18th-century studies. The 18th century almost demands more of that than some other literature. So much of 18th-century literature is topical. The satire is the satire of things that were going on at the time. It is very hard to teach those satires if people aren't aware of the names of historical figures at least, and to some extent of historical movements that are going on. Who writers are attacking and why and how things developed. To do an 18th-century course fairly completely, that is, to teach all the important figures and so on, you almost need some context to teach them in. With Shakespeare you can ignore the times and just teach the plays if you want to. With lyric poetry you can just look at the poems and not care who wrote them or what the person did, just look at them and say this is a piece of art and study it closer. It is much harder to do that with the 18th century. I think I have always been a historical critic, trying to place things in context to give a sense of what it was like to be alive at that time. What was going on at the time, what it is like to be alive, what was life like? What things were going on in the arts and that sort of thing? New historicism
is contextual in a different way. It tries to give you an inside into economic and political forces that were at work maybe at the time, but more particularly, are at work within the literature. How does an author manipulate readers for example? What are power forces within literary works that the author may not even be aware of as he or she writes? How would a upper-class person, Swift for example, write in ways that would enhance his own social class and help keep under restraints people from other social classes? I, myself, have not done much with new historicism. I organized a seminar on it, but that was largely because of my own interest in it. Wanting to learn about it, not because I had anything to contribute to it myself. Even since then, I haven't done much with what came out of that.

CM: Do you think there is much division among the department into critical factions?
PS: Within our department? I guess some. I don't know if maybe factions is too strong a word, but I am not sure that it is. The department as a whole is historically oriented. If there is a dominant approach, that is it. That is reflected in the curriculum itself. Most of the courses are set up historically, and probably most of us are comfortable with that. There are few people who are not comfortable with the historical approach and they may therefore feel uneasy or at times frustrated with that historical approach. To that extent there may be some tension or factions among us. The only person who has a critical theory going that is essentially different from that would be Cox, who is a distinctly new historicist. His brand of new historicism, which is kind of a modified version, is still close enough to historical that there has been tension with it. There is much less division in our department than there is in most departments around the
country right now, where there is a very strong sense of tensions within different
groups between traditional approaches, historical approaches, and various kinds of
new theories, feminists, deconstruction, new historicism. There is a lot of tension
between people working to advance their own positions and try to enhance them.
They are working for turf, trying to get new appointments in their area in order to
build it up at the expense of other areas. I think there is a good deal of tension and a
good deal of antagonism at most places. We don't have anything close to that I think.
Where there is tension, it is just the question of am I doing what other people expect
me to do, am I being as historical as other people, as I ought to be? And, if I am not,
is that a problem? That sort of thing is quite different from the kind of tensions and
factions that exist in other places. And maybe because we have lived together so long
already as a department we're able to live with those and get along. Also, we don't
have any really strong, theoretical argumentations. That's probably because we
haven't been doing much hiring. It also might be the nature of the department, if we
were hiring, to look for people who have a strong theoretical background. I am sure
if we hired someone, we would need to look in the direction of somebody who has a
theoretical orientation, but also look for someone who we can live with, who can state
the case but not start wars.

CM: What can you tell me about August Seminars? Were they really begun in the English
department?

PS: Yeah. I am quite sure I'm accurate that Nancy Taylor started them, that they were
her own idea, that she did virtually all the work the first few years, and that after that
they spun off. They definitely started within the English department. Early on, she
tried to offer one other course besides English in them each year. I don't know if that
was the original idea, but they were predominantly English at any rate. Her idea was
to provide a format mostly for high school teachers who needed to pick up a credit or
two, who didn't want to spend their whole summer in summer school, who didn't
want to start going to school in June right after they finished their classes. So her
idea was early August would be when high school teachers were starting to think
about school again and having to get geared up, it would be one week intensive kind
of thing. Go to class all morning with a nice long break in the middle where she
would bring in wonderful food for people and everybody would mingle together for
half an hour or so, then go back and complete the three to three and a half hours of
classes. Later I think she felt that she couldn't keep doing it; then they started looking
for other people to organize it. I think now it has moved outside the English
department and anybody who wants to teach a course can do it. Yes, it definitely
started within the English department. For many years it was just an English
department program, and for many years a very successful program. People really
liked the courses, and it got on to our campus a lot of high school teachers who
otherwise didn't know Hope all that well. It got them interacting either with our own
teachers or sometimes with teachers brought in from the outside, and that is awfully
good public relations to get in with high school teachers because high school teachers
mention to students that this is a good college and that sort of thing. It was a very
good program, very valuable when she started it.
CM: What about for you as a teacher— to teach a class on George Orwell or C. S. Lewis? Or anyone. Just a subject that you were interested in but don’t regularly get to teach.

PS: That is essentially what it would be. You had a chance to do something. They call them August seminars, so they would be very focused subject instead of something more broad. It did give you a chance to do something different. I did the one on the Chronicles of Narnia; this was just the time I was working on what would become my book on Narnia. So it was a very good format to be able to work things through, to try out things, to talk to students and get feedback and that sort of thing. The Orwell one was more a luck thing, and I think that one was Nancy’s idea. She came to me and said she wanted a course on Orwell because it was the right year to do Orwell, in 1984, and I was interested in it.

CM: Have you seen the attitudes of students changing since you’ve been in the department? Their attitudes towards literature...?

PS: I think so. It’s hard to pin something like that down. It seems to me that Hope students now-a-days are a little less disciplined and a little less work-ethic oriented then they were 20 years ago. And my sense is that they are not as good a writers as they were then. It’s hard to be really sure on that kind of thing because you always look back to the past and see things as better in the old days. And it may just be my doing some of that. I think that the statistics bear out that Hope’s clientele has changed over this 20 years. Hope, 20 years ago, appealed more to middle-class students, often first-generation college students, or maybe second-generation, often either from the Reformed Church or with backgrounds in the Reformed Church. If
their parents were no longer in the Reformed Church, then they come out of the Reformed Church or at least their parents did. Largely people that had to sacrifice to be able to afford Hope College for their students or their children. Today, I think Hope increasingly has priced itself out of that market and we've moved up a notch to a bit more upper-middle class clientele. People who can more easily afford Hope College. Ones who are choosing between Hope College and some other small liberal arts college. Maybe Hope is more of a bargain, or a safer place to send students, or whatever. With that has come some slight sense of a change, that students are less serious, a bit less of the middle-class work ethic that their parents had. The sense that you come to Hope and work really hard, and in many cases work hard in order to prepare for a life of service to people--ministers, teachers, or social workers, or something like that. Now more of the students are ones who are coming to get an education, and more of them to go into a profession. They haven't had to work as hard. They don't see their parents sacrificing to get them here, therefore, they take it casually. They are more laid back, they don't see themselves as having to sacrifice. That's my impression. It's a very subjective thing except where the figures seem to bear out. Look at the income levels of the students. That's on paper. The interpretation of that is subjective. I get the feeling that students are a little more, well, everybody now-a-days is more demanding and critical and that sort of thing than 20 years ago, I suppose. Part of it may just be the change in society, whether students everywhere have changed because people everywhere, at least Americans, have changed over those years. My impression, even so, is that Hope students work
hard, on the whole. Hope students work harder, care more, are much easier to get along with, than students at most institutions.

CM: How do you see the English department fitting into Hope College as a whole? What is its future?

PS: So long as a liberal education is the aim of the college, as it continues to be professed, it seems to me that English is close to the center of what the college is about. For me, at the heart of the liberal education are the humanities. Philosophy is certainly crucial. That is a very important thing for students to get. And then with that and history, literature come very close behind. They are very important parts of a liberal education. It seems to me you can't have a really high quality liberal education without really strong departments in those three areas. (phone interruption). It seems to me that history, philosophy, and English have to be strong if you have a quality liberal arts college. Almost all of the liberal arts colleges that are really well known have strong departments. I see us fitting in principally in that direction. If Hope wants to continue the direction that it is going, we're important. I guess we have, over the past decade or so, built up some reputation off-campus, nationally and internationally, in scholarly ways that at this point give us some opportunity to help build the college's national reputation, its scholarly reputation. That reputation is in a way different from the ones that students hear about or whatever. But it's important too. I guess if we fit in that way, then we can be of service to help building up that reputation. I guess there is another sense that we fit in also, in that we are one of the largest service departments in the college. In teaching both a writing course and a
World Literature course to almost all students, or at least a large proportion of students. In one way it's an disadvantage to have such a large service component. It makes it hard to handle within the department, but so long as the college wants to have those service courses done, and so long as they want writing courses to be within the English department, then we become large. But I guess even if you split off writing into a separate department, there would still be connections with the English department. I guess within that service dimension too we fill a very important roll academically to the college and to other departments.

CM: What about the students who want to be involved in scholarship? The English majors who...

PS: It seems to me a tough sort of thing. I'd love to have ways that involve students in research more like the way the sciences and social sciences can do. We've made efforts at different times, and different individuals have made efforts to increase that kind of involvement, but it is really difficult because the nature of research in the humanities, especially within English and literature generally, is different from the nature of research in the sciences especially, but even perhaps in history or something. The research that one does in literature is usually the result of long years of reading an accumulation of things and of drawing conclusions from that, fitting patterns together and so on. The typical pattern has been, it has changed a little bit now, that the prime years for a literature scholar are later on in the career. Late '40s, '50s, and even '60s and '70s in some cases. As the person matures, and has read more, and learned more, the more experience with literature that one has to draw on, the better
the quality of scholarship. In a sense it is the contrary pattern in sciences. In the
sciences, as soon as you are given an accurate base, the basics, the essentials and so
forth, you are going to be plunged immediately into active research and the knowledge
grows out from that core. The typical pattern in sciences has been that the prime
years in research are in one's 20s and 30s, when someone is fresh out of grad school.
Such a person is right then on top of the field and knows everything that there is to
know about chemistry or physics at that point and immediately starts making an
impact on the field. Then as one's career goes on and gets further away from grad
school, a different pattern is there. They lose touch with the cutting edge of the field,
and by the time scientists get into their 40s there is historically a pattern of them
becoming administrators and that sort of thing because they are getting moved away
from the cutting edge. That lets them do different kinds of research with students
than we can do. They can plunge their students in and students can learn while
they're doing it. They can give students meaningful kinds of jobs to do as a part of a
whole research project. And research in the sciences is usually a joint project, rather
than one individual working alone. Research in literature tends to be a lonely kind of
activity. Very few people work well with others in terms of working with literature.
It's a matter of having to read texts oneself. You can't really give a text to a student
and say "go off and read it and tell me what I need to know about it." You don't
know what you need to know about the text; you have to read it yourself and pick out
the details. So, to a great extent the only things that a student can do for you on a
research project is hack work, which isn't really research, and, therefore, doesn't
count. It doesn't help, it doesn't turn them on. You can have them take certain kinds of notes, look up articles in the library, and sort of thing, but that's not really research. The research, what we are really doing, is the reading, the thinking about it, finding the details we want, coalescing them into a pattern, and seeing relationships between things. That's the real research. So the only real research for the student is to be involved with that. But that can't really happen until the student has read as much as the professor, and of course the student can't be at that level and, therefore, can't be making that same progress. In a way, it seems to me almost the only pattern that can work is that the student comes up with his or her own research project. But that is not the same interactive kind of thing. To have somebody help you with a research project is very, very difficult because that is not the nature of our research. Our scholarship is of a different nature. It is very frustrating. I would love to see it, to be able to work with students, to have a pattern like the sciences where the students were really doing the kinds of things that we are doing and there is some sort of interaction going on, or at least where we are giving them really fine, first hand training of what they do later. It can't be the same kind of thing that the sciences are doing. There would almost need to be an arrangement where a student has a project of his or her own, and does it under the guidance of a faculty person, or has someone oversee it and give suggestions. And I guess we do have some of those. Stapert is doing that now. Is he on a project? He is working with a couple of other people.

CM: Last year especially.

PS: But isn't that his own project more than...he's working with Barry Bandstra?
CM: Right, he designed a computer program for teaching Biblical Lit classes. I think he's done now.

PS: Okay. This summer he is doing something. I have the impression that he had his own ideas of what he wanted to be doing and was doing them, and they overlap at different points with other people's. That's great. And maybe that's about the only way it can happen, when that kind of overlapping happens. I think students have to have an interest, something they want to work on, and then let us help them. I find it very difficult to shape ways that a student can help me do the kinds of things that I want to do. It is simply that we are looking for different things, it doesn't overlap at the right ways. It would interesting from your point of view if you see ways around that. That is sort of a wall that I always come up against whenever I try to solve that problem. Do you see ways that one can get around that?

CM: No, not really. I've seen the same problem, that you don't see joint papers and the humanities journals that have multiple authors.

PS: That's right. As you do in sciences. That's common, almost always multiple authors.

CM: And for the professors that I know and have worked with, they can have one person do this research project more or less by themselves and finish it, graduate, publish the paper five years later. That person's name is on it because they needed that data for this project. But that person wasn't involved the whole way through as you would have to be on a humanities paper. From my point of view, anything would be valuable. Anything is better than nothing in terms of getting some research.

PS: That might be worth our working at that, give it more thought. Of just looking for
ways, even if they could do a particular part of a project, and do a thorough deep
study of something like this that fits into a larger hole. We probably ought to work
one.

CM: I don't think that the emphasis on historicism would be conducive to that sort of thing.
Maybe they're not researching literature, maybe they are researching historical
context, and maybe it doesn't even need to be something that the professor can use. If
they are just gathering facts and seeing how this piece of literature is reflected in this
political context. I know that Dr. Jacobson is interested in that and I hope with his
support for the humanities there will be more money for it. I'm sure that's another
problem.

PS: I think right now, because of his interest, if we can come up with the ideas, he would
be very ready to back them, at least for now, because he is so interested. I think part
of it is that he sees the model in the sciences and he says the humanities should do that
too. But I don't think he has an idea, I don't think he knows either how to do it. I
think he wants us to come up with a marvelous...

CM: ...people sitting down together and saying "well what are we going to do." I think he
is the first non-scientist in 30 years.

PS: But the concept isn't new. Fifteen years ago or so, Chuck Huttar did a summer
research project with two or three students, but I think that it didn't go all that well,
and nobody tried it again.

CM: Maybe he knows what the problems were and we could try to avoid them.

PS: That could be. But I think part of it is what we've just been talking about--the
difficulty of finding meaningful things for students to do. One could easily do the kinds of things that Zan [Ceeley] and Mary Taylor are doing for Workman, for *Studies in Medievalism*. Some of it is meaningful, good preparation. But a large proportion of it is xerosing, typing, things like that. That's really not what we really want. You don't want to type a paper for someone and say it's a research project. It has to be the real thing. And that's what the sciences have been able to accomplish so beautifully, that students are involved in real research projects. Not just lab exercises, but the real thing. That is what I want too. But it has to be something that is real, not just scut work or practice work. But traditionally, that's the way the humanities have been. There is a long apprenticeship period in which you have to learn the skills, and then build up the reading and knowledge base that you need in order to do something that is new and significant. Along the way it takes a lot of writing of papers and a dissertation. All which in a sense are apprentice work. They are practice books and practice articles to learn the skills to do the real work. Of course in the sciences it is a different procedure. We don't need to practice how to write science articles. There is not much to those. The whole work is in the practical lab work itself, and then drawing conclusions and seeing relations, which is often the kind of thing that people talk out, I think, rather than the humanities scholar who is sitting there thinking and reflecting and never knowing the insights. Well, talking about it to other people, but to be profitable, it has to be people who have done a lot of the same reading. Or at least some of the things. To talk to somebody who is very knowledgeable can lead you to things that you haven't thought of looking at before,
books you haven't read and that sort of thing. But it does take two people who have
read and thought of the same works, and done a lot of apprenticeship. And to some
extent, you can get the same thing for undergraduates. I suppose the typical
undergraduates haven't read enough. Even a well read undergraduate will often have
read the standard items, the anthology pieces, the things everybody reads. Most
research comes out of the non-anthologies, a lot of unusual kinds of readings. And
there is the difference. There is room for that system to work better right now, if you
get into fairly narrow portions of the field like into independent studies or something
where there is not a huge body of primary recent materials to work with--you can get
a hold of those. And where there are lots of authors that haven't been looked at in the
past. If you could get a student informed on the recent things that he or she would
need to know, and then say go back and read some of these people and let's talk about
them, I think some very interesting things could happen with something like that. If
you go to the more traditional areas and try to do the same kind of things with
Shakespeare or maybe Swift, the volume of material is so overwhelming that you need
a Ph.D. program to get on top of the material and be at the point where that kind of
talking can occur. It is an interesting question. Keep it in mind. You give it thought
and see if you can suggest things to us on what we might be doing for people and how
we do it. A little suggestion might trigger a lot of ideas from other people on what
might work. And none of us are coming up with that. Maybe because we are so
accustomed to thinking of it not working, we are not able to see past the problems,
where you might be able to see past something that we can't see past. Keep it in
CM: I just wanted to ask you one more thing about Clarence DeGraaf. Do you have any recollections of him?

PS: I didn’t know Clarence well. He was around when I came. He was here for several years after I came to Hope, but I didn’t get to know him well. Partly because of the differences in our ages, and partly because he was at the end of his career and sort of slowing down, moving out of things. My impression of him, my sense of him is a wonderful character, wonderful human being. Real depth in terms of understanding. A marvelous gentleman and apparently a very, very good teacher who really influenced a lot of students in a very positive way. I guess in a sense he was the person who founded the English department, at least as it is now. Before his time it was, I’m not real clear, maybe your history has clarified for you what was, but my impression is that it wouldn’t have been professional in the sense that we think of it. There were people working in English, but some of them moving in and out of the departments into different fields. He was the one who pulled the department together and organized it. That’s my impression.