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Interview with Paul Hoover, 1998

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Paul Hoover

OK. It is June the fourth, 1998. And this is the interview with Paul Hoover, Poet in Residence at Columbia College.

If you could tell us when you came to Columbia and what the circumstances were around your arrival.

OK. I was a young poet in my twenties, active in the Chicago poetry scene. At that time there were poets like Ted Berrigan, Bill Knott, Paul Carroll, Gwendolyn Brooks, Hakeem Magudi, who were all prominent in the city and the young folks followed them, paid attention to them. Bill Knott was Poet in Residence at Columbia College and when he left to go to Emerson College in Boston, which has a similar kind of curriculum, arts and communications, Bill recommended me to John Schultz, who was then head of the Writing/English Department. And I was hired in 1974 to teach four classes a semester, two lecture classes and two poetry workshops. And I was called Poet in Residence, which I am still called today, even though I was a part-time employee.

Four classes?

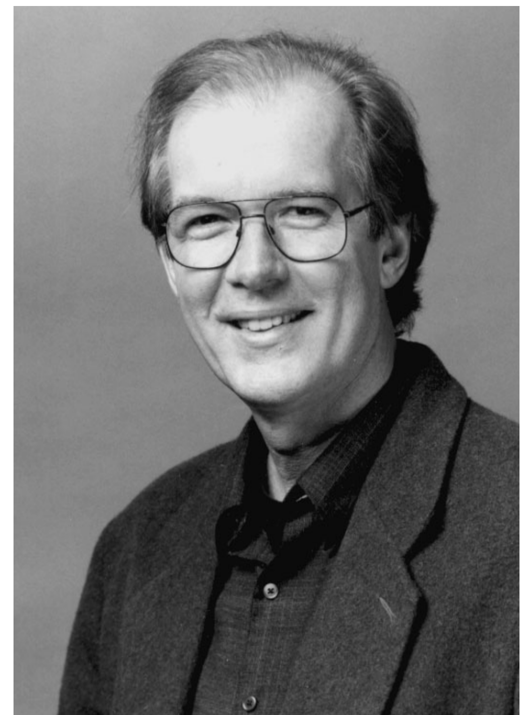
Four classes a semester, part-time, no health insurance, right?

Some things haven't changed but now the class load has changed *(laughs)*.

The College, of course my situation has changed a lot since then. In 1977, after dramatic growth, twenty-five percent growth per semester at the College, you know, really striking growth. So striking there were articles about it, I think, in Chronicle of Higher Education. Articles about, while so many liberal arts colleges are declining enrollment, here's this little undiscovered gem in Chicago which is experiencing dramatic growth. And that was because of our location, because of our progressive program, and also the founder, first President, who was a wonderful man, very charismatic. And when I got to know him, later on in the '80s, really know him, I understood how it was possible for him to make that remarkable thing happen that happened here. It was a mom and pop college owned and operated basically by Mike and his wife. And when you would come in to the College at that time—well, let me back up.

The College was in one building located at the corner of Ohio and Lake Shore Drive. It was rented from a board member for one dollar a year. The conditions—we had good classrooms, the door closed, the windows let through light, but there were holes in the wall and in the floor. It had been a warehouse building previously to converting to classrooms. There was some, there was a lot of talk among younger people about Columbia College. There was a buzz on it, about Columbia, which I had heard about even before I came to Columbia. You know, it's the place to go. There were two places that were kind of hip at that time and they were Roosevelt University, but they sort of had a decline, and Columbia College. You know, if you weren't going to go to a traditional college, also maybe Shimer, but then, you know, that's different.

So I came here in 1974, I taught four classes. I lectured for two hours in one subject, had a ten-minute break, and then lectured for two hours in another subject, and that would be on a Tuesday afternoon. And the first three weeks of the semester my throat would be a wreck because I had to get my muscles in shape again after the summer break. And then, you know, workshop on Wednesday and workshop on Thursday. And I still teach on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, I'm still Poet in Residence, only in 1977 I became a full-time faculty member, as I was starting to say, because of the dramatic growth of the College. Around that time they hired a new dean who was Lya Rosenblum. And she set about, she was told to set about, to make us more institutionally structured. She introduced things like the gen ed requirements of forty-eight hours. There was originally opposition to that I don't wish to bring up, but there was trouble, big trouble from it. But the fun of Columbia College was it was a kind of pioneering, alterna-



tive institution where you could learn a craft or a trade in communications from people who practiced it in the real world. And that's still a large part of Columbia. However, with an enrollment of almost nine thousand, you have to have different kinds of structures and staff to accommodate it. And you can't be as much of a freewheeling type. Nevertheless, Columbia is still, as it was in the early '70s, a hip alternative where you can also get a good general education outside of your professional major and minor. So somebody could come here for, say, Film and they could also take classes in English literature, a lot of film students do that, because they need a background in literature, especially if they're gonna write scripts or direct. They need the intellectual grounding frame around. One of the classes I teach is Literature on Film. I needed a break from poetry, you know? Especially since I now teach five classes a semester. I packed them all under one semester, and so I'm teaching a lot. So Literature on Film is a break for me from poetry. And these novels, short stories and plays that are made into movies. Like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, or what would be another example...

Do you watch all the versions?

I have. Well, there's so many versions of Frankenstein it's hopeless. Some of them are very funny. You know, like Frankenstein Unchained, you know, type things, kind of sleaze movies from the '80s. But I'll usually show with Frankenstein a couple of full versions, including Bride of Frankenstein, which is actually closer to the real story than the original Frankenstein movie. Because, you know, the novel has a bride for Frankenstein which gets destroyed by its maker in a rage of disgust, that he's creating an anti-Eden thing. So, you know, we talk about all these things and then I show clips from other Frankenstein movies. You know, here's ten minutes from this, ten minutes from that, they get a taste of a certain scene as it's rendered by a different filmmaker.

Do you find that, could you do that elsewhere, or is that something that is fairly specific to the atmosphere or the mission of Columbia?

Well, the interdisciplinary push at Columbia, which the College is conscious of, tries to create a network, an interdisciplinary network. This is a course that is specifically interdisciplinary; film students usually are half the enrollment. So I try to engage them on the cinematic side. And they come up with things. They bring in the kind of research that we're not even practicing generally in literature. And we bring things from literature, the formal study, that they don't do in the Film Department. So I personally have to look at the text, as a, you know, to study the patterns of the text. And then to study the film as a text and to look for the same kinds of patterns to reveal to them, even though sometimes a film major may not realize—you get into the feeling that this is a natural event, that everything is a scripted event. We forget how planned every frame is. You know, why is that object in part of the frame, why is it significant, you know? I'll freeze frame with my remote control in the middle of the movie. Why is that there? Why in The Postman Always Rings Twice, why is Nick the husband standing between Cora and Frank in the kitchen in a specific scene, in a symbolic way?

So the image and you're asking them to do what you might do with words...

Right. Slow down and do a close viewing. And so, you know, I enjoy that class a lot and of course there are people who take poetry classes because they want to write songs, and so there are fiction writers who come over because they want to bring a kind of intensity to their writing. To understand how to do compact movements. So Columbia College is a great place to teach because of that writing.

Could you speak to, maybe in your own words for yourself, but also for the larger institution, what you feel the mission of the College is and has that been consistent since you came in the '70s, or has it shifted?

There's an interesting question. Has the mission of the College changed? I've heard discussions in the College, particularly among the older chairs, that they fear that the mission might be changing. What is our mission? Well, we offer an education to the non-traditional college student, to begin with. But not exclusively the non-traditional student, increasingly so. It's not that the non-traditional student is being pushed out by any means, they're here in abundance. But we just have a different range now. We're a college of nine thousand. We also have the cheapest tuition of liberal arts colleges in Illinois. So we don't present ourselves as a traditional elite institution based on research, we're a teaching institution of liberal views. And, you know, Mike Alexandroff was a bodyguard to Paul Robeson. Yeah, this is true, well, this is what I was told, I hope it's true. When he was a young man, on the left, a student of the left, Paul Robeson was making a national tour and one of

his bodyguards was Mike Alexandroff, who would sit with a bat hidden in case he had to vow to protect this valuable person who was under a lot of threat. And so just that story alone perhaps will give you some idea of Mike's position toward education. You had to have really experienced Mike talking, sitting at the boardroom, putting his elbows up on the table, letting his eyes cast off into the corner, thinking about the past, think about what the mission was. He told me specifically, when I asked him in such a setting, I'd go, "We're an arts college." He'd say, "No, no. We are not exclusively an arts college." He'd say, "The arts, colleges that position themselves specifically as arts colleges are one of the most failing, none of them is failing areas, but that's not what we seek to offer. We're a liberal arts college that offers majors in arts and communications. It's different."

So to give you some history of it, when Mike brought in Lya, he was seeking to set, to change, to add to the mission, not to change it. But there was some fear when Lya came in, among the established chairs, they said, "Now we're going to become just the same kind of college as the college next door." I think that's why we've succeeded where Roosevelt—nothing against Roosevelt—but Roosevelt's enrollments have stayed static and ours have grown because we didn't seek to become a regular college. We are fully accredited, we offer all the history courses you need, also psychology, English, and so on. And we even have students who are considering themselves English majors and going on for Ph.D.s in English, you know? I had a student, for example, who was in my Poetry Workshops who took a degree from University of Chicago in Medieval Studies; which is not an easy degree, right? From Poetry Workshop to Medieval Studies. I had a poet named Inka ala Shark Charday when he was Terry Davis, who is the city's leading slam champion of the early '80s, he was my student. And undefeated, retired undefeated, six years of victories, and she went off to graduate school to get a Ph.D. in linguistics. She was a young, black poet. So it's hard to type the Columbia student. It's much more complicated than people imagine. You know, they think because we're an urban institution, that we're in the South Loop, that we must have a certain profile. Well, we have that profile and we have this profile and we have that profile, it's a real mosaic. And all these mosaics interpenetrate, bad metaphor but... So where was I? I was talking about the mission of the College. So to liberally educate, liberal education, to liberally educate the student, take that in the broadest sense. Take that in the political sense, right? Take it in the academic sense, to open up worlds to the students. We have sometimes students who come here from, you might say, disadvantaged academic backgrounds. You know, they got out of a high school where they didn't read their Shakespeare yet, right? They haven't read certain novels yet; they don't know certain terms yet, possibly. I talk about symbolism, might be new to them. And we might get a student such as I had in a Modern British and American Poetry class who as a freshman was writing papers at the graduate level. These were A papers at the graduate level.

How do you deal with that in the classroom when you have such a wide range of ability or preparation? Because I think that a lot of people that speak to that tell me that they had some of the most ill-prepared students, yet compared to other institutions they taught at, they also had some of the most, maybe the most natural or best prepared, that they've had.

Columbia College works in a way, a program at a time, a day at a time. It, despite the growth of its institutional basis, its structure, you can still go into Bert Gall's office, who is the Provost, and you have a plan, if you have a good plan and he sees its ability, you can set up a program in a year, you know, you can get it up and running and going. It's much, you know, quicker on its feet in that way. It's entrepreneurial. If there's a need for this program, let's do it. You know, Phil Klukoff, who is now head of Extended Education, he used to be the English Department chairman. And he perceived a need for interpreter training, it's called interpreter training and that is signing for the deaf, the term isn't deaf anymore, I'm sorry. But you understand.

I don't know what the new term is.

Right.

Hearing impaired

Hearing impaired, yes. Thank you. OK, and there was a need for that. He started the program in the English Department and it grew so sensationally that within three years it was its own department. You know, it outgrew the room we had for it, had to have its own head. So, and that's constantly happening at the College. It's not that other colleges don't start new programs. And I think there's kind of an entrepreneurial excitement that goes on here that's made possible by the College's history, by the College's goals. So how do we

accommodate the students, the wide range of students? When I first started here I don't believe we had very much of a program in, what's it called, helping students who are disadvantaged in English. The Tutoring Center. There was no Tutoring Center, you know, it was all fairly informal, you could get extra work by signing up for a class in the English Department maybe, right, and reading and writing skills. Now we have a vast Tutoring Center at the College on the first floor of this building at 33 East Congress. They put money where it needed to go because they realized that there were a lot of students who need to be brought up to speed. And Mark Withrow and the other people in the English Department and people who take freshman English do screenings now, quite different from the way it used to be, to find out who does have a problem and to immediately get them help, sign them up for tutoring, even require tutoring, requesting tutoring perhaps, right? Because we realize that they're likely to fail if we don't.

Has that been, is that one of the shifts that you're talking about? That the non-traditional students in the early days or in the mid-'70s when you were first here was someone who quite possible was prepared for college but wasn't prepared or didn't fit in at a traditional college and came here, and now we have non-traditional students that could end up here in part because they're ill-prepared or because of the open admission or because the size, those numbers have increased?

Because of open admissions, of course, we don't screen out students who we know to be ill prepared. We try to deal with it when we bring them in. We operate out of the condition of hope. You know, that if we make the proper contact with the student that they can be brought up to the level of expression that they need to survive and learn at the highest level. I saw a student, one of my finest poetry students of the '70s—well, I won't name her, her first name was Chris. She was a black student, she was from a really horrific background, like she had been shot through the jaw by her husband, she was raising three kids by herself, started her own business to do so, you know, and was studying writing and was in my Poetry classes, and had tremendous problems with standard English. And one of my best poets, she overcame a lot.

So if it hadn't been for Columbia...

She would have been lost. She would have never had the chance to get up, to linger, until she matured and developed, you know. So we do give kids that chance and also we do have, it is possible to flunk out of Columbia College. We do have a standard. We try to help the student meet it, but if they can't meet it then we do have academic practices. So you'll have a classroom where you have someone from the North Shore who went to New Trier where everybody knows that they have a high quality high school education, next to someone from an inner-city school that might not have brought the education quite home, as much of it. Or someone who was goofing around so much when they were a kid, because they weren't mature enough, that they didn't take advantage of the education they were offered. And from different backgrounds, social classes, ethnic groups, so the people from a variety of backgrounds that are seated next to each other in class undergoing the same instruction, and you have to be very adept as an instructor, you know. So you design your exercise for that day, or your activity, so it's broad enough to cover different possibilities and to bring people together. And you must not expect that they all hit the same note. That's the first thing, right? First of all, it's a poetry class, there are different kinds of poetry, different kinds of expression. There's more written and there's more oral, right? And really people influence each other in class towards other possibilities that are opened up to it. So it's a blend, and of course you bring your own pressures to bear, presence to bear. Another influence is, they're affecting each other, you're affecting them. So it's generally not a problem. I notice in my classes that if I lose them, I lose them the first week. And I let them know what the class is going to be and I usually lose only one person. Somebody who gets too scared, they think, "Oh no, this is over my head." So I let them know we're really going to move forward now, we're going to have fun. And I give them things to do the first week where they can immediately know each other's work. So I can know their work and they can hear each other's work, and a lot of fear passes all the way around.

It's interesting because I was just speaking with someone in the Dance Department and she summed up the mission, her personal mission, and that she felt it with Columbia as helping students find their voice. And this...

I would say that's true and finding the voice is an expression that comes right out of poetry. You know, that's where the ultimate seems out of poetry but I see my

goal as making my students better, by the time they finish the advanced class sequence, that their publisher will, that they're good enough to make me jealous *(laughs)*. What I should say is, "I wish I had written that." Because I basically try to bring them up to my level and my level is the publishable level.

So you have high expectations, standards...

I have high expectations. I believe that's the only fair thing. If you try to sell them short of that then you're really not offering, you know, the promise, right? What's the goal? The goal is to be one of the poets, to be a really good poet.

That kind of turns academics upside-down because so often the distance between the teacher and the student and that, "You're not going to get close to me."

Oh yeah, "You'll never be like me."

That's a threat, yeah, it's very threatening.

That's disastrous. It has to be more of a shared activity. You know, there are times when I do the exercises myself. I don't do it to be cute or show how engaging I am or anything. I've got to say, we're doing a collaborative writing exercise and then we're one short, there are thirteen in the classroom and we need fourteen. So I pair off with a student and we work together. Yeah, my students go off to really good graduate programs. I have somebody now at Brown. Brown accepts four poets a year in their program and they all get free rides. And she's, you know, a typical Columbia student who really caught on. And you know, I have people in similar programs, Columbia University, Bard College in the east, University of Iowa, etc., OK? So we don't think about, "Oh, you went to a bad high school." No, we get them up to the same level we would expect for ourselves so, what is that, some biblical injunction? The Golden Rule or something? Do unto others... That seems to me the way to handle it. Here's where you want to go, now let's take the time to get there.

And once again what's striking is it's not paternalistic, it's not condescending.

I hate that.

Which would be the experience for many students, particularly the non-traditional, however you decide to define them.

Uh huh. In poetry class there is a critique section. We end the class, about the last half-hour, reading their new poems and talking about them; what's good and what might be improved. And a lot of traditional Poetry Workshops are all that. Ours are four-hour classes. Could you imagine four hours of critique? You know, you'd turn to stone. And besides, to put the emphasis not on the activity that you're making but on dissecting—deconstructing is the fashionable saying now—the poem, tips the balance towards the academic pursuit, puts the value in judgment rather than imagination. So we try to tip that balance. We don't exclude judgment, right? You need to be shrewd, but it's all in the practical sense. So we like, we front-load a lot in the classroom. We do writing activities and stretch them to open up all the channels: visual, auditory, the abstract, the thought processes, and structural. By structural I don't mean iambic pentameter, I mean, "When does his poem need to make a move into some other area of reference?" To freshen it, you know, to enliven the attention. Robert Creely said, "A poem is an act of attention." Ogden said, "A poem is happiness in language." Or, language in a state of happiness. That's not so academic, right? That's a practical thing. You know, let's be happy and make words happy together, you know.

Why—maybe you could tell us a little bit more of your story of your career here and how it evolved and how you ended up putting all these classes in one semester. And if you could touch on why—I think you've spoken to this—but specifically why it's important that you continue teaching here while obvious other opportunities, callings, are out there as well.

OK. Well, that's a lot at one time but my history at the College is, I started full-time in 1977. I was the only poet, I taught all the poetry classes myself. I taught, and both classes were called Beginning/Advanced *(laughs)*. So the first thing that I did was create three tiers: beginning, intermediate, advanced, and start to bring in part-timers to teach as our enrollment grew. So we started with two classes and we now have, I think, about thirteen classes of poetry. And we're an undergraduate program, by the way; we don't have a graduate program. And, let's see, what was the rest of the question?

How your...

How I developed? So when I was first here I hadn't even published my first book of poetry. I published my first book of poetry in '79 and I've now published six books of poetry. And I published a major anthology; W.W. Norton, which is the great publisher of anthologies,

published my anthology Postmodern American Poetry in '94. And I published a novel with Random House in 1988, a chapter was in the New Yorker, and so that's—my whole career as a poet, my publishing history, developed at Columbia College. You know, from being a young poet published in magazines, I'd get published in Paris Review and things like that, but everything happened with me, as it has happened with me as a teacher, you know, during the same history. Why do I stay at Columbia College? I am suited for Columbia College very particularly. It's not to say that I'm not suited for the University of Iowa or Columbia University, obviously I could do that, and my own poetry and my own teaching is known in these places. I was invited to teach at Iowa for a semester but I found that I couldn't do it because of my special arrangement. It would have meant giving up over a year of contact with Columbia College students. I can't do that, it wouldn't be right. My connection is with Columbia College. If I start to become absent and not a part of the program that I build, that I'm responsible for, that's a loss. So even though I've had other opportunities I've stayed at Columbia. Also, Columbia's been very nice to me. When my wife had a job offer in San Francisco State University, we were living in Chicago, obviously, until five years ago, she got an offer. And it's hard to turn down a job in San Francisco, especially since she had been teaching freshman English and now she has a chance to teach in an MFA program at an institution that's not only a wonderful location but is one of the largest creative writing programs in the country. So we talked about it for about two weeks and we realized the real problem was, what would I do? How could she go there and I stay here? And I called my chair, Phil Klukoff, he said, "Call Bert." I don't know how many times people say that, "Call Bert." So I presented the issue to Bert and it was suggested maybe I should fly in and out every two weeks and pack my classes in two-week bundles and be gone for two weeks and then teach intensively. And he says, "Naw, that's crazy, that wouldn't work. Why don't you teach all of your classes in one semester and then just take the other semester off?" And, oh, OK. So you see that way Columbia gets one from me, what I can offer, and it benefits my family because I could be with my family more and I do all my xeroxing and phoning, faxing, from California during the Spring semester and I set up programs, visiting readers, and someone else introduces them. I come back for the final week of classes, a lot of special programs; so it's worked out. And that's made possible by the generosity of the administration, to allow that to happen. They value their resources. I'm a good resource at Columbia. And I've been here a long time and have done a good job and I have a very active professional thing. I bring good things to Columbia too; I bring in good poets.

Do your students influence and shape your poetry?

That can happen. One of the exercises I used to do...

I'm asking, is that another reason you stay?

Oh, the contact with the students?

And your work. Does that feed your creative juices?

Yes, yes. In fact, while I'm able to get a lot of my own writing done in the Spring, because I have the time to do it, and that's a benefit to me professionally, the energy that you get from the contact with students, sometimes you don't even know what you're thinking until you express it with the students in the act of teaching it, I think. There's a clichÈ about learning as you teach, that the best way to learn something is to teach it. It's true. You know, in colleges you can think about things much more carefully. So I had - and also just in practical terms—I had a student in the '80s who did a, well, I have an exercise called "Design a Poem." It's only for advanced students, you have to have a certain kind of sophistication to get there, but I say, "I want you to offer, decide on two constraints that the poem is going to have before you write the poem. These will be formal elements; they're not going to conventionally traditional, but they will hinge on a poem." And she decided one of the constraints would be a certain number, she would limit a certain number of words per line. A kind of quantitative form. And then she had something else: it was going to be a personal poem plus so many words per line. Well, years later I took her idea and modified it and I wrote almost a whole book of poems using a word counting system of that kind, see? And so I, she discovered something, and the students are free to take from each other and influence each other, and she influenced me. And I think some of my best recent poems have been like this. I like to do three words per line, three words per stanza. It's a crosshatch. And I like two times two also. But I have to try to think bigger now because then it gets to be too many words to be interesting. Her five, I could never do her five, that's not in my

voice. And the dance, little bumblebee dance of the words, two by two and three by three, really is kind of exciting when it comes down to word choice. You know, what is the word that will fit here and have some bounce, right? And not only in reference but in sound.

Are some poems, do you write them specifically to be read out loud?
I used to do that more; what I'm finding is that the good poems work both ways. That the voice is the actor and if they could be voiced, if they had music, if they have compression, they can be voiced. I tend not to work in narrative as much; I'm a lyric poet. You know, I like to get the dream and the song and keep going. I also tend to be a little bit involved in abstraction with that mix, sometimes. So, you know, it's sweet and song-like and then there will be a knot, see, and then it will open up again sweet and song-like. But anyway, it's true that students can influence your poetry. I had a student named Gary Cowpy, it's funny that I remember these names now, that was way back in the '70s. And he was writing a very relaxed, glacial kind of surface, I say glacial but it's actually warm, it was a smooth surface, and allowing his humor to come forward. I looked at Gary's poems and I said, "Gee, it's nice how relaxed his voice is." So I tried some of his poems. And part of my style of the '70s, I discovered something myself: don't tighten the voice, don't make a fist as you intently try to put pressure on the poem to make it happen. Open your hands, relax your muscles, so that, you know, let it casually develop.

It sounds so physical.
Yeah, it is, it is. And that's a different kind of expression. Yeats is more of a pop, you know, he puts his fists on the table.

One of the few poets I will admit I'm familiar with...
That you like?

Not that I like, but I'm familiar with.
Yeats is a great poet.

We're getting down and I want to just—there's plenty more I could ask, but I did want to return to your relationship with Mike Alexandroff. You said you got to know him in the '80s. If you cold speak to that again and maybe Knott, did you know, was it Knott who was your predecessor?
Yeah, I was a friend of Bill Knott and Bill recommended me to the job specifically to replace him.

Why did he want you?
Well, I was one of the leading younger poets around town at the time. I was real active, I was on a literary magazine, I still publish a literary magazine called New American Writing.

Is that what it was called then?
No, it was called Oink.

Oink?
O-i-n-k. I just went to a conference, a conference on literary magazines of the Western Hemisphere.

Yeah, did someone do a paper on Oink?
Well, when I told them the history of the magazine that was once Oink, everyone was quite amused and interested. This is New American Writing. It's quite a distinguished journal with four-color covers and we're one of the top probably ten in the country in terms of circulation of magazines of this kind.

Really?
Yeah, and by the way, this is another example of Columbia being wonderful. Columbia helps with the publication of this although it doesn't own it. And, as you see, it has a Columbia logo, it says, "Published in association with Columbia College Chicago." So in the early '70s I was doing a magazine called Oink and now I'm still doing a magazine but it's quite substantial now, you know, two hundred and fifty pages this issue. So anyway, what was I saying? So that's why...

Your relationship with Mike.
And then I remember the first full-time faculty party I went to was at Mike's apartment on Lake Shore Drive. And that, the faculty was smaller at that time, we could all get into the same apartment. That could never happen now. So we have retreats instead, right?

What was that like?
Oh, it was very, it was great. I remember meeting Sam, Dr. Sam Floyd of the Center for Black Music Research, he was there for the first time, and Chap Freeman and Michael Rabiger and Peter Thompson, Lynn Sloan of the Photography Department. By the way, Michael, Lynn, and I founded the Faculty Organization.

Really?
Yeah, we got together in Lynn's apartment...

Is that Michael Rabiger and Lynn Sloan? I interviewed both those people, as a matter of fact.
And Maureen of the Art Department. Anyway, there were a couple more people involved in that. But yeah, we, so, I'm an old timer. I'm in mid-career and I was an old timer because they started

young. And then I went to Mike's party and they were serving salmon and it was great, and champagne. And we were early to the party, we were the first ones at the party, Mike was still putting his tie on. And he says, "Oh, you're the poet. I like Neruda and Hickman." Nawsen Hickman is a Turkish poet who was thrown into prison for his liberal views. And you know, Mike much loved poets of the left like Neruda and Hickman. So, you know, Mike is somebody you can talk poetry with. You can talk philosophy with him. He took me to his club for lunch around the time that he was leaving, before John Duff came in, and we talked for three hours about poetry and different writers that we liked. And he is a man of valuable discourse. You know, he was a lot of fun to be with. But there was a time before I knew him where I was scared to be on the same elevator with him. You know, we'd start to stand there in silence, you know, he's the great president. But anyway, he put this College where it is today. Without Mike there'd be no Columbia College. It's kind of, he had the right idea at the right time. You know, he first saw the revolution in arts and communication, especially in communications.

Do you worry about anything? I mean, the challenges that Columbia has, that it will lose its distinctiveness, could it get too big?

Well, I know that one of the whispered complaints that I hear in the background is that everybody is serving on eight committees. And when you start serving on that many committees and are in your office so much, there is some concern that there is going to be a loss of contact with the student or with the classroom. The College is, in the last five years or so, has made some strong effort to institutionalize itself. I think it's kept its free and easy ways mostly but I can see a new culture developing at the college that is a potential threat to that. I mean, Columbia College could not be a college of the '60s forever. That's just impractical, it's unrealistic to imagine that it should. But contact in the classroom with a practicing professional is still vital to the identity of the College and I think that will be retained. But I remember somebody going to—I will not name the institution, it's a prominent institution here in the city of Chicago, and he was hired, he had a literary magazine kind of like New American Writing and they were acquiring literary magazines at the time. So they brought him in, offered him a full-time tenure track job in exchange for his magazine. And he said that this university, there were "lifers," that's in quotes, right, "lifers" in their offices with a suit and tie who would stay in their offices all day with dust falling into their eyelashes because they were part of an institution, a bureaucracy, they're part of the furniture. And we're blessed that Columbia College, that's not the situation, right? While we continue to institutionalize, build committees, do all that necessary work on assessment... So we all recognize, in other words, that it's necessary to have committees now because the College is nearing a ten thousand enrollment and so we really need these structures. But none of us desire a culture of Columbia where we're all just meeting each other on a committee, you know. The Committee on Committees, right? Because I was told, when we were building I was part of the faculty group that helped develop a lot of these programs like the Faculty Organization, I was on the Bylaws Committee, I was one of the first members of the—oh, they keep changing the name of it, Institutional Policy Organization, right? Where the chairs and faculties sit down together and decide institutional policy. You know, so I, I helped, I was part of the making of these things and so I know their importance. I was here at a time when there was none of that and you were answering only to your chair. There was no other way of expressing yourself. So all of this has been for the good. But I was told by Lya Rosenblum very specifically, when we were defining things, and I said that, perhaps it was selfish interest, I said, "There should be an evaluation of faculty based partly on their production; as an artist or, for example, if you do books, have you done books? Or if you make movies, where's your movie?" And Lya said, "No." Very, very definitely. "This is a teaching institution." And so in establishing these balances we need to put them side-by-side, not publication dominant over teaching. This is first and foremost a teaching institution. They are aware of these balances, they know what it is that a faculty member has to offer. You know, some people offer publications more, some people are very active in the classroom, some people are great at committee work and, you know, community service, right? I try to keep a balance of all of them I can, right? And that's the ideal. But the classroom is what the College is all about. When people are alarmed by the institutionalization of Columbia, really what they're saying is "Let's don't take the focus out of the classroom and into the committee work."

And does that get harder? Ten thousand is a lot different than two, and how do you maintain some quality with all the issues that go with the faculty ratio to student, part-time to full-time...
Well, you have to keep up full-time hirings because as the College grows you have to have a corresponding rise in the number of full-time faculty. The risk for many departments is that the full-time faculty become the administrators. You know, they are concentration heads, they have limited time for this and that. They were hired for the classroom and now they find that they're doing a lot of the administration, and the teaching that falls to the part-timers more. So it's very key that full-time hiring is keeping pace. We've just been given two or three full-time hirings in this department, which are much needed, and that helps a lot.

One thing I'd like to get to, before the end, we don't have a whole lot of time for, but what brought you to poetry, what's, what is your history with that field?
My father was a Protestant minister and my mother was a school teacher and children's author and a religious author.

Really?
Yes. She wrote a children's book published by a religious publishing house and wrote hymns. And so there were writer's magazines in the sewing room in a little country home in Ohio, in southern Ohio. So I think probably—and the kind of discussion we would have at the table. I remember my dad at dinner discussing the difference between Plato and Aristotle. You know, he was putting it in basic terms, but I had access to that sort of thing. My mother and father both had degrees. And I think that the teaching and preaching thing was a source of something for poetry. It took me a long time to acknowledge that. You know, we think we're in rebellion from our parents, but we're really not. We're often recasting that, what it is they have to offer us. So there's a form of poetry called devotional poetry; it tends to be a philosophical, almost theological kind of poem. It's about ultimate things like God, life, and I'm very much drawn in by that kind of poetry, the metaphysical. George Herbert, John Dunn, Emily Dickinson's a metaphysical, Sylvia Plath in her own way has those qualities in spite of the suicide. So I'm really drawn to that and that goes straight back to my dad, you know, giving his sermons. And but I—as a college student I wrote short stories and I disdained poetry. And then I graduated from college, moved to Chicago, took a job as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War—in a Chicago hospital—worked the four to twelve shift and would go home and have nothing to do.

And you're wide-awake, of course; you just got off work.
And I'm wide-awake and I would write poems, I started writing poems. And then I had about ten poems, I saw that there was a graduate program starting at Circle Campus, it was called, University of Illinois in Chicago. And I applied and Paul Carroll, head of the program, called me up and accepted me to the program. And suddenly I found that I was a poet with my ten or fifteen poems in hand. And I was age twenty-four, or twenty-five, see? So from that moment on, to being hired at Columbia College, and publishing through Columbia College, it was a hermetic kind of thing, you know, done at midnight.

And can—there's [something] students probably cannot relate to, you know, whether it's their family being intact or more or less urban on the educational level, but certainly coming to your art at what some would consider later rather than earlier, was it something you set up, "This is something I want to be," since the age of, you know, sixteen?
No, not at all. I fell into it.

Does that affect with your students? Do you get into your own personal relationship with poetry?
Well, I don't usually like to bring my own poetry in to the classroom.

You don't.
Because I don't mind it if they ask me but the danger of that is that, you know, they're so heavily influenced that you don't want them to turn out to be just like you.

I would think that, you know, like for me, it's hard for me, particularly with painting, particularly modern painting, that I wanted the painter standing right next to it and saying, because it's so unclear to me, it's so abstract, and it's hard for me to forget about that and say, "Well, how do I feel about it?"
Oh, see. Well, I express my feelings about poetry constantly in the classroom.

Yeah, I think that would be great to have a poet and even with your poems say, "This is what I meant," when I say, "Well, what's this referring to?"
And we study, oh yeah; we talk about the meaning and structure of poems constantly in the classroom. You know, "Did you notice what

the poet did here, here, and here?" Various aspects of the poem. I will sometimes talk about, "Oh, I did this once," you know, in a series of poems. "And here's how that works. Here's my insight into how you practice this particular kind of expression." Yeah, so, really it's true that I think the best teaching has to come out of someone who practices the art that is in this kind of thing, in the workshop. I hire only poets. I mean, I wouldn't hire somebody who wasn't a published poet.

Does it ever get, I mean, were you in a position before where you'd be drawn more and more to administrative and teaching all year 'round, then does the tension start to get, do you have time for your art?
Oh yeah, well, I think that, I've spoken to some poets who feel threatened by teaching for a couple of reasons. Not here at Columbia but the poets that I know. Charles Stemik, who is a highly productive poet, I asked him for some poems for our magazine New American Writing, he won the Pulitzer Prize in the early '90s, and he said he didn't have anything right then because he had been too busy teaching. The well was dry, OK? Ann Lauderbach, who is a distinguished professor at City Colleges in New York, and a wonderful poet, once told me that...