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The Critical World of Harry Berger, Jr.: An Oral History

Interviewed by Cameron Vanderscoff

Edited by Cameron Vanderscoff and Irene Reti

Santa Cruz

University of California, Santa Cruz

University Library

2015

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Interview History

When Harry Berger, Jr. was young, his father ran a company called Kaylon Pajamas, from the Greek *kalon*, for beautiful. At the time of these sessions, one of the four books he was working on—each on a different topic, from Plato to Shakespeare—was about Socrates’ ironic notion of *Kallipolis*, meaning ‘beautiful city,’ which draws on the same root term. Framed this way, this oral history is a narrative of Berger’s formation from Kaylon to *Kallipolis*, stopping off at jazz clubs, Hawaiian radio shacks, New Critical Yale, and the UC Santa Cruz experiment along the way. At this last and most pivotal location, this telling is an account of his perspective as a professor of literature, founding faculty member, and literary critic. Throughout, he traces the parallel tracks of his pedagogy, campus engagement, and scholarship, considering points of intersection and core philosophies, addressing themes of change, conflict and continuity at UCSC.

Berger defines himself as a critic above all else, and his training in New Criticism, with its trademark methodology of close reading, proves to be a consistent note both in his writing and in his approach to teaching and working at UCSC. After providing an overview of his early biography, discussing life in New York City and New Rochelle, and recounting, among other things, his hatred of superheterodyne radios as a WWII Marine, he turns to his two loci at UCSC, Cowell College and the literature department. At the former, he was a teacher and dedicated participant in the original UCSC collegiate experiment, and at the latter, he was a passionate advocate of close reading as a core value for the new program.

He applies close scrutiny to both entities, commenting candidly on the internal debates of the department, the styles and personas of his colleagues, and his own teaching in the college. Along the way he discusses friends, enemies, and the nature of student engagement over the years, which, according to Berger, has run the spectrum from spectacular to stoned. But even when he is irreverent, whether it's about his work or his students, he always remains acutely aware of the stakes of education. He gives the UCSC classroom an intellectual privilege of place in his larger career, acknowledging "all the writing I did was in terms of teaching. All the books I've written came out of stuff I was doing in courses." In doing so, he defines teaching away from performance—which he criticizes in some of its early manifestations at UCSC—towards something more intimate, less theatrical, grounded in mutual learning. He commemorates this sentiment mostly aptly in one of his own books, *Making Trifles of Terrors*, which is dedicated to "students and their resistance."

Berger applies a nuanced take to the UCSC institution as a whole, commenting on the shift of the school away from its original collegiate model but rejecting the nostalgia of the "golden agers who think everything was better back then." In lieu of a narrative of decline or departure, he posits an ongoing growth of UCSC with a continuity of quality in faculty and students alike, and where it remains, occasional conflicts notwithstanding, "a wonderful place."

Both as a narrator in this oral history project and as a writer, Berger has a rare quality of being both very serious about his work and very casual—his critical approach is that of grand gesture and a shrug, simultaneously. In doing so, he renders his writing rigorous and exacting, but also open, creative, and approachable. He applies this style and range of inquiry in this oral history,

shuttling from Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to Stephen Colbert's "truthiness," Shakespeare's *Henriad* to Ken Kesey's psychedelic bus, with an ease that defies any preconception of distance between these poles. Given this scope, I asked him how he judged success in his work, and he expressed what he hopes his audience thinks on reading him: "There's great shit happening in this text. It's *now* shit. It's full of *now*."

I hope readers find this oral history, too, to be *now*, whether it's in reference to the ongoing story of UCSC, the skills of writing, or intellectual process. As of this writing, Berger is ninety and continues to put out work at a rate, reach, and quality that defies the standards for academics of most any age or field; I would encourage anyone who is interested in the ideas expressed in this transcript to check out his books. Berger himself sums it up this way: "You never get out of school." Some people might find that a cruel and unusual punishment; for Berger, and, I hope, for readers, it is an exhortation for an open-sourced curiosity, close reading across forms, and work that aims for the ongoing *now*.

Before I close, I want to thank everyone who has supported me and this project in its two-year journey. Berger is first: I don't know that I've ever laughed louder or more in an interview. Harry, it was a lesson in scholarship, UCSC, and in having fun with ideas. I'd also like to thank Harry's wife, Beth Pittenger, who graciously welcomed me into their home and was a key resource in my preparation, answering questions about Harry and providing me with a selection of his essays. I also consulted a group of UCSC staffers and faculty who steered my early research in the right direction, including Anne Callahan, Roxanne Monnet, Betsy Moses, and the perennially helpful Michael Cowan. On the

support side, this oral history is part of a series of five enabled through the unstinting generosity of Patricia Kelly, Cowell alumna, and the facilitation of Faye Crosby, current Cowell Provost. After that beginning, the project wouldn't have turned out nearly so well without the assistance and insights of the McHenry Special Collections staff. And finally the buck stops, as always, with my gratitude to Irene Reti, director of the Regional History Project, who stepped above and beyond her usual guidance and advisory role to serve as my co-editor. It was a great joy to collaborate in this new way.

Copies of this volume are on deposit in Special Collections and in the circulating stacks at the UCSC Library, as well as on the library's website. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Elisabeth Remak-Honnef, Head of Special Collections and Archives, and University Librarian Elizabeth Cowell.

—*Cameron Vanderscoff, Interviewer and Co-Editor*

New York, New York, Friday, March 13th, 2015

Childhood: New York, New Rochelle

Cameron Vanderscoff: Today is Friday, January 25th [2013]. This is Cameron Vanderscoff, here with Harry Berger, Jr., for part one of his oral history project. I'd like to start out today talking about your childhood and your family. Given that you ultimately became so involved in scholastics, what did the people in your childhood home teach you about curiosity?

Harry Berger, Jr.: Well, nothing really, because my mom wasn't a curious person. I've said some negative stuff about her.¹ Nothing. My life and my mind and school and the university—they had nothing to do with my family life at all.

Vanderscoff: Hmm. Had either of your parents gone to college? Were they interested in education in those terms?

Berger: No. They weren't interested or disinterested. I mean, they were good parents. They always worried about me and took care of me, asked me how I was doing. But they were not educated in the sense that they went to college and got degrees.

Vanderscoff: Were they interested in education as a priority for you?

Berger: Not as a priority. It was what happens; it was what you did (laughs).

Vanderscoff: What sense do you have of their aspirations for you?

¹ In preparation for these interviews, I sent questions to Dr. Berger in advance. He wrote out some preliminary responses for my review, which he references several times in this transcript. Where helpful, I have supplemented his spoken responses with footnotes quoting his initial written ones.

Regarding his mother, he writes: "...my mother hired couples to cook, clean, and drive. She discouraged me from having many kids over because it might mess up the house, and she encouraged me to go play at other kids' houses, which is what I did most of the time. My mom was really a little too hoity-toity for me; she tried too hard—but at householding more than mothering. I don't mean to put her down, though. She meant well and loved her family and I was happy growing up in New Rochelle. I'm very, very lucky to have had it that good."

Berger: Oh, well, my mother, as a good Jewish, upper-middle class woman, wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer (laughs). Didn't they all (laughter)? I mean, all my friends had the same situation. And they weren't all Jewish either (laughs). I grew up in that middle-class world, in which it was expected that you were going to go to college and that kind of stuff.

Vanderscoff: And what sort of work did your father do?

Berger: My father was a manufacturer. He was from St. Louis. He was one of eight children: seven brothers and a sister. They started out by making shirts. There's something called a Harry Berger Shirt Company. Then in 1931-32 he lost everything in the Crash, and he started up a pajama business. So he made pajamas: Kaylon, which is a take-off on the Greek word *kalon*, for "the beautiful." I didn't know that then. He didn't know it either (laughs)—someone else made it up for him. Kaylon Pajamas: man-tailored women's pajamas, styled by Harry Berger signature. The buttons stay on 133 percent longer. And he was very proud of the fact that he was the inventor of the U-shaped crotch.

Vanderscoff: (laughs)

Berger: Because before that there was a V-shaped crotch. And he put a piece of material in there to make the U-shaped crotch for man-tailored women's pajamas (laughs). So that's what I can tell you about my dad.

Vanderscoff: And what about your mother? What did she do? What mattered to her?

Berger: My mother was simply a housewife. She liked to manage the people who worked for her. She always had a couple. A guy who drove and wore a cap—a chauffeur. The chauffeur and his wife would make and serve dinner. (inaudible) I was embarrassed by my mother, and I was always in with the help—what she called 'the help.' Because that's where I learned jazz. They were usually black couples, and I would go in there and I would listen to jazz with them in their quarters. That's how I got into it. My mother embarrassed me, because she had these social levels going all the time. And I was all against that (laughs).

Vanderscoff: You mentioned that your father's business suffered in the Depression. Was that sort of lifestyle you talk about substantially interrupted by the stock market crash?

Berger: Yeah. I remember we had a very fancy apartment in the late twenties. I was born in '24. When he lost everything, we moved from the East Side to the West Side of New York City, which is a standard thing: East Side, you know, up-down. Then after a year or two—I forget why—we moved up to New Rochelle, New York, in 1931, or something like that. New Rochelle is what I think of as where I grew up, because it was only from '31 to '41. In 1941, I was sixteen. I went to Yale. So the time between '32 and '41, I was in New Rochelle. Went through the school system and the high school system. Lived a block away from a tennis club, and I used to go down and pick up the balls for the pro. When he was giving lessons, I was always in the back of the court getting the balls that someone missed. (laughs) Stuff like that. I spent a lot of time playing tennis and working for the pro.

Vanderscoff: So when you consider the city life and the suburban life, which do you think was more important or influential on your adolescence?

Berger: Well, I grew up in the suburban. I grew up there. It wasn't a question of more or less importance. That's what there was.²

Vanderscoff: Did you often go into the city? Did that remain an important presence in your life?

Berger: Yeah, my folks would—we'd take the train in and go see shows and stuff like that. And then when they moved in, then there was this apartment in New York that I stayed in: 47 East 88th Street. They were there for a long time.

² In his written responses, Berger relays: "I was mainly interested in jazz and writing and sports and girls. Played jazz clarinet and went to jazz nightclubs a lot. Played tennis and took up squash in college. Played a lot of touch football and was an artful dodger. Would go to Central Park and lie in the sun so I'd look good to girls. I suspect I was a real asshole."

I went into the Marines from '43 to '46. Before I went in I met someone who was a model for—my sister did all the advertising for my Dad. And so she had people modeling pajamas. I met the model, and that's who I married eventually. She lived on 108 East 38th Street. I still remember that. She and her mother lived there. I spent a lot of time there.

Vanderscoff: So you talked a minute ago about getting involved with jazz. Given that this love of jazz was something that you picked up from, as you say, the help, did your parents like the fact that you were listening to jazz, or playing jazz?

Berger: They didn't care. My mother didn't like the fact that she had to listen to my clarinet yowling. But otherwise it was fine. Look, they weren't against it. "Hi." [addressed to his wife, Beth Pittenger, who has entered the room].

Beth Pittenger: Hi. I have to go the dentist.

Berger: Oh. You could sit down.

Pittenger: You going to put that in your transcript (laughs)?

Vanderscoff: Yes (laughs).

Pittenger: Did he say that his cousin is [lyricist] Alan Lerner of Lerner and Loewe?

Vanderscoff: No, we did not discuss that.

Pittenger: [heading towards the door] So his parents were accepting of his music.

Berger: My parents were what?

Pittenger: [keys rattling; heading towards the door; voice growing distant] His family was accepting of his music. It was part of—a big thing. Good luck! [Departs; door shuts]

Berger: See you! Now what did Beth say?

Vanderscoff: She just said that your cousin was Lerner of Lerner and Loewe.

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: And so, you did have elements of your family that were very much accepting of music.

Berger: Yeah, Alan Lerner. It was my mother's brother, Abe and Florence—Alan was either their son or their grandson, and Alan and I would go to each other's houses. I think either he broke my O Gauge Lionel trains or I broke his. I forget. (laughs) But he used to sit there and play the piano, and I remember him doing (singing) "Did I remember to tell you that I love you?" And he was very good. So there was a lot of that, in which Alan would be playing the piano.

And then years later, in New Haven, my wife, Maggie, and I went to a play of Lerner and Loewe's, and I went backstage to see if I could see him. And he stuck his head out and I said, "Remember me? I'm Sonny." That's what they called me. And he said, "Oh, nice. Okay." And then he left and he went back (laughs). He didn't want to have anything to do with me for some reason. That's the only contact I had with him.

Education: High School, Yale and Early Writing

Vanderscoff: What did your education do for you as a young person? Did you much like school?

Berger: Well, I didn't like or dislike high school. It's what you did. I liked certain subjects better than others, like a lot of people. Because it was easier for me to do English than math, like a lot of people.

Vanderscoff: Sure.

Berger: And so that's all.

Vanderscoff: What made up your social life in this time? Was that more of a priority for you, relative to school?

Berger: Well, that was tricky. I skipped the third grade. And therefore I graduated when I was sixteen. And therefore I was younger. Most of the people were seventeen and eighteen, and that made a lot of difference. Especially girls. If I liked some eighteen-year-old girl, she would think I was like her [makes diminutive pat-on-the-head gesture]—you know (laughter). So I was in that kind of situation.³

Vanderscoff: Given that so much of your work has focused on the Renaissance, did you care about history or old books as a kid or adolescent?

Berger: No. No, there was no connection. I got into the Renaissance much later. It all came out of, probably, courses I took, papers I wrote in the courses, the stuff that the papers triggered me to go after—stuff like that.

Vanderscoff: So you mention that you were expected to go to college.

Berger: Yeah, but nobody said, “Son, you must go to college.” It was just taken for granted.

Vanderscoff: So ultimately, where did you go to college?

Berger: Yale.

Vanderscoff: And what sort of constituencies and perspectives did Yale expose you to, as opposed to New York?

Berger: (pause) That’s hard. What I found out at Yale was that there were these different constituencies. Guys from prep school, many of whom knew each other, even from different prep schools, because they would play football or something like that. So most of the prep schools guys were sort of *en groupe*. They all sort of knew each other. And I was in another constituency of high school people. And

³ In his written responses, Berger states: “The main problem for me all through pre-college school was this: I seemed smart enough to the teachers at Roosevelt Grammar School in New Rochelle that they skipped me from the 2nd to the 4th grade (this was around 1932-33, I guess). So in all the years after that I was younger than most of my peers. That was especially tough with girls. I graduated from New Rochelle High School in 1941 at the age of 16.”

we did know people from other high schools, and that made a big difference. So there was one group of freshmen who were really interlocked, and another group that was un-interlocked. I belonged to the second group. And that was difficult—made a difference. You knew that. I knew that. I mean, we all knew that, and we had that sense that we had to deal with the prep school contingents.⁴

Vanderscoff: And given your Jewish heritage did you experience—

Berger: That made it even more pronounced.

Vanderscoff: Hmm. Now (pause) I would like to expand the scope of our inquiry just a little bit. What sort of pursuits interested you in Yale? How did Yale, prior to your enlistment in the service, occupy your time?

Berger: That's a good question. I guess I knew I was going to do something with writing. From the time I got there I worked on the *Freshman Weekly* and wrote funny stuff, comic stuff for the *Yale Record*. Both before and after the war I was chair of the *Record* in, I forget when, it was '48, I guess.

But that's what I was interested in: the Yale lit magazine, the *Yale Record*, and something I think I wrote about the *Freshman Weekly*. So it was [then] that I started writing stuff—mainly comic stuff, funny stuff. Then I ended up later—I don't remember exactly what year—working on the Yale literary magazine, submitting poetry and doing some editing. But I don't recall much about that.

Vanderscoff: So you liked writing when you were at Yale.

Berger: Yeah.⁵

⁴ Berger writes: "Prep-school snottiness dominated the atmosphere, but there were a lot of good guys in my class and I had a lot of friends. I was never invited to join a fraternity or secret society but I never gave that a second thought."

⁵ Berger writes: "My main extracurricular interests at Yale in 1941-43 were jazz, touch football, squash and tennis, and writing for the humor and literary magazines (*The Yale Record*, which I eventually chaired, and *The Yale Lit*). In my freshman year I wrote a lot of comic stuff for a pathetic rag called The Freshman Weekly."

Vanderscoff: Did you enjoy academic writing at all? Or did you like the social exposure—

Berger: I didn't mind academic writing. I don't remember not liking it. And I wrote a lot of papers. You know, like you did then. No, I don't have much recollection of it, so I think I must have liked it. Writing was all just one thing for me, whether it was the *Record* or the *Lit* or for class papers.

Anti-Semitism at Yale

Vanderscoff: As a brief aside at this point, did you find that your Jewish heritage was an important part of your identity or an important part of your thought at this point?

Berger: Yeah, it was important, in the sense that at Yale it was kind of a pain in the ass. There was a lot of anti-Semitism back then.

Vanderscoff: How did you personally experience that?

Berger: Well, first of all, you were just not included in a lot of groups. In freshman year, guys from prep schools were sort of pre-established in a passageway that got them into secret societies or fraternities. And I wasn't in that group. As I'm thinking about it, it didn't make much difference in the long run. I may have not liked the situation I was in then, but it didn't affect my performance or anything.⁶

Superheterodyne Radios, "Dickheads," and Jazz in a Honolulu Brothel:

Service in World War II

Vanderscoff: In this time we've been discussing—your high school years, your college years—World War II was ramping up and in motion.

Berger: Yeah.

⁶ Berger theorizes in his written responses that "I navigated through it okay because I didn't look Jewish (stuff came down to that, in those days). I think I also helped myself by trying out for the freshman football team."

Vanderscoff: Prior to your military service, what sort of presence did the war and its events have in your day-in, day-out life?

Berger: Well, only that after a certain point in '41 we all knew we were going to go into it, and it was a question of when, where and how. I forget the details of whether I was guaranteed two years in college—I don't remember. I remember I was in from '43 to '46. I enlisted so that I could go where I wanted to go, rather than wait to get drafted.

Vanderscoff: And in what branch of the service did you enlist?

Berger: I enlisted in the Marines. I had a girlfriend that I didn't think I was going to do very well with. But I tried. So I went in the Marines partly to get the dress blues. So I got my dress blues and I came up from [Marine Corps Recruit Depot] Parris Island—or Cherry Point, I guess—to have a date with her. And on that date she told me she was going to marry some guy. So that was that. (laughter) That's why I got the dress blues, and that's why I got into the Marines, probably.

Vanderscoff: (laughter) A different sort of personal advancement.

Berger: (laughs) Yeah.

Vanderscoff: But, of course, after that gambit failed, you were still stuck in the Marines, as it were.

Berger: Yeah. For three years. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So you went to basic training. Did you have any hopes about where you would be sent? Did you want to be sent to the front lines?

Berger: I never thought much about it. I probably didn't want to do that. (laughs)⁷ As it ended up, I went to radio-radar school for a long time, for almost a year at different places.⁸ And then got sent to Hawaii.

⁷ Berger relates: “[I served] because I had to. No other reason, no higher virtue.”

I spent a year in Hawaii, 1945-'46, attached to a Marine air squadron [Air Station Ewa]. I was in the radio shack. And because I had all this education, which produced a staff sergeant, a straight stripe, I was put in charge of the radio shack, which was a great thing, because it meant I sent other guys out to work on the planes. I didn't, because I couldn't have done it. I just didn't understand that stuff. I was terrible at physics. I had to take physics and build what they called superheterodyne radios. I couldn't do any of that stuff. I hated it. I was always reading and writing poetry on the side, hiding my books so the other guys wouldn't find them. I wasn't very happy, then, doing that stuff. But I did it.

Vanderscoff: Being in the Marines, were you at all surprised, or introduced to new sorts of young Americans than you would have met in New York or New Rochelle?

Berger: Oh, definitely. In boot camp right away, Parris Island right away, there were guys from the South—a lot of guys from the South. To me, it was an entirely different set of cultural pressures.

Vanderscoff: What did you find surprising about these different groups of people in their behavior or their speech or whatnot?

Berger: Well, there's a word I use here in another connection. A lot of 'em were dickheads. (laughter) They really were. I mean, they were kind of assholes. They were always looking for trouble. And they were always trying to assess themselves, seeing who they could fight and beat up and stuff like that. There was a lot of that. And you have to deal with that. I wasn't large. I was kind of small, and so I learned to fight that way, and learned to defend myself and stuff. But it wasn't a big part of my psyche. It was just what I was dealing with, day-in day-out.⁹

⁸ Berger received training in Ward Island, Texas; Logan, Utah; Cherry Point, North Carolina; and Chicago, Illinois.

⁹ Berger affirms: "And though I got along O.K. in the Marines by low-profiling it, I had to spend a lot of time with guys I now vividly remember as dickheads. Yale generated other sorts of dickheads."

Vanderscoff: You mentioned that you continued to write, somewhat clandestinely, in this time.

Berger: Yeah, I used to hide the books. I didn't want them to know I wrote this kind of shit. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: Did you continue to play jazz clarinet in that time?

Berger: Yeah. That was one of the things that saved me. It was sort of funny—when I was in Hawaii, I used to take my clarinet once or twice a week down into Honolulu and look around for places to play. I had a uniform on, so they would let uniformed people do stuff. So I did find a place to play. It seemed to me to be like a dance hall. Went in there, and they said, "Come in." They were playing jazz, which is all head stuff.

Vanderscoff: Sure.

Berger: I knew the numbers, so I played with them for a while. I noticed a lot of people were dancing. Then they'd sit down and they'd go away. And I said to the guy I was playing for, I said, "Why is it that they don't stick around and listen to our music more?" He said, "Don't you know what this is?" I said, "No." He said, "This is a whorehouse." (laughter) I was really, really—I said, "Okay." But I kept playing. I kept going back there.

Vanderscoff: Did your experience in the military impact you as a thinker? By which I mean, was it a significant experience in terms of informing your relationship to work and discipline?

Berger: No. I didn't mind being in the Marines. But I hated the work I was doing in the Marines. I didn't want anything to do with superheterodyne radios: fixing them, making them. I hated it. See, I hated science. I was all into literary stuff. And getting in the Marines I had to learn a lot of quasi-science stuff. Hated it.

Postwar Return to Yale

Vanderscoff: So after your discharge, then, did you return to Yale?

Berger: Yes. As fast as I could. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Do you think that having been a soldier changed the way you conducted yourself as a student in the university?

Berger: I don't think so. I mean, I could be dead wrong about this. We all came back. So everybody had the same experience.

Vanderscoff: Did you continue to wear your uniform?

Berger: Oh, no. You get discharged from the Marines, you put it away.

Vanderscoff: What did you major in at Yale? What were your interests there?

Berger: English lit.

Vanderscoff: I've noticed that you stayed at Yale throughout your tenure as an undergraduate, a graduate student, and then through your first decade of teaching. What was the ongoing nature of Yale's appeal to you throughout all of these shifts in your relationship to it?

Berger: That I was there. (laughs) I went there. I went through to graduate school. I got interested in literature. And the people who taught me when I was in graduate school wanted to get me to teach. So I became a member of the department. I taught for eleven years, and I did not get tenure. That's a complicated story, which I don't need to tell you. I didn't get tenure mainly because a guy whose work I had criticized when I was writing was asked to be the—what do you call it, the guy who judged my work for the promotion. I had already dissed this guy. I had already sliced him up. So he wrote a really negative review of me. That kept me from getting tenure.

Vanderscoff: Just backpedaling for a moment, why did you choose to go on to graduate school, as opposed to going into industry or business with your father? You mentioned your sister did that.

Berger: Yeah. It never occurred to me to do anything like that. My dad always thought, maybe, I was going to end up in the business with him. I had no interest in it at all. I was only interested in what I was doing at Yale.

Vanderscoff: So why did you opt to get your doctorate in particular?

Berger: Because I liked doing that. I liked writing about, and doing literary studies. Is that what you're asking?

Vanderscoff: I suppose my question is in particular, how did you find that literary studies either transformed your worldview, or somehow [affected] you personally, or—

Berger: It didn't. I got into it. It's what I liked. And I kept doing it. It's that simple.

Vanderscoff: Did you have any particular passion for teaching, or was your interest in the material?

Berger: It was in the material. Never thought about teaching it until they asked me to teach. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: And in future sessions we'll come back and talk about some of your notions about teaching, and how you conducted yourself as a teacher.

UC Santa Cruz, the Early Literature Board, and Close Reading

Vanderscoff: For now, let's go back to that moment in the mid-sixties when you were denied tenure at Yale. What was your next move? Did you hope to continue teaching?

Berger: Oh yeah, sure. I was supposed to continue teaching. I knew I would have to look for a job elsewhere. Luckily it was all made easy because a teacher of mine, a guy who in fact lived to one hundred and four years old, connected with the people that he knew that were going to start UCSC. A guy named Page Smith. And he knew Page Smith, and he introduced me to Page Smith. Page Smith, the first provost of Cowell, was the one who hired me. That's how it happened.

Vanderscoff: Did you search other places for work?

Berger: Not much, because this happened pretty soon. I think I remember looking at one or two places. But I don't remember very much about it, so I think this happened pretty soon.

Vanderscoff: Do you recall being at all aware, at the time, of the particular Santa Cruz experiment, the conception of it—the sense that this would be the residential colleges and so forth?

Berger: Yeah. Only that the basic conception was that they were going have colleges a little bit like Yale, a little bit like England. That was all I knew about it.

Vanderscoff: So did you have any sense that you would be going to a place that would be distinct from Yale, or some place that would be undergoing education in a different way? Or did it strike you as simply a logical progression?

Berger: No, what was interesting about it was that it didn't exist until I got there. I was going to the opening of a new university. A new branch of UC. That was a big part of what was interesting to me.

Vanderscoff: Given that it was this new, untried campus, did you have a sense that was any sort of risk in coming here and investing your career here?

Berger: No. I needed a job. It was all positives. It felt positive to me that I got this right away.

Vanderscoff: You were one of the inaugural faculty at the literature board here. What were your hopes for the lit board here in terms of its scope of inquiry, its pedagogy, its style?

Berger: I wanted it to focus on close reading.

Vanderscoff: And was close reading a dominant approach at Yale when you were there?

Berger: Well there was something called the New Criticism that started up in the South but came up and centered at Yale in the thirties and forties. And Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, who was a terrific guy—a bunch of us got close to him right away.

Vanderscoff: Was close reading and the New Criticism that it was associated with, was that a dominant perspective when you were there?

Berger: Yeah. Yeah, it was one dominant perspective. And there were of a lot of people, older folks, who thought it was terrible.

Vanderscoff: What did you personally think that the New Criticism could offer in terms of studying literature that older methods didn't?

Berger: Older methods didn't teach you anything about close reading of the texts and how that works. This was the new thing of the New Criticism.

Vanderscoff: What do you think the problem is with writing about literature without that close reading of the text? What's lost there?

Berger: Well, the problem is you're not writing about it. You're writing about somebody else's view of a text, or you've read the text but you're not talking about how you react sentence by sentence.

Vanderscoff: And were your colleagues here generally amenable to the idea of this New Critical approach? Or was there conflict about that within the department?

Berger: Well no, there wasn't conflict. There were just different ways of doing things. Older faculty there didn't do that. They did more historical kinds of stuff, and intellectual history. One of my colleagues was Harold Bloom. You've heard of Harold Bloom, I guess. And he and four or five of the rest of us—Tom Greene, Alvin Kernan at Princeton, a guy named Richard Sylvester—about five or six of us were in the middle of this new way of doing stuff. And it continued. As we all got settled in universities and hired people, we did our kind of thing. It was a retake of, I thought an improvement over the kind of New Criticism that people

like Cleanth Brooks did. Because theirs was sub rosa really political. They were really Southern, regional conservatives. It was a bad brew. But at the same time, they were very good at teaching how to read poetry.

Brooks is the guy who wrote *Understanding Poetry* (1938), the first New Critical handbook, really. You learned from the way he did it, but you didn't agree at all with what he did. I mean, his readings were both an example to me of how to read, and they were also an example of how not to use that method the way he did. Because he used it politically, and I wanted to de-politicize it.

Vanderscoff: Were you involved in the decision to design the literature board here to have a broad umbrella, inclusive of not just English, but multiple languages and literatures?

Berger: I didn't have anything to do with that. That's the way they organized it. They organized it primarily in terms of the college, rather than departments. So there were people who were just starting up in what would be departments—they were coming in lit, history, science—but we were all in the college. And we taught courses for the college. And we taught in one big college course.

Vanderscoff: So given this broad scope for the lit department, where it wasn't just English-language literature, but rather all these other language literatures, what do you think that that did for the department? Do you personally enjoying working in such a diverse atmosphere?

Berger: I liked the idea. I liked the idea lot, but the problem was that it was very uneven on critical ability. And people in other language cultures didn't know anything about New Criticism or close reading. So that was a complete divide. We were all together, but these guys were not teaching how to read a text and we were.

Vanderscoff: Why did you like the idea? Potentially, in an ideal world, what do you think having a board structured like that would offer?

Berger: Well, I liked the idea of people all getting together and not being isolated. I always thought: French Department, Spanish Department, English Department was sort of artificial in a certain way. Because what were we doing? Were we doing history of ideas? We were all doing that. Were we doing close reading? Some of us—fewer in other departments, more in our department. But I liked the idea that we all were focused on the close reading objective at Santa Cruz. I think that made a difference.

Vanderscoff: How were you involved with setting up graduate programs in those early years?

Berger: I was on the Histcon [History of Consciousness] board at first.¹⁰ I remember one summer there was no one else there. And so I had to function as chair over the summer of Histcon. They didn't call them departments then. They called them boards of studies. We weren't chairs. We were conveners. So I had to sign, "Harry Berger, Jr., Convener in the Board of the Studies of the History of Consciousness." (laughter) That was pathetic. All summer long I had to do that.

Vanderscoff: The literature board graduate program was set up also in those very initial years of the university. Given that in its founding years UCSC placed such primacy on undergraduate education, what place did you think graduate programs could have in this sort of a context?

Berger: Well, I think that all the focus on undergraduates was what you might call advertising. They were always, from the beginning, planning graduate programs. That was always going to be a part of it. But in the beginning, the center of social influences—the college and this very powerful guy, Page Smith—didn't want to have anything to do with graduate training. So we had to think in other terms. And so whatever we did getting ready for graduates was against the

¹⁰ For detail on the later history of Histcon (1977-) see Cameron Vanderscoff, Interviewer and Editor, *Hayden White: Frontiers of Consciousness at UCSC* (available at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/20b91099>) and *James Clifford: Tradition and Transformation at UC Santa Cruz* (available at <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/0r64t762>)

grain of what was going on. Not that it wasn't going to happen, but that it was going to be difficult to get going.¹¹

Vanderscoff: Did you personally hew more towards Page Smith's view in that case, that this place should be focused on undergraduate work? Or did you feel there needed to be more variance than that?

Berger: I differed from Page in a lot of things. He was a wonderful guy for that job. But he was also very impatient, and he was full of big gestures. I mean, he'd ride a white horse into class and wear his three-corner hats. He'd do all sorts of weird stuff like that. He was a performer, and people like myself were not in that sense at all. We were performers in a totally different way. But he did his thing and we did ours. And he was supportive of us. He used his power and authority to help us get going.¹² So it was okay. It worked out fine.

Vanderscoff: What were you and your colleagues looking for in hires to the literature board in those early years?

Berger: What I said before: people who showed they really were into close reading, knew about it, had some experience of it, had read about it, and could do it. Rather than doing history of ideas, history of cultures, which a lot of literary programs did in some way.

Vanderscoff: Do you think you were successful in implementing that program with those hires?

Berger: Yeah. (pause) Yeah, because I hired people from Yale. Three of the first five people hired were colleagues of mine at Yale. One of them still lives over there [pointing down the block]: Marsh Leicester. And Priscilla Shaw—Tilly

¹¹ Berger relates in his written notes, on the rationale for including graduate programs, "It would allow us to transfer our notions of literary study and close reading to the graduate level and thus have an influence on future lit teachers."

¹² Smith discusses the early history of the literature board and Berger's role in it in his oral history. For this perspective, see Elizabeth Spedding Calciano, Interviewer, and Randall Jarrell, Editor, *Page Smith: Founding Cowell College and UCSC, 1964-1973* (available at <http://digitalcollections.ucsc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p265101coll13/id/3479>)

Shaw, Tom Vogler. And we were all colleagues at Yale. We all did the Yale thing. We did the New Criticism thing in different ways, because Tom worked in Romantic studies, and Marsh was a Chaucerian, and Tilly worked in French, German comparative lit—modern poetry and stuff like that. So we all did different things, but we all knew what the different ways of doing were. And we all focused on New Criticism.

Early Cowell College and the Original UCSC Experiment

Vanderscoff: In those pioneer years at UCSC, what role did your college play for you as a teacher and as a fellow?

Berger: Well, it was primary. Because the departments in the first years were really just part of the college. There was no department. We were all members of the college: people in sciences, social sciences, humanities. And we taught our special thing under the college rubric.

Vanderscoff: And how would you characterize Cowell in particular in those days, as your affiliated college, as opposed to the colleges that followed?

Berger: The first college was supposed to be oriented towards humanities, and the second, Stevenson, towards social sciences, and Crown towards sciences. And that's the way it worked. Only they were hiring people for Crown College right away, even though the college itself didn't get off the ground— I mean, Kenneth Thimann, who became provost of Crown and the dean of natural sciences, came in right away with science programs. So they had them going, and they were organizing toward having their own college right away.

Vanderscoff: Did you find that the students who came to UCSC in those pioneer years were in any way different from the students you found at Yale, or different from the students who came here later?

Berger: No, no. The great thing was that except for the fact there were co-eds—and they didn't have co-eds at Yale, yet, when I left—there was no difference. They were terrific kids. They were really smart. They thought coming here was

special for them. It was a new campus, and it got very good publicity and was able to get good students. So we had great students. I was very lucky. That's how I felt. That's how I feel.

Vanderscoff: And as a closing question in these reflections on these pioneer years, do you think that the original UCSC experiment—all we've been talking about, this balance with the boards and the college—do you think it was successful in the late sixties and early seventies? Is it possible to give a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to this question?

Berger: Yes, sure. Yeah, it was successful. And it successfully phased itself out.

Vanderscoff: And how do you gauge that success? Why do you think it was successful?

Berger: Because there was never any problem. In the burgeoning development of the other institutions—the boards of studies in literatures and history—they developed without any problem. The first three colleges balanced that by having humanities, social sciences, science. But that was set up in the beginning. And we had scientists in Cowell who then moved on to Crown; social scientists, who then moved on to Stevenson. So it was all set up. And I remember Dennis McElrath and Charles Page, the first provost of Stevenson. They were there, I think from the beginning. Yeah, they were there in first year, because Dennis and I were very close. We used to visit a lot. So they were involved in it already. They were on the outskirts of the Cowell experience, but they were partly in it. And they just developed their own structures [at Stevenson].

Vanderscoff: You mentioned earlier in your answer to that question that, in addition to being successful, the original experiment also “successfully phased itself out.” Do you think that the success of that original UCSC experiment is something that's tied to a particular time and could not have endured in that way? What do you mean by that?

Berger: I have no idea—I can only say it's what happened at Santa Cruz. (pause) We began primarily as a college which was across-the-board, people from all the

disciplines working together. But we knew that it was going to devolve into a more departmental structure. We all knew that it would, sooner or later. And it began to do that right away. But there was never any conflict. That's the good thing about it. I mean, we knew that's the way it was going to happen. And it gradually happened as people collected more into a literature board and into a history board. To me, it was great. It's the way we knew it was going to be. There was always a little conflict with maybe Page Smith, who wanted to keep it from being that way as long as possible. But that was not a big deal.

So it organized primarily in this new British way of being primarily a collegial structure, but it prepared itself to be a much more American, Yale-Harvard type of thing. Since a lot of people came from Yale and Harvard, there was no problem.

Vanderscoff: Good. Well, I think that's a good point to rest. Next time we can pick up with tracking that moment of change and shift as the seventies passed, and discuss events like reaggregation and reorganization.

Berger: Okay.

Further Reflections on College and Board Dynamics at Early UCSC

Vanderscoff: Today is Wednesday, February 6th, 2013. This is Cameron Vanderscoff here with Harry Berger, Jr. for part two of his oral history project. We are at his residence near the base of campus. Today we're going to start out talking about changes to the original Santa Cruz vision, and talking about reorganization. Do you think that the dynamic between the colleges and the boards of studies, prior to reorganization, was problematic in any way?

Berger: I think it was problematic in the sense that we were all housed in a collegiate way. We didn't have boards of studies until after we had colleges. So we had offices of various kinds, with classrooms in the science building, I think the first year—natural sciences. But I don't remember how we met as a lit board. I remember meeting in the evening sometimes and stuff like that, but I really

don't have much memory of what happened in specifically departmental ways in those early years. I think mainly I remember college stuff.

Vanderscoff: And do you think that that focus on the college made it difficult to get any sort of unity on board, or advance board programs that way?

Berger: I don't think that's what it was. Because the main problem in our grouping was that most universities had English departments, French departments and Spanish departments. We had a literature department, which housed all the different languages in one administrative group. And so we would meet altogether for all decisions. That made it much more complicated, and much tougher. And there were more English people; there were more students majoring in English, [so] that the German and French people had to keep their share of the control of the board. And we had a special trouble with the two Germanists: they tried to control all the other languages. One, John Ellis, was against New Criticism. He was against close reading. He did it himself, and he was pretty good—not bad at it. But he just fought with everyone. It made it very difficult. And that was the main problem. Page Smith had a lot of trouble with him, and other people did too. So the main problems we had were trouble from the Germanists. Everybody else, there were no problems.

Vanderscoff: Hmm. Now for you personally, how did you divide your time between your tie to your college and your tie to your board. Did you have a sense of priorities in that?

Berger: One of the things I don't remember is how that worked in the first few years. I don't remember much about where we met. I remember we did a lot of stuff in Nat Sci, because that was built.

They had trailers down on the field. They were near the provost house, I think, or somewhere. Students lived in trailers.

Vanderscoff: Yes, down by the East Field House, what's now the East Field House.

Berger: Yeah, yeah. And so I sort of vaguely connect their living there with Cowell College, and what went on at Cowell College, because they were close by. I remember we had a big lecture course that this guy [William] Hitchcock gave. They were in the gym, the gym down there. So we all would get together in the gym for those. Hitchcock, Mary Holmes, and Jasper Rose were the trio brought out by Page Smith from various places. Jasper came from Rice University. But so also did Richard Randolph, who was a great guy. He was one of the first anthropology appointments here. He was good. He and I taught together several times, and it went well. But he came from Rice. And also this guy Bert Kaplan, who died just several years ago. He was a big sort of unwieldy guy who never spoke very much, and spoke in a low voice.

It's beyond me why Page hired a lot of the people he hired. It really is. You'll have to go find out from other people what the value of these guys was. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So for you, then, there was a strong sense of conflicting personalities and interests that at times made it difficult to run the board and the college?

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: And did you find it was substantially more contentious in that way than your experience teaching at Yale?

Berger: Oh, yeah. Yeah, because it was new. The lines of power were getting established conversation by conversation. So everything we were doing, we all knew, had something do with what was going to happen to the way we ended up in this place.

Vanderscoff: So on balance, keeping in mind that contentious aspect, do you think that the structure that was set up here and the personalities who were in it allowed you and like-minded people a certain opportunity to have a certain freedom as to how you would establish the lit board and so on?

Berger: That's true. Yeah, and there was something else, which is we really liked the students. We were very lucky. We had a great bunch of students, I thought. They were terrific the first few years. I still see some of them. I thought it was generally a great bunch of students, and I liked them. We all got along pretty well together, as I remember. There were always a few students who wanted to firebomb the place, and firebomb us, but that's the way things always happen.

Reorganization at UCSC:

College/Board Culture, and Hiring/Promotion Dynamics

Vanderscoff: (laughs) Now in the late seventies, under a series of factors, including falling student enrollments and things like the redirect program from Berkeley, Chancellor Sinsheimer came in and did a substantial reorganization of the structure, where the hiring power was stripped from the colleges and devolved to the boards. For you, do you recall if this impacted how you gave your time and energy to your board versus your college?

Berger: I don't remember. Because all of us in literature were in Cowell College, and we would meet together and do stuff together. And it isn't clear to me now which of those things we did were collegial things, and which were lit board things. And why did we first start calling the groups boards of study?

Vanderscoff: I think it was, because they only started calling them departments in the late nineties.

Berger: Not 'til later. But I'm trying to remember whether we thought—I guess it was maybe Page's idea to call them boards of studies. He wanted to get rid of anything that was like what was normally done everywhere else. (laughs) And I thought he did a good job.

Vanderscoff: So because of this level of attachment between the lit board and Cowell College, do you think that for you, your sense of the relevance of the college in your daily life and your work sustained itself beyond that reorganization?

Berger: Yeah, I remember feeling very much part of the college, because most of my friends—the people I hired were people who were, if not in the first college, then in Stevenson. Because we were also doing the Stevenson hiring too. And when we got together, Stevenson and Cowell folks, there weren't that many differences in specific college structural organization, because they were just new-founded. So there was no problem. We were part of what—did we call it a literature board then? I don't even remember. But we were part of Cowell College. Socially there was a lot of overlap.

Vanderscoff: And do you think that climate, that collegial climate, was that supportive of faculty research and faculty efforts to get tenure?

Berger: I thought it was. A lot of people didn't, but that's because they didn't want to do much research. But I've been writing from the word 'go.' I've written all my life. And I hired people whom I hoped would write, though several of them ended up not writing. But people who were serious about that, who really wanted to do criticism—and usually that involves writing. But my hires were, I would say, half and half. I hired a lot of good people, many of whom didn't produce a lot.

Vanderscoff: And do you think that that is problematic? How does teaching play into that research dynamic?

Berger: The people who I'm talking about were very good in classrooms. And they knew their stuff. And so what you were writing and what you were teaching were two different things. Everything I write comes out of what I teach. And I guess after a while, what I write goes back into what I teach. But not at first. I got my cues for writing from teaching. I would try stuff out with students and I was really serious. And I would steal their ideas and print them under my name and do all kinds of things like that.

Vanderscoff: (laughs) Do you think it's problematic that the board of study had so many people in it who were not interested in research? Do you think that's problematic for the board or the university in the long run?

Berger: Well, that varied. I don't I think it's that some were and some weren't. I just think that different folks had different conceptions of what it was. We disagreed about that. I mean, I was into this thing that started at Yale, what's called New Criticism, close reading. And the Germanists were not. They could do it, but they were theoretically against what they thought New Criticism was. They both opposed it in argument, but also in kind of nasty backhanded ways, which is not worth getting into too much.

Vanderscoff: Well, while we're on the topic of the literature board I'd like to track some of the growth it went through over the years. How were the advent of movements like women's studies incorporated into the board and its curriculum? I do know in the very early years there were only perhaps a small handful of women on the board, and that gender balance did shift.

Berger: Well, I tried to hire several women, and two or three of them didn't want to leave their jobs. When I first started doing this, I was trying to get women. I got Tilly Shaw from Yale, who's still in town and still my friend. I forget who else. I can't remember the other ones. I'm blanking out on who the women were, and maybe there weren't that many. (laughs) There were in Spanish; there were women there. But they were mostly language instructors. A lot of women were language instructors, so they were not teaching so much the literature theory stuff, but teaching language sections. There were several women there. I can't remember all of them. They were a very good bunch of people. We all got along really well—I remember that part.

Vanderscoff: So in this mode of discussing curricular shifts that happened in literature do you recall there being a significantly different scope of subject matter in the literature department as of late in your career at UCSC, as compared to early in your career? Do you think there was a shift that occurred?

Berger: New Criticism started in the thirties and forties. I went to Yale as a freshman in 1940, '41. Between '43 and '46 I was in World War II. When I came back to Yale, they hired, in the late forties, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. And Brooks and Warren wrote the textbook called *Understanding Poetry*.

It's a major textbook that we all used to show students how to read poems line-by-line in close reading. And that was happening the 1940s, and that was a big change in literary studies, and it stayed that way ever since. There is history of ideas or literary history—there's all that stuff—but specific New Criticism, close reading of texts, started in the thirties with what they call these Southern regional guys. They brought it to Yale.

A bunch of us got into it, were involved in it. The people I hired were people who did that at Yale: George Amis, Tom Vogler, Tilly Shaw. So that we brought it out to Santa Cruz. We had a lot of trouble with John Ellis, mainly because, though he tried to do the same thing, he kept shooting everybody else down. (laughs) His colleague, who was a really senior colleague, Sig Puknat, the first man [in the board], who was close to Page, wasn't really intellectual at all.¹³ Didn't do it, didn't fight about, didn't worry about it, didn't pay much attention to it. He mainly tried to run the organization. So we [just] had problems with one guy in German.

The people in French did what we did. Neal Oxenhandler was the first French appointment. He was at Yale with me, so I knew him before. He and I grew up, so to speak, in the same environment of close reading. He tried to do it. I didn't think he was very good at it, but he tried to do it.

Vanderscoff: And so this close reading approach that you and some of your peers tried to instill into the board, as of later in the time of your involvement at UCSC, closer to the time of your retirement, do you think that this still was a dominant or central approach in how the board went about its business?

Berger: I do.

¹³ Both Sig Puknat and John Ellis have been interviewed by the Regional History Project, including for their reflections on the early UCSC climate. See Randall Jarrell, Interviewer, and Irene Reti, Editor, *Santa Cruz in the Mid-1970s, a Time of Transition: Volume One* (available at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/175935jh#page-1>)

Pros and Cons of the Broad Structure of the Literature Board

Berger: I mean, there are all kinds of problems, but it isn't worth getting into. I mean, what are the world lit people doing, why are they doing what they're doing? How do they address what we were doing? When they fought us tooth and nail, were they doing it because they didn't want to do close reading, or because it was a much more political thing about running and getting power in the board? I can't answer all that stuff.

Vanderscoff: I'd like to talk about some times in particular about the late eighties and early nineties. In '88, the board was described, by an external review, as being "in a state of transition," which—

Berger: [shrugging] What isn't? (laughter) Come on. From what to what?

Vanderscoff: Well, essentially arguing that there were internal tensions that had exacerbated structural problems which were in the board since the beginning, which it seems to me is alluding to these things that you're talking about—some of this linguistic factionalism.

Berger: Yeah, they weren't structural. They were personal. I mean, there were people who didn't like each other. That's not a structural issue in the same way.

Vanderscoff: Yes. Well, you so you're talking about personal disagreements. However, it does seem to me that there was a structure that lumped everyone together under this large umbrella in a way they perhaps wouldn't have been elsewhere.

Berger: Yes.

Vanderscoff: So what I would ask you is how adaptable do you think this broad structure of the board proved to be, ultimately, in response the needs and agendas of its diverse constituencies?

Berger: (pause) That's a good question. What do you mean, "adaptable?"

Vanderscoff: Did it prove—that structure—to be versatile enough to find common ground in everyone’s interest, or in some sense would it have made more sense to go with the more traditional English department, French department, German department, et cetera?

Berger: (pause) Well, personally, I thought it was terrific. I thought the way Page Smith set it up was terrific, because I wanted to learn sociology, political theory—I wanted to do a lot myself. And I’ve done it, because of that. So that generalized kind of organization—which kept us from being only English, only French—made us work together, not only across languages, but with historians and with others. Because of that, the kind of teaching I’ve done since then, the kind of research I’ve done since then, has been much broader. When I say “me,” I mean all of us. I taught with people in the social sciences. We co-taught. Rich Randolph, Bob Werlin, who was a sociologist—Rich was an anthropologist—we together taught sections. And we’d meet two, three times a week and talk about what we were going to do. We’d set texts. The texts would be ethnographies and poetry, for Christ sake. So that was all part of it. We didn’t even worry about it. That’s what we did.

And so that seemed to me really, really important and good. I learned from it. They learned from it. The students got a good sense of what intellectual work was, that it wasn’t simply chopped down—you do literature here, history here. And philosophy, the history of ideas—we did them all together, though we did them with some sense of distinguishing whenever we had to. So I thought that was really powerful. And I attribute that to the way Page set everything up, though he himself was not much of an intellectual in that way. He was in other ways. He had, I thought, a very bad sense of people he hired—whether or not he hired me or not. (laughter) He had a pretty bad sense of what people could and couldn’t do, and hired some not-good people. But his conception, I thought, was terrific.

Vanderscoff: So, for you, the pros of that broad board structure—this intellectual open field effect—outweigh the cons, in the sense of the animosity and the politics?

Berger: Yes. Yeah, there were all those things. And, for me, the pros outweighed the cons.

“To My Students and Their Resistance”:

Ideas on Teaching

Vanderscoff: Huh. Well, I’d like to shift gears slightly to discuss your thoughts on teaching—the teaching, of course, that you were doing in the midst of all these broader debates. I’ve noticed that you dedicated one of your books to, quote, “students and their resistance.”¹⁴

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: What did you mean by this, and why did you choose to commemorate that sentiment so prominently? What have students and their resistance done for you that’s so profound that you would dedicate one of your books to them?

Berger: Students didn’t jump right into what you were trying to show them. They came out of high schools where they were doing very different things. And they didn’t really know how to do this or want to do it. It took time and it took work, and after a while, when they got into it, they loved it. But they were very resistant at first, coming out of high school, to start being taught by people who had been at Yale, Harvard and Dartmouth, and had dealt with fairly sophisticated groups of students, and were used to throwing heavy stuff at them. We did that to these kids.

Vanderscoff: And that resistance that you talk about from these students, that push back, how has that informed you personally, or informed your teaching style, or your writing?

Berger: (pause) I don’t know. I mean my writing is sort of funny, because on the one hand people find it tough. It takes them a while to get the hang of it. On the

¹⁴ The dedication is from *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complexities in Shakespeare*.

other hand, when they get the hang of it they think it's great stuff, because it's different. I guess with students it was the same thing. They found what I was doing difficult, and I kept at it. And when they could do it they felt good about it.

Vanderscoff: You were discussing, just maybe ten minutes ago, this idea that there was a reciprocal process between your teaching in the classroom and your writing on the page, that they would both cyclically inform each other.

Berger: Yeah, because all the writing I did was in terms of teaching. All the books I've written came out of stuff I was doing in courses. It's all the same to me.

Vanderscoff: So you've found that teaching classes and having that discussion with students has taught you substantial things about the subject matter that you approach.

Berger: Definitely. Yeah, because you throw a question out there, and you get an answer from a student and it's an answer you never even thought of. It's not that the student was brilliant or not brilliant. The student was coming from a place I wasn't at. And I suddenly realized, "Yeah, there's something there. I can use that. I can change that. That's what's happened to me all my life with teaching. Precisely because students didn't know what I did, and were doing something else, I learned from that. You catching onto me?"

Vanderscoff: Absolutely, yeah, this sense of teaching as a reciprocal process.

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: You've written on multiple occasions on the value of revision, of "second sight." We'll discuss this later in terms of your work and your writing process, but I'm curious about how has this revisionary perspective impacted your teaching over the years? How have you evolved as a teacher?

Berger: (pause) Well you know, the second year I remember what I did the first year. And I'll try it out and some of it won't work, because there are different students. They'll come back at me with things that make me think of stuff I hadn't thought about before. Revision is just the name of the game. Because

you've got new students. They don't know what the hell you're talking about. You've got to make them—not think, because they know how to think. They just don't know how to do this theoretical, interpretive stuff. So you have to get them to do that. But while they're doing that they're trying to figure out how works are working. (laughs) They're throwing stuff at you when you ask them, "Well what about this?" And they throw something at you, and some people think, "Well, they're dumb." I think it's terrific, because they say things I had never thought of.

Vanderscoff: While we're in this revisionary mode, given the different shifts you've seen in critical approach and, I imagine, different attacks and rearrangements on the canon, did the composition of the material you taught in your class change from the beginning of your career to the end?

Berger: What do you mean by composition of material?

Vanderscoff: Like your reading lists. Simply the type of material you were assigning, the way you taught it—did that shift?

Berger: I don't think so. But how I've changed over the years in these interactions, I don't know. I mean I have, but I don't how.

Vanderscoff: That's something someone else could speak to better than you, students, even?

Berger: Yeah. I don't think about it. I just keep going. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Recently you've been writing on Plato and Socrates, including on the latter's notion of moral values, of objective moral values. Are there particular virtues or qualities that you can pick out that make a teacher good at what they're doing? What makes good teaching?

Berger: Well there are two or three things. They've got to be good readers. They have to know how to read. Not every academic knows how to do that, because the traditions have been different. The traditions of French and Spanish were to spend a longer time in the history of ideas than we did in literature. The people

at Yale who worked in English were doing this before the people in French were doing it. And the people in French and Spanish and German picked it up, and then hiring changed. After a while, they hired people in German who could do the close reading shtick. It was something that was begun, as I said, by people like Brooks and Warren in the thirties, that developed first in English departments, and then in other languages. And when we were picking people out in 1964, '65 to go to UC Santa Cruz, we made sure to pick people who had done this kind of stuff, as much as we could. We couldn't do it in German, because the Germanists were already there. And both the Germanists were anti-close reading, or anti-New Criticism. Or maybe they were just anti-us, I don't know. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: And so for you, this idea of a teacher being a good reader, is that married, to you, with the idea of close reading, of New Criticism?

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: And beyond reading, what do you think it is that makes good teaching?

Berger: Well, it's hard for me to talk about this because I'm writing about it so much. But it's what you would call a theoretical perspective, that you always understand that there's a problem behind the problem; that when you're talking about close reading, you're talking about one thing which is not another. And you're talking about a procedure, a method that has certain consequences for the people you're teaching. They're going to learn this more than they're going to learn that. And instead of just reading about what happened in the seventeenth century, what the horizon was like, they're getting down on the ground and picking up things that people wrote there and going into that. That's very different from just saying, "The seventeenth century was revolutionary," and stuff like that.

Vanderscoff: So it's something to do with the teacher who can get students to intimately engage with texts?

Berger: Yeah. And what we were also involved in, since we were teaching students from all over the place because of the college, was disseminating a particular method of interpretation that got in the way of people in history, sociology, psychology. And they had to deal with the idea that we were doing close reading, and that wasn't something they did in their field. So there were consequences.

Vanderscoff: It seems to me that in teaching, as in all professions, there are successes and there are failures. But with teaching, unlike accounting or something like that, there isn't as straightforward a barometer as simply to point to a net figure or a bottom line. How do you personally gauge success and failure in teaching?

Berger: Well, in my own case, kids write papers. So they show what they're doing, and that's how you gauge it. Over the course of the quarter, ten-week period, you have four or five papers coming in from each of the students. And you see to what extent they can think about this stuff, and then to what extent they can write about the way they think. Those are two different things. Their writing is a different, special problem. And kids who get the method very often can't express it, because they don't know how to write. So you teach writing always, in my field. You go over the papers like crazy. Because they have to be able to get the writing down, so they can do interpretation.

Reflections on the UCSC Narrative Evaluation System

Vanderscoff: And in that vein of assessing success in that way, how useful was the narrative evaluation, pass/no record system for you as an educator?

Berger: Oh, I thought that was great. I mean, at Yale you gave them what—an 82, 88, A, B, C. This way you had to write a description, a paragraph description. It was a total pain in the ass, but it was terrific. It was worth taking the trouble. I don't know that it was a very good system, simply in terms of the ease of assessment. You look at a whole bunch of narrative evaluations—what are they saying? But the student got more out of it. And that's more important, that the students got a lot out of that system. That's more important than the fact that

faculty had trouble organizing it. [recorder turned off; recording resumes after a brief discussion of the next series of questions]

The Critical World of Harry Berger, Jr.:

Reflections on Writing, Scholarship, and Process

Vanderscoff: So we've been touching upon your writing. I'd like to get into that in some more detail, so we can gain a little bit more insight and background to these things we've been talking about. I've noticed that prior to '88 you published one book, which was your thesis, and edited one collaboration. From '88 to the present you've published upwards of a dozen books and monographs as well as maintained a considerable output of essays. What sparked that shift?

Berger: Well, I've always been writing. I've had publications since the sixties. And all these essays were working towards books. But at the time I wasn't going to just keep them together in a drawer until I got them all done, because you were told to send your stuff out and try to get publications in journals. That's how they evaluated you, whether you were publishing—not books, but just getting in the public's face. So they started all these journals in the thirties and forties that hadn't been there before. Or these journals had changed their character, and stopped being simply philosophical, historical, history of ideas journals and started to move towards interpretations of texts as a basic evidence for philosophy and theology and so forth. And so from the time I started, I guess in the late forties, fifties, there were places to publish. And then there were also the annual MLA [Modern Language Association] meetings and stuff like that, where you would give papers and all the critics would be shocked.

Vanderscoff: (laughs)

Berger: And you'd realize that you were doing something that was different that they didn't like. And you nevertheless had to assume and tell yourself that they didn't know what you were doing, they hadn't gotten on to you yet. Because if you didn't, if you thought that, well, they were right, you'd stop. So I, being the

“you” I’m talking about, assumed that these guys really didn’t know how to do it. These old scholars. They didn’t know *what* I was doing. They didn’t know how to do it themselves. So they resisted it. I always thought they were wrong. And now I *know* they were wrong. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: And so, reflecting on that period of ’88 to the present, do you think that your ideas in your essays had built up to a point that you were then able to write books about them?

Berger: Yeah, well it’s interesting. I got into the [Edmund] Spenser stuff, *The Faerie Queene*. I did my dissertation on that. And that was my point of attack, because I totally overturned the field, as it turns out. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren didn’t read Spenser. They didn’t talk about it. They didn’t think about it. Cleanth Brooks was always making lousy jokes about what a crappy poem it was, and that pissed me off. I thought I was going to work on that. So I went to work on Spenser, partly because the New Critics thought Spenser was bad. [John] Donne was good, Spenser was bad. That was a mental set they had. So I figured, well, I’d show ‘em.

Vanderscoff: So in some ways, in writing about Spenser you were stepping outside of the standard purview of New Criticism?

Berger: Or taking New Criticism in a different direction. And certainly in the field of Spenser, you had a lot of just grizzly old farts in the field. (laughs) They were a terrible bunch of people. They knew nothing about Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. They knew nothing about that stuff. They were somewhere else. They were in the 1920s and 1930s.

Vanderscoff: So from a New Criticism perspective, therefore, was *The Faerie Queene* something of a baroque thing to write about in that way?

Berger: It wasn’t baroque. Yeah, it was weird, if that’s what you mean by baroque—

Vanderscoff: Yeah.

Berger: Yeah, it was weird. Because they wanted to work on what they thought were the hip poets, like Donne and [Andrew] Marvell and all those guys. They thought Spenser was this big, long lazy poem. And they never really looked very hard at it.

Vanderscoff: Staying with *The Faerie Queene* for a moment, you've been writing on it since the fifties. How has this text changed for you as you've viewed it from different standpoints in your life? What have you learned from it over the course of this long engagement?

Berger: I don't know what I've learned. (laughs) I'm still working on it, and it's still changing for me. I'm running a reading group, and we're doing Book One of *The Faerie Queene*. There were about twenty-five people at the last meeting, including Marsh Leicester, Sean Keilen, and I'm doing it with my buddy—do you know Michael Ursell?

Vanderscoff: Heard of, never met.

Berger: He's a great guy. We started up just as informal reading group. We have about twenty, twenty-five people. We're in a room where, even with my hearing aids, I can't hear everything they're saying. And I'm getting kind of upset by that, but they're all talking and they're all really getting into the poem. So I don't have to say anything.

Vanderscoff: So *The Faerie Queene* continues to be for you, then, the source of new discoveries?

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: As a writer, how conscious are you of disciplines and disciplinary lines when you write and edit?

Berger: (pause) Well, I'm not very conscious of it at all. I do what has to be done. In some cases I have to find out what was going on, so I read people who are historians who tell me what was happening. Then I make sure I know that well enough so I don't go off and do some big, goofy modern interpretation that

simply doesn't speak to what was going on back then in social history and political history and intellectual history.

Vanderscoff: So when you write in a literary New Criticism mode, then, do you like to bring in interdisciplinary perspectives, the perspectives of other disciplines on the material that you're writing on?

Berger: I don't think about it. I don't try to, but I have. That's what happens. I don't say, "Well, now I'm going to have to do something historical, something sociological." No. I mean, I know about all that stuff, and I do it because this needs to be done or that needs to be done in order to make something clear.

Vanderscoff: Have you ever found it useful to think in terms of those disciplinary lines, or disciplinary boxes, either here at Santa Cruz or in your writing? What's the point of having these boxes?

Berger: I haven't thought much about what it means to do a lit major, or English major, or history major as opposed to something else. I just accept all that stuff without thinking much about it. And at the same time, the methodology that I'm interested in, and the methodologies that I pursue and try to get down, are all across the place. I've worked on Galileo and history of science and all kinds of stuff because I just happen to take a left turn someplace and find myself in those texts, And so I read those texts. I never worried that I'm only supposed to read poetry. I read whatever the fuck there was to read, and read it the same way.

Vanderscoff: So, keeping in mind the process of revision and these "left turns" that you were just discussing, do you think that you write about a text like *The Faerie Queene* in a different way now than you did in the early fifties?

Berger: Yeah, yeah.

Vanderscoff: What do you think has changed?

Berger: Well, for example, I'm looking at a weird stanza called the alexandrine—I don't want to go into it, nine line stanza. And I'm spending a lot more time these days going from stanza to stanza to see how each one is built, what

happens in it, what the relation is between the rhyme scheme and the rhyme words.

Vanderscoff: Do you think there is a relationship between morality and scholarly criticism? Do you see writing, in a scholarly way, as ethically concerned work or ethical work in any way?

Berger: Yeah. I'm playing with that stuff all the time, including playing around with that word *ethos*, which I don't want to play around with right here.

Vanderscoff: (laughs)

Berger: Yeah. I don't know how to approach this right now. Because everything I do, all the interpretation I do involves bringing out ethical positions that people are taking or not taking, that they're aware of or not aware of. I'm interested in the representation of characters who show themselves to be preventing their awareness so that they can do the bad stuff they want to do and get away from themselves, get away with it. I can show you interpretations. It's hard for me to talk about it. But what I'm interested in is the way in which the language that represents people—because we have language, whether it's a poem or a play, and we go by the language. The analysis of the language shows you what the character is trying not to say, and saying in spite of that. Stuff like that. That's what I'm playing with.

Vanderscoff: Hmm. And so you have a certain interest in what sort of ethical repression is going on there?

Berger: Yes. I hadn't thought of it that way, but that's a good phrase—ethical repression. Yes.

Vanderscoff: I've noticed that occasionally your language in essays and in talks you've given—and simply here talking with me—can be very casual. For instance, using the phrase "Well. Whatever." in an essay on the death of Socrates. What do you think the value or relevance is of the vernacular in scholarly writing or discussion? When you use language that sort of breaks that scholarly mode in

some way, what do you think that does about the material you're talking about? Does that make it more accessible in some way?

Berger: Well, what it does is, it's part of a running critique against a mode of interpretation which also is a mode of looking at the world and so forth and so on. It's hard to do this off the top, but when I started working with Spenser there were virtually no people doing New Criticism. There was something called the Variorum Edition of *The Faerie Queene*, which had all kinds of footnotage telling where things came from, and who wrote like this before, and what Spenser's line sounds like. But there was no close reading in the sense of, "What's going on here? To what extent are you being asked by the verse to resist what people seem to be thinking and doing and saying in the poem?" That was not the kind of interest or question that people in the generation before me asked. They never got into that much.

Vanderscoff: Well, addressing the notion of those questions, as a critic it seems to me that you're part of this critical world. How have larger changes in this world—the path from New Criticism towards, say, postmodernist understandings and so on—changed your sense of place in that world, or the way you've gone about your business of criticizing?

Berger: It's only shown me that the way I thought—back then—was what came to be called postmodern. Those terms don't mean much to me. They do have a certain kind of historical marking, significance. They tell you that certain things that happened in the fifties, and they were critiqued in the seventies, and these things were critiqued in the nineties. And so you can say that this is modernism, so anybody that's critiquing it must postmodernist. But I don't even know what modernism is in that sense—there's what I'm doing now, and there's what I do tomorrow. And what Critic A was doing yesterday, and what I did to Critic A the day after yesterday. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So do you see this critical world, then, as being much more contingent on relationships, rather than these kinds of tectonic movements overlapping in some way, as far as how you go about your work?

Berger: When you say “relationships,” what do you mean?

Vanderscoff: I mean dynamics between individual critics. You were just mentioning, “I’m here today, I’m there tomorrow. This person was there yesterday, they’re there tomorrow.” Do you conceive of it more in those terms than in terms of larger critical movements?

Berger: Yeah, I do. Because if I’m doing a reading of one poem, I want to see what people said, and I want to react to it. And in some cases, what people said helped me and I used it to go on. In other cases, it stops me because it seems all wrong. And so I have to do a mixed kind of thing, in which I pick up the stuff that I think is good and carry it through, and try to go in that direction. And I stomp on the stuff I think is bad.

Vanderscoff: I’d like to broaden our scope a little bit here from critic in academia to writer in culture. I think this also is a way, also, of getting back towards that notion of the vernacular. I’ve noticed that in select instances your writing has made allusions to elements of pop culture. One example of this is you mention the Merry Pranksters and their psychedelic bus [Further].

Berger: Oh, that bus, yeah.

Vanderscoff: And more recently, Stephen Colbert and truthiness [in] talking about Dutch still life [painting], of all things. What relevance have you found in the tools and terms provided by pop culture in thinking about art culture, literary culture?

Berger: Well, I don’t know. That seems sort of self-explanatory. I turn Colbert on and there’s a notion that I think is great and is very funny, and so as I’m writing something I remember it and I say wow, this is truthiness, and stuff like that. I can’t give you a good answer to that.

Vanderscoff: So, in some sense, do you think there is a level playing field as to where you can draw inspiration and ideas, whether it’s something that is typically regarded as high culture or low culture in that way?

Berger: Yeah, yeah. It comes from where it comes from. Wherever you're looking. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Do you think that that has had some sort of liberating effect to where you can get ideas from, and to how you can think?

Berger: Oh yeah, sure. I mean, as I say, I get a lot of my ideas from students who don't know what they're saying. They say things that can be totally brilliant—but they didn't know that. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Huh. As I mentioned a little bit earlier, you've written, on multiple occasions, on the value of revision. Why is revision such a profound term for you when you approach your writing?

Berger: Because it involves what happens when you go forward. You see what you did. You see it again. You see it differently. You hope to see it better. You see it differently and then you change it. And so my relation to my own past is like my relation to everybody else's work. My own work in the past is no different from my relation to John Crowe Ransom's work or Cleanth Brooks's work. It's the same.

Vanderscoff: I'd like to address a few of these individual ideas that you've explored in your writing. You've written in the book *Second World & Green World* on the idea of Renaissance period imagination. What's the value of studying and writing about imagination? Do you think, like time, it is possible to periodize imagination?

Berger: (laughs) My enemy, John Ellis the Germanist, in meetings would always talk about, [imitating tone] "people who are interested in period concepts." He was always taking off on the "period concepts"—the idea of a period imagination. So I have to cleanse my head of Ellis—ask me that again. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: Do you think, like time, it's possible to periodize imagination?

Berger: Oh, that's too formal. I don't know if I want to work with that notion anymore. It's just that it was one way of talking about what seems to have been

happening from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, where people are confronting medieval stuff. I know there's this new book out—Steve Greenblatt has a new book out called *The Swerve* in which some of this is—I haven't read it. But apparently he's talking about some of that stuff. I don't know if I can give you an answer to that question at this point. My mind's a little scambly, and that's a difficult question. Ask it again.

Vanderscoff: Well, it's a two-part question I suppose, in some way. Is it possible to periodize imagination? And then more broadly, what's the value of studying and writing about something as broad as imagination in the first place.

Berger: (pause) I haven't thought much in terms of the period imagination lately. It was something I was into. I was trying to figure out what people like Spenser were doing that hadn't been done before. And this comes up because they were always alluding to earlier stuff. They built their poems on a whole tradition of poetry, and they were writing in it, but also against it. They were borrowing, and taking all the stuff that had been done before and transforming it. So this happens all the way through history. And the question is, at what point does it seem to really turn things upside down. And you look at literature from, say, the seventh to the twelfth century, and it all stayed pretty much within the same set of understandings, a certain kind of universe, which is formalized by Thomas Aquinas and Dante [Alighieri]. And it was after their formalizations of it that people began to be able to look at that image of a whole and say, "That's not the way it seems to me."

Vanderscoff: So you sense that there are, broadly speaking, these sea changes in what people seem to ruminate, or imagine on, and that's reflected in the art from the time.

Berger: Yeah. But it has to do also with, "What were these people reading? What were the artists looking at?" First you grow up and you try to do what people—when you're young—what people did before, so you can do it well. And the next thing you do, once you get to do that, is you try to explode what they did and get them out of the way and turn it in a different direction.

Vanderscoff: So when you study imagination, either an individual's imagination or cultural imagination, what do you think you learn? What does that allow you to get at that other modes do not?

Berger: I don't know, because at this point I don't think in those terms, in imagination, anymore. I don't know what I think in terms of, but I'm not doing that.

Vanderscoff: So this has been, in some ways, one of those ideas that has been subject to the revisionary process.

Berger: It must have been. I haven't thought about it. Whatever has happened, has happened, and I have been uncritical about it. I've written so much that I have to go back to read my early stuff to see what it says. And I don't even remember that. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: So you just mentioned that you've been uncritical about this change away from this idea of imagination. Do you think it's important to be critical in investigating these intellectual shifts that have happened in your own life, or not?

Berger: Yeah, I guess I think it's important. The point is, it's what I found myself doing all the time. So if I didn't think it was important I'd crawl into a hole and die. (laughs) It's important because it's what I'm doing. I'm not being critical about it, but to be critical is what I think you should be doing.

Escape, Electronics Culture, and Stoned Students:

Thoughts on the Pastoral

Vanderscoff: You've written extensively on what you term the green world, or the human reconstruction of the natural as the pastoral. Do you think that the pastoral still has imaginative cachet today? Do you think that the escapist impulses towards the pastoral are present in any way in the contemporary focus on Internet culture?

Berger: I assume that's everywhere, escapism. The word "pastoral" is a critique of escapism—what I'm thinking of as pastoral. But these guys, these writers, Marvell—not everybody—because they're talking about earlier poetry, which was innocently an escape, which was trying to get away from the real world. And their critique of pastoral was a critique of escape from the ways things really are. And so my sense of the poetry [of] Marvell, [William] Shakespeare, Spenser, [Geoffrey] Chaucer, is that their way of getting in the books is to see what had been written before, and to find out what was wrong with it. How they could make it better or different, or explode it and so forth. So they would take up its views of life, and connect its views of life with its modes of writing. So pastoral was both a form of poetry that involved certain kinds of technical modes, and it was a view of the world. If they were going to do a critique, they would use their poetry to make fun of, to mimic the earlier poetry and the views that that poetry projected.

Vanderscoff: And charting that pastoral impulse towards the present, and reflecting on interesting modes—like take, for example, the sixties. The whole tune in [turn on] and drop out, that whole [Timothy] Leary line—

Berger: Well, that's what I remember. In the sixties at Santa Cruz there were all these guys who had been on weed all night coming to class with the red eyes. (laughter) There was a lot of that. There was a big marijuana thing going on at that time and they were trying to connect it with their relation to the world. They were treating it—gettin' high—as a way to deal with life. And that's exactly what people like Spenser and Donne criticized.

Vanderscoff: And so what you witnessed in your students here in the sixties, do you think that has anything to do with some sort of idealistic, or some sort of a pastoral impulse on their part?

Berger: Yeah. Yeah, that's good. I hadn't thought of that. But sure. I mean, what Spenser is critiquing is those assholes. (laughter) Pretty much. Because I remember a lot of those people. They'd be really stoned and they'd come up and

say, (in a halting, slurred tone) “Heyyy pro-fess-orrr, how-are-you-today?” And I would say, “Jesus Christ, sit down.”

Vanderscoff: (laughs)

Berger: I mean, in the sixties if I had a class of twenty-five, four or five of them would come in stoned. It was the way it was.

Vanderscoff: So the teacher can tell.

Berger: And at that time we were allowed to smoke in class. And I smoked cigars. So I would just light up a cigar and blow it at ‘em. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: (laughs) And so what you’re discussing, what you sensed in your students, this pseudo-pastoral impulse, did you sense any sort of ebb and flow in that? Do you think that that impacted the quality of students you had over the years?

Berger: No. It’s interesting, you got a certain bunch of students in or amongst all the others, who were more explicitly in the way. It became okay to do that in class. It became okay to come to class stoned. It wasn’t all that bad. So you just dealt with it. If you’re having a class that’s a conversation—I mean, I never lectured that much. I mostly talked with them. And some of them would take it into the bushes. (laughs) Most of ‘em didn’t. (laughs) You just dealt with it. It became part of what happened in the sixties and seventies, and after a while it sort of dried up.

Vanderscoff: Was that something that was in any way present in student culture when you were at Yale as an undergrad or anything like that?

Berger: No, no. All that started the year I came out here, ‘65.

Vanderscoff: So while we’re on this tangential discussion of distractions in the classroom, later in your career, in your more recent teaching, have you had much interaction with students and electronics culture, in the sense of cell phones and things like that in classrooms?

Berger: No. The students bring their computers in and type notes and things. What other electronic stuff did you have in mind?

Vanderscoff: Well, I suppose simply diversions like—

Berger: I've never been in large classrooms. I retired in '94. All the stuff I taught has just been up to fifteen, twenty people at the most. So I'm not sitting in a room where students are taking cell phones out and having conversations during class, if that's what you mean, no.

Vanderscoff: I ask because in some of these oral histories that I've conducted with professors they've talked about how, as opposed to it just being students just engaging with book culture, you're now dealing with a constituency of students who are very much engaged with electronics culture. Have you noticed any sort of shift in that in your students? Do you think there is a difference between a student of the book culture of the forties, fifties, sixties and so on, and a student of the electronics Internet culture of the nineties, or more recently? Can you speak to that?

Berger: I haven't thought about that. I haven't confronted it, because—see, as I say I retired in '94, and my teaching since then has been sporadic. And I always get in a situation where if I'm asked to teach it's because people want to do it. I'm in a very positive kind of situation. So I'm never involved with a set of surly freshmen.

Vanderscoff: (laughs)

Berger: I haven't had that experience for a very long time. Everything I do is benign for me since I retired. If I'm brought back to teach, it's because kids want to do this. It's not being asked to teach fifteen surly freshmen. I haven't done that since the early nineties.

Vanderscoff: (laughs) Staying on this notion of electronics culture, in a recent interview that I did with [literature professor and colleague of Dr. Berger] Michael Warren, he said that he's quite surprised and astonished by the sudden

accessibility, even a glut, of information that the Internet enables.¹⁵ And [he] suggests that if he were to be a scholar now, actively writing in that way, he would be a very different sort of writer than he used to be. Have you found that the advent of Internet culture, electronics culture has changed the way you access information or the way you go about your work?

Berger: Yeah, it just makes it a lot easier. I don't even have to turn around and pick up a heavy book. (laughter) I can just go to the computer, look it up and find it out real fast. And that's great, because I'm interested in something else, and the more information I can get in the less time, the more time I have to do interpretation. So to me that's fine.

Vanderscoff: Has it meant the advent of greater convenience in your work?

Berger: Yeah. It also means that the whole business of the kind of stuff people had to learn back in the thirties, forties, fifties, sixties—you don't have to worry about it anymore. They have to go through and learn all that stuff and read a lot of books and stuff. But we don't have to that. So you do something else. And that kind of scholarship—it's good to be able to do. I could never do it very well, but I wasn't interested in it. Old fart scholarship, the Spenser Variorum Edition, all those people who looked up all those sources that Spenser must have seen—and this new book that I mentioned by Steve Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, deals with some of that. It's impressive how much these old guys in the generation before me knew. I never knew it. I always just looked it up fast. And having the Internet, I can look it up faster. It's not even an issue anymore. Their kind of scholarship doesn't have to be done. It's already out there.

Vanderscoff: And so do you, then—this electronics revolution we're discussing, it's led to easier scholarship. Do you think it's led to more engaged scholarship?

Berger: Well, that's a good question. I don't know how to answer that question. It's led people like—and there are a lot of people like me. People who live

¹⁵ Michael Warren's oral history is in the editing phase and is slated for release in spring of 2015. -Ed.

around here [faculty housing], and I talk to. It's just made it easier for them to do what they—we—want to do, which is more typical kind of stuff. Changing the modes of close reading and reorganizing them and going back to what was in the thirties, forties, fifties, sixties and seeing how it didn't work. You have to revise the take on all that stuff.

Vanderscoff: Hmm. Well, thank you for that.

"To Share My Revelation":

Further Reflections on Authorship and the "Arts of Interpretation"¹⁶

We started off here discussing the pastoral. And so, coming back to that pastoral, and more particularly the idealization that's so crucial to that process, I'd like to talk about imitation and idealization in terms of art. In your essay "Collecting Body Parts in Leonardo's Cave" you argue that idealization can represent a desire to improve upon nature. You cite perverse, even misogynistic instances of this desire, including an artist demanding five virgin models to draw upon in order to render Helen of Troy.¹⁷ Do you think that to idealize in art is inherently problematic or hubristic?

Berger: Well, yeah. I think the answer is that it's not a question of what I think—do I think that's what they're representing? Do I think that's what Leonardo is showing? And the answer is yes. In other words, Leonardo was doing what fifty years ago people couldn't dream of his doing. He's doing what I'm doing. (laughs) He's making fun of the whole of amputational model, which he reduces idealism to. So one of the things that I'm saying is that people like me find out that all the old writers of the past think just like I do. (laughter) And are doing what I do. But my way of having to present it is that I'm bringing them out. I'm

¹⁶ A conference was held in Berger's honor, which gave rise to a 2009 book entitled *A Touch More Rare: Harry Berger, Jr., and the Arts of Interpretation* (Edited by Nina Levine and David Lee Miller). For readers who are interested in further meditations on his body of work and thought, this is an excellent resource.

¹⁷ The full title of the essay is "Collecting Body Parts in Leonardo's Cave: Vasari's *Lives* and the Erotics of Obscene Connoisseurship." As of this February 2015 writing, it is available online at academia.edu.

showing what they're doing. But, in fact, what I'm really showing is that I'm in their entrails. (laughs) I'm in their entrails. I make them do what I want them to do, so that I can do what I do. (laughter)

Which is unfair to me, in fact. Because I can get evidence from reading. My reading is evidence that something is going on in those texts. It happens to be that what I find going on is what I want to go on. (laughs) I want those texts to do what I do, which is be critical of what's being said and done. I want Leonardo to do what I do. I want Shakespeare, I want Spenser, to look at their stuff the way I do. I want to say that they are ironic readers of their material, just like I am. And so I'm simply reading myself back into all of those authors. That's okay. That's what we do. As long as I can give evidence I can give a persuasive, convincing interpretation and argument, okay.

Vanderscoff: So do you think, then, if someone were to read your work about Shakespeare, are they learning more about Shakespeare, or are they learning more about you?

Berger: I think, naturally, they're learning more about Shakespeare. And if they're learning more about me, that's great. I mean, I don't care about that. I want them to say, "Oh yeah, I never thought of that before, what Berger said. Oh yeah!" (laughter)

Vanderscoff: So in some sense then, is your writing about trying to engender a space of shared revelation about the past or about a particular writer?

Berger: Yeah, I want them to share *my* revelation. (laughter) I mean, let's face it, right? That's what I'm doing, right?

Vanderscoff: I'm curious—you've written on English Renaissance fiction, Italian Renaissance fiction—

Berger: That's because I'm a fraud. I mean, I make do. I learn how to do it. But I'm a lousy linguist. I don't consider myself any good at reading Italian or French and stuff like that, but I make myself do it. I'm very careful using bilingual texts

and so forth. I want to know what's going on on both sides of the double page. I want to be able to read the Greek. I don't know Greek. I teach myself as I go along. And from that standpoint, I'm sloppy and I take a lot of chances. And I'm happy with myself, because I've taught myself how to do that kind of thing pretty well.

Vanderscoff: So if you don't feel you're married too closely to linguistic expertise, when you look at what you've written, how do you sense merit? How do you sense something that's throwaway or not useful or good?

Berger: What makes me happy is when I find a way of talking about what Plato did that nobody else says. That's what makes me happy. And my job is to make that into a persuasive kind of reading, a choice of interpretation. Essentially, ideally, I want to say, "Wow! Look at this. Nobody's ever looked at Plato this way before." Right? That's what I want to say. (laughs) That's what I want people to say about me. I imagine that's what anybody in my position wants to do, at the ultimate. You show everybody that, "Hey, you've never seen this before. Read this text again. And not only that, don't just read my reading of it, but read this text. See what's happened in it. There's great shit happening in this text. It's *now* shit. It's full of *now*."

Vanderscoff: (laughs)

Berger: That's important to me, yeah.

Vanderscoff: Have you ever looked back on something that you've written, or even published in the past, and realized, oh—

Berger: —I really screwed that up? Yeah, all the time. (hearty laughter)

Vanderscoff: (laughs) Which, of course, brings us back to that idea of revision we were discussing a minute ago.

Berger: Yeah, I look at my stuff I wrote in the sixties and seventies, and I can see what I was trying to do. Same person, I know. But when I read it, I say, "Holy

shit. Did I really write that?" (laughter) It's part of my learning process. So you never get out of school.

Vanderscoff: Ah.

Berger: You never get out of school. If you do this stuff, if you're an academic doing interpretation, you stay in school your whole life, as long as you do it. That's cool with me.

Vanderscoff: So addressing all these different topics that you've written about: the Renaissance works from England and Italy, Dutch Still Life, sixteenth century mannerly books, Grecian classics, all these different things, is there something—intellectually, thematically, structurally, however—that unifies these diverse areas of interest for you?

Berger: Well, I never think of it that way. I'm sure there is. I'm old, so I have a career. (pause) I don't know how to answer that. You're saying, "Is there something—?" I don't know if there's something. There's me getting up every morning and doing this for seventy years, sixty years.

Vanderscoff: So do you think, then, that they are solely linked by you and your mode of interpretation in approaching them?

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: I guess a different way of phrasing that question is, when you're considering a mannerly book, a book about courtly manners from the sixteenth century, do you find yourself often drawing upon these other areas of interest as you write about it, as you read about it, as you think about it?¹⁸ Or do these different book-writing endeavors exist in vacuums for you? What sort of dialogue is there between these different interests, when you write about them?

¹⁸ This is in reference to Berger's book, *The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Renaissance Courtesy Books*.

Berger: Oh yeah, I suppose so. I don't distinguish them as different areas of interest. At one point I'm working on one thing, and I'm working on it with everything I've got. To me it's always the same.

Vanderscoff: So in some way, perhaps, it comes back to the *Bildung* of Harry Berger, or the *formaccione*, or something like that?

Berger: Of the *what*?

Vanderscoff: Like your formation, your journey.

Berger: "Formaccione?" Jesus Christ, Cameron. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: Yeah. That's from Hayden White.¹⁹

Berger: Just say 'formation,' all right? (laughter) In English. My "*formaccione*"—Jesus. Come on, Cameron. What was the question, now? (hearty laughter)

Vanderscoff: Talking about this idea of unifying these different areas of interest.

Berger: Yeah, I'm sure that's what's happening, but I never think about it. I'm sure whether I go from Plato to Spenser to Rembrandt, it's the same set of problems that are involved. The problems of how does this work, what have other people said about it. Do I agree with them? Can I just leave it alone? Or do I think they're wrong? And why are they wrong? I work that way with everything, no matter what it is. From that standpoint, it always has to do with—not simply, I pick up a poem or picture and say, "That's neat. I want to write about it." But I pick up in the context of reading about what's been said about it—how it's been presented, not simply how it presents itself. And so, even if I'm not explicitly saying it, I'm responding to a whole tradition of interpretation of an object, which is never alone, but which is set in the middle of its history of interpretation. And I'm trying to clear away where I think it doesn't work, and sharpen where I think it does work, this history of interpretation. I'll pick up what I think is good about it, and turn it. Am I making any sense?

¹⁹ Hayden White brings up *Bildung* and *formaccione* in his oral history, discussing them as educational and pedagogical goals.

Vanderscoff: Yes. So perhaps in some ways the common ground between these areas exists in the interpretation that they're all run through, or that is applied to all of them.

Berger: Yeah. I can look at Rembrandt by myself and have all these things happen. But I could never sit down and try to publish that without mentioning all the other people who looked at Rembrandt and talked about it, and what my relation to them is, as well as what my relation to Rembrandt is. And if I've got nothing to say that they haven't already said, I have to shut up.

In my case, it's always been that I come at it from a different way. I come at art history as a close reader of literature. And therefore I pick out those art historians who have done a certain amount of this, and I try to do it better than they do. And because I come from a tradition of close reading, and the art historians in fact didn't, I can do it better than some of them. It works that way. So I think that having started in Brooks and Warren literary interpretation in the 1940s and 1950s, I've come so that I extended that way beyond where they extended it, into all different kinds of areas, from the Renaissance back to the classical Greek and stuff.

Vanderscoff: I think this is probably a good place for us to rest for the moment. And we can pick up the thread next time with a retrospective on UCSC, where it is now.

Berger: Okay. I'll have to think about that.

Vanderscoff: And so until then, we'll switch off this record. Thank you.

Reflections on Personality, Theatricality and Pedagogy at Early UCSC

Vanderscoff: Today is Tuesday, April 9th, 2013. This is Cameron Vanderscoff here with Harry Berger, Jr., for the third and final part of his oral history project. We're in Dr. Berger's residence at the base of the UCSC campus. You said in our first session that the original UCSC experiment was, in your opinion, successful and, quote, "successfully phased itself out."

Berger: Successfully—?

Vanderscoff: Phased itself out.

Berger: Did I say that?

Vanderscoff: Yeah.

Berger: I'll have to think of what I meant. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: When you think about later in your involvement at UCSC, closer towards your retirement, did you still feel the influence of that original experiment in any way on the campus?

Berger: Yeah, it's hard to answer. It's hard to answer, but I guess my sense is that being on this campus was different from being on the Yale campus. Because its history had just started out. The students were different. We had a lot more freedom. We didn't have the departmental structures right way. It was a very loose combo of college and disciplinary control—not really much control. So that means it was very different from Yale. I thought that was neat. In a sense, we could do whatever we wanted to do; organize what we wanted to organize; read, write and teach what we wanted to read, write and teach. So it was a lot more easygoing. I mean, we worked our asses off and the students' asses off, and we set high standards—but we had a great time doing it. (laughs) We got along with the students really well. We had great students the first few years. We really liked the students and they liked us, and that was terrific.

There were unwritten distances and differences among groups of faculty. There was the Page Smith group, with Mary Holmes and Bill Hitchcock. And those of us who came who were a little snotty and came from Yale and the East Coast thought these people were terrible. I think I've talked about this before—we thought they were really awful, they didn't know what the hell they were talking about. They liked to talk pretty. We thought the students were getting bullshit, really, from those people, who didn't mean to do that, but who just were not very good, and thought mostly in terms of the theatrics and theatricality,

getting in front of a lot of people and saying things to make them laugh and cry and stuff like that. Those of us who had come from tougher places like Yale thought that was terrible— (laughs) Probably wasn't as bad as we thought it was.

So there were two really close, really two different groups and teams there: the people Page brought from his own experience and the people he hired that he'd heard about, like myself and all the people in literature I got. We were very, very different. We had different senses of what was good teaching, what was good scholarship and everything else.

Vanderscoff: And so, given that you had this different style and different approach, do you have any sense of why you were hired by Page Smith and others, what they hoped you and people in your vein from Yale would do for this place?

Berger: I did my undergraduate and PhD degrees at Yale, and I taught there for eleven years. So I had people who were behind me. I came from that kind of environment, and I brought, what, two, three, four, five people from there. They all were doing what we had already done at Yale. That had an influence on how Santa Cruz, developed, I would say. It was essentially members of the Yale English department, who were committed to that kind of teaching and training and scholarship, who started things up here.

Vanderscoff: And so a minute ago you were talking about this style or this sort of theatricality that Page Smith and some others had. Do you think that there was, in any important way, substance beneath that style that contributed?

Berger: Not much. Really, not much. Page was the kind of guy who loved the idea of riding on a white horse into a classroom, for Christ's sake. (laughter) None of us thought that had that much to do with what really went on. And Mary Holmes was a big theatrical, dramatic person who was not really a scholar of art history. Bill Hitchcock, the third member of that trio, couldn't really talk to anybody. He lectured. He worked his lectures out, but he wouldn't talk to any of us. He was afraid to. He didn't do any kind of research or scholarship. He was just a—again, a theater person.

Vanderscoff: So this volatility that you talk about, between these different approaches of teaching, is that something that you think persisted in the campus? Or did that strictly characterize those early years?

Berger: I can't really speak to that, because I don't remember very much how things developed once we got other colleges, other faculties on campus, and stuff like that. I don't really have much sense of the history of that stuff.

Reflections on Change and Continuity at UCSC

Vanderscoff: Well, speaking in this vein of changes, of course originally UCSC was constructed around this whole college-centric experiment, which was—

Berger: Yeah, very East Coast kind of stuff.

Vanderscoff: Yeah, which was later eroded to some extent, and the boards and then the departments became more powerful.

Berger: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: So if the original UCSC was indeed constructed around this college-board vision, what style of institution or what sort of priorities became important in the later years of your involvement: the eighties, the nineties, after reorganization and Chancellor Sinsheimer and things like that?

Berger: (pause) Well, the colleges became less important and the departments became more important, especially when they got grounded. There was the lit board here and history board here, and even if they were connected to colleges, and had their offices there, they became more separate as institutions. And historians—some would be in Crown or Stevenson, but they would be much more members of history than members of Crown or Stevenson. And in the beginning, we felt much more a member of the college than members of any departments, since there were no departments, just scrambled groups of people: literature, history, humanities, social sciences, et cetera.

Vanderscoff: Did you find that the students and colleagues towards the end of your career were noticeably distinct or different, for better for the worse, from those at the very beginning?

Berger: I never thought there was ever much difference, except in one respect, which was predictable, which is that at the beginning we had all terrific students. Also, we didn't have very many of them, and as we got more and more students, and more of them came up through regular high schools and stuff, this became just another of the nine campuses and not such a special place. You got students who were sort of assigned here, whether they wanted to come here or not. And the assignment meant that a lot more of them than originally didn't necessarily want to be here, or groove on being here. They just happened to be here. I don't remember, really, so I shouldn't talk about it, to what extent that produced people going to other campuses, changing campuses and going to Berkeley and stuff. I remember that happening, but I don't remember any of the details of it.

Vanderscoff: Given that later in your time at UCSC so many of the students weren't here because they were sort of attracted to the shine of the new experiment, the new UCSC, did that change the classrooms?

Berger: Yeah, yeah. They just got assigned to this campus.

Vanderscoff: Right.

Berger: (pause) It's hard for me to say, because in all the classes I had over the years I always had a lot of good students. And the other students were there, and I don't remember them as well. (laughs) I taught a lot of students over the years, and I remember the fun of having good students. I always had good students, so I don't remember much about the ordinary students. (laughs) They were there—I think there were certain times when I felt I wasn't getting across very well and the students didn't like what I was doing. I remember three or four times thinking that. But I don't remember what I did about it. (laughs) I just remember having that experience of thinking—unlike the early years, we had students here who don't necessarily want to be here, who got located here. And they don't necessarily want to take a required English course and so forth, so that produced

more friction, more tension between teachers and students. I'm assuming that—because I used to talk all the time with colleagues—that we all pretty much felt the same way.

Vanderscoff: And so we were just talking about students coming here for many years because they were attracted to this experiment. What sort of shine, or cachet, or however you want to put it did that original collegiate structure have for you, and how did you feel about the shift away from it?

Berger: Well, there were specific problems in literature, which had to do with the fact that there were three or four faculty, two of them in German, who sort of raised hell with everybody else; who didn't like the kind of scholarship we did. And that produced a lot of trouble. There was a guy named John Ellis.

Vanderscoff: Yes, I remember you mentioning him in the previous sessions.

Berger: Yeah, because he was a real troublemaker. He probably still lives in town. I don't know. It's been like twenty-five, thirty years. And he was brought by a guy named Siegfried Puknat, who was one of the very first people Dean McHenry brought. Sig came from—Davis, I think? He was an old Germanist who knew the system really well. He knew all about the committee structure, and how you get along, and what you do to get something done, passed by the academic assembly. He knew all that kind of stuff. He did very little scholarship himself. I guess he was an okay teacher. I don't know much about it. But he was mainly a politician. And he politicked hard, and Ellis politicked hard. So the Germanists were hard politicians, and the rest of us weren't much interested in politicking. We liked scholarship. We liked teaching. We liked college life. But we didn't want to politick about it. And that was a problem for a lot of people. Ellis and Puknat really made it difficult for people in other branches of literature. Puknat, not so much, but he was just sort of afraid of Ellis; although he was above him in his position, he was afraid of him and did whatever John told him. He was an honest man. He used to live—I still remember—down at the bottom of, what's the big road, Empire Grade?

Vanderscoff: Oh yeah, out on the west side [of town].

Berger: You go all the way down to the bottom toward town, and you turn right. And right above there it's called Piedmont Court. The building's called Piedmont, a great beautiful set of apartments. And I remember Sig lived there, and we used to go visit him there. And that's all I know about Piedmont Court. (laughter)

But that was the main problem we had. There were a lot worse kinds of problems you could have at other universities. This was our problem. It wasn't all that bad. I think we made more of it than we had to.

Vanderscoff: And so, given that there was this tension within your board, do you think that changed the college-board dynamic for you and other members of literature, in terms of where your loyalties lay and where you wanted to give your time?

Berger: Well, the thing is that as departments, boards of study, structure developed, more of your time went there, and what you did in the colleges was teach the occasional college course, teach a section of the core course, and engage in College Night and stuff like that. So you still knew and consorted with the students in your college, or at least I did, we did, and have dinners and eat at the dining hall with them and stuff like that. But the shift toward a departmental structure meant that that became more and more separate from what you did in class with students. So you still had this very good social situation on campus, which is the effect of the college system, where were together in different ways. But the departmental board structure grew tighter.

Vanderscoff: And did your college and involvement in your college remain an important part of your work throughout your career here at UCSC, or did that change?

Berger: (pause) That's a hard one. I don't know, because I'm the kind of guy who gets up at three or four and goes to the typewriter, computer, and writes. I've done that all my life. I did it at Yale. I do it here. My real life is writing. Teaching is part of it. It's always been part of it. My teaching has always been changed by

what I write; my writing has always been changed by how I teach. But primarily, I think of myself as a critic, as a practicing, writing critic who happens to be in the university. (pause) I don't know how that affects what you want to do. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Compared to the institution that you came to in '65—speaking of all these changes with the college system—what do you make of the university today?

Berger: (pause) Jeez, I don't know how to answer that, except to say I still do things like teach reading groups. I kept teaching something or other every other year, or two, three years. So I still go to classes, and go back and forth with students on texts. Now there are more graduate students, but I find the undergraduates really good—the ones I have contact with—as really interesting now as they were forty, fifty years ago. So I feel good about them. I'm not one of these golden agers who think everything was better back then. No. I think we still have really good students, great students. And the graduate programs have made a difference, too. It makes a big difference to have a more and more powerful graduate program. It affects what happens to undergraduates. And then graduate students become TAs, teachers of undergraduates. We didn't have anything like that in the first few years, and I think this has made it better.

Vanderscoff: You were talking a minute ago about how you feel like a critic above all else, or underneath all else—

Berger: Whatever, yeah.

Vanderscoff: Or whatever, right. (laughs) Do you think that functioning as a critic working for this particular institution, UC Santa Cruz, has done something unique or special or enabling for you in any way, compared to your time at Yale, or critics at other universities?

Berger: Yeah, that's a good question. I have to think about that. (pause) See, I'm pretty self-generated. Had I remained at Yale, I would have done probably the same there that I do here. I don't think much would have changed, because I'm

pretty much focused on my own stuff. That's what I take into the classroom, and that's what I take into departmental meetings—that's my own way of looking at literature, my own way of dealing with students, and trying to integrate what goes on at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and what goes on in this set of studies—English or literature, and history. And I've always been very much involved with classics. I'm writing on Plato and I taught a lot of Plato courses. So for me the stuff all goes around and round and round. I think I would have kept doing at Yale what I've done here, because as I say, I'm pretty self-generated. (pause) I don't think things would have changed, maybe because I would have continued writing, and writing produces new ideas. And I would continue to try and teach new things, new interpretations.

We have a reading book group which has been turned off for a while. We were doing Spenser again, which is my guy. I was the first modern Spenser critic in the last century. It's great going back and doing the stuff I did my dissertation on. I'm learning a lot of new things about it from the way the students read it that I wouldn't even have been able to think about back in 1955, when I was writing my dissertation. So I'm still reading the same kind of texts and teaching them, but it's getting different because of other people, because of students. So as I grow older, I take over new waves, new generational waves, and integrate them into what I'm already doing. Did that make any sense?

Vanderscoff: It did, yes.

Berger: I'm just sort of gassing here. (laughter)

Current Writing Projects

Vanderscoff: You were mentioning just a moment ago that you are now writing about Plato. I am curious about the state of your writing now. What sort of topics or projects preoccupy you in your work and thought?

Berger: Oh, Jesus. I was at this conference and people had asked me, I had to write down on a piece of paper the titles of—I'm writing four books. And I threw the piece of paper away (laughs).

Vanderscoff: We can footnote 'em.

Berger: You don't know want to know the titles of all that stuff. Well, wait a minute, let me see: one of them is called *Harrying: Skills of Offense in Shakespeare's Henriad*. *The Henriad* is four plays: *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part I*, and *Henry IV Part II*, *Henry V*. They all were in a kind of sequence called *The Henriad*. So I'm writing a book about that. And I'm writing a book about Plato called—oh shit, this title won't mean anything to you. It's called *Simonides in Couch City*. Don't ask. (laughter) That's another one. And what the hell else am I doing? I've got a book called *The Perils of Uglytown: Studies*—you're going to hate this—*Studies in Structural Misanthropology*. I don't know if you've ever heard of Lévi-Strauss?

Vanderscoff: Yeah, [anthropologist] Claude Lévi-Strauss?

Berger: He used to write about structural anthropology. Well, I've invented something called structural misanthropology. (laughs) It's about misanthropy and stuff. So I'm writing about that. *Perils of Uglytown*.

Vanderscoff: *Perils of Uglytown*.

Berger: Because in Plato's *Republic* Socrates is developing for these jerks he's talking to the idea of a beautiful city, Kallipolis, which is really a terrible city. It's the worst kind of dystopia—which is usually called 'utopia.' It's a terrible city. It cranks down on everybody, and everything about it is regimented. But this is what the guys he's talking to want to hear. The dialogue shows you that Socrates is giving these guys what they want, but it isn't what Socrates wants. And the dialogue has ways of showing that. So he's giving them their sense of Kallipolis—*kallos* is beautiful—the beautiful city. And it's really an ugly city. So that's why I'm calling this book *The Perils of Uglytown*. It's about how Socrates how he finds himself constrained to tell these guys the things they want to hear, that he thinks are the wrong things to tell them. (pause) Okay?

Vanderscoff: Mm-hmm.

Closing Reflections on a Life as a Critic, Family, and Santa Cruz

Vanderscoff: And what sort of ambitions do you have looking forward? You're writing at such volume. Is that something that you plan to continue?

Berger: I'm trying to stave off death. (laughs) Christ, how old am I? 95 years old, or whatever I am. I'm just trying to stay alive, Cameron. (laughs) Now ask me that question again. (laughter) Seriously, now what do you want me to tell you?

Vanderscoff: (laughs) Just what sort of ambitions do you have going forward? Do you intend to continue or step up this rate of publishing? Having four books going at one time is quite a docket.

Berger: Well, that's what I do. I just get up in the morning, early. I get up at three or four. And I work all day. I love it. And I consider myself very lucky, very happy. When I die, I will have had a very good life. I've got nothing to complain about—I mean, I've had all kinds of problems and personal relations and things like that. But in terms of—what's at my core is doing this stuff, I've been able to do it all my life. There have been no lets, nothing stopping me. So I'm very lucky.

Vanderscoff: (pause) I think that already speaks towards my next question, but I'll ask it anyway, just in case there's anything further you'd like to say, which is: what are you grateful for, or glad for, in your life now, both retrospectively and prospectively?

Berger: Well, the other thing is I'm glad because generally, except for some bad things that happened—like my two sons died—I've had a very good family life. One daughter lives a hundred yards away, over in those apartments over there, and works up on campus. Another daughter used to live down on Van Ness Avenue, but now she's moved up to Palo Alto because she got a job up there. But her son, my grandson, graduated from Brown last June and lived with me for a while. But then, when his mom moved away, moved into her house. So he lives downtown. But he doesn't have a car, so he's always ripping off my car. (laughter) He has my car more than I do. But I have it today. And very often he'll ride his bike up, park his bike in the dining hall over there where all the mess is,

take my car. He probably wants it right now. I should call him about now. Anyway, he's a terrific guy. I'm really fond of him. He got a job at the university right away, down on Delaware Street.

Vanderscoff: Yeah, at the extension down there.

Berger: Yeah. He works down there. And unfortunately he and his girlfriend both— She's graduating in sociology. And they're thinking of moving up closer to Silicon Valley. He wants to work up in that area eventually. He studied econ. He did a major called 'Economic Law and Society' at Brown. So he does a lot of that kind of stuff. And he's working in an office that involves grant writing and a lot of other stuff like that. But he goes to meetings on campus, I know, because he has to borrow my car to do it. So he's this terrific kid, and we're very close. I'm more his father. I've been my grandson's father, in effect, ever since he was three, four years old. There are all his pictures, over there. We're still very close. And we'll stay close as long as he needs to borrow my car all the time. (laughter)

Vanderscoff: And are there any other notes of gratitude or things that matter to you in your life now that you'd like to express before we come towards a close?

Berger: Yeah, well, I've been with Beth for—on and off, with a lot of separations—twenty-five years. She's the smartest person I ever met. I learned more from her—I mean, whenever I write anything I take it to her right away. She's the best critic I've ever had in my life, and that includes all of them. She's really brilliant. We have a good relationship. It's been stormy. We've separated and stuff like that. But we've been together now almost twenty-five years, with the hiatuses. And she just moved back to Santa Cruz, not because we split, but because she's going to school near Oakland and had to live up there, and since she couldn't stand where she had to live, she moved back down. She'll do more commuting. She wants to be a shrink, a therapist. I think she'll end up going to the school JFK, John F. Kennedy [University].

Vanderscoff: Oh, in San Jose?

Berger: Yeah. I think she'll end up maybe finishing her studies there and starting a practice from Kennedy—I don't know.

Vanderscoff: Before we end, is there anything we've missed, or anything else you'd like to say on a professional or personal note?

Berger: I think this [UCSC] has developed into a very fine place with great people, really good faculty. These are my neighbors, so I see a lot of them. And they're all serious. Joe Konopelski, next door, is now chair of the senate. And his wife teaches at this wonderful program, called the ACE [Academic Excellence] Program, for kids who need extra help in math. So I have a bunch of terrific neighbors. I'm very happy to be here, and to see them. I ended up having a good life in a good place. I think this is a wonderful place. I don't have all the criticisms other people have. I have criticisms as they happen, or of people when they get in my face. (laughs) And they do sometimes. But, by and large, this has been a terrific place, and it's always had good students. And we're always trying to do our best by the students. And I've been able to write my ass off here, which is what I want to do. (pause)

Vanderscoff: Well, then I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for all the time that you've given to this. I've really enjoyed these conversations.

Berger: Oh, I enjoyed it a lot.

Vanderscoff: I've learned a lot.

Berger: It went fast. Are we done already?

Vanderscoff: Well, there's no more questions left.

Berger: Okay. (laughs) Your well is empty? (laughter)

Vanderscoff: The well runs dry, yeah.

Berger: No, this has been real fun. I've enjoyed talking with you. It's been great.

Vanderscoff: It's thoroughly mutual. Thank you.

About the Interviewer and Co-Editor:

Cameron Vanderscoff is a freelance oral historian and writer based in New York City. His work with the Regional History Project includes a series of published oral histories, such as *Hayden White: Frontiers of Consciousness at UCSC, 1978-1994* and *James Clifford: Tradition and Transformation at UCSC*, and *Look'n M' Face and Hear M' Story: An Oral History with Professor J. Herman Blake*. In addition to his ongoing collaboration with the Project, he has a range of public and family clients in California and New York, including a new partnership with Columbia University on the Phoenix House Oral History Project.

Cameron is working towards an MA in oral history at Columbia, focusing on applied ethics in the field. He graduated magna cum laude from UC Santa Cruz with BAs in history and literature (focus in creative writing). For him, all of these threads come together in oral history, where individuals become authors through life storytelling, and historical experience becomes literary narrative. The opportunity to elicit and revisit these stories is an ongoing education and a privilege. He likes to do other things too, like writing fiction, playing the blues, and traveling with a notebook.

About the Co-Editor:

Irene Reti directs the Regional History Project at the UC Santa Cruz Library, where she has worked as an editor and oral historian since 1989. She holds a BA in Environmental Studies and a Master's in History from UCSC and is also a small press publisher, writer, and photographer.