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Arthur Wensinger Oral History Interview, 2012 [2]

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Interview Two with Arthur “Jerry” Wensinger by Kanyakrit “Yu” Vongkiatkajorn, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 2012.

KANYAKRIT VONGKIATKOJORN: Let’s see. I think we left off at the work you did as a professor. And your involvement in the humanities, and freshman humanities programs.

ARTHUR “JERRY” WENSINGER: I can’t remember how deeply we got into that, but if I say the same thing twice, it’s not going to hurt.

Vongkiatkajorn: No, it’s fine.

Wensinger: Okay. I must have made the point that I’ve done most of my teaching in the German Department—though I was in the C.O.L. since its very beginning, and I think I mentioned that I was doing language there in 1959. Professor George Creeger (who died in the fall of 2014) and Professor Carl Viggiani (who died, I think almost two years ago now) and I, we took over the class of 1963, which was the second class in the C.O.L. That was fun, and very demanding, because I was also simultaneously teaching in the German Department, and Carl in French and Italian, and George in the English Department. So after that was all done, and we had graduated that class, we would appear occasionally after 1963 and do tutorials and small seminars in the C.O.L. I guess I’m still considered a senior tutor emeritus of the C.O.L., although I didn’t do anything much more in the C.O.L. in the ten years before my retirement in ’94. My principle obligation here was the German Department.

And I think I told you that when my generation first came to Wesleyan, we taught six days a week, up to Saturday noon. And we began the semester quite early, and it ended quite late. In those days, graduation was always in early June, and those guys—they were all guys—they worked very hard, and so did we, teaching, sometimes three, four, classes per semester. It could be made up, too, by a series of tutorials, or a seminar if you combined them. The math was kind of fluid. But the constrictions, of course, of the language and literature departments at that time were such that there were very few large classes; in fact, almost none.

The biggest classes I’ve ever had were in the forties, probably, and that’s when I was doing German literature in translation. We really had to do that after 1967, when all requirements were dropped at the school. I’m still of two minds about that. I think that

people learn, if maybe only by rote, but they certainly learned and worked harder than they ever did up until that point. Everyone had to take a language, and everyone had to take English. Everyone had to take science—a hard science. And everyone had to take history or something like it, all the way along. I don't think there are really any all-campus requirements any longer here, except those that are put down by the major department. If you major in art, you've got to have some language, right? That sort of thing. But it's so much looser right now.

It was a small place when I got here, I may have mentioned this all before. One was surprised to realize later that the administration consisted of very few people: the president, the dean. At first, there was just a dean of the college. And then we got a dean of students, then a dean of freshman came in, and slowly from about three or four administrators, there are now several hundred here, I suppose. Whatever it is, they are costing the University a lot more now than they ever did before. Very few of them teach, a long-standing perversion of the academy. When Butterfield was the president—and I'm sure I mentioned this last time—he interviewed everybody who was being brought here for consideration for a post. And John Spaeth, who was the dean of the college, pretty much interviewed the others as well. There was a dean then of admissions; I can't remember when that came in. They all taught and had departmental affiliations.

But the point is that you could see Wesleyan growing by leaps and bounds. Wesleyan became quite rich in the late fifties, early sixties, by virtue of very clever people on the Board of Trustees, who had us buy something called American Educational Publications. And then that was bought by the Xerox Corporation, and Wesleyan was swimming in money, to the point that it had the richest endowment in the United States—per student. It's certainly not that anymore. I think it's number fourteen—somewhere fourteen to twenty. But we are thoroughly incorporated.

So, interesting innovations were accomplished. The University Press was founded, among other things. I was on the Press board, and that was a great deal of fun. Most faculty and certainly all tenured faculty were formerly expected to serve on committees. And that was the committee that I liked the best. I can't say that the University Press, the Wesleyan University Press committee, was an academic committee, though it really was to all intents and purposes, and I enjoyed that very much. I was on

the Education Policy Committee; I don't feel, or at least remember, that I did much there. And then there was something that had to do with—I can't even think of the names of those committees—it was faculty and students; it was mostly just talk. Some good obviously came from it—people got to know each other.

I was, however, elected to the Advisory Committee. That's the advisory committee to the president; they are the people who make decisions about tenure. And I took that very seriously. Everybody did. It was certainly the most powerful committee on campus. I filled out the appointment of a senior colleague of mine who was retiring. I was asked if I would fill in for him, and then I was reappointed to it for another—well, for a pretty long time. I'm not a power monger at all; I'm not interested much in overt or nominal power, but that's where I felt I had influence.

Vongkiatkajorn: How many years were you on that committee? And how many people were on it?

Wensinger: Oh, gosh! Seems to me that we were elected for two, three, four years, I don't know what. But anyhow, I must have served on it on and off for at least six years. I did enjoy it. It was kind of nervous- making sometimes, and an enormous amount of homework. We really had to read up on all the background of the candidates for tenure here. We had to read their works; we had to get all sorts of letters of recommendation.

And of course we had to listen to the people who came in from the various departments to promote the tenure cases of these candidates, so that is really worth being released from one teaching obligation while you serve.

Now, I see reading the *Argus*, that even visiting professors here are expected to teach little more than two full courses, even only one per semester. But when I was serving here, two would have been a very easy load—a very easy load. Two courses a semester, and you get paid that much money for them? It's nearly a free ride! I exaggerate, of course. Some courses are very easy to teach; they have few students. Some are massive lecture courses, and if you take them seriously, and you pretty much have to unless you want to get booted, it takes an enormous amount of time. However, all those people have teaching assistants who do the grading, and so on. But that begins to look like large universities, with teaching assistants. There was no such thing as that when I first came here. Whoever was teaching did all the work—with minimal exceptions.

It was maybe a little bit too cozy, at the beginning, too controlled. And of course, the faculty was almost entirely men, and in fact, predominantly white Anglo—Wasps: White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, that stands for! That's the way things were back then, certainly in the twenties and thirties and forties, and the end of the fifties when I came here. By then there was a substantial representation of superb Jewish faculty which has since grown exponentially. I think there was one woman on the faculty then, but she was adjunct; she wasn't a full professor. The first woman full professor was a very gifted woman, Geraldine Murphy. She was in English. And I don't know what percentage of the faculty is female and what is male right now. Is it close to half and half, or do the men still predominate? I don't know.

Vongkiatkajorn: I don't know.

Wensinger: Well, you can find out about that. I really should—I mean, I'm the one that's supposed to be the font of wisdom here, but I'm not. The point being that Wesleyan got rich, and then it decided to get bigger. And fairly early on it became no longer just boys, but men and women. It became co-educational in the early seventies. And that did bring a breath of fresh air. At first I thought, "Good heavens, girls in my class? What's the world coming to?" Very quickly you realize that it helped enormously, and it civilized the men in a way. It also alleviated the necessity of them running off to some girls' school on the weekends, and mind you, the weekends were only one and a half days.

And of course it brought other problems, too, you know? Sleeping over, and all that kind of thing. If you're going to do it anyhow, might as well do it safely on campus; you're not driving around with a couple of beers under your belt. So yeah, I certainly was not an enemy of that major move. And we moved pretty early on. I went to Dartmouth, and Dartmouth became co-ed substantially later. I can't pretend to know what the sequence was there, or about Amherst, and Williams, and Bowdoin, but I think those places accepted women pretty much around the time that Wesleyan did. But I still think Wesleyan was ahead.

I had of course experienced all that in graduate school, which was always men and woman, where I did most of my graduate work at the University of Michigan. It's not as if some alien species called women were unknown to us, or me, but it was just quietly

assumed that rich private colleges in New England were for boys with a few prominent exceptions.

I've said that my field was early nineteenth century with Kleist and early twentieth century with people like Mann, Rilke, Kafka, Herman Hesse. I taught a course on Kafka a number of times, in both German—in the original—and in translation. The poets, short story writers, novelists. Thomas Mann was one of my favorites, and I think I did fairly well in teaching him. After the abolishment of language requirements on campus, the foreign language and literature departments were hard put to maintain the enrollment that they had theretofore enjoyed by virtue of the obligatory study of language. So the enormous transition began of teaching foreign literature in translation, and you know a lot about that, being in the C.O.L. I'm sure you've read Franz Kafka, but probably not in the original. Now, we stuffy people in language literature say if you have to read these people in translation, then you're not reading them, because they didn't write in English. What's the name of your language?

Vongkiatkajorn: Hm?

Wensinger: You speak Thai, is that right?

Vongkiatkajorn: Yes.

Wensinger: But there are several languages in that country, aren't there?

Vongkiatkajorn: Yes, but Thai is the main language.

Wensinger: Thai is. Now Thai must have a wonderful literature.

Vongkiatkajorn: I think so.

Wensinger: You don't know it?

Vongkiatkajorn: Not very much.

Wensinger: Not very much. Well, that's sort of by the way. It seems to me that English has sort of taken over the world, and I don't like that very much, you know. The problem that we have in German language study right now is that Germans, though not quite so good in language as the Dutch, or the Danes, or the Swedes for example, are nevertheless very well versed in European tongues. The assumption now is that pretty much everybody in Europe also knows substantial English. Every "educated" person knows English. When Germans start to speak their own language, however, the poor Americans over there say,

“Wait, wait, what are you talking about now? I don’t understand you. Speak English.” So they speak English.

That could be construed as a pretty arrogant point of view, I think. But, Yu, your English is so remarkable, and you took it in school from the time you can remember?

Vongkiatkajorn: I was three years old.

Wensinger: Three years old. You see, well, that’s your culture. We’ve got to catch up.

Everybody does, and there’s no reason why an American student can’t read Thai. Maybe that’s not considered hugely important in the financial world right now. But you can certainly start to learn German, French, Spanish, Italian, the other Asian languages, by the time you’re three and four, and I wish they did it in this country. Puts a whole new world out there.

That is the background for my statement that, with no longer any language requirements and the “lang-lit” departments wanting to keep enrollments up, we saw the handwriting on the wall and began, gradually at first, teaching a lot of courses in English translation. And willy-nilly, we were eventually obliged to do more and more of that. We do insist, however, that our majors take most of their work in German, and be able to write and speak in German well.

And reluctantly, if necessarily, we give credit for some of these German courses in translation. But they’re meant mostly for non-majors, and that’s why Freud and Kafka courses are popular, because everybody wants to know something about them. So I—from 1969 on, let’s say—taught department courses in translation. The enrollment figures were bigger. But the person who loves the language that they’re supposed to be representing is a little pained by not being able to speak to the people taking it in the language in which these things were written. It’s a bit ironic, because, as I said to you earlier, perhaps my favorite teaching experience was this freshman humanities program. And there, of course, we don’t read Plato in ancient Greek, and we don’t read Virgil in classical Latin, and so on. Indeed, more than half of the literature that we read was written in foreign languages until we got into the second semester of the year course. It was called Humanities 1-2, and then it got elegant, and called itself Humanities 101-102. The more digits in the name of a course, the more important it begins to sound.

The good thing about that was that, unless you took the alternative Western Civilization course, but stuck to Humanities (and most of the boys did), nearly everybody, as freshmen, was reading the same thing at the same time. And that gave rise to a great deal of real talk outside of class among the freshman themselves.

We instructors were recruited from various departments on campus to do this, and it was surely a non-professional, an amateur approach to things. I remember a certain teacher in the Art History Department who was teaching it, and I guess he didn't take it very seriously. So when we came to Goethe, he just had nothing good to say at all about this ridiculous old German man, and reading *Faust* in translation. Well, *Faust* in translation can be kind of bad. I mean, it's pretty tedious. But it is a stupendously great piece of literature and unquestionably belongs in the canon of great literature.

Things have settled down, and, at my age, I'm really forgetting a lot of stuff. I don't really remember the courses I taught too well. It's odd; I can remember the first students I had here much better than the ones I had in my last couple of years. I think the memory mechanics in my brain just said, "Okay, I can remember that many people's names." I have a visual memory more than an oral memory. I forget names, but I recognize them by face. If somebody said, "Oh, you remember Judith Schultz, don't you?" I'll say: "I don't at all. I'm sorry." But show me a picture of her and of course I will. I know that. And one's energy level runs down as well. I was somebody who buzzed around all the time. But, that sort of thing disappears, too.... What else should we talk about?

Vongkiatkajorn: Anything—things that you do remember, and you really liked. Such as, what were your first students like?

Wensinger: I liked the campus, the buildings and the lovely eclectic nature of it. And what Downey House used to be. They've just torn the intestines out of that place. It's just a horrible job that they've done over there. They had wonderful rooms, which they sliced right down, so this great, centrally located fireplace is now hugely sitting in a corner—just very, very dumb and unimaginative. The architecture on this campus was a wonderful thing, until they got so-called "pros" in here to redesign buildings. We have a very bad record on that, I think.

And they're now going to ruin the art library. It's going to be taken out from where it is and just shoved willy-nilly, into the stacks over there. Where are they going to find the room? Well, they're going to find the room by making every department go through the list of its holdings—I'm talking about books now, not mechanical devices—so those who care have to fight to keep the books that we really like and may eventually need again. And then they say, "Well, that book hasn't been checked out for ten years, nobody's interested,"—that's not an intelligent or acceptable way of going about things!

If love of history is asking too much these days, can we at least expect some respect? Perhaps not. Sorry to say, brute stupidity, a universal low-grade Age of Anxiety, unfocussed greed, grotesque adoration of Youth and blank-faced Beauty have been ruling the roost for longer than we care to reckon. Since Vietnam? We've lost ground.

To backtrack: Yeah, there were some wonderful writers, for example, in the early seventeenth century in Germany. Nobody knows their names anymore. Somebody will get interested in that person again, and want to be able to read him, and then say: "Hey, I can't find him online." Besides, I'm hopelessly old-fashioned in that I really don't like computers. I've gone on about that. Google is a miracle, but it's a very flawed miracle, you know. And if our culture is going to depend on digitization, I said, well, I throw my hands up in despair.

Other things have been perpetrated here—the Center for the Arts, for instance. I was kind of dismayed—or intimidated—by it at first, and now I think it's quite a wonderful complex of buildings. That's one of the good things that was done. The addition to the library, the reading room of the library and the reference room, I guess they call it, I give that about a B-minus, in architecture. We do not have even a slightly important piece of modern architecture on this campus, and we're almost alone in that. All other campuses with which we compare ourselves have, and they have purposefully gone out to get really interesting architects. We have not done that here except for the Center for the Arts. When I came here, the freshman dorms up on the hill—Foss Hill Dorms—and the other dorms there that became the Butterfield Dorms after he retired, they were all built in the late fifties and then into the sixties. I think they were pretty handsome looking. A lot of people didn't like them.

You are familiar, of course, with the old C.O.L. place?

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm-hm.

Wensinger: I rather got to like that. I had an office there for a while, and as a matter of fact I was the acting director of the C.O.L in the late sixties. In the time of Etherington—Ted Etherington, the president who came in after Vic Butterfield left. It was very hard to manage this place in the revolutionary period of 1968, and partly 1969.

Well, I had an office in the C.O.L., and I began to like it. I liked it because it was so strangely cut up. I mean, I think the intention of the architect in that building was inventive. People could discover little private places to sit, and you would go into small rooms. I don't know who re-designed the squash courts for the Art Department—History of Art Department people, and the C.O.L. people—but so far it's too new, and it hasn't been damaged enough yet to be interesting. And nobody's scribbled little things in pencil on the walls yet. Not that I can approve of that kind of thing, but it needs aging. It needs living in, the rugs have to get soiled: it needs softening. Right now, you go up there and look and you say: "Hey, this looks like an advertising agency corridor on Madison Avenue." Or wherever advertising agencies are right now. I don't see any warmth to it.

So I like quirky places, and I like things that have aged, because students should be exposed to architectural history and slow decay. You know, you can't buy that. I miss other bits of architecture around here—the old houses that Wesleyan bought up and that students lived in were very nice. They want to stop all that right now. You live in that new dormitory there, near the Neon Deli?

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh, Fauver Apartments?

Wensinger: Is that what it's called? That's so hideous!

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensinger: Where do you live, there?

Vongkiatkajorn: I live in Fauver Residence Hall, which is close to the apartments, but not—

Wensinger: But is that the one that I'm talking about?

Vongkiatkajorn: No. But there's Fauver Apartments, and there's Fauver Residence Hall. They look the same.

Wensinger: What road are they on?

Vongkiatkajorn: Foss Hill Drive.

Wensinger: Oh, up in there. Oh, okay. But they're not brand new, are they?

Vongkiatkajorn: 2005.

Wensinger: Oh, I guess I don't even know them. You like them?

Vongkiatkajorn: Yeah, but I'm excited about living in a house next year. I'm going to live in a house on Pine Street.

Wensinger: They've saved a few of them?

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm-hm.

Wensinger: Can you cook there by yourself? That's important, too. Which brings me to another innovation that I totally approved of when it was done: Not only German majors, but German-speaking students—either from Germany, or who knew enough German to live together, some twenty years ago—set up the German House. It was on High Street, a very old house that had been nicely converted, in a kind of messy way, into the German House. That place sparked, you know; it really came alive. Faculty were invited many times over for— That was a tremendously nice innovation. I don't know really why they were obliged to move out, but they moved it to Church Street—or is it Lawn Avenue?

Vongkiatkajorn: Lawn Avenue.

Wensinger: Lawn Avenue. That's where it is. I haven't been in it; they can't be that interested in *emeriti*. But I hope that some of that flavor has been translated over into this new digs. Do you know it? Have you been in the German house?

Vongkiatkajorn: It's very nice.

Wensinger: Oh, good.

Vongkiatkajorn: They have a lot of events, too. They recently had an Easter egg brunch, and they always do something for Oktoberfest.

Wensinger: You see, that's good. That was a very good innovation.

Then they had other houses, you know, organized around languages or around faiths—like Jewish House, and the Asian group. Are you involved with any of this Asian activity?

Vongkiatkajorn: I am Asian. But I'm not in the houses.

Wensinger: But you're not in the houses like that. Too organized?

Vongkiatkajorn: No, I chose to live in Writing House. Which is a new house.

Wensinger: Good. Well, when I went to Dartmouth, one was in a fraternity. In fact, very, very few people were not in fraternities. And it wasn't all crazy stuff at all. Yeah, they drank a

lot of beer on Saturdays, but the important point is that it gave the opportunity to be together.

Well, much of the architecture here is uninspired, to be very polite about it. But the worst desecration happened when they put that Greyhound Bus station up on Brownstone Row—it's called the Zelnick Pavilion. It is so profoundly ugly. I mean it's actively bad; it's not just boring. And seen from the athletic field, it's even worse. It looks like a huge air conditioning plant or something.

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensinger: Mr. Zelnick is a very rich alumnus, and not for many years is anybody even going to suggest that it be torn down, but there is one way of helping to disguise it in the front. And that is to plant Lombardy poplar trees, tall trees that look like flames, a whole row of them, in front as a screen. You could still see it in the back, but it wouldn't stand out like a sore thumb. Everybody that I know that comes on campus says: "What is that?" Because Brownstone Row is a very somber, serious, academic-looking place, and it's handsome in its own unwelcoming way. You know? One finally gets to like it, and then one finally gets even to love it. It's like putting a thumb in somebody's eye when they built that thing there.

The new cinema, where the cinema archives and the cinema movie house are, that also, to my eyes, is an unhappy use or misuse of post-modernism. It's hideous to me, although there are those who like it.

There always is a small group of aesthetically-minded students who come and hang together, and take a lot of art courses, and are concerned about the way things look, or the way people live, or the way people study where they are. And one of those is a very rich boy, and I will not tell you his name, but I know that he was left suddenly alone: his mother died and his father remarried, and then he rather suddenly also died, leaving his second wife, who was rich already in her own right. So this boy and his sister inherited an enormous amount of money—lots and lots of millions. And he liked Wesleyan. But when they put this Zelnick Pavilion up, he was so offended by it that he said, "I'm never going to give you any money until you tear that down."

Vongkiatkajorn: Wow!

Wensinger: [Laughs] Well, what do you say to that? That was a couple of decades ago by now. I mean, talk about a rock and a hard place for an administrator to land between! It was totally unfair, and the current president had nothing to do with putting that carbuncle up. So, I'm just underlining the fact that the beauty of the campus has been damaged here and there by bad decisions—mostly by committee decisions.

And it's high time that we did something about it. I used to work at it, because I was president of the Friends of the Davison Art Center for many years, and was always on the board until the last three years. So, I was very aware, very. We worked hard on helping out the Alsop House, which desperately needs all kinds of money to save it. If you go in there right now, they just haven't done anything at all. It was put on the national list for historic preservation. That's a real obligation, and the college president said he was going to do something about that. I haven't seen anything done yet. That is a very beautiful classic revival building of its kind, an early- to mid-nineteenth century, Italo-New England revival building, influenced by German neo-classicism. There are very few buildings of its quality like it.

It and the Samuel Russell House. Those are the only two Wesleyan buildings that belong in the history of American architecture, really. There are other things that almost make the list—a number of others, but not quite.

So that is a duty of whoever runs the show around here, to see that they're kept up. That thing needs a few million dollars of repair, and nothing's happening, and I'm very cross about that. I gave a lot of my energy to the Davison Art Center. I never taught in the Art Department, but probably fifty percent of the works that I translate—German material that I edit and translate, and so on—have to do with art history.

I use the art library a great deal, and the notion that they're just going to pull that out and stick it wherever they can find spots in the Olin Library makes me angry. [This has now been done. January, 2015. I wish it well. We shall see. I will not be a killjoy. I remain skeptical.] I've heard that in a hundred years, people won't need books. I don't believe that; I believe that people will always have books. I hope so, because there's nothing like them. They need loving homes. You cannot make a nice warm life around a "Kindle." (You can kindle all the fires you want. You know what the verb kindle means?)

To start a fire with pieces of dry wood.) I can see the wonder of them, though, when I travel I see—are they called iPads? Do you have an iPad?

Vongkiatkajorn: No.

Wensinger: I will not have an iPad. I've looked at them, in wonder and amazement at what these little things can do, but somehow they're still cold. So, I'm all for a nice warm campus with warm books.

At one time, this building [Fisk Hall] was being redone, and it needs it again. They wanted to move all language and literature into this building and expand it out in back. My idea was to have an extension out over the parking lot of a couple of floors, and a big open top with terraces. Everybody thought what a great idea.

Well, since I'm often asked about architecture around here, they may secretly think: "Oh, he has a terrific idea. Let's steal that, but don't let him know." I've already seen them—they're quite protective about what they do here, and if a German professor meddles in buildings and grounds, they'll say, "That's none of your business!" It used to be. And my plan would have been nice: there would be nice corridors, and hidden places, and then suddenly a large lecture room, and then small seminar rooms—the way I ideally see the C.O.L.

Now, the C.O.L. has proved itself. It's fifty some years old now, isn't it? So there's a call for that, and a need for that, and it has in a way absorbed the humanities and some of history. Do you have art courses through the C.O.L.?

Vongkiatkajorn: I don't think so.

Wensinger: No, that's not part of Philosophy, that's written literature.

Vongkiatkajorn: There are some courses on aesthetics.

Wensinger: Courses in aesthetics. Oh, what do you see? What are you looking at?

Vongkiatkajorn: Just your office.

Wensinger: Office is a terrible, terrible mess. It used to be something; people would come in and say, "Oh, look at this! Let's have a glass of wine." We used to have wonderful entertainment up here.

Vongkiatkajorn: Really?

Wensinger: At one time, through the seventies and eighties and into the nineties, we had a secretary who was Austrian, married to a second-generation Sicilian from Middletown.

Her name is Hilda, and this place was alive when she was here. She organized dances and parties at the drop of a hat, for German-speaking people. It's very, very quiet up here now. I hate to be constantly harping: "Oh, he thinks only the old days are good." I don't at all. I adore young people and so forth, though I think you might be getting a little short-changed by the powers that be here now. I'm absolutely convinced that our administration is at least fifty percent too big, though, I realize now the most important thing is to have people around here who are going to bring us money.

That's now the job of a university and college president. It used to be demeaning to think that they worried about money. That was the board's obligation. Now they run about the landscape sucking up to rich people. So that's why I call this Wesleyan Incorporated, now.

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh.

Wensinger: And we don't have a mere president, who is very bright, ambitious, articulate, a teacher and perforce partially a CEO—and that is happening not just at Wesleyan. That's phrased a little roughly, but I really do believe he is riven. He teaches well, I hear, and he's perhaps got all the teaching assistants that he needs for grading and so forth. That may be unusual now, and it is good. When I came here, every member of the administration also taught. Butterfield taught philosophy. Dean Spathe was heavy into the Classics Department. But they taught when they could, and things went along well lubricated, without terribly much fuss. I've already said this.

Generally speaking, this widening gap between administration and the faculty is regrettable. We've reached the point where the administration thinks it's equal to the faculty. Well, it's not. At any decent place where people teach and learn, there are two important ingredients: one is faculty, and the other is students. I may even put that the other way around. One is students, and the second is faculty. And don't talk about money, that is not the way of approaching things. [Ha-ha!]

So, the word nowadays around here, and apparently in the entire world, is alienation, right? I'm not on campus as much as before, but when I am here, and when I'm out in the corridor, and a class is over, I see students filing out, not smiling, not frowning, just: "Where's my cell phone?" They come out and the first thing they do is put a cell phone to their ears. Not all, but enough to be very, very noticeable. For about

forty years I've been the master of the bulletin board out there, and I've put up clippings from the *Times* mostly—anything that has to do with German, Germany, German matters. That's what I was doing when you came in, getting another one ready. People used to really look. Students would go and crowd around the clippings and read, but I don't think they read from paper much anymore. I don't see anybody really looking. Occasionally, some person is interested. Have you read much Kafka?

Vongkiatkajorn: No.

Wensinger: Read a story—a very short story called “The Hunger Artist.”

Vongkiatkajorn: Okay.

Wensinger: That's what I think is happening to the world. “The Hunger Artist.” Occasionally somebody stops, and looks at the articles put up there. What I'm putting up right now is from the Sunday paper, and it is very much apropos. It's called “Sprechen Sie Deutsch?” which means “Do you speak German?” This was in an educational supplement of Sunday's *Times*, and it describes trying to save the German language in a multicultural world. I won't go into it, but it's interesting enough, so I'll put it up, and maybe four or five curious people will look at it. Certainly my colleagues will take a look at it, because their job depends on us being able to continue to make the study of this language and literature important. It's very hard right now, with a language that is dying in *this* country; it's not dying around the world. People know the importance of Germany, which of course is the most influential and strongest country in Europe, by far, now. You don't have to know the literature; but you do have to be able to read it, speak it, and use it in business. Well, that's what we're trying to do.

Why don't you just shut me up for a while?

Vongkiatkajorn: No! Do you think that your students changed a lot over the years?

Wensinger: Yes, they're much more independent. They're much more confrontational, but they're much—I won't say they're brighter, but they're a lot less “obedient,” you know. I can understand that. When the kids had to take a language and they picked German, some loved it—and that's where we got our majors from. Some though: “Oh, yawn.” If you know how to drill it into them, make them interested in it, then they'll want to go on beyond the first two years of a language.

Now, young people are far more skeptical about that; besides; they are often lost. They don't know what the hell they're going to do. They have heard: "Oh, you're never going to have as nice or as rich a life as your parents." That's a terrible thing to say! But it's being said all the time because it might be true. I see kids who are—after they got out of here—just floundering with debts that have accrued from their borrowing money for their education. I never knew anything like that, you know. There were people on full scholarships, from a combination of good marks in class and some kind of athletic or other gift; it could be done.

But now it's such a financial burden, and we shouldn't make young people worry about their future. That's what shouldn't be done. How do you get to the point where you're really in some Elysium, some wonderful place where you don't have anything to worry about, except maybe grades? Fundamentally, the students haven't changed, but their behavior is entirely different.... I guess everybody talks about angst.

Well, it's from a German word, *Angst*, which means anxiety. W.H. Auden, great British-American poet, wrote a very interesting work called *The Age of Anxiety*, in which he anticipated pretty much that worrying nature. Adults tend, I'm sure, to exaggerate what we think young people are going through. But young people can bounce back so well. I don't know that I think they're as anxiety-ridden as one reads about all the time. There are terrible things that happen of course. The incidence of, say, student suicide is going way back up again. It was never very high in this country, but of course in Asia, and Japan in particular, the heavy weight of family obligation, and the sense of failure was so huge. That's just terrible, the suicide rate among young people. That's about the worst thing I can think of. Like the kid who went off the George Washington Bridge. He was a gay fellow, and they caught him and photographed him, and he couldn't face up to it. His parents took it in stride, but he couldn't. But those are so remote, and so untypical of what's happening right now. And of course newspapers just want to tell the bad news.

I'm not very good academically now, because it's been so long since I've been in a classroom. I haven't taught for more than a decade and a half. Some people who, right after they retire, ask their department—or are asked by their department—if they can give one course. Well, great, because they make a bunch of money doing that. It never occurred to me; I have so many and different other things to do in my remaining life

besides this, and I don't have to work. But for the first several years after my retirement, I went on, and from the great goodness of my heart, I occasionally took over some classes for people who couldn't do it. (I never asked for any money for it.) And at first I saw little difference in the behavior of students.

How do people differ? I do think that the digital age, or whatever it's called right now, has the profoundest impact upon the people. The campus used to be always swarming with people. In beautiful weather, people were sitting around on the lawn everywhere, together. Now, when I walk around here, I think: "Is this vacation time, or what?" Where are the students when they're not in class? I don't know; it's a mystery to me. Do they go into little rabbit holes under ground, or what? Do they go to Usdan? (Though I never see that overly crowded.) Do they go home?

Vongkiatkajorn: They could be in a library.

Wensinger: Aha. Yeah, I see some over there, too. There is that. Yeah, and that brings up another thing. Students never left campus much when I began teaching here; they just were here. Matter of fact, they weren't permitted to have cars until you were something like a junior, maybe. If one guy from a fraternity was driving into New York, the car was loaded with people. But that state of affairs eventually began to look like a campus prison. "Why can't you get away from here?" Well, then we got co-education, which helped in many ways of course. It kept people around. But now, I don't go around and check; people are in class a lot, but even between classes I do see people sitting because it's sunny there on the front steps of the library. That seems to be a good place. And then that grouping around the former campus student center. Is that where Allbritton is?

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm-hm.

Wensinger: Okay. And then there's that paved area at Usdan; that's all pretty new; people sit on the benches there. But for heaven sakes, how many students are there here? A couple of thousand, if you add them all up? I don't know what our population is here.

Vongkiatkajorn: Around three thousand.

Wensinger: Three thousand! Well, then I still question, where are they? I think they're looking at movies, or at the computer somewhere. That's my impression of things, of what people are doing these days.

I wish I knew more students. I used to have students all the time. They'd come and work on my—I call it a farm. They'd come and rake leaves, or they'd come and help me cut the grass. They'd just come out for dinner. I had lots of them. They could come out, they could find out what it was. I'm sure they would still like to do that. Are you on, let's say, easy personal terms with some of your teachers?

Vongkiatkajorn: Some of them.

Wensinger: Yeah. And do they have you to their home?

Vongkiatkajorn: No, not many.

Wensinger: Not many. That was a kind of a Wesleyan obligation when I first came here. We entertained them; they entertained us. As I say, the fraternities—which were good things here when I first came—were always having parties for the faculty. The faculty were all there, and it was very cheerful. You know, everybody wants to let off steam at least once a week, and so Saturday nights could be fairly hilarious. And then we would meet at the little theater, the '92 Theater (which originally was the library), long before the Center for the Arts was built. That was something people did on weekends. And plays had both faculty and students in them, always. There was musical entertainment, where faculty and students did this and that together. I guess the music here is very good. Are you at all musical? Or no, what's your gift?

Vongkiatkajorn: I don't know.

Wensinger: Well, you're not supposed to really know yet. What are you, eighteen, nineteen, twenty?

Vongkiatkajorn: Twenty.

Wensinger: When I went to my graduation, I was twenty-two. Because—I told you all about Andover where I couldn't quite make it, so they put me back a grade. And I kept being one year older than everybody else. But gosh, I didn't know what I wanted to do until I was practically thirty! Well, no, but somewhere in there. Are you rich?

Vongkiatkajorn: No.

Wensinger: No. You're parents aren't rich? So they cannot say, "Oh dear, you don't have to worry. There's a thousand dollars a day."

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensinger: No, you don't have that? Well, that's good. Otherwise, that would wreck you.

Vongkiatkajorn: What kind of work were you doing most of the time? While you were teaching. Like what books were you writing, or translating?

Wensing: The first thing I ever published—with an older colleague—was a textbook of a novel by Hermann Hesse, called *Siddhartha*. That was published in 1960, or '61. I did a couple of articles on the work that I had done as a graduate student, but I did not publish my dissertation. In the old days, that was considered not dignified, not academically acceptable, to turn your dissertation into a book. Nowadays, most dissertations are published automatically, and nobody, I think, reads them.

Very, very few people say; “Hey did you know such and such famous, famous, famous writer graduated from Yale? And you should see his dissertation.” I did brief articles on research topics in literature, but that was never enough for me. What was lacking—and I’m sure I mentioned this last time—was good translations from German, and not very many people were actually doing this. Of course, there were certain ones that were. But I began doing that, and translating poetry, and so forth. A lot of that got published in various places. I also confessed to you somewhere along the line that I was very much interested in art history and in the performing arts, pictorial arts, and above all architecture. So I thought, “Oh, there are these wonderful books that have never been translated.”

So I did a couple of those. And if I ever get you out there, I can show you a shelf full of stuff I’ve done. I never did anything that was just a translation. That’s a lie; I did. But I always wanted to say to the publisher (and I’ve had several different publishers): “I want to have at least an introduction, or a preface, or an extended note from the translator in that book, to talk about what my approach was to it.” Why I thought this was important, and so forth. Oh, I see one of my books up there, I think. This is the diaries and letters and journals of a woman painter. Her name was Paula Modersohn-Becker; she died in 1907. It came out in German, but then since the original was published, other letters and journals were found, and we translated them even before the originals were published.

Vongkiatkajorn: Wow!

Wensing: And so you'll see a lot of notes, and a lot of stuff about her. This is all our edition, I think. I can't remember. I haven't picked this book up. I never reread my things—almost never. I look at it and say, "Hey, that's great!"

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensing: And this man, Guenter Busch, was the head of the museum in Bremen, and this woman was Liselotte von Reinken,. And then I worked together with Carole Hoey—who was the secretary of the College of Letters.

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh.

Wensing: I spoke the translation, and she took everything down. We gave her full credit, properly. We have a preface, which we did, an introduction which they did, and we translated, and then made acknowledgments, and then a note on this edition, which is a rather lengthy thing, and then all of this stuff at the end. It's almost a six-hundred page book. She's such an interesting creature. She's an artist. And we had a lot of footnotes. My word, look at all of that! So, the text itself ends here. This says what's in the book, and here's a note on this edition. It took a couple of years to do this one—not full-time, mind you; I was teaching.

Of course, in order to get tenure at this place, good instruction is not enough. A great deal of attention was paid to "product," when I was on the advisory committee; it was also important to learn what students themselves thought of one's teaching. It is essential to have somebody with expertise read the student evaluations, and understand them, and not take them overly seriously. You know, one student could say about a teacher: "Oh, I was never so bored in my life." And another person in exactly the same course: "I've never had such a wonderful time." So, you have to really know how to do that. But they're important: you shouldn't get tenure if you're a really awful teacher. If you're a boring teacher, that's all in the mind's eye. You know what's boring? The course that I loved perhaps best of anything in my graduate school was a course in the history of the Germanic languages. And it was so dry! But the teacher was so enthralling that I look back on that—then I also took Gothic; Gothic is a language that hasn't been spoken for hundreds of years. But people still study the Gothic language. It's enthralling, too.

So, teaching is an important ingredient, and then scholarship is also important, and sort of your contributions to the community. You know: “What have you done for Wesleyan?” Those are all taken into account in tenure. So, to satisfy your case when it comes up for tenure, you have to have some pretty decent published work to be judged. And then you have to get letters from people who are not at Wesleyan, and do not necessarily know the candidate, to say, “Hey, this is pretty good scholarship,” or “Hey, this is pretty bad—it’s all wrong.” And in the very worst scenario, they say, “Hm, I think I’ve read this somewhere else before.” And it doesn’t have quotations marks around it. But who can even reliably talk about plagiarism? And then you have to be kind of an approachable person, although we have given tenure here to a whole bunch of really crappy people, I think. Not a whole bunch; I’ll take that back—to some who’ve gotten in under the wire, and some people that go on teaching and boring people forever, and just don’t realize that they’re holding up a spot that a young person could really profit by. Okay, before you go to sleep.

Vongkiatkajorn: I’m not falling asleep!

Wensing: Oh, no? Your eyelids are—

Vongkiatkajorn: But maybe we could meet again? We can go to your house.

Wensing: All right. You have to give me some possibilities. I have to go to New York, but then I’ll be around for a couple of weeks.

[End of Second Part of Interview]