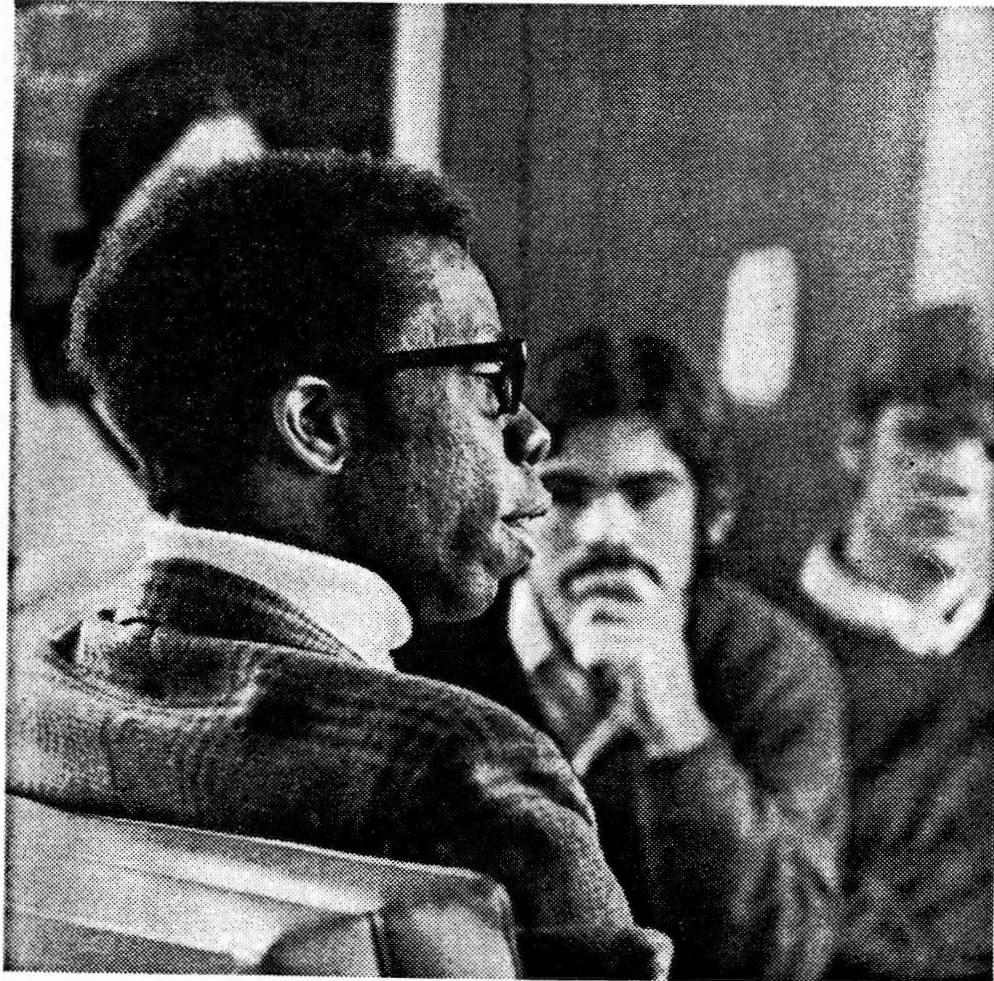


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HERBERT Woodward Martin, originator of "contrapuntal" poetry, chats with students at Aquinas College, where he is "poet in residence."

An experiment in poetry

The several voices of Herbert Martin

by B. G. Brown

THE CONTRAPUNTAL mind of Herbert Woodward Martin will be leaving Aquinas College this spring.

And with his departure Aquinas will lose its first "poet in residence," a title Martin is not loathe to give up, even though he first liked the idea.

He will continue to explore the new contrapuntal form of poetry of which, he believes, he is the originator. To his knowledge no one else has tried the adaptation of musical counterpoint to poetry.

"FOR BETTER or for worse, it's my own invention," he says.

"WE WOULD LIKED to have had him stay. The decision to go elsewhere is his own," says Sister Jean Milhaupt, chairman of the Aquinas English department.

She explained that the idea of a poet in residence was advanced in faculty discussions. It is a title given in many colleges to an established poet or artist. Aquinas was not in a position to follow this course, but it was noted that in Martin the faculty already had a member who could make a contribution to the arts.

In fact, he already had made a contribution, with both published and unpublished works. His poems are in free verse, somewhat in the style of Walt

together and talk together — "two voices in the same poem" just as there are two tunes or themes complementing each other in the same score.

There is more meaning in this verse when Martin himself reads the lines. Reading aloud, Martin insists, is a very important part of poetry. He cites such poets as Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Frost as readers of their own works.

IN A SMALL volume, his first published locally, Martin addressed several poems to Antigone, not necessarily the daughter of Oedipus. Nevertheless one of his earlier poems is titled "Oedipus to

production of "The View From the Bridge." In April he expects to play the role of Alexander J. Potemkin in the musical "Celebration."

At Aquinas he has taught a survey course in world literature, the modern novel, modern poetry and creative writing. He also inaugurated a course in black literature, although most of his students were white.

"I AM A MILITANT liberal in the sense that I believe inalienable rights belong to everybody," he says. "These rights do not belong to one group or race or strata of society. I like to identify with the problem of why people are

poetry.

"FOR BETTER or for worse, it's my own invention," he says.

As for the title, "I don't believe I'll ever be 'in residence' again. You can't be creative on every occasion."

Such a title brings too many demands, some serious and some facetious, Martin feels. He dislikes the jibe: "Have you written your poem for today?"

This is not to say he has not enjoyed his three-year stay at Aquinas. He has enjoyed his students and the feeling apparently has been mutual. His two-year contract as a teacher was extended a year when he accepted the "residence" title.

STUDENT AFFECTION for the poet is symbolized in a painting which hangs on his office wall, a portrait which closely resembles Martin although the subject is a stranger to him. It was given to him by a group of his students who saw the picture by an English artist while visiting in Britain.

"They thought it looked like me, so they purchased it and brought it back for me," Martin relates. "It was an act of love."

In his stay here Martin has won recognition not only as a writer of poetry, but also as a reader. He presented a reading of his poems recently at the University of Dayton. His full, resonant voice, closely related to his singing capacity, forms an ideal vehicle for poetic interpretation.

His restless mind now seeks new fields and new inspiration, he indicates. He is not sure yet just which of several offers he will accept.

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In fact, he already had made a contribution, with both published and unpublished works. His poems are in free verse, somewhat in the style of Walt Whitman. His contribution to form, however, lies in his contrapuntal experimentation.

MARTIN IS A singer as well as a poet and has had baritone and tenor roles in many cantatas and oratorios. After a series of engagements in 1961 he conceived the idea that it might be possible for two or more individuals to counter each other while talking, and yet make good sense. Each voice would work separately as well as together, so what one voice might say could be extended logically by the other.

"After writing six poems in this style," he relates, "it was pointed out to me that they worked every way but backwards. This was a problem I solved with 'Contrapuntal No. 7.'"

This verse, which Martin believes is nearest to perfection in this style, reads:

*"And do you wonder why
in those last two months
we came to touch so close
I found an allowance of courage
fearing neither kiss nor embrace
to drive my image straight
hungering between two worlds?"*

THIS POEM SHOULD be read down the left side, then down the right, and then alternately, line by line together, Martin explains. Then the process may be reversed, reading from the bottom upwards.

He likens this to two persons who stay

IN A SMALL volume, his first published locally, Martin addressed several poems to Antigone, not necessarily the daughter of Oedipus. Nevertheless one of his earlier poems is titled "Oedipus to Antigone," opening with the lines:

*"Daughter! . . . Daughter!
I beg you take my hands!
Teach them newly how to feel.
Encourage these sightless feet
To avoid the brick, escape the stone!"*

The booklet, entitled "New York the Nine Million and Other Poems," now in its second printing, was published by the Abra Cadabra Press, a joint venture of Martin and a faculty colleague, Joseph McNamara. "We called it that because we thought it would be magic if we made any money," McNamara quips.

Martin expects soon to issue a second volume of poems. Most of the poems in the first volume had appeared previously in various periodicals.

BORN IN BIRMINGHAM, Ala., in the midst of the great depression, Martin moved with his parents when he was 12 to Toledo, where he attended high school and took his B.A. degree at the University of Toledo. He has had scholarships and fellowships at Antioch, the University of Colorado and at Middlebury's Bread Loaf writers project. He completed his M.A. work at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He worked in a New York publishing house in the early 1960s. He studied voice also in Ohio and New York.

When he came to Grand Rapids he was interested in the theater, having authored two plays in New York. Recently he was the narrator in Civic Theater's

sense that I believe inalienable rights belong to everybody," he says. "These rights do not belong to one group or race or strata of society. I like to identify with the problem of why people are upset by what's going on in the world—the environment, war, people falling apart and not doing anything about it.

"We must find a way of working our way out of frustrations. We have these things eternally as conflicts."

The poet refers to the dedication in his book as expressing his basic philosophy: "For my mother—love is the most precious thing I know." This line is from an unpublished four-part "Marriage Song."

"**MY MOTHER** taught me my perceptions," he says simply. "She taught me to look at life."

And he is remarkably perceptive, according to his colleague McNamara. "He is always looking for a word or a phrase for his poetry or music. He may take it off a teletype machine or a billboard. And he jots it down in the notebook he always carries."

An example of this perception may be seen in these lines from "Antigone II":

*. . . The world is too public . . . we
spin out our lives in the noise of our
minds . . . Your mouth is the thin
difficulty of porcelain . . . It is a
lonely business addressing truth . . .
There is so much talk running counter
to what I am thinking. This public
world becomes the shout of my whisper . . .
Do you know what I want
to say? It hangs in my throat like
the instrument that rings the bell . . .
It is important to cry.*