

Professor, Prize-winning Poet, Translator In Honor of Herbert Woodward Martin

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Professor Herbert Woodward Martin and his family arrived in Pécs thirty years ago, in early September 1990. He earned a Fulbright grant to teach American and African American literature courses to students of the English Department of Janus Pannonius University as the institution was called at that time. Martin was not the first Fulbright scholar in the department but the first African American who, among other subjects, familiarized the English majors with poems published in *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*, edited by Arnold Adoff and introduced by Gwendolyn Brooks. The anthology contains some poems by Martin too, including “A Negro Soldier’s Viet Nam Diary,” which has heart-wrenching lines about a black soldier facing the loss of innocent lives in a land destroyed by modern weapons, where “Death hangs on the rice” (Martin, “A Negro Soldier’s” 228).

Herbert Woodward Martin was born in Birmingham, Alabama on October 4, 1933.¹ When he was twelve years old, he moved with his mother to Toledo, Ohio where he graduated from Scott High School. In 1964 he earned a BA degree from the University of Toledo, and then would go on to earn a Masters of Arts at the State University of New York, Buffalo in 1967, a Masters in Literature at Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College in 1972. He received his Doctorate in Creative Writing at Carnegie-Mellon University in 1979. Martin became a professor at the University of Dayton, Ohio, where he taught courses in African-American literature and creative writing. Martin became also named Dayton’s poet-laureate and was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Dayton, continuing to teach and perform even after his retirement. In 2002 he also won the Mark Twain Award from the Society for Midwestern Literature. He received an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Wright State University in 2010. He retired from full-time teaching in 1996 but has been continuing his active and prolific career until this day. Currently he resides in Dayton with his wife, Sue Altman. They have two children, Sarah and Julia, and four grandchildren.

Martin began to write poems during his undergraduate years. As a young scholar he attended conferences where he met several American writers and poets. It was in “Les Deux Megots,” a coffee house on Manhattan’s East Side where he gave the first

¹ Biographical data are based on the website <https://www.google.com/search?q=Herbert+Woodward+Martin+Papers%2C+1940-2008+MSS-015%2C095&oq=Herbert+Woodward+Martin+Papers%2C+1940-2008+MSS-015%2C095&aqs=chrome..69i57.1657j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> accessed August 13, 2021.

reading of his own poems. Ambitiously, Martin tried to absorb as many influences as he could and did not limit his work to portraying racial and ethnic issues. His first book of poems, *New York the Nine Million*, was published in 1969 to be followed by many more, including *The Forms of Silence* (1980) with several memorable pieces, for instance the poem “Sonnet: The Expense of Memory” with the beginning lines:

That month, that September, everything was memory.
I woke one morning with dreams in my eyes,
Took the road away from solitary
Fears, from that prison where the heart resides. (35)

The poem is written in a thirteen-line long, irregular sonnet form, which addresses and allegorizes the experience of escaping from private worries and starting to communicate with the world as a writer.

Martin’s both private and professional interest in American poetry in general is very well illustrated by the fact that he undertook guest editing the winter 1987-88 issue of *The University of Dayton Review*, which comprises essays coming from papers delivered at a conference on Emily Dickinson to mark the centennial of her passing away in 1886. Martin calls the introduction to the collection he wrote “A Few Epistles from the World.” Of course, the title deliberately recalls the letter Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Martin’s idea is that the essays in the journal issue are as many letters written to Dickinson, and concludes the introduction appropriately: “... when we all gather here in Dayton, Ohio, to sing your praises, I thought your own words in poem #815 could act as a fitting close to the proceedings.” Dickinson’s words quoted by Martin read as follows:

The Luxury to meditate
The Luxury it was
To banquet on thy Countenance
A Sumptuousness bestows
On plainer Days, whose Table far
As Certainty can see
Is laden with a single Crumb
The Consciousness of Thee (Dickinson qtd. in Martin, “A Few Epistles” 4)

This poem is undoubtedly characteristic of the rhetorical complexity of Dickinson’s work, in which catachresis is a leading trope. In this case, the feature “shifts among signifiers” as identified by Enikő Bollobás with regard to Dickinson’s poetry contributes to its creation (26).

The Log of the Vigilante (2000), an epic poem comprising individually numbered lyrics earned Martin the Mellen Poetry Prize and the Ohio Governor’s Award. In 2004 Kent State University Press published a book on Martin’s career and literary achievements, titled *Herbert Woodward Martin and the African American Tradition in Poetry*, authored by longtime friend Ronald Primeau (1952-2020). As the title indicates the author makes investigations across the whole of Martin’s work up to

2004 in relevant contexts. Chapter 7 of the book is devoted to *The Log*, introducing it as a masterpiece in which “Accompanied by a wide range of music from the oral tradition, the narrative gives voice to slaves and their descendants. Martin juxtaposes a fictional slave-ship captain and a series of historical personages in contrapuntal patterns that invite debate” (Primeau 129).

Martin is regarded as the most distinguished scholar of Dayton-born African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), a child of slaves, which is also made clear in Primeau’s monograph. Primeau writes that “[i]n his monograph on Dunbar, he [Martin] documented considerable evidence from essays and letters about the challenges Dunbar faced and the strategies he used to deal with the obstacles of racism” (152). Indeed, Martin has published on Dunbar’s work extensively, moreover, has also toured and performed the poetry of Dunbar in a great many places of the US. Martin is editor or co-editor of Dunbar’s works and has been part of a number of programs dedicated to the poet. Also, he wrote the libretto for an opera based on Dunbar’s work. Among several others, Barbara Gray made an interview with Martin about his appreciation of and engagement with Dunbar’s poetry. He mentions a poem by Dunbar, “The Retort” (1913) in the talk, which he reads out and presents the memorable features of Dunbar’s poetry through its rendering a debate of the head and the heart (Gray).

During his stay in Hungary through the two semesters of the 1990-1991 academic year Martin developed a genuine interest in Hungarian poetry and translated some pieces by contemporary authors with the help of his Hungarian colleagues. Among them there are some poems by Géza Szócs (1953-2020), the Hungarian poet who died due to COVID-19 virus infection just recently. In personal communication Martin claims that it was the musicality of Szócs’s poems that attracted him to this poet’s work primarily. Not long after its publication, he sent a copy of *The Log of the Vigilante* to Szócs, and the latter wrote a review of it for the Hungarian journal *Irodalmi Jelen* (Literary Present). Szócs made this review complete with his translation of one of the numbered *Vigilante* poems (0400) into Hungarian.

It is an honor for *FOCUS: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies* to publish three of Martin’s translations of Szócs’s poems, for the first time in Hungary.

“Bare-headed on a spiral-staircase”
(Fedetlen fővel a csigalépcsőn)

All that you said once
Even the dress you used to wear.

Bells. Whispers.
It was not me. Was it not you?

No telephone. Simply an altar.
Inside table. Inside stock.
Rural-table in rain.
Muffled speech. Bells.

On February Eleventh
Postmen roam the city
Who is that other postman
One of them: is me
Me

“Poem About The Endless Programs”
(Vers a végtelen programokról)

“What the small computer is able to solve with the help of the large program, can be done with the small program and the large computer. It logically follows from this that the endlessly large program can work by itself as well, without any kind of computer.”

Stanisław Len

Under our love there is another.
Under the program:
another program
in the monsters there live other monsters,
under the law, there is a deeper law—

a hidden creek in the stars
which light our lives:

under our love, there is another.

More quickly, darker, damper
it throbs, slides out of the hand
and kicks the blanket off itself
at night like an infant.
Throws off —

Once you, too, will taste
the deeper wine floating in the wine

ALSO, UNDER THIS POEM, THERE IS ANOTHER

and together with me, we will melt
into endlessly longer programs.

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