

## pro tempore

For twenty years Michael Martin has been living in the shadow of Iron Mountain, or as we say locally, up in the mountain above Plum Creek. Occasionally reporters will hike up the steep path—you can't drive there—to the "cabin" he built. They take pictures and write Waldenesque feature stories about the reclusive poet-artist who has forgone home life, modern conveniences, and the pursuit of publication or exhibition of his work in order to devote himself exclusively to his singular vision. It is an accurate and appealing portrait, but it is incomplete, and finally with regard to Martin's work it is peripheral.

To complete even the external portrait would require some acquaintance with his immense learning, his linguistic gifts, his extensive European and urban experience, and the innately quiet and authentic bearing that could easily persuade his visitors that Martin is indigenous to Plum Creek. The consequential portrait also would require some exploration of the massive accumulation of manuscripts, drawings, and paintings that have overflowed the cabin into the attics and storerooms of his friends. And still remaining of course would be the necessary entry into that delicate and fecund imagination where word and image seem to move in ceaseless exchange toward passages that are humane, whole, and true.

IMR is privileged to invite a larger audience to join that venture by offering these selections of words and images from Martin's long work, *Approaching History*, written in the late winter of 1982. We are indebted to Fred Chappell for the concluding essay that reflects upon that work and upon the contexts and burdens of the contemporary long poem. Chappell's own distinctions as an epic poet and as a critic are well-known to readers of IMR.

Martin's poetry partakes of an Emersonian tradition that seeks union between fact and imagination, that coalesces the individual and the universal experience. He eschews objective correlatives, allowing the self-reliant self to prevail in the quieter and intensely personal arenas of exchange, dialogue, process, and passage, where even Ultimate Mystery is perceived as Becoming. Martin's metamorphosing world of ex-

change has a cinematic quality that connects sojourn and indwelling, duration and moment. The image, the word, the poem are his vital instruments of generation and regeneration. "What must be passed on," he records in one of his notebooks, "in addition to the treasures of civility and kindness, must be the passion and the com-*passion*."

While the contexts of exchange are as surprising and fresh as are people and events and imagination joined, *Approaching History* has an additional design and direction. It moves from far away places to near ones: from the poet as stranger in a foreign country, standing on the threshold of a door that does not open; to an enigmatic exchange with an imposing figure across a trembling threshold (the first passage in our selection); to a mountain porch and a conversation between friends, together, on the same side of the threshold.

The city is necessarily a crucial image in Martin's work because of its indispensable connections with ceaseless vitality, change, and separation within the human community. But *Approaching History* is finally anchored in a mountain, where, as expressed in the powerful central poem in this selection, a fragile windmill breathes a "channeled stormlight/and melody,/this chambered whirlwind and pastoral." Martin's "Appalachian Fall" connects with decline and fall and mortality—and with life and breath and home.

It is noteworthy that the original epigraph for *Approaching History* was from Novalis: "Where are we really going? Always home . . ." Such a vision, whether from the prow of an ancient Ithacan ship or a porch on Plum Creek, makes, as Chappell reminds us, epic demands. And they are demands that exact more than the formalities of guest friendship. Over the years Michael and the local people have taken each other in, not without uncertainty—that's how it is at home—but also with affection and respect, and on the poet's part at least, with awe. As the sequence on Beulah's porch goes on to reveal, Martin is transfixed by the melding of his own vision with this cherished friend's vision of creation and by her understanding of life/death in ways that make "approaching history" and going home a single journey.

Martin's affirmation of a "secret continuity" is evidenced in his method with word and image: for him, the poetry begins as "notebook entries" that in their primary state emerge as prose, literally typed in one long, undivided word, itself a kind of image of continuum. In our selections, the opening of each entry—and occasional lines elsewhere—will remind the reader of that original form. Likewise, the charcoal drawings (greatly reduced here) are parts of sequences, and within each the individual line is a development. Like their counterparts, words, they are immediate wholes that are becoming, emerging toward future ways of seeing and saying.

Certain passages may be helped by a brief explanation: the quotation from Paul Celan's *Todesfuge* (p. 5) may be read, "Black milk of daybreak we drink you in the evening"; "Sagittarius" (p. 18) is the sign under which both of Martin's children, Alex and Eva, were born; "Prima and her Mikhail" (p. 23) alludes to Gelsey Kirkland and Mikhail Baryshnikov. We asked Michael for his translation of the opening epigraph, also from Celan, and, characteristically, after mulling it over for a few days, he responded: "Before it (the eye, alone: in-most—yet almost, itself, alien: almost *outside*), the strange thing (or one), whose guest you are here."

—D.L.



Gene Dalton/Roanoke Times & World-News