



## In Memoriam: Robert K. Martin

Jay Grossman

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## IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT K. MARTIN

Robert K. Martin, professor emeritus at the Université de Montréal and eminent Whitman scholar, died on February 19, 2012. Professor Martin's career as a scholar and a teacher in every way lived up to the highest standards of humanist research, pedagogy, and dedicated service to the profession and the community at-large.

Even a brief overview of Martin's career demonstrates his remarkable range and productivity as a scholar. His ground-breaking contributions began with his highly influential 1975 *Partisan Review* essay, "Whitman's *Song of Myself*: Homosexual Dream and Vision," followed quickly by his first book, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979), which, as Jared Gardner wrote in a review of the 1998 expanded edition, "reoriented completely the language in which American poetry was discussed," by insisting "not that homosexuality tells all there is to say about these poems but that without an understanding of the centrality of homosexuality the poems say precisely nothing." A great deal that we take for granted today about the viability and centrality of sexuality as a crucial hermeneutic in cultural and literary studies generally, and in Whitman studies specifically, can be traced to the critical posture Martin adopted in *The Homosexual Tradition* and employed there to such productive and persuasive effect.

A similar point can be made about Martin's second major intervention in the American literary canon, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (1986). In this work Martin once again reframed the past in order to foreground its sometimes unexpected connections to the literary, theoretical, and political concerns of the present. In the book's preface Martin wrote: "The male couple, as Melville imagined it, can serve as the basis for a reexamination of the way men are called upon to assume roles of power and authority." Melville's representations of alternative relations between men, Martin continued, can serve as "an important part of a larger movement that can ally itself to feminist and ecological thinking." In his critical writing Martin was always looking ahead, testing the boundaries of new connections and coalitions, and his invocation here of "ecological thinking" is one of the earliest I know of what is becoming increasingly familiar today as "green criticism." As in so many other instances, Robert Martin got there first.

Two vital and recurring aspects of Martin's career are also especially noteworthy, for they encapsulate what made him not only a uniquely vibrant scholar and teacher, but a dear and valued colleague as well. Martin edited or co-edited no fewer than five books on topics ranging from Whitman (*The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life after the Life*, 1992) to E. M. Forster to the American gothic; his last, on Italy and its place in the nineteenth-century American literary imagination, appeared in 2002. These collaborative works—as well as the astonishing number of scholarly book reviews he wrote—reveal not only his capacious intelligence and unyielding curiosity, but also his intellectual generosity, sense of scholarly responsibility, and extraordinary service to the fields he has also profoundly shaped. Moreover, all of this work exists alongside essays

and book chapters on crucial figures in an expanding canon that Martin taught us to read anew: Whitman (including his pioneering essay on Whitman and Thomas Mann that appeared in *WWQR* in 1986), Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Hart Crane, E. M. Forster, André Gide, Roland Barthes, Gertrude Stein. Where *indeed* would Gay and Lesbian Studies and American literary and cultural studies be without the work of Robert K. Martin?

In 2006, as a member of the Executive Committee of the Division on Gay Studies in Language and Literature for the Modern Language Association, I organized a special panel in Professor Martin's honor. Before a multi-generational audience of scholars and students who packed the room, stood along the back wall, and sat on the floor, three distinguished scholars sounded the depths of Martin's scholarly work in the context of the continuing unfolding of Lesbian and Gay Studies, and then listened as audience members commented on his political bravery—not only staking his academic career on an open acknowledgment of his own homosexuality, but also focusing his scholarship on the irreducible relevance of sexuality and homosexuality for literary studies. The papers were published in *GLQ* in 2008 (“Queer Lineations: Robert K. Martin and Gay Literary Studies”), providing an opportunity for everyone to reacquaint themselves with Martin's contributions not only to American gay and lesbian literary and cultural studies, but also to the study of a wide array of British, European, and Canadian artists, writers, and theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It goes without saying to those who knew him that Robert was also a kind and gentle man, good-humored, welcoming, encouraging, and supportive. Which is to say that he was not only admired, but loved. In all of these ways his life and his career exemplify all that is best about our shared profession.

—Jay Grossman