

INTERVIEWEE: Joseph Walford Martin
INTERVIEWER: Mary Emma Harris
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[BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW. BEGINNING OF TRANSCRIPT]

JWM: Yes, the "Yours in Christ." There's a batch of them. H.L. Mencken. I think H.L. Mencken's letters were signed that way.

MEH: This is the "Yours in Christ."

JWM: Yes, the "Yours in Christ." I think—there's a batch of them that just appeared in a recent issue of *Harper's* and I just noticed it—noticed the signature there.

MEH: I didn't know if it might have been a takeoff on the Christians who came in the summertime.

JWM: Oh, yeah. Well, it was that, too. But I don't think he invented it, the phrase. I think that may explain its popularity. [LAUGHS] I think he was using it that way. Well, as far as what the college was trying to do in literature is concerned, I don't feel there's very much of a story for me, at any rate. It was, I would say, fairly traditional, at least what I was trying to do. I think Wunsch was trying to do things which were much more innovative. I think Fred Mangold in—more I think in some of the things he was doing after I left was more innovative. He was—I think they had a seminar on Freud and Literature and other things which were not in the pervue of the rather traditionalist version that I gave. What I suppose is, looking back on it now, I was giving off was a good deal the

early 1930s Oxford University English literature school which I had been exposed to and which is quite different then from what was the dominant school at Cambridge under I. A. Richards. Did I get the initials right?

[OVERTALK]

MEH: I think so.

JWM: And as I look back on it, I don't think there was anything that was very startling done in the way of literature. My own view was that you put something in front of somebody and try and stand off to the side and help him discover it for himself. But he has to read it himself. There was this business of the sexual pronouns coming up, too, which you know what I mean by that. He's got to read it for himself, and the teacher can explain things to him, but this is what this word meant to Shakespeare or to Chaucer which is not the quite the same as it means to us—but not really details. But things like the worldview of the Elizabethan, but he can't roll it up in a little capsule and give it to him. Well, that was pretty elementary, but, it, of course, means a fair amount of work for students and is not, I think, as far as the teaching is concerned very exciting. I think my view was that the exciting things happened between the student and the piece of literature and not between the student and the teacher.

MEH: How did you conduct your classes?

JWM: Well, they were all fairly small, so they were conducted pretty much by discussion, "How does this strike you?" and "What do you think he's trying to do here?" And other people would jump in and—or you hoped they would jump in. There was a certain amount of writing of essays which I suppose is the old

Oxford pattern of the tutor in writing essays. This isn't necessarily the best way to do it. I really have come to no final views on that because I got out of teaching in the time of the war and have never been back into it. I've done various other things and never came to any really final views about that. You know the theory on—which I was not responsible for but which I—which was the dominant theory at Black Mountain and which I saw the value of, of the drama and the development and so on. You've been into that—

MEH: Well, somewhat. Since Wunsch is not accessible, I've talked with many students as I can.

JWM: Yeah.

MEH: How would you describe what Wunsch was trying to do at the college?

JWM: Well, he was trying to get—I don't know to what extent this was Wunsch theory and to what extent it was Rice theory—it was certainly held forth by one and practiced by the other—of getting the student to realize himself, I suppose, through taking roles on the stage which they would never completely fit, of course, because plays weren't written for therapeutic purposes. But I think—I think that it did probably develop students in the sense of giving them a chance to express themselves in a way that they wouldn't have had without acting in this play or that. And I suppose part of the function of the drama there was part of community life as well as individual self-expression. I have never sorted the two out. How much it was one; how much it was the other. It was a community that was dependent pretty much on itself for entertainment you might say, and so I suppose that meant part of it played a role, although I don't

imagine there was a great deal of individual self-expression in Xanti Schawinsky's abstract piece of theater where you were a triangle or a cube or a sphere. I wondered myself how that squared with the drama of self-expression. I don't know that it ever was rationalized. I think this was a good and exciting thing to do if the community—the expression of the community is innovating in the arts. And Xanti was a fairly powerful and interesting personality. I suspect that it was due to a large extent to that. Has this been—in your conversations has this been rationalized with the other theory of the drama or put together with it?

MEH: I think people have expressed that there was a certain conflict in the sort of thing he was doing with college educational philosophy, but from what I could gather, it was more one of really his role as director. People have felt—

JWM: You mean that he was too tough a director.

MEH: Not that he was too tough, but that maybe he did too much directing. It wasn't as much a matter of students putting into the production but of students being used as really instruments for putting on his production. [OVERTALK] I'm not sure it's totally true—a totally just criticism.

JWM: Well, I don't see how that production could have been put on without very close and rigid direction—

MEH: Yes.

JWM: —because that was—at least as I understood it, that's what the play was. It's a very meticulous juxtaposition, almost with the formality of a piece of music at times. One form versus another. Well, it was not a medium that I knew very

much about. I think there was just one production that I saw so I probably missed a good deal of it. I'm talking about something that was a long time back, but that's the way it sticks in my memory now. I wondered how—I wonder really what Wunsch may privately have thought of this, because it didn't seem to fix—to me at least—his theory of drama. Of course, he was obviously not going to denounce it publicly or as far as I know I never heard him say—never heard any report of him saying anything about it, but I often wondered what his private view of it was. You've not picked up anything on that?

MEH: No, I haven't. What—do you remember any of Wunsch's productions in particular? Were you there when they did *Bury the Dead*? Does that ring a bell?

JWM: No, that doesn't ring a bell, but that may be simply my memory which I've learned not to trust

MEH: Were you there when Clifford Odets was there?

JWM: No.

MEH: Okay.

JWM: I'm sure I would have remembered Clifford Odets if I had been there when he was there because I had seen and admired a number of his plays in New York. No, the—I don't really remember the individual plays that he directed. No, I can't really help you on that. I'm trying to think whether the fact that—whether you should draw any inferences from the fact that I do remember Xanti's and don't remember any of his. I don't think you should because I think it was the

unusualness of Xanti's play and the fact that I'd never seen anything like it. In fact, I believe nobody had until it was put on. It makes me remember that, but it doesn't necessarily mean that Wunsch's were flat and dull. I think that probably since he was trying to do other things with plays, they probably were duller than a play directed by Xanti because he was looking at it as an educational device in a way that Xanti was not. He was—may have been looking at it as an educational device for educating the world but not for educating the students who were in it, I think. And so, I end up with the conclusion that I'm just sort of zero for you on Wunsch's plays, except for the theory which you know already.

MEH: What did you perceive as being Rice's place in the community when he was there—his role in the community?

JWM: Well, I suppose it existed on various levels. He was—there was the historic level in that there wouldn't have been a community if it hadn't been for the Rollins row that he was the center of. And that, I suppose, people remained conscious of. He was, I suppose, the most articulate person in the community. Or at least the person who was certainly the most free in giving off opinions about this and that and the other. And hence, I suppose, always the center of psychic action. I don't know how much you could say that he played the—there was a sense in which he was also the father figure but also I don't know that you could say that he was the father figure in the sense that, say, Eisenhower was a national father figure when he was president, because I don't think he expressed in that way what the majority of the college wanted to

be necessarily in the sense that I suppose the statistical majority of the American public would have liked to be someone like Eisenhower when he was president or as they perceived him. But I suppose one of the things that's interesting about Rice was the very ambiguity of his role. Ambiguity in art is usually interesting, and I suppose it is in a community, too. Have you come to any conclusions about that?

MEH: You mean about Rice's role in the community?

JWM: Yes.

MEH: I'm not really sure what it was.

JWM: I don't think that—I don't know whether Duberman really comes to any conclusion. This was the basis of a good deal of this long argument that Fred Mangold and I had with him about what caused, as he put it, the dethronement of the king. And I think he—Fred indicated that he saw Rice is in 1937, three or four years after the college was set up, as more central and as more the symbolic center in the sense a traditional king was the expression of the father image of the various kingdoms and so on, perhaps more than Rice at that point was. And this was perhaps some of the subconscious, substratum of this long and very interesting argument between [UNINTEL WORD]. He, of course, had this long interview with Rice the last year or two of Rice's life, I think, and I haven't heard the tapes, but people who have said that they were very good indeed, that Rice was really in his prime in this conversation. He was very brilliant when he was in good form.

MEH: Were these the tapes with Duberman?

JWM: Yeah. Have you heard them?

MEH: No, I'm going to.

JWM: Yes, they—because Rice was a very good talker, and I think this was a one-to-one thing—one of the things, not the only thing, but one of the things that made the—as I thought, the tape with Duberman in this room fairly disastrous was that there were about four or five of us who were—had all been there and had somewhat strong opinions conflicting with each other. And somebody was always cutting in, you see, and nothing ever got quite finished. And that impression was—well, I suppose Duberman might say that in a sense expressed Black Mountain. There was a great deal of confusion to it.

MEH: Do you think that tension between Rice and Albers contributed to Rice's leaving? I mean, was there really that much tension between them? Duberman really presents it as one of the deciding factors.

JWM: Well, I have to start with a caveat again. I was—I was not there when Rice finally left. I was there—it was my last year—when Rice was rusticated for a period of months and so on, [COUGHS] but I was—but I was not too involved in that in that I had already decided the previous autumn, I think, that five years was enough. As far as I was concerned, I was going to go off and do something else. And so I largely stood aside from the things that—I'm not taking responsibility by the fact that I had decided to leave [UNINTEL WORD] but means that I don't have to bear some responsibility for what happens to the college. So, therefore, I don't have the same participation in the thing as I would've had a year ago or as the other people do now, and so I didn't hold it

as completely consistently because of the small community, it's not nearly as easy to be completely consistent in everything you do as it is in a larger community where you get some isolation, and say, "Now, I'm going to leave you. I won't see you til at breakfast" or—well, to go back, I think Duberman is probably right in the sense that they were the two strong personalities of the community and that they were, I suppose, on a collision course. But when Rice went away, it was not just somebody saying, "It's him or me." I think the fact the whole community had the feeling that he had better go away for a while and let things settle down. He had got—well, there had been a good deal of contention. Of course, there was a good deal of contention almost through Black Mountain's history, at least while I was there. I suppose some of it—a good deal of it is probably inseparable from the small community of people who were there because they were, on the whole, not conventional people and were most of them fairly strong individualists. Given that situation, I think you're going to have a fair amount of contention. But I thought it was—the Rice-Albers situation was the thing which was—probably a novelist who was really as omniscient as novelists have to assume they are could really settle. I don't know. Duberman, it seemed to me was—I found what he had to say on the thing fairly convincing on the whole. He had—I think he had made a special effort to pursue that subject and talked to a lot of people on it. I don't know how much—I suspect Albers did not say—he did talk to Albers, but I don't imagine Albers would say anything on that subject. He would be absolutely mum. This wouldn't, of course, mean that he hadn't felt anything on

the subject at all, but—well, I guess what it comes down to is that I'm saying that I don't feel I could very properly outguess Duberman on it because he — although I was there and he was not, he's talked to far more people on it than I—I think never except maybe with one or two people like John Evarts and Fred Mangold did I address myself to the subject particularly whereas Duberman did, of course.

MEH: What did you see as Ted Dreier's role in the community?

JWM: Well, Ted was, among other things—this was not his whole role but certainly he was a buffer state and honest broker and various other terms, none of which express it completely, but he at times—I guess most of the time it seemed to me was mediating or trying to mediate, and I think the fact that he during that last year decided that mediating was no longer possible as far as Rice was concerned was probably a fairly, fairly determining factor in Rice's having to go. Not that everybody said, "Well, he has to go because Ted has changed his mind," but simply that this expressed the way a barometer expresses to some extent the way the other people's opinion had been going. I think he maybe resisted this conclusion longer than some other people did. I've never talked to him on the subject. Never did, so I don't want to put words into his mouth or assume bases of action which weren't there. This is very much an external appraisal and I know his—have you talked to him on this?

MEH: I talked to him. I think was really more helpful to me is his correspondence from the period.

JWM: [POSITIVE]

MEH: I think it was probably in Ted's nature always think that things can be worked out.

JWM: Yeah. I think so. Probably if he—

MEH: Probably longer than most people do.

JWM: Yeah. If he didn't have that nature, I suspect maybe Black Mountain would not have gotten started either. I think he was one of the key people in its starting. It probably wouldn't have gone on if he didn't have that nature of trying to—it seemed to me very often that he was trying to reconcile incompatibles but that's—that is what holds a social group together. I think the logician saying that these things are logically incompatible would give up right away, but people like Ted keep the thing going.

[END OF INTERVIEW. END OF TRANSCRIPT]