Garrett On Rice Education: 'Technical Aura' Stifling

By HARVEY POLLARD

Suffering from a "hangover from the technical school" was how George Garrett, Rice's "writer in residence," described Rice's attitude toward the non-engineering fields. The "technical aura is always present," and people are "plowed under with detail." Needless to say, as one graduate student put it, Garrett teaches in a very "un-Rice-like manner."

GEORGE GARRETT came to Houston a year ago under Ford Foundation auspices to study at the Alley Theatre. Finishing a tour there, he found himself approached by Rice to teach for a year; most of his students are glad he did.

Garrett's works range from prose to poetry, with his latest work a book of poetry entitled, "Abraham's Knife." His literary awards include the "Sewanee Review Fellowship for Poetry," in 1968, and the "Prix de Rome" in the same year. His experience in writing took him to the CBS studios where he wrote for the now deceased thriller, Suspense.

ONLY 32 YEARS old, Garrett has been a sergeant in the army of Austrian occupation, a professional boxer, a truck driver, and football coach of a winning frosh team at Wesleyan in New England. Next year, Garrett plans to leave Rice and go to the University of Virginia to take over a "quasi-Faulkner chair," as a Texas Observer article phrased it. The chair has been held, incidentally, by only two other people: William Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter.

Garrett has surprising things to say about Houston as a city. He said that when he came to the Alley Theatre from the east, people felt a bit embarrassed, perhaps inadequate; they felt out of the "main stream of things." Yet, according to Garrett, Houston is more of a "city" than Chicago or Los Angeles, as far as eating places and the active fine arts. Houston is the only one of the group with a live, permanent stage.

HOUSTON'S ACTIVITY can't be measured by the fact that one
ity that Garrett has noticed between Houston and the people at Rice, and the reason would sound sadly familiar. People who go to Rice are different; they are rebelling against the “Texas life.” The others go to UT or the University of Houston; the Rice student enters a monastery, where he “lives in pleasant little groups,” engaging in “lonely” study. Rice students are different. Garrett observed that with all the “cool chicks” dotting the U of H campus, one would think there would be a closer liaison between the two.

WITH REGARD to his idea of teaching, Garrett finds Rice sadly lacking. “Education is letting things happen to you;” Rice doesn’t think that way. The technical aura, as earlier mentioned, seems to creep over the whole system and stifle the “letting” process.

George Garrett has made quite an impact on the students with whom he has come in contact; he is met with a kind of awe from most. Most students at Rice have never come in contact with a member of the “literary upper crust;” they are surprised that he speaks their language.