

ONCE MY MERRY FRIEND

Review of

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF MARK VAN DOREN

Edited with an Introduction by George Hendrick

Foreword by Dorothy Van Doren

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--Reviewed by **Mitch Finley**

Mark Van Doren, who died in 1972 at the age of 78, is perhaps best known to those knowledgeable about Thomas Merton as the young Merton's English professor at Columbia College in the late 1930s. Van Doren figures prominently in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. When Merton decided to join the Trappists, he left a number of important manuscripts with Van Doren, including his only surviving novel, *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis* (published after his death as *My Argument with the Gestapo*). Later, Van Doren was instrumental in the publication of Merton's first volume of poetry, *Thirty Poems*.

Mark Van Doren was, however, much more than a significant character in Thomas Merton's life. Though he rarely mentioned the fact to anyone (he omitted it entirely from his 1959 autobiography) Van Doren won a Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems* in 1940. He was considered a teacher of legendary stature. His published works include plays, short stories, novels, literary criticism, and a small volume on liberal education that has become a classic. When Van Doren turned seventy-five, in honor of the event *Life* magazine ran a color photo spread on the poet with an essay by Melvin Maddocks. *The New York Times* took note, as did *Time* magazine.

Editor George Hendrick divides the letters into periods to coincide with the chapter divisions in *The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren* (which the author described to Merton before its publication as "the story of how I have learned to stand still.") Van Doren's memoirs provide an excellent context within which to read these letters, because true to form, he spends so much time talking about his family and friends, relatively little talking about himself.

The first letter in this collection dates from 1910, the last from 1972, exactly one month before the author's death. Van Doren's correspondents are relatively few, several of them fellow poets, often former students. There are many letters to Allen Tate and John Berryman, a few to scholar and naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch, the man Van Doren identifies from among his many friends as the best. There are some to Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish, and Allen Ginsberg, and a few letters to Merton's close friend from Columbia Days, Robert Lax. Likewise there are a precious few Van Doren wrote to James Thurber.

□ **Mitch Finley** is a freelance writer who writes "once or twice a year" about Thomas Merton for the Catholic weekly, *Our Sunday Visitor* (the latest of these was a review-essay, "Four Profiles of the Many-Sided Thomas Merton," on Brother Patrick Hart's "trilogy" -- *Thomas Merton/ Monk, The Message of Thomas Merton, and The Legacy of Thomas Merton* --and Victor Kramer's *Thomas Merton* in the January 25, 1987 issue). He is also an adjunct instructor in the Religious Studies Department at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. A former director of the Family Life Office of the Catholic Diocese of Spokane, with his wife Kathy, Finley co-authored *Christian Families in the Real World* (Thomas More Press, 1984). His latest book, *12 Christian Classics*, which includes a chapter on Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, will be published next fall by Sheed and Ward.

Readers will delight in the editor's decision to include a letter written in 1958 by Thurber to William Saltonstall, principal of the Phillips Exeter Academy. Thurber had been invited to be a Visiting Fellow, but could not due to illness. His letter is a witty and glowing recommendation that Van Doren take his place.

There are more than twenty letters here written by Mark Van Doren to Thomas Merton between 1942 and 1968. Several letters to other people provide insights into Van Doren's opinions about and feelings for Merton. Unfortunately, a number of early letters written to Merton have failed to turn up. The Merton side of the correspondence, however, soon to be published, dates from March 1939.*

The "secular" letters of Merton to Van Doren are interesting for the insights they provide into the pre-monastic Merton. Once letters start to issue from the monastery, however, though Merton is never overbearing or phony, he is free with a piety that he outgrew not many years later.

Mark Van Doren seems always to have had a genuine humility before the experience of others, and as some of his later poems reveal, he had equally authentic religious sensibilities. Still, he was not a church-going person. Because the early letters to Merton are apparently gone, readers may never know how Van Doren responded to remarks from Merton such as this one: "I have only one reason for living at all and that is the love, the glory, the good pleasure of Christ" [April 14, 1942].

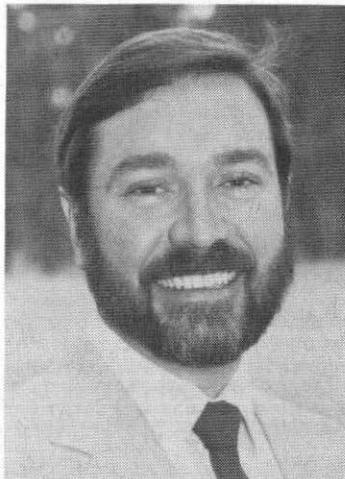
The earliest letters to Merton relate to the manuscripts Merton had left with Van Doren, and various efforts to get them published, especially the *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, which publisher after publisher rejected. Van Doren's observation, however, proved to be prophetic: "Too bad, but time may tell a different story, and I think it will" [May 15, 1942].

Van Doren's concise final sentence in this first of his surviving letters to Merton says as much about its author as it does about Merton's satisfaction with Trappist life. Indeed, it summarizes Van Doren's feelings about his former student right up to the end of Merton's life, for they never changed. "I am happy," he wrote, "because you are."

Van Doren always expressed delight in Merton's books. "...I have now read five new works of yours," he wrote on June 16, 1954, "with the greatest happiness while I read, and still more so remembering."

October 14, 1955, touring Europe Van Doren wrote from Beaune Cote-d'Or, France, that he and Dorothy had visited La Grande Chartreuse. His description must have delighted Merton:

"...I must tell you that nobody has ever exaggerated the grandeur of the scenery thereabouts. The mountains look like cathedrals at the top. They really do. And the gorges look as deep as any place in Dante. The monastery, properly enough, was not to be visited, but we walked around it a little... and naturally thought of you and your brothers at Gethsemani, in a different order to be sure and among less grandiose hills but possessed of equal quiet... We both send our best love, for always."



MITCH FINLEY

* Merton's letters to Van Doren will be included as the first section of the second volume of *The Merton Letters, The Road to Joy*, selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy.

Mark and Dorothy Van Doren visited Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in March 1954. In January of 1956, Van Doren mailed to Merton the first of four Merton poems he was to write, the last after the monk's death. The third stanza reads:

He, once my merry friend,
Came to the stone door,
And the only difference in his smiling was,
It sorrowed more.

One reason Merton and Van Doren remained close friends for so many years is that Merton found in Van Doren a kindred spirit. Like Merton, Van Doren was most himself in solitude and friendship. "I am terribly interested in what you tell me about your wrestling over solitude again," Van Doren wrote in the same letter which included his Merton poem. "I don't pretend to understand it all, but with your suffering I have, believe me, the fullest and tenderest sympathy."

Van Doren delighted in Merton's sense of humor and love of life. He wrote to Robert Lax, December 11, 1957, about a letter Lax had sent him, written by Merton: "The letter is wonderful, of course -- you bring out the deepest and craziest in Merton, and it ought to be brought out, for if it stayed in the walls of Gethsemani would sure tumble some day."

Merton's former teacher was pleased and excited about Merton's outspoken social criticism of the early '60s:

...how come you know so much about the so-called world and Them who think they run it, and in a measure do? *Letter to an Innocent Bystander* lifted my white hair; so did *A Signed Confession* and -- yes -- *Prometheus*, not to speak of *Original Child Bomb*. My question is of course rhetorical It vastly comforts me that you feel wrath and fall to raging. Let there be even more of that, and from Gethsemani, where you never forget what is true even though almost everybody else does [March 19, 1961].

In this same letter, Van Doren responds to Merton's request that he go to New York to receive, on Merton's behalf, Columbia University's Medal of Excellence. Van Doren was overjoyed:

Every now and then Dorothy asks me: Why are you grinning? and I say: Because I'm going to receive the medal for Tom on June 6th. I am both touched and tickled: proud for you and for Columbia, and at the same time blissfully amused for some reason that I don't even try to understand. I really can't wait. I am so pleased that you suggested me for this office.

Later, after Van Doren had been to Columbia to receive the Award for Merton, he wrote: "I was very pleased, amused, and proud to be your ghost. I shall ask for no greater earthly glory" [June 14, 1961].

Van Doren made a second visit with Dorothy to Gethsemani in 1957, then another by himself on December 3, 1961.* Two weeks before his visit, he wrote commenting on the recent death of James Thurber: "Poor man. Poor me. I'll miss him. We can talk about him when I'm there."

A few days after his visit, Van Doren wrote to thank his host:

For all your lovely deeds and words, much thanks. I shall never forget that day, at the retreat, in your class, and on the Abbey walks. I'm sure you gave me time you didn't have; but I think I'll keep it. I've been telling Dorothy all about everything, and have phoned the boys [Van Doren's sons, Charles and John] to tell them. They severally rejoice and send their love once more.... I'll be thinking of you in your little house [the cinder block cabin that became Merton's hermitage] -- but not so little either. I was impressed.

* Van Doren also "lunched" with Merton in Louisville on June 25, 1956, while he was there to lecture at the University of Louisville.

As a result of this visit, Van Doren wrote "Merton's Woods," a poem about Merton's new hermitage, which reads in part:

The monastery bells can still be heard there.
 Or can they? I don't know. I went down once
 By the winding path, and all I listened to was trees:
 Not huge, but many and high, and busy
 With birds; and the top leaves
 Twinkled in sun, as did his eyes when he said at last,
 "Here is my cell."

Regular letters continued to fly back and forth between the two friends right up to the time of Merton's death. On November 29, 1968, in response to a note from Darjeeling, he wrote what would be his last letter to Merton:

...I rejoiced in your card from Darjeeling -- unbelievably up to the time of Merton's death. On November 29, 1968, in response to a note from Darjeeling, he wrote what would be his last letter to Merton:

...I rejoiced in your card from Darjeeling -- unbelievable, of course -- and in all the news you managed to pack in. Please now contrive to have a wonderful journey through unimaginable places.... I tremble to think what is building up in you as a consequence.... Love to you from both of us... We flourish mildly.

Then, December 10, 1968, upon hearing from Gethsemani of his friend's death, Van Doren wrote to Robert Lax, in Greece. His note is a poem that by ignoring all the rules of poetry becomes an anguished protest against his friend's death. It is a verse that powerfully conveys Van Doren's sorrow, as well as his compassion for the grief he knew Lax would be suffering:

Tom dead in Bangkok.
 The Abbot just telegraphed me
 -- no details.
 I never felt so bad.
 I'll never get over it.
 And I know you won't.

Mark Van Doren and Thomas Merton were friends for many years in a world where friendships that last a lifetime had become a rarity. It was a case of the meeting of two men extraordinarily gifted with the capacity for friendship. The results -- echoed in the two men's letters to one another -- call down judgment on a society enamored of commodities and the spiritual emptiness they bring.

The Selected Letters of Mark Van Doren is a volume solid with testimony to a man who "learned to stand still," and who rejoiced through his life in his friends.

Mark Van Doren died four years, to the day, after his friend Thomas Merton -- December 10, 1972.