

THOMAS MERTON ON MARK VAN DOREN: A Portrait of Teaching and Spiritual Growth

by **Thomas Del Prete**

Readers of *The Seven Storey Mountain* will no doubt readily recall Merton's laudatory portrait of Mark Van Doren's teaching at Columbia University. Merton harbored unqualified respect for his former literature teacher's facility in the classroom. He was especially drawn to Van Doren's unpretentious honesty and humble affinity for what was real and true. Merton remembers wondering: "Who is this excellent man Van Doren . . . who does not have to fake and cover up a big gulf of ignorance by teaching a lot of opinions and conjectures and useless facts . . . who really loves what he has to teach?"¹ Van Doren provided Merton with a vivid contrast to the posturing and evasive aloofness that he had come to associate with teaching in higher education, particularly in light of his experience as a student at Cambridge University in England.

Comparisons of Merton's account of Van Doren's teaching and Van Doren's own recollection of Merton as a student is revealing. Van Doren informs us in his autobiography that "*The Seven Storey Mountain* hit me for one like a bolt of lightning."² He recalls that Merton came "in and out of my view at times of his own choosing . . . I considered him a charming friend, yet I remained unaware of the problems which his own account of them was later to make famous" (MVD, pp. 211, 212). It was not until he actually read for himself Merton's reflections on the journey that brought him from academia to the silence of the Kentucky hills that Van Doren became aware of his apparent impact on Merton. In searching his memory for some sign of Merton's feelings towards him as a student,

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948), p. 139. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

2. Mark Van Doren, *The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1958), p. 298. Hereafter referred to in the text as *MVD*.



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Van Doren writes: “[Merton] had kept his thoughts of me a secret, well hidden behind the twinkle in his eyes. Or else it had developed in him later . . . My only conclusion could be that what he said about me in his book, moving and beautiful as it was, revealed more of him than it did of me . . . He had grown immensely, and one proof of this was that he could say such things about somebody else” (MVD, p. 299).

It is possible, of course, that Merton accurately recorded his impressions of Van Doren in his autobiography and that he simply had not communicated them to his mentor at the time. Given, however, Van Doren’s surprise at Merton’s account and their good friendship, it seems more probable that Merton perceived more in retrospect and, in keeping with Van Doren’s own analysis, that he had developed a more mature and informed voice in the interim. One influence on Merton’s perception of Van Doren’s teaching is clear: the scholastic temperament that Merton ascribes to Van Doren in his characterization is easily traced to Merton’s Thomist studies under the self-effacing tutelage of Dan Walsh at Columbia. There is a less obvious yet significant influence, suggested by the correlation between Merton’s perspective on Van Doren’s teaching in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his presentation of St. Bernard’s thoughts on “interior simplicity” in a concurrent writing.

Merton wrote on St. Bernard and interior simplicity in a tract entitled *The Spirit of Simplicity*, published by Gethsemani Abbey in 1948, the same year in which *The Seven Storey Mountain* appeared.³ There is a significant parallel between Merton’s understanding of St. Bernard on simplicity and the sincerity that he observed in Mark Van Doren’s teaching in these works. In fact, the correlation includes Merton’s description of Dan Walsh’s teaching as well.

Van Doren’s sincerity had a deeply personal as well as intellectual connotation for Merton, evidence of a spiritual as well as scholastic temperament. In dealing with his subject “with perfect honesty and objectivity and without evasions,” Van Doren did not perform or pretend or seek to establish his own superiority as part of a social, intellectual or academic game. With his “clear mind” Van Doren “looked directly for the quiddities of things” (*SSM*, p. 140). He sought to ascertain their essential and true nature rather than use them to satisfy an academic theory or elevate in some way his own professional status.

What Merton views as Van Doren’s “sincerity,” his ingenuous “manner” or approach to knowing, resonates strongly with and perhaps originates in his study of St. Bernard. Merton explains that as persons made in the image of God we have a “natural simplicity” according to St. Bernard. When we come to know, think, and act more in accordance with this inherent quality of our own being, when we are true to our nature in this respect, then we are more real, we are in fact becoming ourselves. Applied to matters of the mind, simplicity means “subordinating all our knowledge to the love of God.” “We study in order to love,” Merton writes (*TMSB*, p. 127). There is finally a “*manner of knowing*” [italics mine] which, because it is concerned with truth, can lead us to the love of God. “When we come to ask what is the wisdom of this world, we find that it consists not in a certain *type of subject matter* so much as a certain manner of knowing. The knowledge of created things is not reprehensible: far from it; we know that God made them precisely to arrive at the knowledge and love of him” (*TMSB*, p. 130).

Merton did not characterize Van Doren’s teaching or approach to knowing explicitly in Cistercian terms of “simplicity” (on the other hand, when he describes the “smiling simplicity” of Dan Walsh one hears echoes of St. Bernard’s influence). And, although he suggests that Van

3. *The Spirit of Simplicity* was published by Gethsemani Abbey in 1948. Part II of this study, “St. Bernard on Interior Simplicity,” was reprinted in *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1980). Hereafter referred to in the text as *TMSB*.

Doren was attuned to the spiritual dimension of life (being “no stranger to the order of grace”), he likewise does not indicate that Mark Van Doren linked directly insight in literature to the love of God. It would seem, however, that Merton’s reference to Van Doren’s “manner of approach” has a common layer of meaning with the “manner of knowing” consonant with the interior simplicity of St. Bernard. Certainly in preparing Merton, as he says, to receive “the good seed of scholastic philosophy” and in “casting lights that he had not himself foreseen,” Van Doren’s manner of knowing served as one step in Merton’s journey toward greater knowledge and love of God.

The indications of St. Bernard’s influence on Merton’s portrait of Mark Van Doren suggest Merton’s efforts to understand spiritually not only his experience under Van Doren’s mentorship, but also the character of teaching, learning, and knowing. In this respect simplicity and sincerity are not simply natural virtues but a matter of spiritual orientation. The links connecting St. Bernard, Mark Van Doren, and Merton (St. Thomas Aquinas, too!) have then another significance. They remind us of the importance of considering our own “manner of approach,” of rooting our work in education in a spiritual ground, of making education and the effort to know a matter for the whole person, a spiritual activity.