

connected topics touched upon in the main body of the work. A careful reading of both text and notes offers insightful summations of the thought of major scholars in various areas such as theology and literature, with bibliographical references able to direct the interested reader toward new lines of inquiry. And finally, Conn's appropriation of secular developmental psychology to examine what has traditionally been considered a theological problem offers support for Merton's own discovery (using William Blake's terminology) that a merely natural explanation is ultimately an insufficient basis for authentic selfhood.

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF MARK VAN DOREN

Edited with an Introduction by George Hendrick

Foreword by Dorothy Van Doren

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I

Mark Van Doren was a writer, poet, teacher, scholar and friend to numerous persons; and he was so over a long period of time. His energy, reflected throughout these letters, was enormous and he was the kind of person who could do many different kinds of things quite well. He lived from 1894 to 1972, and from the earliest moments in his career -- for which we have records -- he was involved in an active life of the mind and pursuit of a dual career as teacher and writer which was, as well, combined with a family life to which he was devoted. His relationships to many writers could be charted at great length, and thus there would be many ways in which an overview of this volume could be organized. Van Doren's active work with other writers such as Allen Tate or John Gould Fletcher would be one way. Van Doren's management of his own various writing projects would be another important pattern to observe. Finally, his relationships with his students such as John Berryman, Robert Lax, and Thomas Merton would

be a significant set of patterns which could be observed. The beauty of this book is that its letters, arranged chronologically and with good footnotes, provide the necessary material for future readers to investigate all of these patterns. Reading the book with Van Doren's relationship to Merton in mind one is constantly aware of two things: it was, indeed, fortunate that Merton had Van Doren as his teacher at Columbia; also, Van Doren's tremendous energy and diverse interests *must* have served as a model for Merton himself whose career in some ways seems to reflect Van Doren's, but also surpasses it.

Mark Van Doren is the type of teacher-poet that an earlier age could produce precisely because narrow specialization was neither cultivated nor desired. Van Doren loved to teach and to write and his letters demonstrate how he could juggle these different responsibilities, while at the same time he had little respect for "scholars." A late letter to John Berryman (6-18-71) makes his point quite clear: "Scholarshit is for those with shovels, whereas you're a man of the pen, the wing, the flying horse . . . (p. 267). There is no surprise that the most significant extended conversation reflected in these letters is with Allen Tate, also a man of letters, and someone who was apparently somewhat reluctant to make any easy accommodations with the academic departments of literature.

While Van Doren was early associated with Columbia University, it was clear that his distance was maintained so that he would always retain sufficient energy for his own writing. This fact could be the subject of an extended inquiry about Van Doren's life, loves, and literary interests. It could, as well, be seen as a paradigm which Thomas Merton seems to have absorbed and which allowed Merton to appear to be, in a sense, almost two persons. After 1941, always a monk, Merton never ceased to be a writer, poet, manipulator of words. He must have sensed that this was a combination of talents which his teacher Van Doren possessed. In Van Doren's life and letters the rhythm is an alternation between Falls Village, Connecticut, and the city of New York. In Merton's life it became increasingly a matter of alternation between contemplative patterns as an *isolato* and the realization that the monk had a responsibility to assist those in a more active life. This is also Van Doren's pattern and accomplishment. In both men an almost fierce independence is reflected.

Van Doren saved all of Merton's letters to him and these are preserved in the Columbia University Library. Brought together, the two sets of letters would make a valuable volume. The practical decision of editing selected letters, by both Merton (in a projected five volume series)

and Van Doren here, will make scholars work a bit harder, but from Merton's earliest Joycean fun in letters to Van Doren in 1939 to his final letters in 1968, so full of expectation about the coming trip to Asia, the evidence clearly exists to demonstrate that this friendship thrived.* Such interchange assisted Merton to continue to develop his own understanding of the nature of his vocation.

It was to Van Doren that Merton sent many unpublished manuscripts in 1941 before he went to Gethsemani, and it is in the Columbia University Library that the autograph copy of the Poem "Letter to My Friends," the first poem written by Merton at Gethsemani, exists. It was through Van Doren's contact with James Laughlin of *New Directions* that the poems which Merton had composed before he became a monk were published in the volume *Thirty Poems* (1944). But here, too, the story is complicated. Robert Lax, also a student, friend and correspondent, was in frequent touch with Van Doren, and it was the two of them who collaborated on the project of seeing their friend Merton's poems into print. Van Doren, then, was a facilitator. In February of 1944 he wrote to Laughlin, and by March 10 of that year was "delighted" that Laughlin had written to say he liked what he had read and would publish a book of Merton's poetry.

Of course, the friendship with Merton deepened; the advice and reading continued. The second letter to Merton included in this selection is dated 12 August 1945, and it has to do with the text for *A Man in the Divided Sea*, Merton's second volume of poems. We also know from other correspondence in the Columbia Library that Van Doren kept close contact with others, such as Lax, about Merton. A letter (addressed to "Dear Claudio") from Lax to Van Doren, written on 28 December 1943 after Lax's first visit to Merton, provides, for example, a beautiful picture of the Abbey of Gethsemani from Lax's point of view.

II

In these letters, then, we have the record of Van Doren providing compliments to many different correspondents about their many different kinds of projects. This is what he did -- over the years -- for Berryman, Lax, and Merton. Thus Van Doren is not afraid to write:

* Editors' Note: Merton's letters to Van Doren will be the opening section in *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy, scheduled for publication by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in September 1988.

Your new poems are very rich -- sometimes too rich, I think, for the thin blood outside those walls. I mean, the phrasing runs too often in parallels, and admits too many epithets; result, a tincture of monotony. If that is heathen criticism let it pass.

Substantially the poems are powerful. The *Duns Scotus* is the best, I think, though the whole last series of Figures I like perhaps as well. Do you want me to do anything in particular with the MSS.? I suppose Bob Lax has copies. I'll keep these, of course, and read them many good times again, unless you direct me to send them forth soon. (pp. 180-181)

Van Doren's relationship with Merton was a continuing one. A poem included in a letter in 1947, for example, is received with gratitude and enthusiasm. It is, Van Doren insisted, "one of your richest and best" (p. 182). Two years later the poem appeared in *The Tears of the Blind Lions*. This continuing exchange between the two writers must have been a source of encouragement for Merton. When *Figures for an Apocalypse* was published in 1948, Merton could only have been heartened by the words prompted by his essay which was appended to the book, words about Merton's doubts concerning poetry and contemplation:

... I hadn't seen the note on contemplation. These two places in the book got all my attention at first, and still do in a degree, along with the address to Lax and Rice. Nothing has ever touched me more deeply than the problem you pose on page 110, and somehow solve on page 111.

I agree, if I may, that the good of other souls justifies a refusal to sacrifice the poet's art. But I see and respect the problem, and because you are involved in it -- well, that is the immediate reason that I am moved.

Thank you and your superiors for letting this book exist. It is wonderful everywhere. (p. 183)

Van Doren remained the teacher-critic for Merton; encouraging, nudging, suggesting, and as is the case with all good teachers, he loved to learn from his students. This is one of the most obvious facts reflected throughout these letters. Van Doren could, and did, sustain correspondence with Tate, and Donald Davidson, and Robert Frost. But Lax and Berryman, Merton and Allen Ginsberg were the regular recipients of his correspondence. To Ginsberg in 1948 he writes: "The only thing I have ever been aware of wanting to do in poetry is this: to give something that exists outside myself, and this includes ideas, a form in words resembling its own in something else" (pp. 184-185). To give something permanent form by making a poem was clearly a driving ambition of Van Doren's, yet to help others to give form to their personal visions was another of Van Doren's gifts. It is almost as if Van Doren seemed to realize that mere teaching was too ephemeral. To his own son he could write of the academic life as being almost too secure: "One gets to be thought of as nothing but a teacher"

(p. 195). But to write, to give form, and to see how life and form work together, that is a mystery to which *both* Merton and Van Doren apparently could keep returning.

Of the 25 letters in this volume by Van Doren to Merton only five, interestingly, were written between 1941 and 1953. Twenty were written during the period from 1953 to 1968. The frequency of exchange picks up and also the nature of the friendship deepens. When Van Doren writes his own *Autobiography*, he writes to Merton to ask to quote some Merton lines; when Merton's *Selected Poems* is assembled, it is Van Doren who writes the introduction. These poets loved each other. In 1956 Van Doren could send a poem dedicated to Merton, written after a 1954 visit to Kentucky and Gethsemani:

In our fat times a monk:
I had not thought to see one;
Nor, even with my poor lean concerns,
Even to be one.

No. But in Kentucky,
Midway of sweet hills,
When housewives swept their porches, and March light
Lapped window sills,
He, once my merry friend,
Came to the stone door
And the only difference in his smiling was,
It sorrowed more. (p. 211)

Such love, such encouragement, is the core of the continuing relationship of these men. Visits, editorial assistance, receiving an award *in absentia* for Merton at Columbia all seemed to strengthen the relationship.

III

During the last years of Merton's life (when he was no longer Novice Master and when more and more books flowed from his pen) when perhaps one would expect fewer letters from Van Doren because he was getting fairly old by then, the letters continued to flow rapidly. Compliments, enthusiasms, excitement inform these letters:

Look here, young man, you're going to talk yourself out of Gethsemani. I don't really mean this, but 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, and does not wait for an answer. If any

is to be given, it will be given by men, and will run this way: It vastly comforts men 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.

The Behavior of Titans, I'm feebly saying, is a terrific book, for the aforesaid reasons as well as others. For instance, *Herakleitos*, and the *Atlas* in its best form. I had seen others, but this must have been what you most deeply intended. *Atlas* as you do him is done to stay -- just read page 25 again and see if this isn't true -- and the fatman is so funny that he isn't funny. Meanwhile I keep hearing that dim bell.

As for the desert fathers, I like them even better in this new book. They are funny in the sweetest possible way. They help me at last to see what wit is. It is what one utters when one has truth by the whip end, but doesn't know how to spell whip. (pp. 230-231)

The last years of Merton's life were the most productive. Thus it is not surprising that he would have sent copies of his books to his old friend and teacher during those years. What is surprising is the fact that Van Doren could keep making such insightful comments:

Emblems of a Season of Fury has been going off daily, nightly, by my chair in the living room -- pop, roar, hiss, bang, fire, fire, fire. It is like one of those Vesuvius Fountains we used to have on the Fourth of July -- always more smoke, more fire, more better. It is a wonderful, wrathful, and sweet work. I wish it were going off everywhere, and maybe it is. Much of it of course I knew before, but that didn't matter; or rather, it was all to the good, for thereby your rage was more entirely summed up. (pp. 242-243).

In another letter, also in 1964, Van Doren says to Merton: "Your last letter (not owed; letters aren't owed, any more than breaths are, or smiles) followed me to California, where I didn't answer it (letters do not have to be answered either, any more than thought does, or praise) . . . (p. 243). This suggests the closeness of their friendship. Subsequent letters about various projects and interests cover a wide range of materials by them and others, including their mutual friend Robert Lax. It must have seemed that they could keep writing forever, and so it was a terrible shock for Van Doren to get the telegram about Merton's death. His letter to Lax is poignant:

Tom dead in Bangkok
 The Abbot just telephoned me
 -- no details.
 I never felt so bad.
 I'll never get over it.
 And I know you won't.
 (p. 259)

A letter to Lax written on 30 December 1968 fills in more details. Again, a scholarly project waits for some researcher; Van Doren explains:

America asked me for a piece about him, and I made it up mostly out of his last letter to me (July), talking with great joy about the trip he was to take. Heartbreaking now, and yet because it was so funny -- almost like his letter to you -- it somehow preserves him without loss. (p. 260)

In that letter Merton had joyfully celebrated the possibility of flying away from his life at Gethsemani. The final paragraph of Merton's 23 July 1968 letter, in a way, goes full circle back to the wit and joy in language which must have been so common in Greenwich Village in 1939 and 1940 when these two poets first corresponded:

Right now, as I say, I am taken up with getting shots and visas, and cleaning up my premises and finishing up all the absurd jobs I took on when I was a low creature of earth and not a prospective world traveler. I assure you I hope to make the best of it while it lasts! (Think of all the cablegrams saying "RETURN AT ONCET" being shot to Bali, Tibet, Kamchatka, Ceylon, the Maldives, the Endives, the Southern Chives, the Lesser Maundies, the Nether Freeways, the Outer Salvages.) (Columbia University Library)

This book of letters is quite valuable beyond what it says about Van Doren's relationship with Merton. What I have begun to demonstrate here about Merton could, in fact, be done for many other friends, students, and associates of Van Doren's. The book is partially a record of someone who remained excited about writing and about life throughout his own long life. It is a repository of material which will help readers to understand *both* Van Doren and his many correspondents with whom he was able to carry on many different conversations.

It must have been sad for Van Doren, during the last years of his life -- the loss of Merton, the suicide of John Berryman, the death of Delmore Schwartz, etc. -- yet he remained clearheaded and hopeful. A letter about Frost (3-20-71) says a lot: "There is only one thing that matters: he was a wonderful poet. All the rest is biography and balderdash." Van Doren's letters are testament to his continual love of and work for the recognition of good poetry.