Arts & Humanities

Mark Van Doren as Poet and Teacher

By
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One of the reasons I came to Columbia was to study with Mark Van Doren. I'd heard his name frequently as an important figure in the American literary world; my mother spoke of him with literary reverence; he had received what was for me at sixteen, at least, the imprimatur of T.S. Eliot's praise for his book on John Dryden. I had also read some poems of his in Conrad Aiken's wonderful 1944 Modern Library anthology of *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (so influential, I believe, for many writers of the generation after World War II); I remember particularly liking "The Whisperer," and recognizing the kinship of its closing turn with that of some contemporary short stories I was immersed in (but not, at the time, its kinship with Hardy). Similarly, "Axle Song," very Emersonian in some ways—something that I wouldn't really grasp for many years:

> That anything should be
> Place, time, earth, error—
> Or a round eye in man to see:
> That is the terror.
>
> And a true mind to try
> Cube, sphere, deep, short and long—
> That as the burden of the sky's
> Hoarse axle-song. . . .

And taking up further the agenda in his splendid short poems of over a decade earlier, "Segments" and "Circumstances," with their relation to Emerson's great essay, "Circles." Mark's poems kept company with the poetry of modernity—of Hardy, Robinson, Frost—that I now admire more and more, but could least

appreciate at the time (being attracted to the more sensational modernism of Eliot, Stevens, and Williams).

It was only after I had begun to study with him that I first read a poem that became a favorite of his among my literary friends, the widely anthologized poem that starts:

> This amber sunstream, with an hour to live,
> Flows carelessly, and does not save itself;
> Nor recognizes any entered room—
> This room; nor hears the clock upon a shelf,
> Declaring the lone hour; for where it goes
> All space in a great silence ever flows.

Later on I came to “And did the Animals?” about the consciousness of being in the ark among the animals that Noah had preserved, and a preface for me to all his disturbingly sensitive poetry about animals.

I started at Columbia after he had turned over his Shakespeare course to another of my great teachers, Andrew Chiappe ’33C. But I was electrified by his “Verse,” a mini-course (meeting once a week) with forty to fifty students but with the tone and procedure of a seminar rather than a lecture. Short poems or passages from longer ones, mimeographed, read aloud by Van Doren, were then examined, sometimes with his opening commentary, sometimes only through his shrewdly framed questions to the class.

We were led through a number of texts that have continued to stay with me, and whose selection itself I have continued to consider, among them: the ballade from Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women*; Hart Crane’s “Praise for an Urn”; the first two stanzas of Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence” (and getting me to notice how in the second line, “The rain came heavily, and fell in floods”); the opening stanzas of George Meredith’s “Love in the Valley”; “The Second Coming” of Yeats, but also his “The Cat and the Moon”; Matthew Prior’s brilliant “The merchant, to secure his treasure, / Conveys it in a borrowed name”; Hardy’s The Convergence of the Twain”; Frost’s “The Oven-Bird”; Dryden’s “In Memory of John Oldham”; as well as that staple of introduction to modern poetics, Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “They Flee from Me,” in both the original version and that rendered more smooth by his editor, Tottel (one had, of course, to prefer the more metrically and rhetorically awkward original).

Mark would range in his interpretive concerns from putting a line under a microscope to the widest of digression. And in the very conjunction of those, his teaching voice was the same as that in his poems, however differently pitched. Students of all kinds—not just future writers—can learn more from a poet teaching great literature to them than from a “workshop.” Van Doren’s kind of teaching was, one always felt, part of his poetic discourse.

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