



November 20, 1996

Memorial Minute for Vernon Venable, 1906-1996

Vernon Venable, for forty years — from 1932 to 1972 — one of the truly formative powers on the Vassar faculty, died on June 11, 1996, at the age of 89. Vernon's excellence was manifold. He was a peerless teacher, vividly remembered for his intensity and his great narrative flair by several generations of Vassar students; he was an engaged critical thinker, an astute, feisty, inexhaustible conversationalist and author of insightful studies of Marx and Thomas Mann, in recognition for which he was awarded the James Monroe Taylor Chair in Philosophy; for more than twenty years he was a creative and exacting Chair of the Philosophy Department; for an astounding sixty-three years he was partner, in one of Vassar's great romances, to Ruth Dillard Venable, Professor and Chair of French and beloved by the entire campus for her intelligence, grace, and generosity; he was the devoted father of Jean and Ann and the proud grandfather of Alan; and in a second career quite separate from his academic life, he made himself a nurseryman and landscape architect, winning wide admiration for his keen aesthetic powers. With gratitude for the gifts and assistance he has given so many of us and for the lasting contributions he has made to Vassar's well-being, we miss him greatly.

Born in Cincinnati in 1906 and educated at the University of Cincinnati (graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1928) and Columbia (receiving his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1945), Vernon's coming to Vassar was a marvelous accident. A young writer and adventurer living in France in the early thirties, Vernon was hiking in the Swiss Alps when he happened onto a lost Amedeo Modigliani. Conversation revealed their shared hatred for the fascism then erupting in Europe, and they soon became intellectual and political friends, making plans for several collaborations; these so impressed the editor at Bobbs-Merrill, Yale professor Henry Seidel Canby, that he recommended to his friend Henry Noble McCracken that the young Venable be brought to Vassar to teach philosophy. The idea was appealing to McCracken, as Vernon himself later reconstructed the situation, for he had an unusual problem to solve: in the grip of an intractable feud, the two senior faculty members in philosophy had for twenty years refused to speak to one another. McCracken apparently saw in Vernon's energy and magnetism virtues that might create a new chemistry in the Department and break the enduring impasse, and so, offering him an entry level position of Assistant (two notches below Assistant Professor!) for a grand salary

of \$1000, McCracken hired him. For his part, Vernon initially regarded teaching at Vassar as at best a stop-gap job and planned to stay for no more than a year or two. As things turned out, however, life took a course very different from what either McCracken or Vernon anticipated: before his second year at Vassar was fully underway, both of his feuding senior colleagues had died of heart attacks, leaving Vernon at center stage in the Philosophy Department, and he, in the meantime, had found himself inwardly bound to Vassar by two great passions. He had fallen in love with Ruth, whom he married at the end of the year, and he had discovered in himself — in the lucidity and the expansiveness that the classroom situation inspired in him — a profound gift for teaching. In his first three years, he offered no ^{fewer} less than *eleven* new courses, and he would later remember this as his best teaching, describing the inner experience of it, with its mix of challenge and self-discovery, as “teaching from the spinal column.” At the same time, he went to work renewing the philosophy program at Vassar. In collaboration with his sole surviving colleague, Marjorie Rawlings, he redesigned the major in philosophy, and under his leadership, Vassar was one of the first liberal arts colleges to separate philosophy and religion into two distinct departments. He opened up the philosophy curriculum to all schools and methods, establishing the year-long sequence in the history of philosophy that he himself taught with immense flair as both the foundation for the major and as a much sought-after staple of general education among Vassar undergraduates. His combination of pedagogical fire and organizational vision are chiefly responsible for the flourishing of philosophy in the College to this day. With enrollments and majors on the rise, he seized on the need for new hiring to seek out faculty equally dedicated to teaching, and by the time of his retirement the Department had grown to eight positions representing all the major areas of the field, a size and heterogeneity extraordinary among colleges of our character. In the two decades since Vernon’s retirement, his example has been a standard for many of us, and this past year, we began a campaign to give this institutional form, establishing the annual Vernon Venable Prize for excellence in philosophy as a way of preserving his memory for future generations of students and faculty.

Beyond the Vassar campus, Vernon was known for his philosophical scholarship, for the wit and passion with which, together with Ruth, he shared in the literary and artistic life of New York, and for the aesthetic excellence of his later work as a landscape architect. His two major achievements in scholarship were a critical study, “Poetic Reason in Thomas Mann,” published in 1938, and a book on Marx and Engels, Human Nature: The Marxian View, first

published in 1945 by Knopf, then reissued as a Meridian paperback in 1966. In both works one sees Vernon's identification of the ethical as the center of the human situation, his pleasure in grasping the coherence of the complex, and his fascination with the possibilities of a secular interplay of scientific reason and poetic vision. The study of Mann focused on semiotic play in Death in Venice — in particular, on Mann's technique of heightening paradox to the point of at once lucid and unfathomable mystery by the gradual concentration within one another of polar signs and discrete realms of meaning. Vernon took keen pleasure when, in a memorable conversation in Zurich, Mann himself expressed strong appreciation for the insights of the essay. The Marx book was based on his doctoral dissertation, written at Columbia during a period of philosophical eminence. (The faculty in the Philosophy Department during Vernon's extended relationship with it included John Herman Randall, whom Vernon acknowledges as the book's "most constant ... and patient servitor and sponsor," and John Dewey, Herbert Schneider, Frederick Woodbridge, and Jacques Barzun.) It is a careful and rigorous effort to canvass and grasp systematically, from the inside, all that Marx and Engels had to say about the mutability of human nature. To recall the storms of enthusiasm and hostility, disbelief and horror, in the American response to Soviet Marxism in the late thirties and early forties is to begin to appreciate the boldness of Vernon's book. He met controversy with zest, moved by both a socratic charity, eager to find the depth of each conflicting perspective, and an Enlightenment's passion for demystification. The book still survives as a disciplined, lucid, incisive exegesis of the web of theoretical insights and implications that make Marx a major modern thinker.

Ironically, the activity that was the most marginal to Vernon's life at Vassar, his work as a nurseryman and landscape architect, affords a singularly good perspective on what he gave the College. Vernon helped to landscape the Vassar grounds during the Second World War, and the pleasure he took in this work moved him to buy land in Clove Valley in the early fifties. In 1961 he built his own house on this property and cultivated the land surrounding it; part of the grounds he devoted to his new business, the Clove Valley Nursery. The dramatic beauty of the site caught the eye of neighbors and passers-by, and soon he was receiving and accepting requests to do landscape design throughout Dutchess County and even in the Bahamas. Is it surprising that one can find in his labors in this second career virtues analogous to those that made him a great teacher? People hired him in part because he had such an acute eye for the potential of their land. He appreciated the balances and rhythms intrinsic to a *place*

and its flourishing. He had in himself both the resolve necessary for hard labor over a long period and the love of nature that keeps one from forcing an alien aim upon it. In a similar way, as a teacher he had a keen eye for intellectual potential, and he nurtured it in his students with enthusiasm, infusing his classrooms with drama and passion. Yet he knew when to let his own charisma give way, to disappear as a means in the emergence of a student's own insights and powers. Being the occasion for that emergence and selecting and preparing younger teachers to do the same was his real love. Many, many Vassar students — and many former colleagues, the authors of this minute included — vividly remember this love and find it an enduring source of inspiration.

Michael McCarthy, Mitchell Miller, Michael Murray, Jesse Kalin, Garry VanderVeer,

Norma Weissoff and Betty Daniels.

For Vernon Venable
Nursery Man
Homage, Celebration, and the Affects of Truth

The wind of thought, blowing and being-blown, across the ^{row}
of faces, row after row, year after year.

What manner of man is this?

With his trees--

a fanatic for growing things and keeping their names
straight, grand and petite; driving through, hoeing, cutting,
turning, pruning, eyes out for the regulars and the originals.

With his students--

a master. Each season the seedlings arrive for cultivation,
take root, grow, bloom, blossom, fall by the way and then
transplant themselves. The tools of the master are the question,
the passionate idea, the courage to look also into the darkest abyss
of the blankest face. Famous yields of the hardy variety
that can reveal the inner mystery to Susie Q--from Mana at least
to Galileo--and the braver few who make their way into Human Nature

With his friends--

a meglapyschic who does not reveal but only gives a sign,
listener, stormy general, companion, cultivator of cultivators.

With his beard--

a fine finishing stroke, blown white, your face blowing
like a wind-god. It was like sleeping with a stranger, a new man
she said; no Occam's razor here.

His beard, his students, his trees, his friends:
Now take the measure, and measure the man.

Michael Murray
1972