



Vernon Venable 1906-1996

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“...arguing with Tom was delightful. And quite often the quarrels were quite literally over nothing. To the end Tom and I disagreed about the null set. And all the while Tom was studying me. The philosophy of mathematics was his chief focus. He was one of the first philosophers to concentrate on mathematical practice. For me it was flattering and at the same time marginalizing. I felt like an indigenous person. It's the closest I've come to having an ethnicity.”

The reason Tom studied mathematicians such as Jim Henle was that he thought the nature of mathematics was to be found, neither in an abstract Platonic realm of numbers, nor in the formalisms that bespeak those numbers, but rather in the practices of working mathematicians. So it was handy to have one close at hand.

Tom came to the Smith Philosophy Department in 1971 having studied at Harvard under Burton Dreben, Hilary Putnam and, as an undergraduate, Hao Wang. He also studied at Oxford with Michael Dummett and Phillipa Foot.

Tom's interests in philosophy were wide ranging. Some were technical and abstract such as the mathematical significance of the computer-aided answer to the four color problem. Others, while concrete and startling in their implications, he treated with technical élan. I have in mind his ingenious use of the Skolem paradox that theories that assert the existence of uncountably many reals have countable models to illustrate Putnam's proof that we are not brains in a vat. All the while he pursued his many and diverse interests in the philosophy of religion, the Pittsburgh Steelers, science fiction, the philosophy of art, Madonna, running and, above all, teaching.

Murray J. Kiteley
Smith College

VERNON VENABLE
1906–1996

Vernon Venable, former James Monroe Taylor Professor of Philosophy at Vassar College, died on June 11, 1996, at the age of 89. For forty years, from 1932 to 1972, Professor Venable was one of the truly formative powers on the Vassar faculty. His excellence was manifold. He was a peerless teacher, vividly remembered by several generations of Vassar students for his intensity and his great narrative flair. An engaged critical thinker, he published insightful studies of Marx and Thomas Mann. For more than twenty years he was a creative and exacting Chair of the Philosophy Department, and his combination of pedagogical fire and organizational vision are largely responsible for the flourishing of philosophy in the College to this day.

Born in Cincinnati, in 1906, Professor Venable received his B.A. from the University of Cincinnati in 1928 and his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Columbia in 1945.

His two major achievements in scholarship were a critical study, "Poetic Reason in Thomas Mann," published in 1938, and a highly regarded book, *Human Nature: The Marxian View*, published in 1945 and reissued in 1966. In both works one sees Professor Venable's passionate humanism, 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 on another of polar signs and discrete realms of meaning. Mann himself expressed strong appreciation for the insights of the essay. *Human Nature: The Marxian View* is a careful and rigorous effort to grasp systematically, from the inside, all that Marx and Engels had to say about the mutability of human nature. Professor Venable acknowledges John Herman Randall as the book's "most constant...and patient servitor and sponsor." To recall the turbulence of the American response to Soviet Marxism in the late thirties and early forties is to begin to appreciate the boldness of Professor Venable's project. He met controversy with zest, moved both by a Socratic charity, eager to find the depth of each conflicting perspective, and by an Englightener's passion for demystification.

Initially a writer and free lance journalist, Professor Venable discovered in himself—in the lucidity and the expansiveness that the classroom situation inspired in him—a profound gift for teaching. He was also an extremely effective Department Chair. Under his leadership, Vassar was among the first liberal arts colleges to separate philosophy and religion into two distinct departments. He redesigned the major in philosophy, opening up the curriculum to all schools and methods, and he established a year-long sequence in the history of philosophy, which he himself taught with legendary success, both as a foundation for the major and as a much sought-after staple of general education among Vassar undergraduates. By the time of his retirement the Department had grown from two to eight positions representing all the major areas of the field.

Professor Venable had a successful second career as well. During World War II he helped landscape the Vassar grounds, and the pleasure he found in this work moved him to buy land in the nearby countryside and, after building his own house on it, to open the Clove Valley Nursery. The dramatic beauty of the site caught the eye of neighbors and passers-by, and soon he was receiving requests to do landscape design throughout Dutchess County. He began this work in the early 1960's, and after his retirement from the Colelge he devoted himself to it for almost twenty years. Is it surprising that one can find in these labors virtues analogous to those that made him a great teacher? People hired him because he showed 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 the integrity 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 immense energy and determination. Yet he also knew when to let his own charisma give way, to disappear as a means in the emergence of a student's singular powers and insights.

_____ Memorial Minutes _____

To preserve for future generations the memory of his dedication to philosophical education, Vassar has established the Vernon Venable Prize for excellence in philosophy. Fittingly the Prize is funded by gifts from his students.

Jesse Kalin, Michael McCarthy, Mitchell Miller, Michael Murray
Vassar College

WALTER E. WEHRLE
1946–1996

Walter E. Wehrle, whose last position was at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, died of a stroke on March 13, 1996. Born in Denver, Colorado on August 13, 1946, he triumphed over severe arthritis to earn his M.A. in Classics and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Florida State University. His dissertation was on "The Old Academic Distinction In Aristotle: Essence and Accident; Existence, Form and Universal." His last work *The Myth of Aristotle's Development: Betrayal of Metaphysics* will be published by Rowman & Littlefield.

Ellen Wehrle
Centreville, Virginia

As we went to press, we received the following report:

Peter Guy Winch died of apparent heart failure on the evening of April 27, just after returning from the APA Central Division meeting in Pittsburgh. Winch, 71, was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he had taught since coming to the U.S. in 1984, after a long and distinguished earlier career at the University of Wales at Swansea (1951-64) and the University of London (1964-84). He was President of the Aristotelian Society in 1980-81, and had been Trustee of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* since 1989. He also was Vice President of the Central Division in 1994-95 and President in 1995-96, and as Past President this year was completing his third year as a member of the APA's national Board of Officers. He will be greatly missed by his colleagues and students at Illinois, and by the many in his native and adopted countries and elsewhere throughout the world who knew and admired him and his work.

Richard Schacht
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign