

WILLIAM K. ROSE

1924 - 1968

William K. Rose, Professor of English at Vassar College, was born in San Francisco on April 17, 1924, and died in Poughkeepsie on October 4, 1968. When he came to Vassar as an instructor in 1953, he had had a good deal of teaching experience at various sorts of institutions; he had been a teaching assistant and acting instructor at Stanford University (1944-46), an instructor at Williams College (1948-50), and a lecturer at the University of California in Berkeley (1950-51). Stanford had awarded him the B.A. "With great distinction" in 1944, and the M.A. in 1946. He had gone to Cornell University to study first with David Daiches and then with Arthur Mizener, and there was awarded the Ph.D. degree in 1952.

Throughout the whole of his adult life, Mr. Rose was an energetic and creative teacher, scholar, writer, friend, and citizen. His nature was complex: he was a man of ranging interests both social and aesthetic; a man of deep sensibility; a man both open and reserved; a man possessed of a tragic sense of life and a richly comic way of seeing and talking about it. For all the complexity, a unified being was there, and a unified achievement shines out of his short life.

He was what he was--and became what he became--partly because of his talent for giving himself to life and yet judging it dispassionately and rigorously and always with the greatest intelligence. His was the imagination that Wordsworth called a "feeling intellect." He was fortunate in his nurture as an American; one can see the beginnings of true sophistication and of a taste that was never shallow or precious, in his enjoyment of his youth in the west--notably in the town of his boyhood, Healdsburg, California, "in the prune country" as he used to say, where his forebears have lived for a hundred years. He knew American cities and suburbs because his relatives lived in them, as well as he knew the New York of writers and artists. Later, as a man at home in London, he was never an expatriate.

Since this is a memorial minute for our faculty archives, it is proper to stress his work at Vassar College, inseparable though it was from the rest of his life. One of his oldest friends remarked: "He chose Vassar, even as a young man," and this is true. He was initially attracted, one may surmise, by what the nearness of Vassar to New York's music, drama, and art could do for him and his students, by the sophistication of our faculty and our program, and by the honesty and effort demanded WILLIAM K. ROSE (Continued)

of our students. He came to believe more and more strongly in the value of Vassar as a particular liberal arts college for its students and for American education.

Vassar's English department proved congenial to him; it taught him much and he did much to deepen and define its philosophy and to invent new teaching forms in which this philosophy could

be expressed. The department's insistence upon literary study going beyond the narrow formalism in vogue in the 50's suited him. He believed in the study of literature in depth, achieved through maintaining a close connection between the forms of literature and their human and social and historical contexts, and through enabling students to see what it is to make a form out of raw experience themselves.

He was a brilliant teacher of freshman courses, of narrative writing and advanced composition, and (utilizing his research) of advanced courses in literature. He taught a seminar for many years in the novel of the twentieth century and at the time of his death was preparing to teach an advanced course in modern poetry. All his students felt in him a concern and respect for them, which somehow helped them to develop self-knowledge and self-respect. He perceived goodness and honesty, when these were there, beneath youthful cynicism or pretentiousness, and he helped young people to know themselves and say the things that were true for them. He taught them--especially in the writing courses--to say quite directly what they saw in their lives, to enlarge their views, to develop imagination, and to use language for authentic comment. Thus, through the practice of an art as he conceived it, young people learned something about the nature and possibilities of the world, and were given a chance to live a life both energetic and civilized. The discipline was exacting: he had little patience with determined frivolity; he had the "courage to insist upon the integrity deeper than the easy skills of many students," as a colleague puts it; and he wisely demanded more and more of students as they began to have that integrity.

He was not interested in training all his students to be primarily publishing critics, scholars, poets or novelists; the aim was larger than that. But he did welcome and encourage the few who showed signs of turning into real writers hereafter. His bequest to the college, recently announced but included in his will for several years, attests to his conviction that Vassar should find and encourage young people who may prove to have special power in the creative arts. It might be added here that while such students were undergraduates, he wanted them to read WILLIAM K. ROSE (Continued)

and study as another means to the discipline of literature; and he wanted them to be sound scholars.

Mr. Rose had great energy, which he applied outside his single department. He was from 1962 to 1966 chairman of the editorial board of the Vassar Journal of undergraduate studies. Throughout his years at Vassar he worked on several committees charged with formulating policy for the whole college, the last being the committee on the Comprehensive Plan, which we are at present discussing. Here he exercised a characteristic freedom and wisdom: he wanted to see new ways in which the students might be liberated and civilized, new ways in which we might maintain

and build on Vassar's fundamental strengths. All this of course had nothing to do with gimmicks or cliches, any more than did his teaching. He knew what the strengths of Vassar were, imagined what they might become, and hoped that whatever the college did would be solid, sophisticated, and generally first rate. He will be much missed as we carry out this plan.

Mr. Rose began early to write, and he wrote a great deal in the course of his life, developing his considerable powers as a scholar and critic. He is known for his essays and reviews but especially for his admirable and much acclaimed edition of the Letters of Wyndham Lewis, the painter and novelist (1963). This past year, on a leave from Vassar College and with a Guggenheim Fellowship, he had been at work on a book about Lewis and his great contemporaries--Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot--the "men of 1914" who brought about a literary revolution. It is to be hoped that other scholars may make use of some of the materials that he had collected.

We conclude this memorial minute with a passage from a letter to the London Times of October 16 written by his friend, the novelist and critic Walter Allen: E

His English friends will have been shocked by the news of Bill Rose's death. Letters from Vassar speak of the courage with which he met it....

For the past decade there was scarcely a year in which Bill Rose was not in London for several weeks, and often for several months.

I suspect he was as much at home in London as in New York, and he was the friend of many English poets and novelists. His personal charm was great and his intelligence was

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formidable: he was one of England's warmest and most candid friends: and for many Englishmen he stood for everything that was best and most hopeful in American life. A very fine scholar, he had made twentieth-century English literature his special field, and his edition of the letters of Wyndham Lewis is a model of its kind. We took it for granted, alas, as the precursor of comparable achievements to come. His death is a loss both to his friends on both sides of the Atlantic and to English studies; though one knows that it will be felt most deeply at Vassar, the college which he had served so well and to which he was so ardently devoted.

Respectfully submitted,
Garrett L. VanderVeer
Susan J. Turner

Caroline G. Mercer, Chairman