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SUMMER 2009

# THE SPIRE

Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Graduate Department of Religion, and Oberlin Graduate School of Theology

*Sublime Beauty*  
AND  
*Fragile Joy*





# I N M E M O R I A M

Neil James Brake

(1961–2008)

Vanderbilt University photographer



*Benton Chapel*  
interior  
erected 1959  
Vanderbilt University Divinity School  
photographed by Neil Brake  
2000

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# THE SPIRE

## F E A T U R E S

6

### Spirit at the Roots

Musician and journalist Jewly Hight reveals how the artistry of Americana female songwriters serves as a valuable source of spiritual insights.



12

### A Fresh Architectural Statement for Theological Education

Divinity School student Bonnie Cooper Chappell commemorates in essay the fiftieth anniversary of Benton Chapel.



17

### The Mockery of Christ

Tragedy, Resignation, and Courage in the Life and Work of Artist Eugene Biel-Bienne

Art historian Robin M. Jensen invites readers to view an enigmatic painting that hangs in a stairwell at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

23

### The Greatest Mockery Ever Told

Theologian Paul DeHart encourages us to reconsider our understanding of "kingship."

26

### Starving the Imago Dei

Alumna Shelli Renee Yoder suggests ways to counter the cultural onslaught of body-hatred against women and girls.





# From the Dean

## When Knowledge Becomes Wisdom

(Dean James Hudnut-Beumler delivered the following address to the sixty-seven graduates when he welcomed them into the alumni/ae community on Friday, May 8, 2009.)

Some years ago I was pressed into service to make a short video about revitalizing religion in urban communities. You probably do not think of me as a filmmaker. I lack the hair and the beret for the part; all that Francis Ford Coppola and I have in common is that we each use three names. When it comes to media, I am more of a content guy.

What remains with me from the video is a segment that I filmed with the rector of the Catholic cathedral in Louisville, Kentucky. We were recording footage in a variety of situations where transformative leadership was developing, and we asked Father Ron what accounted for his success and what he would tell others who wanted to be successful in ministry.

To my surprise, he said, "Tell them to pay attention."

Father Ron admitted that he had not learned to pay attention during his seminary days when he was all too eager to learn how to be a priest. It was not until he earned a doctorate in ministry with other clergy that he was helped to see that good ministry comes from paying attention to what is happening, and not what you think should be happening, or what you would like to be happening.

"Pay attention," Father Ron repeated. "I would tell them to pay attention."

I know you have heard these words before, even at the Divinity School. On the occasion of your graduation, I wish to tell you to *pay attention*, but not in the "because it is going to be on the examination" meaning of these three words. Today marks a transition in the direction where your attention needs to be focused. I say this so that you may be useful and effective in the contexts of your ministries.

Half of what we have taught you in the classrooms of Vanderbilt Divinity School may prove useless and may be safely forgotten; the other half will transform your lives.

The problem is that we cannot tell you which half is which. You have acquired a lot of information that you did not know before enrolling; be careful how you use your knowledge.

Knowledge becomes wisdom when it is used in a fitting way, so pay attention. Context is everything. If someone were to tell you a series of great recent calamities in one's life, it would be neither wisdom nor kindness to ask, "Do you think God is punishing you?" This does not mean that theodicy is not an important question, only that it is a question that has its time and place. My faculty colleagues and I hope you will distinguish us by being both knowledgeable and

*...there is no textbook for service in a church where backbone families are losing jobs, or in an agency that serves the poor when the pantry shelves become empty.*

wise, but only you can realize that hope—and only by paying attention.

You are graduating in a time of uncertainty as you and most of us have never experienced. Just as there is no textbook for President Obama to follow for the time he has been elected, there is no textbook for service in a church where backbone families are losing jobs, or in an agency that serves the poor when the pantry shelves become empty. As Walker Percy wrote, "We live in a time of not knowing what to do." The old formulae are in need of revision.

It is in times such as these when prophets are most needed. Great prophets pay attention to what is happening and then say, "Here are our values, and here is our situation." These gifted prophets together lay before those who will listen a clear course of response.

You have attended the School of the Prophets; consequently, we expect you to



bring vision and discernment to those whom you meet and serve. I ask you, as the newest members in a long line of graduates of the *Schola Prophetarum*, to accept this charge:

May you have the courage like Jeremiah possessed to tell people to plant a garden, even when they are experiencing exile, that they may flourish in any context.

May you make your home like Ruth with good people, even when they are not your people.

May you kindle the extravagant hope of Isaiah that situations will get better, that the day is coming when the lion will lie down with the lamb, even for people who have lost their hope.

May you stand up as Esther did against genocide and all forms of violence, even when you do not feel safe.

May you teach like Micah that doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God is enough religion, even in a world that tries to turn faith into a difficult formula.

May you act as Jesus did when he was approached by the rich young ruler, someone who did not have his values. Jesus looked upon him with love. May you, likewise, be filled with compassion for everyone you meet.

And above all, I charge you: pay attention.

# Around the QUADRANGLE

## The Theology of Medicine

Myrick Clements Shinall Jr. distinguished himself during Commencement 2009 as the first student in the history of Vanderbilt University to earn, concurrently, the master of divinity degree and the doctor of medicine degree. For the past six academic years, Shinall explored the intersection between the disciplines of theology and medicine, and his studies culminated in his being named the ninetieth Founder's Medalist of the Divinity School.

As a volunteer at Siloam Family Health Center in Nashville, Shinall provided health care to uninsured patients and fulfilled the Scriptural mandate to extend hospitality and compassion to individuals whose medical and spiritual needs would otherwise be neglected.

Serving as a representative of the Divinity School's chapter of the United Methodist Student Association, Shinall also was instru-

mental in organizing Covenant Disciple groups in the tradition of the eighteenth-century Wesleyan class meetings when members assemble and are held mutually accountable in practicing acts of devotion, justice, and mercy.

A member of *Alpha Omega Alpha* medical honor society, his scholarship has been published in three medical journals: *Pediatrics*, *The Journal of Trauma*, and *The Journal of Pediatric Surgery*. The faculty of the Divinity School awarded him the mark of honors for his paper titled "Wiping Rachel's Tears: A Wesleyan Response to the Suffering and Death of Children."

Having earned his dual degrees, Shinall has begun his residency in general surgery at Vanderbilt University Medical Center while continuing to serve the United Methodist Church as a certified candidate for ordination.



Vanderbilt University Chancellor Nicholas S. Zeppos congratulates Myrick Clements Shinall Jr. upon receiving the Founder's Medal from Dean James Hudnut-Beumler during the 2009 commencement exercises.



Denice Hicks, actress and artistic director of the Nashville Shakespeare Festival, reads from the letters of O'Connor during "The Enduring Chill: Remembering Flannery O'Connor" at the Mercy Lounge. (left)



Celebrated for their close harmonies and mountain-rooted melodies, the musicians of the band Old Black Kettle perform during the benefit concert for the Flannery O'Connor—Andalusia Foundation. Proceeds from the Divinity School's initiative provided for the largest gift, apart from grants, in the history of the foundation. (below)

## Saving the Farm

The artistic legacy of modern American writer Flannery O'Connor was celebrated during the spring semester when the Religion in Arts and Contemporary Culture Program at Vanderbilt University Divinity School sponsored "The Enduring Chill: Remembering Flannery O'Connor." Directed by Robin Jensen, the Luce Chancellor's Professor of the History of Christian Art and Worship, and David Perkins, doctoral student in the graduate department of religion, the initiative supported the Flannery O'Connor—Andalusia Foundation for the restoration, preservation, and management of the farm where the writer lived from 1951 until her death in 1964.

Artists who performed in a benefit concert at the Mercy Lounge included the bands Old Black Kettle and Over the Rhine, performance artist Minton Sparks (Jill Webb-Hill, MEd '91, D'96), singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier, and actress Denice Hicks.

Located in Milledgeville, Georgia, Andalusia is the 544-acre dairy farm inherited by the writer's mother. The farm complex provided O'Connor the inspiration for the settings, plots, and fictional characters that are the signature of her stories.



## In Remembrance of a Gentleman and a Scholar

Chancellor, *emeritus*, George Alexander Heard, who acknowledged Vanderbilt Divinity School as “the conscience of the University,” died on July 24, 2009, at the age of ninety-two.

As the fifth chancellor of the University from 1963–1982, Heard also served as an advisor to United States Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon. Before assuming the role of chancellor, Heard had distinguished himself in the Academy as a scholar of the American presidency and the country’s election process. During his tenure at Vanderbilt, he was highly regarded by higher education administrators for maintaining campus stability during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.

“In the history of twentieth-century education, especially the challenging decades of the 1960s and 1970s, few leaders have been as effective, courageous, ethically consistent, or influential as Alexander Heard,” wrote the Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, president, *emeritus*, of Notre Dame University, in the foreword to Heard’s book, *Speaking of the University*.

From the beginning of his administration, Heard earned the respect of the student body for his staunch defense of the open forum, a practice which he interpreted as the right of students and faculty to invite to the campus speakers of diverse political persuasions in an effort to understand better their perspectives. With his endorsement, students organized in 1964 the program, Impact Symposium; now in its forty-fifth year, Impact Symposium is among the nation’s longest-running student-initiated programs for speakers.

When Heard encountered resistance in 1967 to the University’s invitation to Civil Rights activist Stokely Carmichael, critics were reminded of a statement the chancellor had exchanged the previous year: “The University’s obligation is not to protect students from ideas, but rather to expose them to ideas and to help make them capable of handling and having ideas.”



George Alexander Heard (1917–2009)  
The fifth chancellor of Vanderbilt University

Heard was instrumental in the effort to appoint the first woman, Mary Jane Werthan, BA’29, MA’35, to the University Board of Trust. To ensure that the trustees remained aware of the perspectives of young Vanderbilt *alumni*, he also persuaded the board to establish a new class of trustees comprised of four recent graduates.

Upon the occasion of Heard’s death, Chancellor Nicholas S. Zeppos remarked, “For more than forty years, Alex Heard was a powerful presence at Vanderbilt University. Through his intellect and calm demeanor, he raised Vanderbilt’s stature on the national stage during this twenty-year administration. After he stepped down as chancellor, he graciously made himself available to his successors for advice and guidance. I am gratefully one of the beneficiaries of his wisdom, and his loss is one I feel deeply.”

## Leaving 1982

A university’s first concern is the human intellect—reason, knowledge, understanding, and their applications. Modern universities are thus the seedbeds of the modern world’s pervasive dynamism, the world’s irresistible compulsion to change. Yet universities are ironically suspicious of proposals to change themselves, their own structures and habits, traditions and preferences, whether proposals to do so come from within or without. But universities, too, must change—not their primary values, but their ways of living. The great danger always in the development of institutions is timidity.

Vanderbilt is not an abstract idea, a disembodied spirit with a future somehow independent of Vanderbilt people. Albert Einstein wrote that “Communities tend to be less guided than individuals by conscience and a sense of responsibility.” He was asserting that the responsibility for a community’s welfare, such as Vanderbilt’s welfare, rests ultimately in individuals. And that means all individuals. Albert Camus, writing on the duty of the artist, concluded, “We must simultaneously serve suffering and beauty.” He was saying that not even artists, no matter how rare their talents, can be excused from community service, let us say, university service.

—Alexander Heard  
from his final commencement address  
delivered on May 14, 1982  
published in *Speaking of the University:  
Two Decades at Vanderbilt*  
Chapter XI, page 367  
Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 1995

## Supporting the Next Generation of Ministers and Theologians

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK SMITH

During the spring, the Divinity School honored the donors whose generosity supports the 250 students currently pursuing theological education at Vanderbilt University. Benefactors gathered in the courtyard to meet students and recent *alumni/ae* and to learn of their various ministries.



Rob and Beth Harwell and Jackie Shrago



Shirley Forstman, Bette Halverstadt, and Doris Farley



MarLu Scott, John Collett, Nancy Neelley



Ann Wells, Mary Fern Richie, Mary and Paul Stumb



*"If a man does not keep pace with his companions,  
perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.  
Let him step to the music which he hears, however  
measured or far away."*

—Henry David Thoreau  
(1817–1862)

# Spirit at the Roots

JEWLY HIGHT, MTS'08

## Editor's Note

*Like the nineteenth-century American philosopher and essayist Henry David Thoreau, Jewly Hight has stepped always to the music of a different drummer. As an elementary school student, she aspired to become a percussionist, but her teacher chose for her the clarinet, an instrument considered more appropriate for a young lady's musical education.*

*Stepping outside a gender role defined for her, Jewly fulfilled her ambition to become a drummer, and she has established herself not only as an instrumentalist, songwriter, and vocalist but also as a music journalist whose articles have been published in The Nashville Scene, American Songwriter, No Depression, Performing Songwriter, and Georgia Music Magazine. Upon fulfilling the requirements for the master of theological studies degree and the Carpenter Program's certificate in religion, gender, and sexuality, Jewly was graduated with first honors as the 2008 Founder's Medalist for Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Her research on the spiritual themes in the music of seven female Americana songwriters was inspired and guided by her study of theology and serves as the foundation for her first book to be published in 2011 by Baylor University Press.*

*As one who has been privileged to teach Jewly and to witness the development of her scholarship, I also have been fortunate to hear her recount experiences from her spiritual journey. My favorite story from her repertoire occurred twenty-five years ago when she was baptized in the Gulf of Mexico by a Baptist minister whom she describes as having an independent spirit. Emerging from the baptismal waters and walking to the shore, the four-year-old girl joined hands with a gospel choir and sang the hymn, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."*

*For this issue of The Spire, Jewly introduces us to the choir of seven Americana artists whose voices will be heard in her forthcoming book: Lucinda Williams, Ruthie Foster, Mary Gauthier, Julie Miller, Victoria Williams, Michelle Shocked, and Abigail Washburn. Like the essayist, these women respond passionately to the sounds from a different drummer.*

Several years ago, I made a mix CD for a friend who was seeking a divorce. She had been treated poorly by her husband and had grown emotionally and spiritually deadened over the course of a twenty-year marriage. I cannot remember half of the lyrics I chose, other than that all the songs were recorded by women. But I do recall that Lucinda Williams' "Joy" was one I made sure to include. I thought it could offer my friend something important, a visceral empathy that she had not found anywhere else, from one woman—a particularly potent singer-songwriter, to another—a listener in the thick of life and pain.

Indeed, "Joy" stomps with defiance, harnessing an anger that feels earned. Williams' speaker names the wrong that has been done her and spits the memory and the relation-

*Feminist and womanist perspectives have widened substantially the playing field in theology and ethics, proving the importance of listening to particular voices on the ground long held to the margins by the oppressions of sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism.*

ship out of her mouth like the sour-tasting thing that it is. Her voice flares as she vows to reclaim what is rightfully hers—her joy. The song makes the argument that such a reclaiming can be done.

The fact that I chose to show my friend support with a customized compilation CD instead of any number of other ways says a lot about me—namely, that I often refer to music in order to get something across to someone. But it says even more about the songs: they have substance, a lived, tested truth that is bigger and deeper than strict autobiography and that offers the listener something valuable. It is no coincidence that I now find myself writing a book about the spiritual insights of female Americana songwriters, Lucinda Williams among them.<sup>i</sup>

As a music journalist and critic, I do the lion's share of my writing about Americana music and American roots-oriented music in general. Yet when I encounter songs that say more than seems possible for three minutes of music and lyrics, revelatory performances that are better windows to the soul than the eyes could ever be, the realities of finite word

counts and keeping up with all the new music coming out means that I do not get to dwell on them as I once could.

While I was a student at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, I found another compelling reason to give female songwriters sustained attention.<sup>ii</sup> Feminist and womanist perspectives have widened substantially the playing field in theology and ethics, proving the importance of listening to particular voices on the ground long held to the margins by the oppressions of sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism. Could that also apply to women who put their voices out there through artistic media and make their living doing it? Absolutely.

Womanist theologians and ethicists have built their work on the strong foundation of black women's literature. In fact, the very idea of womanism was articulated first by a poet and novelist, Alice Walker. Womanists regard stories written by black women such as Walker, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston as meaningful accounts of spiritual formation, sprouted from the roots of experience, memory, and imagination.<sup>iii</sup>

Female songwriters, too, can be valuable sources of spiritual insight. And I suppose that a female music critic, writing in the midst of a field that even now—nearing the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century—is still populated with a majority of male writers and more prone to give male songwriters than female songwriters their due, is in as good a position as any to illuminate that fact.

## Spiritual Notations

Books have been written tracing the spiritual journeys of American musical icons, like Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan, or using pop music to explore the finer points of American society's spiritual yearnings, cultural values, and theological paradigms—an endeavor that often involves superimposing external categories on the music.<sup>iv</sup> The history of women in country music has been thoroughly documented, and religion and spirituality in country music has been discussed.<sup>v</sup> There are also many writings on women and rock or blues and a smaller number on women and folk or gospel.





JOHN RUSSELL

The genesis for Jewely Hight's research in spiritual themes within the music of female Americana songwriters developed during her studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. A vocalist, instrumentalist, and songwriter, Hight wrote and arranged her first compact disk titled *Darlin' Understand* which was released in 2007. USA Today praised the songs' artistry for their "chilling, shadowy blues groove and fearful moans" while other critics acknowledged Hight's talent for incarnating the "rocking, honky-tonkin' rhythm of a southern August night." She performs as a member of the band Carry A. Nation and as a dancer with the Southern Country Cloggers of LaVergne, Tennessee.

*I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft* is an important reference point simply for what it is—a collection of interview transcripts with a wide range of black women songwriters—although author Lashonda Katrice Barnett offers no analysis of their work or interview responses and does little to amplify the distinctiveness of their voices. Only a very few feminist and womanist theologians and ethicists have drawn on music in their work to date.<sup>vii</sup>

But no one has looked to the bodies of work of active female Americana songwriters and made note of the spiritual insight they found there. So that is precisely what I am doing. More specifically, my subject matter is the written and recorded works of

Lucinda Williams, Ruthie Foster, Mary Gauthier, Julie Miller, Victoria Williams (no relation to Lucinda), Michelle Shocked, and Abigail Washburn.

I aim not to pin down their systematic theologies for that would be impossible, not to mention inappropriate because none of them claims to be a theologian, at least not in any formal sense. My intention is to see what has emerged in their songs thus far: how they view the world, what they think is important, what concerns them ultimately.

Spending a chapter on each songwriter affords me the rare luxury of engaging their music in considerable detail. Part of the work is narrative analysis: the types of stories they tell, the kinds of characters toward whom

they gravitate, the recurring imagery, themes, messages, language, tones, and emotions.

Because this book is being written by a music critic and was inspired, in part, by the insights of feminist and womanist theologies—none of which is party to mind-body dualism—music never takes a backseat to lyrics or biography. Music itself is a form of storytelling, and the types of music these women choose to play and the ways they sing—during a single song or over the course of a career—say a great deal about how they experience the world. Extended interviews bring me into direct conversation with them; they weigh in on their intentions, inspiration, motivation, visions, and development, as well as what their songs reflect of their lives.

#### A Sense of Place, a Sense of Voice

Because I am writing about female Americana songwriters, I should specify what I mean by "Americana" music. It is a slippery enough musical descriptor, made all the more confusing by the fact that it is applied also to non-musical things, like quintessentially American landmarks, Route 66 or Rock City, for example.

Within the past two decades, Americana has become a catch-all category for contemporary music that maintains strong ties to American music traditions. Often it is folk- or country-based fare by singer-songwriters or alternative country bands. But it can and should encompass the entire array of American roots music that thrives just a little ways outside of the present-day pop mainstream, be it blues, gospel, R&B, bluegrass, old-time, Cajun, rock, or something else; and it should give non-white artists every bit as much and as serious attention as white ones.

Americana performers lend themselves particularly well to career-spanning treatment; the genre suffers little from ageism. Additionally, engaging their past, and all of ours, gives them greater sources from which to draw. Greil Marcus wrote of late '60s country-rockers the Band, now regarded as patron saints of Americana music, "Against a cult of youth they felt for a continuity of generations; against the instant America of the sixties they looked for the traditions that made new things not only possible, but valuable; against a flight from roots they set a sense of place."<sup>viii</sup> I can attest to the power of

Marcus' statement. Roots music hooked me as I tried to renew a sense of meaningful connection with my own southern roots, embodied by the small, fading North Carolina towns from where my family hails.

Americana as a genre is somewhat less affected by commercial pressures than others. Within it, there is a fair amount of room to express political and spiritual ideas that might not translate as well in more mainstream, corporate-controlled sectors of the music industry. Quality songwriting is valued highly, too. Still, Americana does have radio charts, publications, a trade organization, and annual awards; and the performers who make their livings at it, however humble, are by no means completely insulated from business considerations.

I could easily have chosen other songwriters for this book. But those I selected have made distinctive contributions to what is now known as Americana, and were willing to sift through their accumulated bodies of work in conversation with me. A few, like Lucinda Williams, are well known outside the world of Americana and have inspired a generation of imitators. Several have had their songs recorded by other artists, big or small. But each possesses an immediately recognizable singing and songwriting voice, a voice that could not be mistaken for anyone else's.

Lucinda Williams has forged an enduring body of songs out of blues, rock, country, and folk textures and lean, literary lyric writing. She communicates her devastation and desire in a fabulously grainy drawl. Mary Gauthier entrances listeners with heavily shadowed, country-tinged folk, so austere and penetrating that you would almost believe she can see through bone and sinew to soul.

Michelle Shocked has recorded as politically pointed and wildly varied a body of music as anybody on earth, but her heart lies in country-blues, folk, and gospel—especially gospel, which she holds up as the mother root of American music. Ruthie Foster, a classically trained singer whose voice is spicy and supple in turns, has traveled a gradual journey from singer-songwriter of folk to blues, gospel spirituals and soul—music that revives the memories of her early life.

Julie Miller and Victoria Williams are kindred spirits. Miller, wife and musical partner

of Buddy Miller, was known first as a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, then a country-tinged folk-rock one, not that she entirely overhauled the sound and content of her music when she shifted from one market to the other. Her frail, child-liking singing is striking, and Williams alone can match her quavering, youthful vulnerability. Williams' songs, steeped as much in jazz and folk as anything, are gleeful, meandering adventures that often spill out—way out—of familiar song structure.

Musically, Abigail Washburn does quite a bit of reaching back to tradition, not least because her primary instrument is the clawhammer banjo, which predated the Scruggs-style banjo playing identified with bluegrass. She draws on the styles and songs of old-time, gospel, and Appalachian and Chinese folk music.

All of these women, except for Washburn, are a generation older than I and have recorded at least five albums in their decade-plus careers. Washburn serves as an important link to a new generation. She has produced only four full-length albums—two of those as a member of the all-female string band Uncle Earl—but Washburn came to music with an already thoroughly considered worldview and has given us enough to get a good sense of her voice.

#### Then Sings Their Souls

*The history of women in country music has been thoroughly documented, and religion and spirituality in country music has been discussed. But no one has looked to the bodies of work of active female Americana songwriters and made note of the spiritual insight they found there.*

There are reasons why people cling to these women's songs as meaningful works. Ruthie Foster took her ultimate direction from the episode that got her singing in the first place: her mother's firm, exhorting words to her shy teenaged daughter, who was tucked away in her bedroom, strumming quietly on her guitar. Foster remembers, "She burst my door wide open, and she just stood there with a dishrag in one hand and her hand on

her hip in the other and said, 'Girl, just open your mouth and sing.'"

Now she carries on the spirit of that exchange, speaking especially, but by no means exclusively, to other women. By singing songs like "Phenomenal Woman"—a Maya Angelou poem celebrating the female body and set to strutting soul music—and by taking the stage with an all-female, all-African-American band (a lamentably rare sight), Foster creates a space in which other women can begin to imagine expressing themselves just as assuredly.

Ruthie Foster's songs embody an alternative version of mothering. Sometimes, as in her songs "Mama Said" and "Full Circle," she immerses herself, and by extension the listener, in her own mother's empowering words. At other times, her songs feel like testimonies—her way of conjuring the bold spirit of the Missionary Baptist Church's "Amen Corner" where her grandmother played a vocal role—only this time in a bar. She will retell her own experiences, then suggest that all people have a unique voice within them, a voice worth recovering, preserving, and putting to use.<sup>ix</sup>

Just as palpable as the joy Foster gets from singing is the sense of responsibility she feels in her musical role. "I've got to pay attention to what I want to say and the story I want to tell, even if it's my own," she says. "It's like Mama used to tell me, I have a soul to save

and it's mine. And if I have to sing that, then that's what I'll do. I have a story to tell and a soul to save."

For Foster, the phrases "story to tell" and "soul to save" are near-synonyms. When she talks about soul-saving, she is getting at something entirely different—and more this-worldly—than the idea of escaping damnation in the next life. She means: "Saving that



sense of who you really are and what you came here for. Finding that again.”

Foster’s career itself is a demonstration of the ongoing process of claiming and exercising her voice. She does not look like a singer-songwriter is “supposed” to look. Music critics and industry personnel all too frequently interpret “singer-songwriter” as white, and she is African-American. She recalls her father’s skepticism when she sent him photographs taken during her brief relationship with a major record label: “I got this picture in my mail, and the first thing I wanted to know was, ‘Who is this white woman with my baby’s nose?’”

Undeterred by the record label’s, and her own, early inability to grasp what she wanted to do and who she wanted to be, Foster gradually developed proficiency as a folk singer-songwriter. Since then, she has taken up musical styles familiar from her childhood, so that she now moves freely between musical traditions and has a broad range of expression, from intimate storytelling to cathartic belting. A fully realized voice, for her, requires room to maneuver.

When Lucinda Williams writes songs that depict the dynamics of relationships—and she often does, some of them narrative-driven, some straight-up blues, and others lyrically lean and incantatory—she demonstrates an uncommonly acute awareness of how people affect one another. She captures them wounding or comforting one another, satisfying one another’s desires or denying them, even helping one another reach greater spiritual awareness. Human connection is so important in Williams’ body of work that isolation seems like one of the worst evils that can befall a person.

Abigail Washburn is just as focused as Williams on human relationships, only she envisions how those interactions play out on a global scale. Her music draws on a sense of interconnectedness, as in interconnectedness with everyone, everywhere on earth. Plenty of songs critique the *status quo* and argue for change, but Washburn offers songs that actually incarnate the change she desires, moving freely between Asian and American flavors. She charts a new spiritual geography, a new way of being in the world, and enlarges

the idea of home, helping people to place themselves in a rapidly changing, globalizing world.

Like Washburn, Michelle Shocked was pursuing social and political concerns well before music-making ever presented itself as a possible career. But Shocked is an unabashed, full-fledged musical activist, jabbing at abuses of power wherever she finds them. In a very real way, Shocked has acted as a prophet to America by placing before our eyes our nation’s sins, especially those of racial injustice, and the country’s blessings, including a rich musical heritage that offers

... if you tend a muscadine vine properly and diligently, it will give you robust grapes. ...if you trim back a Virginia creeper and thwart its progress in one direction, it will almost willfully push through another way.

spiritual sustenance. The seemingly scatter-shot course she has pursued from jump-blues and jazz to dub and western swing has, by design, denied industry personnel, critics, and fans the chance to place her within stylistic boundaries.

I have not yet interviewed Julie Miller on the record because of her health issues which also have prevented her from being on stage for the past few years, but she has made it clear that she wants to participate in my project. Despite the physical distance her situation currently forces between her and her audience, her recordings reveal the most intimate and sensitive of singers and songwriters. As Miller encounters others’ pain, she takes it into her heart, until it overflows into songs that tenderly acknowledge the suffering she has seen—and not just seen, but felt deeply. She often returns to a central image: everyone, regardless of age or station, is a spiritual orphan, a child without parent, comfort, or home in this world. She includes herself within the orphaned number.

Victoria Williams, a close friend of Miller, invites her adult listeners to remember the adventures, humble miracles, and resilient hope of childhood and to rethink what things in life are worth serious attention and what is silly enough to overlook. Her songs are rife with imagery culled from nature and

the mundane which she treats with wonder and whimsy, rarely getting caught up in realism. And she has never published her song lyrics, in liner notes or anywhere else—a significant move meant to beckon listeners to join her in the game and come up with their own interpretations of her lyrics.

Next to Williams and Miller, Mary Gauthier seems serious, indeed. She intentionally crafts songs that require effortful listening, then leads her live audiences into the elemental human act of watching, listening, and reflecting side by side. Only when they are paying rapt attention can they really experience the leap that she makes in her songs: she moves from a particular voice to one that consciously bears the weight of many people’s stories, from “I” to “we.” Striking a thoroughly egalitarian posture, she tells the stories of people living on the fringes and confronts her listeners with their common humanity, dignity, and worth.

#### Muscadine Wine

Mary Gauthier, Victoria Williams, Julie Miller, Michelle Shocked, Abigail Washburn, Lucinda Williams, and Ruthie Foster are as distinct from one another as they are from their musical peers. But there are also threads running through all of their work, commonalities I had not contemplated before conceiving this project.

One recurring theme is really more like the absence of a thread. A few years back, Barbara Ching wrote an essay characterizing alternative country, one of Americana’s tributaries, as hyper-masculine nostalgia and a reaction to feminized commercial country.<sup>14</sup> The songwriters I am treating do not play into either category, but occupy a separate space—or spaces—altogether. They are women, as I have mentioned many times over by now, and that aspect of their identities significantly shapes their work. But it also takes them to very different places.

Some, like Lucinda Williams, Gauthier and Shocked, sing in a way that could be heard as brash and unfeminine, and use language as visceral as any of their male counterparts to convey what that they feel, to tell a story, to provoke. Gauthier intentionally

writes songs that veil the speaker’s gender; Shocked has sung a number of songs from the vantage points of male characters.

Victoria Williams and Miller keep concerns and insights of girlhood alive and present with their disarming voices. Miller’s voice sounds like a ten-year-old’s, in the best possible sense, full of breathy wonder and often sadness, defying the tendency to settle into ordered, armored propriety with age. Williams sounds young and old at the same time, like a child engrossed in the wonder of her surroundings and a jazz-pop singer from the last century. She conjures for harried adult listeners the unfettered adventures of a tomboy.

Foster and Washburn speak especially to women, both in what they sing and with whom. Uncle Earl is not the only all-female group Washburn has performed with, and Foster currently tours with a female, African-American rhythm section. Foster mothers listeners toward feeling comfortable in their skin, and Washburn taps into the somewhat obscure tradition of old-time songs that are pro-woman.

Another thread is that these songwriters are all, in their own ways, dedicated to personal and artistic growth, which is not at all something to be taken for granted given popular music’s rapid turnover of names, faces, and sounds. Their artistic voices are like vines, both the sort you cultivate and the sort that grow wild. Horticultural wisdom holds that if you tend a muscadine vine properly and diligently, it will give you robust grapes. Likewise, if you trim back a Virginia creeper and thwart its progress in one direction, it will almost willfully push through another way.

And so have their songs. Shocked battled her former label in order to follow her vision and record the music she felt compelled to record; Lucinda Williams pared down her lyrics and began wringing a world of meaning out of simple images, even after she had already earned expectant and exacting fans with her narrative songs. Victoria Williams, having emerged on the other side of a painful divorce, is redefining her relationship to her early songs, and what they mean to her now.

Empathy is also evident in each of these women’s repertoires. They are not just writing for themselves. Miller takes on others’ pain and blankets them in her prayers. Foster wants to help them find their voices. Shocked throws her lot in with others and takes up for them politically. Washburn journeys to them, in more ways than one. Nearly all of these women strive to identify with others, tell their stories, and understand their pain, which brings us back to that mix CD. The gesture accomplished what I had hoped it would for my friend: put a little water back in her well.

<sup>14</sup> The as-yet-untitled book is to be published by Baylor University Press in 2011.

<sup>15</sup> I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Professors Ellen Armour, John McClure, Melissa Snarr, Robin Jensen, Diane Sasson, and Victor Judge for their guidance, ideas, and willingness to let me begin working out these ideas in classrooms and conversations. I dare say this project would not have happened without them.

<sup>16</sup> Black women’s literature is important enough to womanism that Stacey Floyd-Thomas developed a thorough methodology for tracking the moral and spiritual formation of its female protagonists in *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics*.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Friskics-Warren’s book, *I’ll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence*, is one of the finest examples of an alternative, spiritually astute interpretive frame for pop music.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann’s *Finding Her Voice: Women In Country Music, 1800-2000* is the definitive history on the subject. Tex Sample’s *White Soul* points to the tendency in country music to differentiate between institutional religion and authentic spirituality, among other things. David Fillingim’s *Redneck Liberation* tries, perhaps too forcibly, to fit the country music tradition into the mold of liberation theology.

<sup>19</sup> Cheryl Kirk-Duggan’s essay “African-American Spirituals: Confronting and Exorcising Evil Through Song” in *A Troubling In My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* identifies a theodicy in African-American spirituals. In *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*, Sharon D. Welch appeals to jazz as a model for political engagement. Wendy Farley, in *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*, suggests that Appalachian folk songs are profound articulations of the will to survive and thrive here and now, and not just the desire to escape to the next life. Heidi Epstein’s *Melting the Venusberg: A Feminist Theology of Music* offers just that: a feminist theology of music that does not devalue the body through hierarchy and logo-centrism; however, she devotes the bulk of her attention to classical music before briefly discussing African-derived traditions and the influential gospel-blues singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

<sup>20</sup> *Mystery Train*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Foster does not invoke the term “womanism,” but in a very organic way, her music and commentary embody many of the traits identified with womanist ethics and theology. In particular, her story exemplifies radical subjectivity, as described by Floyd-Thomas in *Mining the Motherlode*: younger women claim their identities as they are mentored by experienced older women, their literal or figurative mothers. Floyd-Thomas also likens this aspect of the process to testifying, and much like Foster, shows how creating ritual space underscores the porous boundaries among spiritual practices, life, and art.

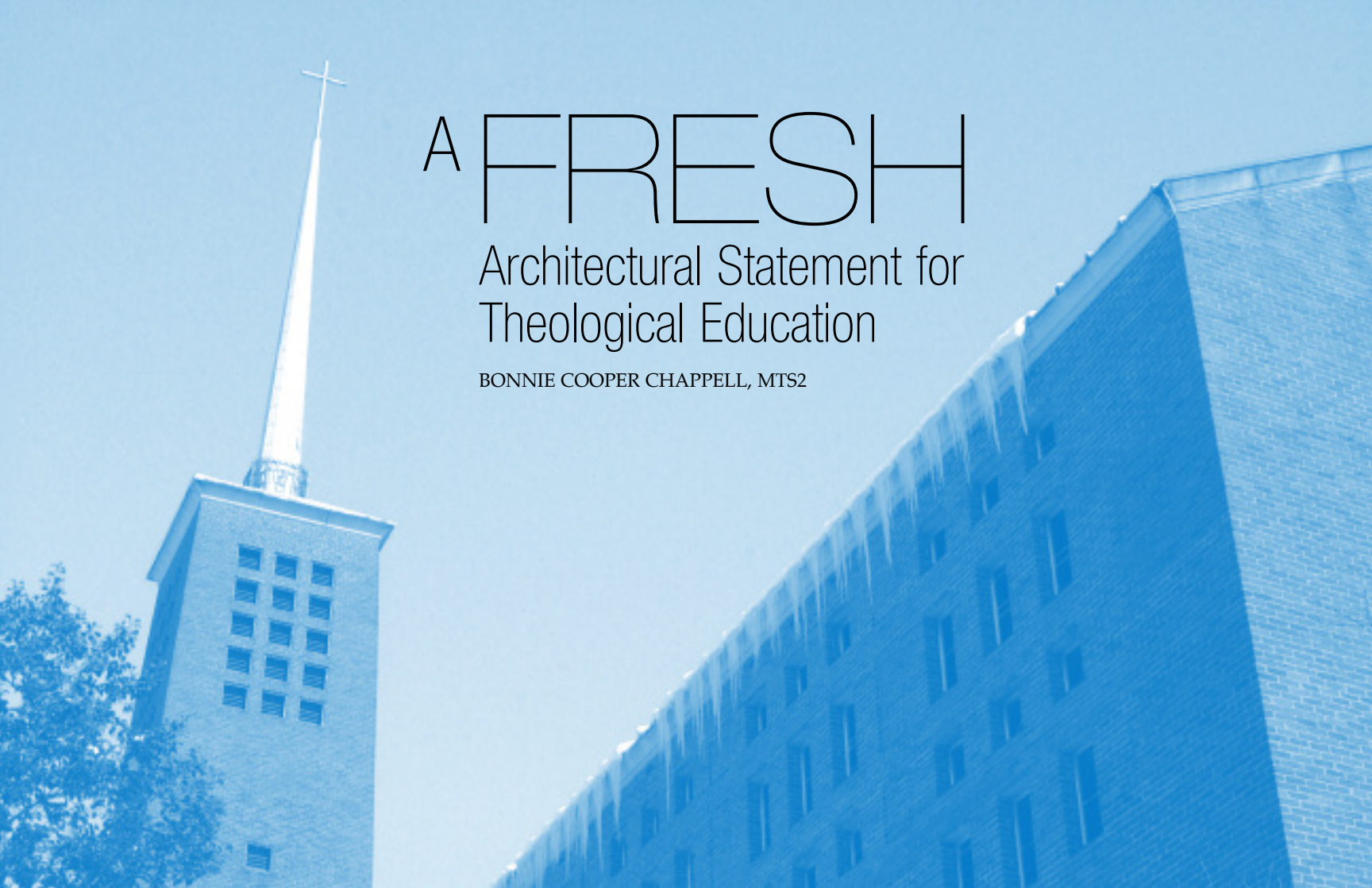
<sup>22</sup> The essay, “Going Back to the Old Mainstream: No Depression, Robbie Fulks, and Alternative Country’s Muddied Waters,” appeared in the collection *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*.



# A FRESH

## Architectural Statement for Theological Education

BONNIE COOPER CHAPPELL, MTS2



*The Props assist the House*

*Until the House is built*

*And then the Props withdraw*

*And adequate, erect,*

*The House support itself*

*And cease to recollect*

*The Auger and the Carpenter—*

*Just such a retrospect*

*Hath the perfected Life—*

*A past of Plank and Nail*

*And slowness—then the Scaffolds drop*

*Affirming it a Soul.*

—Emily Dickinson

An entire semester at the Divinity School passed before I found myself in Benton Chapel. On a radiant spring afternoon, I instinctively veered left as I walked toward 21st Avenue, South instead of taking the familiar right turn to the library. After climbing the stone steps to the entrance, I pulled hesitantly on the knight handle guarding the door, not wanting to disrupt whatever might be going on inside. Entering the foyer and finding the building empty, I drank in the calming silence and immediately decided that the chapel was the perfect place to work on my essay on Emily Dickinson’s exploration of spiritual formation and the Crucifixion in “The Props assist the House.”

I walked past the statues of Dismas and Lazarus, made my way up the green terrazzo stairway, and sat down in a pew in the middle of the balcony. I stayed in that pew for several hours, allowing my gaze to alternate between my volume of Dickinson and the soaring ceiling, between the notepad in my lap and the afternoon light streaming through the stained glass. Benton Chapel filled me with theological insight, centering both my essay and my spirit.

Benton Chapel celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year. Since 1959, the chapel’s spire has stretched into the Nashville skyline, reminding the Vanderbilt community of a most basic commitment: the place of the sacred in intellectual pursuits.

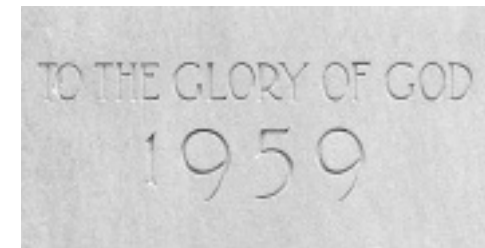
The chapel has served the Divinity School as its symbolic scaffolding, offering support in times of growth and struggle, and as its foundation, helping students and faculty alike to keep central the faith that drives their studies and vocational discernments. In the fifty years since the construction of Benton Chapel, Vanderbilt Divinity School has matured into a leader in theological education and a committed advocate of social justice; it now stands “adequate, erect.” We mark the anniversary of Benton Chapel—proud that such a fine structure stands on our campus and proud of the history that makes its presence central to the work of the Divinity School.

In the mid-1950s, Divinity School Dean John K. Benton set in motion plans to move the School to a new building all its own. Wesley Hall, the School’s original home, was destroyed in a fire in 1932. After a few years in leftover space in Kissam Hall and Neely Auditorium, an old YMCA facility was added to Vanderbilt in 1936 and christened the new Wesley Hall. Twenty years later, the time had come to provide the Divinity School with a more appropriate space. Early plans provided for “administrative and faculty offices, classrooms and refectory, men’s dormitory and chapel,”<sup>vi</sup> that eventually became the Divinity Quadrangle. Dean Benton died on August 21, 1956, three years before the building was completed. Benton Chapel is dedicated to his memory, and the

space continues to celebrate the legacy of this important figure in Vanderbilt history.

Benton came to Vanderbilt in 1939, inheriting a School of Religion steeped in financial crisis. During his tenure as dean, financial difficulties were eased as the School rose to national prominence. Under Benton’s guidance, the School of Religion increased its focus on ministry, improved the library facilities and increased its circulation, and attracted a number of prominent faculty members.<sup>iii</sup> Dean Benton also was involved in the 1952 decision to admit African American students to the Divinity School.<sup>iv</sup> In 1956, the School of Religion became Vanderbilt Divinity School, signaling the School’s membership among the most prestigious theological schools. At the time of Benton’s death, the School was “a major, interdenominational institution that would soon rival the best in the country.”<sup>v</sup> The naming of Benton Chapel is a most appropriate tribute to a man who contributed significantly to the Divinity School.

*Since 1959, the chapel’s spire has stretched into the Nashville skyline, reminding the Vanderbilt community of a most basic commitment: the place of the sacred in intellectual pursuits.*



After Benton’s death, J. Philip Hyatt, professor of Old Testament, served as interim dean, and discussions of a new home for the Divinity School continued. During this interim period, Marvin Halverson, executive director of the National Council of Churches’ Department of Worship and the Arts, visited Vanderbilt as a consultant for the University’s plans for a new chapel. Halverson praised the Divinity School for taking such a step, asserting that the project had “a singular possibility of making a fresh architectural statement for theological education.”<sup>vi</sup>

J. Robert Nelson became the dean of the Divinity School shortly thereafter, and he oversaw the building project through its completion, including “a lofty chapel in con-

temporary style.”<sup>vii</sup> The Nashville architectural firm of Brush, Hutchison & Gwinn was hired to design and construct the new building. In his consultations with the building committee, Halverson noted the importance of architects being prepared to explore “the symbolic role of the religious building in the community.”<sup>viii</sup> Brush, Hutchison & Gwinn proved more than willing to enter such exploration; in the midst of a secular university, they created a structure that attests to the importance of worship.

While the firm of architects oversaw the structural considerations of the chapel’s construction, a number of artists were brought in to attend to the aesthetic elements of the building. Most notably, Robert Harmon of Emil Frei, Incorporated, in St.



repeatedly in correspondence between Dean Nelson and Robert Harmon. Though the artist urged the Dean to allot more of the budget to the chapel’s windows, all parties involved felt that the glass used in the end was most reasonably priced. In one letter, Dean Nelson jokingly remarked that compared with the \$160 per square foot glass that was used in constructing a window at The Upper Room, the chapel’s stained glass seemed like “bargain basement stuff.”<sup>ix</sup>

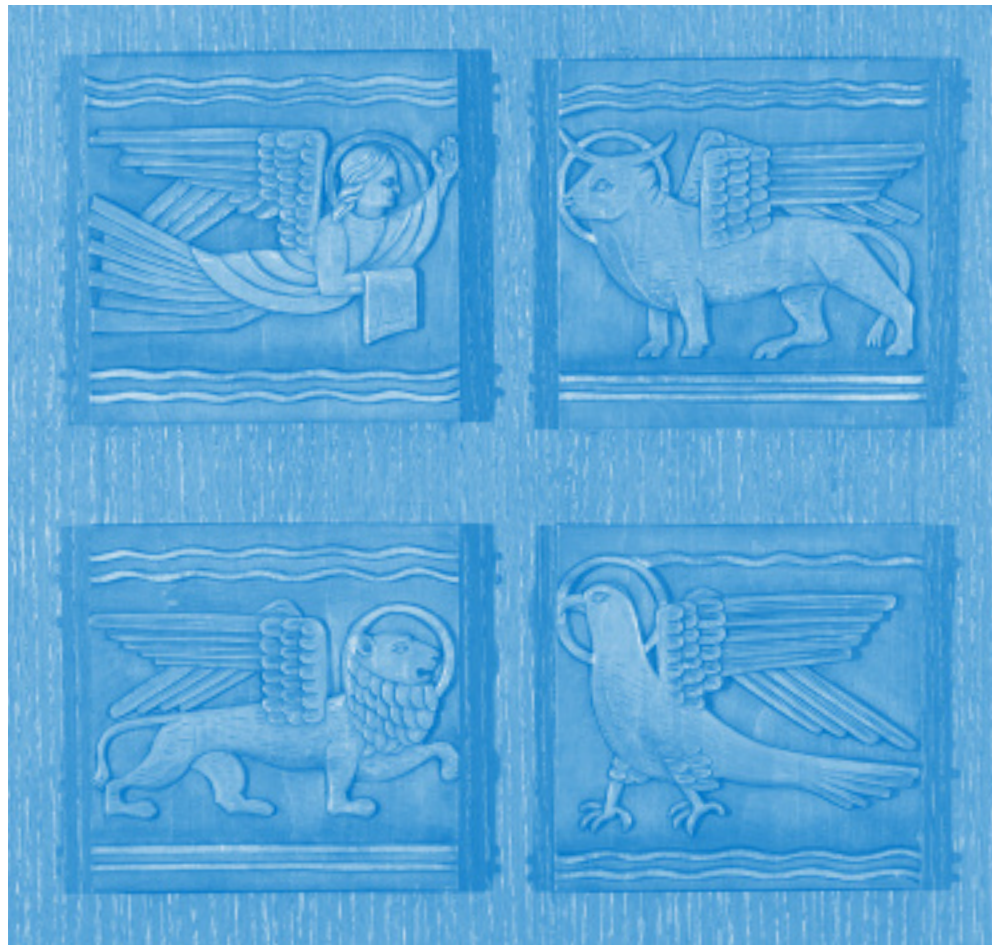
Several other artistic details complete the space. On the building’s exterior, the cornerstone proclaims simply, “To the glory of God,” and wrought iron iconography surrounds the walls. Two pairs of metal knights, each holding swords, serve as door handles at the main entrance. A pair of statues representing in poignant detail the biblical figures Dismas and Lazarus stand in the foyer and are dedicated to Edwin Mims, professor of English literature from 1912 to 1942. On the pulpit are four carved panels, each representing an evangelist, helping speakers to proclaim the good news. Dean Nelson once admitted, “I have discovered quite by accident that one of the most attractive architectural features of the building is the rounded stairway coming from the ground floor to the chapel.”<sup>xii</sup>

Basic considerations for the requirements of a chapel included the installation of a public address system. Though this seems an

Louis, Missouri, was commissioned to design the chapel’s stained glass windows. The plans included the more than three hundred small windows that flood the space with colored light and one elaborate window above the entry doors, the Word of God window. The building committee determined the Word of God to be an appropriate theme for the window, suggesting that it “is basic for the essential concern of theological education—the wholeness of the Christian Gospel” and that “[i]t lends itself to artistic expression.”<sup>x</sup> Within the window itself, this theme is represented through the waters of chaos and the inspiration of creation, as the seed that carries the Logos into the world, and as Christ, the Word Incarnate. This beautiful window, the funds for which were given by Divinity School *alumni/ae* in memory of Dean Benton and in honor of the School’s continued work,<sup>x</sup> serves as a continual reminder of the space Vanderbilt makes available for the study of religion.

A great deal of energy went into securing quality stained glass at an affordable price. The figure \$20 per square foot is mentioned





the University became uncomfortable with Lawson's prominent role. On March 2, Lawson was given twenty-four hours to withdraw from the University or face expulsion; Chancellor Harvie Branscomb announced on March 3 that Lawson was no longer a Vanderbilt student. The Divinity faculty was shocked and dismayed by the administration's actions, and they worked diligently for Lawson's readmission. When attempts to have Lawson simply apply again were rejected by the University, nearly every faculty member submitted letters of resignation. The administration was so frustrated with the ordeal that it threatened to turn the newly constructed quadrangle, Benton Chapel and all, over to the Law School.<sup>xviii</sup> Dean Nelson even sent a letter to Brush, Hutchison & Gwinn in which he conveyed his remorse that their creation would "not be used indefinitely for its intended purpose. I hope that you understand the inevitability of the decision which we of the faculty have taken," Nelson told the architects. "It is with the

obvious choice for such a large space, the sound system was almost omitted. While the architects made provisions for the system's incorporation, Dean Nelson reported that the faculty felt it an unnecessary addition: "Sleeth is of the strong opinion that we do not need any such thing at all. As professor of preaching, he insists that any half way respectable preacher will have the voice adequate to fill that Chapel. As to the acoustics, he said that is what we have architects for!"<sup>xix</sup> Robert Gwinn responded that though he and the other architects "sincerely trust you will develop strong-lunged preachers who will be able to fill the Chapel without mechanical aid.... The PA system is, we feel, a precautionary measure costing a minimum amount of money."<sup>xiv</sup> Having attended lectures of soft-spoken professors in the chapel, I am certainly grateful that the architects' pragmatic proposal was accepted.

Dedication ceremonies for the Divinity Quadrangle and Benton Chapel were held on March 20–22, 1960. General opinion of the building around the University was unanimously positive. Dean Nelson beamed that visitors "expressed their appreciation for the design and construction of the building in the most extravagant terms."<sup>xv</sup> Sidney F. Boutwell, assistant dean of men, commented that the Divinity Quadrangle was "a very handsome addition to the campus."<sup>xvi</sup> In the

historical context of the University and the Divinity School, the completion of this major building project was eclipsed by a series of events as foundational for the University as the brick and mortar that support Benton Chapel.

As Benton Chapel and the Divinity Quadrangle changed the physical landscape of the University, the Divinity School took on an increased role in Vanderbilt's ideological landscape. In the fall of 1959, Divinity student James Lawson began leading training sessions in non-violent resistance in preparation for a lunch counter sit-in campaign aimed at integrating downtown Nashville. Lawson moved to Nashville in conjunction with his work for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, hoping to play a role in the developing Civil Rights Movement.<sup>xvii</sup> Because the Divinity School had been admitting African American students since 1952, Lawson was able to work toward his baccalaureate while maintaining an active role in the Nashville community.

In February of 1960, the sit-in campaign and the protests it generated gained so much attention both in Nashville and beyond that

*"As professor of preaching, he insists that any half way respectable preacher will have the voice adequate to fill that Chapel. As to the acoustics, he said that is what we have architects for!"*

—Dean Nelson

utmost regret, not only because of this building and the University but because of friends like you and the community of Nashville which we love."<sup>xix</sup>

The Lawson Affair was so much a part of Vanderbilt's life at the time that it was the topic of the chapel's dedication address on March 21, 1960. Liston Pope of Yale Divinity School delivered a speech on that occasion in which he chastised the University for its opposition to Lawson's activities and praised the Divinity School for its uncompromised support of Lawson.<sup>xx</sup> In the months following the building's dedication, the faculty continued to work for Lawson's reinstatement. Not until a number of professors from the Medical School and from the College of Arts and Science threatened to resign were the concerns of the Divinity School adequately addressed. That summer, on June 13, James Lawson was readmitted to Vanderbilt, though he chose not to return. With their

demands recognized by the administration, the Divinity faculty withdrew their resignations.<sup>xxi</sup> The events of 1960 forced Vanderbilt to grow and change in ways other Southern universities had not yet done, and they secured for the Divinity School a prophetic role within the University.



Harvie Branscomb's involvement in the chapel runs deeper than his general approval of the project. The chapel project as a whole, including the creation of a chaplain position within the University, was part of Branscomb's plan for Vanderbilt from the beginning. Before his tenure as chancellor, Branscomb served as the dean of Duke Divinity School and was a prominent New Testament scholar; the establishment of a first-rate divinity school at Vanderbilt was important to him. Branscomb oversaw the creation of the Office of University Ministry, feeling "that preaching in [a nondenominational] context would really bring quality thought to religious issues and engage the Vanderbilt community in discussion of these important matters."<sup>xxii</sup> Chancellor Branscomb's commitment to the availability of ecumenical preaching on Vanderbilt's campus, and to the University's continued support of theological studies, was so great that he is now part of Benton Chapel's physical structure. His ashes, along with those of his wife Margaret, are interred in the wall just to the left of the pulpit.

On the Vanderbilt campus today, Benton Chapel continues to stand tall, reminding visitors of the importance of making a place for the study of religion and for inclusive worship in an academic institution. Today the chapel is the setting for several lectures, including the Cole Lectures, which take place every year during homecoming and reunion weekend, and the Antoinette Brown Lecture, which highlights the work of women in theological scholarship. Worship services of multiple denominations also take place in the space each week. Benton Chapel remains unlocked, allowing students, faculty, and visitors to enter the sanctuary for prayer and meditation, or for the composition of essays. In the midst of a bustling college campus, the chapel offers peaceful silence.

Since its spire first reached fifty years ago into the Nashville sky, Benton Chapel has been fully incorporated into the life of the Divinity School and the University, providing a place where ecumenical worship and academic theological exploration are allowed to complement each other. Perhaps a part of the inspiration for my essay on Dickinson's poem came from the voices of great theologians that continue to echo through the chapel: Rudolf Bultmann, H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Paul Ricoeur, Walter Brueggemann, Gustavo Gutiérrez, James H. Cone, Sallie McFague, Phyllis Trible, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Peter Gomes, Ada-María Isasi-Díaz, and Katie Canon. They have breathed the forces of their lives' work into our chapel, and as beneficiaries of their service to the Academy, we are surrounded and uplifted by the weight of their work. The contributions of such scholars and the intellectual gifts from generations of professors and student theologians comprise an unrepeatable legacy to our Divinity School; they have "Affirm[ed] it a Soul."<sup>xxiii</sup>

*Bonnie Cooper Chappell earned her baccalaureate, summa cum laude, in English and Christianity from Mercer University. She will be graduated from Vanderbilt University Divinity School with the master of theological studies degree in December 2009. The photographs accompanying her essay were taken by Steven Green of Vanderbilt University Creative Services.*

<sup>i</sup>James P. Byrd, Jr., "Charting a New Vision: The School of Theology," in *Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest, and Change*, ed. Dale A. Johnson, 63-86 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), 73.

<sup>ii</sup>Dean John K. Benton to Marvin Halverson, National Council of Churches, July 23, 1956.

<sup>iii</sup>Byrd, "Charting a New Vision," 76-77.

<sup>iv</sup>Peter J. Paris, "The African American Presence in the Divinity School," in *Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest, and Change*, ed. Dale A. Johnson, 234-251 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001).

<sup>v</sup>Byrd, "Charting a New Vision," 85.

<sup>vi</sup>Marvin Halverson to J. Philip Hyatt, February 6, 1957.

<sup>vii</sup>Dean Nelson to Emil Frei Jr., November 5, 1958.

<sup>viii</sup>Marvin Halverson to Dean Benton, August 27, 1956.

<sup>ix</sup>Dean Nelson, "Proposal for a design of the narthex window of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School Chapel," October 3, 1958.

<sup>x</sup>"The 'Word of God' Window," Divinity School archives.

<sup>xi</sup>Dean Nelson to Robert L. Gwinn, December 19, 1958.

<sup>xii</sup>Dean Nelson to A.W. Hutchison, July 7, 1959.

<sup>xiii</sup>Dean Nelson to Robert Gwinn, November 11, 1958.

<sup>xiv</sup>Robert Gwinn to Dean Nelson, November 13, 1958.

<sup>xv</sup>Dean Nelson to Brush, Hutchison & Gwinn, March 30, 1960.

<sup>xvi</sup>Sidney F. Boutwell to Dean Nelson, December 23, 1959.

<sup>xvii</sup>James M. Lawson, et al., "The Lawson Affair, 1960: A Conversation," in *Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest, and Change*, ed. Dale A. Johnson, 131-177 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), 136-137.

<sup>xviii</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>xix</sup>Dean Nelson to Brush, Hutchison & Gwinn, June 2, 1960.

<sup>xx</sup>James M. Lawson, et al., "The Lawson Affair, 1960," 142.

<sup>xxi</sup>*Ibid.*, 150-161.

<sup>xxii</sup>John Compton, in James M. Lawson, et al., "The Lawson Affair, 1960," 170.

<sup>xxiii</sup>Emily Dickinson, "The Props assist the House," No. 432, in *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 251-252 (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 252.



# Life in the Hospice

BY JOHN WILLIAM ORZECZOWSKI, MTS2

*I was tired, but they just kept playing up and down the sepia tiled hall of the hospice. The boys were bouncing on couches and throwing pillows, blankets, and stuffed animals at each other. Lord, I thought, never let me have kids.*

Some stacked the bright pastel hospital-grade mattresses and took turns jumping off the bed frames onto the pile, twirling and flipping through the air to a not-so-graceful crash. Bongsi held my hand warmly and stood at my side, his awkward metal crutches leaning against the wall. His injury kept him from the maelstrom, but not from the delight. The other bright round faces kept dashing past us, every now and then a stray pillow grazing us. Bongsi laughed heartily as I surveyed the antiquated yet important-looking medical equipment: large boxes like tube radios; hoists for lifting useless limbs; countless books and charts.

The English nurse, Emma, had talked me into this night. She was able to stomach large doses of screaming children when she invited them to stay with her once a month. The girls had been over the weekend before, and she asked if I would be willing to stay with the boys this week. I was assured that I would not be left entirely on my own; Emma would come kick off the festivities and leave around bed time.

I was most interested in getting a good night's sleep after a week of hot shoveling in a narrow ditch. This was my third summer volunteering at the farm in Swaziland, and I was willing always to help wherever I could. I spent time with the children, too—and loved them—but always in small doses: tutoring a couple in reading after school, helping another with math homework, playing the occasional soccer game. I was not prepared for all the testosterone-crazed boys at once.

I rolled my sleeping bag and carried it across the farm to the hospice, setting it up on

a small cot. The building was new and smelled fresh, but it felt ominous as I considered its intended purpose. In a country where almost half the population is HIV-positive, the need for good end-of-life care is ever-presenting. I had spent some time in the Mbabane government hospital downtown and had seen the AIDS patients: a man, looking like death personified, pushing his IV on a wheeled frame, his sunken eyes full of unspeakable pain; a woman with the tell-tale sores around her mouth and a rasp of pneumonia or tuberculosis. Expiring people were stacked up in corners and on top of each other in large wards with no privacy and bathed in the stench of incontinence and despair. We would anoint them and pray while trying to get past the platitudes. This hospice, tended by the watchful grace of Emma, would be different from that hospital.

*In the midst of children playing in a hospice—children who were acquainted with death—there was life, God-given life.*

Crowding onto a couple of couches to watch *Star Wars*, we enjoyed cokes and cookies. With the light sabers still whirring, Emma gave them directions to listen to me and go to bed soon; she disappeared into the cold Swazi night. When the movie was over, the chaos began: hide and seek—up and down the halls, in storage rooms and between rows of beds—smashing each other with pillow projectiles. Someone found the light switch and flicked it on and off, and on and off, like a lightning bug signaling to a mate.

I walked back to the living room—if you could call it that—where we had watched the movie. I ripped one of the cushions from the couch, slowly, deliberately. Dodging the chaos in the flickering hallway, I found Senzo sulking in a doorway. He was one of the oldest boys—almost as old as I—and it seemed an even match as I pummeled his shocked face—his blue beanie flying off his

head in the onslaught.

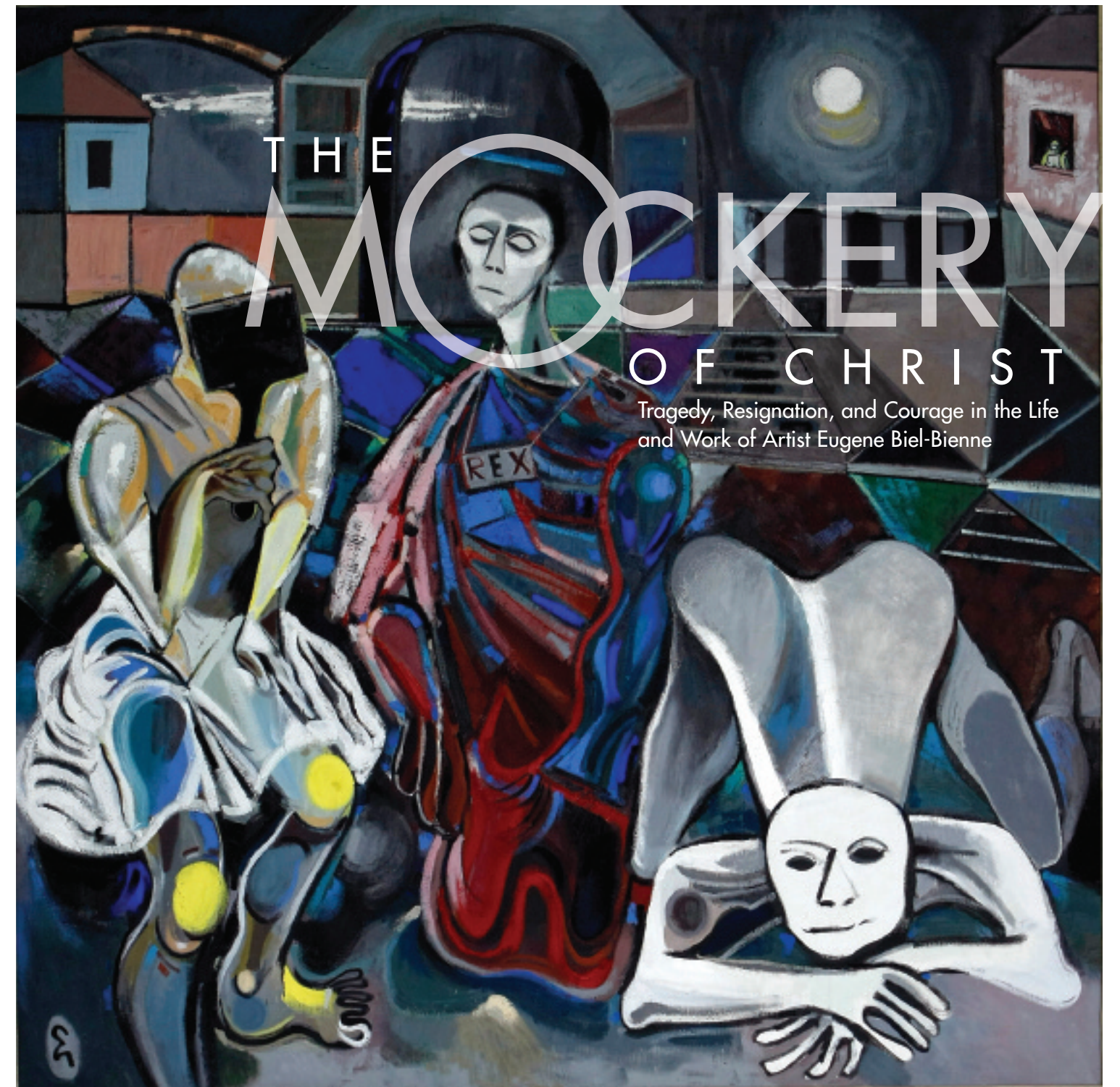
Finally, the boys calmed down. They crowded into the room where bright pillows and mattresses were scattered kaleidoscopically on the floor. We said our prayers and prepared for bed; I patted their curly black hair as I hugged them goodnight and tried to pronounce their names with the awkward guttural syllables and clicks.

A few hours later, I awoke suddenly to my alarm and remembered Emma's instructions: I had to wake Muhle so that he could take his ARVs. These HIV medications had to be taken at precisely the right time, so I crept down to their beds and searched for Muhle among the sleeping faces.

Muhle was sixteen, but HIV and malnutrition made him look like a child. Seneliso, his big forehead sticking out of the covers, saw me and realized why I was there. He gently nudged Muhle awake, walked over to the faucet, and poured a glass of water for the bitter pill. Like a father, he said a few tender siSwati words as Muhle blinked cautiously and swallowed the pill in one big gulp. The two promptly went back to sleep—Muhle's fragile immune system boosted not least by the care of his friend.

The irony of the evening was not lost on me. In the midst of children playing in a hospice—children who were acquainted with death—there was life, God-given life. And the contrast was strikingly beautiful. And these children understood the hardness, persistence, and goodness of grace more than I probably ever will. To say that suffering is redemptive or for some greater purpose is too often a way to look past another's pain. But we might do well to stop, recognize, and remember these moments in the midst of darkness—moments of intense grace, beauty, and life.

*The author, a graduate of Southeastern University, composed this essay for Pencil Markings, an anthology compiled by the students enrolled in the pastoral theology seminar in transitions and crises offered during the 2009 spring semester by Professor Evon Flesberg.*

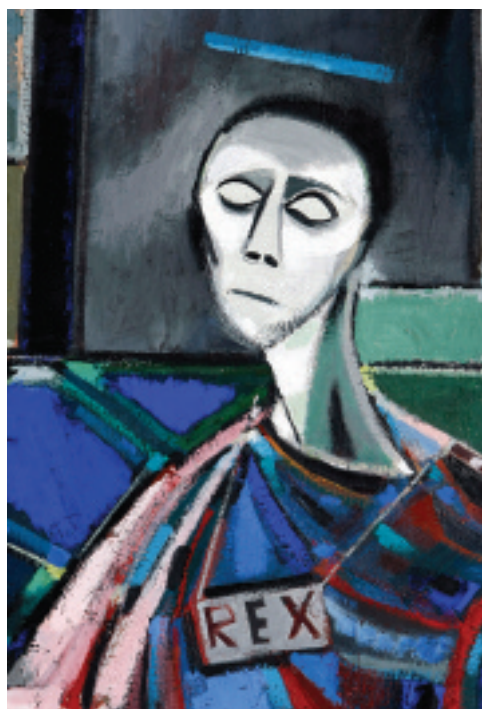


ROBIN M. JENSEN, PH.D.

*The Luce Chancellor's Professor of the History of Christian Worship and Art*

*A substantial but enigmatic painting hangs in an open and unimpressive stairwell at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Perhaps this setting was the only place large enough to allow a viewer to step back far enough to get a good look. Yet, even though students and faculty pass this painting several times a day on their way to offices and classrooms, very few actually stop more than once to take notice of the work of art. Furthermore, few know anything about the painting or the artist, although given its prominent placement—even in the unimpressive stairwell—it has to have made an impression, perhaps even raised some questions, or demanded some consideration.*





The viewer's interpretation is guided by the painting's title attached to the lower frame: *The Mockery of Christ*. A dark expressionistic group of three figures is set into an open architectural space. The haloed central figure must be Jesus; a sign hanging around his neck reads "REX," referring to the mocking title given him in the gospel passion accounts: Matthew 27.27-31; Mark 15.16-20; Luke 23.11, 36-38; and John 19.2-3, 14-22. His bald head is skull-like and his eyes are downcast, seeing nothing and making him seem passive, pensive, or detached. His body is wrapped in a heavy blue and red cloak—suggesting the purple or scarlet robe that the soldiers put on him in order to show him false homage and ridicule. On his right (the viewer's left) another balding figure in a short tunic holds an object that appears to be a mirror although we only see it from the back. The angle of his head suggests that he is looking over his left shoulder at Jesus, possibly trying to show him how he appears in his "royal garb." He may be a Roman soldier, perhaps even Pontius Pilate. To Christ's right a naked and whitened figure crouches, buttocks high in the air, with a face similar to but even more skull-like than Jesus' since the eyes are mere empty holes.

The background group of buildings, arches, stairways, and a balustrade is constructed of cubes and triangles that look like stacks of children's blocks. A moon hangs low in the sky shedding its cool white light. The space has the unsubstantial, eerie, and slightly false appearance of a stage set. A nude woman leans out of a window. Her right hand covers her mouth in mock horror; her left makes a gesture that could be interpreted as either

*Is it mocking those who pay too little to the hurt and horror of Christ's story or who likewise find themselves academically distanced from the realities of human despair, evil, or betrayal?*



dismissive or beckoning. Perhaps she is a harlot calling out to prospective clients. Perhaps she is laughing at the scene in the foreground and catching the eye of viewers as if to say that she sees what they see. The artist's signature appears in the lower left, a monogram ("E") within a small white oval. According to the attached plaque, the artist's full name is Eugene Biel-Bienne.

The image is disturbing. It does not soothe nerves or calm hearts, and it certainly does not beautify the stairwell. Rather, it jumps from the wall as an accusation. What is that sardonic looking naked figure doing there? Why does Jesus seem so resigned to his fate? And who is the teasing, even dancing, individual who holds up the mirror? The colors are at once both vibrating and chilly.

An art historian might associate this work with German expressionist paintings from the pre-war period as it shows affinities to works by Max Beckman or Otto Dix. Beckman's clowns and actors, symbols, and even colors are evoked. But here the space is not so constricted as in most of the expressionists' paintings of that era—not quite so claustrophobic. The lines here are more

curved and less staccato. But one is also reminded of Picasso and even Matisse in certain respects. The artist incorporates cubism, especially in the crouching figure, the woman in the window, and in the stacked geometric architectural elements. At the same time, the figure on the left is delineated very differently with its carefully drawn hands and classically draped tunic. All three figures are placed along the same plane in the foreground—even to the point that their features are cut off by the frame, making it seem as if they are right on top of or even surrounding the viewer. The subject matter of the painting is clearly Christian, but it also appears to throw a challenge. Is it mocking those who pay too little to the hurt and horror of Christ's story or who likewise find themselves academically distanced from the realities of human despair, evil, or betrayal?



Unfortunately, answers to questions about this painting or its artist are not easily available. No one in any office of the Divinity School has information pertaining to how this painting came to be hanging in the stairwell. A little sleuthing, however, turned up three individuals who provided crucial



pieces of the artist's life story which gave the subject and style of the painting itself much more significance.

The first of these individuals, Wilson Yates, was a young divinity student in the early 1960s. Yates remembered Biel-Bienne as a craggy-faced, commanding presence with a heavy German accent. They met in the home of Gordon Kaufman, at that time a young professor of theology. The occasion was a gathering of students who had complained that the Divinity School did not take the arts seriously enough. Kaufman invited them and his friend, Biel, from Vanderbilt's art department to dinner. As Yates recalled, none of the students had ever seen any of Biel's work, but the conversation was lively and went on into the evening. One of the topics of conversation was Biel's acquaintance with Paul Tillich whom Biel described as "a most unusual theologian—one who had a sense of the sensual and the sexual." Yates remembered a particular story told by Biel about Tillich:

*Tillich came to my studio one day and he said, 'Biel, I do not have a ticket to the artists' ball and they say that it is all sold out.' I said, 'Tillich, I would be embarrassed if you came because you would be embar-*

*rassed. You see, this year it is a masked ball and there will be a lot of nudity.' Tillich responded, 'That's all right, I will wear one item so you are not embarrassed and you see, it will allow me to extend my theological explorations. Indeed the nudity will help all the more.' I got Tillich the ticket and asked him which item of clothing he would wear. 'Ah Biel, that will be the surprise, won't it?' On the night of the ball I watched to see if he would arrive at all, and he did. He came in the door dressed in his trench coat but then took it off to reveal himself, as you say in America, in his altogether. I went over and I said, 'Tillich, you have worn no item of clothing and you said that you would. What will the artists think?' 'But, Biel, I have. Don't you see this mask? Now we will see how the artists react.' And we moved in good spirits among the artists. Tillich, you must understand, was an amorous man. Who knows how he went home?*

Yates concluded his story by returning to the evening at Kaufman's. "And then Biel said to all of us gathered: 'I hope this will be instructive for all of you young theologians. A masked ball is a good place to practice theology.'"

A second set of recollections came from

Robert Baldwin, professor of theatre and fine arts, emeritus, at Vanderbilt. He was designer and technical director of the University's theatre at the time that Biel came to Vanderbilt. He met Biel when the artist joined the Vanderbilt faculty in 1959 as a teacher of drawing and painting. Walter Sharp, then chairman of the fine arts department, introduced Biel to Baldwin as a man of "considerable artistic distinction and a great draftsman." As it turns out Biel's application had been supported by letters of recommendation from Ben Shahn, Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, and Fernand Léger. Shahn's commendation claimed: "I find Biel's work of the best. There is no question about his competence or his deserved position in art. There is no question about the depth of meaningfulness of his work." When Sharp received the application he thought at first it was a hoax—a joke played on him by junior members of the department.

Baldwin and his wife, Helen, became great friends of Biel and acquired one of his paintings, *Night of the Three Clowns*. This large work which measures four feet by eight feet was completed in a single evening in 1960 and according to Baldwin, "was painted with great verve" although the theme and the style are very disquieting.



One of his colleagues would visit, stand in front of the painting for some time, and then bow in respect. Yet another would altogether avoid the room where the painting hung, saying that the image frightened her.

Baldwin recounted an occasion when Chancellor Harvie Branscomb visited the Baldwins at an after-theatre party. When Branscomb saw the painting he remarked that "One would have to be emotionally disturbed to live with that." Biel, who was present at the time, suggested that the chancellor might like to attend an exhibition of his works at a local museum. The chancellor replied that he did not think he would care to, and Biel responded, "You should. It would do you good."

The third individual—and the one who provided the most information about Biel—is prominent Nashville artist Paul Harmon. Harmon first met Biel in the early 1960s when he was a young artist working in Nashville. Biel had taken some of his Vanderbilt students to view a juried exhibition of local artists at the Parthenon and rather caustically critiqued many of the works and their artists. When he got to one of Harmon's works, however, he immediately said: "Now *this* is a painting—*this* man is an artist."

That was an auspicious introduction. Harmon and Biel became close over the succeeding years; Biel served as a mentor to Harmon who became an internationally respected painter in his own right. Harmon has become the conservator of a large collection of Biel's works and personal papers. A portion of Harmon's studio doubles as the archive of Biel's papers and stores a large proportion of Biel's surviving paintings and drawings. The affection and respect he still feels for Biel is palpable, and he shares his materials and memories generously, including a photo of Biel's gravesite in Calvary Cemetery, Nashville.



PAUL HARMON

A well-spent few hours with Harmon reveals Biel as a prolific and remarkably talented artist whose work spanned five decades and three continents. Harmon's files also tell a life story no less dramatic, dark, or tragic than the artist's paintings. In fact, it appears that his paintings are truly a visual biography of the artist himself.

Eugene Biel-Bienne was born Egon Vitalis Biel, to French-Swiss parents in Vienna on November 27, 1902. Reared Roman Catholic, he was well-placed socially and culturally as his father was the Austrian ambassador to Japan. After being trained at Köln where he received his doctorate in art history, he went to Paris to study art and was associated with the School of Paris in the 1930s. It may have been at this time that he changed the Germanic form of his name (Egon) to the

*A review of this show in Paris' La Liberté claimed that Biel's "fecundity and imagination equal Picasso's; his intensity too. One thinks, also of the great tradition, of Daumier, of Forain; but one realizes soon that one is confronted with a unique artist."*

French version, Eugene, and adopted the name of Swiss border town Biel-Bienne as his professional surname. During this phase of his life he became friends with famous artists and intellectuals of his day, including Paul Tillich. He also was much influenced by the works of Sigmund Freud and the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg. In 1936 he had his first solo exhibition at The Wildenstein Institute in Paris and was on the cusp of international recognition. A review of this show in Paris' *La Liberté* claimed that Biel's "fecundity and imagination equal Picasso's; his intensity too. One thinks, also of the great tradition, of Daumier, of Forain; but one realizes soon that one is confronted with a unique artist."

However, the outbreak of World War II radically changed his fortunes. In 1938 Hitler declared Austria a province of Germany, and Biel, along with his Jewish wife, Hertha Maria, was forced to flee Vienna permanently for Paris.

During the early part of the war he served with the French army and was in the south of France when the French surrendered to the Nazis. Publicly critical of the Nazi regime, he and his wife were both in grave danger. Biel took risks by delivering contemptuous cri-

tiques of the Nazis on radio broadcasts and by drawing derisive caricatures of Nazi authorities. When the Nazis moved into Paris, they raided the radio station from which he made his broadcasts, and they were forced again to flee—this time to the south of France where Biel joined the French resistance. His wife, attempting to bring his artwork by car from Orleans, was strafed by the Luftwaffe, and her injuries left her disabled and physically fragile for the rest of her life.

Biel's predicament came to the attention of officials in the United States in 1942. His name surfaced on a list of intellectuals and artists that the Roosevelt administration attempted to evacuate from war-torn Europe. Biel was especially aided in this by Marie Norton Whitney Harriman, wife of

William Averell Harriman and owner of the Marie Harriman Gallery in New York where an exhibition of Biel's work had been held in 1938. After several fruitless attempts to achieve proper immigration papers (attributable in part to his wife's medical problems), they finally arrived in New York in 1942.

Biel's plight on arrival was nearly as dire. He and his wife were penniless and had no possessions beyond a small case of his drawings. All of his paintings were lost and, presumably, became part of the spoils of war. At some point during the war, in order to secure crucial medical care for his wife, Biel returned to France as an intelligence agent for the United States. Fortunately, Biel's work came to the attention of the Baroness Hilla von Rebay, an expatriate artist herself, the mistress of Solomon Guggenheim, and the director of the Guggenheim Foundation.<sup>10</sup> With Rebay as his patron, Biel was supported by Guggenheim fellowships in 1943 and 1944. Rebay, primarily an avant garde portrait artist, was known to have a difficult and tempestuous character, but she also was recognized as a patron of struggling painters, often persuading Guggenheim to provide emergency assistance to those in financial crisis.

Rebay's significant correspondence with Biel demonstrates both her material support of his work as well as her criticism of it. Given his German-Swiss background and his probable identification by the Nazis as a degenerate, it is not surprising that she would have developed an interest in the artist. His style, however, was not one that she approved. The letters between them reveal both her criticism of his work and his own pride. His ego matched her scorn as well as her frustration with his lack of progress in his studio. Meanwhile, Biel's wife, Maria, also corresponded with the Baroness with words that appear to have tried to mollify and soothe her so that their stipend would not be halted.

In order to supplement his income from grants and sales of art and to acquire and supply a studio, Biel taught at Fordham University, Parsons School of Design, and the New School for Social Research. His teaching was a secondary occupation, however. From 1944 to 1953 Biel had four major exhibitions of his work in New York, two of them at a group invitation at the Guggenheim Museum (that included work by Bauer, Chagall, Kandinsky, Klee, Modigliani, Mondrian, and Seurat) and a solo show at the Weyhe Gallery, which was glowingly reviewed in the *New York Times*, *Art News*, and *Art Digest*. He also participated in a group show in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Around 1957 a set of twelve of Biel's drawings were given to the Paris Musée National d'Art Moderne whose curator, Bernard Dorival, pronounced them the most gratifying examples of Viennese Expressionism that sought its effects in a "graphism at once biting and light, caricatural and elegant, continuously shuddering and vibrating in pain."<sup>11</sup>

In 1954 he and his wife moved to Venezuela to join her sister, Martha Ertl, who had emigrated to South America during the war. Three exhibitions in Venezuela from 1954–1956 established his reputation in Caracas, where the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo has more than two hundred of his works in its permanent collection. Two years later, however, Biel accepted the position of the director of the French-American Art Institute in Washington, D.C., and the couple moved back to the United States.

After his wife's death in 1959, Biel joined the fine arts faculty at Vanderbilt as a teacher of drawing and painting. He told colleagues that he wanted to escape the worlds of New



The artist's posthumous portrait of his wife

York and Washington, D.C., and the memories of his struggles, disappointments, and the prolonged decline of his wife. His mourning for Maria was expressed in a series of paintings, one titled *Ma Princesse est Morte*, and another (a self portrait of himself lost in grief) titled *Après la visite de la Mort*. A posthumous portrait shows her in her bed for the remainder of his life. He was then fifty-seven years old but according to sources, misrepresented his age by claiming to be forty-seven in order to be a more attractive candidate for the position.

Biel's work at Vanderbilt is referred to as his "Nashville Period." His first year was focused on producing drawings, but soon he began to paint in oil. He was an extremely popular and respected teacher but a difficult colleague for some of his peers at the University. An article in the *Vanderbilt Hustler* from 1965 titled, "Biel—The Emotional Approach to Art," quotes one of his students as saying: "Dr. Biel doesn't just teach names, dates, and places. He inspires you. He wants to make you learn to love what is really beautiful in art and to be able to make critical judgments. He is the finest teacher I have ever had."<sup>12</sup>

The years at Vanderbilt were perhaps no more happy than those in New York and Washington. Although he held four exhibitions in Nashville from 1962 to 1963 (at the Cheekwood Art Museum, Tennessee Fine Arts Center, the Parthenon, and the Vanderbilt Art Gallery), he did not find the daily grind of faculty meetings or academic paperwork compatible. According to various sources who recall those times, Biel's personality clashed with that of the chancellor, and he tried the patience of department chairman Sharp. Biel was not an easy colleague, and was almost universally perceived as somewhat haughty, yet just as committed to causes of justice in his last years as he was in his anti-Nazi youth. According to Yates, Biel's friendship with several faculty members at the Divinity School, including Gordon Kaufman, prompted Biel to join them in their Civil Rights activities which led to the controversial expulsion of then-student Reverend James Lawson in 1960.<sup>13</sup> The painting *The Mockery of Christ* was given by Biel to the Divinity School in 1963. No one remembers why the painting was mounted in the stairwell.

Terminated at Vanderbilt that same year (1963), he remained living in Nashville, in an



apartment overlooking Centennial Park and continued to exhibit his work in Nashville and Caracas. After his death in the winter of 1969, several galleries in different cities hosted retrospective exhibitions, and these continued until 1982. His work is still held in many important collections including the National Gallery in Berlin, The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, The Guggenheim Museum in New York, the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Washington, and the Cheekwood Museum of Art in Nashville.



Eugene Biel-Bienne

Photograph by Herb Peck Jr.

*Christ, REX, is looking past it all and challenges us to seek what it is that is permanent, lasting, or meaningful in this life marred by suffering and loss, but also marked by moments of sublime beauty and fragile joy.*

Despite critical acclaim during his life, however, Biel's work has largely fallen out of view and his story nearly forgotten. Much of his work is carefully stored at Paul Harmon's studio, along with archives of letters, papers, reviews, photographs, and scrapbooks. Such obscurity seems only another undeserved tragic episode in this life story. Perhaps the painting *The Mockery of Christ*, hanging in an obscure stairwell at the Vanderbilt Divinity School, is profoundly understood against the backdrop of that biography. The image seems to express a resignation to such mockery, which is the vanity and folly of human *hubris*. Christ, REX, is looking past it all and challenges us to seek what it is that is permanent, lasting, or meaningful in this life marred by suffering and loss, but also marked by moments of sublime beauty and fragile joy.

In the catalogue of his retrospective solo exhibition at the Tennessee Fine Arts Center in 1960, then director Harry Lowe commented that to be exposed to the art of Biel was "to undergo a shattering experience." This was, he explained, because of the intensity of the art: "It smolders, then flares up in the disciplined violence of his color, in a sort of fero-

cious dismemberment and distortion of forms in order to capture the essence of an attitude, the full implication of a gesture." But, he added: "Inseparable from this intensity is the humanity of Biel's art....Biel is, in the main preoccupied with the character of man...His people—whether they wear a soldier's tunic, a politician's cut-away, a lawyer's robe, a laborer's cap, a fop's top hat, a harlot's sheath, or an executioner's mask—cannot escape the limitations set by pessimism to the scope of life, the uneasy, unending fluctuation between boredom and pain."<sup>vi</sup>

Such pessimism undoubtedly grew from a life that witnessed great horror, betrayal, suffering, and despair. But this life was one lived not only with resignation, like that of Christ in the Divinity School's painting, but also with dignity and courage.

*This essay will appear in the forthcoming book, Visual Theology, edited by Robin M. Jensen and Kimberly J. Vrudny (Liturgical Press, 2009). The images of Biel-Bienne's painting The Mockery of Christ were photographed for The Spire by Steve Green of Vanderbilt University Creative Services.*

<sup>i</sup> From correspondence with Wilson Yates, September 3, 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> From the archives of Paul Harmon.

<sup>iii</sup> Based on conversations with Robert Baldwin, February, 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> From conversation with Paul Harmon, May 19, 2008.

<sup>v</sup> A collection of Biel's papers, photographs, and digital images of his work are also at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, donated in 1995 by Paul Harmon.

<sup>vi</sup> The author would like to thank John Guider of Nashville, for a short unpublished essay that contains much of this biographical information.

<sup>vii</sup> From a translation included in the catalogue: *A Retrospective Show of Paintings and Drawings by Biel* (Tennessee Fine Arts Center, Cheekwood, October 9–November 13, 1960). The comparison, however, infuriated Biel, who deemed it superficial and thus thought it diminished him.

<sup>viii</sup> Rebay inspired Guggenheim to found the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later the Guggenheim Museum) and convinced him to commission Frank Lloyd Wright as its architect. See Rolph Scarlett and Harriet Tannin, *The Baroness, the Mogul, and the Forgotten History of the First Guggenheim Museum* (Midmarch Press, 2003).

<sup>ix</sup> From the *Retrospective* catalogue.

<sup>x</sup> *Vanderbilt Hustler*, 1965.

<sup>xi</sup> Reverend Lawson at that time had been encouraged to come to Nashville by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Enrolled as a student in the Divinity School, he also served as the southern director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and conducted nonviolence training workshops for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In the 1960s Lawson and his colleagues launched a series of sit-ins to protest segregation in various downtown Nashville stores and lunch counters which led to his expulsion from the University. Years later, Lawson received an official apology from the University, and he served as a Distinguished University Professor.

<sup>xii</sup> From the *Retrospective* catalogue.

## The Greatest Mockery Ever Told

PAUL DEHART, PH.D.

Associate Professor of Theology

There is a French film from 1958 with a wonderfully evocative title: *L'ascenseur pour l'échaffaud*, which translates "Elevator to the gallows." You feel the irony bite the more you think about the title. On your way to your own hanging? At least you will not have that tiring climb up the stairs! In fact, this elevator will get you to your destination quickly and conveniently; just try not to think about where that destination is.

There is the same acid irony in the Crucifixion scene painted for us by the evangelist Luke. For what we are witnessing, if we only have the eyes to see it, is the inauguration of a king. But what king has ever had to drag his own throne to his coronation? Every king is high and lifted up, exalted; a banner announces his identity. Just try not to think about what sort of lifting up this is or what sort of sign will announce his office. It is incumbent upon Christians to consider with great care *who* this king is.

The glory of a king is reflected by the aura of praise and wonder from those who struggle to catch a glimpse of him, who shout his name, who bestow titles upon him. The kingship of Christ, in its most peculiar glory, must therefore be read from the reactions of those around him. But the announcement of his regal title: King of the Jews, king over the people chosen by God to bear the divine name in this world, to be in the world the sign of God's eschatological order, the sign here and now of the final banquet in which there is perfect community between all—that sign is intended as a joke. So who hails him?

Luke tells us that the people, the common folk, the king's subjects, are standing by, watching. They are spectators to a drama in which is being played out just what it might mean to be the ruler of this chosen people. They are in suspense, waiting to see what will happen, waiting to learn what God's kind of kingship is. They are finally unready and unable to bestow the title upon him.

The people standing by and watching are the people of God in every time and place. They are the sheep that God speaks of through





*This dying man, this utter failure of worldly power is indeed a mockery of all kingship, the most devastating mockery possible, the mockery of human power by God.*

Jeremiah as “my sheep,” my people, those who have been preyed upon by their so-called leaders rather than guided and protected, dispersed rather than united. As those who assume the burden of being a people bearing the name of Christ, Christians are even today these watching and waiting people, these sheep. They are waiting to learn; they need to hear and be shown, again and again, what kind of king they have in Christ. As always, they will settle for watching and hearing the tribute brought to him by those who can make themselves heard all too easily: the strong, the brilliant, the successful, the prominent, or the bearers of authority. If we are to learn what kind of king Jesus is, we will have to listen to the latter. What does Luke tell us of their tribute? What title do they give Jesus?

The rulers scoff at him, and the soldiers mock him. To the rulers, the supposed pillars of the people, this man is no king. Is there anything more telling than their justification of this judgment? He saved others, but cannot save himself! To them, the strong one—the true leader and ruler—is precisely the one who has saved himself, who has exalted himself above others. Jesus has gotten it all wrong. He clearly does not understand how power works in this world. What kind of miserable excuse for a king is it who does not know that to save the people, to give oneself to their healing, to their flourishing, is simply to be dragged down to their level? And the proof that this cannot be the king of God’s own people is that this so-called anointed one has met with total failure.

So the leaders of God’s people, those entrusted with guiding and protecting and shaping the community chosen by God to bear the divine name in the world, these leaders pay Jesus only the tribute of scorn. But in the grand irony of the Crucifixion, in

what Luke sees happening quite over the heads of these supposedly realistic and sharp-eyed observers, this very mockery unwittingly really does tell us who he is, what God’s chosen king must look like. Whoever he is, he must be one whose devotion to the people of God will place him far beneath the esteem of the powerful. This king will, time and time again, be seen by those who bear real power in this world first as a potential rival, and eventually as a laughable failure, someone who started something in this world that he could not finish.

This judgment of the world is quite correct. Jesus has indeed got it all wrong; he has indeed failed. This man who presumed to shepherd the people of God, to gather them under his wings—it is as if he did not know what kind of world this human world is, this world we have made for ourselves.

Think of the soldiers. They at least know what a true king and ruler is. The king is the victor, the commander, the one who has authority to give orders and have them obeyed. That this man bears the title of king is to them an insult, a joke, a slap in the face to those who honor the real power and leadership associated with the name of king. But there is irony here again, for the soldiers are more correct than they know. This dying man, this utter failure of worldly power is indeed a mockery of all kingship; it is the most devastating mockery possible; it is the mockery of human power by God. For as human, he is despised, shoved aside, and finally squashed, quite easily; however, this man will bring into the world the future of God whose coming cannot be stopped.

That is why this condemnation and execution is really our condemnation, the execution of the world we have made, of the myriad of ways in which we almost desperately stave off true community, in which we make

ourselves comfortable, at home in this world, and carve our niche and huddle inside the machinery of worldly power and authority. All this is shown for what it is because the one executed is the real and genuine human being, the one who understands and lives fully human communion. The world of humanity is what we have made of ourselves, and it is we who shove the one real and true human being out of this world entirely.

But because of who this king is, the story does not end there; it does not end with our miserable betrayal and Jesus’ execution. In that death a new life of community is offered to God’s people, a new way of creating a common identity beyond the terrifying and crushing structures which seem to be the only way human beings have found to unite themselves.

If the world—the world which is in all of us and shapes all of us more deeply than we know—if that world in putting Jesus to death says with great precision just what kingship means, then in this same bloody culmination of Jesus’ life we are offered a glimpse of another way, another possibility of living together, and hence of what it means in Christian faith to confess Christ as king.

The author of Colossians prays: “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.” The Church’s lord, the true ruler of the people of God, is no mere wielder of power but has the ability to give power, to create power, and this power which he gives is in turn the power of communal life, of life together in spite of the terrible darkness of this present age.

But what kind of king gives strength to his subjects instead of deriving it from them? What kind of king can strengthen with *all* power? Jeremiah’s prophecy long before anticipated the answer: “I will gather the remnant of my flock... I will bring them back to their fold... Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and

righteousness in the land.... And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord, God, is our righteousness.’”

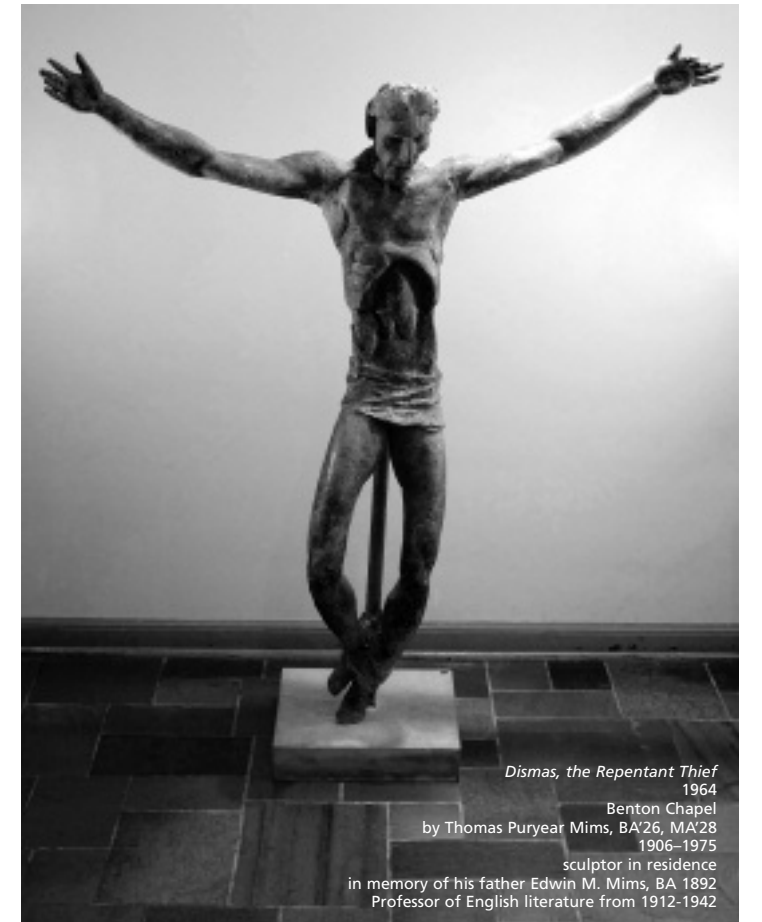
That is the answer. Only God is justice; only community with God enables true humans belonging together. God is our justice. We did not earn this rightness; we do not deserve it; we cannot achieve it. We have only to receive it and show it in this world. Colossians reminds us that it is the blood of this king, handed over to the people, which works this rightness in the world. The signs of his death are the food and drink of the people of God, strengthening them with a life not theirs, enabling them to be the sign of the coming kingdom here and now. The real king is God given for you.

*Only an outsider, a criminal, one who finds himself like Jesus outside the law, witnesses with new eyes the installment of God’s own presence as justice in the world.*

Let us return finally to Luke. A king—even if it is God appearing in the middle of this world’s history—a king must be recognized as such, his followers are his sign, his glory in the world. But who in this dark scene really recognizes that Jesus is king? Luke tells us. It is not the rulers, not the soldiers. It is not even the people, those sheep scattered and confused by their mercenary shepherds. Only an outsider, a criminal, one who—though for very different reasons—finds himself like Jesus outside the law, outside the circles of human society. Only one who is looking from outside upon that makeshift and miserable house of worldly polity, only he understands that what he is watching is the king’s enthronement. He is witnessing with new eyes the installment of God’s own presence as justice in the world.

We who bear the name of Christ have no other role in this world than to see with those eyes. Of course, we may think we have it easier. After all, we see the crucified one bathed

in the backward light of the Resurrection. But that triumph, great as it is, turns out to be only another sign—an announcement that the true future of this world is God among us as the realization of perfected community—but a premature announcement. It is one more sign, along with the body of believers around us, and the shared blood of the cup.



*Dismas, the Repentant Thief*  
1964  
Benton Chapel  
by Thomas Puryear Mims, BA'26, MA'28  
1906–1975  
sculptor in residence  
in memory of his father Edwin M. Mims, BA 1892  
Professor of English literature from 1912–1942

All we have are signs, played out against the backdrop of the crucifying world, the world which still seems to reign around us and in each one of us. So we must ask ourselves again: Who among us can match this criminal’s confession? Who of us can do what he did, to look at Jesus on the Cross, really a dead man already, and make one of the most astounding confessions of faith to be found in the New Testament: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

*Appointed in 1997 to the faculty of Vanderbilt University Divinity School, DeHart is the author of Trial of Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology and Beyond the Necessary God: Trinitarian Faith and Philosophy in the Thought of Eberhard Jüngel.*



# Starving the Imago Dei

BY SHELLI RENEE YODER, MDIV'02

## Ministerings

Beginning with this issue of *The Spire*, we introduce a new forum, *Ministerings*, to illustrate the various forms of ministry practiced by students who receive their theological education at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Alumni/ae are encouraged to submit proposals for reflective essays to: [divinityspire@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:divinityspire@vanderbilt.edu).

It is impossible to purchase groceries without passing a dozen or more magazines plastered with too-skinny celebrities partially-covered by bold-face type wondering, "Could She Be Anorexic?" The tragic irony, of course, is when the photographs and headlines are juxtaposed with whimsically lettered teasers promising that this will be the issue to help you shed seven pounds in seven days.

The lifestyles of "girls these days" who do not have anything more important to do than to worry about calories, fat grams, Chanel sunglasses, and Juicy Jeans are impossible to be taken seriously. Most of us are sick and tired of hearing about eating disorders and the girls who dwell obsessively upon food and fitness. We simply do not care.

But we rarely spend much time contemplating the myriad messages these magazines

reflect about contemporary culture and the feminine mystique circa 2007. Instead, we mindlessly internalize these messages and images as the ideal and move along through the check-out line and on with our lives.

Not all of us, however, move along without consequences. Indeed, for millions of women and girls, the pursuit of a feminine ideal results in the loss of relationships, careers, and even their own lives in a vicious attempt to lose another pound, run another mile, skip another meal, purge another binge. The statistics speak for themselves: eleven million Americans suffer from eating

... body-hatred, weight and exercise obsession, and emergence into womanhood with a destructive self-identity are the new rites of passage.

disorders, seventy million worldwide; eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychological disease; fear of being overweight is the most common motivator for teenage girls considering suicide.

But this is not a disease affecting only teenagers, and certainly not only the stereotypical rich, white adolescent girl. Moreover, this is not a disease of which the devastating personal and social impact can be communicated adequately via statistics. Rather, it is through works like Courtney E. Martin's recent book, *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body*, in which we begin to understand more completely the totality of both the personal and social implications of the emerging eating disorders epidemic.

A first step toward better understanding the disorders is to move beyond the stereotypes. On this point, Martin, a twenty-five-

year-old writer, filmmaker, and teacher, is helpful: "In a study conducted in urban public schools in Minnesota of five thousands teenagers, it was found that Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American girls tended to report similar or more concern with the size of their bodies and as much eating disorder-like behavior as their white peers, if not more." Moreover, the rate of middle-aged women seeking treatment for eating disorders has recently increased by four-hundred percent.

Despite the arduous work of first and second wave feminist pioneers and the continuing efforts of today's third wave contingent, body hatred, weight and exercise obsession, and emergence into womanhood with a destructive self-identity are the new rites of passage. Detailing this journey, Martin beautifully builds upon the work of Joan Jacobs Brumberg's 1997 work *The Body Project*, which argues that women and girls are seen too often as unfinished business, not enough, and lacking typically in some physical dimension. The dominant cultural messages say that our worth lies in our willingness to be tweaked, tuned up, changed, improved, nipped, and tucked—even to the point of death.

Dominant cultural messages say that our worth lies in our willingness to be tweaked, tuned up, changed, improved, nipped, and tucked—even to the point of death.

And of course this emphasis on the female body is rooted in the pervasive message that girls are objects of pleasure—objects to be enjoyed, gifts to be given. Consider the common phrase, "She's the total package." Not only are such messages demoralizing and demeaning, they encourage girls down a path that leads to nothing more than chasing their tails. Inevitably arising above the din of a thousand mixed messages is the mortal wound to one's self-esteem and self-confidence: "You are not enough." And even as girls and women accomplish more and more, there is never enough accomplishment. As success results in greater autonomy, there is never enough control. As nutrition and fitness gain increasing status as daily priorities, there is never enough perfection. As Martin notes, our

"perfect" girls are our "starving" daughters.

What Martin brilliantly and convincingly accomplishes is to give faces to overwhelming statistics. She moves the evidence of research from our heads to our hearts as she writes from a raw and vulnerable vantage point, relating her own history with disordered eating tendencies and an insatiable drive towards perfection. Amplifying the author's fresh and profoundly honest perspective, however, are the voices of hundreds of girls whom Martin has interviewed for this project. Perhaps for the first time since Sara Shandler's *Ophelia Speaks* do we hear from girls about girls.

As Martin notes, body-hatred within girls has become normal, and a self-critique of one's thighs, arms, calves, noses, ears—any and all parts of the body—has become rou-



# gleanings

## Alumni/ae Class Notes

Class Notes appear only in the printed version of this publication.

tine. Body hatred is expected and demanded. It is a community identifier, a form of girl-bonding. Without a certain amount of body hatred, one risks being ostracized or referred to as one who “thinks she’s all that,” which is not a compliment.

## The use of female imagery for the Divine has the potential to curb the cultural onslaught of body-hatred against our women and girls.

For those of us located in Christian communities, this notion of identification and bonding should resonate. Our faith is based on the act of Baptism—a community identifier created in response to the question “Where do I belong?” In our attempt to answer this question, we naturally begin to compare ourselves to others. As one wrestles with questions of identity, emotional and psychological vulnerability too often incubates notions of body shame and body hatred that too frequently result in the development of eating disorders, disordered eating behaviors, and profoundly warped self-images.

It is not easy to wrap one’s mind around the notion that a girl could have a pathological fear of fat to the point of running so hard and so often that she actually breaks her feet—and then continues running. Who can relate to the girl who holds her breath when she smells food to the point of passing out because she fears the aroma alone will put pounds on her?

Well, I can. I know firsthand. I survived anorexia, and now work in the field of eating disorders where I often encounter people who tell me that they could never do what I do. Such confessions of inability are not about the daily difficulties of running a non-profit foundation. The work is not over their heads; rather, the work is over their hearts. Such comments reveal an inability to show compassion towards those who suffer from an illness one does not understand. The reaction that Martin recounts, and that I have personally heard, goes like this: “It makes me sick to see really skinny girls. I don’t understand why they do this to themselves. It is a disease, I know. But it is hard to feel sorry for them. I want to say to them, ‘Just eat already!’”

In returning to the topic of magazine covers, the temptation to roll our eyes and think there are bigger, more important

problems to solve and better ways to spend our time is a real one. Spending a second of our over-committed lives on a girl’s obsession with her thighs while we are in the middle of an unjustified war, a burgeoning immigration debacle, and a global ecological

crisis seems like an act of individual social injustice and a waste of our collective time. And so, sadly, most of us do not care. Our uninformed instincts suggest that the obsession that leads to anorexia or the need to control that leads to bulimia is the fault of the person. Such blame, however, ignores the roles played by our culture, our communities, and ourselves.

For Christians, the belief that we are made in the image of God holds a certain power to reframe our understanding, but before moving far down the path to re-imaging God, we must expand the metaphors used in reference to the Divine. The use of female imagery for the Divine has the potential to curb the cultural onslaught of body-hatred against our women and girls. Such simple yet profound change may encourage the belief in girls that they are fearfully and wonderfully made, indeed. The call to the Church is to risk moving beyond male-exclusive language for God and to include feminine terms for the Divine, not just for those special sermons and occasions, but throughout our worship and everyday discourse.

As Martin contends, “For an adolescent, an adult’s inaction is an action. Silence is speech.”

We must speak out! From the pulpit, during Sunday school, Bible studies, and fellowship hours, we must address the normalized body hatred present in our culture and take a stand.

We must be more vigilant in our use of language. In conversation, refuse to accept put-downs and unkind remarks made by others and be aware of the spoken (and unspoken) remarks we make too casually about ourselves. Comments made “in jest” teach others to be concerned about externals and critical of their own bodies. Speak kindly and lovingly about your own body. Verbalize the amazing ways your body shows up for

you each day. Never criticize another’s appearance. Praise others for the individuals they are, not how they look.

And do not diet—ever. Diets do not work and send unrealistic messages about quick-fix solutions. Rather than diet, adhere to a healthy, balanced routine of nutritious eating and fitness-promoting exercise. And during those many Sunday afternoon potluck and Wednesday evening shared meals together, avoid comments about what you or someone else is eating and how much. Be a conduit of change in the way you recognize and honor the image of God within yourself and others. And by all means, talk about eating disorders. Identify resources for your congregations and be informed.

I recommend beginning with Courtney Martin’s important new book. Indeed, we owe Martin a debt of gratitude for her courage and refusal to stay silent. Her fresh and profoundly honest perspective is a clarion call for personal and cultural transformation that should challenge and inspire each of us who lives in community with women and girls seeking to understand their bodies in relation to the *Imago Dei* and desperately in need of love and support as they journey towards physical and spiritual health and wholeness.

*Readers of The Spire were introduced to Shelli Renee Yoder in the fall 2002 issue when her autobiographical essay titled “Pursuing a Crown of Perfection: A Journey from Atlantic City to Vanderbilt University Divinity School” was published. A finalist in the 1993 Miss America pageant and a survivor of anorexia nervosa, Yoder served as the executive director of the Eating Disorders Coalition of Tennessee. During the summer, she and her family returned to her home state of Indiana where she is developing a book manuscript on re-imaging motherhood and working as a consultant in the areas of disordered eating behaviors and body image consciousness. Yoder was graduated from Purdue University where she earned a baccalaureate in interpersonal and public communication and from Indiana University where she received a master’s degree in counseling and human services. She attended Vanderbilt University Divinity School as a Dollar General Scholar and fulfilled the requirements for the Carpenter Program’s certificate in religion, gender, and sexuality.*

Illustration by Aimee M. Swartz















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*The Reverend Doctor James M. Lawson Jr., D'60*

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