

# Princeton Theological Review

Vol. 21, No. 2 | Spring 2018

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# Editors's Note

KATHERINE ELLIS & BRIAN FOX

*General Editors, Princeton Theological Review*

The jazz musician Charles Mingus likely did not have the epistle to the Romans in mind when he composed “Moanin’” for the 1959 album *Blues and Roots*. Yet the way the frenetic wailing of the baritone saxophone summons a chaotic chorus of horns evokes the words of the apostle Paul about the Spirit interceding for us with moanin’ too deep for words. Art too can intercede for us, giving voice to ideas we struggle to express. It captures the heights and depths of human experience: joy and suffering, hope and fear, praises and curses, celebration and lament, comfort and critique, the moments when mere speech fails us. Art takes many forms—poetry, music, dance, painting, literature, photography—and these myriad manifestations allow us to express and receive ideas beyond conventional communication.

As an academic journal, the *Princeton Theological Review* acutely recognizes the challenge of articulating an idea that lies just beyond the reach of our words. This present publication explores the relationship between art and the church to better understand how art might help us engage with the various disciplines of theological study. It expands on the first issue of Volume 21, a *festschrift* for Gordon Graham, which celebrated his contributions to aesthetic philosophy and his deep commitment to the life of the church. The papers in this issue follow his lead by engaging in the difficult work of thinking about, writing about, and discussing the aspects of art and Christianity that push at the limits of our language. This challenging task proves to be deeply rewarding, as these essays highlight the ways that a thorough analysis of art or aesthetics can shed light on aspects of the Christian faith.

Peter Benson’s exploration of faith and embodiment in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* articulates how literature can poignantly subvert unjust societal and religious norms. By analyzing Wilson’s automaton language in conversation with later literature on cyborg theory, Benson honors *Our Nig*’s literary and ethical significance. Wilson’s critiques of nineteenth-century race relations in the North are explored through the biracial protagonist’s struggle against her own embodiment, described in machine- or animal-like language. This essay demonstrates literature’s ability to expose injustice and wrestle with questions of human identity and agency.

Andrew Bock’s essay highlights similarities between hip-hop music and the Old Testament wisdom tradition through Kendrick Lamar’s album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Lamar is rendered a sage, and his lyrics are cast as a prophetic proclamation against suffering, injustice, and violence. Bock challenges the church’s propensity to dichotomize the profane and the sacred by exposing the harmonies between Lamar and the Old

Testament. This critique serves as a reminder that non-religious art can offer a prophetic witness to religious communities.

Max Heidelberg's contribution contemplates the role of beauty in the theological aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards. Heidelberg argues for an Edwardsian account of beauty that is not reduced to efficacy, but unveils divine and human relationality. This essay explores the manner by which beauty is the proportionality of right and just relationships as revealed through God's being. Aesthetics is thus not confined to a subfield of philosophy or contingent upon causation. Rather, this essay argues for an Edwardsian understanding of conversion, ethics, and revelation through the lens of beauty. By way of Edwards, Heidelberg reveals that a robust understanding of beauty has doctrinal and ethical implications for the church.

Jonathan M. Platter's essay explores the role of art in cultivating senses that enable the church to understand creation as a sign of God. Through an analysis of Ercole de' Roberti's *The Dead Christ*, Platter demonstrates the ability of art to foster a theological aesthetic which attentively delights in God's transcendent and triune beauty. Ultimately, through delight in beauty and contemplation, this essay describes a practice of sensing which enables one to better know and hear God. Through Platter's unveiling of art's pedagogical role, the church is encouraged to properly see both creation and God as signified through creation.

Casey Smith's examination of the presbytery mosaic of San Vitale argues that the presence of Sarah highlights the fulfillment of God's promises within broader Eucharistic themes. Smith's essay illustrates the deep historical roots of the relationship between art, theology, and the church. She contends that the lunette of Sarah does not merely mirror the Eucharistic liturgy. Rather, the artistic depiction of Sarah evokes divine promises offered through the Eucharist and echoes Marian themes of chastity and divinely begotten life. This essay offers a glimpse into the way art has allowed the church to connect theology, scripture, and liturgy throughout history.

In addition to these five papers, the present issue also includes a number of visual and poetic art pieces with accompanying reflections. While we are only able to include a small sample in our print journal, we encourage our readers to visit the *Princeton Theological Review's* website to see the online publication with all of the artwork in full color. From May-Linn Borgen-Nguyen's poem "Mary wears an áo dài," which highlights the beauty of a culturally Vietnamese Mary, to William Carroll's piece *7:32pm AFT: The 5th Day of Holy Week* that responds visually and theologically to the horrors of war; from Jade Dominique Lee's photographic reflection on death and growth in *Homegrown Distraction*, to He Li's visual depiction of Christian kenosis and perfection in *Untitled*, to Garrett Mostowski's vivid evocation of human brokenness in his poem "Toward a Theology of Confession," art's many ways of moving us are fully expressed. The inclusion of original artwork serves as a sort of practicum: an opportunity to not only write about art, but a chance to create it. These pieces underscore that art speaks in a way well-written papers cannot, offering a different mode of expression and allowing this journal to consider the broad relationship between art and the church from a new perspective. The accompanying reflections offer a window into the artist's creative imagination, describing part of the purpose or process behind the piece. These additions encourage us to make

space for art in our intellectual discourse and to value the ideas expressed by paintings, poetry, and photographs.

Finally, we are grateful for the collaboration of three additional individuals. Deep thanks are due to Mary K. Farag, Assistant Professor of Early Christian Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, for her foreword to this issue. With reference to debates about art in the early church, she illustrates the ongoing nature of Christian concerns about artistic engagement. The questions that are asked in this journal are not new—though the answers may have shifted through the centuries. We are also indebted to two contemporary visual artists for generously allowing their art to form this journal's cover. Alyson Lecroy evocatively photographed Makoto Fujimura's liturgical installation at All Saints Church in Princeton, NJ, visually uniting both art and the church.

Art is a voice *for* the church—the preposition matters here. Art can serve as a vehicle through which the church communicates its identity, beliefs, and story. It captures some of the ineffable elements of the Christian faith, expressing ideas that the Psalmist describes as “too wonderful, too high for us to attain” (Ps. 139:6). This kind of sacred art is not only for the church's private consumption, but its public declaration: it expresses the Christian commitment to beauty, truth, justice, and humanity itself. In every image of Jesus on the cross, artists reaffirm Christ's complete commitment to us in the fullness of our human experience.

But art is also a voice *for* the church, in that it convicts and challenges the institutions of Christianity. Art speaks to the church, proclaiming the injustices and failings that the church must reckon with and correct. In this way, art forever calls the church away from an introspective, meditative disposition. It is a mistake to think about art as passive consumption, like viewing a painting in a gallery or going to the opera. Art is not about appreciation, but reorientation. It encourages us to reconsider how we encounter and engage with the world by nurturing our aesthetic, theological, and intellectual imagination. With moanin' too deep for words, art speaks to us and through us. We hope that this journal encourages you to listen attentively to its voice.

March 30, 2018  
Princeton, NJ

#### CORRECTION

The editors wish to apologize for a printing error that occurred in the Fall 2017 print edition of *PTR* 21:1. Due to a printing error, a sub-section of Gesa E. Thiessen's article “God, One and Three—Artistic Struggles with the Trinity” was appended to Robert McSwain's “Sacramentality and Sub-creation: A Response to Gordon Graham's *Philosophy, Art, and Religion*.” The online edition preserves the correct versions of all articles and may be viewed at [ptr.ptsem.edu](http://ptr.ptsem.edu).



# Foreword

MARY K. FARAG<sup>1</sup>

*Princeton Theological Seminary*

Defining the word “art” is as difficult as keeping water from slipping between cupped fingers. Why? Well-worn expressions like “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” capture the reasons. Ecclesiastical leaders, from the beginning of the church to the present day, have struggled to define “art” and to identify what role the arts should play in the church. Ecclesial arts, broadly conceived, could include not only visual installations in church buildings, like paintings, but also reading aloud, ceremonial attire, processions through urban and rural space, architectural design, liturgical furnishings, to name only a small number of examples. When executed well by the artist or performer and, more importantly, received well by the viewer or participant, the arts could convey the glory of God, direct humanity’s attention to divine things, and lift up the downtrodden. If misinterpreted or abused, the arts would likely produce the opposite effects: distraction away from God, reinforcement of injustices, and so on. Even the Eucharistic gift of Christ’s body and blood, as Paul the Apostle warns in 1 Corinthians 11, can be consumed to detrimental effect, depending on the disposition of the gift’s recipient. Likewise, the result of producing and interacting with ecclesial arts can be a help or a hindrance to the Christian’s daily return to God. Much indeed depends on “the eye of the beholder,” and by analogy “the ear of the listener,” etc.

The voices of the past that allow some arts and disallow others—the voices of the past that are critical of the use of certain arts in church—underscore the point: when the goal is loving God and becoming godly, anything that stands in the way needs to be confronted. It is said of Pachomius, the founder of communal monasticism in the fourth century, that after he built a place of prayer beautifully, he proceeded to deface it (*Paralipomena*, 32). Because his building project *for* God did not lead him *to* God, but led him instead to praise himself and admire the works of his own hands, Pachomius purposefully damaged the newly-built place of prayer. The circumstances of this particular story, whether true or not of Pachomius, stress the point that Christian arts should help the Christian’s journey, not hinder it. As a visual reminder to himself and the monastics under his care, Pachomius introduced ugliness to the place of prayer—a visual reminder that the place of prayer is a place for praising God, not oneself. Finding himself in the posture of the Pharisee in the parable of Luke 18, Pachomius quickly “beat his breast” like the publican by disfiguring the work of his hands.

<sup>1</sup> Mary K. Farag, Assistant Professor of Early Christian Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, works on the history of Christianity in late antiquity. Her primary interests lie in ritual practices, material culture, and historical theology.

Similarly, Augustine, bishop of Hippo in the fourth and fifth centuries, speaks about how restrictions are introduced to guard against straying off course from the path to godliness (*Confessions* 10.33.50). Augustine relates what he has heard about Athanasius, fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, on this matter: to prevent beautiful singing from becoming a distraction, Athanasius had his psalm-readers modulate their voices so that they seemed more to recite psalms than to sing them. One need not look so far ahead to Iconoclasm in the ninth century or to disapproving stances toward the arts articulated in the sixteenth-century Reformation to find still more critical views of the arts in church. The critical chorus throughout history reiterates the ever-threatening problem of abuse that besets the use of the arts.

In the same passage referred to above, Augustine testifies that his own tendency toward restriction would get tempered by the memory of how beautiful church music brought repentant tears to his eyes when he was first returning to the faith. Those who celebrate ecclesial art emphasize how the arts can function positively and effectively in the Christian effort to return repentantly to God.

One might say that even God models the making of art, if we consider the acts of creation at the beginning of time and re-creation in Christ's passion as resulting in works of art. God beheld the work of creation and said, "It is good." It is upon the cross that God incarnate re-creates humanity and says, "It is perfected" (more typically translated, "It is finished"). At once utterly glorious and utterly disgraceful, the cross, God's perfect work of art, defies our categories of beauty and ugliness. It is in responding to the cross, perhaps, that voices at times celebrate, at other times criticize, the role of the arts in the Christian life.



# ARTICLES

# Even Automata May Eat the Crumbs That Fall from Their Master's Table

## The Struggle for Embodiment and Soul in the Mechanical and Metaphysical Tensions of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*

PETER JAMES BENSON<sup>1</sup>

*Princeton Theological Seminary*

In 1859, Harriet Wilson published what is considered to be the first novel written by a black woman in North America. Only recently rediscovered in 1981, *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* is a semi-autobiographical work that mirrors Wilson's life of indentured servitude to a white, Protestant family in New Hampshire. Frado, the protagonist of the novel, is a biracial girl who inhabits the blurred intersection of animal, human, and machine. Throughout the tale she is portrayed as a type of automaton who is wrestling with her identity and the characteristics that make her both like and unlike the white family that benefits from her production. In this way, Wilson's novel is a forebear of cyborg literature, in that it grapples with the boundaries separating human and animal, and the relegation of the body to the status of machine. While borrowing from contemporary sentimental themes, *Our Nig* also diverges from the literature of the day in a subtly subversive fashion. Wilson thus utilizes the novel to implicate the religious and political communities of her nineteenth-century New England, voicing a critique of Northern race relations as she struggles to find her place within the household and society.

Mechanical references attach themselves to Frado throughout the story, but it is immediately following the death of her master's son, James, that she is explicitly referred

<sup>1</sup> Peter studies theology and literature at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he is completing his MDiv. He is interested in how science fiction grapples with a universe haunted by the ghosts of pre-secular modes of thought, as well as themes of suffering and radical religious commitment in twentieth-century British fiction. Peter intends to pursue further graduate work in English literature upon completion of his MDiv.

to as an “automaton.” Leaving the death bed of the man on whom she had pinned her hopes for escape from the terrors of her indentured servitude, Frado “moved about the house like an automaton. Every duty performed—but an abstraction from all, which shewed her thoughts were busied elsewhere.”<sup>2</sup> Knowing the story to be partly autobiographical, it could be read as if the text itself were written while Wilson was in such a removed state, performing a duty in an abstract way. In fact, Wilson gives us reason for why this might be so in the preface to *Our Nig*: she reveals that her motivation to write is the necessity to maintain the “feeble life” of her son amid her own poor health—a task that she ultimately fails.<sup>3</sup> As was the case for Frado with James, death is near Wilson, and she is without hope for support or economic escape, reliant on what she can receive in exchange for the role she takes on as an automaton.

Though a “free black” serving in a northern domestic setting, Frado is nonetheless treated as inherently inferior by her employers, the Bellmonts. The similarities between Frado and her pet dog Fido extend beyond the (almost certainly intentional) resemblance of their names. As Karen Kilcup puts it, “In the Bellmonts’ economy and psychology, both Frado and her dog embody merely different versions of domestic animals; both are less than human . . . [Frado] is literally enduring a dog’s life.”<sup>4</sup> Wilson illustrates this in the dinner scene where Mrs. Bellmont reacts with outrage to James’s request for Frado “to sit down *here*, and eat such food as we eat,” as if Mrs. B. (as Frado often refers to her) were being told to share a meal with a dog seated at table.<sup>5</sup> By then commanding Frado to eat from her mistress’s dirty plate, Mrs. B. attempts to reiterate Frado’s animal status within the household.

Descartes, discussing the treatment of animals, wrote that “it seems reasonable since art copies nature, and men can make various automata which move without thought, that nature should produce its own automata much more splendid than the artificial ones. These natural automata are the animals.”<sup>6</sup> Possessing no rational soul, their movements were purely mechanical; death was merely the decay of “one of the principal parts of the body,” a final and irreparable breaking down.<sup>7</sup> In this vein, once Frado is classified as “animal” by her mistress, it naturally follows that she would view her as a sort of unthinking organic corpse of cogs and pistons—an automaton that blurs the line between man and animal and machine. The 1830 edition of the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* defines *automaton* as “a self-moving machine, or machine so constructed, that, by means of internal springs and weights, it may move a considerable time as if endowed with life.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig, Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Karen L. Kilcup, “Frado Taught a Naughty Ram: Animal and Human Natures in *Our Nig*,” *ELH* 79, no. 2 (2012): 349.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> John Cottingham, “A Brute to The Brutes?: Descartes’ Treatment of Animals,” *Philosophy* 53, no. 206 (1978): 553.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Harrison, “Descartes on Animals,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 167 (1992): 224.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine Inglis, “Maternity, Madness and Mechanization: The Ghostly Automaton in James Hogg’s *The Three Perils of Woman*,” in *Minds, Bodies, Machines, 1770–1930*, ed. Deirdre Coleman and Hilary Fraser (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 63.

Further complicating this definition, Katherine Inglis describes the automaton as “at once a true self-mover and a mimic of autonomous motion, a mechanical simile that moves as if endowed with life”; its two meanings (“self-moving and directed”) seem contradictory, an indication of the difficulty that accompanies classifying such boundary-averse objects.<sup>9</sup>

The rise of industrialization and capitalism also found the terminology of automata adopted into discussions regarding labor and production. As Simon Schaffer writes, “For Marx the culmination of manufacture was just a system ‘set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself; this automaton consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.’”<sup>10</sup> The Enlightenment, he notes, produced a modern view of society whereby the population was split into two groups: the “enlightened public” and the mechanical laborers who “could perhaps never be, enlightened.”<sup>11</sup>

Marx’s definition harkens to a passage in *Our Nig* where fourteen-year-old Frado is described as “the only *moving power* in the house.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout the story the only person within the walls of the Bellmont house to accomplish any work or see results for their labor is Frado. With her mother absent, Mary is revealed to be a housekeeper in name only, electing to leave “all the washing, ironing, baking, and the common *et cetera* of the household duties” to Frado.<sup>13</sup> Even the missionary attempts of the family toward their servant appear fruitless. Aside from Frado’s work and the beatings inflicted on her by Mrs. B., there seems to be very little productive energy exerted within the household. Jane is practically an invalid, and on the same page that Frado is described as the “moving power” of the house we are told that the rather simple task of buying back Frado’s dog, Fido, requires “great exertion” of Mr. Bellmont, the practically defunct head-of-household.<sup>14</sup> Frado seems to be early proof of Donna Haraway’s claim that, with the rise of mechanization, machines have become “disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than just a “caricature of [the] masculinist reproductive dream” of authorship, Frado threatens to supplant the Bellmonts as the only character truly capable of writing her own future by self-developing while in the home, relegating the Bellmont family to stationary points of resistance, the bolts around which her gears rotate.<sup>16</sup>

Extending Marx’s metaphor further, we see the Bellmont household as a system of machinery in which Frado functions as both automaton and laborer, being the source of power and the organs by which that power is exercised. Starting on her very first morning with the Bellmonts, Frado is “programmed” like one of Pierre Jaquet-Droz’s eighteenth-century animated dolls: “[S]he was shown how it was *always* to be done, and in no other

<sup>9</sup> Inglis, 62–63.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Schaffer, “Enlightened Automata,” in *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe*, ed. William Clark, Jan Golinski, and Simon Schaffer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 164.

<sup>11</sup> Schaffer, 164.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 35; emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, with Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Haraway, with Wolfe, 11.

way; any departure from this rule to be punished by a whipping.”<sup>17</sup> Frado is made “to run hither and thither from room to room,” like the pistons of an engine, converting energy into momentum until she becomes “indispensable,” her workload steadily increasing as the throttle is let out.<sup>18</sup> While, like Jaquet-Droz’s dolls, she is capable of performing multiple kinds of tasks, Frado is more than a programmable machine. There is a breakdown in the management/laborer dichotomy, and Frado is at different times either unwilling to perform a task or unable (usually due to sickness or lack of materials). Mrs. Bellmont increasingly relies on verbal and physical violence to get Frado moving. And while the number of sequences Frado can perform increases, it is clear that Mrs. B. does not wish her to learn anything peripheral to her assigned household duties, considering her “incapable of elevation.”<sup>19</sup> A machine has no need for writing or religion.

Christopher Keep, reflecting on L’Automaton Maillardet, an automaton built in 1810 with the ability to “compose” a poem in French, posits that the writing automaton “suggests the presence not of a program but of a person, one whose actions are the free and spontaneous expressions of some deep reserve of selfhood, an inwardness or depth of being which is capable of reflecting on itself as a self. The very appearance of writing, as Plato suggests in the *Phaedrus*, is always marked by the trace or outline of a living presence, the unique individual who is both the source and origin of the enunciative act.”<sup>20</sup> In this case, however, the “automaton”—Wilson as Frado—was not programmed to write. Yet, she eventually escapes the machinery of the household and her role as an ambiguously indentured servant to make her own way in the world, a machine programmed for the service of others now pursuing its own ends. Wilson could be pictured as one of the writing automata of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, stolidly sitting at her desk with ink well placed just so as the tension of her wound figure is released in clicks and whirs and in the movement of pen and ink on paper, slowly spelling out the story hidden in the invisible mechanical interior of the writer. To see such a character bent over a piece of paper scratching out a fictionalized narrative would indeed have been a novelty (though not one much appreciated at the time, as we know from the lack of reviews and copies of her book). And yet this writer betrays more than a thoughtless series of symbols—there is an intentionality in her words.

But the automaton cannot *be* intentional, as it lacks understanding of the symbols it scratches onto paper—it lacks “linguistic ability,” simply mimicking humans.<sup>21</sup> However, machines are capable of cognition and a “literary culture of their own,” Paul Crosthwaite argues, when they escape the “prison of nonintentionality” by “emulating humans to the extent, at least, of ceasing to dwell in grey boxes on laboratory desks [or, alternatively, cramped attic rooms in New England homes], and emerging, instead, as embodied creatures free to explore the world they inhabit.”<sup>22</sup> Through her autobiographical novel,

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Keep, “Of Writing Machines and Scholar-Gipsies,” *English Studies in Canada* 29, no. 12 (2003): 55.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, “Clockwork Automata, Artificial Intelligence and Why the Body of the Author Matters,” in *Minds, Bodies, Machines, 1770–1930*, ed. Deirdre Coleman and Hilary Fraser (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 90.

<sup>22</sup> Crosthwaite, 101.

Wilson offers her own proof that there is a ghost in the machine—the black automaton is indeed cognizant and in possession of her own voice. In fact, Frado's personhood is most developed when she is outside the Belmont home, away from the machine that draws from her "moving power." At school Frado proves her cleverness not through her studies but through the creative antics with which she entertains the other children. When beyond the confines of the household walls, Frado interacts with the "other" domesticated animals, which affords her the rare opportunity to exercise authority and mastery. In an incident with the "willful sheep" she displays the skills not of a student but of a teacher; educating the sheep through trickery, she is assisted by her ability to comprehend the character of the animal and imagine a path to an alternative nature for it. Notably, it is also outside the home that Frado finally confronts Mrs. Belmont, discovering her own hidden power and "free and independent thoughts" when she threatens to quit if her mistress strikes her.<sup>23</sup> This has the miraculous effect of temporarily reversing their roles, as Frado's willful mistress carries the wood that Frado was sent to fetch. These events are part of the education of Frado as she develops from childlike ignorance of symbols, to adolescent exploration, to a practiced knowledge and command of language. Through her insistence on exercising the self-will that Mrs. Belmont, Mary, and others attempt to deny her, Frado achieves embodiment and the literacy necessary to perform the task of retelling her story.

The form this story takes in the pages of *Our Nig* is a mimicry of the sentimental abolitionist literature of the nineteenth century. Wilson uses tropes such as the dying, saintly, white character who seeks justice for the oppressed black protagonist (James here is reminiscent of Eva or Ophelia in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*); the emotional leakage represented in a constant flow of tears; the poor, unruly, black child in need of God and an education; and the appeal to the power of religion to right wrongs and provide spiritual comfort. But Wilson's work diverges from contemporary sentimental pieces in significant ways: there is no transformative conversion for Frado; supposedly saintly characters are tainted by unfulfilled promises and cowardice; the heroine is plagued with guilt and doubt and delights in the deaths of her enemies; freedom does not resolve the tensions inherent to the enslaved life, nor does it bring fulfillment; gender relations for Frado (and her mother) are mostly problematic, and a peaceful or fulfilling domestic life is never achieved. Faye Halpern's assessment of Stephen Crane's 1893 novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is appropriate here: this story "cannibalizes sentimentality: it steals its ingredients, arranges them into something utterly unsentimental, and has us ingest the result."<sup>24</sup> Further, as Ellen Prato Fiorito notes, Wilson's writing does little to affirm the agency of her hero, nor does it concern itself with providing confidence in public institutions or morality, as "[n]either her hard work under cruel servitude, nor her good looks, clever mind or sense of humor serve to better Frado's circumstances. Wilson's rhetorical strategy to deny the effective operations of individual agency to the central protagonist marks *Our Nig* as something of an anomaly in nineteenth-century American literature."<sup>25</sup> It should be

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Faye Halpern, *Sentimental Readers: The Rise, Fall, And Revival of A Disparaged Rhetoric* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2013), xv.

<sup>25</sup> Ellen Prato Fiorito, "'To Demand Your Sympathy and Aid': *Our Nig* and the Problem of No Audience," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 24, no. 1–2 (2001): 40.

unsurprising that a work that cast aspersions on the purity of abolitionists and on the social and economic conditions of free Northern blacks would meet with lackluster applause.

While Wilson's work may not have played much of a role in the abolitionist movement of its day, it is nonetheless a milestone in the development of language—not just for Wilson but for all black Americans. As the editors of *Harriet Wilson's New England: Race, Writing, and Region* note, “sentimental fiction itself is revised into a unique African American form by Wilson.”<sup>26</sup> Wilson retells the free-slave narrative, subverting the prevailing dialogue of her time by turning the discussion from the “moral righteousness of white” to the “agency of blacks for redress”; she attempts to answer the neglected question, “What do the slaves think?” by offering a dog's-eye-view of the life of a free black.<sup>27</sup>

Like the uncanny poems composed by L'Automaton Maillardet, *Our Nig* is an artifact that profoundly influences how we understand and perceive its author. As Donna Haraway argues in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, retold stories function as tools to “reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities”—dualisms such as servant and master, man and machine, lost and saved.<sup>28</sup> Much as the automaton is the ancestor of the cyborg, Wilson's text could be considered a grandparent to what Haraway describes as “cyborg writing.” Cyborgs are creatures fused with both fleshly and mechanical elements, unlike automata, which masquerade as flesh but are entirely machine. Cyborg writing is about “the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked [cyborgs] as other,” which entails a “struggle for language.”<sup>29</sup> Wilson's Frado not only struggles for language to understand who she is, but also transgresses boundaries that Haraway claims have lost distinction by the late twentieth century: the boundaries between human and animal, and animal-human and machine. While Haraway deploys cyborgs because of what their repudiation of boundaries can mean for women, they are also a tool for exploring the fusion of contrasting natures as well as the danger of mechanization: will machines enhance our humanity or override it? So, cyborg may be a better term to describe the increasingly embodied Frado. To speak of her as a cyborg draws us closer to the reality of her dual-natured existence and the tensions inherent in her position. Frado neither accepts the identity of indentured automaton, which she inherited through the black skin of her father, nor fits into the white, Christian society of those “holier-than-thou” who left her mother, Mag, destitute, and who in many ways perpetrate the same ills against her.

The feminist elements of the automaton analogy cannot be overlooked either. Frado's primary role at the Belmont house is in the kitchen—traditionally a feminine area. The automaton at the heart of the interior domestic space, she is increasingly weakened by the weight of the home she carries, sputtering under the pressure. Mary, who “did not choose to be useful in the kitchen,” was unequipped to contribute productively to the

<sup>26</sup> JerriAnne Boggis, Eve Allegra Raimon, and Barbara A. White, *Harriet Wilson's New England: Race, Writing, And Region* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Prato Fiorito, “To Demand Your Sympathy,” 40.

<sup>28</sup> Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, with Wolfe, 55.

<sup>29</sup> Haraway, with Wolfe, 55–57.

household, even in the role of task-master, as becomes clear when she nearly kills Frado during her brief stint as mistress of the house.<sup>30</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that she does not survive outside of the Bellmont home for long; unwilling to contribute to the household machine, she also lacks the drive for embodiment that Frado exhibits and is unprepared to live in an outside world where females in the story must rely on utility. The effect on Jane is opposite to that on Mary; unable to contribute to the household because of her constant illness and denied the agency to make her own choices, her decision to defy her mother and marry a man of little “means” allows her to escape the smothering effect of a domestic setting where she has very little say in the “transactions” of her life, an “exchange” which she never regrets.<sup>31</sup> By using these terms of transaction, Wilson suggests that Jane improves upon leaving the Bellmont house because she is finally empowered to become an active agent in decisions regarding her own body, rather than a passive piece of a machinery at the mercy of the machinations of others.

For Frado, though, trouble extends beyond the social and material to the metaphysical. In a conversation with James, Frado reveals her struggles with theodicy and her origins: “Who made me so?” she asks, before stating her dislike for the God who would make her black and her mistress white.<sup>32</sup> Frado’s distress is verbalized again later in the story when she seeks consolation from her fellow creature, Fido, asking, “[W]hy was I made? why can’t I die? Oh, what have I to live for? No one cares for me only to get my work.”<sup>33</sup> Referring to herself as “made” rather than born, she finds inaccessible the comfort of a Christian soul available to those who must be “born again.” She is not alone in this, as Mrs. B. “hardly believed [Frado] had a soul.”<sup>34</sup> Much as the robots of the future will do in science fiction literature, Frado doubts whether there even is a heaven for one such as herself—an idea which her mistress frequently corroborates. As scholar Julia Stern observes in “Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*,” “Mrs. Bellmont’s modus operandi is to deny Frado those aspects of identity that link the mulatta to her mistress. Thus the mixed-race child must be made black, defeminized, and turned into an animal.”<sup>35</sup> To recognize oneself in the animal or machine is to raise uncomfortable questions regarding oneself and any systems built on denying such a commonality; Mrs. B. is playing a zero-sum game. Frado must be all machine, no flesh. In one of the most disturbing scenes in *Our Nig*, Mrs. Bellmont beats Frado “inhumanly” and then props “her mouth open with a piece of wood” so that she cannot speak or make a noise.<sup>36</sup> In this way, Mrs. B. treats Frado like a squeaking machine: a wedge of wood resolves the annoying give that results from pressure being applied to an imbalanced object. Put another way, “Mrs. Bellmont wants nothing less than to reduce her spirited servant to an automaton—a silent, submissive, working machine. To this end, the most brutal punishments she concocts to torture Frado involve the utter repression of the child’s voice.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, 34, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Stern, “Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*,” *American Literature* 67, no. 3 (1995): 449.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Stern, “Excavating Genre,” 448.

So, Frado wrestles with a material existence from which she can expect no spiritual escape. Valued solely for her labor and the entertainment she provides, she sputters and malfunctions under the extreme conditions she is subjected to, frequently ill and leaking tears. There are those, however, who see “a soul to save” in Frado; both Aunt Abby and James desire an “immortality of happiness” for her.<sup>38</sup> But if Frado is an automaton, that raises significant theological issues, including the question of religious authenticity. How much of Frado’s action is automatic and how much is authentic and self-aware? As Wendy Beth Hyman recognizes, “It is not difficult to see in automata a living experiment in analogy, a hypostatic union in wood or brass.”<sup>39</sup> Hyman’s reference to the debate regarding the coexisting human and divine natures of Christ as an analogy for the automaton hints at the difficulty and weight of what is being parsed. Which nature—the mechanical or the human—controls Frado’s passions and motivates her religious action? Is she even capable of accessing what Mrs. Bellmont understands to be a white (and thus exclusively human) religion? In early modern religious literature the automaton was used as an analogy for those who are falsely religious. As the seventeenth-century English preacher John Rogers wrote regarding the religious affections, “A true *Saint* is made *willing* and *spontaneous* by a *principle within*; but a *Hypocrite*, or any other man, is *moved* as the *Automata* are moved, or things of *artificial motion*. . . . It is some *weight without* that poyseth them, and puts them upon *motion*; so something or other that is without, *swayeth*, and *worketh*, and *weigheth* upon the *hearts* of *Hypocrites*, to make them *willing*. . . . and not an *inward principle*.”<sup>40</sup> For Wilson to describe Frado as an automaton is to raise questions regarding the possibility of her conversion. This is illustrated by the neighbors’ apparent surprise at Frado being “serious” about religion.<sup>41</sup> When Aunt Abby cautiously mentions to James that Frado “*seems* [emphasis added] much affected by what she hears at the evening meetings,” James replies uncertainly, “I *hope* [emphasis added] she is thoughtful.”<sup>42</sup> Significantly, this conversation is recorded in the chapter entitled “Spiritual Condition of Nig,” which opens with the ominous lines: “What are our joys but dreams? and what our hopes / But goodly shadows in the summer cloud?”<sup>43</sup> James and Aunt Abby are ultimately unable to affect the change they were hoping for in their promising proselyte, nor can they help her escape the fate of a creature fashioned in the image of humans but intended to be subservient to them. Unlike the sentimental literature of the time, which often featured dramatic conversion scenes (think of Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), Wilson never neatly ties up the question of Frado’s Christianity. She does, however, continue to relate how “carefully applied” Frado is to “self-improvement, and a devout and Christian exterior,” as it provides her with a level of “confidence from the villagers.”<sup>44</sup> Frado heavily relies on this in order to achieve a level of uncertain self-subsistence, toiling away and “busily employed in preparing her merchandise,” for which

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> Wendy B. Hyman, *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 10.

<sup>40</sup> Brooke Conti, “The Mechanical Saint: Early Modern Devotion and The Language of Automation,” in *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 102.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, 69.

she receives mostly frowns, but also some smiles and—for the first time—monetary compensation.<sup>45</sup> Is Frado truly changed by the gospel introduced to her by her white masters, or does she wear a mask of piety, knowing that by hiding her mechanical face she will find readier acceptance in New England society?

Wilson's focus on Frado's Christianity in *Our Nig* offers contrast to the religious lives of those around her, raising questions about the religious attitudes and assumptions of her time. James is a failed messiah, a would-be savior who on his deathbed is unable to extend the promise of paradise to the prisoner suffering beside him who "felt a strong desire to follow" him.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps most tragically, Aunt Abby and James—the two persons most concerned with Frado's spiritual well-being—almost completely neglect her material needs. The most James does is tease the possibility of Frado's removal to his household, while attempting to minimize her physical torture at the hands of his mother by requesting Frado attend to him instead of her. Even given the excuse of his ill health, James (like St. Aubert in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who dies before he can free Tom) illustrates the urgency of the situation for black Americans and the consequences of dallying over solutions. Mrs. Bellmont repeatedly twists scripture to serve herself (e.g., she desires to train up Frado "in my way") and literally tries to exclude her from the "table," a common Christian metaphor for the fellowship of believers.<sup>47</sup> And yet, despite being the most ill-treated character in the story, Frado is also the only one who displays any sense of guilt. Frado's constant prayer, scripture reading, repentance, and pious church attendance are unmatched by the other two overtly religious characters—Aunt Abby and James—and offer a sharp critique of the other household members, who seem unbothered by questions of Christian conduct and interiority.

Read this way, it is most often the Bellmonts themselves who lack the "inward principle" that marks the "true saint," being moved instead by the artificial forces of society, domestic needs, and racism. It is the Bellmonts who are the true automata of the story. While residing inside the domestic system of the home, they move about the house remorselessly, enslaved to a culture that has programmed them to be blind to the injustices facing their black servant, perpetuating a system that would cause the mother of a mixed-race child to abandon her offspring at their door. It is as if they are endowed with life, when in reality they are reactive to the weight without.

Tellingly, Wilson twice analogizes Frado to characters from the Bible. One of the occurrences is in the last line of text: "Frado has passed from [the Bellmonts'] memories, as Joseph from the butler's, but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision."<sup>48</sup> She is referencing the Old Testament story of Joseph, a boy who was sold into slavery by his own family, falsely accused of wrongdoing, and placed into prison. He was eventually released after the chief butler, whose dream Joseph had interpreted, remembered what he had done and spoke highly of him to the pharaoh. By writing a fictionalized autobiography, Harriet Wilson offers her interpretation of the "dream" that was her life with the Bellmonts, presenting it for consideration. Recognizing the natures

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, 72.

<sup>46</sup> Wilson, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, 72.

they share as fellow prisoners and animal-machines, Wilson seeks a common ground, not looking to disguise her “defects” or the “humble position” that ties her to them through a cyborg duality.<sup>49</sup> Rather charitably, she compares the Bellmonts to the butler who found forgiveness instead of associating them with the baker—another prisoner whose dream Joseph interpreted but who was doomed to condemnation and death. In return, she asks that the reader remember her and speak on her behalf.

The other time Wilson analogizes Frado it is not so explicit but would nonetheless have been apparent to her biblically literate audience. As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Bellmont is outraged by Frado's inclusion at the dinner table and forces her to eat from her dirty plate, which Frado does, but only after having the dog lick it clean of crumbs. By including this scene, Wilson compares Frado to the Canaanite woman who asked Jesus to heal her daughter: after the disciples asked Jesus to send her away, Jesus tested the woman's faith by telling her that he came for the “lost sheep of Israel” (which would not include her), stating that “[i]t is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs,” to which she replies, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table” (Matt. 15:24–28, ESV). Jesus, remarking on her great faith—the like of which he had not encountered among the religious Israelites—then heals the woman's daughter. In Wilson's version, the dog (and by extension, Frado) actually does eat the crumbs from the master's table—and the master does not like it. The very writing of the story is Wilson's display of great faith, which she presents before those who are able to save her son. The question she raises is whether the reader will respond like the religious hard-of-heart who, having no inner compulsion, are moved instead by the weight of society and racism; or whether, like Jesus, they will prove themselves to be ruled by another nature, showing themselves to be human and truly alive, capable of saving her son.

In Wilson's *Our Nig* we find prescient echoes of future machinic dystopias of androids and automata, where machines in the shape of humans ask, “Why was I made?” and try to find a home among humans who value them for their productivity rather than their voice or shared image. In borrowing from the sentimental abolitionist literature of the day, Wilson upends the popular genre to reveal the implicating reality of life for free blacks in New England and the duality of the existence they are asked to live. Through the blurring of boundaries in the character of Frado, Wilson illustrates the complications of that existence while drawing attention to the commonalities she shares with her white brethren and the mechanical and hypocritical ways their lives complicate hers. In an act of great faith, she insists on a place at the table for her and her son. Reading *Our Nig* in this way further illuminates the struggle of nineteenth-century Northern free blacks and exposes the immoral social and religious assumptions underlying the world of the author, while also recognizing the literary significance of Wilson's exceptional work.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, 3.

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# A Good Kid Navigating a Mad City

## Kendrick Lamar as a Sage for the Twenty-First Century Church

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### INTRODUCTION

Music has historically been a way for humanity to struggle with, challenge, praise, express gratitude for, and protest experiences and tensions in life. Beginning with the Old Testament, music has played a central role in creation's response to the revelation of God and human experience. Genesis presents Cain's son Jubal as the creator of musical instruments and the father of all who play the harp and flute (Gen. 4:21). The Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1–18) celebrates God's destruction of the Egyptian army during the crossing of the Red Sea. Music brought down the walls of Jericho (Josh. 6) and caused King David to dance until his clothes fell off (2 Sam. 6). Music was an essential part of the prophets' training (1 Sam. 10:5; 19:19–24; 2 Kings 3:15). The psalter was ancient Israel's hymnbook through which they praised and thanked God. In the New Testament, Mary sang a hymn praising the power of God and the great reversals God had brought about and will bring about through the birth of Christ (Luke 1:46–55). Even while facing persecution and being imprisoned, Paul and Silas sang hymns to God because they trusted in God's protection and faithfulness (Acts 16:25–26). Throughout church history, music has continued to play a central role for Christians in responding to God and human experience: Charles Wesley wrote thousands of hymns covering every aspect of Christian spiritual experience, the African American community expressed its liberation found in Christ despite oppressive structures in America through black gospel music, and contemporary worship music praises God for God's grace and mercy. Even contemporary, mainstream rap communicates about God and human experience in urban communities.

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But what kind of voice does rap provide for the contemporary church? While religious studies scholars have started to make connections between hip-hop music and religion,<sup>2</sup> theologians have begun to analyze the theology of hip-hop,<sup>3</sup> and some pastors have even started to utilize elements of hip-hop in their churches and to reach the culture around them,<sup>4</sup> there has been very little written about the intersection of rap and the church from the perspective of biblical studies and biblical theology. A starting point for investigating this intersection is the music of Kendrick Lamar, because he is a mainstream religious rapper who talks to God and about God in a way reminiscent of the Old Testament sages. Lamar draws upon dominant themes of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes while utilizing the formal structures common to Old Testament wisdom literature to emphasize these main themes.<sup>5</sup> Lamar is a voice reminiscent of the Old Testament sages, providing a template for the twenty-first century church, especially the urban church, to struggle with the intersection of God and everyday life.

To properly contextualize this contention, this paper begins by first examining the general connections between hip-hop music and the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament to situate hip-hop music within the sapiential tradition, because both are alternatives to dominant, traditional narratives, both are rooted in lived experience, and both are concerned with ethics. An analysis of Lamar's album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* follows, explicating the Old Testament wisdom tradition for those living in the projects. Finally, I will discuss how the relationship of the sacred and the profane, central to both hip-hop music and the Old Testament wisdom tradition's worldviews, is relevant and necessary for the twenty-first century church. An overemphasis on the profane nature of hip-hop music, and hip-hop culture at large, by the church has robbed the church, particularly the urban church, of a wise and insightful voice.

#### HIP-HOP AS WISDOM TRADITION

With "Rapper's Delight" landing on the top charts in 1979–1980, a new era was born. The hip-hop era, with rap as its vehicle, officially commenced after a decade of build-up at the grassroots level. Daniel White Hodge defines hip-hop as "an urban subculture that seeks to express a lifestyle, attitude or theology. Rejecting the dominant culture, it seeks to increase social consciousness, cultural awareness and racial pride."<sup>6</sup> Rap as the mouthpiece of hip-hop culture<sup>7</sup> gave a voice to the urban community at a time when the

<sup>2</sup> Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman, eds., *Religion in Hip-Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Efreim Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, wisdom literature will be restricted to the canonical Old Testament books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. This narrow definition of what counts as wisdom literature is beneficial so as not to stretch and distort what wisdom means in the Old Testament. By a scholarly consensus, these three works are all considered works of wisdom, and these three books are considered authoritative by the majority, if not all, of Christendom.

<sup>6</sup> Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Hip-hop culture includes four primary artistic expressions: rapping or emceeing, turntablism or DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti. Even though rap and hip-hop have at times become synonymous in popular

urban community thought it had become voiceless. It gave a voice to young men and women trying to find their way in the hood by providing a medium through which to argue, talk, yell, whisper, love, hate, chill, eat, sleep, confide, and build community.<sup>8</sup>

Hip-hop was born out of the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society. This shift resulted in the collapse of the middle economic section of urban communities, which displaced many and left thousands unemployed.<sup>9</sup> Hip-hoppers were tasked with trying to find meaning in the pain and misery of inner-city living. This search for meaning resulted in the creation of a culture that “transcends age, political status, socioeconomic status, social standings, even gender, [to offer] an alternative source of identity and social status for young people in a community that had abandoned them.”<sup>10</sup> For many, including Hodge, hip-hop was and is a safe and productive alternative to the streets. Rap provides an alternative lifestyle, attitude, and theology to the dominant culture of the streets; it provides an alternative to sex, drugs, alcohol, and violence.

Like hip-hop, the wisdom tradition in Israel arose as an alternative to the dominant tradition of the day, Yahwism. Yahwism’s interpretation of reality rested on the basic assumption that God was actively involved in leading history towards a righteous end. It claimed “God chose a particular people, fought on their behalf, called prophets, issued legal codes, sent angels to maintain contact with humans, enlisted foreign powers to discipline the chosen race, and promised to bestow a new covenant on inveterate sinners for the sake of God’s honor.”<sup>11</sup> This predominant tradition of ancient Israel was challenged by Israel’s sages. Instead of viewing history as divinely controlled, the sages understood reality as resting on a universal foundation. This universal foundation was God as the creator of all existence. For the sages, God revealed God’s self through the act of creation, and God continues to help people understand the mysteries of creation through personified Wisdom (Prov. 8:22–36). Divine truth can be found in all of creation by the searching of the human mind. For the sages, there was no exclusive connection between God and a particular people—rather everyone could make contact with the divine. This is evidenced by Job not being an Israelite, Qohelet searching the whole earth, and the proverbs being generalized to apply to one’s life regardless of historical situation. God was not only the God of Israel but the God of all people. This universal understanding of reality meant everyone could connect with transcendent reality and God was concerned with all people.<sup>12</sup>

Not only are hip-hop and the Old Testament wisdom literature both alternatives to dominant, traditional narratives, but both are rooted in experience and both are concerned with ethics. The teaching of the sages is summarized by Walter Brueggemann as a “theological-ethical reflection ‘from below,’ grounded in experience that, as such,

culture, rap is the oral component of hip-hop culture. Rap consists of rhythmic and/or rhyming speech over stylized music. This is the primary oral medium through which hip-hoppers are able to express their message.

<sup>8</sup> Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Hodge, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Hodge, 42.

<sup>11</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 197.

<sup>12</sup> Crenshaw, 199.

constitutes a tradition alternative to the better-known traditions of salvation history rooted in God's miracles and expressed as covenant."<sup>13</sup> The starting point of wisdom literature is human experience and observations, and its central focus is the well-being of human beings. The sages ask questions regarding what is good for men and women and then find the answers to these questions through past experiences.<sup>14</sup> However, wisdom teaching is not merely a description of experiences and observations but "a shrewd and seasoned reflection that processes and generalizes experience in order that the new generation may benefit from the accumulated insight that arises from reflection upon older experience."<sup>15</sup> Wisdom is the application of knowledge gained through life experiences to new but similar situations. This reflection upon lived experience is central in all three of the Old Testament wisdom books. Many proverbs are portrayed as teachings from a father, or mother, to a son (Prov. 1:8–19; 2:1–22; 3:1–12, 21–35; 4:1–9, 10–19, 20–27; 5:1–23; 6:20–35; 7:1–27; 22:17–24; 31:1–9). The father is reflecting on his own experience in order that his son may benefit. The father focuses his teachings on familiar experiences ranging from robbing and killing out of greed (Prov. 1:8–19) to the temptations of women (Prov. 2:16–19; 5:15–20) to dealing properly with the poor (Prov. 22:22–23). The goal of these reflections on commonplace experience was the formation of character. The book of Job is rooted in the experience of the suffering righteous and is portrayed as the lived experience of a man named Job.<sup>16</sup> Ecclesiastes is framed as the personal experience of Qohelet, who has seen all of the deeds that are done under the sun and then reflects on these experiences and concludes all is vanity (Eccles. 1:14).

Lamar's album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* is Lamar reflecting on some of his own experiences growing up in Compton, for the sake of helping guide other young people who are trying to navigate the "mad city." In the outro of "Real," he includes a recording of his mother encouraging him to reflect on the experiences of his younger days: "Tell your story to these black and brown kids in Compton. Let them know you were just like them, but rose from that dark place of violence. Give back with your words of encouragement."<sup>17</sup> Lamar heeds the advice of his mother by creating an album to function as a window into the life of a young Lamar trying to survive the streets of Compton. He reminisces on his desire to fornicate with his girlfriend Sherane, participation in a robbery of a home with his friends, becoming inebriated, and experience with gang violence. Lamar is recounting and reflecting on his own experiences growing up in Compton to help form the character of the next generation who are being raised in a context similar to his own.

The terms "good kid" and "mad city" both have double meanings on this album. On one level the "good kid" is Lamar and the "mad city" is Compton. Lamar paints a vivid picture of the difficulties growing up in Compton. He cites how one evening he was leaving Bible study when he was jumped by a gang because they recognized him and

<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 232.

<sup>14</sup> Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, 233.

<sup>16</sup> Whether the narrative about Job has a real-world referent to a man named Job who undeservedly suffered does not matter for the purposes of this argument. The narrative of Job is constructed based on the experiences of people in the Ancient Near East who saw the righteous undeservedly suffering.

<sup>17</sup> "Real," Apple Music, track 11 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

knew he was not part of their gang. He then reflects on how he was a victim of police brutality even though he was not part of a gang and tried to avoid illicit activities. Even when someone is trying to avoid the evils of the inner city they are not safe. Lamar is trying not to allow the craziness going on around him in Compton to change him. Some of the craziness surrounding him in Compton includes gang violence, gun violence, drugs, robberies, and police brutality. On another level, the “good kid” is a metaphor for any kid with a good heart who is trying to escape the craziness of the hood. Lamar’s experiences growing up in Compton can be generalized to stand as a metaphor for all kids with good intentions who are trying to escape the craziness of the hood. The good kid is overlooked and disrespected by his community because he is not part of a gang. The police disrespect him even though he is not affiliated with a gang. He is not trying to be involved with robbing a house or killing another person, but at times he has no choice except to ride along on a drive-by shooting or to rob a house because it is what his friends or family are doing. He is not trying to be involved in this lifestyle, but it is just what is happening around him. This craziness happening around the good kid is the mad city. The “mad city” is a metaphor for the circumstances surrounding people living in the inner city. Compton and what is happening in the streets and projects of Compton exemplify the mad city. Through an analysis of Lamar’s *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, we find Lamar reflecting on his own lived experience in order to help all the “good kids” who are out there trying to navigate a “mad city.”<sup>18</sup>

#### THE GOOD KID AND THE M.A.A.D. CITY

Kendrick Lamar burst onto the mainstream rap scene with the release of his second studio album, and his major-label debut, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* in 2012. This album debuted at number two on the US *Billboard* 200 chart, and it would earn Lamar four Grammy nominations, including a nomination for album of the year. The influential nature of this album has even warranted a collegiate course where “students are juxtaposing Lamar’s music with literary works from James Joyce, James Baldwin and Gwendolyn Brooks and the 1991 film, *Boys n the Hood*.”<sup>19</sup> Adam Diehl, the instructor of this course, based a class around *good kid, m.A.A.d city* because of the contemporary social issues broached in this album. Diehl regards hip-hop music as an art form that gives visibility to underrepresented issues in contemporary society: “Whether it’s White Lines, which is about the cocaine epidemic in the ‘80s, or J. Cole’s new song on the Mike Brown situation, hip-hop is about immediate feedback to the world people observe around them.”<sup>20</sup> With *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Lamar broaches contemporary social issues through an explicitly religious lens by reflecting on his own lived experience while wrestling with the tension between his experiences growing up in the hood and his belief in God.

*good kid, m.A.A.d city* is a conceptual album rooted in the lived experience of Lamar. As the subtitle puts it, this album is a “short film” written by Lamar about himself. The “film” traces the story of a day in the life of a young Lamar and his misadventures with a group

<sup>18</sup> See “Good Kid,” Apple Music, track 7 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012; “m.A.A.d city,” Apple Music, track 8 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Jaleesa Jones, “Georgia Students Study Kendrick Lamar for Class,” *USA Today College*, last modified September 1, 2014, <http://college.usatoday.com/2014/09/01/georgia-students-study-kendrick-lamar-for-class/>.

<sup>20</sup> Jones.

of friends, culminating in a life-changing experience. The plot of the album begins with a teenage Kendrick Lamar, nicknamed K-Dot, wanting to have sex with a girl named Sherane. When he arrives at Sherane's house, he is confronted by Sherane's cousins, who run in one of the two major Compton gangs, the Bloods and the Crips. After being roughed up by Sherane's cousins, he meets his friends, robs a house, becomes intoxicated, and decides to get revenge on Sherane's cousins with a drive-by shooting. A shoot-out with Sherane's cousins results in the death of one of Lamar's friends. Lamar and his companions drive away and try to cope with what has just transpired. This is a turning point in Lamar's transition from a youthful K-Dot to the mature and inspirational Lamar we know today. While trying to cope with the loss of a friend, Lamar and his friends are stopped by a wise neighbor who tells them they need holy water and then leads them in praying the "sinner's prayer." The plot concludes with a mature Lamar reflecting on everything that has transpired, and deciding that he will give back to Compton by providing a road map for how a good kid can navigate the mad city. Through his own life experience, Lamar seeks to impart wisdom to the next generation of youth trying to navigate life in the inner city. He does this in part through the form of the album, an autobiographical narrative.

The form of an autobiographical narrative is attested in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup> Because wisdom is grounded in experience, the sages of ancient Israel opted for a confessional style of writing to convey the positive lessons derived from their diverse experiences to the next generation of Israelites.<sup>22</sup> The form of this style of writing begins with a personal observation by the author followed by his reflection on the observation, which leads to a moral lesson for the son or pupil. A clear example of this form may be observed in Proverbs 24:30-34: the observation (vv. 30-31) elicits a reflection (v. 32), which produces a moral lesson (vv. 33-34).<sup>23</sup> *good kid, m.A.A.d city* chronicles Lamar's observations growing up in Compton, and a mature Lamar reflects on these experiences in "Compton" and "Money Trees."<sup>24</sup> The moral lesson Lamar is trying to impart to the next generation is to resist the temptations of the ghetto and the theology of the streets, which emphasizes sex, alcohol, drugs, violence, and money. Experience is the great teacher in the Old Testament wisdom literature, and it is the basis for Lamar's message to the next generation of kids who are actively trying to overcome the hardships of the hood.

A second formal element of *good kid, m.A.A.d city* that helps shape the content of the album is a non-linear storytelling technique. This technique helps emphasize how the maturation process of K-Dot into an adult Lamar takes many twists and turns. The goal of human life in Proverbs is to move towards maturity. One becomes mature by heeding the advice of experience as a primary teacher. This understanding of maturation rests on

<sup>21</sup> This form is found in Prov. 4:3-9; 24:30-34 and Eccles. 1:12-2:26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:18; 8:9-9:1; 9:11, 13, 16; 10:5, 7.

<sup>22</sup> James L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. John H. Hayes (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1974), 256.

<sup>23</sup> Crenshaw, 257.

<sup>24</sup> "Compton," Apple Music, track 12 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012; "Money Trees," Apple Music, track 5 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

the assumption wisdom can be learned, and Proverbs is supposed to be used as a teaching tool (Prov. 10). For Lamar, the twists and turns of his life can be used as a teaching tool. Lamar in an interview revealed “the story is about one day in the life of me and my homeboys” with “twists and paybacks.”<sup>25</sup> These “twists and paybacks” help emphasize how Lamar does not see the world as perfectly ordered or linear but as cyclical.

Lamar’s cyclical view of the universe is revealed in the cyclical nature of his album. The album opens with “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter,” but this is not the beginning of the story about the good kid and the mad city. Instead, this song along with “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe” and “Backseat Freestyle” provide the background information of what matters most to a young K-Dot: sex, money, and power. These earthly wants of a young Lamar are juxtaposed with the sinner’s prayer that opens the entire album. This juxtaposition illustrates where a teenage Lamar’s desires are currently and where they are headed as he matures and recognizes what is truly real in life. It is a foreshadowing of Lamar finding the sacred within the profane of his life. The culmination of his maturation and his discovering of the sacred through an elderly neighbor occurs in “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst.” After the death of his friend, he realizes he needs to leave his old lifestyle behind and prays the sinner’s prayer to begin a new life, his real life.<sup>26</sup>

The narrative of K-Dot’s maturation into Lamar begins in “The Art of Peer Pressure.” Lamar begins the story by telling his listeners to pay close attention to his real-life story.<sup>27</sup> After narrating a day of misdeeds with his friends, the track ends with his friends dropping him back off at his house because they “know he trying to fuck on Sherane tonight.”<sup>28</sup> One must fast-forward from “The Art of Peer Pressure” to the last song on the album, “Compton,” to follow the narrative of the good kid. At the end of “Compton,” Lamar tells his mother he is taking the van and will be back in fifteen minutes.<sup>29</sup> This scene loops back around to the first track on the album, which ends with Lamar’s mother leaving him a voicemail: “I’m sitting here waiting on my van, you told me you’d be back here in fifteen minutes.” The first track begins where the last track ends, with Kendrick taking his mother’s van to go meet Sherane.<sup>30</sup>

This non-linear storytelling technique helps emphasize Lamar’s cyclical view of the cosmos. This is similar to how the form, or lack of form, in Ecclesiastes helps emphasize its main conviction. Ecclesiastes lacks an obvious structure because the world lacks an obvious structure. Ecclesiastes challenges the traditional interpretation of an ordered

<sup>25</sup> Kendrick Lamar, quoted in Insanul Ahmed, “The Making of Kendrick Lamar’s ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city,’” *Complex*, last modified October 23, 2012, <http://www.complex.com/music/2012/10/the-making-of-kendrick-lamars-good-kid-maad-city/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” Apple Music, track 10 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> “Art of Peer Pressure,” Apple Music, track 4 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> “Art of Peer Pressure.”

<sup>29</sup> “Compton,” Apple Music, track 12 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> This narrative structure of *good kid, m.A.A.d city* can also be found in Ryan Bassil, “The Narrative Guide To Kendrick Lamar’s ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city,’” *Noisey*, last modified April 17, 2013, [https://noisey.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/65penb/the-narrative-guide-to-kendrick-lamars-good-kid-mad-city](https://noisey.vice.com/en_uk/article/65penb/the-narrative-guide-to-kendrick-lamars-good-kid-mad-city).

universe by questioning the two major assumptions of Proverbs: (1) The universe is ordered enough that we can see the meaning of life and (2) The good are rewarded and the wicked are punished (Eccles. 9:2). The ancient sages were adept at utilizing formal elements to convey meaning.

Lamar's cyclical view of the cosmos is akin to the worldview of the book of Ecclesiastes. After searching and seeing everything done under the sun, Qohelet concludes all things are wearisome (Eccles. 1:8), there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9), even memory is not permanent (Eccles. 1:11), and from dust we came and to dust we shall return (Eccles. 3:20). Lamar signals memory is not permanent by slowly fading out the verse about Keisha's sister after she claims "I'll never fade away, I'll never fade away / I know my fate, and I'm on the grind for this cake."<sup>31</sup> Since memory fades and people are not remembered by subsequent generations, Lamar hopes he has put in enough work so someone will sing about him when he is gone.<sup>32</sup> He does not seem confident he can ever do enough for people to remember him.

Lamar situates himself in the heritage of the sages by building not only on the forms but on the themes of the wisdom literature as well. Besides the themes of a theology of everyday life, maturity, experience as a primary teacher, and the cyclical nature of life, which were discussed in conjunction with the formal elements, Lamar builds on the theme of the personification of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly found in Proverbs. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a woman who calls for the simple to learn from her righteous words and through her find life and favor from the Lord. Woman Wisdom in *good kid, m.A.A.d city* is the neighbor of Lamar who points him toward God. She takes her stand at a crossroads of Lamar's life.<sup>33</sup> She tells him what he is seeking cannot be found in the temptations of the streets but only in God. By leading him in the sinner's prayer, she helps him begin a new life in Christ. In the book of Proverbs and the life of Lamar, Woman Wisdom has competition from another woman for the hearts and minds of the people.

Woman Wisdom has a foil in Woman Folly,<sup>34</sup> who sits instead of stands (Prov. 9:14); knows nothing (Prov. 9:13) instead of having good advice, insight, and strength (Prov. 8:14); and is an adulteress with smooth words (Prov. 2:16) and stolen bread (Prov. 9:17) instead of righteous words (Prov. 8:8) and proper bread (Prov. 9:5). Woman Folly appears in *good kid, m.A.A.d city* as Sherane. Sherane tempts Lamar with sexual favors and involves

<sup>31</sup> "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst," Apple Music, track 10 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst."

<sup>33</sup> Woman Wisdom takes her stand at the crossroads besides the city gates and calls out to the simple. Lamar's neighbor takes her stand at the entrance to their neighborhood and calls out to Lamar and his friends.

<sup>34</sup> Woman Folly is connected to, if not the same as, the Strange Woman in Prov. 2:16–19; 5:1–14; 6:20–35. Woman Folly is symbolic of the wrong way of life or the way that will lead to destruction. This is in contrast to Woman Wisdom, who is symbolic of the right way of life or the wise way. The strange women earlier in Proverbs are adulteresses whom the father instructs the son to avoid pursuing. In contrast, the son should pursue a noble wife. This practical advice of avoiding strange women and pursuing noble women is generalized in Prov. 8–9 as two ways of life. Pursuing an adulteress is the epitome of the way of destruction. These strange women seem to be connected with Woman Folly because both of their paths lead to death and both are seductresses.

him in gang violence. According to Lamar's mother, she is a "hoodrat" who is ignorant and knows nothing but sinful desires, and if he messes around with her then he will not move on to the next grade in school.<sup>35</sup> Whereas Woman Wisdom and Lamar's neighbor reveal what will bring one life, Woman Folly and Sherane entice one to death through their false promises.

#### FINDING THE SACRED IN THE PROFANE

The Christian church in America has typically rejected mainstream hip-hop music and culture even when they are overtly religious—dare I say even Christian.<sup>36</sup> Christians have rejected mainstream hip-hop with the claim that it is too profane. The profane nature of hip-hop includes cursing, crude talk, promiscuity, and drugs. Focusing on the profane nature of rap music has obscured the relationship between the sacred and profane in this genre of music. The rejection of rap music is just one example of how the church has rejected the profane in society because it is in direct contradiction to the sacred. Instead of simply dismissing the profane areas of society, the church needs to struggle with a biblical understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. A proper understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the profane allows for the church to avoid simplistic answers to the deep problems of pain and suffering, allows for popular culture to be a theological space, and opens an avenue for people to authentically express themselves.

Before discussing a proper relationship between the sacred and the profane, the terms "profane" and "sacred" must be properly defined. Hodge provides a two-fold definition of the profane in which the profane includes both the "social realities in life that occur every day, are ordinary, common, general" and the "contours of life that are deemed evil, wicked, immoral, and corrupt."<sup>37</sup> The profane nature of life includes both mundane experiences and activities which are typically labeled as "sin." However, these "sinful" actions are simply the reality of life for those living in the ghetto.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the profane, "the sacred areas of life are typically deemed 'special' and/or hallowed; they are the areas that are meant to be taken with great care in a mindful manner."<sup>39</sup> The sacred is considered special because it is something wholly different from our natural world. It is usually linked with religion or a connection with God. This connection with God can manifest itself through prayer, meditation, a rock, a neighbor, or music.

In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, one encounters the profane in both the ordinary and immoral senses of the word. Lamar speaks about normal experiences in his life, including spending time with his friends and taking his mother's van to visit his girlfriend. Additionally, he

<sup>35</sup> "Sherane aka Master Splinter's Daughter," Apple Music, track 1 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Many religions, including Christianity, are represented in hip-hop culture (e.g., Islam and the Five-Percenters). Religious imagery and themes are pervasive in rap music, and much of this imagery can be traced back to the Bible or at least through church history. Rap music contextualizes these themes and images for the inner city.

<sup>37</sup> Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*, 160.

<sup>38</sup> A friend who lives in the projects described to me the use and selling of drugs in his context as a lifestyle, not a choice. Drug culture has become part of the identity of many living in the projects.

<sup>39</sup> Hodge, 160.

speaks about his immoral activities such as robbing a house, becoming intoxicated, and being involved in gang violence. Lamar does not simply recount his past misdeeds, nor does he advocate for this kind of immoral behavior. Instead, he uses these experiences as a starting point in his search for God. A youthful Lamar was caught in the pitfalls of Woman Folly until Woman Wisdom called out to him in the form of his elderly neighbor. He was pointed to God by a neighbor shortly after being involved in a shoot-out. From the midst of the profane, Lamar was able to find God. Lamar has inherited the “black music’s sacred profane ideology—an ideology of fusion that sees the sacred in the profane.”<sup>40</sup> Lamar points to the workings of the divine in the midst of the struggles in the projects. Whereas religions tend to distinguish between the sacred and the profane and concern themselves with the sacred, “hip-hop instead focuses on the ‘profane’ and sacralizes it in an attempt to invert traditional religious dichotomies.”<sup>41</sup> By inverting the traditional dichotomy between the sacred and the profane and concerning itself with the mundane events of life, rap “represents a spirituality of the everyday.”<sup>42</sup>

Christians who want to reject hip-hop music on the basis of its profanity are quick to gloss over the profanity found in scripture. Many exemplars of the faith had hidden vices. Noah is exalted as an exemplar of the faith, but he was a man who loved liquor and immediately became drunk after exiting the ark. David was identified as a man after God’s own heart, but he lusted after women. His lust resulted in him having Uriah killed in battle so he could take Uriah’s wife as his own. Paul was the first great Christian missionary and church-planter, but before his conversion he was a religious zealot who struggled with a thorn in his flesh. Jonah was called by God to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, but Jonah wanted the people of Nineveh to perish. God’s forgiveness of the people of Nineveh provoked a response of anger from Jonah. Jonah wanted the people to perish for their evil acts. Jesus embraced those whom the rest of society looked down upon because of their lifestyle, like the woman at the well and Zacchaeus. Even more, Jesus called the Pharisees a brood of vipers and referred to Peter as Satan.<sup>43</sup> While the profane can be found throughout the whole biblical canon, a worldview of the profane is a central focus of the Old Testament wisdom literature. Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are concerned with the mundane, everyday events and the rougher edges of life. The sages were able to see the sacred in their everyday lives. Proverbs addresses universal experiences ranging from robbing and killing out of greed (Prov. 1:8–19) to the temptations of women (Prov. 2:16–19; 5:15–20) to dealing properly with the poor (Prov. 22:22–23). Proverbs warns the younger generation to avoid Woman Folly and her promises (9:13–18), while the book of Job contains possibly the most profane act in all of scripture: putting God on trial.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim claims that religions distinguish the sacred from the profane while privileging the sacred.<sup>44</sup> Instead the church must take its lead from Old Testament wisdom literature by taking the profane as its starting point and searching for

<sup>40</sup> Christina Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(RAP): Locating the “Spirit” in Hip-Hop,” *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2006): 2.

<sup>41</sup> Zanfagna, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Zanfagna, 2.

<sup>43</sup> The examples are identified in Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Zanfagna, “Under the Blasphemous W(RAP),” 2.

the divine in the profane. There are three implications for understanding the relationship of the sacred and the profane as a worldview of finding the sacred within the profane. The first is it allows for the church to avoid simplistic answers to the deep problems of pain, distress, suffering, anxieties, and evil acts. Many Christians today understand suffering as punishment for sin. They subscribe to the worldview of Proverbs that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. However, for what wickedness is a newborn baby being punished when the baby is born with a critical illness? When Christians pursue God and God's will for their lives, why do they continue to fail classes, become sick, or lose their jobs? The book of Job addresses the inexplicable suffering of the righteous. Job is introduced as an everyman who suffers even though he has committed no wrong act. The blameless stature of Job is even confirmed by God (Job 1:8). God allows Job to suffer at the hands of Satan even though he has committed no wrong (Job 1:13–2:10). Job then puts God on trial and accuses God of not hearing the prayers of the poor (Job 13, 24). In the end, God calls out Eliphaz and Job's other friends for not speaking correctly of God like Job has done (Job 42:7). Job's friends assumed Job must have committed some wrong to bring God's wrath upon himself, but this is an incorrect assumption. Putting God on trial is the correct way to speak with God when one's life experiences contradict one's understanding of God. The perspective that suffering is precipitated by sin is a narrow answer to an immense problem of suffering. Instead, one's suffering should push one to ask questions of God and to listen for an answer.

The second implication is it allows for popular culture to be a theological space: "As descendants of black music's sacred-profane ideology, rap artists encode spiritual philosophies in the thorny arenas of sexuality, substance, and suffering. To accept this presupposes that popular culture could be a theological space—an arena in which one may encounter God even in what may be deemed unholy places."<sup>45</sup> The prior analysis of Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city* illuminates a worldview akin to the Old Testament sages within the thorny areas of his own experiences of sexual intercourse with Sherane, robbing a house, and participating in a drive-by shooting. An acceptance of this Christian analysis of *good kid, m.A.A.d city* results in the creation of a theological space in which one may encounter God while listening to the album. Rap music has traditionally been deemed unholy by the Christian church, but it can be a medium through which youth encounter God. It is the job of church leaders to teach congregants, especially youth, to listen to rappers like Lamar through Christian ears. Lyrics from Lamar's songs can be used to teach Christian truths and to point others toward Jesus.

Finally, a proper understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the profane opens an avenue for people to authentically express themselves. Kendrick Lamar is a familiar voice for many in the church today. Many people have histories and backgrounds of which they are not proud. Many congregation members are uncomfortable sharing their experiences because they are afraid of being alienated by the church. The church needs to be better in informing congregation members that their backgrounds, histories, and past sins are not what define them. Instead, what defines them is their relationship

<sup>45</sup> Zanfagna, 1.

with God. In *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Lamar is expressing his past life, which culminates in a conversion experience, the beginning of his new life.<sup>46</sup> Through his past experiences that do not look or sound nice, Lamar is able to guide the next generation of kids with good intentions trying to navigate the craziness of the hood which surrounds them. Many people in churches today use, or could use, their past experiences to help guide and teach others, but they express these past experiences in explicit terms. Using explicit language to explain these life stories allows for these experiences to carry their full weight and magnitude. All Christians possess profane areas in their lives, but some are better than others at covering up these areas. Being authentic does not always look or sound pleasant, but in being authentic, Christians can grow in their connection with God and with each other. Being authentic is a way in which one can truly point others to God and nurture their relationships with God.

#### CONCLUSION

Hip-hop music, even though it is typically rejected by the Christian church, can be situated within the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament because both are alternatives to dominant, traditional narratives, both are rooted in lived experience, and both are concerned with ethics. An analysis of Lamar's album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* reveals how he is able to explicate the form and themes of the Old Testament wisdom tradition for the twenty-first century church, especially the urban church. The themes and form of Old Testament wisdom literature and hip-hop music illustrate how both take the profane as their starting point and search for the sacred in the profane. This understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the profane allows the church the ability to struggle with the problem of suffering, popular culture to be a theological space, and people to authentically express themselves. Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city* is a reflection on his lived experience to help the next generation of adolescents navigate the adverse circumstances of the hood, which is reminiscent of the Old Testament sages who derived moral lessons from everyday experience to lead the Israelites along the path of life.

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<sup>46</sup> "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst," Apple Music, track 10 on Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Interscope Records, 2012.

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# Identifying the Divine

## Edwards's Use for Beauty

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Beauty is a central theme in the thought of Jonathan Edwards as a whole. In his analysis of beauty and the Trinity in Edwards's work, theologian Kin Yip Louie writes that "Edwards' theological aesthetics is inseparable from his Christian doctrine" and "a channel for the perception of and communion with a personal God."<sup>2</sup> But if Edwards's theological aesthetics is inseparable from the rest of his project, what is it exactly that his understanding of beauty is doing? This paper's aim is to bring Edwards's conception of beauty forward to show that beauty is not merely peripheral or an accident of God's being and creation but a central pillar of Edwards's theological system. In other words, beauty has a use in Edwards's theology as a whole as an ontological marker of proper relationship with God.

Much contemporary discourse about beauty seeks either to make beauty either an end in and of itself, pushing back against pragmatic tendencies to reduce beauty to its use, or to make beauty an unnecessary—yet somehow still vital—part of our common life. Ki Joo Choi argues that although art is often given a causative role in moral formation, this empirical defense of aesthetics can be easily disproven. In a particularly jarring example, Choi cites historians who describe how Nazi concentration camps would often host concerts performed by the camps' prisoners; the music itself apparently did nothing to transform SS officers' moral outlook.<sup>3</sup> In his own defense of beauty, the artist Makoto Fujimura recognizes the fallibility of this empirical approach and dismisses causative or necessary roles for beauty altogether. Fujimura goes on to demonstrate that beauty is conducive to flourishing but not necessary to daily survival, describing beauty as an extension of God's own gratuity and self-satisfaction.<sup>4</sup> Edwards, for his part, does not depend on uncertain outcomes or a tenuous conception of generosity in his treatment of beauty. Instead, Edwards provides a robust role for beauty as an ontological marker of the divine. Edwards makes beauty a theological, relational, and revelatory necessity. In

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<sup>2</sup> Kin Yip Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God: The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Ki Joo Choi, "The Deliberative Practices of Aesthetic Experience: Reconsidering the Moral Functionality of Art," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 194.

<sup>4</sup> Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting With Beauty for Our Common Life* (New York: Fujimura Institute, 2014), 33.

examining the thoroughgoing use of beauty in Edwards's thought, we will be able to see how beauty signals the being of God at work in the world. Far from being pragmatic and reductionistic, Edwards's use of beauty both appreciates beauty for its own sake and gives beauty an active role in conversion, ethics, and revelation.

I will begin by first explicating Edwards's account of beauty in both an early and a late source: Edwards's treatises "The Mind" (1723) and *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765), which set forth beauty as being of two kinds, primary and secondary, and describe beauty in terms of proportional harmony, or the "consent" of beings to one another. It is in the context of this consent that beauty is what I have described as an "ontological marker" of divine being-in-relation, a unifying principle in Edwards's thought. Secondly, I will discuss some recent readings of Edwards to show how beauty as ontological marker has been dissected in two interpretations of Edwards's work. I will conclude by employing Edwards alongside another contemporary discussion of aesthetics—the work of Elaine Scarry—to show how Edwards invites us to reconsider aesthetics in theological discourse.

### I. BEAUTY IN "THE MIND"

Before beginning with a discussion of "The Mind," some biographical background is in order. George Marsden writes that by 1722, Edwards "was pursuing his spiritual goals with such intensity [that] he was organizing his views on everything."<sup>5</sup> In this formative period of Edwards's life from 1721 to 1724, Edwards was receiving his first true pastoral experiences in New York City and Connecticut and putting his theological education from Yale into practice for the first time. The intensity of these early pastoral experiences was enhanced by Edwards's own awe and contemplation of the created world around him. In the summer of 1723, between his pastoral assignments, Edwards was working on his scientific notebooks, developing his understanding of natural revelation and expressing awe at the created order he both perceived and studied in the works of Newton and Locke. As he did so, the twenty-year-old Edwards began to develop a systematic and holistic metaphysics. Marsden notes, "Everything in his religious training and in the Calvinist theologians, whom he studied . . . disposed him to think in this holistic way."<sup>6</sup> "The Mind," the treatise Edwards wrote during this formative summer, is the intellectual progeny of this holism. "The Mind" categorizes different kinds of beauty and positions beauty as that which reflects right relationship to all being. As such, it is an ideal starting place for thinking about the role of beauty in Edwards's metaphysics and in the life of God.

Edwards begins "The Mind" by asking, "[W]herein is one thing excellent and another evil, one beautiful and another deformed?" He immediately asserts, "It is an equality, or likeness of ratios . . . . Excellency . . . seems to consist in equality."<sup>7</sup> Edwards blends a moral concern with an aesthetic concern: that which is excellent must also be beautiful. Beauty, interchangeable in "The Mind" with excellency, thus "consists in similarness, or

<sup>5</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Marsden, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Mind," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader: Revised Edition*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 22.

identity of relation.”<sup>8</sup> Deformity is dissimilarity, occurring in the disagreeability between beings. Beauty or excellency is, on the other hand, “the consent of being to being, or being’s consent to entity. The more the consent is, and the more extensive, the greater is the excellency.”<sup>9</sup> Beauty, which consists in this consent, becomes the ontological marker of proper proportionate relationship. “Consent,” as opposed to disagreement, refers to this proportionality, or analogy, of one sort of being to another. This is where Edwards’s holism comes into focus, and Marsden summarizes Edwards’s view succinctly in stating that “beauty and excellency consisted in right relationships to the whole picture, ultimately to the whole of being.”<sup>10</sup> For his part, John Bombaro provides a slightly wordier—but no less helpful—summary of these ideas: “‘Consent,’ in Edwards, is the mutual reception of one mind to another that they should actively join themselves to one another. It is the act of the unified mind’s capitulation to the (beautiful) idea of shared existence—a union. Consent not only establishes, as it were, the terms of ‘agreement’ or love between minds, but it ontologically constitutes the union itself.”<sup>11</sup> For this consent to take place, there must also be apprehension, or vision. Edwards states that “pleasedness in perceiving being always arises, either from a perception of consent to being in general, or of consent to that being that perceives.”<sup>12</sup> Consent requires mutual perceiving; and, of course, there is also an intuitive link between beauty and sight. If perception is required, then there must always be a referent, for “one alone, without reference to any more, cannot be excellent; for in such a case there can be no manner of relation no way, and therefore, no such thing as consent.”<sup>13</sup> Following Edwards’s line of thinking, the ultimate referent is, of course, God, and in “The Mind” Edwards shows that God is the only truly extant referent, the only being who exists in and of itself: “[T]he greater a being is, and the more it has of entity, the more will consent to being in general please it. But God is proper entity itself, and these two therefore in him become the same; for so far as a thing consents to being in general, so far it consents to him.”<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, Edwards also distinguishes between two kinds of beauty in “The Mind”: natural beauty and spiritual beauty. Examples of natural beauty are “the beautiful shape of flowers, the beauty of the body of man and of the bodies of other animals.”<sup>15</sup> These instances of beauty, being material and therefore sensory, are “shadows of being,” which are beautiful insofar as they have a proportionate or analogous relationship to true Being and source of beauty in God’s self. Spiritual beauty, or “harmonies” as Edwards calls them, are “of vastly larger extent; i.e. the proportions are vastly oftener redoubled, and respect more beings, and require a vastly larger view to comprehend them.”<sup>16</sup> The Platonic privileging of the spiritual over the material is a foregone conclusion in Edwards,

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> John J. Bombaro, *Jonathan Edwards’s Vision of Reality: The Relationship of God to the World, Redemption History, and the Reprobate* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 61.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards, “The Mind,” 26.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, 26–27.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, 25–26.

and a large portion of “The Mind” sets forth to demonstrate the superiority of the spiritual being to the physical and, ultimately, Edwards’s conviction that “nothing else has a proper being but spirits.”<sup>17</sup> While the natural world, and the beauties within it, constitute a kind of language of God—revealing God’s character and power insofar as the natural world connects to the being and person of God via analogy and proportion—true vision and capitulation to the being of God is possible only as a spiritual reality. Natural revelation is given weight in Edwards, but on its own natural revelation is not enough to perceive God fully, or even accurately.

To summarize Edwards’s thought in “The Mind,” the beauty of the physical world draws its line of sight from the beauty of divine being. As Edwards’s holism again comes into focus, we see the concept of beauty developing as a central thread in Edwards’s metaphysics, in his understanding of revelation, and in his ethics. For Edwards, to be is to have beauty, to experience revelation is to at last perceive or be conscious of beauty, and to act virtuously is to have one’s affections trained on beauty. To reiterate, beauty functions in Edwards as an ontological marker of the divine. What is difficult about Edwards’s use of beauty is that he treats as beauty as an ultimately spiritual reality. Those things that catch our eye or move our imagination only do so as intimations of spiritual excellencies. And yet while Edwards’s valuation and bifurcation of spiritual and physical is an important categorical distinction to make, there is another sense in which Edwards does not divide the two at all. As an analogy—however imperfect—to a spiritual reality, the beauty of the world is consonant with the beauty of the divine, calling human persons to both recognize the Triune God and live in accord with the Divine Life. This will be made clearer below in Edwards’s late work *The Nature of True Virtue*.

## II. BEAUTY IN *THE NATURE OF TRUE VIRTUE*

Written near the end of Edwards’s life, *The Nature of True Virtue* was part of Edwards’s foray into what Marsden describes as an “international conversation on moral philosophy.”<sup>18</sup> Here Edwards begins with what amounts to a categorical statement: “[W]hen it is inquired, what is the nature of true virtue? this is the same as to inquire, what is that which renders any habit, disposition, or exercise of the heart truly beautiful?”<sup>19</sup> To introduce his answer to this question, Edwards distinguishes between particular beauty and general beauty. This is in line with his earlier distinction between natural beauty and spiritual beauty in “The Mind,” though Edwards’s terminology has evolved somewhat. Rather than differentiating the beauty of the world from the spiritual beauty of God, Edwards goes further to differentiate between that which is beautiful in a specific place and time, and that which is permanently and ultimately beautiful.

Particular beauty is “that by which a thing appears beautiful when considered only with regard to its connection with, and tendency to some particular things within a limited ... private sphere.”<sup>20</sup> This “limited sphere” may be nature, or it may be a person’s own

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 467.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader: Revised Edition*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 244.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, 245.

preferences; importantly, it is something contingent, beautiful “in connection with” something else, dependent on limited vision for its relative beauty. General beauty, on the other hand, is permanent and eternal, requiring no such contingency. General beauty is “that by which a thing appears beautiful when viewed most perfectly, comprehensively and universally, with regard to all its tendencies, and its connections with everything it stands related to.”<sup>21</sup> Notably, Edwards claims that “the former [particular beauty] may be without and against the latter [general beauty].”<sup>22</sup> In this sense, it is general beauty that constitutes true beauty, or that which bears the ontological mark of God’s own being. True beauty is a “general beauty of the heart,” a beauty which transcends the particularities of context and time to reveal itself as beautiful when viewed “most perfectly” in sight of the whole.<sup>23</sup> True beauty, for Edwards, is evidence of the unifying reality of one’s right relationship with God.

It is clear that Edwards tends, once again, towards holism. And where is the holism to be found but in God? Having distinguished particular and general beauty, Edwards’s mature work in “True Virtue” seeks to make God—as the only being which is generally, perfectly beautiful—“the first and the last” in ethical discourse, as in all things. To describe God as such, Edwards begins by writing that true virtue is that which “most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general.”<sup>24</sup> For Edwards, as described by Marsden, “[God’s] being and beauty . . . were the sum and comprehension of all existence and excellence,” and it is in this way that we are brought at last to Edwards’s thesis, that “true virtue, or universal benevolence, is possible only if one’s heart is united to God, who is love and beauty and the source of all love and beauty.”<sup>25</sup> In stating this thesis, Edwards elegantly points back to his concept of consent, or capitulation, to Being: “True virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general. . . . [I]t is that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general, that is immediately exercised in a general good will.”<sup>26</sup> It is this benevolence that transcends particular beauty, and it is transcendent in terms of its motive; that which has a peace with that which is generally beautiful takes its cue from the being of God, making the goodness and happiness of God’s general beauty the acting subject’s goodness and happiness.

If this sounds remarkably like conversion, it is because conversion is precisely what Edwards is getting at. Marsden writes, “For Edwards, a truly spiritual sense of beauty was what distinguished the regenerate from the unregenerate.”<sup>27</sup> As a marker of divine being, beauty also becomes a marker of the regenerate life. As dispositions are brought into line with the life and person of God, people are caused both to apprehend beauty and—by God’s grace—to become virtuous themselves, becoming capable of committing acts of true beauty: “[T]rue virtue primarily consists, not in love to any particular beings, because

<sup>21</sup> Edwards, 245.

<sup>22</sup> Edwards, 245.

<sup>23</sup> Edwards, 245.

<sup>24</sup> Edwards, 245.

<sup>25</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 268.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards, *Nature of True Virtue*, 245.

<sup>27</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 465.

of their virtue and beauty, nor in gratitude, because they love us; but in a propensity and union of heart to Being simply considered.”<sup>28</sup>

To review, in the late thought of Jonathan Edwards is found a more thorough presentation of his early thought on beauty in his description of an aesthetic sense that is inseparable from revelation, conversion, and virtue. Having now described Edwards’s use for beauty in both an early and a late work of his theological philosophy, I will turn to contemporary Edwardsian scholarship to show how philosophers in the twentieth century have read and understood Edwards’s aesthetics in philosophical discourse. I will begin with a discussion of Sang Lee’s chapter “Imagination as Aesthetic Sense” in his seminal work *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, as it is nearly impossible to begin this discussion elsewhere. I will then address Roland Delattre’s *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* before concluding with a comparative discussion of Edwards’s aesthetics with Elaine Scarry’s work on ethics.

### III. TWO INTERPRETATIONS: SANG LEE AND ROLAND DELATTRE ON EDWARDSIAN BEAUTY

Sang Lee writes that Edwards understands beauty as “the content of the law according to which God creates and upholds the world,” or “the eternal repetition of God’s internal being.”<sup>29</sup> God’s beauty as “a form of similarity” implies that there are other inferior—but not un-beautiful—forms of similarity.<sup>30</sup> In Sang Lee’s analysis, these similarities are identified by “the habit of mind itself,” which Lee describes as “the sense of beauty.”<sup>31</sup> Importantly, this “aesthetic sense is not a separate faculty but rather the active tendency of the entire self that determines the direction of all the functions of the human person.”<sup>32</sup> Coextensive with Lee’s development of Edwards’s understanding of the mind as that which operates the entire person, the aesthetic sense is an extension of the mind’s activity.<sup>33</sup> In this line of thinking, Lee writes, “The sense of beauty is the habit of mind, the direction of the whole self.”<sup>34</sup> This disposition of the mind, to use Lee’s terminology, “move[s] the self towards beauty and value.”<sup>35</sup> Yet a problem remains: how is it that a mental or spiritual process—and Edwards was a consummate idealist—be at the same time a sensory organ? To resolve this tension, Lee demonstrates that the logical conclusion is to make the mind itself into a sense organ, an “amalgamated totality” of “active and receptive dimensions of the mind and heart.”<sup>36</sup> Edwards’s holism, again, comes to the forefront, and Lee does not hesitate to show that the perception of beauty championed by Edwards leaves “behind him the older separatistic conception of the moral or aesthetic sense. In [Edwards], the imagination, affections, and the understanding

<sup>28</sup> Marsden, 248.

<sup>29</sup> Sang Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 82–83.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Lee, 148–49.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, 150.

<sup>33</sup> Lee appeals to Edwards’s famous sermon “A Divine and Supernatural Light” throughout his discussion of the aesthetic sense to make his argument, showing how for Edwards apprehension of the divine was not passive reception but an active perception of that which is truly beautiful and excellent (Lee, 150).

<sup>34</sup> Lee, 155.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, 155.

<sup>36</sup> Lee, 159.

converge in an integrated event of immediate [aesthetic] sensation.”<sup>37</sup> Lee goes on to demonstrate the ontological function of this sense, describing it as “the expression of the very being or essential disposition of the human self.”<sup>38</sup> Just as beauty is an ontological marker of the divine, the sense of beauty is an ontological marker of what it means to be human. If beauty and the sense of beauty are the key to understanding the relationship between human beings and the Divine Being, then Lee’s demonstration of Edwards’s use of beauty clearly has implications for epistemology (what Edwards the theologian would call revelation) and moral transformation (what Edwards the theologian would call conversion). My differentiation here between Edwards the philosopher and Edwards the theologian is well-trod ground, but it must be said that Lee does not demonstrate the explicit function, what I in this paper have called *use*, of Edwards’s aesthetics in his theology—although Lee certainly understands this. As a philosophical project, Lee’s work succeeds in describing Edwards’s philosophical frame as whole but still leaves us looking for a use for Edwards’s aesthetics in his constructive theological work.

We will now move from Sang Lee to the work of Roland Delattre, whose *Beauty and Sensibility* is one of Edwardsian scholarship’s original investigations into Edwards’s aesthetics. Delattre’s thesis is that “the aesthetic aspect of Jonathan Edwards’s thought and vision . . . provides a larger purchase upon the essential and distinctive features of his thought than does any other aspect . . . [whether] Platonist, scholastic, Calvinist, or mystic.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike Lee, who gave Edwards’s aesthetics an important if not definitive role in his description of Edwards’s dispositional ontology, Delattre approaches beauty and sensibility as a hermeneutical lens through which to view the entirety of Edwards’s work. While Lee approached what he described as an “aesthetic sense” as a manifestation of Edwards’s dispositional ontology, Delattre takes Edwards’s concepts of beauty and sensibility to be guideposts that “lead us to . . . dimensions of [Edwards’s] thought most peculiarly his.”<sup>40</sup> Delattre—a self-described Niebuhrian<sup>41</sup>—hopes that Edwards’s work on beauty can provide the Christian faith with semiotic clarity, leading to “a reformation through resymbolization in word and deed.”<sup>42</sup>

Delattre begins by stating that, for Edwards, “beauty is the central clue to the nature of reality,” by which he means that “the concept of beauty, and the perception and enjoyment of spiritual beauty in particular, offers as deep a penetration of [divine] mysteries . . . as is available to men.”<sup>43</sup> Revisiting Edwards’s concept of consent, Delattre writes, “The primary beauty of being’s cordial consent to being and the image of such beauty in the secondary beauty of harmony and proportion provide [Edwards] with the

<sup>37</sup> Lee, 163.

<sup>38</sup> Lee, 163.

<sup>39</sup> Roland Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), vii.

<sup>40</sup> Delattre, vii.

<sup>41</sup> Delattre, ix–x. Delattre admits to having Edwards brought to his attention by H. Richard Niebuhr during the construction of his doctoral dissertation. Niebuhr’s own concern with reconfiguring Christian ethics and the role of the church in the mid-twentieth century factors into Delattre’s constructive aim of presenting an Edwards “retranslating” the Christian tradition in his own time.

<sup>42</sup> Delattre, viii.

<sup>43</sup> Delattre, ix–x.

surest clue to the mysteries of things that are and the things that are good.”<sup>44</sup> Beauty—by Delattre’s reading and my own—is “the first principle of being,” structuring that which is normative, universal, and perfect.<sup>45</sup> Beauty as “the surest clue to the mysteries of things that are and the things that are good” is Delattre’s phrase for beauty’s role as an ontological marker as described in this paper’s thesis.

Delattre pairs this concept of beauty with Edwards’s concept of sensibility, a faculty that corresponds to one’s sense of beauty. Like Lee, Delattre treats sense perception of the beautiful as an important function in its own right as that which draws us towards the “clues” that beauty represents. This perception is described in Edwards’s *Religious Affections* as a “spiritual disposition and taste” of that which is beautiful, and it is this sense that leads humans to moral excellency like a moth to the flame.<sup>46</sup> Thus Edwards imparts a “sensible element” to human understanding, which likewise makes the will—the understanding that helps the will act upon what it finds most desirable—amenable to the affections, which provide sensory data to the will.<sup>47</sup> Delattre’s opinion is that while the sensory aspect of Edwards’s aesthetic concept has been given significant attention—even more so since the publication of Sang Lee’s work—there has not been “a systemic examination of his conception of beauty that can stand comparison with the careful attention devoted to his conception of . . . sensibility.”<sup>48</sup> To remedy this, Delattre offers an interpretation of Edwards’s concept of beauty that is both philosophical and theological: “The preeminence of beauty among the divine perfections corresponds to the central place of beauty in [Edwards’s] vision of reality as one grand system of being and good. . . . All of his systematic works . . . offer both theological and philosophical arguments for the position he defends. He sees the two tasks as essentially one because their common object is the end One.”<sup>49</sup> Beauty is the first principle of being, the ontological marker calibrating both Edwards’s philosophical and theological engagement. Beauty marks the “one grand system of being and good” that Delattre describes, true to Edwards’s own holistic vision of a universe in which a sense of the beautiful links knowledge of God to conversion and right action. The use of beauty, in Edwards’s and Delattre’s view, is to differentiate that which is of God from that which is not, to teach and stimulate truly virtuous and excellent action in the community of the saints, and to turn the awakened hearts of reprobates from darkness to light. The common goal of this project is the blessed consent of being to being, or of general beauty to particular beauty, and in this also the elevation of human beings from discontinuity to continuity with the great whole, the narrative of redemption that God plays out in the world.

<sup>44</sup> Delattre, ix–x.

<sup>45</sup> Taking stock of Delattre’s work, Sang Lee actually collapses Delattre’s understanding of beauty in Edwards into his own concept of dispositions: “If both beauty and disposition are essential to the divine being, they are then coordinate categories. The essence of the divine being is the beautiful disposition and the dispositional beauty. The category of disposition articulates the inherently dynamic character of the beauty of God” (Lee, *Philosophical Theology*, 176).

<sup>46</sup> Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Delattre, 5–6.

<sup>48</sup> Delattre, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Delattre, 15.

## IV. ELAINE SCARRY AS EDWARDSIAN ETHICIST

In closing, I will now consider Elaine Scarry and her book *On Beauty and Being Just*, which articulates an account of beauty as the means and end of education and ethics. Scarry's anchoring principle is that "beauty brings copies of itself into being."<sup>50</sup> Beauty is that which begets beauty, and thus the "perpetuat[ion] of beauty . . . incite[s] the will towards continual creation."<sup>51</sup> There is something of an infinite regress here—Scarry does not offer any account of a divine person behind any kind of primordial or original beauty—but the immediate implications of this description of beauty are clear: beauty demands creativity through evaluation and reinvention. Scarry describes two genres of errors of beauty. The first error is in the realization that something once thought beautiful is, in fact, not beautiful; in Edwardsian terms we might call this an instance of particular beauty. The second error, "more grave" than the first, is "the sudden recognition that something from which the attribution of beauty had been withheld deserved all along to be so denominated."<sup>52</sup> Again, to apply Edwards's own distinction to Scarry's thought, we might say that this second error is the failure to regard an object or person as beautiful in the eternal, general sense. Insofar as ethics are concerned, Scarry wants to describe the virtuous life in the context of "the shifting weights of beautiful things" that we navigate as we try to ascertain the true and the beautiful.<sup>53</sup> Scarry at first sounds as though she is separating herself from Edwards when she insists that beauty is found only in particulars and that errors of beauty frequently make "a composite of particulars" that erase distinctions between beautiful objects.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Edwards's holism would lead him to find that which is generally beautiful in the context of the larger whole. This is not to say that Edwards erases distinctions, but that distinctions make sense only as part of a larger composite. Beauty, for Edwards, is not individual but relational. For her part, Scarry does not skimp on this relational aspect of beauty either: "At the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you—as though the object were designed to 'fit' your perception. . . . It is as though the welcoming thing has entered into, and consented to, your being in its midst."<sup>55</sup> Echoing Edwards's own language of consent, Scarry marks beauty as that which transports us from one state to another. Beauty marks a new state, results in relational and perceptual transformation, and elevates the perceiver to a new state of being. Here, Scarry does somewhat fall into the trap of beauty-as-causation, which was mentioned in this paper's introduction. For Scarry, beauty's application is in its welcome, which, Scarry argues, causes a transformation of moral judgment. A further Edwardsian inflection, however, can correct Scarry's move to a causative understanding of beauty: if we remove the comma and describe beauty as "the welcoming thing [which] . . . consented to your *being* in its midst," we approach Edwards's description of beauty in *The Nature of True Virtue* as that which simply is the marker of true excellency and

<sup>50</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Scarry, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Scarry, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Scarry, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Scarry, 18–19.

<sup>55</sup> Scarry, 25–26.

goodness. This ontological reality of beauty disposes of causation by making beauty that which is “Being, simply considered.”<sup>56</sup> This Being, which has “the most being, or has the greatest share of existence,” must also have “the greatest share of the propensity and benevolent affection of the heart,” true virtue in the Being of God alone, against which all else is beautiful insofar as it participates in that capitulation to Being that Edwards calls consent.<sup>57</sup> With Edwards’s notion of consent in view, we can now calibrate Scarry’s work on ethics with an Edwardsian lens. Her qualifications that “Beauty is sacred,” “Beauty is unprecedented,” and “Beauty is lifesaving” can be understood in terms of their ontological-general status as being part of God’s own person, outside of their immediate application.<sup>58</sup> As sacred, unprecedented, lifesaving, “beauty, sooner or later, brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors,” and thus “beauty is a starting place for education” and that which, classically speaking, grows out of education: ethics.<sup>59</sup> Beauty provides, in Scarry’s view, “a plentitude and aspiration for truth.”<sup>60</sup> Scarry’s work, then, can be read as an Edwardsian application of beauty’s *use* as the ontological marker of God’s own excellence and goodness. Beauty converts (as education), inspires (as “excellence,” or moral norm), and beauty teaches (as revelation).

#### CONCLUSION

In closing, it will be helpful to reiterate just what an Edwardsian use for beauty is. Edwards provides a robust use for beauty that resorts neither to tenuous appeals to causation nor to contemporary descriptions of aesthetics as beneficial at best and distracting at worst. Instead, Edwards has a use for beauty by making beauty the binding thread between God, the world, and the creature, an ontological marker of a just relationship with the divine and proper proportion. That which is beautiful is that which is apprehended in its proper setting; in Edwards’s holistic focus, things of true beauty appear most clearly “in their whole nature and the extent of their connections in the universality of things.”<sup>61</sup> Beauty, in Edwards, is the ontological marker of “proper entity itself” as a “universal definition of excellency.”<sup>62</sup> As such, beauty is neither peripheral nor accidental, but central to Edwards’s theological system as a whole as that which demarcates the divine and, in the apparent—if imperfect—beauty of our common life, our own human relationship to Divine Being. In providing this robust role for beauty, Edwards can give theologians and ethicists an opportunity to revisit aesthetics not as a sideshow, but as central to their task and calling.

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<sup>56</sup> Edwards, *Nature of True Virtue*, 248.

<sup>57</sup> Edwards, 249.

<sup>58</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 23–24.

<sup>59</sup> Scarry, 31.

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<sup>61</sup> Edwards, *Nature of True Virtue*, 245.

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# Reading Art and Hearing God

## Learning to Read Creation

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*The heavens are telling of the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
And night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
Their voice is not heard.  
Their line has gone out through all the earth,  
And their utterances to the end of the world.*

—Psalm 19:1–4 (NASB)

*Poetic reverie . . . never falls asleep. Starting with the simplest of images, it must always set the waves of the imagination radiating.*

—Gaston Bachelard<sup>2</sup>

In his *De doctrina Christiana*, St. Augustine depicts creation as a network of signs.<sup>3</sup> Created beings sign forth a generative excess. Because finite beings do not exhaust or produce their own being they elicit a sense of a transcendent act of generosity, making it possible for the particularity of the creature to become a sign of the Creator.<sup>4</sup> Like any form of communication, reading the signs may not be immediate. Even the sign-character of created things may not be evident. So, what do we do when we cannot recognize creation as a sign of the Creator? Or, the question that I find most pressing for

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<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 1964), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* (*Teaching Christianity*), ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2014) (henceforth *De doct.*).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 82–90; Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 41–58.

this context, how do communities that are committed to discerning the divine cultivate a sense of the sign-quality of creation?

Augustine himself has a sense that there is a broken relationship between creatures as signs and their Creator. He notes that there are three kinds of things: pure signs (like words), pure realities that are not signs for anything else (of which God is the only instance), and realities that can also be signs.<sup>5</sup> Because creatures are realities to which our signs refer, the sign-reality relationship can seem to terminate in creatures, full stop. Consequently, our vision needs to be retrained in order to recognize that creatures are in fact signs of God. So “teaching Christianity”—one way of translating “*De doctrina Christiana*”—entails in part an induction into a linguistic practice, a way of “reading” creation.

I propose that such “reading” of creation—a recognition and comprehension of the sign-character of created beings—is analogous to synesthesia. In strict cases of synesthesia, one perceptual mode generates the simultaneous experience of another perceptual mode—i.e., an aural stimulus also generates a visual sensation, such as when the sound of a particular note or instrument is accompanied by a specific color (known as “chromesthesia”). Synesthesia is consequently called “cross-modal” perception because perception according to one sense faculty (or mode) is experienced simultaneously with another sense faculty. I will argue that the church can use art, which is already embedded in practices of sign-making, to cultivate skill in reading the signs of creation by developing a kind of synesthetic perception.<sup>6</sup> My argument will have three steps: first, I will clarify what I mean by synesthesia in the experience of a work of art. Second, I will argue that Christian use of art functions analogously to the *triplex via*, principally through making something familiar appear strange to us.<sup>7</sup> Ercole de’ Roberti’s painting *The Dead Christ* will provide an example of how one work of Christian art deploys a kind of temporal foreshortening in order to make something appear strange and, consequently, generate a synesthetic experience.<sup>8</sup> And third, I will return to the sign-character of creation to reconsider how aspects of creation might “say” something beyond the economy of

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *De doct.*, I.2.

<sup>6</sup> A few words about the use of the category of “art” in this essay: I do not intend to restrict my reflections to the world of fine art or “high art,” though this is certainly included. Rather, “art” includes multiple mediums, the production of which demands some degree of artistry or artistic discipline (even if this artistry is fairly rudimentary, as in congregational singing of hymns), such as music, drama, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, etc. For convenience, I will focus on instances of “high art.” However, my reflections should be equally applicable to less refined productions of art like regular church singing and performance. Further, although I focus almost exclusively on painting and visual art—which is more readily connected to the theme of “reading”—I believe my reflections apply equally well, *mutatis mutandis*, to non-visual arts.

<sup>7</sup> This use of the *triplex via* is derived from W. Norris Clarke’s argument that religious art and metaphysics are parallel especially in the common act of remotion (negation)—i.e., by making the familiar strange in application to God or the transcendent. Cf. W. Norris Clarke, “The Metaphysics of Religious Art: Reflections on a Text of Saint Thomas,” in *The Creative Retrieval of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Thomistic Philosophy*, New and Old (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 152–70.

<sup>8</sup> For helpful discussion and video footage of de’ Roberti’s painting, see Chloë Reddaway, “Time and Eternity: Yesterday, Today, and Always | The Audacity of Christian Art,” The National Gallery, video, 6:39, October 26, 2017, <https://youtu.be/nGUX5oLSA9o>.

words. This third step will have the benefit of showing how art might contribute to theological epistemology.

# I

The universe is analogous to scripture at least to the extent that it generates a potentially endless series of commentaries. Art is one form of commentary on the universe of things we inhabit. In a sense, the simple existence of this commentary community suggests an excess in all things as “signs,” a sense that “things are not only what they are,” and they “give more than they have.”<sup>9</sup> I will return to this theme in the final section, but for now I want to consider a more specific lesson that might be drawn from art as a kind of commentary tradition. Nicholas Wolterstorff draws attention to the notion of “fittingness” in art, which is the proportionality between things of different types.<sup>10</sup> Art comments on creation by finding fitting modes to re-present it. Fittingness—e.g., that big is more appropriate for loud and small for quiet—relies on some form of synesthesia. According to Wolterstorff, there are two general uses of the word “synesthesia.” In one, what Wolterstorff calls “strict synesthesia,” it refers to the direct production of a sensation in a different mode than the original perception. In the second, what he calls “loose synesthesia,” a mode of sensation “is produced merely by *thinking* of something not in that modality, without any sensory stimulus actually occurring.”<sup>11</sup>

Christian art, especially insofar as it is in continuity with the tradition of icons, relies on one kind of “loose” synesthesia, which through habituation could become more like “strict” synesthesia: reading images. Initially, such reading is loosely synesthetic because it contains a moment that requires deliberate thought between the seeing and the reading. However, like all reading, through increasing skill, the deliberative effort diminishes so that eventually comprehending the sense (meaning) of the visual signals (the perception of the text) becomes almost entirely transparent in the act of seeing—i.e., seeing and reading become simultaneous (we immediately perceive the word *as a word* and not simply a series of marks). In this way, the training of loose synesthesia can develop into a kind of strict synesthesia.

It might seem, however, that to speak of “reading” a work of art—at least a work of visual art—is not properly cross-modal, and consequently not synesthetic, because reading and visual art both depend on visual sense. However, my argument in the previous paragraph depends on the fact that reading itself is already synesthetic. Reading takes one form of communication that is initially *oral* and transmutes it into a visual medium. Consequently, the efficacy of the visual act of reading depends on the immediate connection between the word visible and spoken.<sup>12</sup> When a work of art depicts an *image*, rather than consisting of words, this synesthetic element is heightened, for what is not strictly a “word” is taken as communication in a word-like manner. This can be seen in the way even a realistic painting, say a portrait, goes beyond simple likeness

<sup>9</sup> Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), 26, drawing on the language of Jacques Maritain (in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* [New York: Pantheon-Bollingen Foundation, 1953], 127).

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 99.

<sup>11</sup> Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 100.

<sup>12</sup> This may then entail that cases of strict synesthesia, like chromesthesia, are different only in degree from mundane acts like reading.

to also communicate something of the character, status, or persona of the subject. The painting *tells* of the person, and so viewing it with proficiency entails *reading* its depiction. That we are able to read a painting further entails that viewing it is also an act of listening, a receptivity by which we might hear what the images and marks have to say. Though this may sound like a mere metaphor, I am only describing the fact that a painting has the ability to communicate beyond merely producing a visual sensation.

## II

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Thomas Aquinas developed a way of moving from sensation and experience to an understanding of God as communicated in and through the senses. Together constituting what is called the *triplex via* (meaning “threefold way”), it consists of three moments: affirmation, negation, and supereminence. However, it can in a sense be developed from how God is depicted in that library of literary art called the Bible.<sup>13</sup> For instance, Moses approaches a burning bush in Exodus 3. As a created reality, a relatively ordinary bush is taken to display God (affirmation). Yet, the ordinary is made strange, distanced from the regular happenings of finite things insofar as the bush is consumed by flame but not destroyed (negation). And then God supplies a name that is in some ways the evasion of a name or a name beyond names, “I am that I am” or “I will be what I will be” (3:14), going through the estranged ordinary (affirmation and negation) to an ever-greater mode of naming (supereminence).

A key way in which art can mirror this *triplex via* is by including an element of “negation” or strangeness within something that, by virtue of being created (whether representational or non-representational), is always also “affirmation.” A work can, consequently, display affirmation and negation, or the ordinary made strange, to allow the intellect to move through these two moments toward a supereminent judgment concerning God. W. Norris Clarke provides an example of such intentional strangeness in icons of the Madonna, in which either her size in proportion to the Christ-child or her strange affectless gaze is disruptive, calling attention to an excessive, transcendent dimension in the image.<sup>14</sup> I suggest that this negative moment causes a disruption in the perceptual mode, allowing for another mode to cooperate in reading the art. By making the image of the Madonna strange, a synesthetic experience is generated that allows for a moment of reading and hearing, an opening in which the transcendent can be intended.

A striking example of such negating, estranging moments in Christian art can be found in Ercole de’ Roberti’s *The Dead Christ*.<sup>15</sup> The painting is the right-hand panel on a small book-sized diptych, the left panel of which is a depiction of Christ’s birth. It is significant

<sup>13</sup> In a fuller account, I would supplement this *triplex via* interpretation of scripture and the arts with a spiritual/anagogical approach like that of James Fodor in “The Beauty of the Word Re-Membered: Scripture Reading as a Cognitive/ Aesthetic Practice,” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 161–83.

<sup>14</sup> Clarke, “Metaphysics of Religious Art,” 160; for his own, fuller analysis of the role of negation/remotion in religious art, see 159–62.

<sup>15</sup> This painting and its “strangeness” was one portion of a presentation given by Chloë Reddaway for the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge, where I first encountered it as an object of theological reflection. Chloë Reddaway, “The Problem of Painting Christ: Surprising Answers to the Greatest Artistic Challenge,” Christian Theology Seminar, University of Cambridge, November 2017.

for my reading that the diptych was commissioned (ca. 1490) for personal devotional use, most likely for Eleonora of Aragon (1450–93).<sup>16</sup> As a work of devotional art, the image is intended to be read over multiple viewings, allowing for endless resonances and spiritual connections through regular, prayerful encounter. There are several significant features of this painting, which together create an intense strangeness. To describe this, I will discuss the painting in four quadrants, though there is only one landscape that unites the whole. In the bottom-right quadrant is the largest figure, Christ's dead body in a sitting position on the tomb, supported by an angel on either side. It appears he is being moved out of, not into, the tomb, and yet this is not a depiction of the resurrection, as evidenced by the emaciated and pale flesh of Christ as well as the angels' mournful visages. To the immediate left, in the bottom-left quadrant, St. Jerome (347–420) in the desert looks upon the dead Christ with his arms open and receptive. Above Christ, in the top right, St. Francis (1181/2–1226) receives the stigmata—i.e., the marks of Christ's wounds on his own hands, feet, and side. And in the top left we see Christ's deposition—the three crosses standing on the horizon while Christ's dead body is taken down.

Together these four figures create a strong impression of the strange, of some kind of negation of the ordinary. The largest and smallest figures—the sitting, dead Christ and the deposed Christ—stand in a diagonal relationship and lead one to read everything else in the painting by their relation to these two Christs. Though four different times are depicted (deposition, pre-resurrection, St. Jerome, and St. Francis), the painting situates the times of St. Jerome and St. Francis between cross and resurrection, contemporary with the crucified and entombed Christ. The horizon of the painting recedes into the pre-crucifixion past, yet there seems to be no time beyond the dead Christ in the foreground, seated on the tomb. In a sense, the position of the viewer is made “future” to the time of the pre-resurrection Christ, both because the diagonal timeline of the painting positions the viewer there and because we approach the image knowing of Christ's resurrection. And yet this is complicated—“negated”—by the contemporaneity of St. Jerome and St. Francis. They are both temporally later than the resurrection of Christ in the same sense as we are, and yet in the world of the painting they are seen kneeling before and beholden to Christ's mortified body, seemingly on the cusp of resurrection. Likewise, the viewer can no longer take for granted her own relationship to the time(s) of the painting. The image itself disrupts our sense of time.

Not only is the time of the viewer disrupted. The positioning of St. Jerome and St. Francis raises questions about their own time and place. Both of them are kneeling with arms open and hands upturned in receptiveness. Their gazes are both transfixed by Christ's wounded body. In Christ's wounds these two receive their past, present, and future—life marked by Christ's death. De' Roberti presents an icon of the life of discipleship, life suspended between the constituting moments of Christ's death. The beginning and end of saints Jerome and Francis, it seems, are constituted by the beginning and end of Christ's death. The juxtaposition of the saints' lives of discipleship paired with the time of Christ's death provides another element of strangeness, resonating with Paul's claims that “living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil. 1:21) and “power [δύναμις] is made perfect [τελείται] in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Transposed into the temporal framing of

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Manca, *The Art of Ercole de' Roberti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 60–65, 69.

this painting, time for discipleship is opened up between Christ's deposition and preparation for resurrection.

A seemingly ordinary and mundane aspect of creaturely being is taken up in this painting and made strange. For somehow, we the viewers are drawn to see ourselves as temporally later than the four times presented, and yet simultaneously contemporary with St. Jerome and St. Francis, placed in time by the bracketing moments of Christ's death. Our time is embraced in the same disrupted present of these earlier saints, these icons of discipleship, as we too find our own time of discipleship in the extended darkness of the triduum between cross and resurrection. This strangeness, the negation of our ordinary sense of time, opens up for a response in the viewer, that we might see a "supereminent" time of Christ's self-giving love enfolding our present tense.

How, then, is this *triplex via* reading of de' Roberti's painting an instance of synesthesia? I suggest that this can be seen in two ways, one of which is signaled within the painting itself, the other in how the viewer is postured in relation to it. First, I have already noted that the temporal frame constitutes the present life of the two saints in a striking way, in a sense by "negation." I suggest that within the painting this strange temporality can be seen to be effected by the act of attention displayed by the two saints. They kneel and listen, and it is by their act of listening, signaled by their receptive and deferential postures, that their time is enveloped by Christ's triduum. Their time is written within Christ's because they attentively listen for Christ's address in the silence of his death. This is how the viewer reads the time of these saints. Second, this reading is a kind of formation or preparation, so that by virtue of the viewer's disrupted present time—which becomes identified with the present time of St. Jerome and St. Francis—the viewer is invited to listen *with* them so that by our act of listening we too might find our present life of discipleship in the span of time of Christ's death. In reading the painting, we see the attentive listening of these two saints and are thereby addressed by Christ's silence that we might listen as well, that in his death we might live.

### III

In the introduction, I raised the question of how we learn to "read" the signs of creation, how we come to see that created things are not purely "realities" but are also "signs," and suggested that art can have something of a pedagogical role. Christian art (or art used by the church), I suggested, trains our judgment through cultivating a kind of synesthesia whereby we can read or hear God's address in and through creation. I have clarified what this aesthetic synesthesia entails and given an example through a reading of Ercole de' Roberti's *The Dead Christ*. I will now return to the question of the sign-character of created being. I argue, in sum, that the training effected by church-deployed art like de' Roberti's *Dead Christ* cultivates an aesthetics of creation, which allows for reflections on theological epistemology.

First, there is an analogy between the attention needed to read a work of art and the attention needed to read creation. Only by learning to take time and focus one's attention in a posture of receptivity can one recognize the sign-character of art or creation. De' Roberti's little painting is a particularly clear example of this, both because of its complex interplay of figures and because of its intended use. The diptych was commissioned, as noted above, for devotional purposes and was made in book form. It was intended for

ongoing spiritual reflection, and its form as a book suggests an analogy with the practice of reading. In both form and function de' Roberti's painting displays the value of ongoing attention. The analogy of attention between art and creation is not merely accidental, however, for both depend on the judgment that the relationship and character of things are communicative, even if only self-communicative. The ability to communicate is both the excess of the thing, i.e., that a thing holds forth for others more than it contains within itself as its being flows outward into self-disclosure. Attention entails a desire for the object, a sense that in its communicating excess it is beautiful, worthy of attention. And this beauty is the *claritas* of the being, its intrinsic integrity shining forth, or its "fullness of intelligible content" through which we come to hear the *call* of God in creaturely beauty.<sup>17</sup>

That the form of every being is simultaneously also beauty entails that beings stand in relations of communication (at least potentially), sharing and so acting as signs, at minimum signs for themselves. If all things are in fact created by God, then it is intrinsic to every being to be dependent on its Creator. Consequently, the more perfectly a being communicates itself, the clearer its dependence on God becomes. And, conversely, the more perfectly a being communicates its dependence on God, the more clearly it communicates its own integrity and beauty. This is the excess of every being: the fact that in its self-communication to other beings it displays a fullness not reducible to, though also perfectly intrinsic to, itself. It communicates its whole being, but its "whole being" is not its own insofar as it is the surplus of God's own self-donating being. It is a sign of God, precisely as it perfectly displays itself in its own intrinsic beauty.

Interestingly, de' Roberti's painting suggests that time itself can become a sign of God, so that our present tense can come to display the span of time between crucifixion and resurrection. And this is disclosed in the painting through an analogy of attention. As we the viewers learn to pay attention to the worshipful attention of the saints, we come to see the beauty of Christ's self-giving and suffering death as the embrace of the whole of our finite, dependent time. The whole of time is recast as the radical dependency of Christ's self-emptying. As our temporality is given to signify the self-emptying of Christ in and through time's radical dependency, it points toward its enveloping source and end—the God who is neither time's opposite (as if by referring to God, temporality exhausts and evacuates its own essence) nor its simple extension (as if the reference does not exceed itself at all but simply points to more of the same). Through this act of attentive reading, time itself displays the beauty of Christ, offering its dependent, created form as a sign of the abundant act of self-donation that Christ fulfills on the cross. Christ is then both the ultimate act by which our time receives its form and the beauty toward which our time gestures.

As creaturely signs display the beauty of Christ, they become more beautiful in themselves and are more desirable by participating in the desirability of Christ himself. And as we "use" the signs of creation in order to "enjoy" the beauty of Christ, we find, as Michael Hanby puts it, "that signification has its origin and end in the gift and delight between Father and Son. . . . to say that God uses [things as signs] is to suggest that things

<sup>17</sup> Brendan Thomas Sammon, *Called to Attraction: An Introduction to the Theology of Beauty* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 104.

are finally things precisely in the degree to which they participate in the doxological beauty of God, in short, in the degree to which they *become* ‘signs’ signifying and manifesting this beauty—which means that they ‘are’ only in and as relations, both to God and other *signa*.<sup>18</sup> This “use” is not a manipulative or perversely instrumentalist “use,” because it is at the same time the proper enjoyment of the thing that is always “thing” and “sign.” Created things, consequently, are perfectly enjoyed in being perfectly used for directing our delight to the beauty of creation’s transcendent source—God.

If the delight we find in the beauty of creaturely signs is finally also a partaking in the mutual delight of Father and Son, then learning to “read” creation leads to an intimate knowing of God *from within*, by participating in the movement by which Father, Son, and Spirit fully co-inhere. Consequently, spiritual literacy involves more than propositional assent. Creatures are not signs in the sense of conveying sentences the propositional content of which is a truth-claim about God. The knowledge that learning to read creation produces is not, strictly speaking, propositional (though aspects of it may be expressible propositionally—I am not advocating any pure non-cognitivism). Rather it is the knowledge that comes through intimate familiarity with and delight in the unique particularity of the object of one’s desire. What is more, it is also a knowledge that shares in the knowledge God has of God’s own self, through the intimate delight that is shared in Father, Son, and Spirit.

The knowledge that we have of God through the creaturely signs that display (through affirmation, negation, and supereminence) the God on whom they depend, then, is significantly different than the knowledge we gain about other created things. For we know other created things precisely in their discreteness, in the relative degree to which they are bounded off from ourselves. Yet God cannot be known properly in such a way, for God is not bounded in any way, and neither can we be positioned relative to God as if we are bracketed off from our existing from and in God. So we know God insofar as our being (which is itself a movement of desire) is made transparent to the movement of mutual desire in God’s triune life. This is to say that knowledge of God is simultaneously delight in God’s beauty and a prayerful contemplation of the dialogue shared by Father, Son, and Spirit. Therefore, the signs of creation are read properly when through them we come to hear God.

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<sup>18</sup> Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 34. Cf. Augustine, *De doct.*, I.35.

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# *Pudicitia* and Offering

## Examining Sarah's Depiction in San Vitale's Presbytery Mosaic<sup>1</sup>

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### PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS OF THE MOSAIC

San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, contains a lunette facing the altar with a scene depicting the hospitality of Abraham that is flanked by a smaller scene that portrays the binding of Isaac. The lunette's mosaic recounts the story offered in Genesis 18 where the three visitors come to Abraham (who serves the unnamed beings during their stay) to tell him that his wife will soon become pregnant. This is the famous scene wherein Sarah laughs at the prospect of becoming pregnant at age ninety (see Gen. 18:12–15).

The basic pericope from Genesis 18 is preserved in the visual portrayal: Abraham is serving a ram to three men who also have bread placed before them on the table at which they sit; Sarah is more remote but also present, engaged in the main event taking place. However, there are a few notable differences between the biblical text and the mosaic. First, the text does not make explicit who the three visitors are, while the mosaic seems to suggest that they could be the three divine persons.<sup>3</sup> Second, Sarah's face does not clearly reveal laughter, although it can be argued that perhaps she is "laughing" or covering a chuckle with the hand raised to her mouth.<sup>4</sup> Third, the two narratives of the

<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to numerous other scholars and colleagues for assistance and advice on earlier drafts of this essay. These include Samantha J. Scott, Jared Wiefraert, and Matthew A. Smith; furthermore, Aaron P. Johnson selflessly offered substantial insight for the research and revision of the final draft.

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, space and breadth do not permit a fuller explanation and argument for this premise, but the golden nimbi; beardless (and hence possibly timeless) identical faces of the figures; and the theological, political, and spatial contexts suggest that these could be the persons of the Trinity. Numerous early exegetes, however, argue that only the Son appears to Abraham, accompanied by two lesser angels. Some examples include Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* I.1; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV.10; and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* ch.126.

<sup>4</sup> In her description of the mosaic, Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis characterizes Sarah's mouth-covering as a chuckle (*Ravenna in Late Antiquity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 244).

hospitality of Abraham and the binding of Isaac are not placed together within the text as “neighboring” stories as they are in the mosaic.

These differences might suggest that the visual representation has its own “narrative” that it seeks to express using the story from the biblical text. Concentrating on these distinctions might help illuminate the narrative that the artistic program attempts to articulate. To this end, the following discussion will examine these differences, particularly focusing on Sarah’s depiction to determine her specific role within this lunette and its immediate mosaic context. While it is only a preliminary inquiry that can be modified as research reveals further insight, it is nevertheless a pertinent one because much of the scholarship pertaining to San Vitale’s mosaics has focused on other characters present or other panels.<sup>5</sup> This discussion investigates Sarah’s unique portrayal, suggesting that perhaps Sarah displays the Roman virtue of *pudicitia* as her distinct offering to God. Thus, this discussion seeks to be fruitful for the general study of women in Late Antique Christian art by examining a particular depiction of Sarah in this famous Italian mosaic.

Much like in the scriptural account, Sarah appears as a significant figure in the mosaic. Although she is on the far left side of the scene (according to the viewer’s perspective), she is still engaged in the action occurring outside of her immediate placement. Her eyes are directed toward the main action of the scene and her body follows a similar posture. Although she is offset from the center of the program both spatially and visually as she is placed within a small tent-like structure, she is nonetheless connected to the episode through the directionality of her gaze.

In the mosaic, Sarah stands on the threshold of a small yellow structure large enough only for her frame; her posture is frontal and her features display naturalism. She wears a brown garment with gold frontal stripes, resembling a dalmatic tunic, and her feet are covered by red shoes or slippers. Her head, shoulders, and arms are covered by a light blue veil with the end draping from her waist to her calves in the center of her body, terminating in a tasseled end. Her left arm, bent at the elbow, rests naturally across her midsection, while her right hand bends at the elbow as well but reaches upward toward her chin with her index finger resting upon it. The colors of her garment echo the garment colors shown in the mosaics of Christ, Justinian, Theodora, and Melchizedek, and its style most closely resembles that which is worn by the men in Justinian’s court.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A selection of the scholarship on the mosaics includes the following: *The Basilica of San Vitale Ravenna*, ed. Patrizia Angiolini Martinelli, trans. Mark Roberts and Roberta Pansanelli Clignett (Modena, Italy: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1997); Giuseppe Bovini, *Ravenna Mosaics*, trans. Giustina Scaglia (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978); Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Robin M. Jensen, “Early Christian Images and Exegesis,” in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Joachim Poeschke, *Italian Mosaics: 306–1300*, trans. Russell Stockman (New York: Abbeville, 2010). While some of these do mention Sarah, most offer little more than a description of her presence in the scene.

<sup>6</sup> The mosaic of Christ is found in the half-dome of the apse, while Justinian and Theodora are depicted on the north and south panels of the apse, respectively; finally, Melchizedek is depicted along with Abel in the lunette on the presbytery’s south wall.

Her light blue veil echoes the garments that the visitors and the rightmost Abraham wear.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1: Lunette on the Northern Wall of the Presbytery in San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Photo Credit: Jared Wielfaert. Reprinted with permission.

Although construction on the church of San Vitale initially began around 532 CE, the apse and presbytery mosaics were probably constructed between 545 and 550 CE.<sup>8</sup> These portions of the church express a significant iconographic program centered around the Eucharist. The theme befits this area of the church because it surrounds the altar where

<sup>7</sup> The mosaic scene occurs in a lunette on the lower register of the left wall in the presbytery on the northern side. It is surrounded by four other discrete mosaic scenes that depict (from left to right) Jeremiah—known because of the titulus above him—the prophet holding a scroll, two angels holding a clypeus, Moses—identified by his titulus—receiving the Law, and the Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai. See *The Basilica of San Vitale Ravenna*, ed. Patrizia Angiolini Martinelli, trans. Mark Roberts and Roberta Pansanelli Clignett (Modena, Italy: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1997), 188–89.

<sup>8</sup> Poeschke, *Italian Mosaics*, 160. Agnellus of Ravenna, *The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*, trans. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 171, 190–92. This dating of San Vitale comes from the 9th century CE Andreas Agnellus of Ravenna's *The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna (Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis)*, in which Agnellus says the following: "In his reign the church of the blessed martyr Vitalis was founded by Julian the banker together with this bishop [Ecclesius] . . . The beginning of the building of the church was prepared by Julian, after the said Bishop Ecclesius had returned with Pope John to Rome from Constantinople with other bishops, sent by King Theodoric in a legation, as you have heard above" (*LPR*, ch. 57). Agnellus also provides the inscription from "the narthex of blessed Vitalis," which reads, "Julian the banker built the basilica of the blessed martyr Vitalis from the foundations, authorized by the *vir beatissimus* Bishop Ecclesius, and decorated and dedicated it, with the *vir reverendissimus* Bishop Maximian consecrating it on April 19, in the tenth indiction, in the sixth year after the consulship of Basilius" (*LPR*, ch. 77). Deliyannis notes that the year was 547 (Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, 225).

the Eucharistic action of the liturgy would have been performed.<sup>9</sup> One side of the presbytery contains the lunette with the hospitality of Abraham, while the opposite side contains the lunette with Abel's and Melchizedek's sacrifices. These images are united by the vault containing the image of the victorious nimbed Lamb that hovers over the altar. The depiction of the Lamb probably refers to the proclamation in the Gospel of John: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, NRSV). This allusion is distinctly Eucharistic because Christ's death functions like the Passover sacrifice. Yet the nimbed Lamb is fully alive and is enthroned, signifying the triumph that Christ's death engendered. Those who received Eucharist in this church would have been partaking of the sacrament while surrounded by this Eucharistic narrative. While the Eucharistic theme resonates strongly throughout the mosaics in the presbytery and its immediate spatial context, there is a general theme of sacrifice and offering that emerges among the lunettes on the south and north walls of the presbytery, which are central to this paper.<sup>10</sup>

#### A BRIEF COMPARISON: SARAH IN SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE AND SAN VITALE

Another church constructed under Ecclesius, Santa Maria Maggiore, contains a mosaic on the southern wall of the nave that also portrays the hospitality of Abraham.<sup>11</sup> In that depiction, Abraham is serving the three visitors, but he is also directing Sarah, who is preparing the bread.<sup>12</sup> The two portrayals share many features: the three nimbed visitors are seated at a table with bread before them; an oak tree shades the table with the men; Sarah appears to the left, inside of a small structure; and Abraham serves the guests with a platter upon which is an animal.

The motionless Sarah of San Vitale sharply contrasts with the active Sarah whom Abraham directs in a parallel mosaic at Santa Maria Maggiore, which was crafted nearly a century prior. In Santa Maria Maggiore, Sarah stands in the doorway of the structure from which she looks toward the scene wherein Abraham is serving the visitors. Sarah stands while her body bends toward her instructing husband as her eyes also gaze toward him; her hands are lowered toward the table, gesturing at the bread resting atop it. This scene diminishes Sarah's connection to the episode occurring to the right, wherein Abraham is serving the three visitors.<sup>13</sup> Sarah's eyes seem to look no further than the man immediately before them. Furthermore, Abraham appears in both scenes, each of which depict him as turned away from the other scene and towards the action in which he is directly involved. Thus, it appears that Sarah does not have a strong connection to the main pericope; Abraham appears as the primary actor, entertaining his visitors, while Sarah simply prepares the bread behind the scenes.

<sup>9</sup> Jensen, "Early Christian Images and Exegesis," 82.

<sup>10</sup> Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, 250.

<sup>11</sup> Poeschke, *Italian Mosaics: 300–1300*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Poeschke, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Herein lies a complication: in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic, there are "two Abrahams" depicted side-by-side; the one on the left features in a discrete scene with Sarah, while its right-hand counterpart is depicted in a distinct scene serving the three visitors. It is ambiguous whether Sarah's gaze in the leftmost scene is intended to extend past that "episode" and into the scene of Abraham serving the visitors. It is unlikely in my estimation that her gaze is meant to connect to both scenes.

In Santa Maria Maggiore, Sarah's depiction is ordinary, maintaining the wider motif of women in the nave as well as the general biblical account.<sup>14</sup> However, San Vitale does not maintain the same linear motif, because it is a centrally-planned church unlike the rectangular basilica-style of Santa Maria Maggiore. Sarah's appearance in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic follows the Genesis account, for she prepares the cakes just as her husband instructs her (see Gen. 18:6). Further, she is one female in a series that adorns a portion of the nave. Unlike this illustration of Sarah, the artistic program in the San Vitale mosaic suggests a different intention for Sarah's presence.

#### MOSAIC MOTIFS: EUCHARIST AND OFFERING

The lunette from San Vitale displays a larger theme of the Eucharist as indicated by the binding of Isaac, the bread set before the visitors, the ram near Abraham, and the sacrifices of Abel and Melchizedek on the facing lunette. The bread might seem to be inconsequential to the larger Eucharistic motif because it is present in the Genesis 18 account of the story, but the mosaic presents each portion of bread with an X-like embellishment, perhaps resembling the host that would be served during the liturgy.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the altar of the church lies below these two scenes, revealing their thematic connection to the physical space. The bloody sacrifice conveyed in the binding of Isaac mirrors the bloody sacrifice of Abel, while the unbloody sacrifice of the bread before the visitors mirrors that of Melchizedek. While the hand of God prevents Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, the hand of God accepts the sacrifices of Abel and Melchizedek. Compared with these prominently depicted figures, Sarah's role seems trivialized; she is out of the center of the frame, stands still, and has no particularly conspicuous function in the larger mosaic program but appears only as an added feature from the scriptural story. However, she is central to the thematic expression of this scene, and her unassuming portrayal strengthens her presence: while at first glance Sarah's inclusion in the mosaic seems peripheral, her discreet presence in fact demonstrates her narrational role, which will be further explored shortly.

As Robin Margaret Jensen aptly notes, early Christian art frequently combined Old and New Testament themes to reveal their connectedness as well as to demonstrate how the latter realized the former while the former prefigured the latter.<sup>16</sup> The mosaics in San Vitale seem to confirm this type of mixed imagery. In the lunette facing the depiction of Abraham and the visitors, Abel presents an offering from his flock that was accepted by God, and Melchizedek presents bread and wine, both of which are recorded in Genesis.<sup>17</sup> The New Testament connects Abel with Christ's sacrifice in Hebrews 12:24 wherein Christ's blood that brings the new covenant "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Moreover, the previous chapter also mentions Abel, but this time it commends the sacrifice that he made prior to his death and also notes his faith through which he continues to speak (see Heb. 11:4). The same epistle also mentions Melchizedek

<sup>14</sup> *Roma Felix – Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, ed. Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Carol Neuman de Vegvar (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 98, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 120.

<sup>16</sup> Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 84–88.

<sup>17</sup> The event featuring Abel is recorded in Gen. 4:4, and this account of Melchizedek's offering is presented in Gen. 14:18.

numerous times, but the example most pertinent can be found in chapter 7, in which Christ is a perpetual priest who has “arise[n] in the likeness of Melchizedek” (Heb. 7:15; see also 7:16–27). These New Testament interpretations of the Old Testament passages already reveal how Christians had connected these men’s offerings and offices with the sacrifice of Christ. Thus, it is not surprising that San Vitale’s mosaics that help frame the church’s Eucharistic space have adopted a similar orientation.

While there is a particular Eucharistic motif present in the mosaics surrounding the altar space, there is the more general theme of offering that is significant to the presbytery’s mosaics. This lunette with the two men presenting their offerings strongly expresses sacrificial themes, so it is plausible that its counterpart on the opposite wall does the same. The theme is less pronounced in the accompanying episode, but it might be subtly present in the plated calf that Abraham offers his visitors. Abraham’s ram offering paired with the bread upon the table partially mirrors the sacrifices on the facing lunette where Abel offers his livestock and Melchizedek his bread and wine. The lunette does include the theme of sacrifice as illustrated in the binding of Isaac that occurs on the right side. Abraham’s sword is drawn, and the young Isaac is already bound on the altar awaiting his oblatinal fate. The ram that was provided as an alternate sacrifice is also present at Abraham’s feet, while the hand of God is reaching toward the obedient father as if stopping the slaughter of the promised son as the voice of God does in the biblical text.<sup>18</sup> Early Christian authors associated this story with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross,<sup>19</sup> revealing that the mosaic presents analogies between this Old Testament story and the New Testament’s affirmation of Christ’s death. The depiction is probably proffering the scene from Genesis as a prefiguration and antitype of Christ’s death and sacrifice.

The cast of characters selected for these lunettes feature offertory or sacrificial motifs, but so do many other Old Testament figures; so one might wonder why these particular personalities were selected. It has already been noted partially that each of these figures functions as an example in the book of Hebrews, but this provides only vague connective tissue. The larger Eucharistic theme that is present in both the content and spatial context might further help illuminate this query. Notably, each of these persons (with the exception of Sarah) appears in the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*’s Eucharistic liturgy.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, their respective textual settings correspond to how they are portrayed in the mosaics. Abel’s favorable sacrifice is mentioned along with Abraham’s theophanic vision of Christ, Melchizedek as high priest, and Isaac as the promised son.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Jensen, *Face to Face*, 120–21.

<sup>19</sup> Jensen, “Early Christian Images and Exegesis,” 79–81. Jensen notes such typological assertions by Gregory of Nyssa, Paulinus of Nola, and John Chrysostom; she notes that the connection probably arises from the notion of sacrificing a beloved son as well as the connection between Mount Moriah and Golgotha.

<sup>20</sup> The *Apostolic Constitutions* dates to the late fourth century, but it was not condemned until the seventh century (see Lucien Deiss, *Springtime of the Liturgy: Liturgical Texts of the First Four Centuries*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979], 215). Although this text probably originated around Syria or Constantinople, Justinian’s reassertion of power and sending of *exarches* to Ravenna make the transmission of these ideas to the west by the mid-sixth century a distinct possibility.

<sup>21</sup> Deiss, *Springtime of the Liturgy*, 231. The connection of Abraham’s theophanic vision of Christ assumes that one of the visitors is Christ preincarnate or at least a vision of such. Additionally, the parallel with Isaac depends on highlighting his binding as pertinent to him as the promised son.

Even if there is no direct connection between the artistic program at San Vitale and the eastern Eucharistic liturgy just described, this provides textual evidence that Late Antique Christians were connecting these figures to the Eucharist (and to a lesser extent, to one another).

#### SARAH'S *PUDICITIA*

The major characters (i.e., Abraham, Isaac, Abel, and Melchizedek) and their respective actions in these lunettes all concern the theme of offering and sacrifice, but it is difficult to make this connection with Sarah and the visitors, the last of the major figures in these scenes. The middle scene of Abraham making offering to the visitors functions as the linchpin of the two other offerings in the lunette: Sarah's offering and Abraham's offering of Isaac. The visitors probably correspond to the three divine persons as a type, so their presence and centrality encourage the viewer to connect these Old Testament scenes with the Christ event; God has become incarnate in Jesus Christ to become an offering for the world that the church commemorates through the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus, when considering the lunette's portrayal of Abraham's offering of Isaac, the viewer might consider how Isaac is a type of Christ, the Lamb of God. Such connections can also be made with Sarah's portrayal within this scene, but her offering is unique to her place within salvation history and existence as a mother. I suggest that Sarah's distinct pose reveals that her offering is her own body as matriarch and co-progenitor with Abraham.<sup>22</sup>

Such an interpretation might be grasping at the wind if one only considers Sarah's depiction in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic, but her distinct position in the San Vitale mosaic offers a subtlety that might allow for such an interpretation; the peculiarity of her portrayal suggests that perhaps her presence constitutes more than narrational necessity. Jensen suggests that the mosaic from San Vitale focuses more on "the promise of progeny to Abraham than a divine theophany."<sup>23</sup> Although Jensen does not elaborate on her statement, she rightly highlights the nuance that the selected episodes together engender. Elsewhere, Jensen considers the larger artistic and theological program that these lunettes embody, explaining that the church's elevated mosaics would reflect and prefigure the Eucharistic event occurring below.<sup>24</sup>

As previously stated, in the San Vitale mosaic Sarah stands within a small structure wherein she faces the focal scene where the visitors sit, while her right hand reaches toward her chin with her index finger outstretched and her left arm rests across her torso. This static pose can be compared to depictions of *pudicitia* in Roman antique art. In Roman ideology, *pudicitia* was understood partially as a virtue related to one's public

<sup>22</sup> Sarah herself does not prefigure Christ or Christ's work as do the other main characters, but she might be a prefiguring of Mary. Suzanne Spain takes up the task of arguing that Sarah prefigures Mary, but this argument is made concerning the mosaics traditionally thought to depict *Maria Regina* in Santa Maria Maggiore. For Spain's argument, see "'The Promised Blessing': The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore," *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 4 (Dec. 1979): 530-35.

<sup>23</sup> Jensen, *Face to Face*, 119. It should be noted that Sarah's inclusion and particular depiction seem to be beyond the scope and space of Jensen's specific project. This statement comes in a section in which she is discussing various depictions of the hospitality of Abraham in a larger discussion of Trinitarian depictions in Late Antiquity.

<sup>24</sup> Jensen, "Early Christian Images and Exegesis," 82.

sexual behavior, which affected one's social presence.<sup>25</sup> This ideal was often portrayed in honorific statues that praised the named woman for her expression of *pudicitia*.<sup>26</sup> Typically, the pose entails a veiled female figure clutching her veil with one hand while the other rests across her body (typically across the midsection).<sup>27</sup> One second-century BCE statue from Rome depicts a woman in a nearly identical pose to the one Sarah maintains in the San Vitale mosaic, and a fourth-century statue from Ostia depicts a woman (possibly Fausta) similarly, but the arm positions are inverted and the woman grasps her veil to the left of her chin.<sup>28</sup>

It is not sufficient to argue that Sarah depicts *pudicitia* merely from her physical appearance, but there is also some literary evidence that connects Sarah with *pudicitia*. Augustine of Hippo's *De Civitate Dei* uses *pudicitia* to explain Sarah's chastity.<sup>29</sup> The first significant example explains that God defended Sarah's *pudicitia* when Abraham instructed Sarah to tell Pharaoh that she was his sister, and Pharaoh took her.<sup>30</sup> Augustine emphasizes God's preservation of her *pudicitia* because *pudicitia* does not just concern a woman's physical sexual behavior but also the social ramifications pertaining to it. Augustine's audience would have been aware that Sarah being taken into another man's household as a married woman would have brought *impudicitia* upon her, and thus his argument, which he hinges on Sarah, would be voided if her *pudicitia* was not firm.<sup>31</sup> *Pudicitia* does not merely concern physical injury; it can also affect social standing with one's community, including reputation and moral persona. Thus, Augustine carefully explains that despite Pharaoh taking Sarah into his house, God preserved her *pudicitia*, so that his readers would know that not only was she not physically defiled but her reputation as a holy woman was not tainted either.

The second significant example Augustine presents displays how Abraham preserves Sarah's *pudicitia* when he copulates with Hagar at Sarah's behest.<sup>32</sup> Augustine strongly affirms that Abraham has intercourse with Hagar only out of necessity for progeny. Abraham's actions are shown to be the result of Sarah's directive that he should procreate with Hagar and not because of his longing, love, or affection for Hagar; the act was entirely free of lust, gratification, or desire. Concupiscence is entirely foreign from their purely physical encounter, which further distances *impudicitia* from Sarah. It does not, however, distance Hagar from *impudicitia*. Hagar's implied *impudicitia* resonates with Augustine's larger discussion, in which he contrasts Sarah as both free person and

<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2–5. Langlands notes two important features pertaining to *pudicitia*: it did not merely refer to women's behavior but was also applied to men as a virtue, and the concept was reified into a Roman goddess as well. Moreover, *pudicitia* has a broad semantic range, but it is frequently rendered as "chastity" or "modesty."

<sup>26</sup> Jane Masségia, *Body Language in Hellenistic Art and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 127.

<sup>27</sup> Masségia, 124–25. Masségia explains that the standard pose and clothing take their name from Roman coins on which the goddess *Pudicitia* is displayed.

<sup>28</sup> Archer St. Clair, "Questions of Form and Function in the Case of Four Late Antique Statuettes," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996): 150.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine discusses Sarah's *pudicitia* largely in Book XVI.19, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XVI.19.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine does not use the word *impudicitia* with reference to Sarah. I use this word to refer to the condition (social or physical) in which *pudicitia* has been compromised.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XVI.25.

retaining *pudicitia* while Hagar is a slave woman tainted by *impudicitia*.<sup>33</sup> Roman conceptions of *pudicitia* were commonly associated with free persons, while *impudicitia* was attached to slaves; although this is not always the case, Augustine seems to affirm this typical framework as it suits his purpose.<sup>34</sup>

That Sarah could be functioning paradigmatically as a display of female chastity seems plausible. It becomes particularly curious when one considers that the mosaic illustrates Sarah in such a way that she embodies this ideal, especially as she is placed within the small structure (unlike the mosaic counterpart in Santa Maria Maggiore) but still is not separated from the main action entirely. Her role in the San Vitale mosaic is not one of helping her husband serve their guests; instead, she makes her own distinct contribution to the lunette's thematic coherence. Her presence seems to reveal Sarah as an exemplar of chastity with her own modest offering as an ideal woman, which extends beyond her simple inclusion due to the demands of the biblical text as the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic instead suggests. Although Augustine's strong affirmation that Sarah maintains and embodies *pudicitia* is not enough to deny any other interpretation of what Sarah's pose might suggest, it does support this as a plausible reading of Sarah's place in the San Vitale mosaic when paired with other visual evidence that her pose resembles earlier *pudicitia* poses in art. While further investigation would need to examine the conception of sexual virtue in Christianity as an expression of offering to God, especially related to motherhood,<sup>35</sup> the present considerations attempt to correct the neglect of Sarah in accounts of the visual program of this San Vitale lunette by indicating the most likely way in which to draw her into the thematic register of the larger episode.

#### CONCLUSION

If Sarah is in fact depicted in this Roman style of an ideal woman, then it is not difficult to imagine that in this scene she prefigures Mary, a Christian woman who strongly embodies the virtue of chastity.<sup>36</sup> The pose alone is not enough to substantiate this claim, but other considerations help make it more viable. First, the other characters in the scene prefigure Christ or the Christ-event in some way, so it is reasonable to think that Sarah would also prefigure someone related to the Christ-event. Second, Sarah does not readily fit the program of sacrificial motifs, but she does embody the promise of Christ's coming

<sup>33</sup> Augustine also does not use *impudicitia* in reference to Hagar, but the sharp contrast implies it.

<sup>34</sup> Langlands, *Sexual Morality*, 22–23. While discussing *impudicitia* in Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*, Langlands explains that *pudicitia* is necessary for the free person, while *impudicitia* often becomes part of the moral landscape for slaves because their sexual behavior can be out of their control.

<sup>35</sup> One example of such a connection might be present in the following: Brook Nelson, "A Mother's Martyrdom: Elite Christian Motherhood and the *Martyrdom of Domnina*," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 11–26. Nelson describes how a Christian mother became a Christian martyr by killing herself and her two daughters for the sake of her and her daughters' *pudicitia*. Although Nelson's project does not aim merely to connect sexual virtue with offering, it does seem to provide an example in which these two converge compatibly.

<sup>36</sup> See Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 166–68. Cameron rightly notes that even into the fourth century Thecla is still offered as a paragon of Christian chastity as demonstrated by Gregory's use in the *Life of Macrina*. Cameron also observes that the fifth-century patriarch Proclus finds Sarah to be a type for Mary in the Old Testament.

as the co-progenitor of the Hebrews alongside her husband. Third, Mary had been becoming a more central figure in Christian thought between the fifth and sixth centuries, most notably as indicated by the proceedings of the Council at Ephesus (431 CE).<sup>37</sup> If Jensen is correct in noting that the hospitality of Abraham in San Vitale moves beyond a representation of the theophanic to suggest an interpretation more focused on the promise of progeny, and these other elements are considered, then it seems plausible that Sarah here is functioning as a prefiguration of Mary.

Sarah as a type for Mary thus continues the larger artistic program of Old Testament prefigurations of the Christ-event, but how might this connect to the broader project of the space? As mentioned previously, this lunette along with its opposite mosaic counterpart are located within the sanctuary of the church, specifically residing beside the altar, and so it is not surprising that one finds sacrificial and (more specifically) Eucharistic themes within these scenes. Jensen postulates that “the artistic representations on the walls [mirror] the living human drama on the ground.”<sup>38</sup> However, this does not seem to account for Sarah’s presence specifically if Sarah is neither simply a necessary narrational feature nor another embodiment of Old Testament sacrifices as I have suggested.

The place that these mosaics occupy in the larger church space suggests that they do not merely reflect the liturgical act being performed below but that they reiterate the promise of the meaning the sacrifice contains. Sarah’s presence indicates to the viewer that the image is not one in which the Eucharistic liturgy is merely prefigured and thus mirrored in its artistic program of the lunettes. She stands as an affirmation that God’s promises are ultimately fulfilled. Her own body testifies to the promise of progeny and, in that, the coming of Christ, but this also proclaims the further promises made in the coming of Christ. Thus, as the Eucharistic liturgy is performed, the promise contained within the Eucharistic elements is evoked by the unassuming presence of the matriarch of Israel.

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<sup>37</sup> Spain acutely states that the building of Santa Maria Maggiore and the Council of Ephesus were not causally related; rather, their contemporaneity reveals the larger shift toward Mary’s prominence within Christianity (“The Promised Blessing,” 534n69).

<sup>38</sup> Jensen, “Early Christian Images and Exegesis,” 82.

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# ARTWORK

# Mary wears an áo dài

MAY-LINN BORGEN-NGUYEN<sup>1</sup>

*University of Stavanger*

Surrounded by bright neon lights,  
Mary wears an áo dài  
And a golden khan dong as a halo  
On cloud-shaped stone she keeps watch,  
Clutching her child forever  
Frozen like the night she appeared  
In that jungle by the mountain so long ago  
A place of sickness, leaves and empty stomachs  
And enough tears to drown in  
When we, her children, called «Mẹ ơi!», our mother responded «Ơi».  
Appearing not as a stranger, but as a reflection of ourselves  
And since then we have not forgotten her  
Not during starvation and pain,  
Not during the war that split our home in half,  
And not on the boats on the endless sea  
Cramped like animals on Noah's ark,  
Praying for her to appear again  
In her blue áo dài  
with her golden khan dong

Today our home is covered in red  
Although the ground and sky still looks the same  
Our churches are full  
of the young in their school uniforms  
and the old with their wrinkles and faded memories  
We regard the sculptures with awe  
Our Lady wearing our clothes and faces

<sup>1</sup> May-Linn Borgen-Nguyen is a nineteen-year-old Roman Catholic of Vietnamese and Norwegian descent. At the moment, she is studying history in order to become a teacher at the University of Stavanger, Norway.

We wonder to ourselves:

«Who are we, that the mother of our Lord should come to us?»

We know that Mary has many faces and God has many shapes

But in these simple moments, in these holy places, they are Vietnamese

#### ARTIST'S REFLECTION

As a Vietnamese Catholic there are few images as dear to me as Our Lady of La Vang, and it is also one of the best portrayals of Mary. Dressed in the traditional Vietnamese gown (áo dài) and headdress (khan dong), she symbolizes hope in difficult situations. According to folk stories, Mary showed herself to Vietnamese Catholics in the eighteenth century, a period of brutal persecution. The area where the apparition happened is called La Vang, and thereafter Our Lady of La Vang was born. In my poem, I tried to express the importance of cultural representation in religious art, with Our Lady of La Vang as a prime example.



# 7:32pm AFT: The 5th Day of Holy Week<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM CARROLL<sup>2</sup>  
*Azusa Pacific University*



<sup>1</sup> William Carroll, *7:32pm AFT: The 5th Day of Holy Week*, 2017, charcoal on paper, 30.5 x 25 cm.

<sup>2</sup> William Carroll is a US Army Veteran currently obtaining his Master's in Theology and Ethics at Azusa Pacific University. He is a native of Los Angeles, CA, and grew up in Big Bear Lake, CA. He served in the US Army from 2005 to 2013 as a Fire Support Specialist before transferring into the Reserves as a Civil Affairs Specialist.

#### ARTIST'S REFLECTION

I spent eight years from 2005–2013 in the US Army. I still find myself affected by the events for which I trained and in which I participated. The lives that were lost never disappear, and the memory of their departure is always a poignant reminder that the world is sometimes violent in unimaginable ways. I produced this piece the day after the United States dropped the “Mother of All Bombs” (MOAB) on a Taliban military target in Afghanistan. The strike itself was militarily accurate and deemed a success. The attack was carried out on Maundy Thursday.

Later that evening, after hearing the news, I walked through the Stations of the Cross; being mindful of this event led me to a deep place of uncomfortable sorrow and frustration. The next day, on the morning of Good Friday, I followed my practice of spending the morning hours in front of my easel. All that came to mind was an echo of the black and white video showing the MOAB’s detonation in Afghanistan’s Nangahar Province. In my heart, this image repeatedly contrasted with the suffering that Christ bore in his love for humanity. In the midst of this tension I attacked the easel, raging through the question of why and praying for the ability to forgive with Christ-like love, while only being able to leave a violent image with a sacred timestamp.

# Homegrown Distraction<sup>1</sup>

JADE DOMINIQUE LEE<sup>2</sup>  
*Princeton Theological Seminary*



<sup>1</sup> Jade Dominique Lee, *Homegrown Distraction*, 2018, photograph.

<sup>2</sup> Jade Dominique Lee is a second-year MDiv candidate with a background in visual arts and design and a passion to serve God and others.

ARTIST'S REFLECTION

On a stormy night last year, a tree fell at the center of Princeton Theological Seminary's campus. It fell, but it was not uprooted. The fallen tree left behind a stump; it left behind a message to interpret about tradition. This photograph was taken by a tree located near the fallen tree. No longer a blossoming body, the fallen tree is now only a stump covered by grass. It is hidden. The woman in the photograph, too, is hidden by a tree's new growth: leaves. These leaves are symbolic of the growth that continues on the campus even after the tree had fallen. Nevertheless the new leaves are a distraction, and the stump of the tree, the stump of tradition, continues to be masked and unchecked. The ugly, spidery roots of the stump still run deep and lurk beyond human eye. Only those with a hand in covering the stump up know that the fallen tree is still there.

# Untitled<sup>1</sup>

HE LI<sup>2</sup>

*Yale Institute of Sacred Music*



<sup>1</sup> He Li, *Untitled*, 2017, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 cm.

<sup>2</sup> He Li is a painter and a scholar of philosophy and theology. He is currently completing a master's program at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. His works can be found at [heliportfolio.com](http://heliportfolio.com).

#### ARTIST'S REFLECTION

The intention behind this piece is to encapsulate the Christian experience of the created world within the image of a mundane setting. I seek to do so through two primary elements: emptiness and perfection. I thus consciously avoid including ornamental elements; for the most part, I only paint things essential to the compositional structure that I had in mind at the moment of ideation. The large, flat fields of color and simple light modulation all proceed from this methodology. This principle of emptiness is informed by a very old spiritual lineage: kenosis, or emptying, has been at the heart of the Christian experience since the early days of the church.

# Toward a Theology of Confession

GARRETT MOSTOWSKI<sup>1</sup>  
*Princeton Theological Seminary*

Hail the priest of the-least-of-these,  
the one who has not come out  
of the moth-ridden sacristy for ages. Pray,  
tell them we've arrived on hangnails,  
bunions and calluses, fungus-plagued feet.

+

Ask if we may wet the dry  
stoups with our split lips  
as an emblem of the cross, set apart  
their vestment—borrowed  
stole—to clean in-between  
our sibling's toes?

<sup>1</sup> Garrett Mostowski is the new Pastor/Head of Staff at First Presbyterian Church in Miles City, MT. His work has appeared in *Caesura*, *Pour Vida*, *Christian Century*, *The Thread*, and other publications. He wholeheartedly believes that LeBron James is the greatest basketball player of all time.

+

We've come only for what's mysterious.

We require some sign, a ceremony by candlelight

to hallow our oath: "We have changed our mind

once again." We'd like the rite to revise

the course of history:

grace

bread

wine

ARTIST'S REFLECTION

I had to preach the Sunday after President Trump's election, and I kept thinking that I would rather lead a ten-minute corporate confession in place of the homily. As I was thinking about what confession even meant, I came across a prayer of confession by Reinhold Niebuhr, which ends, "May we with contrite hearts seek once more to purify our spirits, and to clarify our reason so that a fairer temple for the human spirit may be built in human society."<sup>2</sup> My poem is an attempt "to clarify our reason" for confession, culminating in the final two lines, which, I think, represent a fairer temple in society for the human spirit.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Major Works on Religion and Politics* (New York: Library of America, 2015), 699–700.

#### ADDITIONAL ARTWORK

Please note that the Spring 2018 online edition includes further works of art that, due to medium constraints, could not be included in this print edition.

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# Book Reviews

**James Calvin Davis. *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017, 240 pp. \$25.00.**

There are better and worse ways to disagree. Christians once regularly tortured non-believers, executed heretics, and went to war over theological disputes. Churches have since largely recognized that division is preferable to violence as a means of navigating controversy (5–6). In his book, titled *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church*, James Calvin Davis advises a better way for Christian communities to traverse theological disagreement. The fulcrum of Davis’s argument is forbearance, itself a virtue by being a commitment to other unifying virtues. Throughout his book, then, Davis constructs a robust account of forbearance for a church that wishes to be both confessor of unity and witness to the world.

Davis does not allow this theological emphasis to stray into pure abstraction, however. He acknowledges that disagreement is often an unavoidable event, one that can induce sharp pain and long-lasting frustration. Nor does he claim to have discovered a unifying solution fit for every ecclesial situation. Rather, he works from an explicitly Reformed tradition to recast Christian attitudes toward disagreement (x–xi). The entirety of Davis’s book asks what might be possible if Christians start viewing disagreement as an opportunity for growth.

Here, then, is Davis’s conviction regarding forbearance: “In the practice of forbearance, Christians do not create unity; we confess it” (12). It is not a solution to every problem, but “an active commitment to maintain Christian community through disagreement, as an extension of virtue and as a reflection of the unity in Christ that binds the church together” (9). Providing an entry into his project, Davis describes forbearance accordingly in his first chapter. He justifies the necessity of forbearance by pointing to biblical passages in which Christians are exhorted to bear with one another as a reflection of God’s own forbearance with the church (10–14).

Grasping this description of forbearance is key; note that forbearance is not one virtue but several. Perhaps more accurately, it is not so much a singular characteristic as a locus of commitment within a constellation of virtues. Consequently, most of Davis’s chapters focus on different virtues; those chapters, in turn, branch off to explore additional virtues. For instance, in a chapter on wisdom, Davis also includes entire sections on intelligence, discernment, empathy, and imagination. The number of virtuous characteristics that forbearance commits believers to is ever multiplying.

Material in these chapters may be familiar to readers concerned with virtue ethics, as Davis dedicates chapters to humility, patience, hope, wisdom, faithfulness, and friendship. Still, it is to Davis’s credit that he manages to fuse so many elements into a coherent and linear account of what forbearance entails. He writes with the intent to

reshape informed, theological discussions of disagreement in the church, making the book fitting for academic use. Yet, his commitment to introducing the texts and figures he uses as warrant for pursuing these virtues suggests that he anticipates a wider, popular-level audience as well.

Those texts and figures are his two primary types of evidence. The former is a series of scriptural passages, while the latter comes from church history, particularly within Reformed strains of Protestantism. Davis's choice of figures is both logical and bewildering. His selections are consistent after his identification with a Protestant and largely Reformed tradition, yet seem to resist adhering to his own claim that "diversity... serves as a fruitful (if imperfect) antidote to the nearsightedness that our finite perspectives place on us" (39). Davis's argument for the characteristics of forbearance, then, is one of admirable clarity, if not diversity.

One of the most distinctive points in Davis's discussion of forbearing virtues is his characterization of love as friendship. Christian accounts often favor a purely disinterested love for all, a non-consequentialist love capable of propelling the Good Samaritan into action (114–16). Here, however, Davis argues that Christian theology provides material enough for love that is explicitly interested in what is mutually at stake (114). This is "not a nebulous love for humanity but the commitment to love-in-community," meaning that Christian love ought to include an invested consideration of what is relationally beneficial (124).

Since something that is not beneficial to the community needs to be eschewed, Davis's account indicates that exclusion is compatible with Christian love. This realization prepares his readers for the largest objections to forbearance: concerns over truth and justice. Sympathetic to both, Davis identifies the former as a generally conservative worry over sacrificing truth in pursuit of unity (132). The latter is a broadly liberal anxiety over slowing down pursuits of justice (156). Davis responds that forbearance actually allays both concerns. He states that division over truth claims is appropriate if excluding those who fail to be inclusive (148), which in turn enables concurrent implementations of justice (166). In other words, Davis does not allow any descriptions of forbearance that would make abuse permissible. Beliefs that are explicitly hateful and dehumanizing gain no traction in Davis's account of forbearance (172).

Still, he provides little regarding parameters of forbearance beyond this exclude-the-exclusive mentality. He resists detailed and programmatic recommendations for individual communities struggling with disagreement. What of disputes where one view is not explicitly dehumanizing but is bluntly incompatible with another? Davis is often quick to note that forbearance does not dissolve disagreement, but forms a certain type of response, often shaping our beliefs in the process. He does not, in my reading, offer commentary on what happens when that process fails. Instead, Davis writes his closing chapter on the possibility of forbearance as a witness and model for civil society.

Even as someone who knows that easy answers to difficult questions are scarce, this lack of attention on the possibility of failure disappoints me. Yet, as one who often feels perplexed about the distinctiveness of Christian witness in contemporary society, I think that Davis's work proves itself worthwhile for both personal and ecclesial betterment.

Perhaps, much like Davis's hopes for a church that habitually forbears, pursuing my own remaining questions will be not only remedial, but formative.

NAOMI KETCHENS

MDiv Middler

Princeton Theological Seminary

**James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*.  
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017, 256 pp. \$22.99.**

*Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* completes the three-part "Cultural Liturgies" series by James K. A. Smith, a project dedicated to recovering an anthropological account of humans as lovers shaped by liturgies. The first two books focus on Christian worship and imagination, and are recommended prior to engaging the third. In book three, Smith takes this anthropology public and rebuffs prevailing tendencies to spatialize and rationalize politics. He successfully realizes both aims of the work: to "work out the implications of a 'liturgical' theology of culture" and "offer an alternative paradigm that moves us beyond contemporary debates in political theology" (8).

Chapters 1 and 2 uncover the religious nature of politics and the political nature of Christianity, blurring neat distinctions between state and church. Supposedly 'neutral' liberalism directs people towards ultimate ends; supposedly 'apolitical' Christianity engenders penultimate, earthly justice (28). Leaning on Augustine and nodding toward Hauerwas, he argues the earthly city is constituted by "formative practices aimed at a *telos* that is often antithetical to the goods of the city of God" (51). Smith then "delineate[s] how Christian worship carries the scriptural vision of the church as *polis*" (54). The liturgy of Christian worship is a "twofold political act involving the formation of political agents and the proclamation to [rulers] that the created order of culture is subject to a higher law" (60). Christ's resurrection and ascension reorganize and reconfigure earthly authority: rulers now serve a temporary (i.e., *secular*) function under Christ's kingship, which negates their "claims to be mediators of ultimacy" (79).

Chapter 3 takes a constructive turn to highlight the oft-overlooked "Christian legacy and imprint on Western liberalism," thereby "complicating any simple demonization or distance" (95). In many ways, political liberalism descends from the Christian political witness; to entirely eschew liberalism is to eschew Christianity's prodigal son (112). But Christian participation in earthly politics requires careful discernment, governed by the "Christological distinctiveness of the gospel and the incarnational specificity of the body of Christ" (123). Despite common assumptions, public commitment to particular dogma does not undermine pluralism; in fact, Smith contends traditional religious communities, which form virtuous people, are necessary to sustain pluralism in liberal democracy (132). Smith continues with unembarrassed earnestness, arguing that political witness must not rely on ahistorical and minimalist natural law, but be "nourished by the Christological specificity of the gospel" (151). The civil rights movement acts as an archetype for the

gospel-informed, ecclesially driven, neighbor-focused political witness he advocates (163–64).

The significant contribution of the book is that Smith locates the political center of gravity in the church *without* resorting to sectarian rejection of earthly politics. By premising politics on an Augustinian anthropology in which humans are affective creatures, not just political animals, he reveals humans are formed by political practices that direct them toward a *telos*. Politics, it turns out, is for lovers. But the church, not the state, is (or should be) the primary *polis*, which funds the imagination and animates believers. Drawing on Oliver O'Donovan, Smith recovers the concept of *saeculum*—as in, limited and passing—and can account for the mitigated function *secular* authorities play before Christ's return. He offers a political theology with a robust ecclesiology that does not capitulate to earthly politics but does not deny the impact of Christ's kingship on the political sphere either.

In chapter 6, Smith squares up to the pressing question for the cultural liturgies series: “why should we think liturgy is the counterformative discipline we’ve suggested?” (178). He dubs this the “Godfather Problem,” riffing off the *Godfather* movie, in which the family commits heinous crimes but regularly attends the liturgy. Given the liturgically centered church's participation in atrocities like the African slave trade and Rwandan genocide, it seems liturgy does not furnish imaginations and form saints like Smith suggests. He readily admits Christian liturgy is no panacea. Yet he notes other visions of the good life (e.g., capitalism, nationalism) conscript people in their own liturgies. If his anthropology is correct, competing liturgies are constantly training people to love certain ends: “We are liturgically deformed; and by the grace of the Spirit, we are liturgically reformed” (207).

It is fitting that Smith ends the cultural liturgies series with the “Godfather Problem,” as it is a substantive critique, and this section is one of the more stimulating portions of the book. While simple solutions to deformation evade, Smith proposes ecclesiological ethnography as a means to at least detect deformation. “There is no witness that isn't empirical . . . insofar as witness is embodied . . . all of our ecclesiological claims are [open] to empirical assessment” (189). He suggests local pastors act as ethnographers, conducting cultural exegesis of the rites of empire in their context. Pastor-ethnographers, by taking liturgical audits, help congregants “unmask” the rites of the earthly city and “cultivate” their heavenly citizenship (197). This conversation and coordination between theology and social science (on theological grounds) is intriguing. My one critique is that he seems to gloss over the fact that pastors themselves are prone to be inscribed in the same deformative liturgies that capture their congregants' hearts. It is good for pastors to be “locals” (1 Cor. 9:22–23), but the above case studies of theologically justified slavery and genocide are indictments against pastors who had been inscribed in liturgies of racism, capitalism, nationalism, etc. So ethnography, it seems, must involve some outside readers, an ecumenical dimension—because deformative liturgies can make even local pastors become ever-seeing but never perceiving. Smith has long been a proponent of reformed-catholicity, and exploration of an ecumenical approach to the “Godfather

Problem” could strengthen the ecclesial ethnography he proposes. Other than that, this chapter will act as a helpful charter for future pastors and theologians.

Overall, *Awaiting the King* is a productive work that accomplishes much. It is recommended to Christians concerned about worship, formation, and witness. (That accounts for quite a few of us.) For those familiar with contemporary debates in political theology, Smith provides a new voice worth heeding. But for the uninitiated, he manages to take some of the influential voices off the top of the bookshelf and make them more accessible. He also laces the book with brief, enticing analyses of narratives (films and novels) that illustrate and illuminate his arguments. Perhaps most importantly, the book is recommended because it does politics in a hopeful key—an instructive feat in these turbulent times. Smith demonstrates that when Christians are formed by the story of God bringing them into the kingdom of the Son (Col. 1:13), they have an opportunity to offer the world “a radically different way to imagine politics—a rival version of faith, hope, and love that doesn’t paper over reality but *discloses* it” (223, emphasis original).

MICHAEL NICHOLS

MA(TS) Junior

Princeton Theological Seminary

**David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, 616 pp. \$35.00.**

In attempting to translate the Bible, the most frequent norm is “translation by committee,” wherein a number of scholars settle upon the most agreeable renderings, and disagreements are handled by democratic process. Enter David Bentley Hart and his translation of the New Testament. By contrast to this approach, Hart has no interlocutors and no committees; instead, he alone translates the New Testament in its entirety from its various manuscripts (albeit not without reference to scholarly consensus). He writes, “I have come to believe that all the standard English translations render a great many of the concepts and presuppositions upon which the books of the New Testament are built largely impenetrable. . . . I [am] opposed to translation by mass collaboration on principle [ . . . because] all such renderings, it seems to me, become ineluctably mired in the anodyne blandness and imprecision of ‘diplomatic’ accord” (xv).

In many respects, this approach is refreshing. The New Testament is a diverse collection of texts written by multiple authors in a variety of literary genres, ranging from ecclesial letters to historical accounts and from poetry to parable. Hart’s translation preserves the idiosyncratic nature of each author’s voice. He does so without any attempts to “smooth over” the oddities in their writing, which would produce a Bible that reads in a more unified but less authentic tone. Hart’s translation, sometimes “rough around the edges” and sometimes downright poetic, yields a finished product that recaptures the eccentricities of the original Greek text. Hart also provides useful explanatory footnotes laden with scholarly resources, including notes of manuscript histories, word usages, and linguistic nuances. Certain notable examples include his treatment on Junia (317), an explanation of the implications of “violence” in Luke 16:16

(145–46), women’s silence in the church in 1 Corinthians 14 (345), and the word “antichrist” in 1 John 2 (481–82). His postscript contains detailed expositions of certain Greek words and their history of appearances and meanings in various texts, explaining his choices to translate them in certain ways.

In other places, however, Hart’s utterly literal approach to the text can lead to some odd results. Consider the way he renders John 1:14: “And the Logos became flesh . . . and we saw his glory, glory as of the Father’s only one” (169). Hart’s choice to render *μονογενής* as “the Father’s only one” surely adheres to his mission to leave behind doctrinal commitments, and is not without its share of comparative translations such as in the NIV or the ESV. However, some may consider rendering *μονογενής* as anything besides “only-begotten” to be a particularly theologically declarative move, no matter how much controversy the concept of Christ’s divinity may have engendered historically. Indeed, Hart spends considerable time defending his choices about the Johannine prologue. Lexically, there is some ambiguity as to whether *μονογενής* necessarily entails only-begottenness, since (1) it comes from *γένος* rather than *γεννάω*, and (2) it is used in Hebrews 11:17 to denote Isaac’s relationship to Abraham, and Isaac certainly is not the only child Abraham begat. Still, Hart’s literally faithful reproduction may indeed fail the litmus tests of theological stringency for some readers who are not fully on board with his philosophy of translation. Given his approach, however, his dedication to the absence of theologically interpretive decisions wherever possible is unsurprising: he remarks that he is attempting to shake loose the fetters of “doctrinal expectations that have shaped the decisions of translators for centuries” (xv). However, some may consider his renderings to make theological declarations all their own.

Another important question concerns the audience of the book. Hart frequently explains to readers his choices via footnotes (or his postscript) on a level which seems to assume an absence of familiarity with the field of biblical studies, which suggests that his volume may have been produced with an audience of laity or perhaps moderately educated clergy in mind. However, his translations and footnotes frequently employ words which the vast majority of readers in such categories would find unfamiliar. His use of terms such as *farraginous*, *euphony*, *chiliarch*, and *maladroit* are unremarkable to those in his field or in educated circles, but are likely to be lost on a lay audience, thereby leading one to wonder who the intended audience is. He seems to desire the raw natures of the New Testament texts to be accessible for those whose facilities in ancient languages do not match his own. However, this mission may be undermined by Hart’s linguistic propensity for using English equivalents of *hapax legomena* that only scholarly readers would digest without pause. This vocabularistic predilection combined with Hart’s now-trademark acerbic wit may be disconcerting for lay readers, further calling into question the volume’s intended audience.

These matters, while pertinent, do not detract for the most part from the pleasure of reading Hart’s translations. In his introduction, Hart opines that this text is not produced for liturgical reading or for literary eloquence; and yet, his rendering of the New Testament is still a delight to read, and brings a joy to scriptural reading unparalleled by other translations of late. A number of translation decisions may at times hamper his

renderings for some readers. Furthermore, all but the most bitterly sarcastic observers may find an apparent trenchant derision in some of his explanatory annotations or introductory notes, which may be particularly rebarbative to lay readers. Still, Hart has done excellent work in providing this translation. Pastors preaching from his work will find the scripture enlivened with new vigor, and laity reading it may find new spiritual insights for old verses thought to be worn entirely threadbare. I recommend Hart's translation of the New Testament to anyone who wishes to see the scripture in a new light.

MATTHEW A. SMITH, THM/MA  
*Lee University*



# Call for Papers

## FAITH BEYOND THE SANCTUARY: CHRISTIANITY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

People of faith believe God's call extends past the walls of the church. Yet when religious people engage with the public sphere, complexities and conflicts emerge. With these tensions in mind, what is the role of faith communities in the broader political community? How has scripture influenced and been influenced by politics? What theologies underlie or are implicit in public life? How might faith communities responsibly interact with the state and engage in public discourse? How has the church historically grappled with matters of faith and public life? What might the global church teach us about these issues?

We invite graduate students and early-career scholars to submit papers considering these and related questions to the Spring 2019 issue of the *Princeton Theological Review*. We welcome submissions from diverse disciplinary perspectives: biblical studies, church history, theology, ethics, social science, philosophy, etc.

Paper submissions should be between 4500 and 5000 words and in an editable file type (doc or docx). All papers must be formatted according to *The Chicago Manual of Style* (17th edition) and include a full bibliography in addition to footnotes. Where CMOS does not offer specific guidance, please consult the Society of Biblical Literature's *SBL Handbook of Style* (2nd edition). Papers should engage with recent research and scholarship. There are no restrictions on research methodology. Submissions must be original work, must not have been previously published, and will undergo double-blind peer-review.

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If you have any questions, please contact the editorial team at [ptr@ptsem.edu](mailto:ptr@ptsem.edu).

Submissions are due **December 14, 2018**.



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