

Letters

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A Discussion: Vaclav Havel, A Performer of Political Thought

Vaclav Havel, until recently the president of Czechoslovakia, is an unusually reflective political voice. The author of numerous plays, a supporter of revolutionary forces in Czechoslovakia for many years, and an influential essayist, Havel is convinced of the moral worth and obligation of politics and the political life. Because his life represents a unique intersection of literary, political, and philosophical discourses, discussion on Havel at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities has attracted a number of interested faculty members over the years. The 1990/91 Fellows Program, dedicated to the relationship between Eastern European literature and political change, provided a year-long focus for an encounter between Michael P. Hodges of the Department of Philosophy and Jean Bethke Elshtain of the Departments of Political Science and Philosophy—an encounter which has turned into an ongoing conversation. *Letters* recently invited Professors Hodges and Elshtain to discuss the present state of their views.

LETTERS: You both have been carrying on an extended conversation about Havel.

HODGES: For both of us, Havel's life presents a powerful model of a very attractive blend of reflection and practice, of a kind of open-ended possibility that's not governed by looking at immediate ends, at the possibility of success, but at something larger than that. His life is unproblematically exemplary.

ELSHTAIN: I think we would call him a "performer of political thought."

HODGES: That is an appropriate description in light of his own writing. The other thing that's ex-



Jean Bethke Elshtain and Vaclav Havel confer at a Collegium on Political Philosophy in Prague in September 1992. Also present were (l. to r.) Stephen Heintz (Director, International East-West Study Center, Prague) and Martin Palous (former head of the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

emplary about his life is the extent to which it is a single fabric. His public life, his private life, his writing—it all seems to spring from some deep commitments of his. The question then comes: how will we assess him as a political thinker, as a political philosopher, although he resists calling himself a philosopher at all?

ELSHTAIN: That's right.

HODGES: I want to try out the idea that we should treat his philosophy as a performance, too, as a performance directed toward an audience. The audience is constituted by a community that already shares some fundamental commitments, and it's only in light of this that their debate goes on. The power and validity of that debate is already constituted by their agreement in some way, and by his capacity to highlight and call to consciousness in his life, actions, and writing the fundamental points of agreement that they have. And that's as far as we need to go. In that sense it's a piece of rhetoric

in the classical sense of the word.

ELSHTAIN: I would add to that, perhaps putting a slightly different spin on it. Certainly it's the case that he shares with the people of his place not just a Czech, but essentially a European, background that's constituted by forces that have crystallized their identities over time. Historically that would include Christianity, both Catholicism and the Protestant revolt, and the Enlightenment. It would include lots of different voices—ironic voices, pious voices, skeptical voices, rationalistic voices, and even demonic voices. I think that Havel would suggest that there are things he can and must assume, there are ideas that are shared. And yet, there are lots of ordinary, solid, decent people that are from time to time capable of doing really awful things, and so it becomes necessary, and he jokingly used this phrase in a discussion in Prague, to shake up the "psycho-physical apparatus."

HODGES: That's right, it is necessary to do that at key points. We

can even think of American examples. Martin Luther King, Jr., who called us to our better natures, and whose example, whose life, at least his public persona, was one which did that for us all. In that sense he galvanized us, focused us around certain features of that shared structure which had not been given adequate voice, which had been lost in the shuffle. In that sense Havel's actions, his life, are part of the attempt to call us to our better natures.

ELSHTAIN: I think that's absolutely right. One of the themes he talks about in his work, and it's a theme that I think is difficult for Americans to come to grips with, is the preparedness to suffer. This is not to demand sacrifice from others, since one can't demand that other people be heroic, but one must oneself be prepared to suffer. That is, you may have to pay a price for your enactment in a situation in which, for all you know, your life may end in total obscurity. You may die alone in a prison cell someplace. One of the things that people in Czechoslovakia say when you talk to them is that when Havel emerged in 1989, people knew the name, but nobody knew what he looked like. We knew more about him here, in a way, because in his own country he could never be on television, he was never in the newspapers, and his plays couldn't be produced. So they said it was a stunning thing

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for people to be able to see him and to listen to him, and that had a profound effect. Before that, he was, as with the other dissidents, a name, but he wasn't a presence because he didn't have a stage. So, part of the notion of Havel as a performer of political thought is that you require a stage. And often the stage isn't just there for you to walk on and play your part; you must create it. How do you create a public space that makes possible the realization of freedom, of free action and the responsibility that goes with it?

HODGES: Those are the right questions to ask of Havel, and that's why he talks so much about what theater is, about theater as constituting a community, both in the simple sense of a group which comes together in a theatrical setting, but also in the larger sense. And so he sees himself as an actor. If the audience ignores him, that's one thing, but he has to act, he has to be an actor and hope, but not demand that anyone pay attention to him.

LETTERS: In Havel's *Disturbing the Peace*, the theater he was drawn to most strongly was the theater of the absurd. And yet, now you're talking about a kind of creation of or attraction to meaning. Is this in tension with his participation in the theater of the absurd?

ELSHTAIN: Havel actually talked about that in a conversation in Prague. Someone said, "When I read your plays and then I read your essays, I have the sense of two different people." And he said, "No, it's the same man." It's the same world outlook but moving in different arenas of human experience and speaking in different voices. Not a different man, but different voices. Havel said that he sees both the plays and the essays "as a genre through which one can shake people up and pull them out of themselves." But they are different arenas of human action. Also, his is theater of the absurd, but not a theater of cruelty. He is using Camus' sense of the absurd, which expresses his realization that

human beings are bound to be finite and imperfect, and that to avoid a terrible kind of solemnity one must be able to reflect even on the experience of being a dissident. Havel does this in his play, *Largo Desolato*, in which he pokes fun at himself, but that in no way detracts from the seriousness of his commitments as a dissident. Finally, he seems to me an exemplary modernist. He is all the currents that constructed modern identity in the very best sense. There is displayed in his work and within his own identity an ongoing and interesting tension, even a tug-of-war at times, between the skepticism and piety, the ironic voice and the moral voice. I think it's that tension that he knowingly preserves.

HODGES: In one of the *Letters to Olga* he says, "Man is the only animal that reflects upon itself, upon the mystery of his existence, and the mystery of his ability to reflect upon himself, and as such he is the only creature capable of stepping outside himself in order to point to himself." There is the notion of the absurd. That is, if you have the capacity to step outside of yourself you're never exhausted in the multiplicity of your actions. All those actions can come into question. That's what his plays make eminently clear.

ELSHTAIN: But it's a self that is not so infinitely displaceable that the self can never be held accountable. Since responsibility is one of his big themes, there is an entity there that in fact must be called to account, can be held responsible.

HODGES: Now, let's see if we can say something about what that is. That self is constituted by the network of agreements that constitute the possibility of a discussion, and it need be no more than that. In that network of agreements there is the possibility of calling out certain aspects of the self, shaping and reshaping it in various ways. It

need not be any higher nature in the sense of something that is metaphysically transcendent.

ELSHTAIN: This is where the issue will get joined. I think first of all about the undeniable fact that in Havel's work he is convinced that he does in fact require something more. The

question is what is that something more beyond the network of agreements. I would distinguish this way: it's not a set of metaphysical categories he requires, but a framing of the horizon of being that provides a transcendent, not metaphysical, context within which the self is realized. I think Havel would

argue that if the self is constituted solely by the network of agreements and relations and the context within which one finds oneself, then this would lead over time to impoverishment in the possibilities for self-constitution of the sort that made Havel himself possible. Havel argues that one requires some transcendent framework, some beyond, some Other before whom one is responsible, or within which human beings are defined.

HODGES: I agree with you if you think of this network of agreements as agreements that we arrive at by some kind of choice or by some kind of congress of national agreement. That is far too shallow to make sense of commitment, of obligation, of the dimension of self-transcendence that we need here, and that Havel appeals to over and over again. This network of agreements is not something we arrive at, but is a way in which we are *de facto* alike, that we can't change. They may be open to some historic transformation, for all we know, but that's irrelevant. They transcend me because they are not choices I can make. I make choices in light of them. I can't escape them. Havel's skill is in describing things in such a way that his followers and opponents see that cer-

tain things aren't possible. At first they see themselves as role players in this huge ideology that he talks about, as just going along with it, then all of a sudden that whole set of activities is cast into a different kind of relief which they can't escape. And that's all one needs in order to sustain a political dialogue and to move others. Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't address everyone, he only addressed those of us who already began with a sense of fairness and justice and racial harmony. He called us to our better selves.

ELSHTAIN: But there also has to be some horizon beyond in order to call us out of ourselves. The words that come to mind when I think of Havel's writing are notions of mystery and of awe, notions of that before which perhaps the only appropriate response is a kind of silence. There is about him a profound awareness of the fact that there is a tremendous amount that we cannot account for, that we cannot fully explain, that is not exhausted by understanding our histories and our context. And that helps to make possible a world of personal responsibility, as well as an appropriate recognition of man's place in the overall scheme of things.

HODGES: But I like mystery to be mystery. I'd like to say simply that every time we shine a light, there is a darkness which surrounds it. In that recognition, we recognize the limitedness of any of our human projects. We don't understand that limitedness against a backdrop of a mystery that is not really a mystery because we can import something that we know. If we're going to be silent, let's be silent about it! Let's not sneak in a sort of quasi-theological understanding of it. That's where I become nervous.

ELSHTAIN: What makes you nervous? Why do you become nervous about that?

HODGES: I become nervous about that because of my own philosophical understanding. If the finitude of human projects only becomes clear against a backdrop of



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presupposed infinity, it's not true to itself, because then that finitude already presupposes an infinite perspective. That's what bothers me.

ELSHTAIN: On the other hand, if the way in which we talk about this beyond or this mystery is always in relation to our experience of it, the danger is that we fall into a kind of subjectivism. Here I'm thinking of the essay on power and powerlessness in which he talks about a pre-political, hidden sphere out of which being or truth emerges. He quite unabashedly talks about life "in its essence," which is not human nature as some preformed teleology, but is more like a human condition. Life in its essence, the human condition, is a world of plurality and a world of multiple possibilities. This would contrast with any notion of a "subjective experience" of mystery. He is able to discuss things that we sometimes think we can't discuss because if we do we're going to fall into essentialism. But instead it's a notion about a human condition, not human nature. It shifts the terms of the discussion.

HODGES: It puts it in new words. I'm not sure it shifts it.

ELSHTAIN: I think it does. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, says that if there is a human nature, we can't know it. But there is a human condition, and she goes on to characterize that human condition. It's very much like Havel's characterization: we enter a world that's not cut to our measure, it's there already, we're already in it, we're born helpless and dependent beings. We have to engage not just others but a natural world, a world of objects on which we depend in some way. Those are all features of a human condition, not a preformed human nature, and that's what he's talking about when he talks about life in its essence.

HODGES: It's a question whether you can get from there to anything more substantial. Again, when we move from a horizon of responsibility to one's time and place, to the human condition, into its meaning for the political life, you and I don't disagree too

much. I want to say that this horizon is constituted out of the finitude of our practices. But I don't want to go on then to identify it and give it a structure in some sense, because it seems to me that that's just cheating at that point. This is not just the silence of "I don't know," it's a more profound silence. The silence of "I don't know" demands, "well, get to work and find out." But here, Havel calls our attention to a silence that is constitutive of our very practices and of every attempt to come to know. That seems to me to be a very different territory. I think it has traditionally been expressed theologically, though I think the theological expression of it fundamentally falsifies it.

ELSHTAIN: I don't think Havel's is a theological expression of it.

HODGES: It's always lurking.

ELSHTAIN: Oh, it's lurking, but I think there's a kind of reticence to name in a way that plays into some kind of system.

HODGES: His reticence is that he does not want to be caught-up in dogma. He doesn't want to be captured by the explicit dogma, Catholic or whatever. I want to carry it one step further, in a sense.

ELSHTAIN: And I don't. I think if you carry it a step further, then in fact the horizon of possibility both for the construction of self identity and certain other sorts of possibilities dissipates. I am prepared to take Havel at his word that he requires certain categories in order to think certain thoughts,

to engage in certain actions, and to be the kind of person he is, I accept that.

HODGES: I accept his self-description, unquestionably. That's critical. I don't know how to move beyond that as a self-description. I don't mean of his particularity, but of his performance, which is essentially a social performance, social in its meaning. I think that is absolutely right, he is playing to an audience, and has to be playing to an audience.

ELSHTAIN: I think he would say that it is social in its meaning, but my hunch is he would say that doesn't exhaust the meaning. He describes at one point, in discussing the dissident experience, the complexity involved in overcoming fear. In fact, what he feared most was giving some kind of offense to something outside himself. And that fear was stronger than the fear of what the regime would do to him.

HODGES: How does that differ from the experience, not unique to Havel, of inescapability of myself?

ELSHTAIN: What do you mean by inescapable? That you can never get out of your own skin?

HODGES: No, the notion that it's not possible for me to do just anything. I can't escape that notion of self, and Havel draws me to that self.

ELSHTAIN: His notion about that self is a self that is constituted not just out of the culture I'm a part of and the history I'm part of and so on, but with reference to something that frames that partic-

ular world. The self for Havel emerges simultaneously both out of a pre-political realm and with reference to something other and beyond.

HODGES: I'm all for the pre-political, I just don't want to turn it into something. To do that is to fall back into metaphysics, and therefore ideology and so on.

ELSHTAIN: Well, again, metaphysics and ideology are two different things. Certainly it can resist ideology. Whether it can resist metaphysics would be another question.

HODGES: I'm not sure how you draw that distinction.

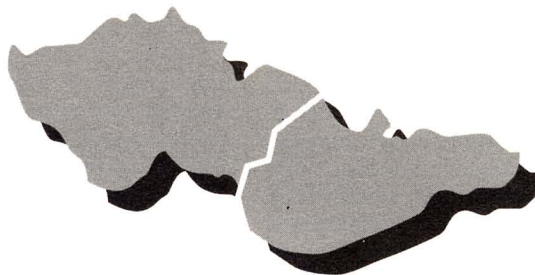
ELSHTAIN: So, this seems to be the one point on which we continue to disagree.

LETTERS: But it's an interesting point. I wanted to ask you both, are you working on Havel now?

ELSHTAIN: I've just written a paper which I gave at a meeting in Prague, enormously condensed, of course, because Havel was sitting right there. But it's going to be translated by someone into Czech.

HODGES: I wouldn't say I was working on Havel, but I'm interested in him and I continue to be drawn into discussions on Havel, partly because Jean keeps bringing people here who are doing it! I am working always on the relationship between questions of transcendence and the possibility of knowledge, solidarity, unity. Those seem to me to be a nest of questions that take on roughly the same shape whether you deal with politics, epistemology, or philosophy of religion, or whatever.

ELSHTAIN: And I'm interested, and have been forever, in thinkers, and Havel is one, Camus is another, who find themselves poised and want to remain poised between various possibilities, between skepticism and belief, between the absurd and the committed. The most interesting thinkers are those who keep themselves in that tension between possibilities. And they're tugged a couple of ways, but they keep working the ground, that terrain in between.



An Afternoon of Reflection

Chancellor Emeritus Harvie Branscomb remembers the Vanderbilt of yesteryear and offers advice for tomorrow.

HARVIE BRANSCOMB was Vanderbilt's Chancellor from 1946 to 1963. During his tenure, the University moved from a regional self-awareness to a national orientation and developed in quality, resources, and vision by a previously unimaginable speed and determination. Recently, Mr. Branscomb spoke of the changes he has seen at Vanderbilt to a group of faculty members who have been in the college for a short time. He is ninety-seven years old, but we knew from experience as we considered calling him for a presentation at the Center that his intelligence, memory, sense of timing, and power of presence are extraordinary. He holds a memory of Vanderbilt and a sense for its future that are rare in their combination. A talk by him would be an unusual opportunity for insight into the University's recent past as well as into its present life.

I called him last spring to see if he would consider doing the program. After I explained my proposal he said, "When do you want to have this event?" "In the early fall," I told him. "Charles," he said, "I don't even buy green bananas. I can't plan that far in the future. Call me in September and we can talk about it then." I took his expectation of talking in September as a good omen, and when I called three months later, he had thought about what he would say and was ready to make plans—plans over a short time period that would be about right, I thought, to allow bananas to ripen.

It was a remarkable afternoon that was informed by a range of experience, dedication, and passion that gave us to know something about leadership and education that we professionals can overlook. We include here excerpts from both his formal remarks and the discussion that followed.

Mr. Branscomb said to four of us who stayed after the program that he expected this to be his last presentation. As I recalled the intensity of his words, his clarity of commitment, and his flawless recall of lines from Euripides in an-



swering a question, I doubted that he was right. Or at least I hoped that he was wrong. Justice seemed to me to require a little more time and at least one more moment like the one we just had.

—Charles E. Scott

I WOULD LIKE TO SAY at the beginning that the changes that have benefitted Vanderbilt are due to the work and dedication of many people and to social changes that I shall mention. I have been asked to speak of the significant changes that I have seen. I can mention some of them, but I will not be able to give proper credit to the individuals who have

formed this institution over the last forty-six years.

I don't think anyone can quite realize the extent of the changes that have taken place in this institution unless one had seen or known Vanderbilt as it was in the 1940s. Let me see if I can paint a concise picture of some of the features before we move on to discuss changes that have taken place.

When I first arrived on the campus and saw its limited character and the encroachment of the city on the area, I gave some serious thought to the possibility of moving the University, with the exception of the Medical School, to some open area ten or fifteen miles

from the city, an idea that I soon abandoned. The University was housed in three of four structures that remained from the original days, fine examples of Victorian Gothic, plus a number of rather nondescript buildings which had been constructed later for classrooms. We also had two relatively new structures: the Joint University Library, which had been built just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and the Medical School. In one respect the University was woefully deficient. Neither Chancellor Garland nor Chancellor Kirkland, influenced by German university models, had really believed in dormitories. Chancellor Garland made the statement that dormitories were "breeding places of misbehavior" and that he preferred for students to live "in the Christian homes surrounding the campus." That principle was modified slightly by the construction of one dormitory!

As far as finances were concerned, the University which began with what appeared to be the magnificent sum of a million dollars had failed to keep up in its resources with the growth of knowledge, the growth in the student body, and the changes in the demands on universities. In 1946 the endowment for eight schools and colleges totaled 28 million dollars, of which 14 belonged to the Medical School and hospital. Faculty salaries were shamefully low. The chairmen of the departments in the Medical School received ten thousand dollars a year, and full professors in the College of Arts and Science enjoyed salaries of around four thousand dollars.

The professional schools call for some special comment. The Divinity School was nearly destroyed by the separation from the Methodist church some thirty years earlier. It had few students. Its building had burned. The only reason, I am sure, that the School had been continued was that a loyal Divinity School faculty still remained with no jobs offered them by the Methodist church. The Law School, manned chiefly by local

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lawyers, had been closed during the war and reopened in 1946, the year that I arrived. The Medical School began with a great flourish. It had the beginnings of a great institution, but the inflation which followed the First World War had reduced it to a point where it could no longer pay for indigent patients, and paying patients did not want students to practice their art upon them. The hospital in 1946 was losing money steadily, and the Medical School no longer had adequate funds for any expansion or growth. It was in 1950, I believe, that the Dean of the Medical School recommended formally to me that the Medical School be abandoned and closed. The Graduate School of Arts and Science existed on paper and had brief spurts of development. It had no funds of its own, however, no separate faculty, and no status as an institution.

I'd like to mention also that when I arrived in 1946, I was told that no black person had ever been on the Vanderbilt campus, except in a domestic capacity. And while I am confident this was an overstatement of the facts, it did indicate the point of view of this deeply Southern aristocratic University at that time. Furthermore, due I think in large part to the failure to develop dormitories and an attractive student life, the undergraduate student body was rapidly becoming local. In 1946, two-thirds of the students in the College were from the state of Tennessee, and approximately one-half were from Nashville and the surrounding region. The rest of the student body was limited almost entirely to our neighboring Southern states.

This rather depressing picture was, however, only part of the story. From its beginning Vanderbilt had maintained high standards, both in the selection of its faculty and in the admission of students. For the first few decades of its history there were no rival institutions in the South that had any claim to distinction. Vanderbilt was able to attract the better students from

Florida to Texas, with the result that the Vanderbilt Alumni in the 1940s was unusually strong. It was on these foundations that the subsequent growth was able to build.

The changes which have taken place since those years nearly a half century ago are quite obvious. They have been due to a number of factors—the changing economy of the South, the growth of the institution from a Southern college to a nationally-recognized university, the growth of the intellectual inheritance, and finally to changes in the society which we serve and which supports us.

The campus was able in the 1960s to acquire a good deal of land. During this period the University constructed fifteen or sixteen dormitories. The Divinity School was moved back on the campus in beautiful quarters to which was attached the University Chapel. The Law School received new quarters of its own with additions to its endowment, and it became an outstanding school. The Engineering School was given a new building of its own and an annex. The Medical School, brought out of its doldrums largely by the development of federal aid for medical research and also by the growth of medical insurance which provided indigent patients who could pay their way, has exploded into a plant almost the size of the rest of the campus. The union with Peabody College, which had been discussed for years, was finally achieved in the 1970s. The School of Management was added to the

University during this period, and it has developed into a substantial and well-recognized program.

The endowment funds, so meager at the beginning, have grown at an almost unbelievable rate. I am now advised that the figure is somewhere between \$500 and \$700 million. Much of this, of course, belongs to the respective schools and colleges.

Two other changes are important. During the 1950s, Vanderbilt took the lead among private colleges and universities in the South in admitting black students, and by 1963 integration was legally achieved for all parts of the University.

The second change may seem insignificant, but it was more important than it may appear. I mentioned earlier that for many years the University had only one old dormitory for men, and more recently McTyeire Hall was built for a limited number of women. The housing of other students had been taken over by the fraternities, all of whom had off-campus houses. These were old residences, a number of them dangerous fire traps. Furthermore, the fraternities packed these students into rooms—four in a room, some in attics. The situation was really one that the University could not continue.

I took on a fight with the fraternities to abandon their houses and to move onto campus—students being housed in University dormitories in accordance with University responsibilities. This was a bitter fight. The fraternities were strong, but the proposals carried

the day. The University was fair with the fraternities in the handling of the financial transfer, and we moved, therefore, from a dangerous fraternity situation into one in which only a few officers were allowed to live in each house in order to assure its protection.

Now let's talk about some changes to the ethos and character of the institution. Back in the '40s, the administrative staff consisted of the Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor, the Business Manager, and the secretary of the Alumni Association, whose chief duty was to send out a postcard every Christmas asking for money for the University. The development of a large administrative staff since those years has been absolutely necessary and very successful.

But there are some risks involved in the development of a fairly substantial bureaucracy. The most substantial risk is the possibility that the points of view, the needs, and the aspirations of the people of the rank and file will get weathered out as they move up through the various levels of the bureaucracy. Currently the administrative offices have been careful to keep open several avenues of communication, the two most important perhaps being free discussions with the University Senate and the annual speech made to the Board of Trust by a faculty member on faculty concerns. But as institutions become larger, this problem grows accordingly. I mention this not because I think that it is a current problem, but it is something for us to keep in mind. It is important that the institution keep alert to the need for some way of open and direct communication between the schools and faculties and the central administrative structure.

I mention a second change, the change in the sense of community on the campus. Back in the '40s and '50s, we were much smaller, and we made an effort to get the faculty acquainted with one another. There was a sense of belonging to the institution as a whole. Today, simply due to the growth



HARVIE BRANSCOMB
Chancellor, 1946–1963

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in size and complexity, much of that has faded. Today friendships and the sense of strong unity belong to schools and departments rather than to the University as a whole. I don't think this can be avoided, and the substitution of close associations and mutual support within a lesser division of a large institution is not bad. I would only suggest that we must not lose a sense of intellectual unity in the University as a whole. After all, *universitas* is a basic conception behind the institution.

The communal sense in these days seems to me to be made of rather formal ties established among different parts of the institution. The development of interdisciplinary programs and relationships has become much more an official rather than an informal function, as perhaps it once was. This is something to keep in mind: that we don't drift apart, each one going his own way.

Another aspect of community is even more significant, and this applies to the student body and to the University body as a whole. Today we have set, I am afraid, diversity as a primary objective. Diversity is not the goal; it merely makes a contribution. The goal is mutual understanding, respect, cooperation, fellowship, and social solidarity. To be sure, a university believes in and must maintain freedom of opinion and divergence of views, but this divergence and these differences must function within a complex web of mutual respect and cooperation.

A third change which I think is of some concern to a lot of us is the imbalance that has taken place in the growth of the University. It's a very simple fact: the society we live in is now concerned about the economy and technology and science, and that's where the money is. So, the biological and the physical and the medical areas of the University have been able to get the resources for development that other parts of the University have not gotten. But the economy doesn't exist by itself. It is dependent on education, on wise politi-

cal leadership, on social and family stability, on social solidarity, on a widespread, common-accepted sense of fairness and justice. Knowledge is not in compartments but is an interwoven web. We should keep to the fore the concept of the unity of the University and a national need for the unity of knowledge so that administrators, corporations, and foundations will begin to realize that there are other aspects of the University that need equal support. I am confident that this will come, but in current years we have certainly seen an imbalance in growth. Some defense of what in previous years has been the heart of the University must not be forgotten.

I am going to stop at this point.

QUESTION: Will you entertain questions and discussion?

HARVIE BRANSCOMB: Sure!

QUESTION: I have a question concerning the radical increase in the size of our endowment. I can see that you could get people who knew what the institution was like in the 1950s to continue contributing. But in order to grow as much as the institution has grown, you had to find money.

BRANSCOMB: Oh yes.

QUESTION: How did you do that? How did you get the endowment built?

BRANSCOMB: All right. I started out with the observation that the Vanderbilt family had established this University, it was named after the Commodore, but none of the members of the Vanderbilt family had ever taken a real interest in it aside from a few contributions for equipment and some buildings. Now I'm not going to tell you the whole story—it would take a long time to do it—but I got Mr. Harold Sterling Vanderbilt first to come and visit us. His wife told me afterwards that he didn't want to come at all! She told me that he said, "You know, all that man wants is my money." And she said that he had the check in his pocket that he was going to give me. So he

came here, invited to spend the night.

When he first arrived, I took Mr. Vanderbilt for a walk around the campus. He was quite surprised. He didn't know it was that big a place. Then I showed him all the portraits of the Vanderbilt family we had hanging in Kirkland hall. I eventually took him into my office, and I could see he braced himself for the touch. I talked a little bit, and he said, finally, "Well, all right, what can I do for you?" And I said, "You can do two things. First, your cousin, Mr. Frederick Vanderbilt, made us participants in his will and gave us the largest contribution of a single individual in the University's history—larger than the Commodore's original million . . . and we don't have his portrait. Could you borrow a portrait of Mr. Frederick Vanderbilt, and let me have it copied?" "Oh," he said, "I'll get that for you." I said, "That's great." He said, "What else," now with a different tone of voice. I replied, "Well, your cousin Mrs. Twombly is a very generous woman." She was a Vanderbilt heiress, somebody with lots of Vanderbilt money. I said, "I thought she might want to build Twombly Hall for the women here. I have never met her. Now that you've been down here, and you've met me and seen the campus, would you be willing to write her a letter introducing me so I can go talk to her about it?" And he did.

Of course, this was the only decent way that Mr. Vanderbilt's visit could have been handled, since he had come at my invitation and was my guest. But he clearly expected something different, and the way he was entertained laid the basis for a long and fruitful friendship.

Two years later I got him to take a membership on the Board of Trust, and subsequently, when the timing was exactly right, I asked him to be Chairman of the Board of Trust, and he accepted. Now, the fact was that Mr. Vanderbilt was well known in all the relevant circles in New York. Well, with him on the board, I could get any-

one I wanted on the Board of Trust. We got the president of J.P. Morgan, the president of Chase National Bank, the Vice-President of The World Bank. We got all these guys on the Board of Trust! So when I wanted to get some money, I would write one of them and ask them, "Would you take me over to Mr. so and so." That helped a lot!

In a thirty year period we also got off to a good start with some foundations. The period after the Second World War was a very good one for American universities. The country had learned that we had to find out about the rest of the countries in the world. We didn't have people who could speak the language of some of our allies! They realized that universities not only taught language and culture, but that they were the places research on new technology came from. It was the government that began making contributions for research. And the country as a whole began to feel like the universities were very important. It was a good period.

Then some things just happened serendipitously, just fell out of the sky. You just had to be alert and follow some of these things up. I read not long ago a book of old Greek plays, one of which speaks of this serendipity. Euripides' *Medea* ends with something that I think applies to the growth of Vanderbilt. It reads like this—I think I can quote it:

Great treasure halls hath Zeus in heaven

From whence to man strange dooms be given,

Past hope or fear.

And the end men looked for cometh not,

And a path there is where no man thought:

So Hath it fallen here.

Well, the path fell to us where no man expected it in a half-dozen different happy occasions!



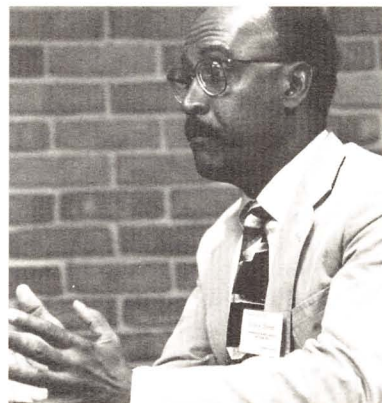
Transatlantic Encounters

The "Discovery" of the New World and the Old

A collection of photographs
from the October symposium, which was organized
by the 1991/92 Fellows.



The symposium was well attended by Vanderbilt students, faculty, and staff, as well as by a number of visiting faculty from neighboring universities and local secondary schools.



Ten visiting scholars and nine Vanderbilt faculty members participated in the three-day symposium dedicated to literary, artistic, historical, and anthropological responses to the collision between the Old and New Worlds.

Spring 1993 Center Programs

The Center for the Humanities will sponsor a number of new and continuing programs in the spring semester. As the newsletter goes to press, the following programs are either in place or in the planning stages. Contact the Center at 3-6060 or 3-6240 for more information concerning meeting dates and times, or to be placed on the regular mailing list for a specific program.

The Advance of Democracy in the Contemporary World: Political and Intellectual Debates. This series of informal discussions will bring together faculty and students from different disciplines and regional specializations who share an interest in recent and often controversial advances in the theory and

practice of democracy. Speakers will look at opportunities and challenges that democracy has faced in a wide range of countries. Coordinated by KURT WEYLAND, Department of Political Science.

The Cutting Edge Seminar: Explorations in Interdisciplinary Scholarship. Introductory sessions for the College of Arts and Science's new graduate program in Social and Political Thought. Coordinated by JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN, Department of Political Science.

Great Works Series. The Center will continue to host Friday brown-bag luncheons to learn about and discuss landmark works of literature. Dates and times to be

announced. Coordinated by JAMES LANG, Department of Sociology.

Faculty Luncheon Seminars. On Mondays at noon, faculty members are invited to meet at the Center for work-in-progress presentations. Dates and speakers to be announced. Coordinated by BEVERLY ASBURY, University Chaplain.

Foucault Reading Group. Faculty from a variety of disciplines are invited to participate in a discussion of two essays by Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* and *Two Lectures*. The discussion will focus on issues of power and dominance, and the subordination of oppressed groups and individuals. The program will meet on Wednesdays at 4 p.m. Dates to be

announced. Coordinated by WILLIAM FOWLER, JR., Department of Anthropology, and JOEL HARRINGTON, Department of History.

Postmodernism and the Concept of Culture. This seminar will meet every other week on Mondays at 4 p.m. throughout the spring semester to discuss the concept of culture in postmodern thought. The initial focus will be on recent writings of Jean Baudrillard. Exact dates to be announced. Coordinated by JAY CLAYTON, Department of English, and RICHARD BROWN, Department of English, Leeds University.

THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1988 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989, the center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

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LETTERS is the semiannual newsletter of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University, Box 1534 Station B, Nashville, Tennessee 37235, (615) 343-6060.

Director: Charles E. Scott
Assistant Director: Mona C. Frederick
Secretary, Editor: Benjamin S. Pryor
For more information concerning the Center or any of its programs, please contact the above address.

Vanderbilt University is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W.E.B. DuBois Professor of the Humanities and Chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard University, delivered a public lecture on December 3, 1992. His visit was sponsored by the Divinity School, the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center, and the Humanities Center. More than 300 people attended the lecture.