

# The Dominion of the Dead and the Witness of the Liberal Arts

---

Gary A. Phillips

---

The 30<sup>th</sup> LaFollette Lecture  
October 9, 2009

---

*[www.wabash.edu/lafollette](http://www.wabash.edu/lafollette)*

The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

*The Dominion of the Dead and the Witness of the Liberal Arts*  
Gary A. Phillips

PREFERRED CITATION

Phillips, Gary A., “*The Dominion of the Dead and the Witness of the Liberal Arts.*” *The Charles D. LaFollette Lectures Series* (2009): < <http://www.wabash.edu/lafollette/phillips2009/>>

EXCERPT

Classical liberal arts teaching and learning at its best is potent in helping us engage and interrogate the economies and ecologies of life-with-the-dead precisely because it serves as one of those few educational refuges, or haunts if you will, from the insistent pressures to reduce prudential teaching and learning to myopic, present-day utility, which in my mind equates with living alone and with no past. From classics to chemistry, music to mathematics, English to economics, the liberal arts bear witness to the enormous landscape of human experience and the potential for those who have passed on to continue to address vital present-day questions and truths, and, oh yes, to call us to account.

---

*The LaFollette Lecture Series* was established by the Wabash College Board of Trustees to honor Charles D. LaFollette, their longtime colleague on the Board. The lecture is given each year by a Wabash College Faculty member who is charged to address the relation of his or her special discipline to the humanities broadly conceived.

For more information, contact Dwight Watson, LaFollette Professor of Humanities, Professor of Theater, Wabash College, Crawfordsville, IN 47933. Phone (765) 361-6342. E-mail: [watsond@wabash.edu](mailto:watsond@wabash.edu). Website: [www.wabash.edu/lafollette](http://www.wabash.edu/lafollette)

---

Copyright Gary A. Phillips. This article may be copied without the copyright owner’s permission only if the copy is used for education, not-for-profit purposes. For all other purposes, the copyright owner’s permission is require. In all cases, both the author and *The LaFollette Lecture Series* must be acknowledged in the copy.

The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

*The Dominion of the Dead and the Witness of the Liberal Arts*

Gary A. Phillips  
Department of Religion

*Enter Ghost.*  
But soft, behold! Lo, where it comes again!  
I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion!  
If thou hast any sound, or use of voice,  
Speak to me!  
If there be any good thing to be done,  
That may to thee do ease and grace to me,  
Speak to me!  
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.i.126

I want to begin by thanking the Charles LaFollette family for their longstanding and generous support of the College, especially the students and faculty in the humanities. Mr. LaFollette valued humanistic teaching and scholarship and well appreciated the special contribution the humanities make to the Wabash liberal arts educational mission. Gerry and Charles LaFollette and their families have been wonderful stewards of that legacy, and for that the College is most grateful. I also want to thank my good colleague Greg Huebner for returning from sabbatical leave to provide his generous introduction. And to Leslie Day go our collective thanks for agreeing to serve as the fourth LaFollette professor and to fortify the humanities in the many rich ways that she does.

When Bill Placher invited me in May 2008 to present this year's LaFollette lecture, a moment then and an honor now I will long treasure, little then did I expect that I would be here in Salter Hall and he not. Little then did I anticipate the other individual and collective traumas that would befall Wabash and the nation this past year. Student loans drying up, budgets slashed, the near-collapse of our nation's financial system, and two wars abroad have created enormous hardship and uncertainty for countless of our fellow citizens, many living here in Crawfordsville. Worlds and institutions shaken; jobs, income, homes, and retirements vanished; families and futures fragmented. We struggle to make sense of the loss—of financial resources, of good friends and colleagues, of cogent explanations of the past, of future purpose. What will we do in response? Given my responsibilities, I have wondered how these traumatic experiences will affect the ways we teach Wabash students to become independent thinkers, responsible and resourceful citizens, mature men who will live humanely in a world where trauma, death and loss are not to be evaded but engaged as an aspect of the examined life. What stories will we tell? What voices will we hear? This is the immediate context and one set of concerns I bring to the podium today.

I come with other concerns as well. As a student of the Bible my teaching and scholarship in recent years has focused on ways Jews and Christians read their scriptures in the wake of the Holocaust. I struggle with the difficult ethical and theological questions presented by the death of six million Jews, especially the gratuitous suffering of 1.5 million children; the maddening connection between violence and religion and the failed witness of many Christians who could have acted in timely ways to interrupt the horror; the inspiring and unsettling artwork of Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak, who visited Wabash last spring, and who has managed somehow to live forward creatively after the Shoah; and then there are the practical actions needed to interrupt everyday damage and violence, to repair what is broken and in need of repair right here on our campus. I confess having far more questions than answers. I find some solace in Rainer Maria Rilke's advice to the young poet Franz Xavier Kappus who struggled with questions about his own life: "[H]ave patience with everything unresolved in your heart," Rilke wrote, "and [...] try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. ... [T]he point is, to live everything. Live the questions now."<sup>1</sup> For Rilke, questions have a rhythm and life of their own, and no one can force or foresee the answers, should there indeed be any. By attending carefully, patiently, to what he calls the "enormous landscape" of experience,<sup>2</sup> he advises, we may yet discover creative ways to move forward, to breathe.

Not always sure how long to wait patiently or where to turn for creative answers to the massive suffering and loss represented by the Holocaust, I have come to view religion as sometimes offering direction. Rabbi Schmu'el Sperber once said: "Religion offers you answers without obliterating the questions. They become blunted and will not attack you with as much ferocity, but without them the answers would dry up and wither away. ... The question is a great religious act. It helps you live great religious truths."<sup>3</sup> It can and should help you to act. So, too, the disciplines of the humanities provide direction and resources that enable us to live with the difficult questions and the great truths, religious and otherwise, and to act. How? By calling upon us to recount the past, to reassemble the wrecked or inchoate pieces, and to refashion narratives for living forward *with* the questions posed especially by death and suffering, perhaps even creatively as Sam Bak does. By minding the past, the humanities equip us for mending the world.

You may be wondering about my title, "The Dominion of the Dead and the Witness of the Liberal Arts," a "real uplifting title" one of my colleagues has joked. To be clear, "Dominion of the Dead" does not refer to the far-flung kingdom of Deadheads, that world-wide network of Jerry Garcia, Grateful Dead, tie-dye groupies; nor to the paranormal phenomena popularized by late-night cable TV psychics like John Edward and his ilk; nor should we to confuse it with the forsaken zombie world popularized by George Romero's 1974 classic "Dawn of the Dead," a movie I still much enjoy. The spooky, macabre, and ghoulish are not what I have in mind.

Instead, by "dominion of the dead" I refer to that dimension of human experience in which commerce and communion with the dead, our precursors and predecessors—for instance, the spectral interaction as Shakespeare imagines it of son Hamlet encountering spirit of departed father, and our ongoing interaction with Hamlet's dilemmas — is woven into the fabric of our

lives.<sup>4</sup> Classical liberal arts teaching and learning at its best is potent in helping us engage and interrogate the economies and ecologies of life-with-the-dead precisely because it serves as one of those few educational refuges, or haunts if you will, from the insistent pressures to reduce prudential teaching and learning to myopic, present-day utility, which in my mind equates with living alone and with no past. From classics to chemistry, music to mathematics, English to economics, the liberal arts bear witness to the enormous landscape of human experience and the potential for those who have passed on to continue to address vital present-day questions and truths, and, oh yes, to call us to account. From my perspective the great promise of the liberal arts is to change lives, to change the world, by regular commerce with those not living. In the exploration of the “dominion of the dead,” the liberal arts do more than conserve the Aristotelian virtue of *Sophia*, the ability to think well, although they do that richly; they command *Phronesis*, the practical virtue that challenges and enables us to *do* well in the world.

Where exactly do we encounter this dominion and its denizens, and what is the nature of its witness? Robert Pogue Harrison observes that the dead live with us everywhere in the world: in our “graves, homes, laws, images, dreams, rituals, monuments and the archives of literature” (x). Their posthumous presence is a persistent, material reminder that humanity is not self-authoring or self-grounding. As *Homo sapiens*, Harrison writes, we are born of our biological parents. But as *human beings* we are born of the dead—“of the regional ground they occupy, of the languages they inhabited, of the worlds they brought into being, of the many institutional, legal, cultural, and psychological legacies that, through us, connect them to the unborn” (xi). In short, to be human is to live with the dead; they are our constant companions.

From their abode in the ground and the many other cultural sites where they indwell, the dead, like the ghost of King Hamlet, return to us to inform and inflect the meaning of our present and future lives. Their presence is vital for humanizing the living, a view we find in considerable tension with a modern striving to distance human life from death and the dying. For Mother Teresa, however, the striving took her in an opposite direction: “Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted,” she said, “according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work.”<sup>5</sup> Acutely conscious of the children, the infirm, the desperate, the suffering and neglected of Calcutta culture, she closed the distance between death and life, permitting her life to be altered, addressed, by the dying. For this Christian saint, faith was cauterized by the trauma of others that grounded her in this world and not some fabulous yonder, not a glory land where trauma is erased. Her life was a witness to the truth that when religious vocation cushions believers from the real world, serves as a palliative for pain and not a prescription to intervene on behalf of the suffering of others, it fails.

Mother Teresa stands in notable contrast to another luminary who was no saint. Regarded by many as perhaps *the* most influential philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger meticulously described the ways in which awareness of death is constitutive of our human existence; unlike other species, we human beings are conscious of the possibility of our ownmost death. But the awareness of our death and the alleviation of the suffering of others, epitomized by Mother Teresa’s witness, escaped Heidegger’s mind all together. Notwithstanding his rich phenomenology of time- and death-consciousness, Heidegger lacked the conscience called for by

the suffering and deaths of his Jewish countrymen.<sup>6</sup> As Rector of Freiberg University, he was responsible for the Nazification of the institution through the establishment of the *Führerprinzip* and Nazi racial policies, legal conditions that laid the groundwork for the industrialized death factories of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Mauthausen. While Martin Heidegger may have succeeded brilliantly in philosophizing about the human condition, he failed miserably in humanizing the conditions of the innocents given over to his administrative care.

With the potential to animate both consciousness and conscience, the humanities play a favored role among the liberal arts—note I say favored, not *exclusive*, role—engaging the dominion of the dead. Haunted by our ancestors, we humanists excavate the hallowed ground of painting and poem, sculpture and score, drama and dig, literature and language to recall, retrieve, reconstruct, and retell those lived experiences to which the dead bear witness; we exhume the many human pasts intent upon repairing the world. *To repair, to mend the world*. By underscoring the notion of mending the world, I give the humanities’ Greek and Latin ancestry a decidedly Jewish inflection. For the early first century Rabbis and later medieval Kabbalists, every aspect of Torah learning and living was done *mit’nei tikkun ha-olam*, “for the sake of repairing the world.” For these Jews in particular and Judaism in general, comprehension is inseparable from care for creation, reasoning from responsibility for the other, or to invoke Aristotle again, *sophia* from *phronesis*, thinking critically from acting responsibly. On this score Athens and Jerusalem are Alpha Aleph fraternity brothers.

And what do I mean by “the witnessing” of the liberal arts? The 17th-century philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and humanist Giambattista Vico offers direction. Citing Vico, Harrison argues that “our basic human institutions—religion, matrimony, and burial ... but also law, language, literature and whatever else relies on the transmission of legacy”<sup>7</sup>—are anchored in the precedents of the past. We read, we speak, we calculate, we legislate, we moralize, we persuade, we invent, we govern, we worship, we educate, and we discern what is true following in the footsteps, for better or worse, of our ancestors. Challenging Descartes’ notion that truth is “derived a priori by deductive rules” and ascertained through observation, Vico countered that truth is verified through creation or invention. In *The New Science*, Vico takes his respectful distance from Descartes’ “geometrical method” when he writes: “The criterion and rule of the true is to have *made* it. Accordingly, our clear and distinct idea of the mind cannot be a criterion of the mind itself, still less of other truths. For while the mind perceives itself, it does not *make* itself” (my emphasis).<sup>8</sup> “*Verum ipsum factum*—‘the true is the made.’”<sup>9</sup> Truth, as with life, is not simply what is posited; it is what is *made* and *remade*, *done* and *redone*, *created* and *recreated* across the multiple facets of human life.

As we know, Vico’s style of humanism owed significantly to classical rhetoric and philology, two fields dear to the humanities. Valuing both *prudentia* (practical wisdom) and creativity, Vico possessed a pragmatic and inventive philosophy of education, a view preserved, I would argue, in the better liberal arts curricula, including Wabash’s own. Vico wrote: Students “should be taught the totality of the sciences and arts, and their intellectual powers should be developed to the full” so that they “would become exact in science, clever in practical matters, fluent in eloquence, imaginative in understanding poetry or painting, and strong in memorizing what they have learned

in their legal studies.”<sup>10</sup> To those students intending “a career in public life, whether in the courts, the senate, or the pulpit,”<sup>11</sup> he insisted that the making and remaking of the true requires mastery of the persuasive arts appropriated from the ancients. It is not enough to recall Socrates’ or Cicero’s argumentative art. One must be able to engage the ancients creatively for a different time and audience in order to make *humanitas* anew, to mend the world, *miḥ’nei tikkun ha-olam*. From this perspective, encounter with the “dominion of the dead” signifies first and foremost *activity* on our part: the concrete, persuasive transformation of the present through the agency and thought of those who have preceded us. Witnessing in this way to the past means human intervention in the present world, which, in Vico’s 18th-century world meant, cultivation of the “total life of the body politic.”<sup>12</sup>

The human is defined by its association with the ground and the act of burying the body,<sup>13</sup> a connection that survives underground in the etymological link between death and humanity. The Latin word *humanitas*, which gives us the English word *humanity* and *the humanities*, is related to *humando* (and *humo*), meaning *to bury*, “to cover with earth, to perform the funeral rites over the dead.”<sup>14</sup> The human and the humus, namely the earth, soil, dirt, and ground, implicate one another, name one another, cover up one another. We see this connection also attested in the Hebrew word *adam*, the biblical<sup>15</sup> name for humankind and the first human. *Adam* is linked to *adamah*, meaning “ground.” The creation account in Genesis 3:19 plays upon this association in God’s famous curse of Adam: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you (*Adam*) return to the ground (*adamah*), for out of it you (*Adam*) were taken; you (*Adam*) are dust, and to dust you (*Adam*) shall return.”<sup>16</sup> We can hear God’s belabored assonance, his rhetorical effort to remind Adam of who and what he is, in the effort to engender a little humility (*humilitas*), literally “nearness to ground,” to connect him to the earth that moments before God for some inexplicable reason felt compelled to curse: “Cursed be the ground (*adamah*) because of you (*Adam*)” (Gen 3:17). *Adamah/Adam*: This double curse has always puzzled me. Is it nothing more than a clever rhetoric flourish on the part of the biblical writer intended to communicate guilt by linguistic association? Or do we catch sound of something darker here? It is striking that the ground should be made to suffer because of Adam’s transgression. Are we witnessing at the start of Genesis first signs of an impulsive God who takes out his frustration with *Adam*/the human on the earth, the beginning of a pattern of behavior on God’s part that explodes exponentially three chapters later in the deluge of the earth when all living things not sequestered with Noah and his band on board the ark are destroyed? We listen to the words but what are we hearing preserved in the language? Questions. More about Genesis in a few moments. For now, it suffices to recognize the connection between *Adamah* and *Adam*; humus and human; earth and earthling; death, diety, dirt and *Adam*; the human condition is from the ground up “humic,” our ways of understanding “necrocratic.”<sup>17</sup>

Back to the humanities. Thoroughly humic and necrocratic, the fields of the humanities strive to uncover and recover universal and particular human experiences, especially those that are buried over time. In archeology material fragments and artifacts are exhumed from graves, restored, and brought to public light to further our conversation with the ancients; in religious and theological study myth, ritual and belief are reconstituted from papyri, scroll, and clay tablets, compared across epochs, their grave histories and origins exposed, shedding light on the ways humans and deities coexist—or in many cases not!; in linguistics latent meanings, dead etymons, and lost connotations,

even dead languages themselves, are retrieved, their genealogies reconstructed to further communication;<sup>18</sup> in literature textual meanings are restored through careful, close readings between the lines aided helpfully by feminist, postcolonial, deconstructive, and other suspicious forms of reading intent on uncovering the obscured, ostracized, and obliterated; and in painting, sculpture, music and theater our predecessors are posthumously retrieved, revived, and recast—as with the *Bacchae* production this weekend—mimicked, morphed and ironized, buried and retrieved time and again to enthuse our humanity with the spectral.

And let us not forget our Social Science and Natural Science colleagues. When it is not busy probing neural networks in the laboratory, psychology concerns itself with the humic as it unearths traumas and desires and applies therapies to make the living whole, when it reads the psyche, like Freud's Mystic Writing Pad, etched and engraved by life experiences. As for Division I, for a starter recall that the *grahve* (derived from *gravitas*) was the 18th-century term for mass later upgraded to the *kilogram*. When you stop to think about it, Division I's interest in the necrotic is nearly universal, stretching from the Big Bang to the biosphere.<sup>19</sup> What are the cosmological, geological, and biological records if not necrogenic? What is biomass if not the absorbed and reabsorbed dead living on in the air, the sea, and the earth?<sup>20</sup> Grave diggers one and all, we in the liberal arts search out the dead who dwell in our texts, our traumas, and our tissues. Suffice it to say the work of the liberal arts is grave business.

You may know that I am not the first LaFollette lecturer to speak about the dead. In her 1994 address entitled "Dialogues with Death," Leslie Day said: "[I]t is not death as a biological fact that I find interesting or appropriate for this lecture but our human response to it" (1). Approaching death and the dead from the perspective of an archeologist who self-confessedly pushes "the boundaries of the humanities in biological sciences and anthropology," Professor Day argued that the excavation of tombs and the reconstruction of funerary rituals opens a window onto a culture's basic structures. Archeology so practiced amounts to "a dialogue with the dead, which reflects not only universal human patterns but also elements specific and particular to them." (11) Concentrating on burial practices in Kavousi, Leslie showed how exhumation of the material fragments is the start of a "conversation which the archeologist conducts with dead cultures". "Much can be learned," she said, "by eavesdropping on the conversation which each culture conducts with death." (7)

Continuing in Leslie's footsteps, let us now "eavesdrop" on three biblical texts, listening for long-buried conversations that witness to ancient suffering amplified for our ears. Let us listen for lost voices, historical experiences and questions thought mute but retrievable by careful attending, the sort of skill that the liberal arts proudly promotes. My reading originates from an ongoing conversation and collaboration with my lose Drew Theological School Hebrew Bible Professor colleague Danna Nolan Fewell<sup>21</sup> with whom I have written extensively on the Bible, the art of Samuel Bak, and suffering. Together we have excavated three textual sites in Exodus, Genesis and the Gospel of Mark, holy terrain for covenantal symbols and practices that have grounded Jewish and Christian identities over the ages.<sup>22</sup> With the artwork of Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak as a lens, I want to show how his creative, artistic wrestling with the trauma of six million Jewish dead offer us a point of entry into the dominion of the biblical dead. His demanding artwork asks us to



see and hear the familiar differently, to appreciate how trauma can be lived with creatively. By attending carefully to the landscape of Bak's experience, we may be able to hear in these sacred texts, perhaps for the first time, the Bible's own creative efforts to deal with suffering and loss and, perhaps why the teaching of the Bible is so vital for the liberal arts. But first let us meet Bak in his artwork, listen to what he paints, and attune our ears more precisely to biblical voices long since silent now made audible once more.



*Creation of Wartime III*, 1999-2008

Samuel Bak

Oil on Canvas

50 x 75"

An exhausted refugee collapses atop a rubble heap in a bombed-out building, enveloped by war-shattered residue: wrecked furniture, discarded kitchen utensils, dilapidated shoes, rent blankets, broken beams—detritus of a human world gone up in smoke. He reaches out toward a vacant silhouette of Michelangelo's Father-God. Only the divine hand remains, an amputated placard tacked to a perforated wall. A vista of destruction looms beyond the remains. Both human and god-shape are framed by artillery shells and rifle; blank walls, canvas, scroll, book, and tablets; a tethered cross shrouded with prayer shawls; and smoke-laced skyline.

Michelangelo's God ceiled an orderly universe in the Sistine Chapel; here he has been blasted to smithereens, his form traced by broken bricks, propped split timbers, crematoria smoke wafting its question toward heaven, and the elusive double *yods* (יָ), the Hebrew letters signifying the unspeakable biblical name of a bodiless god. Exiled from Michelangelo's vaulted holy space, this

deity breaches wall, promise, covenant, perhaps morality itself, leaving behind Adam in a wholly different universe of meaning.



*Creation of Adam*  
Michelangelo  
Fresco  
Ca. 1511  
480 cm × 230 cm (189.0 in × 90.6 in)

Thus we are thrust into the artistic terrain of Samuel Bak,<sup>23</sup> where intimate worlds, grand landscapes, symbolic narratives, and personal artifacts have been destroyed and provisionally reassembled. *Creation of Wartime III* is one of many Bak paintings that seek to reappropriate classic Christian representations of creation. Scenes of destruction and construction, of tentative survival, of tenuous restoration, Bak's reimaginings create a parallax affect that alters perspective and enables us to gain a different depth perception. By shifting our focus from the world's creation to a world in need of mending, he offers us precarious representations of *tikkun olam*, the "repair of the world."<sup>24</sup>

A child prodigy who, at age nine, held his first exhibition in the Vilna ghetto, the only Jewish artist to both in the camps and at Yad Vashem, whose painting now spans seven decades, Bak weaves together personal history, Jewish history, Christian history, and Western art history to fashion a visual narration and narrative vision of his experience of Shoah and life lived in the shadow of crematoria chimneys. His narrative tapestry is woven with threads of paradox, irony, and reverse patterning. In *Creation of Wartime III*, "new creation" is tainted by apocalypse; ruination serves as marker for divinity; *Müsselman*, the term Primo Levi ascribes to the concentration camp Everyman, is proxy for the new-born human; books, scrolls, and tablets lie unwritten; canvases go unpainted; pointing fingers signal no clear direction—death in life, life in death, *deathlife*.<sup>25</sup> Bak works with the rubble of ruptured stories where plots no longer progress tidily from birth through life to death. Life and death "are no longer opposites or alternatives, but co-exist with a painful intimacy that alters our way of seeing the self in relation to history."<sup>26</sup>

Art and suffering, like life and death, the living and the dead, are allies. Jewish philosopher and Torah translator Franz Rosenzweig, a survivor of the Great War,<sup>27</sup> has observed that art "aggravates

the suffering of life and at the same time helps people to bear it,” teaching “us to overcome without forgetting.” Far from erasing trauma or obscuring injury, art overcomes by “structuring suffering, not by denying it. The artist knows himself as he to whom it is given to say what he suffers. . . . He tries neither to keep the suffering silent nor to scream it out: he represents it. In his representation he reconciles the contradiction, that he himself is there and the suffering also is there; he reconciles it, without doing the least debasement of it.”<sup>28</sup> Bak echoes Rosenzweig in more gripping terms when he says his art aspires “to protect the scar of an ancient wound while remaining true to [the] knowledge of the wound itself.”<sup>29</sup>

Implicit in Bak’s observation are the narrative qualities and disruptive effects of suffering, as well as his own sense of obligation as an artist to bear witness to the dead.<sup>30</sup> In narrative terms the wound marks the critical event that forever changes “what the past was supposed to lead up to” and opens up a future that “is scarcely thinkable.” Wounds of catastrophic proportion—e.g., critical illness or injury, death of a child, war, forced exile, genocide, natural catastrophe—leave individuals and communities with scarce and depleted resources for comprehending who they are and what they are to become. Like Bak’s Adam, survivors find themselves in the midst of what one critic terms “narrative wreckage,” namely, the collapse of all coherence to life.<sup>31</sup> The survivor’s challenge, therefore, is to take stock of the remains, to select the viable remnants, and to engage the arduous task of reconstructing a new story that seeks to repair and reorder both self and community.

Stories of suffering, because partial and provisional, must be revisited frequently. New circumstances, new audiences, new perceptions, and the changing experiences of the teller demand ever new articulations of the story, reinterpretations of the past, reimagined futures.<sup>32</sup> Iteration is key to meaning, and no one knows this better than Bak. A master of retrospective refrains and revisions, he revisits the narrative wreckage of the Shoah, exploring its impact on Jewish life, Western history, human nature and culture. By returning to Vilna, his childhood, the Warsaw ghetto, the graves of his murdered family in Ponary, the Bible, the great artistic masters time and again with the Shoah on his palette, he paints stories that mourn, remember, and provisionally repair the once-beautiful, the once-vibrant. Standing in knowing doubt before idyllic visions and consoling fictions, he paints in ironic colors and exacting, troubling detail a universe of paradoxical truth that both bears witness to the wounded and lost, and challenges all who see to take up the constructive work of repairing the narrative wreckage wherever we find it.

What is *Creation of Wartime III*<sup>33</sup> if not a visual rendering of narrative wreckage? Michelangelo’s glorious ceiling has collapsed in to the gory, and along with it the majestic universe it projects. His vision of an ideal Adam about to be imbued with the near-touch of divine life, about to enter history with promise, potential, and partner, explodes. Perfect physiques degrade into debilitated forms. Beauty disintegrates into brokenness. Solidarity with heaven’s hosts gives way to abject solitude. Even the deity can’t escape: The commanding presence of God literally evaporates, gone up in the Shoah’s smoke. The wound’s raw truth obliges another story, a revised prologue, new opening words to the Genesis. Listen to Bak’s bible-sounding voice:

*In the beginning was the Shoah ....*

Bak lives in doubt before Michelangelo's vision of creation and divine providence, a vision that many have associated with that of the Bible itself. Bak has even described himself as challenging the Bible's depictions of God and divine promises. But, as students of the Bible and of the liberal arts, we wonder if Bak may not be quarrelling with the Bible so much as intuiting the Bible's *own* complicated efforts to sort through narrative wreckage and to repair communities fractured by catastrophe. Can we possibly imagine that the Bible, too, lives in doubt before theological visions that fail to take into account the horrors of life? Can we imagine that the lofty Bible lives much nearer to the ground than we ever had thought? If so, how does the Bible manage to structure and overcome human suffering "while remaining true to the knowledge of the wound itself"? What buried secrets does the Bible hold from us, beckon us to recognize, about its people and its past? Let us follow Bak through his studio to the library to the Bible to burial sites of those long passed.

## I. REMEMBERING SINAI

In Bak's *Memorial* the fractured, pieced-together tablets of the Ten Commandments form both a visual metaphor for the broken Sinai covenant and a headstone memorializing the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah. The monument appears to mark where the dead are buried, but the bodies are not to be found, nor is the god who once delivered the people from Egypt's bondage. The tablets, twin gravestones, stand in for, bear witness to, an absent deity and a missing people.



*Memorial*, 1986  
Samuel Bak  
Oil on Canvas  
39 ¼ x 31 ¾"

Rusting double *yods*, letters signifying the divine name, are manually riveted to the top of the right tablet, a seemingly desperate, wishful, imposition of divine presence. The people themselves are present only in traces and pieces: A dismembered, roughly re-membered, Star of David forms the center piece of the tablets' puzzle, its shape a sorry example of the stone cutter's and iron worker's crafts. Here the identity of a 20th-century Jewish people is patched back together after historical rupture, a rupture now integral to the identities of both those lost and those remaining, an insistent but uneasy cohesion in an unstable, damaged structure. On the left tablet the number 6 both grieves and accuses. Engraved in the digit are the six million who perished in the Shoah, as well as the sixth commandment, "Thou shall not kill." Implicated in this cipher, as well as in the barbed wire, prison-striped salvage, metal stays, and bullet holes, are both the victims and the perpetrators inextricably bound together.

When we return to the Exodus covenant narrative (Exod 19-20; 31:18-34:35)—for those unfamiliar, it is the story of Moses' rocky reception of the 10 commandments at Mt. Sinai—with Bak's image in mind, we ask: What is the biblical text memorializing? What dominion of the dead do we encounter here? What graves are being marked? What reminders are being issued? We note that laws, rules, and commandments are not needed where problems do not exist. A reminder that the injunction *not* to kill is unnecessary if no killing is taking place. Covenants, contracts are not needed when parties trust one another to act responsibly. Consequently, we might ask, do the commandments attempt to bring cohesion to a world where little or none is to be found? Do they function to forge an ethos among ancient Israelites where there is a disparity and clash of values? And do they insist, maybe even overly so and to a fault, on divine presence, authorship, and authority because the community's experiences have given it reason to doubt and distrust?

The Exodus story hints at severe communal trauma. Moses himself, angry with the people's anxious need to image the god who delivered them from bondage, shatters the original tablets. A divinely ordained massacre of the people ensues, and a second set of tablets must be constructed, chiseled this time by human hand rather than the finger of God. The tablets become the symbol of the covenant—a truce perhaps?—between people and God. But they also convey memories of violence, suffering, and betrayal, bearing the freight of doubly failed responsibility and trust. The insecure people who need signs of God's presence have offended the insecure, unsteady deity who reacts in defense of his honor.

Many scholars now posit that the Decalogue and its framing story of the encounter at Sinai, indeed the entire stretch of biblical text from Genesis to Kings, comprise a post-exilic construction, an imaginative, theological remembering of the historical experiences of a community suffering first Assyrian, then Babylonian defeat and forced migration, enduring the hardships of reconstruction, and undergoing the continuing economic and political pressures of Persian occupation. Those experiences are recast, played out, in a narrative ostensibly about escape from

Egyptian bondage. But a different trauma is being lived out through the story. If this is true, then we must ask how the destruction of the 8th-century BCE northern kingdom Israel (732-722 BCE), of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BCE, the killing and exiling of major portions of the population, the devastation of land and economy have informed the production of the Exodus text and its vision of covenantal partnership. Does the insistence on covenant reflect a communal situation where no covenant seems apparent, maybe even possible, where the people's confidence in God's continuing care and conscience is shattered? Do the Ten Commandments themselves, with their apodictic formulations, their notable neglect to articulate penalties for transgression, picture an Imperial, subjected colony that lacks the authority even to discipline its own citizens? Amidst such cultural and political wreckage, do we discern a narrative attempt to shape a communal identity, in resistance, against the pressures of an alien Empire's values?

Granted, the Assyrian defeat, the Babylonian exile, and the subsequent centuries of hardship hardly match the magnitude of the Shoah, and we recognize the moral danger in equating cataclysms and genocides. Nevertheless, we detect in these events profound ruptures in Israel's history, deep fault-lines in Israel's theological foundation, that compelled its official storytellers to rethink, to reimagine, the contours of the community's narrative self-representation. The covenantal story, from Abraham to David, is now reconstructed as an epic that artfully, truthfully discloses the suffering and loss that has been endured and maps more viable, less naive sequels. Mimicking political covenants imposed by domination, these wounded storytellers project a life in covenant with God, perhaps as a subversive act of political resistance against Imperial rule, certainly as a means of defining the community over against the dominator. In any case, the story picks up the narrative wreckage, structuring life and identity under colonization, expressing a wary hope in God's ability and willingness to liberate—in effect, offering God another chance. At the same time, the story and storytellers seek to hold God accountable to the same moral standards as the people: “Thou shall not kill” serves as much a reminder to God as it does a rule for the human community.<sup>34</sup> We encounter here a narrative that artfully weaves together memories of cultural catastrophe, domination and a dominion of suffering and death, admissions of communal culpability, defiant resistance to captors, and a chastened view of a god whose promises and deeds have come up short.

## II. RECREATING CREATION

As we've seen in *Creation of Wartime III*, Bak's images of creation raise similar questions and interpretive possibilities for reading Genesis.



*Genesis*, 1988  
Samuel Bak  
Oil on Linen  
31 ¾ x 39 ½"

In his 1988 painting *Genesis*, creation begins with floating stones and cultural artifacts—broken bottles, random dishware, a chalice waiting to be filled, sliced fruit waiting to be eaten. Creation begins, not *ex nihilo*, nor even with some chaotic cosmic stew, but with life interrupted. We hear a different voice:

*In the beginning was the interruption ....*

“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” (1:2). Absent from Bak’s scene is the spirit of God hovering, birdlike over the deep.<sup>35</sup> Instead, remnants of a damaged human community hang suspended over a barren landscape. Creation begins with a cataclysmic upheaval of normal life, the equivalent of a communal Big Bang, that marks the beginning of new time and space.



*Bereshit Bara*, 1995  
Samuel Bak  
Oil on Linen  
32 x 39 ½"

In a painting entitled *Bereshit Bara*, ruin and rubble literally constitute the text of Genesis itself; architectural fragments form the Hebrew letters and words *bereshit bara*—the first words of the Bible—that launch the Genesis creation. Are words materializing from wreckage? Turning into wreckage? Are communal structures being built from words? Dissipating into words? Is creation coming undone? Or is it straining to emerge from un-creation?

Bak's imagery invites us to reread the initial chapter of Genesis with an eye toward the historical crises that most likely evoked it. Genesis 1 is read ardently in classical theology as a declarative statement about the world's naissance and nature, a determining source for much Christian doctrine about the nature of creation and the human condition. Modern historical critical investigation, with its emphasis on cosmos emerging from chaos, routinely regards this biblical story as a superior monotheistic response to inferior, competing ancient Near Eastern creation accounts like the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic and Old Babylonian and Assyrian versions of the Atrahasis myth. At Bak's visual prompting, however, we are invited to see Genesis 1 in a different light,<sup>36</sup> as a story intent upon structuring the suffering of deportation, death *en route* and in diaspora. Like Bak's paintings, like the Exodus account, the Genesis text is the product of wounded storytellers responding to communal upheaval.



*Bereshit bara elohim*, “in the beginning of God’s creating,” the land/earth was *tohu vbohu*, “without form and void” or better, “wild and waste.”<sup>37</sup> Listen again:

*In the beginning there is a “rent at the heart of the world.”*<sup>38</sup>

exile, conquest, destruction, killing, captives, corvées. The prophet Jeremiah had borne witness to the event of Babylonian conquest and deportation. Using the anomalous phrase *tohu vbohu*,<sup>39</sup> he describes a wild and wasted land, heavens without light, mountains quaking, a world without human inhabitant, desolation.<sup>40</sup> In the beginning, (*bereshit*) both the character of God and the storyteller of Genesis are confronted with *tohu vbohu*, the aftermath of destruction, narrative wreckage so profound that even the divine spirit finds itself in exile, seeking shelter. Far from picturing this God as the transcendent deity who “exists outside of time and space,”<sup>41</sup> we are invited instead to imagine a vulnerable god *in need* of time and space and earth and human company (*adam*). In the beginning, a nameless, homeless, *elohim* hovers (Gen 1:2) over the face of the deep, with no place to alight and no people to claim as his own. Like the dove sent forth from the ark after the deluge, God has no ground to set his foot, no way to end the ceaseless hovering.<sup>42</sup>

Surveying the material and narrative wreckage, working from his own need, his own lack, this God takes up the remains and begins to reorder time and space, to begin a new story, effecting a “repair of the world” through gatherings and separations, connections and divisions. God extends sentience and order beyond the divine self into once-empty, wasted *tohu vbohu*,<sup>43</sup> and he instructs those created in his image to do the same.

What were the original storytellers *really* saying? Doing? Human beings (*adam*) created in the image of a deity who experiences loss and acts to structure that loss, are not transcendent sovereigns in miniature. Rather, humans are positioned in the story, like the God who creates them, to move toward life and to reorganize their own world, to be fruitful and multiply, to fill and subdue, to rule and have dominion. Far from offering universal permission to dominate, these last commissions, we can imagine, address a powerless, defeated people. They constitute not a license to some privileged sovereignty, but encouragement to the community to reclaim any space whatsoever, to carve out for itself a place, a home in a world gone awry, to replenish a dwindled population, to extend sentience, life, into empty, lifeless, space—as God himself has done. God and people are created and creative in each other’s image: Both confront and must respond to the need to give structure and purpose to life in response to suffering.

God’s proposal, “*Let us make ...*,” (Gen 1:26, my emphasis) announces what the text is actually doing. The text is making—a making—creating, realizing an identity, a new image, for this human community. To be fruitful and multiply is an act of hope, of reimagination, of reinvention of a future where none had appeared to exist. The subsequent *toldoth*, or genealogies, bear witness to this future. At once a tool of survival and an act of pedagogy, the creation story structures post-exilic suffering both for present survivors and for future generations who will need to learn how to confront narrative wreckage in their own lifetimes.

This brings us to the institution of Sabbath in Gen 2:2-3 with its multiple functions within and beyond the story world. Sabbath resolves the divine dilemma, at least temporarily, providing rest for the restless deity. At last, the hovering, homeless god now has a place in time to perch, to cease from constant busyness. Sabbath will find fuller expression in subsequent Priestly material where the structuring of religious life parallels the creation of the world, and where cultic order is designed to create and protect a place for the *mishkan*, the place of God's presence.<sup>44</sup> Past, present, and future elide and abide under a common roof. Looking backward in time the Priestly writers evoke the generations of ancestors, the dominion of their Jewish dead, for a new world. Having returned from exile to the Land of Promise, these storytellers revivify the cult, reconstruct the walls of Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple, and retell the story informed by generations of exile, suffering, and death.

Hence, it will become increasingly clear that, for these wounded storytellers, God's presence among them is contingent upon the story they tell and the world they create and sustain. Sabbath provides a time and space to remember and retell that story, as a way of securing God's presence among them, as a means of unifying the community, and, importantly, as an act of political resistance to a Persian Empire demanding ultimate allegiance and ravenously siphoning the products of colonized labor. On the Sabbath the community is free to imagine life without class constraints and to consider for themselves what aspects of the world need mending.

The creation story in Genesis 1 is followed by others also wrestling with communal trauma. For, what is the story of the Garden of Eden but another attempt to structure the suffering of exile? It exposes other complicated truths of suffering—human culpability, divine ambiguity, and the mysterious role of desire divinely instilled in all living things. Genesis 4 tells another version involving two brothers, divine arbitrariness, failed human fraternity and divine failure to act responsibly and live humanely, and yet another exile. The story of Noah follows, veiling exile with flood waters, speaking the difficult truth of both human and divine violence. The Babel tower, Abraham's call, Hagar's dismissal, Jacob's flight, Joseph's capture, and so it goes, retellings of exile, each limited and partial, iterative and recursive, but all attempting to work through communal trauma, to speak the truth of human and divine suffering, to accept and name human and divine culpability, to live in the presence of the dead, all the while re-imagining creatively what the future holds.

### III. CRUCIFIXION AND CRISIS

Finally, we turn to Bak's engagement with the Second Testament, the Christ figure, Christian theology, and the questions that engagement raises. If Bak subverts Michelangelo's universal Adam with his many mundane, particular, and beleaguered Adams, he also undermines the universal Christ of the Western Christian and artistic tradition with the faces and figures of particular children: the famous boy from the Warsaw ghetto, his murdered young friend Samek Epstein,

even Bak himself. The crucifixion, the privileged image of human suffering in Western art history and the triumphant symbol of divine love and salvation in Christian theology, is repeatedly destabilized, most provocatively in Bak's paintings of the Warsaw ghetto boy.<sup>45</sup>



*Warsaw Ghetto Boy*, 1943  
Photograph  
The Stroop Report



*Study I*, 1995  
Samuel Bak  
Oil on Linen  
18 x 21 3/4"

Playing upon the cruciform implicit in the photographed boy's posture, Bak reproduces the boy as a new and different Christ figure who stands outside the convent door, waiting to enter Christian sanctuary and consciousness, challenging religious fixation with Jesus' crucifixion and its proclaimed power to effect salvation. But what salvation can Jesus provide for the lost children of the Shoah? Or to pose the question in Emil Fackenheim's haunting terms: "What are the sufferings of the Cross compared to those of a mother whose child is slaughtered to the sound of laughter or to the strains of a Viennese waltz?"<sup>46</sup> Even the young Sam Bak, though fascinated with and moved by images of the suffering Christ, sheltered as he was with his mother in a Vilna convent by Catholic nuns, finally concludes that traditional Christian theology of the Cross has little to say to, or even about, a child of the Shoah:



*Warsaw Ghetto Boy*, 1943  
Photograph  
The Stroop Report  
18 x 14"



*Crossed Out II*, 2008  
Samuel Bak  
Oil on Canvas

In some ways I felt luckier than Jesus. My dead father, a miserable prisoner of a Nazi camp, never pretended to be all-powerful. He was no master capable of creating worlds! Yet he saved me in the direst of circumstances from certain death, whereas Jesus' father, willing to see his son suffer, ignored the plea "Why have you forsaken me?" and let him die on the cross.<sup>47</sup>

The unresponsive deity that, in Christian tradition, allows, even enables, the death of the son as the instrument of world salvation becomes, in Bak's works, the unresponsive deity who permits the useless suffering and deaths of a million and a half children for no good, no reason whatsoever. The ghetto boy, with his uplifted surrendering and pleading hands, implicates an indifferent deity, denying claim to any familial connection or grand universal plan, and recasts the salvific suffering of Jesus for what it is: the abandonment, torture, and execution of an innocent human being.

Indeed, in *Crossed Out II* we find Bak's child caught in the cross-hairs, bearing a cross, awaiting execution, his death hood doubling as burial shroud. Through elision of photograph and canvas, mediated by Bak's childhood experience, the lost boy of the Warsaw Ghetto is positioned as a different, this-worldly Christ child. Transported from the street to his place of execution, the child stands before us, crossed wooden beams sandwiching his torso, marking him a clear target. By any theological or other measure, we are witnesses to a scene of perverted justice. As we face this child

and the fate we anticipate is about to befall him, we realize that God is not the only party in question. Where are we in this picture? Do we hold the camera? Are we the shooter? Do we hold the weapon that will ultimately cross this child out? Are we dispassionate onlookers, reluctant bystanders, eager spectators, sight seers unprepared or unwilling to interrupt the violence? What *are* we willing to do?

Such challenges to an unresponsive god and an implicated community can also be found, if one listens closely, to the gospels, in particular the Evangelist Mark, whose abrupt ending pictures Jesus' disciples in stunned disappointment, disbelief, and disarray. (Parenthetically, I feel a keen poignancy in focusing upon Mark's gospel today. As you may know, this very text was the focus of Bill Placher's last writing project—a theological commentary on Mark, which I am happy to report will be published next year by Westminster John Knox Press.) Unlike Pharisee-competing Matthew, Rome-conscious Luke, and loquacious John, minimalist Mark provides no triumphant conclusion to Jesus' horrific suffering. There is no appearance of a resurrected Jesus, no once-again living Jesus to comfort the disciples, no characters capable of attributing meaning to Jesus' senseless and ceaseless suffering. All that remains by narrative end is an empty tomb—and yes, that mysterious young man dressed in white that no one can explain—with no body to be found and nobody to assure that all is or will be well.<sup>48</sup> Less an ending than a sudden stop, the story pictures three women who flee from the scene desperately afraid and at risk: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one for they were afraid ...” (Mk 16:8 NRSV). “For they were afraid” (*ephoboounto gar*). Most scholars take this anomalous phrase to be Mark's final word on the matter,<sup>49</sup> although subsequent hearers were less than satisfied and proceeded to append no fewer than four alternative endings, including one that popularizes snake handling and poison-drinking as signs of belief. The pain and suffering reflected in this alternative ending is well worth probing, but that is a serpentine story for another day and another garden. The concluding “for they were afraid” is an ill-formed, grammatically infelicitous phrase, dangling ultimately its unsettling preposition (*gar*), leaving the hearer herself hanging, creating for the reader the linguistic and literary effect of the experience of the desperate women hanging on for dear life. But neither word nor resolution is forthcoming; the text remains suspended grammatically, narratively, and theologically.

What human history and experience does Mark's story conjure? If, as some scholars posit,<sup>50</sup> Mark's gospel was produced at the time of the Roman siege of Jerusalem between 68 and 70 CE, the story may point to a cataclysmic moment that forever altered the emerging Christian community and its way of life. In 68 CE Vespasian aborted his siege of the rebel city to return to Rome to be acclaimed Emperor. A period of sixteen months elapses before his son Titus was dispatched to finally suppress the Jewish revolt and raze the city. Plausibly composed during this 16 month hiatus when the community experiences a tantalizing false reprieve, imagining perhaps that they have weathered the worst, the Markan text jolts them back to reality, painting a grave picture of both present and future. Gathering pieces of Hebrew prophecy and oral traditions from the earliest Christian community, the Markan storyteller assembles this first-ever narrative of Messiah Jesus and his disciples slouching inexorably to Jerusalem and to the cross.



*Carrying a Cross*  
Samuel Bak  
Oil on Canvas  
18 X 14"

With a present marked by quandary and fear, Mark forecasts an imminent future of utter abandonment: false prophets, arrest and trial, betrayal of brother by brother, father by child, and children by parents (Mk 13: 5-37). Projecting the Markan community's present-day experience as Jesus' story, the storyteller prepares the community for a time when neither human nor divine help will be forthcoming; when all means of perseverance, salvation, recovery are in doubt; when the religious expectations of the fabulous Kingdom of God, the dominion of God,<sup>51</sup> gives way instead to a dominion of the Markan dead and dying, and to a suffering and death that will be their lot at Roman hands. Caught in the liminal moment between life and death—*deathlife*—the Markan community is imaged in character and deed at a point of utter loss and abandonment by a deity seemingly impervious to their suffering. No subsequent retelling of this ending and experience by Mark's editors or later gospel rewriters relying upon Mark's story, no matter how passionate the effort to accentuate life and downplay death, can expunge the anxious memory Mark preserves. The Markan community lives but a generation and a half after Jesus' execution, an event that stunned his earliest followers and whose potent aftereffects had yet to dissipate. Mark anticipates the dead and the dying, and narrates a proleptic story in which his community must now come to terms with their own near demise at Titus' hands. If the storytellers of Genesis and Exodus are

repairing their communal worlds in the aftermath of Babylonian exile catastrophe, Mark writes on the cusp of an unfolding Roman catastrophe conscious that yet more wreckage is imminent, suffering a foregone conclusion.

Like Bak's disturbing images of crucified children, Mark's narrative stands in grim doubt before confident Jewish Messianic expectations, projecting instead haunting scenes of the deaths of innocents and innocence. Just as Bak focuses our gaze on the death of this one child and the deaths of 6 million others, so Mark refuses to allow his audience to avert their eyes from the truth, confronting them repeatedly with the gruesome suffering that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem, and reshaping Jesus' experience as a forecast of what lies ahead for them personally. Our eyes are fixed on the ground not the horizon, on the grave not the grandiose. Just as we are implored to bear witness to Bak's crucified boys and to consider our own culpabilities and responsibilities in a world hell-bent on destroying children, Mark's audience is also pressed with the ultimate questions: Is this the promised end? What will they do? What will they do in the moment when suffering affords no escape, when choiceless choices are all that await them? Will they, like Mark's Jesus, attend to the physical needs of those around them? Will they afford compassion even while under duress themselves? Will they collaborate with the Roman enemy? Will they die as they have lived? Will they run away in fear? Like Bak, Mark provides no answer. The ending leaves the final act of world repair to the reader knowing that so much remains in doubt: how does one respond to an incomplete sentence, to an empty tomb, to a community paralyzed by fear and sentenced to certain Roman destruction?



William C. Placher, 2008

Photograph

Compliments of Kathleen Cahalan

Saint John's University School of Theology/Seminary

Responding to the observation that the gospel of Mark "is too harshly focused on the paradox of negation to be of enduring attraction," Bill Placher counters: "Yet perhaps it is just these features of Mark that make a particular appeal in our age of uncertainty, when a Gospel that ends with

Christ triumphantly present is harder to reconcile with the horrors of the world around us and the doubts within us. Mark throws the ball to us, as he did to his first readers. The three women run away silent, but we have heard the story; it is up to us, in our lives and testimony, to tell it and keep it alive.”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, one might argue that the Bible habitually “throws the ball to us,” leaving the final acts of world repair to its readers and its listeners. How does one respond to *tohu vbohu*, betrayed covenants, captive and besieged communities, broken promises, abandoned homes, forsaken cities, murdered children, lost jobs, denied loans, devastated budgets, wrecked economies, intractable wars, vanished dreams? And how are we, as humanists, readers, teachers, listeners, viewers, citizens of a different Empire positioned in relation to the wreckage around us? Can we identify with the wounded? Can we be counted among those who wound? The narrative art of the Bible, like the visual art of Samuel Bak, ushers us into the dominion of the dead and bears witness to lives lived in affliction and uncertainty, lives that depended upon the text’s construction, lives that continue to depend upon the text’s interpretation and interruption. But we are reminded that the Bible is not a lifeless theological gravestone, a landmark offering unquestioned certainty, or a cathedral ceiling attempting to circumscribe our worldview. Rather, like the works of Samuel Bak, the Bible marks a threshold. It shows us a road into an enormous landscape of uncanny, scarred beauty where past and present, pain and possibility confront us and challenge us to recognize rupture and wreckage all around us, to see it clearly, to speak of it truthfully, to acknowledge our own culpabilities in its making, and to engage in the creative labor, the hard work, the artwork, of *tikkun olam*.

And so it is to each one of us, humanists, teachers and students of the liberal arts alike, grave diggers one and all, standing in the presence of ghosts who speak to us, that the ball is tossed to us repeatedly, every day, by our predecessors, denizens of the dominion of the dead whose voices come to us today, You have heard them speak: Aristotle and Cicero, Shakespeare and Michelangelo, Vico and Rilke, the Priestly writers and the Evangelist Mark, Mother Teresa and the Warsaw Ghetto Boy, Rosenzweig and Bak, our own Bill Placher. In truth the dead “hound the living with guilt, dread, and a sense of responsibility, obliging us, by whatever means necessary to ... keep the story going, even if we never quite figure out what the story is about, what our part in it is, the end toward which it’s progressing, or the moral it contains ....” And so it goes. That is as it should be. The dead speak to us, they call upon us liberal artists, fraught as we are with doubts and questions, to witness, to make the truth, to do something to repair this world.<sup>53</sup>



## NOTES

1. *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, Book 4; <http://www.sfgoth.com/~immanis/rilke/letter4.html>.
2. See Lawrence Langer, *Landscape of Jewish Experience. Paintings by Samuel Bak* (Boston: Pucker Art Publications and Brandeis University, 1997).
3. Quoted in Jonathan Magonet's *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 27.
4. I have borrowed the expression "Dominion of the Dead" from Robert Pogue Harrison's book of the same title (Chicago University Press, 2003).
5. [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/let\\_us\\_touch\\_the\\_dying-the\\_poor-the\\_lonely\\_and/216343.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/let_us_touch_the_dying-the_poor-the_lonely_and/216343.html).
6. Heidegger granted an interview to *Der Spiegel* on September 23, 1966, about his politics and past on the condition that it could be published only after his death. The interview appeared May 31, 1976.
7. See Harrison, ix. I follow Harrison's use of Vico early on in his book.
8. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giambattista\\_Vico](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giambattista_Vico).
9. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vico/>.
10. *The New Science*, 19 cited in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vico/>.
11. From Vico's 1708 Commencement address at the University of Naples "On the Order of the Scholarly Disciplines of Our Times," cited in [http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Giambattista\\_Vico](http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Giambattista_Vico).
12. *The New Science*, 64 19 cited in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vico/>.
13. Harrison, xi.
14. See Harrison, x; *Cassell's Latin-English, English-Latin Dictionary* (London, 1952), 255.
15. A direct etymological link between *adam* and *adamah* is disputed. Driscoll offers that the root *adam* derives from the Assyrian *adamu* meaning to build, to construct. In the active sense, mankind is the producer who makes or produces; in the passive sense mankind is made, produced. See James F. Driscoll, "The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01129a.htm>.
16. In contrast to the Hebrew of Genesis 3:19 where two different terms are employed for "ground" (הָאֲדָמָה) and "dirt," (עֹפָרָה); the LXX uses the same word (τὴν γῆν).
17. Harrison, x.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Harrison, xxx.
20. *Ibid.*
21. See <http://users.drew.edu/dfewell/>.
22. Portions of this lecture are found in "From Bak to the Bible: Imagination, Interpretation, and *Tikkun Olam*." Co-authored with Danna Nolan Fewell. Pp. 21-30 in *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, 20/3 (2009).
23. For a representative selection of Samuel Bak's recent work see [http://puckergallery.com/samuel\\_bak.html](http://puckergallery.com/samuel_bak.html).

24. The expression *tikkun olam* evokes the ancient Jewish sense of responsibility for social justice. It has more recent spiritualized roots in Kabbalistic thought.
25. Lawrence Langer's term for describing the psychological experience of "dying while living" encountered in the testimony of Holocaust survivors. See *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
26. Lawrence Langer, "The Holocaust Theme in the Paintings of Samuel Bak," in *Samuel Bak Retrospektive 1946-97* (Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen, 1998), 137.
27. Rosenzweig wrote *The Star of Redemption* in the trenches of Macedonia on postal cards.
28. Robert Gibb's translation of the relevant text in Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* in "Unjustifiable Suffering," in *Suffering Religion*, eds. Robert Gibbs and Elliott R. Wolfson (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 13-35.
29. See the Bak interview in Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint. A Case Study on the Life of a Photo* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004).
30. See Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience" *JAAR* (1971): 291-311.
31. Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1995), 55.
32. On Bak's iterative renderings of the Warsaw Ghetto boy see Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, *Icon of Loss: The Haunting Child of Samuel Bak* (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2009). Also Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, "Bak's Impossible Memorials: Giving Face to the Children," in *Representing the Irreparable: The Shoah, the Bible, and the Art of Samuel Bak*, eds. Danna Nolan Fewell, Gary A. Phillips, and Yvonne Sherwood, (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2008), 93-124.
33. In particular Bak's "Creation" (1999), "Creation of Wartime (1999), and "Creation of Wartime II" (1999).
34. We hear echoes of Genesis 6-9 and the second chance God extends toward mankind where God has cleansed the world through flood. Do the second tablets functions like the bow God sets in the Sky (Genesis 9:13) to remind him never to destroy creation by flood again?
35. The root sense of the verb that is frequently translated "swept" over the surface of the waters.
36. See Lawrence Langer, *In a Different Light: The Book of Genesis in the Art of Samuel Bak* (Boston: Pucker Art Publications; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).
37. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 2000).
38. Martin Buber's description of Job in *On the Bible*, ed. Nahum Glazer (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 191.
39. The Greek phrase of the LXX— ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος — is a hapax legomenon.
40. See Jeremiah 4:23-26a, one of only two other places in which *tohu* and *bohu* occur together.
41. So argues Nahum Sarna in *Bereshit Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989).
42. Cf. Deuteronomy 32:11 where God is an eagle hovering over her nest in a desert wasteland. We hear a faint echo, reading now backward through Matthew's Gospel: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (8:20).
43. Cf. the second part of Elaine Scarry's book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
44. For Jews after the Roman destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 CE the divine *mishkan* will find a new textual home in the Torah and Mishnah.

45. See Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, *Icon of Loss: The Haunting Child of Samuel Bak* (Pucker Art Publications/Syracuse University Press, 2009).
46. Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York University Press, 1972), 75.
47. Samuel Bak, *Painted in Words—A Memoir* (Indianapolis/Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2001), 375.
48. Ancient literature is fully populated with the posthumous: Gilgamesh confers with Enkidu, Patroclus appeals to Achilles, Anticlea and Elpinor converse with Odysseus; ovid, Plautus, Pliny the Elder, Lucian, Plutarch, and more. The Bible is possessed with its fair share of ghost sightings, too: Saul's encounter with the witch of Endor in I Samuel 28:7-12; the frightened disciples who mistake the water-walking Jesus for a ghost in Matthew 14:25; the startled disciples frightened by the resurrected Jesus in Luke 24:36-53; and that mysterious white-robed youth in Mark 16:6. Through encounters with such ancient texts the dead return to us and so we to them.
49. The usage is infrequent. See Plotinus, *Ennead* 5.5; Plato, *Protagoras* 328a; Genesis 45.3 (LXX). One finds *gar* ending sections of texts, but as Bill Placher points out it is odd to end a whole book this way. *Mark*. Theological Commentary Series. Unpublished manuscript, 2.
50. See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).
51. In political terms "dominion" stands for a sovereign or supreme authority and the power that authority exercises to govern and control. The legal sense of "dominion" is that of dominance or power through juridical authority. The term conveys predominance and ascendancy that is associated in spatial terms with territory or tract of land, as in the dominion of a King. But "dominions" are not just earth-bound. Paul's Letter to the Colossians speaks of the **κυριότητες** the "principality" of the Angels, that heavenly dominion where thrones, rulers and authority reign supreme (Colossians 1:16). There is an interesting link worth exploring here between "dominion" (**κυριότητες**) and the favored Gospel term "Kingdom" (**ἡ βασιλεία**), the Greek word that figures in the expression "kingdom of God" or "Kingdom of Heaven," or otherwise rendered in nonspatially as the "Kingly Presence of God," "the Domain of God's Activity," or the "The Power of God." (In Hebrew and cognates, the "Malkuth Shamayim.") The connection between "dominion" and "kingdom" is found in the Book of Daniel (7:27), an apocalyptic writing that reflects the Hebrew people's exilic suffering under Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. I will have more to say about suffering, the Bible and storytelling soon.
52. Placher, *Mark*, 11.
53. Harrison, ix.