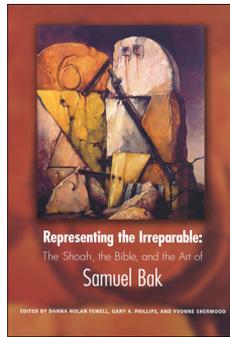


○ **REVIEW OF DANNA NOLAN FEWELL, GARY A. PHILLIPS, AND YVONNE SHERWOOD (EDS), *REPRESENTING THE IRREPARABLE: THE SHOAH, THE BIBLE, AND THE ART OF SAMUEL BAK* (SYRACUSE: SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008)**

Peter D. Miscall



This collection of essays had its origin in a session of the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL held in Philadelphia in November 2005. Seven essays by Michael Fishbane, Lawrence Langer, Alicia Ostriker, Danna Fewell, Gary Phillips, Yvonne Sherwood, Dan Mathewson and Charles Rix are from that meeting. Two others, by Michael Fishbane and S. Brent Rodriguez Plate, were added subsequently. Bak contributed a short introduction to his art and a brief concluding reflection on the essays.

There are 77 reproductions of Bak's artistic work from a 1946 self-portrait to the 2006 *Boarding The Saint Louis*. There are reproductions from 11 other artists whose work Bak engages with. Dürer is by far the best represented. Indeed Bak's *Boarding The Saint Louis* reflects on the former's *Melancholia I* (1514); the two paintings are presented on pages 88-89. The essays all engage with, in varying ways, specific works of Bak and, when relevant, with the works of the other artists. Since the reproductions are all of high quality, there are no questions as to the content and features to which each essayist is referring. The reproductions are arranged and placed as closely as possible to the relevant essays.

In his introduction 'What, How, and When: On My Art and Myself' (pp. 5-9), Bak reflects on his decisive shift in the late 1950s into the 1960s from his successful abstract works to a concern with subject matter and an exploration of the actual. Bak, a native of Vilna, Poland, is a Shoah survivor and the Shoah, both the reality of the Nazi death camps and of all the subsequent struggles of Jews and others with this reality, becomes his subject matter, the actual that is to be explored. There was a past lying dormant in him, 'a trauma that had been silenced for too many years' (p. 6).

Although some of this was emerging in his abstract works, Bak turns to a style that is both realistic and fantastic to wrestle with this past, this trauma, and with all the memories surrounding it. Describing Bak's style in words is difficult, probably impossible, and most of the essayists devote space to discussing this very difficulty of speaking about Bak's art. I can only encourage readers of this review to look at Bak's work whether in this book or on the Internet. All of his works are dominated by sharp and clear images, images derived from and playing upon the Shoah (for example, the boy from the Warsaw ghetto [p. 111] and chimneys of crematoria), previous art works and the Bible. His *Creation* (1999; p. 32, p. 73) invokes all three: the smoke of crematoria in the background and a refugee Adam reaching out to the suspended hand of a disembodied God. The latter invokes both the opening chapters of Genesis and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel panel, *Creation of Adam* (p. 32). Langer, in his analysis of Bak's Genesis paintings, discusses the particular work and its imagery. Phillips and Fewell summarise his themes and images in their opening paragraph:

Dismembered human figures of flesh, metal, wood, and stone. Broken pottery and rusted keys, petrified teddy bears and discarded children's shoes, floating rocks, and uprooted trees. Broken chess pieces. Fractured rainbows. Books turned buildings, tablets turned tombstones, memorial candles turned crematoria. Soundless musical instruments, flightless doves, mechanized, immobile angels, crucified children. (pp. 33-38)

And yet there are also

pears and paradise, new growth on broken branches, sunrises in sunsets. Color and catastrophe. Genesis and genocide. Exodus and expulsion. Ruins and remnants. Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Mantegna, Dürer, de Chirico echoed and subverted. Paradoxes. Contradictions. Ambiguities. Excesses. (p. xi)

All of these are 'ingredients of survivor's post-Holocaust landscape'. Fishbane refers to Bak's vast landscapes 'not the idyllic harmonies of the Dutch masters, but now scenes of vast vacuity' (p. 18).

Bak's paintings force his viewers to interpret but to interpret with no assurance of any certain result. Bak asserts 'My paintings carried no answers, only questions' (p. 7). Most of the essayists echo, reinforce and detail this assertion in their individual ways. Fishbane, for example, closes his study 'Myth, Midrash, and Mysticism' (pp. 15-20) with 'The question is insistent, and one must choose'. Interpretation requires choice; despite their promise myth, midrash and mysticism offer no sure answers. Ostriker, in her reflections on Bak's works incorporating dreams such as *Dreaming Jacob* (1999; p. 42) and *Isaac's Dream* (1999; p. 57), turns also to Midrash, an ancient mode of biblical reading that privileges diversity and unending interpretation, to emphasise the priority of question to answer (pp. 43-53).

Plate, while discussing Bak and Benjamin as allegorists, analyses Bak's *Still Life with Tikkun* (1999; p. 72). *Tikkun* is 'repair' and refers to the question of hope in Bak. Hope is again a topic that the essayists approach from their own concerns, but never is it an easy hope, a hope that goes beyond or outside the challenges of Bak's specific style or beyond or outside a world and people after two world wars and the fact of the Shoah.

Fewell and Phillips approach this in their first article, sub-titled “‘Unseamly” Reading After the Holocaust’ (pp. 75-87). The first noun plays upon ‘unseemly reading’ that would contest what Fackenheim calls ‘seamless reading’, ‘the ways in which Christian theology and biblical exegesis has proceeded as though the Holocaust had never occurred’ (p. 75). The authors offer a challenging reading of the Flood narrative in Genesis informed in part by Bak paintings such as *Departures* (1971-92; p. 90) that itself echoes and disrupts Doré’s *Noah’s Ark*. Rupture, disruption, interruption are key terms in their essay and also occur in other articles as counters to any notion that there is easy access, easy answers, easy hope in Bak’s work.

Sherwood, in ‘Iconoclasm and Akedah’ (pp. 125-42), meditates on Bak’s works, such as *Dress Rehearsal* (1999; p. 148) and *Isaac’s Dream* (1999; pp. 144-45), that reflect on the Akedah in Genesis 22. Iconoclasm refers to an uncertainty in a work and/or in its interpretation ‘between creative and destructive forces’ (p. 127). She closes with a muted question (there’s no question mark in the original):

And how can we deem this questioning, destructive iconoclasm merely, when it seems to seek out a certain, very qualified, saving, and uses the artist’s damaging-caring hand to extend the text’s own ‘Do not lay a hand’ [Gen 22:12] against the atrocities of Shoah – and the biblical text. (p. 139)

Mathewson centers his essay ‘Images of Disaster’ (pp. 151-61) on Job, a biblical figure often reexamined in light of the Shoah, but a figure that Bak never depicts. Mathewson connects Job and Bak’s work through the category of the ‘impossible’: the Shoah is ‘something without reference in the world of the known and familiar’ (p. 153). Bak’s ‘familiar’ images of chess pieces, dreamers, a little boy with raised hands, are deformed and dismembered in his attempt to represent the impossible. Hope is pointed to in complicated images of death-in-life. It ‘exists only *through* the impossible, and it is not guaranteed, not inevitable, and more gestured toward, rather than precisely revealed’ (p. 157).

Bix, in the closing essay ‘The End of Time’ (pp. 165-76), analyses Bak’s paintings of musicians such as *Sounds of Silence* (1995; p. 164) and *Multiple Voices* (1996; pp. 182-83) in light of Messaien’s *Quartet for the End of Time* and Levinas’s ethics of the encounter with the Other. Bak’s musicians play on broken, fragmented instruments that produce the sound of silence. For Bix this evokes ‘the uncontainable alterity of the *Other*, the unexplainable nature of suffering and grief... which finds its solace, such as it is to be had, in being available to serve the *Other*’ (p. 175).

I highly recommend this work for all who are interested in any or all of the topics introduced in the book’s title. How does one represent the irreparable whether in words or in painting? How does one read the Bible after the Shoah and indeed after the twentieth century? The art of Samuel Bak attempts this. Studying his art and reading this collection of essays engages the viewer and interpreter with Bak’s works, western art tradition and style, the Shoah and the Bible.