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NOTES ONLINE

This is the fourth online issue of arts. Our first issue was smaller, less adventurous in format, and an experimental work in progress. In the ensuing year and a half, we have increased the size, become, indeed, more “adventurous,” and given the publication its own signature and accessibility in a new and fresh way. I want to comment on what we had in mind in introducing the two online issues as complementary to our two print issues and what I think we have accomplished.

First, we very much wished to expand our reach from a twice-yearly to a quarterly journal. Financially, however, this was impossible, since print publishing is so expensive. Online publishing, however, is much less so.

Secondly, we wanted to reach an online readership. Journal publishing is in transition with some readers wishing all issues were online and others preferring print alone. We sought what we hoped was a constructive middle ground. We would provide both and do so by increasing the number of issues rather than moving from one medium to another.

Thirdly, we wanted to have greater flexibility in size—online publishing allows us to have an issue of 30 pages or 60 pages with a minimal increase in costs, and it opens up the possibility of our printing much longer academic articles which we wish to do.

Finally, we wanted to provide a greater flexibility in production schedule that online publishing allows and make articles more easily accessible to the reader. Our hope for one-tap-of-the-key accessibility to individual articles, however, has come more slowly and you have indicated as much to us! I feared we had you locked into downloading the whole issue to get to the articles. With this issue, however, we will provide in our cover e-mail greeting to you the ability to open not only the whole issue as one long document but each article in the issue with “one-tap-of-the-key”. A small change but one that we think will make the articles more immediately accessible on your screen.

Our enthusiasm with this publishing format does not mean that we are moving arts to four online issues. The print edition has its own advantages as well as a welcoming readership and we will maintain faith with that format. I should add that both the online and print issues are on the ATLASerials, the online collection of major religious publications published by the American Theological
Library Association (see the sidebar note) which is accessible to all subscribers. So print and online, two by two, a good year of good material to read.

**IN THIS ISSUE**

In this issue, we begin with an article by John Handley that offers us an introduction to the work of Patrick Graham in his essay *Patrick Graham: Waiting for the Silence*. Graham is one of Ireland’s major artists and a current exhibition of his work is now in San Francisco, and will travel to Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and St. Louis. This article is a part of that exhibition catalogue.

Our second article is about one of the museums where Patrick Graham’s work will be exhibited, MOCRA, the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art at St. Louis University. The article is an interview with its director, Terry Dempsey. The interview first appeared in *Art and Christianity*, the publication of ACE, the Arts in Christian Enquiry, an international organization focused on religion and the arts and located in London. *arts* and *sarts* have long been related to ACE through the mutual work of its members. Its 20th International Conference will take place this July 9-13 in Boston. There is an ad for the conference in this issue. ACE would welcome your interest in attending!

James McCullough has provided us a wonderful essay on the work of Graham Sutherland entitled *Twentieth Century Grunewald: Reclaiming Graham Sutherland for Christian Art*. The essay has a special focus on Sutherland’s *Crucifixion*, a work commissioned by the Anglican parish church of St. Matthew in Northampton, England. The painting and the commissioning of the work have been dealt with by a number of writers including Graham Howes in his essay in *Visual Theology*, edited by Robin Jensen and Kim Vrudny. McCullough’s work is an engaging and insightful addition to scholarship on the subject.

In each issue we reprint an article from an earlier year that has demanded a great deal of interest from our readers. The article we have chosen is *From Bak to the Bible: Imagination, Interpretation, and Tikkun Olam* by Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips (*arts*: 21:1, 2009). It is an excellent presentation of the contemporary Jewish artist, Samuel Bak, and his treatment of Holocaust themes and their appropriation in our time.

Finally, we have a recap of the *sarts* November 2011 annual meeting in San Francisco by Deborah Haynes and two brief pieces on events there. One is by Mark Burrows who has written on the *sarts* session on poetry: *Poet Jane Hirshfield addresses SARTS session at AAR* and Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu’s notes on *SARTS Panel Honors Alejandro Garcia-Rivera*.

We would be delighted to hear from you and your thoughts on this issue.
A Note from the sarts President

Robin Jensen

Dear arts subscribers,

Thanks for stopping by to read our latest arts online issue. As the President of sarts, I am pleased to see a recap of our November meeting events. We had a wonderful turn out for the event to honor Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, an excellent presentation by our current Luce Fellow, and a wonderful poetry reading and conversation with Jane Hirshfield.

I know that not all arts readers are sarts members, but I would like to take this opportunity to encourage all of you to let us know how the organization could do a better job of serving you. Our new website (www.societyarts.org) is building and we are eager for your ideas and contributions, suggestions for news stories, featured artists, discussion boards, or anything else that you think will enhance our electronic communication with one another. Please send me an email (robin.jensen@vanderbilt.edu), or click on the “contact” link at the top of the sarts site’s home page.

Among the many goals the Board set for our Society’s work this year is a continued push to make more and more people aware of sarts and arts. Outreach is important to us and crucial to our mission. We need to grow. If you know of individuals who might be interested in joining us or subscribing to the Journal, please send us their name and email address so we can send them a complimentary online issue of arts as a way of introducing ourselves.

I hope that you will take note of our Fellowship information and deadline (May 15, 2012). Just click on the website’s “Fellowship” link for more details. We hope, soon, to have details about our Fall Meeting in Chicago. Look for that in the next month or so.

Finally, for those you who are Facebook users, sarts and arts has a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/pages/Arts-Sarts/162952720446299?ref=ts). Go there for updated information and join our conversation!

With all best wishes,

Robin Jensen
President, sarts

ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies had its charter meeting at the 2002 AAR/SBL.

The Society was organized to provide a forum for scholars and artists interested in the intersections between theology, religion, and the arts to share thoughts, challenge ideas, strategize approaches in the classroom, and to advance the discipline in theological and religious studies curricula.

The goal of the Society is to attract consistent participation of a core group of artists and scholars of theology and religion in order to have dialogue about theological and religious meaning of the arts, and the artistic/aesthetic dimension of theological and religious inquiry.

Annual Membership: $50
www.societyarts.org
Recap:

**sarts Annual Meeting & Events 2011**

In November, the Society sponsored a number of meetings and sessions at the national conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco (SBL). Presentations by both senior and emerging scholars, opportunities for networking with like-minded scholars in the arts, religion, and theological studies, for mentoring, and for discussing trends in our various arenas of creative and scholarly work made this a rich brew.

On Friday afternoon (November 18), we co-sponsored a session with the Arts, Literature and Religion Section of the AAR. A panel of noted scholars and graduate students addressed the topic of “New Frontiers in Theological Aesthetics: Taking Stock and Charting Courses.” Designed to honor the work of Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, the panel featured energetic short three-person presentations on topics that Alex addressed.

That evening we held our annual sarts reception, where we honored the artistic work of the late Stephen De Staebler. A recent double issue of arts, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Wilson Yates, featured Stephen’s sculpture. It was supported by the Center for the Arts, Religion, and Education (CARE) at the Graduate Theological Union. In addition, the many contributions of the late Doug Adams were also featured as we drank wine and ate tasty desserts.

Two presentations followed on Saturday morning (November 19). First, the 2011 Luce Fellow, Sara Patterson of Hanover College presented her research in a lively talk titled, “A Gimme Mountain: Religious Expression and Experience at Salvation Mountain.” Second, Bay Area poet Jane Hirshfield offered a stimulating and inspiring talk titled, “Given Sugar, Given Salt: Poetry, Art, and Inclusion.”

Please read more about these events on the following pages. And plan to join us next year in Chicago!

*Deborah Haynes, Co-Chair, sarts
Marketing and Promotion Committee*
Pioneering theologian Alejandro (Alex) García-Rivera (1951-2010) was a committed scholar to the end. During the last weeks of his life, as Alex met with colleagues and students who came to his bedside, he constantly expressed the hope that the “paradigm shift” he had begun would continue to gain momentum. Shortly after his passing, his current and former students and colleagues began to think of ways to honor him while moving the scholarly conversation about theological aesthetics forward. This had been his last charge to them.

The result was the collaboration “New Frontiers in Theological Aesthetics: Taking Stock and Charting Courses via the Sketches of Alejandro García-Rivera.” The work for the session included the collaborative sharing of papers leading up to a public presentation on November 18, 2011 during the AAR Annual meeting. The standing room only crowd was regaled by accounts both intensely personal and theoretical about Alex’s far reaching impact. Scholars explored Alex’s insistence on the potential theological aesthetics holds for becoming a unitive discourse for respectful and fruitful engagement among diverse fields and communities.

The session, chaired by Mia Mochizuki, included brief looks at the work of theological aesthetics and the liturgy (Thomas Scirghi, SJ), art and religion methodology (Cecilia González-Andrieu), the impact on the dialogue with science (Oleg Bychkov and Mark Graves), and aesthetics and ethics (William O’Neill, SJ). Additionally, although unable to be present in person, papers were read on behalf of Ronald Nakasone addressing interfaith questions and Frank Burch Brown who offered his wise assessment and vision for the future of the field. The session, designed as a round table, included short responses from doctoral students from the Graduate Theological Union. Student responses were given by Larry Fraher, Patricia McKee, April Lynch, Jenny Patten, Elaine Belz, Peter Doebler and Trung Pham. Participants were also presented a copy of the Cithara Journal, Volume 51, No.1, a memorial issue also dedicated to García-Rivera. Many of Alex’s close...
friends and colleagues were in attendance and the gathered community was particularly moved by the presence of Alex’s wife, Kathryn.

The session was sponsored by sarts with organizing support from the AAR’s Arts, Literature, and Religion Section, the Graduate Theological Union and Loyola Marymount University.

Further information about Alejandro García-Rivera is available at:

Journal of the American Academy of Religion:
http://jaar.oxfordjournals.org/content/79/2/280.excerpt

Religious Studies News:
http://rsnonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=742&Itemid=836

Also see:
http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?entry_id=4758

Have you seen the new sarts website?

sarts launched its new website, custom-designed by Keypoppy Christian Resources, in early July 2010. The new site offers a variety of resources to online visitors navigating the intersection of the arts and theological/religious studies: feature stories in arts magazine, information on fellowships, updates on sarts programming and workshops, links to other resources on the web, and a calendar of events. The new site also provides several innovative features available only to sarts members. Members can make online payment of dues and register for sarts programs at AAR/SBL meetings. They can exhibit their art in personal online galleries or share syllabi. The site also gives members access to the membership directory and the ability to post events on the calendar.

www.societyarts.org
Poet Jane Hirshfield addresses aarts session at AAR

Mark S. Burrows

What exactly is poetry? Or, more to the point: what sort of art is poetry, and what does the poet’s work teach us about the arts in more general terms? In keeping with aarts’s tradition of inviting artists to address us as one component of our scheduled sessions, this year’s annual meeting featured poet Jane Hirshfield who explored such questions in her presentation “Given Sugar, Given Salt: Poetry, Art, and Inclusion.” Her talk shaped itself around poems she read, beginning with her translations of ancient Japanese poetry and then turning to a sampling of her own work taken from her six published collections of poems. None of us wondered whether these were “spiritual” poems, or even religious. After all, how else should one describe a poem like one of those she read and discussed in this session, “Tree,” which tells of her “decision” to allow a redwood to root in a “second growth” from a fallen stump, and begin to grow next to her home in Mill Valley, knowing that this is “foolish” but knowing as well that

Even in this
one lifetime
you will have to choose.

And choose what? To honor the tree by letting it do what it means to do? As she goes on to suggest in the poem’s final lines,

Already the first branch-tips brush at the window.
Softly, calmly, immensity taps at your life.

As she explored this poem with us, we each conjured in our minds the vision of a small house dominated by the mass of a slowly maturing redwood. We also imagined, following her lead, what it means that our lives are sheltered by such “immensities” that exceed our knowing, and even our surmising.

Each event in our lives—in their inclusivity—offers an occasion to reflect on such larger questions and deeper wonderings than our prosaic eyes at first allow us to see. Poets like Ms. Hirshfield assist us in facing such larger and unavoidable inevitabilities. Her poems tutor us to open ourselves to this “inclusivity” of life, both its “sugar” and its “salt,” which is able to discern larger meanings than we might otherwise notice if left to our own less attentive devices. Is the “immensity”
she mentions a religious or spiritual category? Or is this sense of an “immensity,” as a tacit dimension of our human existence, an invitation to what she elsewhere describes as “an enlargement of being, the slowed and deepened breath that comes with the release of fixed ideas for the more complex read” (from Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry [Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008], 33)? And is this a spiritual or religious “margin” of insight, properly speaking, or something else entirely?

The fact of Ms. Hirshfield’s religious identity—that she is a long-time practitioner of Zen Buddhism and has for many years been associated with Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery—did not arise until she herself addressed the matter after her talk, admitting that she did not want to be considered as a narrowly or specifically “Buddhist” poet. But is poetry, and art more generally, a specifically “religious” enterprise? Or, is there a poetry that is specifically Buddhist or Christian or affiliated with any other religious tradition? Or, is the specific religious affiliation of a given artist germane to the integrity or “witness” of their work? Is “inclusivity,” in other words, a proper recognition of art’s capacity to “see” and “speak” within a broader and finally more “ultimate” human horizon? In offering what she calls a “seven-word definition for Buddhism”: viz., “Everything changes; everything is connected; pay attention.” Would this be different in the hands of a properly Christian theologian? One hopes not.

One moment in her talk points to the artistic mastery one finds in her poems, and illustrates the entrancement we felt during that session. She selected one of her poems, “Da Capo,” taken from a collection entitled Lives of the Heart (HarperCollins, 1997). Before reading the poem, she commented that this particular piece had elicited a vexed response from a reader whose attempt to make the soup described in the poem had been regrettably unsuccessful. Of course, the “directions” are hardly adequate as anything beyond a general summary of the ingredients required for making a lentil soup: “[S]lice carrots, onions, celery. . .” and so forth. Beyond a naming of the ingredients, Hirshfield offers few details about how to prepare the soup—nothing that would suffice for a recipe in a proper cookbook, something the poet certainly knows about as a one-time sous-chef at the celebrated vegetarian restaurant “Greens” in San Francisco. But this is a poem, after all, and the opening line, “Take the used-up heart like a pebble / and throw it far out”, should have been notice enough of this.

As she spoke about this poem, moving quickly past this disenchanted reader’s complaint, she remarked that “there is always a new place to begin” in our lives, no matter the difficulties we face. The poem begins with that opening line, describing what would happen if one threw one’s heart out into a quiet lake. “Soon there is nothing left,” she goes on to write. “Soon the last ripple exhausts itself / in the weeds.” What follows is her listing of the ingredients needed for lentil soup, and as the short poem turns from this, the reader follows a line that...
ends with a one-word imperative: “Eat.” This is not the command—or is it invitation?—uttered by a minister or priest at the height of the eucharistic liturgy, “Take and eat.” Or is it? Is it anything different than this, this poem which joins in pointing toward our yearning for communion and suggests the courage required to take up our broken or belittled heart and begin again—“from the beginning” (or, literally, “from the head”) as the Italian title suggests? The poem then moves adroitly away from admonition to invitation: “You may do this, I tell you, it is permitted”, closing with a line that returns to voice another imperative, this time one that looks forward: “Begin again the story of your life.”

Is this a poem about “inclusion”? Perhaps, in the sense that occasions of loss, crisis, disappointment, as “Da Capo” suggests, are never only about endings. They are moments of decision, calling us toward yet unanticipated new beginnings in our lives. But how exactly are we to “begin again”? Making soup is a metaphor that points toward creativity, and more than this: toward our capacity to sustain life in abundance and with attention to beauty in a physical, bodily sense. In this sense, Hirshfield’s poem invites us to move from the note of despondency that shapes the poem’s atmosphere at the outset toward an “enlargement” that finds voice in the poem’s concluding invitation. Here, we find ourselves facing at least one of the primary functions of poetry, and art more generally—though, true to her vocation, Ms. Hirshfield does not assert this in the poem. Neither does her poem make such an assertion; indeed, few poets or artists voice assertions about what it is that they make. What she did do was to suggest how a poem like “Da Capo,” beginning with two unrelated metaphors—the wounded heart thrown out “like a pebble” into a lake, and the domestic task of making soup—moves toward a way of reframing one’s own life, of beginning again, and in this sense is a poem about one of the many “lives of the heart.” In her remarks at this session, she suggested as much if in a less direct manner, commenting after reading this poem that “each moment in our lives is a new place to begin.” Conversion of heart, whatever this means, can never be confined to the past tense.

In one of her published essays on poetry, Jane Hirshfield suggests that “the part of art that is art, and not device, unshackles us from usefulness almost entirely.” But is this really the case? Is the invitation that finds voice in such succinct forms of the genre we have come to call “wisdom literature” finally “useless”? Such questions needed no answer among those gathered, in focused attention, for Ms. Hirshfield’s talk. We knew that the answer would come in the living, and in sensing the presence of an “immensity” that calls us to a more capacious and generous way of life.
SARTS Faculty and Student Fellowships, made possible through a grant from the Henry A. Luce Foundation, seek to **advance knowledge at the intersections between theology/religious studies and the arts** by supporting the research of graduate degree students and faculty, particularly newer faculty whose career and future contributions to the study of the intersection of the arts and religious and theological studies may be influenced by this support.

The fellowship program also seeks to **enhance and expand the conversation** by building a network of those working in this area and recognizing their contributions to the wider academic community. It is the intention of the fellowship program that the projects supported will contribute to a wider discussion, national in scope.

**Awards are up to $3000 each.**
Up to three graduate students and three faculty members annually.

**APPLICATION DEADLINE: MAY 15, 2012**
For more information and to apply, visit www.societyarts.org.
For several decades Patrick Graham has created meditations in the form of ethereal landscapes and iconic imagery that touch upon questions pertaining to reality, the meaning of life, and the search for faith in a world of diminishing absolutes. You have not really seen a work by Graham until you have stood right up close to it, taking in the experience of pure looking. This is what I discovered while previewing his work at the Jack Rutberg Gallery in Los Angeles several months prior to this exhibition. During that visit, I lost all sense of time as I sat on the storeroom floor, staring at numerous pieces for hours on end, observing and experiencing what no photograph of his work can reproduce or convey. The minuitia of detail, the torn-paper hills in the background, and the intentional texture of surface wrinkles all disappear under the flash of the camera (though we try our best). Works like Graham, to recall Walter Benjamin, were never intended for reproduction.

There is a rawness to Graham’s methods—the way he makes those barely discernible little markings alongside his grand, bold imagery—that simply knock the breath out of any pretentious self-importance or ego that the artist might want to convey about himself. Graham, who in my opinion most poignantly mourns a lost Catholicism, is dead serious and speaks in a most sensitive voice about the Irish religious experience. And, without taking away anything from Graham’s intention, his work has universal appeal, particularly to those who struggle with issues of identity, freedom, or faith.

Graham has often referred to his early ability to easily render the human form in remarkable detail. As a child, he realized he possessed a natural facility to draw—a skill that needed little development. As an adult, he came to the painful and deep realization that art was more than imitation. He sought to abandon this natural “facility,” looking beyond mere skill and hoping to plumb the depths of life for something more profound and meaningful. And he succeeded. Yet to suggest that Graham’s shift resulted in a downright rejection of his natural skill cannot be supported when one sees his beautiful and sensitively

**NOTES**

rendered bodies and forms. They exist like phantoms in our dreams, appearing and disappearing before our eyes; we cannot find them and yet we see them in his work. Graham has taken his exquisite ability to draw to a level few artists achieve, creating an ongoing and shifting exchange between the artist and the viewer.

Leaving behind his reliance on pure skill alone meant that Graham had to turn inward to his interior life and let emerge from this vulnerable place the forms and landscapes of his art. There is a distinct redemptive quality to Graham’s creative process. He describes it in poetic and mystical terms of abandonment, emptiness, silence, and above all, the willingness to surrender the need for certainty:

In this world of silence, no truth exists, there is the abandonment of power that truth manifestly becomes in that other world of dogma, ideology and aesthetic certainty.

The silence becomes the painting, the painting comes from silence. It is the moment when painting is no longer an act of doing or making but of receiving. There is no ego shape here, no facilitative reply to aesthetic notions, whether historical or contemporary, there is only that desperate faith of the abandoned and... there is the discovery and rediscovery of ‘Art’ which is exhilarating.²

T.S. Eliot, in his Four Quartets, describes this same essence of waiting, of the visionary move of the spirit in terms of silence and abandonment in psychic darkness. For both Eliot and Graham, faith and perseverance are central to the creative process which entails an inevitable period of surrender:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant
Panorama
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away...

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love for the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.³
Graham often speaks about the power that emerges from this silent waiting as being redemptive in his life. “To be an artist, you have to have no art in you, to be able to let go of what you learned otherwise you can’t hear or see anything.”4 “I have to empty myself. I walk into a wall of loathing again, praying for the emptiness where art comes from.”5

What emerges from this place are remarkable and elusive images, like that found in his diptych, Cold and Fatal Heros (1988, Figure 1). Dark and rather mysterious, the surface of this painting/drawing/collage is scarred and battered, appearing like an artifact or ancient reliquary that has survived the ages. Across the top of the left panel appears the phrase, “Contemporary Heros, Love is Colder than Death.” Immediately below, the simplified form of a drummer marches forward underneath an arch containing the words “Tin Drum.” Below the drummer appear five horizontal snapshots of a pastoral landscape, their succession reminiscent of a film strip, hinting at the passage of time. This panel captures a sense of depth and motion, as if some important story is being retold.

The right side of the diptych shows what is easily misread as a Madonna and Child. Rather than a mother-son relationship, Graham has given us a self-portrait: a father and son. The child has been simplified to an essential form, helpless but glowing in bright pinks and reds (the colors of birth), and a golden iridescent halo caressing his head. The words “Robin Gr...,” his son’s name, is written on the collar. The father lovingly embraces his son, pressing his face

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5. Ibid., p. 76.
against the child's head in a gesture familiar in the icons of mother-child imagery over the centuries. Both figures are shrouded in an aura of bright, luminous light, and enclosed in an overarching niche, built up of applied and painted elements.

The diptych format was highly developed as Catholic devotional art in the Medieval and Renaissance periods. The two panels were hinged in the center and often depicted images of patrons or saints on one side and the Crucifixion or Madonna and Child on the other. Increasingly in the 20th century the iconography of the religious imagery found in these early devotional pieces have been reinterpreted by other artists. The Crucifixion, in which a female figure hangs in place of the crucified Christ as the eternal woman bearing the sins of humanity, is a common example. Graham has taken religious iconography and reinvented it, giving us a familiar and sacred image of the Madonna and Child and recasting it to depict the tender bond that also exists between father and son. The tin drum, of course, is a symbol of masculinity and military victory; it is also a favorite toy of childhood, and as such, imparts a sense of innocence, play, and make-believe. But I would suggest there is more. Graham is also bringing to light the intense dichotomy facing fatherhood and manhood: the desire for tenderness offset by the demands of masculine duty. Men are expected to raise and encourage their sons to become warriors and fighters when duty calls, yet they as fathers they love their sons and worry about their fate.

Hans Hofmann, one of the most influential writers and thinkers on art and the creative process in the twentieth century, emphasized that the religious dimensions of modern art must not fall into the trap of religious dogmatic interpretation, but rather be understood in terms of pure spirit, concern, and encounter. Graham has intuitively taken hold of this reality and reinterprets religious iconography in a way that allows for the artist and the viewer to reencounter deeply religious experience in terms of what matters in everyday life. As such, his work has the ability to cut through dogmatic rhetoric and focus on the sacredness of human relationships as God-given and essential to the realm of the spirit.

Ten years after *Cold and Fatal Heros* (1988, Figure 1), Graham created *Dead Swan Captain’s Hill* (1998-99, Figure 2). In this large diptych, an endless series of hills dotted with little crosses is plummeted by bombs, dropped by airplanes at night (with one plane dropping the Magen David or Stars of David in lieu of bombs), while unsuspecting sheep graze below. The two panels read more as a single image than conjoined images, the right side featuring a prominent hill, labeled like a strategic military position that must be conquered.

*Pieta* is image-laden. By its very name, it brings to mind Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, one of the most famous sculptures in the western world. Yet with Michelangelo’s interpretation—the serene Madonna cradling the limp body of her adult son—it is easy to miss the tragedy of the moment. Michelangelo has

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6. It can be noted that Graham has accomplished this very thing in the work titled *Lough Owell*, 1986, where a woman appears in the center of the canvas in a cruciform pasture.
sanitized the iconography of a crucified man by removing practically all reference to the tortured, bloody body that the Virgin would have beheld, giving us instead a greeting card version of Christ’s death. And perhaps this is what Graham is doing here as well. At the place where these two war zones meet, the word is depicted as a doublet in building-block type letters, “P I E T A,” in bright colors and spanning both canvases.

This is a picture of the reality of war and its desolation. A place where bombs fall indiscriminately on innocent animals and graves and where mothers await the return of their sons’ dead bodies. It is all rendered as if done by a child, naive and straightforward, and rather painless in its cartoon likeness. There is a kind of tenderness, as well, in this child-like quality, most poignantly exemplified by the small prayers planted in script that run diagonally (and one horizontally at top right) with phrases such as “for a good harvest,” “for an illness in the family,” “for the gift of a son,” “for a daughter away” and “for a favor received.” These notations are reminiscent of the hand-written prayers left by those at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and at religious shrines throughout Ireland.

Lough Owell is a lake near to where Graham grew up, a locale known for its wildlife and where blackbirds, among others, thrive. It is a curious picture, with all those little cross grave markers, sheep, and Magen Davids, under the twice-written Pieta. It is also a landscape so loaded with religious connotation that one simply has to stand back and wonder.

Figure 2. Dead Swan Captain’s Hill, 1998. Oil and mixed media on canvas.
Graham refers to the landscape of Mullingar, Ireland, where he grew up as having a continual effect on his art:

The landscape has influenced my work right up to the present, particularly the low horizon; and that great vista where you can encounter space, and figures in it, in all kinds of ways. It’s a desolate notion of space: rural poverty, with lots of husbands having to leave in war-time. An empty desolation, populated mostly by women. Silences. No conversations. A looking-in, rather than a lived experience. That ‘looking-in on things’ has stayed with me: a self-contained art.  

In his large diptych entitled *Wreath* (2005-2006, Figure 3), Graham returns again to this landscape theme. As in the previous diptych, *Wreath* (2005-2006, Figure 3) reads as a single image rather than two separate adjoining panels. In the distance to the left is a hill, barren and dotted with tombstones. A dark cloud looms over the top of the hill while below, red paint, spattered and dripping, evokes the imagery of blood. Words again play an important part in the image Graham has created. Across the top of the two canvases appear the words “House,” “King,” and “Of Tyre,” while at the lower left, running vertically up the side, appears the word “Ezekiel.” In large and imposing letters the word “Wreath” appears twice, nearly stacked one above the other across the top of both canvases, while in the lower right—and in fact dominating the piece as a focal point—is the image of a red wreath, pounded and beaten, barely recognizable as such. The entire surface of the two canvases bears the marks of desolation and violence, as if to suggest that this is the site where a great battle has been fought and lost.

There is a story about the ancient city of Tyre in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel where the Prophet announces the judgment of God upon the city: “[The Babylonians] will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses. Your stones and timber and soil they will cast into the midst of the waters. And I will stop the music of your songs, and the sound of your lyres shall be heard no more.”

Ezekiel’s words came to pass when in 332 B.C. Tyre was conquered by Alexander the Great and its people massacred. In the 12th century, it was again seized and occupied by the Crusaders, making it part of the Kingdom of Jerusalem—a religiously occupied state. *Wreath* (2005-2006, Figure 3) is in all likelihood the retelling of this religious oppression, occupation, and destruction of life and liberty through the eyes of an Irish artist who has lived his life in an occupied country. The title, words, and depiction of a wreath speak symbolically to the site of tragedy and memorial. As Jack Rutberg pointed out to me, the wreath symbolically honors or memorializes, and in this painting we are also offered a hint of yet another aspect of the painting’s intent. In the writing at the top, one finds the words: “For H.B.”
The reference is to the artist Hans Burkhardt (1904-1994), whom Graham befriended in the mid 80s, and for whom he held great admiration, as did Burkhardt for Graham. Burkhardt had devoted much of his life and art to the protest of war. Like Graham, Burkhardt’s remarkable paintings stood apart from the prevailing art world and academic landscape, and therefore Wreath is as much a reference to that struggle as it is about the futility of war.

As we have seen, there are frequent references to the Judeo-Christian tradition throughout Graham’s work, and this is by no means accidental. The use of diptychs, titles such as “Deposition” or “Requiem,” all hint at this intentionality. But even more interesting are his small preparatory sketches where the word, ruah, frequently appears. Ruah is the Hebrew term denoting breath or spirit of God, found also in humans and even in animals. It is presented in the Old Testament as the invisible force necessary for life, something that is given, but also taken away (Psalm 104:29-30). As such, it is an interesting word to meditate upon—this very essence of life that is here one moment and gone the next—something which Graham is very much in touch with and is an underlying presence in much of his art.

A wonderful example is a finished piece not included in the exhibition (2001, Ruah - Breath: Odalisque Series). In this remarkable drawing Graham has created for us a vision, a performance, or a ritual underway. At the center, a male figure is caught up in a mystical dance, swooping to one side, his back to us. As he dances mid-air, his arms and legs dissolve, while a small pair of wings on his shoulder blades flutter away. Who this figure might be is not immediately clear, but his importance is suggested by the halo that shimmers around his head.
Here again we see the merging of image and word. Across the top of the picture appears the word breath, and below this, the Hebrew word ruah. It is important to pay attention to how Graham inscribes his works. The words truly become part of the overall composition, not only as signifiers, but as part of his mark-making process. Therefore, a single word might be scribbled across the entire length of his work, making it difficult to read as a single noun or verb.

His figure hovers above a large rectangular plane where Graham has written two words, The ALTER (written partly in reverse), as both an amusing interplay and a play on words. In other works, Graham has depicted a religious altar, a place of sacramental transformation. Here, however, hovering over an altar, he suggests that this figure is being altered—that is, changed. The butterfly has often been used as a metaphor for Christ and the resurrection—the larva, which seals itself up in its tomb-like cocoon or chrysalis, only to reemerge as a transformed winged being. During this process, the caterpillar’s body literally dissolves or melts before morphing into a butterfly. It is as if Graham has drawn this dancing figure at a critical stage of his own metamorphosis—partly morphing, partly whole. And while this takes place, he is flanked by hearts, a universal symbol of love.

Figure 4. Ruah - Breath: Odalisque Series, 2001. Mixed media on board.
Across the front of this altar is written “The World.” On the left side of
the picture plane, written vertically, we discover the word “Resurrection,” while
beneath the figure are the words “Dancing,” “Jumping,” and “Leaping.” If, at
times, we are tempted to believe that Graham’s work dwells only on the dark side
of reality, here we have proof that this is simply not so. This is a joyful piece, one
infused with the belief that a great hope and future awaits us, one where spirit
and resurrection are met with love, dancing, and leaping.

Graham’s work, then, has much to do about the loss of hope, despair,
and the rediscovery of hope. In an interview with John Hutchinson in 1989, he
said this despair is the result of continued loss, resulting in a “kind of
resurrection.” “When I speak of absolute surrender in relation to my work, it can
seem like a horrendous notion, but a loss of self-will, combined with an awesome
sense of—for want of better words—some sort of ‘God experience,’ is what I’m
trying to achieve. When you succeed you either die or you experience an
alternative reality.” His work, though certainly autobiographical in one sense,
reaches beyond personal experience alone as he strives to make sense of the past,
the present, and the future. His work addresses the timelessness of time, the
repetition of history, and the continuous cyclical nature of silence, abandonment,
and redemption in the creative process.

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When you enter the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art you are met by the distant but hovering presence of a monumental triptych by Michael Tracy, *Triptych: 11th, 12th, and 13th Stations of the Cross for Latin America: La Pasión*. The panels are abstract in form made with acrylic on tarpaulin that is mounted on wood and includes the use of glass, pottery and hair. The work pulls the viewer into a world of mystery yet presence that invites conversation and meditation. The longer you look at its three surfaces with their movements of light, texture, and colour, the more the Passion is revealed. Created between 1981 and 1988, the work was the artist’s response to the political turmoil and suffering of Latin America within the larger meaning of the passion of Christ. It is, in almost iconic fashion, reflective of the museum’s own commitment to provide contemporary religious artworks that are provocative as well as sustaining, prophetic as well as reconciling.
MOCRA was formally opened in 1993 at St. Louis University in a redesigned chapel that had been formerly used by Jesuit theological students at the University. Its director, The Reverend Doctor Terrence Dempsey, S.J., a major leader in the field of theology and the arts, provided the vision and the leadership for the museum’s creation. At the time of its opening, it was celebrated as the world’s first interfaith museum of contemporary art, and, since that beginning, it has been recognized both nationally and internationally as a museum whose works probe both the social and cultural issues of our time with the religious imagery of artists who engage those issues.

Over its 18 years of exhibitions and educational programs, the museum developed a constituency of diverse groups and received a well deserved press for its substantive and, at times, provocative shows. A show that represents well the type of exhibitions that it provides is a relatively recent exhibition from 2009. For the season of Lent and Easter, Dempsey created an exhibition entitled Good Friday. (The exhibit would also be shown, again, in 2010). It included works drawn from the museum’s collection as well as from private collectors and works on loan from the artists. And it included works ranging from pieces of established 20th century artists such as Georges Rouault, James Ensor, and Salvador Dali to more recent artists working out of revolutionary settings. One such work was Douglas DePice’s Jesus in Central America—The First Station of the Cross with its realistic portrayal of the police arresting Jesus who is portrayed as a working class figure surrounded by sorrowing protest followers. A second work was Sister Helen David Brancato’s Crucifixion—Haiti portraying a crucified Haitian figure above a boat of fleeing Haitian boat people. Still other works invited reflections on the theological meanings of the Lenten season including Steven Heilmer’s sculpture Pieta Stone: Meditation on the Last Temptations and Adrian Kellard’s Prayer of the Faithful in Ordinary Time. (In the Spring/Fall issue of arts (22.3/23:1), Terry Dempsey has written an essay that provides images and discussion of the works in this exhibition. (See www.artsmag.org to subscribe and to view the backlist).

New institutional ventures such as MOCRA require figures who have the vision for what a museum could be and the skills to institutionally and politically bring it into being. Dempsey did this with consummate skill over the past 18 years. Having done his doctoral work in the religion and arts program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where he worked closely with Jane Daggett Dillenberger, John Dillenberger, and Doug Adams, he became an important figure for later scholars working in religion and the arts and a leader, more broadly, in the field of theology and the arts. In a recent discussion with him, I raised a number of questions about his experiences with the museum.

WY: You have written of the interfaith character of the museum stating that it is “dedicated to the ongoing dialogue between contemporary artists and the world’s faith traditions, (and is committed to) serving as a forum for interfaith
understanding.” In setting forth this part of your vision, you commit yourself to interfaith work. Over these years, how have your realized this goal?

TD: Our museum is an interfaith museum, exhibiting works by artists from many faith traditions as well as artists who are not practicing members of any faith tradition but who, nevertheless, feel that their art possesses a deep spirituality.

Our group exhibitions have allowed us to bring together artists from a variety of traditions. In our 1993 opening exhibition, Sanctuaries: Recovering the Holy in Contemporary Art, we set the stage for what we hoped MOCRA would do by showcasing the diversity of spiritual and religious expressions of 30 contemporary artists.

Our programming also has helped to create special dialogues. For instance, in conjunction with our 2003 exhibition, Avoda: Objects of the Spirit, an exhibition of ceremonial art by New York artist Tobi Kahn, we brought together not only the artist but also representatives of four major faith traditions--Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam--for a fascinating and enlightening conference on the role of ceremonial objects in the faith life of each of these traditions.

In our 1999 exhibition of the work of contemporary calligrapher/painter Bernard Maisner, we brought together ethno-biologist/anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake and Islamic scholar John Renard for a discussion of the role of art in all cultures and the particular place of manuscripts and calligraphy in several faith traditions.

In 2002, in conjunction with the exhibition, The Greater Good: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, we organized a forum for dialogue that included art, religion, and ethics that included representatives from the medical and legal communities as well as a professor of African-American studies--the son of one of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment victims. It was a powerful conference.

WY: Who is the constituency of MOCRA?

TD: We are a part of Saint Louis University, so our first concern was for MOCRA to be an institution that might broaden and deepen the educational and faith experiences of our students, faculty, and staff. We also wanted to be a player in the greater St. Louis metropolitan arts community and a growing audience of St. Louisans gives testimony to our success. I also wanted MOCRA to be regional in its outreach and we have been helped in this effort by having appeared five times on the cover of the Art Now Midwest Gallery Guide. In our first national and international coverage, the February 1993 issue of ArtNews, the eminent art historian Peter Selz wrote a brief article about MOCRA that announced our arrival in the art world. We have been featured in articles in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Art in America, the Oakland Tribune, the Chronicle for Higher Education, America Magazine, the British Catholic magazine The Tablet,
and numerous other publications. We have also taken advantage of the internet with our website, our Facebook page, and the beginning of a series of podcasts related to our exhibitions. Our constituency is broader and much more diverse than it was in the beginning attracting, now, the interests of artists, art historians, theologians, worshipping communities, social justice groups and the general public.

WY: You say that you want the museum to “create a conversation” between the viewer and the work of art – a conversation that implies a “dialogue”. What is the character of that dialogue? What might be its contours?

A good conversation takes on a life of its own, and one cannot choreograph the directions it might take. The same thing happens with art. With the art we have exhibited at MOCRA, I am cautious to impose one exclusive meaning on the work. We all have had the experience of great artworks speaking to each of us in ways that often connect with what is going on in our own lives and when we return to those artworks at another time, depending on what is happening to us, we may gain new insights from the work. A student who worked for me a number of years ago at the museum was a bit wild in her first years at Saint Louis University. Something, however, happened to her in her senior year that changed her—she never disclosed to me what that was, but she did point out one work that was on display in our museum that changed her life—a work by James Rosen entitled Homage to the Pieta d’Avignon. She said that when there were no visitors in the museum, she would quietly sit in front of this painting and pray and that those moments with the work influenced her to go to church once again.

I also think that the environment that we provide the works of art we exhibit helps with that conversation. The museum used to function as a large chapel for Jesuit students who were preparing for the priesthood or brotherhood. When we turned the chapel into a museum, we worked hard to retain that sense of a sacred space, and I think we did a reasonably good job. So when people enter our space, they recognize immediately a sacred context in which to view, experience, and dialogue with these works of art.

WY: There are now a number of “religion and art” galleries on seminary and university campuses. I think of MOBIA—the Museum of the Bible in Art, of the galleries at Wesley Theological Seminary and United Theological Seminary, of the new Doug Adams Gallery created by CARE, the Center for the Arts in Religion and Education at the GTU in Berkeley, and the Chicago Loyola University Museum of Art (LUMA)—and there are a host of other schools that have designated gallery space and exhibition programs. In a way you have provided theological education an important model that has helped stimulate this work. But the creation of these types of ventures as well as maintaining them is not always easy. Do you have any insights for what needs to be done to further implement schools’ commitments to developing and sustaining such galleries?
TD: I am greatly encouraged by the growth in these museums and galleries. I would hope that the schools with which most of institutions are affiliated continue to realize the uniqueness and importance of such exhibition spaces. Such museums and galleries are not money-makers but they provide a precious resource for which there is a growing hunger in the theological and artistic communities as well as within the general public. Most are understaffed. We certainly are—there are three of us who work 80% time (plus five work-study students), but we find that we are, in reality, often working 120% time. We work this hard because we believe in what we are doing, for we are showing our visitors how, in their own prayer lives, contemporary religious and spiritual art might become thresholds to the holy.

WY: What are your ongoing dreams for MOCRA?

TD: My first dream (and concern) is that MOCRA outlasts me. We all know stories of particular programs or institutions founded by one person and when that person is out of the picture, those institutions or programs die or become a shadow of their former selves. I am in my mid-sixties and I would like to see MOCRA continue to have a life beyond my association with it. We have done over 40 exhibitions at MOCRA, and they have covered a wide variety of themes and have incorporated many different artistic styles and media—from traditional painting and sculpture to inflatable sculptures and sculptures that incorporate human blood. People have asked me if after 40 exhibitions, am I running out of ideas for exhibitions? The exact opposite is true. If one is dealing with the religious and spiritual dimensions, the possibilities are endless as the artists of our time use the styles and media of our time to deal with timeless themes. I would like to see MOCRA continue to be an important presence in the dialogue between the religious traditions and the artists of our time. This is where the dream meets the financial realities with which any museum wishing to survive must deal. MOCRA receives most of its funding from its parent institution, Saint Louis University, and for that I am most grateful. To assure MOCRA’s survival, I need to do whatever I can to help develop an endowment for the museum. Then I can let go of this dream and let it take on a new life in the hands of whoever succeeds me—and I do have faith that this will happen, because the museum has become an important part of people’s religious and spiritual lives.
For a magazine article published in 1951, Graham Sutherland wrote:

People have said that my most typical images express a dark and pessimistic outlook. That is outside my feeling. In the sense which I have previously mentioned, the precarious tension of opposites – happiness and unhappiness, beauty and ugliness, so near the point of balance – are capable of being interpreted according to the predilections and needs of the beholder – with enthusiasm and delight, or abhorrence, as with the taste of bitter-sweet fruit.¹
Sutherland was in the 1930’s through the 60’s a major, at some points the major, figure in British art. His public prominence began with his expressive landscapes which were successfully exhibited in the late 1920’s through the 1930’s, rising again in a series of wartime artwork sponsored by the Imperial War Museum. His turn toward privately commissioned works, his explicitly religious works and his series of highly publicized portraiture, marked both the apex as well as the beginning of his decline in critical reviews, being increasingly eclipsed by his long-time friend and eventual rival Francis Bacon. Compared to Bacon’s, Sutherland’s personal life was remarkably free of scandal or strangeness. Married for over fifty years to his wife Kathleen, through whom came about his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Sutherland approached his art as a disciplined and proficient workman. Evidence supports the impression that his faith was genuine albeit of a quiet, underscored expression. An infrequent churchgoer, he nonetheless acknowledged his faith publicly and, as I will argue, sought both theological and aesthetic integrity in his work.

Sutherland’s work, in both its implicit and explicit religious modes, raises interesting questions about the relationship between art and its potential effect on the faith and formation of viewers. This article will focus primarily on his rendering of the Crucifixion for a church in Northampton, England, shortly after the Second World War, as well as relevant paintings leading up to and following this painting. Some brief reflections on the ways that art draws the attention and affections of viewers will conclude with a commendation of Sutherland’s work for a new generation.

Sutherland began his artistic career in etching, producing a number of executions of landscape themes, subject matter that he subsequently explored as he moved into oil painting. Sutherland freely acknowledged his indebtedness to the English Romantic tradition of William Blake, Samuel Palmer, JMW Turner and contemporaries Paul Nash and Henry Moore. The influence of Samuel Palmer is very clear in Sutherland’s early landscape work, and starting in 1934 with visits to Pembrokeshire, a rural coastal area in south Wales, Sutherland began a series of vividly original landscapes and paintings based on organic forms such as tree limbs, roots and other such natural “found objects.”

Sutherland’s usage of organic forms highlights his association with the Surrealist Movement, although he was primarily connected to English Neo-Romanticism. As Martin Hammer writes, Sutherland from the mid-1930’s,

...had become obsessed by the possibility of extracting strange, hidden motifs from the countryside, as a vehicle for projecting disquieting, metamorphic imagery in the resulting pictures.

All of these influences are brought to bear in Sutherland’s mature work.

NOTES
2. For insight both into his work habits and his conversion to Catholicism, see Robert Melville, “Graham Sutherland,” in Hammer, p. 170-71.
3. Of his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism, Roger Berthoud describes the social and intellectual context of the mid to late 1920’s. Several of Sutherland’s friends and acquaintances had converted, and the writings of Chesterton, Belloc, and those of the Oxford Movement were acknowledged as influences. His courtship of Kathleen Barry, a committed Catholic, was a strong influence; Graham Sutherland: A Biography, London: Faber and Faber, 1982, p. 52-59.
Sutherland’s *Crucifixion* for St. Matthew’s Church in Northampton, England, is dated 1946, and the context of this work is worth reviewing. The European war ended in May of 1945. Sutherland had been in close proximity with the sufferings the war unleashed as a commissioned war artist. But it was not until afterwards, in late 1945 into 1946, that the full extent of the Nazi concentration camp and extermination programs were fully revealed. It is clear that there was a kind of synchronistic relationship between Sutherland’s absorbing and responding to current events and the commission that now afforded him an opportunity to find a means to express the cruelty of humanity and the potential of its redemption.⁷

There are two major sources for Sutherland’s iconography of the Crucifixion. The first was the celebrated *Isenheim Altarpiece* by the artist known as Matthias Grünewald. As late as 1974, while receiving the Shakespeare Prize for outstanding work in British arts and letters, Sutherland paid tribute to his lifelong admiration for German art, including that of Dürer, Altdorfer, Cranach, and Grünewald.⁸ “I respect him, perhaps more than any other, and rank him among the greatest painters of all time.”⁹ The connections are not difficult to see. Both employ physical distortion in order to heighten expressionistic effect. Both seek to project an image of suffering. Both depict Christ *post mortem*. Both advance the Western tradition of using the crucifixion as a means of portraying a theology of Christ’s identification with suffering humanity. For Grünewald, the immediate context was that of the hospital run by members of the Order of St. Anthony, which served among others sufferers of what was then called St. Anthony’s Fire, the result of ingesting poisoned rye which produced painful and disfiguring sores on the body. Scholars have come to see that Grünewald was not merely experimenting with new techniques of painting, but rendering Jesus in a way that identified His suffering with these sufferers in their disfiguring agonies.¹⁰

Likewise Sutherland sought to portray this identification in his own historical context. Sutherland had already been immersed in the sufferings of the Second World War as a commissioned artist for the War Museum. But in late 1945 he was sent a copy of a newly published document put together by the American military:

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⁷ Berthoud p. 76ff.
⁸ Hammer, p. 40.

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I remember receiving a black-covered American Central Office of Information book dealing with the [concentration] camps. It was a kind of funeral book. In it were the most terrible photographs of Belsen, Auschwitz and Buchenwald. These photographs were to have a great effect on me; I saw them just before I received a commission to paint a Crucifixion – in them many of the tortured bodies looked like figures deposed from crosses. The whole idea of the depiction of Christ crucified became much more real to me after having seen this book and it seemed to be possible to do this subject again. In any case the continuing beastliness and cruelty of mankind, amounting at times to madness, seems eternal and classic.\textsuperscript{11}

Martin Hammer draws a connection between Sutherland’s depiction of Christ and the poetry of his contemporary, David Gascoyne. Only four years previously Sutherland had provided illustrations for a compellation of Gascoyne’s poetry. This collection includes a poem entitled “Ecce Homo” which begins:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7} He discusses his exposure to the camps in Hammer p. 105. For a fuller account of Sutherland’s commission for the painting and his struggle with its theme, see Graham Howes, \textit{The Art of the Sacred}, London: I.B. Tauris, 2010, p. 59-74.

\textsuperscript{8} Hammer, p. 291.
Whose is this horrifying face,
This putrid flesh, discoloured, flayed,
Fed on by flies, scorched by the sun?
Whose are these hollow red-filmed eyes
And thorn-spiked head and spear-struck side?
Behold the Man: He is Man’s Son. 

The St. Matthew’s Crucifixion received some contemporary criticism as insufficiently portraying the hope represented by the Cross. Two things should be borne in mind. First, Sutherland originally intended for the painting to have a lighter, sky blue background. For him, such a colour represented hope, and would have more clearly intimated the hope of the Resurrection. But contingencies related to the church interior necessitated Sutherland’s adopting a more somber purple-blue background.

Secondly, Sutherland operated with what appears to be an understanding of the message implicitly present in the image of the Crucifixion. Sutherland wrote,

The Crucifixion idea interested me because it has a duality which has always fascinated me. It is the most tragic of all themes yet inherent in it is the promise of salvation. It is the symbol of the precarious balanced moment, the hair’s breadth between black and white. It is that moment when the sky seems superbly blue – and when one feels it is only blue in that superb way because at any moment it could be black – there is the other side of the mirror – and on that point of balance one may fall into great gloom or rise to great happiness.

The resulting image is one that combines Sutherland’s ability to create “disquiet, metamorphic” imagery drawn from encounters with nature and the disturbing realities captured in the photographs fresh from the liberated concentration camps. Christ in Sutherland’s painting takes on the shape both of twisted thorns and emaciated victims of genocide. The painting remains where it was first unveiled to mixed reactions on 18 November, 1946, in the south transept of this Anglican church in Northampton, directly opposite the equally controversial Madonna and Child (1944) of the sculptor Henry Moore.

Sutherland’s St. Matthew Crucifixion, as well as subsequent works portraying explicitly Christian themes, raises questions at the heart of theological encounter with the arts. For example, how can religious art be assessed and analyzed in relation to how it intentionally or unintentionally affects the spiritual orientation of the viewer? One might think of these as two axes along which religious art assumes an orientation.

10. See Brown, p. 351.
15. This would include the Crucifixion (1947), the Thorn Cross (1955), the Crucifixion for St. Aidan’s Church (1959), the Noli Me Tangere (1961) and most spectacularly the Christ in Glory tapestry for the reconstructed Coventry Cathedral (1962).
The first, particularly relevant in modern religious art, is that of the particular and of the universal. Twentieth century Christianity tended to seek validation of its message by highlighting its universal implications and accessibility. This tension between the particular and the universal is reflected in corresponding artwork. Francis Bacon, although not a religious believer, serves as an example. Bacon abstracts the Crucifixion from its Christian particularity and employed it as a vehicle for portraying general human suffering, affliction, and ultimate meaninglessness. His of course is perhaps an extreme example, but it illustrates this approach. David Gascoyne’s poem cited above serves as another such example. Jesus is referred to as “Man’s Son” and we are described later in the poem as “callous contemporaries of the slow/Torture of God.” These are the characteristics of a universalizing depiction of the meaning of Christ’s Cross. 

In the St. Matthew’s Crucifixion, Sutherland set out to render the image “immediately intelligible and within the tradition,” a statement which would seem to apply to all of his commissioned religious works. Sutherland sought to retain the particularity of the subject matter, while communicating contemporary relevance. To his startled first viewers at St. Matthew’s Church, Sutherland, “soon won them over by describing how he wanted to try to sum up the agony and suffering of the war in the agony and suffering of Christ.” Sutherland appeals to the particularities of Christianity in order to explore the universal experience of inhumanity, or put another way, a universal experience is summed-up in a particular instance.

A second axis of theological assessment of art involves contrasting orientations of immanence and transcendence. Martin Hammer’s observation of the primacy of nature in Sutherland’s work provides a helpful clue in this regards. In Sutherland’s art, organic objects assume human proportions, and human figuration takes on the appearance of organic forms. Sutherland’s best work invites viewers to perceive nature and natural objects in a new, if perhaps melancholic light. That gift applied to the explicitly religious works that similarly invites new apprehension of traditional themes.

Seen in this light, Sutherland’s work tends towards the immanent dimension of God’s relationship with the world; of God’s presence, particularly within the natural world. Spirituality here involves the capacity to perceive God’s implicit presence in the world around us. Sutherland several times described his as a “pantheistic” vision, although one should be careful of pressing this word for precise definition beyond his apprehension, expressed through his work, of an almost supernatural effervescence in nature, and of parabolic motifs found within it.

This helps explain the power of his St. Matthew’s Crucifixion. Here is a sense of the deep identification of Christ with suffering humanity. It rightfully bears comparison with Grünewald’s Altarpiece, and indeed translates...
Grünewald’s medieval expressionism into the war-torn twentieth in a fitting and convincing manner. It is for this reason, conversely, that some find Sutherland’s large-scale Coventry Tapestry (1962) a less successful work. The theme of the tapestry, Christ in Glory, is one which emphasizes Christ’s transcendence and this, one could argue, was not Sutherland’s native religious language. Sutherland’s works most successfully exegete God’s presence within the human drama, doing so with strong reference to his own contemporary historical context.

A final point of theological reflection involves the question of how a work of art might advance a viewers’ engagement with the subject matter, or in terms of practical theology, how art might promote spiritual formation. Here I will restrict my brief comments to the St. Matthew’s Crucifixion.

The image of Jesus on the Cross alone, without any surrounding figures, derives in part from the Western tradition of the Man of Sorrows and the more general trend beginning in the seventeenth century of focusing solely on Christ alone. In the medieval period, such imagery was used to promote a more direct engagement of the viewer with Christ, to recognize His sufferings, to sorrow over them, and to identify with them.20

While Sutherland’s image accords with his desire to “remain within the tradition,” having Christ portrayed in such a manner participates in the process toward thematic abstraction and the more universalistic orientation with which it is associated. Nonetheless, with its traditional iconography of Christ and its setting behind a church altar, Sutherland’s painting remains rooted within the Christian framework and its particularistic meaning. The “precarious tension,” the aesthetic value Sutherland frequently alludes to serves here to root viewers within the Biblical frame of reference while inviting them to consider for themselves Christ’s suffering in the world as well as for the world. It invites contemplation on the Christ of history as well as the Christ Who continues to identify with “the least of these” who suffer affliction.

In an interview with Sutherland, critic Robert Melville approached the delicate subject of Sutherland’s faith and how it affected his work. Melville wrote:

My question was not really an attempt to find out something about his private life. It arose out of a strong feeling that his art does in fact express a religious attitude, although it rarely proclaims itself in symbols.21

Sutherland’s religious language, emphasizing the Divine Presence within the world, reflects back upon those decisive influences of the English Romantic tradition. A sincerity of faith, respect for and knowledge of the Christian Tradition, integrity of craft, and artistic originality come through in works that commend renewed appreciation on a broad scale.22


22. Sutherland himself summarized the possibility of his art:

In any case the painter is a kind of blotting paper; he soaks up impressions – goes through ‘periods of fullness and evacuation’ as Picasso has said; and is very much part of the world. He cannot therefore avoid soaking up the implications of the outer chaos of twentieth century civilization. By that token tragic pictures will be painted – subconsciously perhaps, and with necessarily having a tragic subject. Picasso himself during the war painted tragic “still lives.” Maybe one can only “mutter in darkness – spirit sore.” But one has in one’s hand the instruments of transformation and redemption. Sutherland, “Thoughts on Painting,” in Hammer, p. 145.
From Bak to the Bible: Imagination, Interpretation, and Tikkun Olam

*Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips*

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, Adam-like, 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 appears beyond the remains. Both man 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.


ABOUT THIS ARTICLE
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Michelangelo’s God ceiled an orderly universe in the Sistine Chapel; here he has been blasted into thin air, traced only by broken bricks, propped split timbers, crematoria smoke wafting its question toward heaven, and elusive double yods (“”) signifying the unspeakable biblical name of a bodiless god. Exiled from vaulted holy space, this deity breaches wall, promise, covenant, perhaps morality itself; leaving behind Adam in a wholly different universe of meaning.

Thus we are thrust into the artistic terrain of Samuel Bak,1 where intimate worlds, grand landscapes, symbolic narratives, and personal artifacts have been destroyed, yet provisionally reassembled. Creation of Wartime III is one of many of Bak’s works that reappropriate classic Christian representations of creation. Scenes of destruction and construction, of tentative survival, of tenuous restoration, Bak’s reimaginings parallactically shift the focus from the world’s creation to a world in need of mending, offering precarious representations of tikkun olam, the rabbinic notion of “repairing of the world.”

A child prodigy who, at age nine, held his first exhibition in the Vilna ghetto, and 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 rich 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 is proxy for the newborn human; books, scrolls, and tablets lie unwritten; canvases go unpainted; pointing fingers signal no clear direction—death in life, life in death, deathlife.3 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.”

Art and suffering, like life and death, are well-known companions. Jewish philosopher and biblical translator Franz Rosenzweig has observed that art “aggravates the suffering of life and at the same time helps people to bear it,” teaching “us to overcome with-out 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.” In similar but more graphic terms, Bak says his art aspires “to protect the scar of an ancient wound while remaining true to [the] knowledge of the wound itself.”

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.7 In narrative terms the wound marks the critical event that forever

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NOTES

1. For a representative selection of Samuel Bak’s recent work see http://puckergallery.com/samuel_bak.html.

2. The expression tikkun olam evokes the ancient Jewish sense of responsibility for social justice. It has more recent spiritualized roots in Kabbalistic thought.

3. This is 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).

changes “what the past was supposed to lead up to” and opens up a future that “is scarcely thinkable.” Wounds of catastrophic proportion—for example, critical illness or injury, death of a child, war, genocide, natural catastrophe—leave individuals and communities with scarce 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 theorist terms “narrative wreckage,” namely, the collapse of all coherence to life. 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. 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, with the Shoah on his palette, to Vilna, his childhood, the Warsaw ghetto, the Bible, the great artistic masters, 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 narrative wreckage wherever we find it.

What is Creation of Wartime III if not a visual rendering of narrative wreckage? Michelangelo’s ceiling has collapsed, 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 in the Shoah’s smoke. The wound’s raw truth obliges another register, a new story, a revised prologue—In the beginning was the Shoah....

Bak clearly lives in doubt before Michelangelo’s vision of creation and divine providence, a vision that many have equated with that of the Bible itself. Bak has even described himself as challenging the Bible’s depictions of God and divine promises. But, as biblical exegetes, we wonder if Bak may not be quarrelling with the Bible as much as intuiting the Bible’s own complicated efforts to sort through narrative wreckage and to repair communities fractured by cultural catastrophe. Perhaps the Bible, too, lives in doubt before all visions that fail to take into account the painful complexities of life. Perhaps the art of Samuel Bak and the art of biblical storytelling share deep resonances about the true
nature of suffering and survival. Perhaps Bak’s relentless verisimilitude can lead us to see and hear more clearly how the Bible wrestles to structure and overcome suffering “while remaining true to the knowledge of the wound itself.”11 How might our readings of foundational stories—of covenant, creation, and crucifixion—reflect truly the Bible’s labored efforts at tikkun olam?

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 stand in, mark a place, for an absent deity and a missing people. Rusting double yods, letters signifying the divine name, are manually riveted to the top of one of the tablets, a seemingly desperate, wishful, imposition of divine presence. The people themselves are present only in traces and pieces: A dismembered, roughly remembered, Star of David becomes the center piece of the tablets’ puzzle, its form a sorry example of the stone cutter’s and iron worker’s crafts. Here the identity of a 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. 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 (Exodus 19-20; 31:18-34:35) with Bak’s image in mind, we wonder what the biblical text is memorializing. 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 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 biblical stories hint at 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 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. If this is true, then we must ask how the destruction of the northern kingdom Israel (732-722 B.C.E.), of Jerusalem and its temple (586 B.C.E.), the killing and exiling of major portions of the population, the devastation of land and economy have informed the production of the 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, reflect 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 or manner of the Shoah, and we recognize the critical and moral danger in equating all such cataclysms. Nevertheless, we detect in these events profound ruptures in Israel's history 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 navigates narrative wreckage, structuring life and identity under colonization, expressing hope in God's ability and willingness to liberate—in effect, offering God another chance. At the same time, it holds 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. We encounter here a narrative that artfully weaves together memories of cultural catastrophe, admissions of communal culpability, defiant resistance to captors, and a chastened view of a god whose promises and deeds have come up short.

**Reviewing Creation**

As we’ve seen above in *Creation of Wartime III*, Bak’s images of creation raise similar questions and interpretive possibilities for reading *Genesis*. 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. *In the beginning was the interruption*. . . Absent from the scene is the spirit of God hovering, birdlike, over the deep. Instead, remnants of damaged human community hang suspended over a barren landscape. Creation begins with a cataclysmic upheaval of normal life. In two paintings bearing the same title, *Bereshit Bara*, ruin and rubble literally constitute the very text of Genesis itself; architectural fragments form the Hebrew letters and words *bereshit bara* 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 crises that most likely evoked it. As we well know, *Genesis* 1 is read ardently in classical theology as a statement about the world’s naissance and nature, a determining source for doctrine about the nature of creation and the human condition. In historical critical investigation the text, with its emphasis on cosmos emerging from chaos, is
regarded as a superior monotheistic response to competing ancient Near Eastern creation accounts. At Bak's prompting, however, we see Genesis 1 in a different light, as a story that structures the suffering of deportation, death en route and in diaspora. Like the Exodus account, it is the product of wounded storytellers responding to communal crises.

_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.”

_In the beginning_, there is a “rent at the heart of the world:” 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_, he describes a wild and wasted land, heavens without light, mountains quaking, a world without human inhabitant, desolation.

In the beginning, 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. Rather than seeing this God as the transcendent deity who exists outside of time and space, we are invited instead to imagine a vulnerable god _in need_ of time and space. In the beginning, a nameless, home-less, _elohim_ hovers (Genesis 1:2) over the face of the deep, with nowhere to go and no people to claim as his own. Like the dove sent forth from the ark after the deluge, God has no place to set his foot, no way to end the ceaseless hovering.

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_, and he instructs those created in his image to do the same.

Human beings 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 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 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,” reflects what the text is actually doing. The text is making, creating, realizing an identity, a new image, for this human


15. See Jeremiah 4:23-26a, one of only two other places in which _tohu_ and _bohu_ occur together.


17. Compare with Deuteronomy 32:11, in which God is an eagle hovering over her nest in a desert wasteland.

community. To be fruitful and multiply is an act of hope, of reimagining, of reinvention of a future where none had appeared to exist. The subsequent toldoth, or genealogies, bear witness to this future. A tool of survival and an act of pedagogy, the creation story structures 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 Genesis 2:2-3 with its multiple functions within and beyond the story world. Sabbath resolves the divine dilemma, providing rest for the restless deity. The hovering, homeless god now has a place in time to alight, 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. 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 as an act of political re/uni00ADsistance to an 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, human and divine failures to act responsibly, 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, and all re-imagining what the future holds.

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 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. Playing upon the cruciform already 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 the crucifixion of Jesus and its vaunted power to effect salvation. For what salvation can Jesus provide for the lost children of the Shoah? Or to frame it in Emil Fackenheim’s pointed question: “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?” Even the young Sam Bak, though fascinated with and moved by images of the suffering Christ, finally concludes that traditional Christology has little to offer a child of the Shoah:

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.

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 deaths of a million and a half children for 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 as the abandonment, torture, and execution of the innocent.

Indeed, in *Crossed Out II* we find Bak’s child caught in the cross-hairs, bearing a cross, awaiting execution, his deathhood doubling as burial shroud. As we face the child, we realize that God is not the only party in question. Where are we in this picture? Do we hold the weapon that will ultimately cross this child out? Are we dispassionate observers, reluctant bystanders, 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 reads attentively, in the Gospel narratives themselves, in particular Mark’s Gospel, whose abrupt ending pictures Jesus’ disciples in stunned disappointment and disarray. 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 suffering. All that remains by narrative end is an empty tomb with no body to be found and nobody to assure that all is or will be well. Rather, less an ending than a abrupt 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” (Mark 16:8). Most
scholars take this to be Mark’s final word on the matter, although subsequent hearers were less than satisfied and proceeded to append no fewer than four alternative endings. The concluding “for they were afraid,” is a grammatically ill-formed phrase, dangling ultimately its unsettled and unsettling preposition (gar), leaving the hearer hanging, mirroring perhaps the desperate women hanging on for dear life. But neither word nor resolution is forthcoming; the text remains suspended grammatically, narratively, and theologically.

If, as some scholars posit, Mark’s gospel was produced during the time of and in response to the Roman siege of Jerusalem between 68 and 70 C.E., the story may reflect and reflect upon a cataclysmic moment that forever altered a community and its way of life. After Vespasian has aborted his siege of the city to return to Rome to be acclaimed Emperor, a period of sixteen months elapses before his son Titus returns to complete the destructive task. Plausibly composed during this hiatus when the community experiences a tantalizing false reprieve, concluding perhaps that they have weathered the worst, the Markan text yanks them back to reality, painting a grave picture of both present and future.

Gathering pieces of Hebrew prophecy and oral traditions of the early Christian community, the Markan storyteller assembles for the first time a narrative of Messiah Jesus and his disciples heading inexorably to death. 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 (Mark 13:5-37). Projecting present experience in Jesus’ story, Mark 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 religious tradition fails to make sense of the suffering and death that will be their lot. 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 untouched by suffering. No subsequent retelling of this ending and experience by Mark’s editors or later gospel writers indebted to Mark’s story, no matter how passionate the effort to accentuate life and downplay death, can erase or overwrite the searing 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 have yet to dissipate. Mark remembers the death and the dead, and narrates a proleptic tale in which his community must now come to terms with their own near demise. If the storytellers of Genesis and Exodus are repairing their communal worlds in the aftermath of catastrophe, Mark writes in the midst of unfolding catastrophe aware that yet more narrative wreckage is imminent, suffering a certainty.

Like Bak’s disturbing images of crucified children, Mark’s narrative stands in grim doubt before certain grand Messianic expectations, portraying 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 an unmistakable forecast of what lies ahead for them. 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 what is for them the ultimate question: What will they do? What will they do in the moment when suffering affords no escape, when choiceless choices are all that remain? Will they, like the Markan Jesus, attend to the physical needs of those around them? Will they afford compassion even while under duress themselves? Will they collaborate with the 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?

Responding to one commentator’s observation that the gospel of Mark “is too harshly focused on the paradox of negation to be of enduring attraction,” the late William Placher writes “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.”

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 v’bohu, betrayed covenants, captive and besieged communities, forgotten promises, abandoned homes, forsaken cities, murdered children, lost dreams? And how are we, as readers, listeners, viewers, citizens of a different Empire positioned in relation to such wreckage? 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, bears witness to the dead, 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. But the Bible is not a theological monument, a landmark offering 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 a 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, painful labor, the artwork, of repairing the world.

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