

Remembering Angels:

The Memory Work of Samuel Bak

By Donna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips

Disfiguring Dürer

In 1514 Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia* angel sat on the verge of the Enlightenment, surrounded by the tools and symbols of science, art, and architecture, backlit by a promising rainbow and a dazzling comet. On her belt were the keys to power, at her feet the purse of wealth. Absorbed in creative quandary, ever the analyzing insomniac in a sleeping world, Dürer's angel-artist-architect struggled to solve an inventive problem that would alter the future of humankind.

Suspended over her shoulder, an hourglass suggested that solving the problem would be but a matter of time, because the world was an orderly place where geometry and logic prevailed, where certain procedures had predictable outcomes, where, if one thought hard enough and applied sufficient skill, an answer could be found, the new idea would inevitable emerge. The angel, after all, held a compass, the very tool God as *Deus Artifex* was believed to have used when he inscribed the horizons of the world. Was it not within this angel's power to extend the range of human understanding and ability, to attain divine-like knowledge, and to do what God himself had done?

In 1514 the angel was also sitting at the midpoint of Dürer's career posing for the artist's self-portrait. Recently recovered from a near-fatal illness, fully cognizant of the body's frailty and of the failure of his imagination and skill to represent his pain, Dürer stationed his angel at the edge of the sea, her wing pinned to the wall by an hourglass measuring the relentless seepage of future to past, linking gravity to grave. Confronted with vast possibilities, infinite mystery, and "the temporalizing horizon of death" (Koerner, 23), her melancholy face expressed what Erwin Panofsky has called "the tragic unrest of human creation," the frustration of life spent "in competition with God" (156). Emblematic at once of the 16th century German cultural spirit and Dürer's personal existential struggle, the ambivalent angel sat paradoxically poised in *Melencolia I* between divine-like possibilities and human limitations.

In 1945 in a displaced persons camp in Bavaria, a young Samuel Bak, one of the two hundred survivors of the Vilna ghetto cleansing, first encountered Dürer, that "most German of German

masters.” Decades later, Bak would begin an artistic deportation – in his words a “plundering” – of this most ambivalent of German angels (Bak, 272). From the brink of Dürer’s Enlightenment to the edge of Bak’s memory, Dürer’s angel would be repeatedly exiled to Jewish landscapes scarred by the Shoah, forced to witness and reflect upon the devastation wrought by Enlightenment aspirations and values gone awry. In a series of canvasses produced in the 1980’s and 90’s (e.g. *After Dürer* [1980], *Nuremberg Elegie* [1982], *Seascape with Melencolia* [1984] and *Elegy III* [1997]), the angel sits amidst ruin, her melancholic self-absorption giving way to a state of mourning for a world in wreckage.

In this current series, *Remembering Angels*, Bak once again dismembers and re-members Dürer’s angel in apocalyptic moments where the ordered, logical, divinely ordained world of Dürer’s day has dissolved into one of chaos, chance, and arbitrariness, where stones and trees float through the air (*With Other Remnants, Wind of Ponary*), where building blocks become dice (*Guardian of Suspended Warnings*), where feathers outweigh cannon shells (*On the Other Hand*), where right is left and left is upside-down (*Between Right and Wrong*). *Melencolia’s* emblems of future progress are here, but are reinscribed as broken, useless or misused, discarded artifacts of lost culture and community. *Melencolia’s* celebrated creativity, visible only in ironic traces, is profoundly constrained by scarce and ruined resources, broken tools, and the lack of imagination, energy, and freedom. No longer the analyzing and manipulating subject, the angel herself is frequently a work in progress – a sculpture, machine, cutout, or collage – or the raw material for some further construction (*Appearing, Covenants, Force of Gravity, Guardian of Suspended Warnings, With Other Remnants*). She has become the object, the new, but inept, invention of some other unidentifiable imagination.

If, in *Melencolia*, Dürer’s angel had fancied the future and its inviting destinations and destinies, had in fact announced a new age, she is now in Bak’s landscapes grounded, held captive, and sentenced to bear witness to a present shattered by the past. Flight is impossible, escape not an option. Her wings are tattered, patched up, disassembled, partially or wholly removed, in process of repaid, affixed to trees, or cast in stone. Metallic stays and drooping straps signal a mechanistic artificiality and ineffectiveness, a sad and ironic remainder of the Classical and Enlightenment myths of human potency and potential. Her keys, (*Two Views*) have now become so big and cumbersome that they weigh her down, threatening to drown her should she fall into the sea. No longer able to unlock the secrets of the future, have they now become heavy reminders of and questions about the past? Her purse has been exchanged for the luggage of the refugee (*Testimonials, To the Saint*

Louis), holding the piteous remnants of a once-full life, precious belongings, but too much of a burden for any one traveler to carry.

But if Bak has put Dürer's angel – and by extension Dürer's pious artistic ambition – under judgment, he has also complicated the verdict by confusing her identity and taking her out of solitary confinement. She supplements her role as Dürer's ego and Renaissance artisan, taking on new and multiple identities and forms. Disfigured and reconfigured, she is old; she is young. She is dark; she is light. She is male; she is female. Large; small. Flesh and bone; wood, stone, metal and canvas. Living and breathing; sculpted and constructed. Whole; partial; multiple. Elegant; bedraggled. Bak overlays her with a host of other angels and images from his memory – family members, friends, and other human saviors and victims – individuals and communities who were both able and unable to rescue, able and unable to escape. Consider the refined, stylish angel in *Testimonials*. She sits packed and ready to leave, calmly reading a book. Is she waiting on the train in the background that will take her to Auschwitz? Is she hoping to be transported to safety in the hot air balloon, to be carried along by the rising smoke? Or are the balloon and train not headed in the same direction? Unattached wings, nailed to a tree, fallen on the ground, bear the ominous stripes of a camp prisoner. Will she, with her fur collar and leather gloves, with her books and closely guarded canvases, only find escape through the crematoria chimneys?

Guardian angels, travelers, loved and lost family, camp inmates, displaced persons, soldiers, monuments, ghosts, spectators, broken sculptures, lost drawings are all re-collected here and reassembled into an angelic host whose poignant plights and significance in Bak's own survival move us far beyond a judgment of Dürer's legacy. We see angels equipping other angels (*Force of Gravity, New Wings*), consulting other angels (*Consultation*), guarding the dead (*Guardian of Sleep*), enacting liturgies of mourning (*Measure of Time, Ongoing Elegy*), preserving cultural legacies (*Testimonials*)-compromised angles who nevertheless gesture to something beyond. But we also sometimes see only angelic remains: a feather ripped from a wing (*On the Other Hand*), dipped in blood, ready perhaps to sign a last will and testament; wings nailed to walls (*Six Wings to One*) as if they were some hunter's trophies; and the all-pervasive petrified angels, place-holders for an absent deity and a belated rescue. These remodeled re-membered figures take on sobering new purposes: messengers of a post-Shoah age, guardians of a savaged earth, protectors of remembered innocents, belated heralds of warning, custodians of memory, impaired repairers of a broken world. They announce,

commemorate, and confront a world where traditional religious verities may not longer be counted upon.

Bak and the Bible

The interrogation of religious verities takes Bak beyond Dürer to the Bible itself and extends themes from prior works (many which can be found in Lawrence Langer's *In a Different light: The Book of Genesis in the Art of Samuel Bak*). Here, as there, some of the compositional elements of *Melencolia I* have been weighted with biblical themes. In particular, the Bible and *Melencolia* have converged and contorted in the reiterated motifs of rainbows and ladders. Dürer's prospective rainbow is, in Bak's landscape, retrospective, pointing back to a past covenant with God that has now been broken, a divine promise that has not been kept. God's self-reminder to constrain destruction has lost all ethereal innocence. Now a series of wooden fragments variously suspended, nailed, staked, lodged, propped, and toppled, Bak's hand-made rainbow at once exposes divine failure, and mandates the subsequent human obligation to engage, however pathetically, partially, imperfectly, in *tikkun olam*, repair of the world.

The ladder for Dürer might have represented human aspiration, ascending expectations, divine-like-capabilities, or human construction in process, is for Bak, also a pointer to the biblical past. In Genesis the ancestor of Jacob dreamed of a ladder with angels ascending and descending, recognized it as a sign of God's fidelity, and with a stone monument marked the place as sacred. By contrast to both Dürer and the Bible, Bak's ladders are useless, illogical, and hardly hallowed. Leading nowhere, they, like Bak's rainbows, are frequently broken, suspended by rope, precariously propped, belayed from below. Neither human nor angelic figures make use of them. Lacking either human or heavenly purpose, these unstable and empty tools mark a severed connection between heaven and earth, another moment when God's promise to protect have fallen to the ground.

In *Between Right and Wrong* Bak suggests a new chapter of ironic biblical re-vision. In the distance we see a city aflame (a new Sodom?). In the foreground we are greeted by a gathering of bewildered multi-sized angels who nearly block our view of a lone traveler (a new Lot?) who has turned his back on them. So many angels, and only one survivor! The group is flanked by signs reading "right" and "left" but pointing "left" and "right"/ The ominous allusion to being "chosen" either for the gas chamber or the work camp now reinterprets the famous argument between Abraham and God about the righteous and wicked of Sodom and the conditions under which the city

might be spared. Right/left, righteous/wicked, right/wrong – the polarized either/or worlds of both Bible and *Lager* obscure the faces of the innocent, show the arbitrariness of murder and redemption, and raise profound questions about the divine ability or willingness to perceive goodness, execute justice, or enact rescue.

This ironic remanufacturing of the Bible leads us back to the angels themselves as manufactured beings who can neither take flight nor look to the heavens for help or hope. With no reassuring heavenly body in the skies – sun, star, comet, or rainbow – on which to fix their attention, Bak's angels experience a literal "dis-aster" (Blanchot, 75). Encouraging astrological signs have been replaced by slashed and uprooted family trees blowing by overhead (*Wind of Ponary*), floating stone shrapnel threatening to crush all below (*With Other Remnants*), or storm clouds portending another deluge (*Covenants, Guardian of Sleep*). The angels have lost their voice and many their sight. Hooded, blind-folded, asleep, eyes downcast, staring vacantly out to some nowhere, alone and silent, or in mute collaboration, these figures live in a heavy, silent, and grace world that can hardly be borne with eyes open.

Matters of Time

Remembering angels past leads Bak to re-member time and its material symbols. In counterpoint to Dürer's professional embrace of future possibilities and his personal struggle with present realities, time, for Bak, manifests disturbing, disruptive properties. Broken hourglasses, defaced clocks, clocks with no hands or pendulums, hands with no clock faces, compasses that double as clock hands, grinding wheels turned clock faces, clocks and bells that fail to sound their alarms – all underscore different senses of time and how time matters. A time of safety and innocence has been forever disrupted, while a time of danger and death carries on with fearful constancy. The positive valence of time's dependability once posited by an Enlightenment view of science and cultural progress has been recast as scattered instances of survival contingent upon the capricious, accidental timing of help from others. Bak's various rescues by his father, his mother, his aunt, Sister Maria, and other angels fell, like dice, on an ironic timetable, where both the hand of time and of human protection were unpredictable. And for all the angels who cannot move, for whatever reason, there is also the sense that time, sometimes, stands still. Emblematic of this is *Measure of Time* where an empty ghetto building sits suspended in the top half of a broken hourglass. Reminiscent of a snow globe winter scene, the structure is captured in time, frozen in space, its sand foundation oddly

unresponsive to the force of gravity. The angel's memorial flame is lit, but the candle is not consumed. Inside, outside the fragile glass world, time stands still.

As historical events recede in time and space, the more precious and prominent, whether moments of rescue or abandonment, call for monuments that will keep memory alive (Young, 1). But what kind of memory takes place here as we remember these angels, as these angels remember? To memorialize his rescues and rescuers, Bak reaches, like the man in the crypt in *How to Remember*, for monuments and mementos, material objects, objects that matter, to re-member his past: memorial candles, crypts, prayer shawls, tablet-shaped wings, statuary, cloth Stars of David, blank but open books. When recast and juxtaposed with the symbols of Dürer's artistic and cultural age, these concrete remnants of Bak's Jewish identity and experiences underscore the high cost of integrating the past with the present. For the world re-membered is a disfigured, incongruent, damaged place and moment, a place and moment where intact villages on charming hillsides, form the backdrop for a flood that has mired an angelic monument, and is sweeping away all the mundane elements – toys, dishes, food, lamps – of a quotidian life no longer possible (*With Other Remnants*). In a place and moment where fractured globed and misplaced polyhedrons, disassembled angels, and broken tools are the commonplace, we see Bak memorializing his current world – not by a single act of representation but iteratively, with a host of angelic revisions intended as a monumental mosaic memorializing both his personal rescuers and the six million whose guardian angels never materialized.

With memory comes the work of mourning, as much a nod to an uncertain future as a memorial to a decided past (Derrida, 20-21). It is an effort of the *tikkun olam*, a healing of the torn world, which Bak envisions in part as a fabrication of memory, of necessity a re-membering of the pieces of life and death on the way toward a reconstitution, however imperfect. Never finally to be achieved – hence the return to and refashioning of Master Dürer – Bak's refabrication is a re-membering ever in process, showing us, in fact, *How to Remember*. In that particular work, we see monuments and mementos strewn at the base of a sarcophagus and angels looking askance, or possibly away, from a single male figure who stretches out a partially extended carpenter's rule toward the surrounding detritus – unlit candles and fallen rainbows, grinding wheel and purse, compass and cloth. Is he reaching toward an assemblage of props as if some set designer waits in the wings for the materials with which to set the stage? Is the human figure wanting to gather these objects to himself and thus into the crypt for some final rest? Or are the objects beckoning him to

reach out, to recollect them, to extend himself with tools and talents, inciting a restlessness that takes him beyond the repository of the dead? The meaning is not certain, just as memory is not certain, given and monumentalized once and for all, but both must be worked out continuously in the face of realities. But what does seem certain is a profound restlessness in Bak's repetitions that moves his prodigious handiwork beyond Dürer, beyond the Bible, beyond standard monuments to a horrific age, and that presses his viewers to search this memory work for clues about our guardianship of the present.

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