SOURCE VERSUS DISCOURSE:
HAROLD BLOOM AND ROBERT ALTER
RE-IMAGINE THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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for
Maureen,
my companion along the way

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ABSTRACT

The Book of Genesis, biblical scholars hypothesize, is a compound of manifold documentary materials that were once spliced together by redactors to achieve the biblical text's present form. Moreover, modern scholarship has determined that the various embedded source-texts, some composed about five-hundred years apart from one other, are more or less incompatible and discontinuous. A certain dissonance consequently is felt to plague the received text. Yet in order to save the appearances of Genesis, to give it a sense of coherence despite itself, the Hebrew scholar and literary critic Robert Alter takes a discourse-oriented approach to the book, seeking to uncover a set of original aesthetic principles that operate within it. Harold Bloom, on the other hand, conducts a source-oriented inquiry into the nature of one hypothetical pre-Genesis source, known as the Book of J. He chooses to avoid the irregular texture of the inherited Book of Genesis by focusing on a single archetypal narrative strand. In this study, I compare Alter's and Bloom's understanding of specific episodes in Genesis, in light of their textual difficulties, with an eye toward evaluating the respective merits of each critic's hermeneutic orientation. Notwithstanding their differences, each critic is participating in a current movement that treats the Bible as literature. A close analysis of each critic's procedures and interpretations demonstrates telling resemblances between traditional religious exegesis and two species of a literary approach to the Bible.

ABBREVIATIONS

BN ..... The Art of Biblical Narrative, Robert Alter

GTC ..... Genesis: Translation and Commentary, Robert Alter

BJ ..... The Book of J, Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg

INTRODUCTION

> *What comes to pass in a sacred text is the occurrence of a* pas de sens. . . . Pas de sens--*that does not signify poverty of meaning but no meaning that would be itself, meaning, "beyond literality." And there is the sacred. The sacred surrenders itself to translation, which devotes itself to the sacred; the one and the other are inseparable.*
>
> Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel" (204)

To begin, let us consider the problem of beginning in the Book of Genesis, whose Hebrew title is *Bereshit*, the first book of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The original title is taken from the first word of the Hebrew text, *bereshit*, familiarly translated as, "In the beginning"; the third century B.C.E. Greek version, the Septuagint, gave us the equally apposite title, "Genesis." Apropos to its title, of course, the book recounts the beginning of the cosmos, locating the origins of human life and history in the creative word of God. Genesis thereby provides us with a kind of blueprint of the Beginning itself, offering by way of metaphor a genetic, if mythical, explanation for all reality. It presumes to be an authoritative account of our origins.

Yet, it is instructive to note that *bereshit*--the first word of the original text--is given to two alternative renderings. Scholars tell us that the Hebrew is ambiguous, so that *bereshit* may defensibly be translated as either an absolute or a dependent clause: Gerhard von Rad goes with the former option ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . ."); E. A. Speiser with the latter ("When God set about to create heaven and earth . . ."). And the difference is not insignificant. As Gabriel Josipovici explains,

> these are not alternative ways of translating; they seem to be alternative accounts of the origin of all things. The traditional account [in the absolute form, as von Rad translates it] says that everything began with God creating heaven and earth; the NEB account [rendering a dependent clause, as does Speiser] suggests that before the creation of the universe there was already something, though we only enter the narrative at the point when God starts to create. In the one case God is the origin of all; in the other the possibility is floated that God himself may have been a part of some primal chaos out of which our world too was made, just as man is later made out of dust. (Book of God 53)

Faced with such uncertainty, we may feel prompted to ask, Just where do we begin? For many religious readers, this will be an onto-theological, even historical, question: What are the actual origins of the universe? What really happened back then? Given the ambiguity of the first verse of the first chapter of Genesis, secure knowledge about the origin of the universe, if that is what one must have, is not forthcoming. For other readers, the question will be a literary one: How does the text begin? What is the nature of its beginning(s)?

In more ways than one, the beginning of the text (and, by implication, the beginning of the universe) is fraught with ambiguity. Emblematic of the text's elusiveness in this regard is the fact that the first word, *bereshit,* begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *beth*--not the first letter, *aleph.* As far-fetched as any suggestion of its significance may seem, this is something that the early rabbis themselves singled out for comment; for them, the second letter of the alphabet, in this principal setting, symbolized the mysteriousness of the beginning of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). So says the Jerusalem Talmud: "'Just as the letter *beth* [ב] is closed on all sides and open only at the front'--Hebrew it must be remembered, is read from right to left--'similarly you are not permitted to enquire what is before or what is behind, but only from the actual time of creation'" (Book of God 67). Notwithstanding the overingeniousness of this analysis, on the side of the rabbis' recherché commentary is the fact that the Bible generally tends to subvert conventional distribution or linear sequence. In respect to Genesis, in particular, the rule of primogeniture is repeatedly reversed in favour of a nearly inscrutable principle of divine election: over and over again, a younger son displaces the inheritance rightly belonging to the eldest. In New Testament parlance, many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. Internally deconstructing and eluding simple understanding, the text of Genesis as a whole similarly invites us to ponder origins and beginnings, yet seems ultimately to withhold them, only allowing us oblique views of the complex nature of human and cultural genesis.

As if to complicate matters further, the Book of Genesis represents the beginning twice, in two self-contained, independent Creation narratives set side by side. 1.1 to 2.4a, for example, which scholars call the Priestly (P) version of Creation, relates a grandly ceremonial six-day cosmogony, in which a methodical and transcendent God bespeaks the natural world into being with ritualistic precision and ease. This tightly patterned account culminates in the simultaneous creation of man and woman in God's image--and, at the end of this beginning, "God saw all that He had done, and, look, it was very good" (1.31).[1] There is no transgression here, just stately procession, formal order. Following this elegant, poetic cosmogony is a second, less trim version, from 2.4b to 3.24, known as the Yahwistic (J) account. Here we have the Garden story, a kind of folktale, which presents us--in contrast to P--with a more earthbound, anthropomorphic Creator who fashions a man from clay, and plants him in a paradisal enclosure. Then--after the fact, as it were--this Creator constructs woman from man's rib. Also noticeably different this time around is the fact that the new creatures are, evidently, not so "very good." Rather, a disobedient man and woman defy God and are summarily expelled from Eden.

The two Creation stories are thus conspicuously different versions of the Beginning, for they contradict each other in respect to local details and, in general, maintain vastly different orientations towards the facts of human nature, divinity, ecology, gender, and so on. I will have the opportunity to speak in detail about these variations later, in Chapter 2, but for now it is sufficient to notice that, even at the beginning of Genesis--this "book of beginnings," as E. A. Speiser tags it (xvii)--the idea of an originary "beginning" remains, paradoxically, a fugitive conception. As a critical reading of the narrative will show, indeed there is no single, centered point of origin in the text. Rather, Genesis directly splits off in two directions at once, as if to dramatize a crisis of beginning, or even to facilitate meditation on the nature of representation as it bears on human genesis. Uncannily, if *bereshit* is translated in the dependent, as Josipovici shows, then the narrative paradoxically opens *in medias res:* in that case--as Jack Miles puts it--"we come upon

work in progress" (God 26). Connnected to this penchant for self-subversion--even self-parody--in Genesis is the sense that the Torah (and the Hebrew Bible) as a whole inscribes within itself its own history of elusive origination: as Regina Schwartz suggests,

> When Moses receives the tablets of the law [i.e. "torah"], before he begins to promulgate it, he dashes the tablets to pieces. The Torah is rewritten; thus, all we have from the beginning is a copy, one that proliferates further copies. . . . The Book itself is imperiled, lost over and over. And so it must be remembered, recovered, rewritten, and rediscovered over and over. (46)

On this reading of Moses' reception of the sacred Law, the "original" text is forever lost to us--to recall the epigraph at the beginning of this Introduction, as Derrida puts it, "the sacred surrenders itself to translation" in this case. Certainly, it is therefore reasonable to suggest that our desire for *the* beginning is confounded here, for all we have access to is a proliferation of translations, mediations of the original numinous Word on the origins of the universe. Yet this appears to be in line with the Creator's original purpose: "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1.28), God enjoins the first humans, signifying the divinity's peculiar zeal for human "growth," or the multiplication of his image through sexual and, deducing from the polygenetic form of Genesis, also textual reproduction. Indeed, the verse, "be fruitful and multiply," can be seen as striking the keynote of the whole book. As will become clear later, the almost obsessive preoccupation with growth and fertility, and the ideal proliferation of the divine *image* which is their purpose in Genesis, is connected to the theological business of the perpetuity of the Blessing. This will be discussed later, when it will be shown that genealogical continuity, intimately connected to the divine dispensation, is an urgent matter inasmuch as it is required to guarantee the transmission of the Blessing. For now, though, we will leave off with the observation that from the outset of the Book of Genesis, as all this goes to show, any univocal conception of "beginning" as a single stable point of origin is problematized. So, one may be inclined to ask, just where *do* we begin to interpret Genesis?

In answer to that question--if not to assuage our nostalgia for origins, in the Derridean sense--I will turn to two recent renderings of this seminal book which attempt to

persuade us of something of its "original" condition or quality. The first rendering, the Book of J (1990), translated by David Rosenberg and interpreted by Harold Bloom, refers us to a single pre-Genesis "source text"--the putative foundation of Genesis itself--which is believed to lie buried in the inherited text. The source text these critics examine is the so-called "J" (or Yahwistic) narrative strand which begins with the "second" Creation story, the hypothetical origin of a coherent, artistically superior piece of secular literature embedded in later, supposedly inferior redactions, and produced by an individual author. In contrast, the second rendering, Robert Alter's Genesis: Translation and Commentary (1996), presupposes that the whole of Genesis has an original, artistic integrity. Alter specifically suggests that, whatever the nature and number of "sources" that went into its assembly, it is the end-product, the final redacted form of the text that we ought to attend to. Thus, he reads the two Creation stories consecutively (P, and then J), for he believes that together, within the whole context of Genesis, they represent a subtle and purposeful subsurface unity. Alter's aim, then, is to establish, against source-directed critics like Bloom and Rosenberg, the fundamental coherence of the received text. The difference between each critical approach, as Alter suggests elsewhere, "is ultimately the difference between assuming that the text is an intricately interconnected unity . . . and assuming it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents, as most modern scholars have supposed" (BN 11). It is roughly the difference, too, between a (diachronic) historical reconstructionist methodology and a (synchronic) literary-formalist one. Which is to say, Bloom occupies himself with a putative *source*, Alter with a *discourse*.[2]

However, both orientations towards the Book of Genesis intersect, as I have suggested, in a shared fixation on *origins*, which is all the more ironic given what I see as the text's own evasiveness about origins and beginnings. Bloom attempts to excavate an original secular source text; Alter, a supposed set of lost, ancient aesthetic standards that make sense out of the irregular documentary terrain of the received text. Both critics hanker after something lost. My aim in this study will therefore be, broadly speaking, to

determine the extent to which these critics are warranted in presenting their respective texts as original and meaningful holistic entities (the redaction for Alter; one narrative strand for Bloom). To this end, in Chapter 1 I will review the history of the criticism of Genesis to place Bloom's and Alter's competing assumptions about the authorship and transmission of the biblical book within a scholarly context. In subsequent chapters, I will compare their readings of the beginning and end of the Genesis narrative, keeping in view my own sense of the metanarrative dynamics operating in the texts, in an effort to gauge the literary merits of each critic's rendering.

Both approaches, it will also be noted, come out of a shared history of treating biblical writing more as literary script than as Scripture. The relatively new moniker, "the Bible as literature" (now the title of a legion of books on the subject) describes a movement which applies literary-critical methods to biblical materials, and which finds in the Bible a great subtlety and scope of qualities traditionally associated with only secular literature in the minds of professional critics. As one popular text on the new subject of the Bible as literature states, to read the Bible this way is to look at it "in the same way that one would look at any other book: as a product of the human mind" (Gabel and Wheeler 3). Gone, it would seem, is the traditional notion that the Bible is special revelation; rather, the biblical texts are treated to rational examination like any other product of the human mind. Thus, critics who take up the task of discussing the Bible as literature tend to do so with an eye toward the "internal relationships" of biblical writing, and will often eschew the "referential qualities of texts" (the express purpose of one recent group of essays on the subject; Alter and Kermode 5). That is, the current, mostly secular literary investigations into the Bible stand apart from traditional hermeneutic approaches, insofar as the former attend primarily to formal structures and strategies in the texts, rather than to formulating theological or moral pandect upon them. To be sure, in the Bible as literature movement there are as many approaches as there are current fashions in literary criticism: all kinds of literary methods are brought to bear on the subject, as a recent addition to the Bible as literature

bookshelf, The Postmodern Bible (1995), attests. What gained its momentum with Erich Auerbach's initial musings on the nature of biblical artistry, in the first chapter of Mimesis (in which he suggests that, because of its characteristically laconic style, biblical narrative is "fraught with background" [12]) has now become a thoroughly institutionalized set of assumptions.[3]

Yet many readers of the Bible, whatever their religious predilections, tend to view the text as a serious historico-theological document (a fact readers find either odious or confirming) and might prefer to distinguish between "biblical writing" and "literature," especially in consideration of the latter's associations of artifice, free-play, invention, and frivolous amusement. (For a cynic might ask, why do we need a book such as Philip Rosenbaum's How to Enjoy the *Boring* Parts of the Bible, if the Bible is self-evidently "literary"!?) Eminent professional critics such as C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot have indeed argued that biblical writing is averse to "mere" aesthetic responses and descriptions, believing that it is a peculiarly ethically demanding writing (Norton 335-37). But now that a burgeoning industry is centered upon the notion of the Bible as literature, I wish to inquire into what is implied by taking a literary approach to (heretofore, at least) religious texts; for instance, what values does such study trade in or conceal for the benefit of literary analysis? If not overtly ideological (that is, religious or moralistic), what are the epistemological and ethical valences of Bloom's and Alter's literary readings? These larger concerns will require, in particular, that I explore to what genre or genres (if conventional genre distinctions are even applicable here) the Book of Genesis belongs: history? law? fiction? the morality tale? myth? theology? mixed or other? In this context, I will consider the ethico-political implications of each critic's hypothesis.

In what immediately follows, I will measure Bloom's presupposition concerning the literary integrity of the Yahwistic strand, and the scientific basis of his inquiry, against Alter's claim that there exists a profound aesthetic unity to the Book of Genesis.[4] Alter, as we will see, must consistently account for the surface contradictions of the text if he is to

make a strong case for aesthetic integrity. Bloom, on the other hand, because he treats one source on its own, eliminates the *prima facie* difficulties of textual contradiction and duplication--yet, for his part, Bloom runs the risk of stretching our credulity, since any recovery of J is perforce tentative, and since his vision of the author J is highly conjectural. Moreover, according to his own set purposes, Bloom must show that episodes in the single strand instantiate a kind of integrity within themselves. Throughout, then, I propose the following question: Which heuristic assumptions make for the most plausible and most interesting--and also *interested*--version of this book of Beginnings?[5]

[1] I use Robert Alter's translation, Genesis: Translation and Commentary, throughout, unless otherwise specified.

[2] I borrow Meir Sternberg's adroit formula, "between source and discourse" (22), as it pertains to the alternative directions of inquiry in biblical studies.

[3] David Norton's two volume study, A History of the Bible as Literature, follows the slow growth of the idea of the Bible as literature. Although Auerbach is the most celebrated of the earlier critics who reconceived of the Bible in aesthetic terms, he was not the first to express literary interest in the Bible. Incidentally, Matthew Arnold was the first to use the phrase, "The Bible as literature"; and Richard Moulton, at the turn of our century, established the literary study of the Bible in the academy (see Norton, vol. 2, 272ff).

[4] I speak of Bloom's suppositions throughout this study, rather than Rosenberg's, since I will be dealing with Bloom's commentaries and not with the translation *per se*. In any case, as reviewers point out, the translation even appears to be premised on Bloom's understanding of the Yahwist. David Stern, for example, argues convincingly that "Rosenberg's translation was produced with Bloom's reading in mind" (307).

[5] Although these criteria may seem rather vague, it will become clearer as I proceed that interest is a significant matter in relation to our reception of ancient, and therefore radically alien texts such as Genesis. The issue is all the more pressing in relation to a sacred literature. In this case, in the absence of determinate understandings of ancient Israel's literary traditions, both Alter's and Bloom's claims are necessarily tentative and hypothetical. In the way of tentative hypotheses, each proposal attempts to offer the most satisfactory explanation of the literary phenomena in question; it is up to us then to evaluate explanatory power. And explanatory power is insoluably bound up with political power, so that where empirical evidence or positive standards are lacking, we are thrown back onto considerations of the *interestedness* of each critic's readings.

CHAPTER 1

The words of Torah are fruitful and multiply.
Talmud, Hagigah, 3b (Bruns 189)

God's first words to his newly-created humans in the Priestly Creation account of Genesis are, perhaps not surprisingly in light of its twice-told tale of Beginning, suggestive of the book's preoccupation with multiple origins, continuous creation, fertility, growth, and mass proliferation: "Be fruitful and multiply" (1.28)--the first divine mandate, instructing humans (and texts, I will later suggest) always to begin again, so as to spread the Blessing. This command is in fact borne out by the larger narrative, most obviously in relation to its content (for example, Genesis is a book of generations [5.1]: it is a story about the prolific descendants of Adam and Eve and, through them, the transmission of the Blessing) but also in relation to its polygenetic form (the text literally grows by fragmentation and duplication--for example, there are two Creation accounts, and many other such "doublets"--thus spatially expanding in a way analogous to genealogy, textually multiplying the Blessing). As the contemporary fictionist John Barth proposes, Genesis is even "proto-Postmodernist in its deployment of what art critics call 'significant form'--the form a metaphor for the content, or form and content reciprocally emblematical" (61-62). However questionable is the claim to Genesis's proto-postmodernism, Barth is quite right to notice that the text invariably instantiates, at both its narrative and metanarrative levels, the divine charter. Title, form, content--and even the uses to which the text has traditionally been put--are all equally and uncannily consonant with each other, reciprocally emblematical. Beginning--and then beginning again--is manifest throughout. In view of its traditional uses, the text of Genesis is itself a point of departure in a variety of contexts, intertextually and historically. It is positioned, fittingly, at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, functioning as a prologue to the biblical canon; Genesis thus extends beyond itself to include the larger history of Israel, and also early Christianity, in its narrative genealogy.

We might go further to observe how the text subsequently was expanded along (and the Blessing appropriated by) a multitude of historical and mythological lines, insofar as it was pressed into the service of three major flourishing monotheisms. And Genesis has grown on non-religious readers alike, who find in the classical Hebrew tales such secular "blessings" as archetypes, an allegory of the Big Bang, or simply compelling stories.[6] The phrase, "fruitful and multiply," from beginning to end, aptly characterizes the genesis of this very prolific book. Bloom's and Alter's versions of Genesis, then, are only the most recent offspring of the enduring reproductive capacity of this most seminal of texts.

Let us then (in precisely biblical fashion) begin once again, by turning to a consideration of the composition and transmission of the Pentateuch, or the Five Books of Moses, as it relates to Bloom's and Alter's alternative versions of Genesis. These two critics choose different sides of a three centuries old controversy regarding the origin of the texts; I will discuss the credibility of each orientation--that is, the holism of Alter's literary approach versus the atomism of Bloom's historical-critical approach. This entails a brief survey of the history of source theory, upon which Bloom and Rosenberg's reconstructive project is based, and against which Alter posits and privileges narrative coherence and composite artistry. Indeed, it will be important to gauge the integrity of Genesis as far as possible on textual grounds, in order to evaluate the prior philological presuppositions of both Bloom and Alter.[7] I will then begin to consider some of the theoretical implications of each critic's orientation, to determine what might be lost or gained ideologically by treating the text as (to quote Alter again) either "an intricately interconnected unity" or "a patchwork of frequently disparate documents" (BN 11).

The philological presuppositions which govern each critic's view of the condition of the received text and of its sources are centered on the questions of authorship and textual transmission. And each critic has radically different solutions to these questions. Robert Alter, for example, conscious of the implicit liabilities of his view, makes reference to the textual and authorial problems of Genesis in the introduction to his new translation:

> The informing assumption of my translation and commentary is that the edited version of Genesis--the so-called redacted text--which has come down to us, though not without certain limited contradictions and disparate elements, has a powerful coherence as a literary work, and that this coherence is above all what we need to address as readers. . . . What seems quite clear, however, is that the redactors had a strong and often subtle sense of thematic and narrative purposefulness in the way they wove together the inherited literary strands. (GTC xlii)

Here, by making his critical assumptions explicit, Alter lays out his own view of the quality of the redacted text. But he is also defining and defending his project against the modern source criticism, in particular, against the Documentary Hypothesis which achieved its ascendancy in the realm of biblical studies in the nineteenth-century. Alter ultimately rejects this kind of documentary or "excavative" historical scholarship, its scientific pretensions, and the hypotheses it produces. Yet, before we simply assent to Alter's view, *vis-à-vis* literary holism and the "thematic and narrative purposefulness" of the redactors, it is necessary to gain a purchase on just what is at stake in his retreat from the widely influential findings of source criticism, findings which for some readers will legitimate Bloom's alternative version of the story.

Source criticism, or Higher Criticism as it was once called, interrogates the integrity of the Pentateuch, or the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible traditionally believed to have been dictated by God, written (and then rewritten) by Moses--"That Shepherd," as Milton says, "who first taught the chosen Seed, / In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth / Rose out of *Chaos*" (Paradise Lost I.8-10). What source criticism shows is that the individual biblical "books" in this collection are fragmented compilations produced by no single author at no single point in time. Rather the books are seen to have developed gradually over a period of at least five hundred years, involving the hands of many authors. To be more specific, the "authors" of the biblical books "are more properly understood as editors or redactors" (Mann 4) who succeeded one another, indirectly collaborating together on the assembly of the Pentateuchal texts. As Alter acknowledges, source criticism thus claims that "what we actually have is a constant stitching together of

earlier texts drawn from divergent literary and sometimes oral traditions, with minor or major inventions by later editors in the form of glosses, connecting passages, conflations of sources, and so forth" (BN 132). Consequently, these critics--having shown the impossibility of Mosaic authorship, and further having rejected the idea of individual authorship altogether--formulated a variety of hypotheses to account for what they believed to be a more or less rimous concatenation of text. As Alter puts it in his introduction,

> two centuries of biblical scholarship have generally assumed that Genesis--and indeed most biblical texts--is not strictly speaking a book at all, but rather an accretion of sundry traditions, shot through with disjunctions and contradictions, and accumulated in an uneven editorial process over several centuries. (GTC xl)

Although he rejects the conclusion that the end-product is finally no more than "sundry," Alter shows himself to be well apprised of the composite nature of the text he translates. He nevertheless prefers to presuppose that "Genesis is a coherent book, what we moderns would think of as a work of literature" (xxxix-xl). The parts add up to a coherent whole in Alter's view, a whole which is the product of "conscious artistry" (BN 32).

But it is the latitude we are permitted between orientations to biblical writing--between Alter's holism and the source-critical atomism--that interests me here. Can we not determine readily enough, on textual grounds, whether Genesis is more like a coherent narrative than an anthology? How far can empirical scrutiny of the text take us? Alter and Bloom of course have very different answers to this question.

I cite Gabel and Wheeler's catalogue of "obvious repetitions and contradictions" in Genesis in order to illustrate the kinds of textual obstacles one must negotiate if one is to stake a claim to narrative coherence:

> Noah is directed in 6.19 to take two of every kind of living creature into the Ark with him, but in 7.2 he is told to take seven pairs of every clean animal and one pair of those that are not clean. . . . In Genesis 21.31 Abraham names a well Beer-sheba; in 26.33 the well is named all over again by his son Isaac. There are two parallel and separate accounts of God's offering the Covenant to Abraham, in 12.1-9 and 17.1-14. And in the story of Jacob and Esau in chapter 27, Jacob is given two separate means of deceiving his father. . . . Still later, Jacob's name is changed to "Israel," but one source of the text ignores this and calls him "Jacob" to the end. In

> the story of Joseph there is a flat contradiction as to whether the Ishmaelites or the Midianites sold him to the Egyptians. (89)

These and many other conspicuous inconsistencies certainly cast doubt on the integrity of Genesis or on the purposefulness of its redactors, and, moreover, provide compelling evidence of documentary layering and editing--even careless editing. Source-directed critics find such textual cruces to be an embarrassment to the proprieties of logic, which include the rules of non-contradiction and linear sequence. Indeed, for nearly a millennium, and probably longer, alert readers have discerned something of the incoherence of the biblical texts: as Richard E. Friedman notes, "in the third century A.D. the Christian scholar Origen responded to those who raised objections to the unity and Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch" (18),[8] which indicates to us that some very early readers had an inkling--and likely more than that--that the biblical "books" were redactions of discrete materials. As time went on, the orthodox view of Mosaic authorship was publicly contested, and the unity issue slowly came to the foreground of biblical studies.

In the eleventh century, for example, Isaac ibn Yashush, a Spanish Jew, posited the impossibility of Mosaic authorship based on certain anachronisms in the text; says Friedman, "The response to this conclusion was that he [ibn Yashush] was called 'Isaac the blunderer'" (19). That is, ibn Yashush's reading skills were called into question, leaving the myth of single authorship intact. Interestingly enough, this is a move which modern advocates of the literary-unity approach will nearly reproduce in their arguments against those who cast suspicion on the aesthetic integrity of the redaction. If the text does not appear to cohere, argue the unity-directed critics, it is because alien aesthetic standards, to which we ought to be receptive, are at work in the ancient text; we should learn to read better. As Alter asserts, "one of the chief difficulties we encounter as modern readers in perceiving the artistry of biblical narrative is precisely that we have lost most of the keys to the conventions out of which it was shaped" (BN 47); "the biblical notion of what constituted a meaningful and unified narrative continuum might at times be unfathomable

from the enormous distance of intellectual and historical evolution that stands between us and these creations of the early Iron Age" (133). Indeed, such generous hermeneutic sensitivity is salutary, for it takes into account the potential alterity of the text at hand. "The fact that the text is ancient and that its characteristic narrative procedures may differ in many respects from those of modern texts should not lead us to any condescending preoccupation that the text is therefore bound to be crude or simple" (21), Alter cautions. This leads him on a search to recover the peculiar "modalities of prose fiction," as he calls them, that are supposedly operative in biblical writing; Alter will thus attempt to "illuminate the distinctive principles of the Bible's narrative art" (ix). Yet, it may be questionable how far--in the absence of empirical evidence and comparison texts, both of which we lack--one should proceed along such lines of inquiry. Alter, conducting an intrinsic criticism, uses the utmost ingenuity to discern *in* the texts their own hermeneutic, but this leaves him open to the charge of circularity, insofar as he looks for an alien aesthetic and a redactional sophistication that he already presupposes exists in the text. (This is, however, only one of a number of alternative circles available to us, as will become evident.) It is instructive to recall that, prior to Alter's (among others') bid for overall coherence, scholars had become increasingly obsessed with the *lack* of coherence of the same text.

In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes and Benedict de Spinoza publicly rejected--based on variations in the Pentateuchal texts--the orthodox view of individual authorship and its attendant bias towards unity (and by this time, such critique was no longer considered mere blundering). Later in the same century, Richard Simon was to argue further that the Pentateuch is made up of diverse sources and traditions, compiled and edited--he believed--by the scribe Ezra in about the fifth century B.C.E. And, by the eighteenth century, efforts were underway to identify and analyze particular sources: a minister (Witter), a physician (Astruc), and a professor (Eichhorn) each arrived independently at a similar hypothesis concerning the diachrony of the Pentateuch. These devoted lay biblicists were the first to propose a two-source theory of Genesis, having

distinguished the documents J and E (later known as P). In particular, the physician Jean Astruc, as a result of the 1753 publication of his Conjectures in which he speculated on the parameters of the separate sources, gained the title, Father of the Documentary Hypothesis. He was so dubbed, interestingly enough, not long after Abbé d'Aubignac became Father of the Homeric Problem in 1715 (Cassuto 10); scholars evidently perceived that the Homeric question had much in common with investigations into Pentateuchal authorship. Could there have been a committee of Moseses, just as there may have been a committee of Homers? The heterogeneous nature of the texts suggested that, if not a committee, then a conflation of inherited materials went into the making of the biblical books.[9]

These eighteenth-century scholars identified the two sources of the Pentateuch by each source's peculiar use of divine names. Astruc aligned two names (*Elohim* and *YHWH*, the Tetragrammaton) with their sources: the Elohistic (E) source, which he assigned to the first Creation account; and the Yahwistic (J) source, to the second Creation account.[10] Throughout the Hebrew Bible, in fact, a variety of nomenclature is attached to God--e.g. *Elohim*, *Yahweh*, the unpronounceable *YHWH*, *El Elyon*, *Sadday*, *El Sadday*, *Edonay*, *El Olam*, among others--and it has been found, since Astruc's pioneering work, that these names are deployed in different contexts and for specific purposes.[11] Astruc was the first to "appeal to variation in the divine names as a sign of different sources" (Campbell and O'Brien 2), a scholarly method later used to delimit the parameters of other documentary materials.

The early two-source theory laid the groundwork for major developments in Pentateuchal source criticism in the nineteenth century. The Documentary Hypothesis, as it is conventionally known, reached its decisive form in Germany at that time, replacing the old religious doctrine of Mosaic authorship (even replacing the notion of authorship itself) with a new critical *doxa* that has since dominated the field of biblical studies. The German scholars, Karl Heinrich Graf, Wilhelm Vatke, and Julius Wellhausen, are commonly credited with the new compositional model; as Bloom explains in the Book of J, "Graf

concentrated on establishing a temporal order of the sources, while Vatke worked to decide whether the sources represented earlier or later phases" of the cult history of Israel; but Wellhausen "combined both enterprises so as to render a supposedly clear portrait of the historical development of the religion of Israel" (21). What emerged from this research was the *classical form* of the Documentary Hypothesis, though this univocal label is somewhat misleading given the fact that each scholar had his own conception of the Hypothesis (Campbell and O'Brien 5; Friedman 24-27). In general, though, scholars had begun to agree that the biblical texts constituted a kind of discordant network of dissimilar materials.

Still today, the Documentary Hypothesis comes in as many varieties as there are source critics, but we can roughly delineate its contours thus: the theory usually posits that J (from the German *Jahve*, rendered in English as Yahwist) is the oldest strand of the Pentateuch (dated between the tenth and ninth century B.C.E.), and that E, for Elohist, was written later (eighth century). These two sources, originally identified by Astruc, are believed to have been conjoined in the seventh century. Then, a group of priestly scribes (P) edited and glossed the earlier sources; it is believed that these scribes imposed their own institutional, hieratic perspective on them. Also, a D document (the book of Deuteronomy, seventh-century) is supposed to have been appended to JE. Later nineteenth and twentieth-century source scholarship suggests, finally, that a Redactor or a group of redactors--whom Alter terms "composite artist," and Bloom terms "villain"--edited and assembled the four sources (J, E, D, and P) to achieve a more or less unified scriptural text. "The Pentateuch as we know it thus came into existence no earlier than the end of the fifth century B.C.E." (Companion 580).

This is approximately "the serving of alphabet soup" (20) that Bloom gives us in the Book of J to explain the genetic history of the assembly of the Pentateuch; he emphasizes, though, that certain revisionists (E, D, P, and R) functioned only to mutate and censor J, the supposedly superior base strand which runs through four books of the

Pentateuch, and which is a putative tenth-century B.C.E. literary masterpiece: "Very little of high literary quality in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers," says Bloom, "is by any author except J" (Sacred Truths 9). Bloom and Rosenberg claim to have "restored" the J source to its originally sublime condition in the Book of J.[12] Informed by the painstaking work of the source critics who came before them--more specifically, by Martin Noth's 1948 version of the source hypothesis[13]--Bloom and Rosenberg attempt to present a respectable literary reconstruction of the ancient Yahwistic narrative, which they claim to have lifted from among the rubble of the redaction. Here, then, are two interrelated claims that we must evaluate: first, Bloom's exact identification of authorship; second, the empirical possibility of isolating the J strand in the received text. The overall question is, How much can we know about J (text or person)? And how much scientific legitimacy does Bloom's project have?

Let us survey his claims in detail. Bloom boasts, in regard to authorship, that "the Yahwist is one of the small group of Western authors we identify with the Sublime, with literary greatness as such. J's peers are Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Tolstoy, Proust, and only a few others" (316).[14] Beneath the detrital layerings of centuries of substandard redaction lies one of a handful of Bloom's strong poets. J's peculiar self-invented "irony of incommensurability" and enlightened but impish "tone and stance" (rather vague terms, often adduced in Bloom's discussions), set J apart from the later accretions of drily "religious" redactions. In contrast to Alter's view of the matter, then, Bloom demotes the redactor to the textual equivalent of adulterer. To literary-unity critics like Alter, Frank Kermode, and Northrop Frye, who privilege final redaction, Bloom has this to say:

> This Redactor, a formidable fellow, has received very distinguished praise in our time, but I am afraid he is the villain of this book, since I am convinced that but for him we would have a much fuller Book of J. . . . This book attempts a restoration of the greatest Jewish writer, for the writing's sake and ours. (22-23)

For Bloom, only certain delimited elements of the Torah--the oldest fragments--have artistic merit, and these isolated elements add up to a coherent narrative composition, the product of J's sublime artistry. For all the revisions, then, the Yahwist has maintained its autonomy in the text; her "lively vision" (24), asserts Bloom, has remained wholly unassimilable to all later redactions.

In the hands of Bloom, the hitherto anonymous J becomes a fully formed personality with a fascinating, detailed biography. Bloom supposes that J was "a *Gevurah* [*sic*]" (19), meaning "great lady."[15] He lays out the bulk of his assumptions at the outset of the Book of J:

> I am assuming that J lived at or nearby the court of Solomon's son and successor, King Rehoboam of Judah, under whom his father's kingdom fell apart soon after the death of Solomon in 922 B.C.E. My further assumption is that J was not a professional scribe but rather an immensely sophisticated, highly placed member of the Solomonic elite, enlightened and ironic. But my primary surmise is that J was a woman, and that she wrote for her contemporaries as a woman, in friendly competition with her only strong rival among those contemporaries, the male author of the court history narrative of 2 Samuel. (9)

In a more recent book, The Western Canon, Bloom has cheerfully taken up the ingenious, if facetious suggestion of Jack Miles (see Yearbook 296): Lady J is thus further identified as Queen Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon. Bloom's specificity is quite outrageous, given the paucity of evidence. After all, the Book of Genesis has nothing like a dust cover containing a brief author biography.

Bloom's list of unexpected assumptions grows: he believes that the Yahwist is a rather detached, even disinterested, secular ironist, in the way of the most exalted of poets: "J was no theologian, and rather deliberately not a historian" (13), says Bloom. She was, therefore, neither bound to religious codes nor to historical fact in her writing. "To call J the composer of a national epic," he says, "also seems to me misleading" (13); instead, Lady J was "above all else an elitist and an individualist" who distrusted "traditions centered on the mass of the people" (249). The bourgeois J, contrary to most reader's expectations, is thus non-sectarian, even largely apolitical, except insofar as she looks

down her nose with a so-called "politics of disdain."[16] According to Bloom, J indirectly ridicules the Israelite kings Rehoboam and Jeroboam, successors to the throne of Solomon; more generally, Bloom says that J averted patriarchal misogyny in her writing. But these are less thoroughgoing political analyses on J's part than the casual results of Sublimity. Bloom argues, similarly, that "the Book of J fits no genre" (13); the Yahwistic literature is *sui generis*, transcending all categories of politics, history, religion, and literature. She was far too uncanny and strange (in the Bloomian sense of those terms) to bother with such banal matters, and like the strongest of writing in Bloom's Western Canon, her text paradoxically reflects "a mode of originality that . . . so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" (Western Canon 3-4). Lady J is a consummate *artiste*, and cannot be assimilated to any vulgar system of values. Throughout the Book of J, Bloom compares J to Kafka, to the comic mode of Chaucer, and to Shakespeare. J is the Hebrew bard, in Bloom's estimation, "a prose Shakespeare" (319); in a twist of unforeseen irony, a kind of retrospective bardolatry replaces traditional bibliolatry.[17]

Now, the least original of Bloom's claims concerns female authorship, since three years prior to the publication of the Book of J, Richard Friedman had proposed the same thing. Citing the Yahwist's favourable representations of women, Friedman says, "the possibility of J's being a woman is . . . much more likely" (86) than with the other sources; but Friedman goes on to acknowledge, as one should, the essentialist basis of his proposal. We could add, also, that Bloom's and Friedman's analyses confuse authorship with artistic persona; the inference and attribution of authorship from narrative persona is premised on a reductive adequation of authorial and narratorial voices and points of view. Nevertheless, there is no reason to rule out female authorship, just as there is no way to prove male authorship. Interestingly, as other commentators have observed, Bloom does not credit Friedman for the suggestion (though Friedman's book *is* referred to in other contexts by Bloom).

Far more controversial and conjectural, however, are Bloom's exact specifications of time, place, and purpose of authorship, details which the historical record and scientific inquiry cannot verify. As I have noted already, there are many divergent perspectives available on the matters of time, place, and purpose/s of authorship. As Alter says in his review, "the evidence that the Pentateuch addresses the politics of the Davidic dynasty right after the split of the monarchy into the two kingdoms is, to put it mildly, highly inferential" (Commentary 31). What, then, are we to make of Bloom's author myth?

Perhaps it is the unverifiable (and, lucky for him, unfalsifiable) nature of Bloom's enterprise that makes his exposition so brilliantly compelling. He may be, first of all, nearer to the historical truth than some would like him to be, though there is no way of knowing this. More significantly, Bloom's invitation to "imagine an author" (the title of one of the commentaries in the Book of J) has the benefit of unsettling a reader's preunderstandings of the nature of biblical writing and authorship. We all surreptitiously smuggle in a vision of an author whenever we read, argues Bloom; he is merely making his particular vision of authorship explicit, and showing how it influences interpretation. This has the effect, he thinks, of repudiating the idea of ancient authorship as anonymous committee work, and of refuting the "death of the author" as proclaimed by "recent critics of the French variety" (18). Furthermore, by championing this particular image of an author, Bloom puts the biblical text in a different light: that is, his author myth serves to defamiliarize biblical stories and characters that have become too familiar, allowing for the possibility of new reading experiences on our part. It is this, I think, and less the truth of history and original authorship as such, that Bloom may be after. "Learning to read J," Bloom suggests in a revealing moment of folk-singer lyricism, "will teach you how much authority has taught you already, and how little authority knows" (306). Here, one suspects, Bloom betrays the actual aim of his study; his purpose is to decenter established reading practices by making the text strange, by contesting its popular appeal. As he says, "Even if imagining an author and calling her J is an arbitrary and personal fiction,

something like that imagining is necessary if we are to be stirred out of our numbness" (35). In effect, the tacit scientific and historicist pretensions of the Book of J are perhaps better understood as so much camouflage, concealing seditious motives.[18]

Bloom himself readily concedes the hypothetical status of his Lady J, or of any J for that matter: "Since I am aware that my vision of J will be condemned as a fancy or a fiction, I will begin by pointing out that all our accounts of the Bible are scholarly fictions or religious fantasies" (9-10). Bloom is willing to fictionalize with the best of the scholars, though they would not likely look at the matter this way. "For J, we have a choice of myths, and I boisterously prefer mine to that of the biblical scholars" (19). And why not? No one can close a case against individual preference when positive evidence to the contrary is lacking. Bloom does not even defend his position: "I can prove nothing; I can only invite other readers to the hypothesis that there is one J" (22). Bloom's myth of an author and of the circumstances of her writing evidently add up to a kind of contrived, but enabling, thought-experiment or game. If this is indeed the case, perhaps Bloom's interpretation of J is part of a larger antagonistic move intended to sabotage established biblical and religious understandings--perhaps, that is, he is involved in guerilla exegesis--but this is a conclusion that further analysis will have to test.

Beyond the issue of authorship, however, we ought to consider the problem of identifying and recovering the J text, supposedly transmitted to us scattered but intact, in the Book of Genesis. Bloom, following in the footsteps of positivist historical-critical scholarship, is apparently practicing science when he claims he has indeed identified J embedded in the obfuscatory priestly revisions (7th-5th centuries B.C.E.). "J comes to us now enwrapped in a redacted package that we need to pull apart if we are to see what was once there, at our origins" (279). As he laments, human script has become holy Scripture in an ill-fated and ironic history of redaction and ideological normalization which buried the sophisticated Lady J in the graveyard of "normative" tradition: "Nothing is more arbitrary than the endless misprisions of J, who has served nearly every other purpose except those I

believe to have been her own." (14).[19] J is therefore a victim of "twenty-five hundred years of institutional misreading" (22) which neutralized, censored, and muted the potency of J's art. The greatest irony, in Bloom's estimation, is that so many faithful believers, having "mistaken the figure for the figuration" (16), have taken to worshipping a literary character, Yahweh. If we are faithful to the scientific imperative, then, we will be compelled to recover the truth about this text and its purposes.

Normative tradition, as quickly becomes apparent, is anathema to Bloom's Lady J. Yet, as David Stern points out, "the 'normative' is the least examined idea in Bloom's book. . . . In fact, the notion of normativity in Judaism, as in any religious tradition with a long history, is deeply problematic" (309). So, for example, when Bloom speaks of "twenty-five hundred years of institutional misreading," it would be unreasonable to suppose that any "institution" could have remained unchanged all that while; yet Bloom's assertions lack any such distinctions. In the hands of Bloom, normativity becomes a rather monolithic concept. To further complicate matters, as Miles says, "the inconvenient truth is that nothing in biblical interpretation is more thoroughly 'institutionalized' than the notion that the Bible--and in particular the Pentateuch--is an edited work" (Yearbook 294). Thus, Bloom's antitheticalism is itself informed by "institutional" readings and highly "normative" traditions, while appearing to abrogate those very terms. Atomizing the text is not as radical a move as it may seem; indeed, Alter is more surpising and subversive insofar as he contests the established methods of biblical inquiry by insisting on holism. It appears, then, that Bloom's oppositions (Yahwist strand versus received text; unorthodox Yahwism versus "normativity") are in need of further refinement. We must also observe the extent to which "normativity" merely connotes Bloom's antitheticalism, and not J's. In this regard, it is fair to say that what is "normative" for Bloom (that is, contemporary Judaisms and fundamentalist religions) is *not* likely to bespeak the same type of thing as was normative for J, three thousand years ago. If the real J was as antithetical as Bloom, it

is likely she had different battles to fight. Bloom does not therefore sufficiently take into account the alterity of his subject.

Nevertheless, accurately determining the character of the Yahwist's social milieu, as I have already suggested, may not be chief among Bloom's concerns. J, it seems, is rather hostage to Bloom's *present* concern with the repressive nature of certain cultural phenomena, so that what Bloom lacks in the way of scholarly rigour and theoretical correctness, he makes up in aggressive spite. It may be relevant, then, to ask what it is exactly that Bloom (insofar as he is filtered through his subject, J) is opposed to?

His implicit target is the mostly straw-man notion of a staid religious establishment, which to his mind is unchanging, universal, wholly negative, and life-denying. This is what his deconstruction of "sacred" text is meant to combat. Pragmatically, Bloom is probably effective enough; many readers who are not familiar with the history of source analysis will indeed be stirred out of their pew-seat numbness by a consideration of the historical formation of the Pentateuch. That Bloom is subversive of at least many popular modern traditions of interpretation is certain. Contrary to most readers' understanding of the Bible, for example, Bloom asserts that the foundational text upon which the Bible is based is even anti-religious: "the God of the Jew and the Christians, of the Muslims, of the secular scholars and critics, is not the Yahweh of J" (14); actually, "by normative standards, Jewish or Christian, J's portrayal of Yahweh is blasphemy" (280). By subsequently sacralizing the text, a "whole company of normativizing scribes and priests--E, D, P, R--performed a work of *avodah*, of service, to Yahweh," but thereby neglected a great canonical "writer of genius, the Yahwist" (23). That is, in Bloom's view, later religious enthusiasm effaced J, and continues to do so, covering over the greatest of writers with an "exuberant varnish" (35):

> To read the Book of J, we need to begin by scrubbing away the varnish that keeps us from seeing that the Redactor and previous revisionists could not obliterate the original work of the J writer. The varnish is called by many names: belief, scholarship, history, literary criticism, what have you. . . . I want the varnish off because it conceals a writer of the eminence of

> Shakespeare or Dante, and such a writer is worth more than many creeds, many churches, many scholarly certainties. (47-48)

This kind of talk is doubtless intended to tease and discomfit readers--religious and non-religious alike--to drag us out from under the shadows of dogmatism or simple ignorance. Bloom, though highly speculative, thus poses a threat to traditional conceptions of "scripture," its nature, meaning, and authority. This granted, how legitimate are the tacit (if finally divested) scientific pretensions of Bloom? What is the possibility of actually recovering this ancient text, of scrubbing off the varnish?

In answer to those questions it will be sufficient to observe that, ever since the initial nineteenth-century researches into the nature of the Pentateuch, every point of the Documentary Hypothesis has been contested: scholars dispute the exact dimensions of the particular documents, their dates of composition and revision, and the precise nature of each "source" (whether they are, finally, written documents or oral traditions). Edmund Leach's witticism, that distinguishing the sources is as impossible as unscrambling an omelette, deftly sums up the problem here.[20] The scholarly debates have culminated in recent years with various critics overhauling the Hypothesis, and others rejecting it completely. In light of the amount of dissensus which plagues documentary theory (as Bloom himself is aware [9]), we should approach the J text with an amount of skepticism. As Campbell and O'Brien indicate, "within broad guidelines which may perhaps find a certain consensus, there will always be as much latitude in areas of the source hypothesis as there is in the interpretation of a text" (xii). *Interpretation*--this is what source theory, in the last instance, evidently comes down to; and so we are thrown back on Alter's and Bloom's competing interpretations, deprived of the option of appealing to scholarly authority or empirical evidence in order to sort out what is the "true" nature of the text.

In light of the inconclusivity, Campbell and O'Brien, in their annotated collection of Pentateuchal sources, preface their book with reference to the limits of source theory:

> There is a tendency to speak of "the Yahwist" and "the Priestly writer" as though these were established identities. At the broad level this is legitimate

> enough; anything else would be pedantry. But in fact, at any level, there is always some scholar's identification of text at the back of any statement about a source. . . . A statement cannot just be about J; it has to be about Eissfeldt's or Holscher's or Noth's J or the author's J, and so on. (xii)

The Book of J, as I have noted, is indeed based on Noth's 1948 formulation and supplemented by Bloom's own "intuited" sense of the text (see BJ 21); thus, a rather dated scholarly account and a highly idiosyncratic interpretation determine the contours of the text. This is not by any means the realm of hard science or rigorous historical analsysis. We are, rather, dealing with *one* set of interpretations of the text of Genesis.

In the end, then, the Documentary Hypothesis is completely provisional--by definition, hypothetical--a set of working assumptions which has as much legitimacy as one is willing to give it. The hypothesis is only a model, arranged for the set purpose of making a particular argument or saving the appearances of an object of inquiry; it is appealed to in order to analyze indeterminate phenomena when determinate truth is lacking. But this should not stop us from "trying on" Bloom's particular vision of J, if only temporarily, for what it is worth. This is the spirit in which Bloom himself proceeds, as he explains elsewhere: "I believe literature is part of speculation and wonder, and any hypothesis is good enough for me" (Sacred Truths 3). Moreover, an empirical criticism--were we able to carry one out--would be missing the point of Bloom's speculative enterprise, for he is engaged in a self-conscious thought-experiment, an antithetical procedure that has ends *other than* archeology or palaeography in mind. He is, as he puts it, a "critical pragmatist" (8), one who advances working assumptions of writing so as to explore the text with different eyes, as it were. Notwithstanding his appeal to the positivist historical-critical paradigm and his ostensible privileging of "origins," Bloom therefore seems to be engaged in the ironic antithesis of the very conditions which justify his own project. Scientificity, historical reconstruction, biographical truth--such are the legitimating discourses invoked to lend the Book of J authority but which nevertheless are of secondary interest to Bloom. Thus, while his project has the characteristic verisimilitude of "hard"

scholarship, it is but a vehicle for more deviant purposes; by actively misreading the text, as is his wont, Bloom opens up a dissenting space within normative tradition. If this is the case, and the Book of J is more like satire or a kind of pastiche than formal scholarship, Bloom (in a brilliant stroke of double irony) employs the same dissembling irony which he attributes to his object of study, J. Bloom is, I am suggesting, a *provocateur*, and J is his enabling fiction.

Yet, if Bloom fictionalizes a great deal of the compositional history of Genesis, so do other critics. As I have been indicating, any determinations about the true nature of the text are bound to be more or less arbitrary, and therefore permissible. Alter, for example, though never as antagonistic or shocking as Bloom, makes his own set of enabling assumptions about the nature of biblical writing, alternative assumptions that are ultimately as unsubstantiated as Bloom's. But they are, like Bloom's, interesting alternatives. According to Alter, first of all, a Redactor, or an imagined "composite author"--a person or persons who carefully collated, interpolated, and conjoined sources in a peculiarly literary manner--is responsible for the artistic merit of Genesis. To appreciate its literary qualities, then, we must treat Genesis as a coherent, autonomous work of art: we must read it synchronically. Alter further refines his notion of biblical art:

> One need not claim that Genesis is a unitary artwork, like, say, a novel by Henry James, in order to grant it integrity as a book. There are other instances of works of art that evolve over the centuries, like the cathedrals of medieval Europe, and are the product of many hands, involving an elaborate process of editing, like some of the greatest Hollywood films. (GTC xlii)

Thus, for Alter, the *process* of the text's composition is less important than the *product*. However many hands contributed to the making of Genesis, the final form of the text still achieves a fundamental coherence. Form takes precedence over formation.

As Alter has argued in an earlier book, biblical narrative embodies a special set of aesthetic principles or "modalities" which, if recuperated, would make sense of the disjunctive intertextuality of the received texts; that is, special rules of biblical writing

allegedly inhere in the prose. Were we to read its formal structures properly, argues Alter, "the values, the moral vision embodied in a particular kind of narrative" (BN x) would manifest themselves. He subsequently attempts, therefore, to infer from the text its own theory, or, perhaps, its redactor's intention. However, it will be noted that Alter thereby decontextualizes biblical narrative in order to read it autonomously and synchronically, as a self-contained system of discourse. Unlike Bloom, that is, who at least gestures to historicize J (by placing the text within the specificity of its supposed compositional context), Alter dehistoricizes Genesis, ultimately overlooking the conditions which brought the Torah into being (notwithstanding his tacit attempt to reach beyond the text to a redactor's original, historically-specific intention) and, moreover, which bring his own readings into being. This line of analysis is suggested by Bernard M. Levinson in his similar critique of Meir Sternberg's synchronic approach to biblical narrative: while attempting to avoid the positivistic reduction of text to origins (the alleged result of diachronic, historical-critical models of scholarship), the synchronic approach dehistoricizes the text, treating it as a self-referential, closed system. In Alter's case, then, synchrony is bought at the cost of reifying the once-historical moment of the text's redaction. Such a critical approach is thus blind to both its own historical situatedness *and* the historical conditions of the text's production, as well as the differences between these two moments. Alter wishes to circumvent such problems, of course, by mounting an intrinsic criticism which discovers in the text the perdurable rules of its own discourse; he seeks to apprehend a transhistorical set of relations which are the "key" to unlocking the narrative art of Genesis. What this reveals is that Alter is perhaps not as attuned to the alterity of the text as he had first seemed.[21]

Also revealing is the fact that the synchronic method is used in rabbinical exegesis, in what is known as Midrash. And this is not a mere coincidence in Alter's case. The rabbis' religiously motivated exegesis is informed by the dictum, "There is neither early nor late in the Torah" (Levinson 133; also cited by Alter in GTC). Alter, in fact, appeals to

midrashim throughout his translation since such analyses, based on the belief in the inspiration and, hence, the perfection, autonomy, and transhistoricity of the text, always attempt to smooth over textual inconsistencies, to explain them with reference to a higher order of sacred continuity. Alter explains, "with their assumption of interconnectedness, the makers of the Midrash were often as exquisitely attuned to small verbal signals of continuity and to significant lexical nuances as any 'close reader' of our own age" (BN 11). While Alter does not subscribe to the same theological dogma as the rabbis (11-12), it is nevertheless telling how closely his method matches up with exegetical hermeneutics. Decontextualized close readings of this kind are based on a faith in the relative perfection of the text, and in its preservation of meaning over time; hermeneutics is then the discovery or disclosure of meaning inherent to the text. What such a stance elides, however, is the genesis of both the text's composition and the reader's interpretation: that is, in the first instance, exegesis ignores the relations which obtain between the various textual layers and the contemporary socio-political milieux out of which each developed and to which each may offer a response; in the second instance, exegesis does not take into account a reader's assumptions, ideological interests, historical and social locations, factors which make certain interpretations possible, and indeed authoritative. Thus, Alter follows a line of inquiry into biblical writing which tends to overlook non-biblical determinants of meaning.

For instance, Alter's readings are sometimes vulnerable to the charge of anachronism.[22] Indeed, to interpret the inconsistencies of the received text, as we will see, Alter marshals together a number of sophisticated formalist principles so as to construe troublesome textual cruces. In particular instances, he also draws on his knowledge of the novel to recontextualize difficult textual terrain, to redefine biblical narrative in terms of complex, modern literary structures and strategies. Thus, despite his claiming to simply "illuminate the distinctive principles of the Bible's narrative art" (BN ix) by discovering *in* the text its own rules of interpretation, Alter could be said to be imposing foreign aesthetic principles on the text. His analyses of biblical stories (again, as we will see later) make

regular use of medieval midrashim, twentieth-century narratology and Russian formalism, among other "conventions" culled from modern novels and film (BN passim). He thereby reconceptualizes biblical narrative with reference to anachronistic, non-biblical aesthetics (cf. the related critique of narratology in The Postmodern Bible 89-90). And, in general, Alter leaves the non-biblical origins of his methodology unexplored, calling insufficient attention to the fact that modern methods may in fact falsify biblical narrative. (On occasion, however, Alter does acknowledges this risk; BN 131.)

Yet, to extend the same generosity to Alter as we did to Bloom, we might remember that there is simply no way to determine the nature of biblical aesthetics outside of the individual books themselves; we have no comparison texts, nor were histories of ancient Israel's literary tradition written. So if Alter *were* to attempt to historicize Genesis (as Bloom pretends to do) he would not gain any certain ground. The conditions necessary for verifying either critic's claims (to its original aesthetic, or to the origin of the text) are lacking. Consequently, Alter's view of biblical writing need not be simply dismissed as anachronistic or ahistorical, since all methods are equally open to those charges. Rather, Alter is, like Bloom, pragmatically advancing a set of working suppositions that *make sense*, which may be construed negatively, as "creating meaning which is not in the text," or more positively, as "restoring meaning to the text." On the latter view, Alter's hypothesis of coherence has the advantage of deriving meaning where source-directed analyses have found only shoddy workmanship or incoherence. Historical-critical scholarship has tended to reduce the text to the requirements of linear logic, such as continuity and non-contradiction, requirements which are far too restrictive in relation to most art forms (cf. Levinson 131ff); as a result, the source critics have parceled out the text into its constituent parts, without an appreciation for the kinds of profound continuities which may inhere in the whole, despite surface contradiction.

Alter calls his translation of Genesis "an experiment in re-presenting the Bible--and, above all, biblical narrative prose--in a language that conveys with some precision the

semantic nuances and the lively orchestration of literary effects of the Hebrew" (GTC ix). Therefore, his assumptions about the peculiarly "literary" qualities of Genesis are, as he explicitly concedes, hypothetical: despite his competence in Hebrew, there remains "no proof" (xxii) of his views. As with Bloom, then, we are in the realm of educated guesses and sophisticated approximations--of experiment, more or less. One may contend that this is slightly less the case with Alter, who at least works with the original language, and can be said to be so much nearer to the redactor's intention as a result. Again, however, the question is not, are these critics' hypotheses absolutely correct; but rather, how do they work? Does Alter's view satisfactorily explain the literary phenomena in Genesis?

In a collaborative essay with Kermode, Alter suggests the fruitfulness of *any* approach which can expand our understandings: "elements like disjunction, interpolation, repetition, contrastive styles, which in biblical scholarship were long deemed sure signs of a defective text, may be perfectly deliberate components of the literary artwork, and recognized as such by the audience for which it is intended" (27). Consequently, in Alter's new translation and commentary, he re-interprets redundancy, irreconcilable contradiction, interpolation, and other manifestations of supposed careless editing as instances of (for example) formal symmetry, deliberate patterning, significant recurrence, perspectival play, "playing dialectically with alternative possibilities" (GTC 45). Repetitions of almost identical scenic details, for instance, become doublets, motifs, or type-scenes; near verbatim repetition becomes parallelism. And surface contradictions, which are for source critics obvious evidence of haphazard editorial splicing, are harmonized and redefined in terms of vibrant tensions and contrasts. Such are the hypothetical modalities of biblical narrative.

For one example of Alter's ingenuity, observe Genesis 47.12-13:

> And Joseph sustained his father and his brothers and all his father's household with bread, down to the mouths of the little ones. And there was no bread in all the earth, for the famine was very grave, and the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine.

As source critics will happily point out, there is a flat contradiction here, between what Joseph is evidently able to provide his family (i.e. bread), and the absence of the same provisions from "all the earth." Thus, in Martin Noth's documentary scheme--upon which Rosenberg's translation depends--verse 12 is assigned to the Elohist; verse 13 is identified as an alternative version of the story belonging to the Yahwist. In source critical terms, then, two incommensurate versions (E and J) of the famine in Egypt have been indecorously combined. Alter, however, thinks such minute criticisms are beside the point of what the redactor, who conjoined them, was trying to achieve: "such readings," he says, "reflect an unfortunate tendency to construe any sign of tension in a narrative as an irreconcilable contradiction, and underestimate the resourcefulness" (147) of the redactors. In this particular case, Alter suggests that the "tension with the preceding verse . . . is of course pointed" (282). In Alter's harmonization, an *apparent* contradiction functions as a subtle critique of Joseph's management of the land's food supply. Alter does not spell out the details of this critique, but his implied reading runs along the following lines. We know that Pharaoh has given Joseph the responsibility of superintending the storage and distribution of food throughout Egypt; but as verse 13 implies, Joseph neglects the needs of the populace. The narrator, as if to heighten the disparity between public duty and personal interest, notes that Joseph feeds his own family, even down to "the little ones," but does not provide for his subjects. The succeeding hyperbolical words, "there was no bread in all the earth," show up Joseph's insufficient concern for those beyond the family circle. Alter's reading of the scene is corroborated by the earlier occurrence of a similarly significant contrast at 41.54-55, to which he refers us.

One of Alter's major contentions is that the biblical narrative often operates along the lines of collage or film montage; on this analogy, we can imagine editors carefully splicing various documentary materials together in order achieve subtle modulations of characterization, setting, tone, significance, etc. Such is the nature of Alter's redactor myth. We can also imagine the happy results of such editorial work: numerous intratextual

tensions and juxtapositions that blend into and rebound off of one another, achieving a complex synthesis and submerged continuity despite surface discontinuity. Such is Alter's view of textual coherence. The most exemplary case of such montage-like juxtaposition is the double occurrence of Creation, to which I will turn for consideration in the next chapter. Alter will harmonize the Priestly and Yahwistic Creation accounts to suggest that the redactors, by placing the two stories side by side, create a meaningful whole.

Thus, a discourse-oriented approach makes sense out of the strains and stresses of the received text by trading in a logic of consistency for a far more subtle aesthetic logic. Alter's view is not without its difficulties, however, for--as even he concedes--insoluble textual cruces do exist and, moreover, certain source materials gape awkwardly at us through the window of the received text. In light of unwieldy textual difficulties, we may indeed wonder whether the redactor in fact has, as Alter likes to imagine, a "strong and often subtle sense of thematic and narrative purposefulness"; that is, we may question the redactor's competence. Note, for example, the confusion over which tribe, Ishmaelite or the Midianite, sold Joseph to the Egyptians; or, the disparity between 46.34 and 47.6--in the first instance Joseph says that "every shepherd is abhorrent to Egypt," but in the second Pharaoh himself makes Joseph's brothers "masters" of his "livestock." Pharaoh would not have given the job of shepherding as a gift if it was so stigmatized. Are these (and many others like them) the sort of blunders that Alter's scrupulous redactor would have made? How do we account for such unsubtle inconsistencies? Perhaps the text is not governed by quite as purposeful or principled a redactor as Alter would have liked, for if it were the case that Genesis was produced by a subtle literary artist of such high pedigree, such awkwardnesses surely would not be found. The redactor may not have been as adept as Alter leads us to believe; alternatively, perhaps, by deliberately preserving the idiosyncrasies of the various sources, the redactor is ingeniously playing with discontinuity. In this case, the redactor is even more brilliant than Alter imagines. The latter possibility is one that Levinson explores, for instance, suggesting that the redactors

put together materials in such a way as to be self-subverting; inconsistencies and asymmetries become the occasion of *aporia* which deconstruct narratorial authority. In Alter's view, however, "all the details are effective because the author is presumed to be a good one" (Norton 379), one who has determinate meanings in mind. Thus, argues Norton, Alter "gives no attention to the fact that different strands of material remain identifiable in the stories. A full account of the issue (which is not what he is attempting) would deal with the elements that tend to make one perceive the text as fragmented as well as showing what is to be gained by viewing it as a unity" (381). Are there other views available, like Levinson's, which take into full account the polyphonic, intertextual constitution of the text?

David Damrosch, in The Narrative Covenant (1987), suggests that the opposition Alter sets up between holism and atomism--between coherent and incoherent patchwork (see BN 11)--does not give us a full picture of all the options available to us as readers. Both approaches ultimately falsify the complexity of the text and the possible intention/s of the redactors. To subordinate all of the various documentary materials to a conception of unity, as Alter does, is to impose a kind of closure on the text that may not have been intended, and which in any case the text does not always warrant. On the other hand, unraveling single strands to inspect them independently misses the point of redaction, for surely the fact that the many documents are physically conjoined--however problematically--suggests something of the redactors' intentions; we are meant to read a conflated text. Damrosch, therefore, provides an alternative reading strategy to "keep us from under-reading the complex internal dialogue of the text" (Narrative Covenant 307); he wants us, in particular, to respond more equally than Alter does to the various source materials and the dialogical, sometimes aleatory relations that obtain between them. Rather than suppressing the text's internal heterogeneity, Damrosch advances a *via media* between holism and atomism, suggesting that the text be regarded as a "purposeful patchwork" (325). Although, concedes Damrosch, such a reading of biblical narrative does not lend

itself to closure and univocity, "for most readers an awareness of the multiplicity of biblical narrative should enrich the reading process it destabilizes" (325). Damrosch's view, then, attempts to keep in-tangle both the internal resistances of documentary layering *and* the continuities of the whole redaction; this would allow us to "savour the friction" (Roland Barthes' phrase, describing Genesis 32) between incommensurable textual data. The readings that such an approach produces are inevitably contingent on which aspects of the text are being foregrounded at any one time, but the benefit of this orientation is that it does not conceal the dissonance and disunity which, whether by defect or design, characterize the text.

But are we spiraling down yet another hermeneutic vortex, whereby we are enabled to perceive the end that we posited at the beginning?

By now, indeed, it will be clear that the alternative conclusions one reaches concerning the "real" texture of Genesis--regarding whether it is a ragbag of various traditions or a complex, synthetic whole--are largely functions of the critical paradigms and preunderstandings brought to bear on the subject. Norton, upon surveying the many aspects of the history of literary criticism of the Bible, makes the same observation: "as so often with the Bible, it is remarkable how conclusions from the same evidence can be so different, according to the premises used" (21). Bloom and Alter, as we have seen, never move very far out of their respective circles; there is an inevitable amount of arbitrariness to their separate claims, and each is open to the charge of methodological solipsism. On a general level, it can be agreed that the text of Genesis is indeed constituted by various sources or traditions (problematically related to one another); yet, there is no critical consensus on what this manifest intertextuality might *mean*. The question remains largely open, then, whether we should proceed with an eye toward the overall aesthetic effect of the finished discourse, or whether it is better to dissect the received text and isolate individual sources. In the absence of determinate rules of interpretation, of course, it is impossible to say once and for all which approach is correct; we can, however, evaluate the

alternatives on their own terms, based on certain observations concerning the ideological and ethical import of those alternatives. In either case, we should ask which sets of assumptions are sanctioned by the designation of "original" significance: what values are legitimated by each rendering of origins, of the *Bereshit*.

[6] As an article in a 1996 issue of Time stated, there has been "a modest but unmistakable Genesis revival in American culture" (68). That magazine issue was devoted to promoting Bill Moyers' soon-to-be-broadcast panel discussion series on Genesis and a number of new books and translations.

[7] I depend on textual scholarship for the delineation of the parameters of the philological and historical issues involved here. As we will see, however, there is a lack of consensus on those issues--a significant discovery in itself, to be brought to bear on the work of Alter and Bloom.

[8] See Friedman's Who Wrote the Bible? for a concise account of the disintegration of the idea of individual authorship, and the emergence of multi-documentary analysis. For my brief discussion on the rise of documentary theory, I have depended mainly on Friedman, U. Cassuto's The Documentary Hypothesis, Antony Campbell and Mark O'Brien's Sources of the Pentateuch, and The Oxford Companion to the Bible. Both Alter and Bloom, as well as Speiser, provide brief sketches of the development of source theory as well.

[9] It is important to note that Alter acknowledges the composite nature of the biblical texts. It is, rather, the conclusions source criticism--the history of which I am presently outlining--tends to reach regarding the readability of the texts that Alter takes issue with.

[10] It should be noted that the first Creation story, which early scholars assigned to E, was later assigned to a group of priestly editors (P). There appear to be two separate sources in the Pentateuch which use the name Elohim, one which scholars identify as E, and the other as P (see Friedman 52-53). In any case, Genesis 1 is distinguishable by its naming of the deity Elohim.

[11] For enlightening discussions on the various uses of the divine names, see Cassuto's chapter, entitled "The Divine Names," in The Documentary Hypothesis, and Jack Miles's more recent God: A Biography, *passim.*

[12] This is not the first time the J source has been published: Peter Ellis appended the Jerusalem Bible translation of J to The Yahwist: The Bible's First Theologian (Minnesota: Liturgical, 1968). And, the various documents (J, E, D, P) have been set off from one another with multi-coloured backgrounds in the Polychrome Bible, part of The Sacred Books of the Old and New Testaments: A New English Translation, ed. Paul Haupt (London, 1897-9; see Norton 91-92).

[13] See page 328 where Rosenberg says, "The scholarly sources I followed for extracting the J text are the standard authorities in the field, as refined most recently by Martin Noth and superseded by the insights of Harold Bloom." There are, on the contrary, certainly more recent refinements than Noth's 1948 study. For a synopsis of a variety of challenges to and outright rejections of the Hypothesis by "standard authorities" since Noth, see Campbell and O'Brien, 10-15.

[14] The formula "J to K" characterizes the legacy of the Yahwist (J) because Kafka (K), argues Bloom, is the legitimate heir of J's peculiar dissembling irony ("Introduction" 1).

[15] Reviewers competent in Hebrew have pointed out that "gevurah," which appears throughout Bloom's commentary, is a malapropism: Alter notes, "*gevirah* is the word for "grand lady," whereas *gevurah* can only be an abstract noun, meaning "power" or "bravery'" (Commentary 30). This is not, however, merely a linguistic faux pas, for Bloom has spoken elsewhere of "how important it is that the critical imagination never fall into careless habits of accuracy" (Agon 18). He has proven true to his word!

[16] It should be pointed out that there are many other views on the nature of J's interests. As the subtitle to Peter Ellis's study, The Yahwist, indicates, the J writer may be "the Bible's first theologian." Alternatively, the Yahwist may be a history writer, as John Van Seters suggests in

his Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis (Louisville: Westminster, 1992). Moreover, we have our choice as to the actual date and conditions of composition of J: Joel Rosenberg, in King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), suggests that J and E collaborated on one Pentateuchal source; Richard Friedman, in Who Wrote the Bible?, similarly supposes J and E are contemporaries, but thinks they are rivals, associated with opposing sides of the divided monarchy. Further, a colleague of Bloom, Leslie Brisman, in The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), concludes that J is a later text than E: working with the older text of E, the J writer is afflicted by something like Bloom's anxiety of influence and wrestles with his predecessor. Thus, Bloom's view (that J is the oldest source text, and that its author was an enlightened sophisticate with no political or religious affiliations) is only one--and not necessarily the most plausible one--of a variety of divergent views.

[17] The irony here is that the two kinds of "idolatry" have traditionally complemented each other. Speaking of Thomas B. Macaulay, David Norton says, "like so many, he [Macaulay] is a bardolator before he is an AVolator" (180). Indeed the links between the adoration of Shakespeare and the superstitious homage to the 1611 Authorized Version (AV, a.k.a. the King James Bible) translation of the Bible are well forged, as Norton subsequently shows. Bloom is thus perhaps less original than he would like to think, since the comparison of Shakespeare with biblical writing is an old one.

[18] Daniel M. McVeigh, in "'J' as in Joke?," argues that Rosenberg's translation is, similarly, a self-conscious attempt to "informalize the text, lessen its traditional distance and dignity" (370) which most translations impute to it. McVeigh identifies many "arbitrary" aspects of this translation--for example, colloquialization, "primitivized" syntax, mis-translation of individual words, paraphrase, excessive punning--all of which are more or less unwarranted by the Hebrew--which indicate that the Book of J is a subversive "joke," intended primarily to provoke and polemicize.

[19] What is curious is that revisionism--the basis of Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence--is scorned in relation to J. In The Western Canon, Bloom asserts, "great writing is always rewriting or revisionism" (11); yet, none of the revisions of the Yahwist count as great writing in Bloom's estimation. Jack Miles thus remarks of the inconsistency, "in the Book of J, by sharpest contrast with The Anxiety of Influence, Bloom wants history to stop. The earliest stratum of Yahwism is the only one worthy of consideration" (Yearbook 296). Bloom himself acknowledges this inconsistency: J's "uncanniness calls into question my own conviction that every writer is belated" ("Introduction" 2). According to Bloom, then, none of the subsequent revisionist traditions achieved (to use his literary topography) a "strong misreading."

[20] Leach speaks further of source-criticism as the kind of activity which is "at best laborious and . . . not likely to improve the taste" (cited in Norton 91).

[21] This may need further clarification. Bloom ostensibly links the text to a specific historical context. Alter, by contrast, assumes that the text itself communicates whatever historical or intentional moment is important to its interpretation; that is, the form of the text *is* its historical specificity. So, if not wholly dehistoricizing or decontextualizing, Alter's view is yet ahistorical for hypostasizing the historical moment, making the moment timeless. He assumes that our access to the text's meanings or redactor's intention is unimpeded by historical change.

[22] See Mieke Bal's "The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape" for a critique along these very lines of Alter and other literary-critical discourses on the Bible.

CHAPTER 2

Go to Genesis the geaunt, the engendrour of us alle.
William Langland, Piers Plowman VI. 231

For better and for worse, as a blessing and as a curse, the Book of Genesis has provided a mythology for people to live by. And although modern societies are post-Christian--indeed post-religious, many people having dismissed or at least disregarded the authority of Church, Synagogue, Mosque and the canonical texts which legitimate these institutions--some of the ideas and emblems of that first book of beginnings nevertheless prevail, and because of their prevalence, are firmly entrenched in the social *realia* of our time. To some extent, for example, both the Bible and the patriarchal traditions of interpretation based upon biblical texts continue to influence and sometimes obstruct discussions about sexuality, gender, and ecology. And if the Bible maintains its influence only indirectly, it does so at such a basic level as to be almost imperceptible. The biblical myths subtly continue to condition aspects of existing social relations and to set the terms by which dominant discourses proceed. Indeed, it may be argued that the Bible has created some of the very categories within which we think of ourselves and of others.[23] Conceived of in this way, the Genesis narrative in particular not only describes the genesis of religion, language, ethnicity, human psychology, and so on, but it also has a share in generating and perpetuating certain ideologies and social practices itself. Just so, Langland's giant Genesis (in its many guises) is still very much the "engendrour of us alle."

For the purposes of this part of my study, in which I will compare Bloom's and Alter's renderings of the so-called Primeval history in Genesis (Chapters 1-3), I wish to draw particular attention to the fact that ideas associated with the inferiority of women stem directly from these first chapters: the Creation myths in this text, at least as they have traditionally been told, have underwritten centuries of male power and privilege and a dismal amount of misogyny. The chauvinist judgments found in the Jewish

intertestamental Book of Sirach ("From a woman sin had its beginning, / and because of her we all die" [Sirach 25.25]), in the Pauline epistles, and in the writings of the Christian Church Fathers, all take their bearings from those opening words of Genesis. Paul, for instance, concluded from passages in Genesis 1-3 that women are lesser creatures who ought to be subject to men--for men are God's actual image-bearers.[24] Tertullian (c. 200 C.E.) inferred from the actions of the first woman in the Garden that women, in general, "are the devil's gateway."[25] Such are the kinds of interpretations whence emerged the idea that women are responsible for sin and evil in the world; the attendant notions that women are easily led astray, and that they in turn corrupt men, find their provenance in the interpretive tradition of Genesis as well, if not in the very text itself.[26] As a founding text, a text, moreover, which presumes to narrate the Origins of Everything, it should be observed that Genesis has had the full weight of authority on its side; that fact has subsequently legitimated certain devastating interpretations like those of Paul and the Fathers.[27] On returning to the text, we should keep in mind the various ways the Creation myth has been used and abused, for those interpretations form a hermeneutic backdrop against which Alter's and Bloom's renderings are distinguished. It remains to be seen whether Bloom and Alter can ransom the beginnings of Genesis from the unpropitious history of its interpretation. This is an especially important task for Bloom, given the kinds of enlightened ideational qualities he attributes to J.

Bloom contends that the Yahwistic narrative, contrary to popular belief, is not a patriarchal text (in the sexual-political sense).[28] In fact, the J text supposedly reflects woman's concerns through and through. J, Bloom would have us believe, is "an ironic woman who sees through all patriarchal myths" and who "keeps being interpreted as a misogynist" (BJ 243). Alter, by contrast, believes that J's version of primeval history *does* show evidence of patriarchal ideology. Following a popular modern view of the Yahwist's creation account (2.4b-3.25 in the received text), Alter assumes that the Garden story has all the markings of a male-centered bias, and that it is rather the first version of creation, the

Priestly account (1-2.4b), which is liberative because it endorses the equality of the sexes. It is a shrewd redactor who, believes Alter, has syncretized the alternative viewpoints by conjoining the egalitarian P and patriarchal J. Alter, as we will see, finds grounds for harmonizing the Priestly and Yahwistic creation accounts, arguing that the resulting synthesis represents a greater literary achievement than its individual parts. However, given the radical differences between each version of Creation (and of woman), we will need to assess the tenability of Alter's harmonization. And as we will see, Bloom's alternative interpretation of J--which I will also test--throws a wrench into Alter's neat structural symmetry. Moreover, certain contradictions between the two stories would seem to pose insuperable obstacles to even a sophisticated Alterian rapprochement.[29]

Some rather obvious inconsistencies come about through difference in sequence. In P, the sequence of creation is: vegetable, animal, and then human. Equally as significant in this context is the fact that creation is called into being by divine fiat. Here, on the sixth day, male and female are spoken into being simultaneously ("male and female he created them" [Genesis 1.27]), as the crown and glory of the new world. Each day leading up to their creation, new creatures and conditions of life are issued into being, all of them intended to serve the purposes of God's consummate image-bearers. Light, darkness, land, sea, sky, stars, sun, moon, vegetation, and animals--each innovation, from the elements to the elephants, is part of a procession that moves slowly and grandly toward the culmination of God's project, the creation of human beings. As Benno Jacob says, "in chapter 1 man is the pinnacle of a pyramid" (cited in von Rad 77), representing the height of God's art. Then, God commands the first human couple: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth" (1.28). The humans are given stewardship over all that has come before them, and like vice-regents of God their King, man and woman share in the divine sovereignty. The Priestly writers, speaking out of an institutional context, thus teach that by original design humans were made to be proxy king

and queen--little gods on earth. According to this account, the Creator's purposes are presumably fulfilled in the proliferation of his image in one very special species.

In J, on the other hand, the sequence of creation is: man, vegetable, animal, and finally woman. These are the same events that are represented in P, but they occur in a different order here, signalling a radical shift of priorities as well as a new set of cosmological assumptions. Alter says, for instance, "man culminates the scheme of creation in P, but man is the narrative center of J's story, which is quite another matter" (BN 145). Creation, furthermore, is not uttered instantaneously into being--as Milton would say--by the "Omnific Word" (VII.217); rather, in J a less transcendent deity mechanically scoops together a pile of wet earth and molds a man. Yahweh then "blew into his [first man's] nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature" (2.7): the human is inspirited with the divine. Yahweh, after having shaped animals out of clay, but finding none among them fit to be Adam's "sustainer" (Genesis 2.19; "help meet" in the KJV, "partner" in the Book of J), assembles woman from the substance of the sleeping man (from his rib). Yahweh then brings the newly fashioned sustainer to Adam, whom he names "Woman" (2.23), and later "Eve" (3.20). Thus, whereas P's creation culminates in the simultaneous creation of male and female, J's version centers on the slow development of man--especially animated by the divine breath--and on the conditions of his success and misadventure in the Garden. J dramatizes *his* experience of loneliness and longing and, finally, of fulfillment. Woman, it seems, is relegated to a role of auxiliary. Alter thus remarks that the Yahwist "imagines woman as a kind of divine afterthought, made to fill a need of man, and made, besides, out of one of man's spare parts" (141). Or, as Frye puts it, "the creation of Eve . . . seems to be something of a second thought, a rectifying of an original deficiency" (Words 191).[30] Some critics are further embarrassed by the fact that woman, coming last, occupies the same category as the animals in this narrative--the category of potential helper for the man (Milne 161). In other ways, too, the links between woman and animal are clear: for one, Adam names the woman as he names the animals;

and for another, woman acts as mediator between serpent and man. The man's act of naming, as von Rad says, is "an exercise of sovereignty, of command" over the beasts of the field and the birds of the air; in particular, his naming the woman is "the actual expression of a previous inward interpretive appropriation" (84). In sum, as object of naming, she is therefore symbolically appropriated to a male system of values, and woman's association with the animals further demotes her to sub-human status. Later, Adam will give the woman a proper name, "mother of all that lives" (3.20)--the proposed etymology of "Eve" in the narrative--thus consigning woman to the role of maternality. For all time, generic woman is defined as "mother," which of course has positive significances as well. If Eve is accounted the mother of sin by later tradition, it is only at the expense of neglecting the fact that she is presented as a nurturer and life-giver.[31]

Other differences between P and J concern each writer's perspective on nature and human freedom. In the Yahwist's case, for instance, human mastery becomes far more limited than it was in the Priestly exordium. Yahweh says: "From every fruit of the garden you may surely eat. But from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die" (2.17). As Jack Miles points out, "for the first time, there is a prohibition" in Genesis, for earlier in P "something is commanded but nothing is forbidden" (God 30). Now, however, certain "goods" are off-limits. But how can this be? As Byron protests, "it was the tree of knowledge; / It was the tree of life: knowing is good, / And life is good; and how can both be evil?" (Cain 1.36-38).[32] In the text of J--as distinct from the later Christian tradition that Byron is disputing--it is not at all clear that the two trees are "evil," but one does get the sense that something is amiss. Nature, in particular, takes on a rather baneful aspect in Chapter 2, a point to which I will return below. The Priestly God, by contrast, sets no limits, nor do there seem to be any negative associations with the creation: rather, it is said that "every tree that has fruit bearing seed, yours they will be for food" (1.29). In fact, the *whole* "earth" is freely given to both male and female. But in the Yahwistic narrative the humans are restricted to the

enclosed space of a garden--a dangerous place as it turns out--and man is expected to work the soil for a living. Curiously, man has been placed in Paradise "to till it and watch it" (2.16), which is a very different thing from being told to conquer the earth and hold sway over its flora and fauna. J's humans are granted the less prestigious occupation of farming; they are not so much vice-regents of a Celestial King (as in P), whose dominion extends over the whole earth, as they are caretakers of a select piece of crown land.

Indeed, the natural world in J is not so easily conquered, nor are all the trees on this crown land lawfully given, which suggests a further difference between the Priestly and Yahwistic perspectives. Nature, which was unequivocally positive in the Priestly narrative, now appears unruly, even perilous, as the appearance of the smooth-talking serpent will confirm. Human nature, as well, is presented as a rather hazardous substance: after having capitulated to their natural impulses, the first man and woman feel ashamed of their nakedness and are punished by Yahweh for, as we say, "doing what came naturally." Yahweh (if not the Yahwist) appears to be slightly disgusted by the immodesty of his creation, the natural world. In P, by contrast, there are neither dubious trees nor wily serpents lurking. Rather, P offers us an unqualified affirmation of the natural world ("And God saw all that he had done, and, look, it was very good" [1.31]) and, without questioning or testing the humans, God endows the world to them. Moreover, a serenely omnipotent God has everything under strict control in the Priestly account--nature is ruled--but in the second story, a deity somewhat limited in power and knowledge is reduced to waiting upon the unexpected from his creation. Indeed, by the end of Chapter 3, J's creation is a grand experiment gone awry, for the insurgent human will perilously asserts itself, resulting in the dissolution of paradisal harmony. There is, therefore, a sense of the unpredictable in J's narrative, wherein so much hinges on human choice. Consequently, because of the humans' willfulness, Yahweh guarantees man and woman much pain, and expels them from the Garden. This is the first of a series of Yahweh's disappointments with his creation, as J represents them, which will lead to the deity's eventual embittered

lament, "I regret that I have made them" (6.7). A rather negative evaluation of nature (human or otherwise) seems to be implicit throughout J.

There is, as Miles says, a conspicuous "narrowing of focus and a heightening of the tension between creator and human creature" in the Yahwist's account (God 30). A certain anxiety afflicts relationships in the story. Unlike P's account, which is a piece of highly structured poetry emphasizing predictable order and divine sovereignty, J's fable gives us a tense play of dynamic forces continually on the verge of conflict: as Campbell and O'Brien explain, "the J account is told as a dramatic story with a crisis and its resolution" (92). From the moment the prohibition is set, suspense builds in the narrative; the simple presence of the forbidden tree of knowledge whets our appetite. Will the humans be obedient? What would happen were they to partake of the forbidden fruit? The narrative draws us in to a human drama which will reach its critical moment in the almost inevitable transgression. The crisis is finally resolved when the man and woman are expelled from the garden, yet that resolution begs other questions about the precariousness of Yahweh's world: What has been gained or lost? What kind of deity creates a world like this? P, with its moral equilibrium and chaste structure, does not elicit these sorts of difficult but provocative questions.

Significantly, as I have already suggested, the tension and anxiety of this narrative seem to be centered primarily on a crisis in male identity. It is the man's development, at least initially, which seems to be at stake. The divine interdict, for example, is issued exclusively to the man, before the existence of woman has even been conceived. When woman does arrive on the scene, it becomes apparent that she has learnt of the proscription second-hand. This is probably why her recital of the prohibition at 3.3 ("You shall not eat from it *and you shall not touch it*, lest you die," emphasis mine) is a modification of Yahweh's original words. Alter explains: "Eve enlarges the divine prohibition . . . adding a ban on touch to the one on eating" (GTC 11). Perhaps in transmission, the interdiction has--ironically enough!--become corrupt. Pamela Milne argues, therefore, that "since the

creation of the woman follows the prohibition, the text is stressing that it is only man's fate which is at stake: the woman and the snake are essential actors in the working out of man's fate but the focus is on the man" (159). Thus, although woman and serpent must suffer certain consequences, the whole sequence of the narrative seems to be directed toward establishing and testing the *man's* obedience. The J text consequently appears to represent a thoroughly anthropocentric universe.[33] At least, it is one in which uneven priority is given to male and female. The Yahwist does not evidently create man and woman equally, as does P, "in the image of God."

There are also substantial stylistic differences between these opening chapters of Genesis which imply and undergird thematic variations. The Priestly narrative, as Alter explains, is "grandly paratactic, moving forward in a stately parade of parallel clauses linked by 'and' (the particle *vav*)" (BN 142).[34] In Alter's translation, especially, the paratactic syntax of the opening verses stands out:

> When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And it was evening and it was morning, first day. (1.1-5)

The chain of linking "ands" in these and the following verses of Genesis 1 systematically mete out in exact and equal proportion the various orders of creation ("And there was light . . . . And it was evening and it was morning . . . etc.) rather like the Omnific Word itself uttering the world into being. As both John Barth and Alter point out, this is an occasion of "significant form." The parataxis propels us forward in an even and predictable manner, thus registering the balance and symmetry of the creation procedure, as well as the ease with which God completes his handiwork. Formally, that is, the prose (which is more like poetry) emphasizes design: it is metonymic of the ordering power of the Creator. Everything in P is "numerically ordered; creation proceeds through a rhythmic process of incremental repetition":

> each day begins with God's world-making utterance ("And God said . . .") and ends with the formal refrain, "It was evening and it was morning," preceded in five instances by still another refrain, "And God saw that it was good. P's narrative emphasizes both orderly sequence and a kind of vertical perspective, from God above all things down to the world he is creating. (BN 142).

The mastery of this Creator over his creation is quite marvelous, as the prose poem suggests. Because God has spoken the world into being with ritualistic precision and ease, it is only apposite that the language used to represent the scene should also effortlessly glide from command to completion, with the simple conjunction "and" connecting the two.

The stately formality of the prose clearly reflects the nature of this cosmogony; balance and symmetry are dominant features throughout, both in terms of style and content. As P represents it, creation "advances through a series of balanced pairings, which in most instances are binary oppositions" (142). The creation is a matter of splitting the primordial "welter and waste" into light/darkness, water/sky, dry land/sea, sun/moon, birds/beasts, etc. The Creator thus proceeds by *differentiation*,[35] as chaos is gradually parceled out as cosmos:

> each moment of creation is conceived as a balancing of opposites or a bifurcation producing difference in some particular category of existence. In the first half of Chapter 1 (verses 1-19), for the first four days of creation, before the appearance of animate creatures, the governing verb, after the reiterated verbs of God's speaking, is "to divide," suggesting that the writer was quite aware of defining creation as a series of bifurcations or splitting-offs. (BN 143).

The exact, methodical manner in which God goes about his task of differentiation is, again, mirrored in the stylistic terseness of the prose. P's account is therefore a sort of carefully modulated hymn to Harmony and Order.[36] In a related manner, it is a hymn to Obedience, for divine commands are immediately obeyed in P's universe.

Genesis 2-3, in comparison, presents us with a creation narrative that is far less stylized or patterned, implying a very different set of thematic variables. "J's strikingly different sense of the movement of creation," says Alter, "makes itself felt from the outset

in his syntax and in the rhythms of his prose" (BN 144). Consider the first protracted verses of J (as Alter translates them):

> On the day that the LORD God made earth and heavens, no shrub of the field being yet on the earth and no plant of the field yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to till the soil, and wetness would well from the earth to water all the surface of the soil, then the LORD God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature. (2.4b-7)

Here, "after the grand choreography of resonant parallel utterances of the cosmogony [of P], the style changes sharply," Alter says in his commentary; "instead of the symmetry of parataxis, hypotaxis is initially prominent" in the second Creation story (GTC 7). This long, sinuous sentence, with its "elaborate syntactical subordination" (7), undulates snake-like across the page, and, because of its hypotactic distension, resonates with a certain dissonance that is alien to the concordant Priestly proem. What does this difference in syntax suggest? As Alter says, J

> needs this kind of ramified syntax, so unlike P's, because he constantly sees his subject in a complex network of relations that are causal, temporal, mechanical, and, later in the chapter, moral and psychological as well. His prose imparts a sense of rapid and perhaps precarious forward movement very different from P's measured parade from first day to seventh. It is a movement of restless human interaction with the environment, even in Eden. (BN 144).

Structure and symmetry are not dominant features of this narrative, nor would such qualities be appropriate to a story which illustrates the precariousness of human will. J, "interested in the complicated and difficult facts of human life in civilization" (145), makes dialogue and individual agency central to its unfolding drama. There are obstacles to negotiate and mistakes to be made in J; unlike P, wherein divine commands are unproblematically obeyed, J gives us a universe in which a central commandment is violated. Due to the evidence of free-will, then, the emphasis falls less on symmetry and order, or on the immediate fulfilling of the divine will, than on potential disorder and the destructive effects of human denial of divine sovereignty. Yahweh, though perhaps more

demanding than the Priestly God, is conspicuously less in command of his creation. Just so, J loosens control of the prose, and opens it up to irregularity and dissymmetry.

In contrast to P, then, who "is interested in the large plan of creation" (145), and who gives us an almost aerial view of the emerging cosmos, J situates the story closer to the earth. In fact, an intimation of the shifting order of priorities in J can be detected in the diction of the opening verses: in the first sentence (quoted above), for example, the words "soil" and "earth" each occur three times, alongside associated terms such as "field" (two times) and "humus" (once). Another mark of J's this-worldly, earthbound perspective is the fact that the story promises to recount the making of "earth and heaven," in that order of emphasis; this is in contradistinction to P's manifest concern with "heaven and earth." Whereas P gives us a heavenly perspective on the creation (we see a majestic, eagle-like God, "hovering over the waters" [1.2], delivering the world into being below us),[37] J takes us immediately down to the moist earth where, like a potter, a distinctly anthropomorphic deity shapes a human from humus. Alter's translation adroitly captures the original wordplay (*adam* is formed from *adamah*) suggesting that humans are at one with the earth, a sentiment not found in P, whose transcendent and imperialistic God commands, "fill the earth and conquer it."

Each Creation account therefore registers a contrasting set of priorities. A particular orientation towards humanity, divinity, nature, and so on, is implied in each of the two stories; and, in each survives a very distinct cosmogonic *mise en scène*. So a continuous reading of the primeval history in Genesis is made rather difficult. How, then, does Alter conceive of narrative integrity in this context?

I

We will recall that Alter adduces the analogy of film montage to account for textual variation and duplication in biblical narrative. This analogy "suggests something of the dynamic interplay between two different presentations of a subject in narrative sequence which we find in the Bible" (BN 140). Rather than keeping rigorously to the rules of non-contradiction and linear logic, Alter appeals to a dynamic aesthetic, enabling him to renegotiate difference and discontinuity. Alter asserts, "just such a technique of placing two parallel accounts in dynamically complementary sequence is splendidly evident at the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible" (141). Contradiction and redundancy are thus ultimately subsumed by a notion of redactional coherence. The alternative accounts, in particular, are seen as "complementary rather than overlapping, each giving a different *kind* of information about how the world came into being":

> The P writer . . . is concerned with the cosmic plan of creation and so begins appropriately with the primordial abyss whose surface is rippled by a wind from (or spirit of) God. The J writer is interested in man as a cultivator of his environment and as a moral agent, and so he begins with a comment on the original lack of vegetation and irrigation and ends with an elaborate report of the creation of woman. (141).

As we have seen, P relates the origins of the cosmos, J the complexity of the creaturely. What we are given is two different emphases and perspectives on cosmology--which is a brilliant literary achievement, thinks Alter. On aesthetic grounds, Alter attempts to show that the two perspectives are thus necessary to a more nuanced understanding of the world. Yet, while it is true that some of the information in the alternative versions may be different in kind, other features (as Alter himself concedes) are flatly contradictory. Why do the redactors preserve such inconsistencies? How are they desirable, much less necessary?

Alter confesses that, if the two Creation stories were canonical, the redactor may simply have been obliged to use both versions. In this case, what we have in the received text is more like a treasury of ancient traditions than a work of art, a depository for official

documents, and not necessarily a collection of the best of ancient Israel's literary tradition. If so, what Alter sees as redactional integrity would be "the purely accidental result of some editor's pious compulsion to include disparate sources" (BN 147). This is, in fact, Speiser's view of the matter, "that the narrators acted in the main as custodians of diverse traditions which they did not attempt to co-ordinate and harmonize when the respective data appeared to be in conflict" (299). Reporting purposeful artistry in this case would be rather dubious. But this conclusion, thinks Alter, is uninteresting and ungenerous. Alter prefers to restore meaning to the text where biblical scholars have denied it, and to assume that what he is reading is the result of design, not default.

Alter proposes instead that

> if . . . we can escape the modern provincialism of assuming that ancient writers must be simple because they are ancient, it may be possible to see that the Genesis author chose to combine these two versions of creation precisely because he understood that his subject was essentially contradictory, essentially resistant to consistent linear formulation, and that this was his way of giving it adequate literary expression. (145)

Contradiction is indeed *necessary* on this account. The radically improbable nature of the subject matter of Genesis 1-3 is thus presented through a kind of kaleidoscopic double-vision. According to Alter, such textual non-linearity reflects a "broader vision of creation, man, and God":

> God is both transcendent and immanent . . . both magisterial in His omnipotence and actively, empathetically involved with his creation. The world is orderly, coherent, beautifully patterned, and at the same time it is a shifting tangle of resources and topography, both a mainstay and a baffling challenge to man. Humankind is the divinely appointed master of creation, and an internally divided rebel against the divine scheme, destined to scrabble a painful living from the soil that has been blighted because of man. (146-47)

Both . . . and: the rule of non-contradiction gives way to the rule of *tension* and *paradox*. Alter's analysis thus brilliantly solves textual cruces, as it keeps in focus a kind of sophisticated aesthetic coherence which can accommodate genuine disparity. Biblical narrative, in this view, invites us to savour the carefully modulated tensions and paradoxes

which obtain between different aspects of a single phenomenon. Indeed, it is as if all the complexities of reality have been subsumed by a unified, though quite sophisticated onto-theological vision (the occurrences of the theological categories, transcendence and immanence, in Alter's discourse are telling). Perhaps Alter is thus unearthing the original theological underpinnings of the narrative. In the beginning of Genesis, "the redaction gives us first a harmonious cosmic overview of creation and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguities of human origins" (GTC 7)--the contrasts and contradictions are indeed necessary to complete a *comprehensive* picture of the complex universe, and of the nature of God, humanity, and the natural world. Moreover, it is a picture which reveals the relations that obtain between these ontological categories. We could indeed be forgiven for mistaking Alter's findings for a kind of theological vision after all; like other theologies we may be familiar with, Alter's "discovered" in Genesis appears to be global in scope, for it presumes to encompass the magnitude of the created order. Which is to say, there are conspicuous similarities between totalizing theological ideologies and Alter's claim to the text's comprehensiveness.

Yet, given the modern acknowledgement of marked discontinuities between P and J, other less totalizing interpretive moves which account for the coexistence of dissimilar entities might seem more befitting. For example, by way of objecting to Alter, one might propose that the redactors--and here I posit another author myth--have included two Creation stories to resist certainty and repudiate a comprehensive point of view, rather than to complement each other or fill out a more complete picture of reality. At least, that is the immediate effect of the juxtaposition. So we could say that the redactors were promoting indeterminacy in regard to cosmogony and ontology by refusing to decide between P or J. Both stories may be held up as equally probable or valid, but mutually exclusive, perspectives; by extension, both are rendered equally questionable or provisional. Rather than contributing to a fuller onto-theological understanding of the world, of divinity, and of

human origins, the co-presence of disparate materials is more likely to subvert comprehension and comprehensiveness. Let me explore this possibility further.

As I suggested in the Introduction to this study, it may be that we are given *two* beginnings in order to problematize, first, the very idea of a univocal capital-B Beginning, and second, our desire for Origins. That is, a single, centered point of origin and absolute reference is denied--even negated--perhaps because the search for origins is implicitly repudiated as a mere fantasy. The redactors would thereby be addressing, and then subverting, our *nostalgia* for origins. Actually, it is not unreasonable to suppose that, because as a genre creation stories are inherently implausible or fantastic, the redactors supply contradictory accounts both to confound our desire and to undermine the authority of the genre. If this is so, discontinuity is meant to be taken seriously as an index of what can or cannot be known. Contradiction, on this view, operates to critique psychic and textual closure, as well as authorial (or narratorial) omniscience--after all, who could know about the Creation but God himself? The redactors could thus be using the two beginnings ironically to cancel each other out, to obfuscate Creation self-consciously. That is, by placing the two accounts together montage-like, each account is relativized, rendered incomplete. Biblical narrative would therefore be operating along the same lines as postmodern metafiction, contesting the very possibility of representation.[38] Far from outlining with a high degree of subtlety and totality the contours of the created universe (Alter's view), the text seems to renounce certain historical reference and truth-value.

While this alternative view is a skeptical one, and is perhaps less convincing because it seems to reflect a modish critical trend that renders every text undecidable, under the circumstances such skepticism is by no means out of place. First of all, this interpretation (complete with the redactor myth I have provided) has the advantage of continuing to treat the text as a literary composition, and so does not dissolve the text into so many atomized strands that are ultimately alien to one another; to use Damrosch's phrase, my alternative reading treats the text as a "purposeful patchwork," laying bare

instances of dissonance and disunity which destabilize the reading process, but which are paradoxically integral to the text's purpose. Furthermore, the skeptical view imputes to the redactors a certain down-to-earth sobriety; presuming to speak about the Origin of everything, after all, calls for a suitable amount of modesty. What better way to signal the text's provisionality, as well as one's uncertainty in regard to the mysteries of the origins of the universe, than to preserve two distinct accounts of the same event? Certainly, the opening chapters of Genesis genuinely court doubt: by the very fact of its fragmentation, the text warrants a skeptical reading that finds a kind of mystical indeterminacy to be a governing condition of its significance. And this approach, I suggest, may even get us closer to the truth of ancient Israel's lost aesthetic standards than Alter's view to final coherence. This reading perhaps reveals something about early Israel's incredulity toward Creation narratives as such (though we will never know for certain). But most importantly, this view is consonant with an informed reader's actual experience of reading the text. A modern reader attuned to textual disjunctions and familiar with source-criticism can afford to posit coherence only at the expense of denying his or her originally acknowledged reading experience; the same reader, in a properly self-reflexive mode, would feel obliged to examine the ethico-political reasons for suppressing incoherence.

Aesthetic unity and narrative integrity (Alter's concerns) are obviously not the hermeneutic bywords of this sort of reflexive reading. Where Alter finds a more comprehensive view of the world in the text, the reading I have proposed finds just the opposite. Radical contingency and multiplicity, not determinate meaning, take precedence. While certain occult resemblances between discrete narrative units may present themselves to the reader, the intended overall effect of the redactor's technique may originally have been to relativize and multiply perspectives. One may recall Levinson's view in this context: believing that the redactors deliberately installed *aporia* in order to disrupt representation, Levinson finds parts of Genesis to be self-subverting. Seen in this light, the text undermines its own authority. Although I wish to preserve some order of meaning

in the text where Levinson's deconstructive approach finally annuls it, his notion that documentary layering is deployed to impede "presence" is germane to my argument. This accomplished, Genesis can be opened up to other, even non-biblical versions of creation and the various cosmologies and ontologies they imply. Importantly, such openness will perhaps liberate Eve--if she cannot be emancipated within the text itself. A biblical criticism that practices self-examination, and is not afraid to bring to light the particular biases and sociopolitical locations of individual readers which condition their readings, is able to clear a space for much-needed alternative (e.g., feminist, liberationist) interpretations of equal legitimacy.

This brings us to Alter's interpretation of the primeval woman. How does she figure in Alter's harmonization? He says,

> it may make no logical sense to have Eve created after Adam and inferior to him when we have already been told that she was created at the same time and in the same manner as he, but it makes perfect sense as an account of the contradictory facts of woman's role in the post-edenic scheme of things" (BN 145-46).

For a comprehensive view, again, the biblical "writer" supplies two competing definitions of woman. In explanation of how these views came about, Alter supposes that "the writer is a member of a patriarchal society in which women have more limited legal privileges and institutional functions than do man, and where social convention clearly invites one to see woman as subsidiary to man" (146); given the social realities of woman's subordination, J's description of Eve is appropriate. "On the other hand," suggests Alter,

> our writer [*sic*]. . . surely had a fund of personal observation to draw on which could lead him to conclude that woman, contrary to institutional definitions, could be a daunting adversary or worthy partner, quite man's equal in a moral or psychological perspective, capable of exerting just as much power as he through her intelligent resourcefulness. (146)

Consequently, "the proper account of origins is a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in which man and woman are aspects of the same divine image" (146). Now, how do the two descriptions of primeval woman work in contiguity with one another? Alter adduces

another analogy to rescue the text from the source critics who would rush to dismantle it into its constituent parts. In the manner of a post-Cubist painting, he argues, the narrative frame of the first three chapters of Genesis happily accommodates both versions, simultaneously encompassing divergent perspectives so as to give us a glimpse at both the "ideal" (gender equity, in P) and the "real" (patriarchal hegemony, in J). Thus, "the Hebrew writer takes advantage of the composite nature of his art to give us a tension of views" (146). The tension of views, on this reading, allows for a more total ontology precisely because contradictions are only ever *apparent contradictions*. That is, according to the underlying aesthetic principles supposedly unearthed in the text, the two seemingly incompatible stories are complementary. Evidently, in Alter's view, they even combine to express a theology (my word) of woman.

Interestingly, it seems as though Alter has neglected the historical conditions of each source's production in the preceding discourse on woman: Alter inconspicuously refers to "our writer" as the composer of both P and J here. Now, either Alter has forgotten that they were produced separately, or he is speaking metaphorically of the redactor. In either case, Alter tactically decontextualizes the two accounts, thus precluding interesting historical questions. For example, what was it about the condition of exile which allowed for the representation of the equality of the sexes? And how did it come about that a priestly school--a thoroughly patriarchal institution, we presume--was able to represent equality? Such questions are excluded from the purview of Alter's synchronic vision. Conveniently, too, the suppression of the history of redaction surreptitiously works in favour of Alter's argument at this point, insofar as he wishes to accentuate or postulate as given the ultimate consistency of P and J. By appealing to an imaginary level of continuity (by employing the phrase, "our writer") Alter is assuming the very thing he has to prove.

Certain other questions arise with regard to the credibility of Alter's particular views on the two accounts of the origin of woman. First of all, we will recall that Alter regards

the second story as a *description* of woman's place in the world; he envisions an author, the earnest Yahwist, setting down on a scroll the way things really are. Yet, leaving aside the problem of historical knowledge which would militate against our being able to determine, easily or accurately, the way things were three millennia ago, it is questionable whether the original authors were even so empirically constrained. Indeed, given the polemical religious context of the text's dissemination--if not also of its production--it may be more accurate to speak of the text as *prescriptive* rather than descriptive. That is, perhaps the Yahwist was not recording facts, but rather proclaiming a covert ideological vision. At least, that is historically how Genesis has been received, as authoritative scripture containing a vision that does not necessarily correspond to the way things are, but to the way things ought to be. Of course, remarking on the various contexts in which the text has been deployed does not necessarily discredit Alter's view; after all, his reading of the text (and of the text's composition) may be more politically advantageous, even emancipatory. But it is instructive to note that for most readers the sequence of Creation represents something other than a mere historical description of woman, or a period-piece representation of the social milieu of tenth-century B.C.E. Rather, if what the Creation offers is a description at all, it is seen by these readers as an absolute and universal description, a theological agenda, to be imposed upon the order of the world.

But can we infer from the text's reception something about the text's purpose? An answer to this question would seem to hinge on our ability to determine the genre of Genesis. For example, did the biblical writers or redactors think of themselves as composing "scripture"? Might a redactor have had certain ideological interests--for instance, an interest in the denigration of woman--that he was wishing to disseminate under the authority of an especially sanctified generic category? If so, the two Creation stories are not, as Alter and other Bible as literature critics would have us believe, benign historical or literary documents, dispassionate accounts "of the contradictory facts of woman's role in the post-edenic scheme of things." Consequently, a formalist-structuralist appreciation of

biblical narrative would obscure more than it reveals about the Bible. So if we take the popular uses to which the Bible is put as an index of its generic character, then we need to develop a more refined and reflexive understanding of biblical writing. But how could we ever determine the genre of this ancient, alien text?

We have no certain access to the redactor's intentions, given the fact that there are many competing views on the matter; nor can we be sure that the ways in which Genesis has been tagged and categorized in any culture or historical period correspond to its original purpose. Yet, perhaps it is unnecessary to seek the text's genre along such positivist lines. For it is equally useful and perhaps more interesting to look "in front" of the text, so to speak, at readers' actual experiences of reading Genesis, for the determinants of its "nature." Readers play a large part in effectuating any text's meanings, since meanings are not exclusively objective or built-in to the text. Such are the pronouncements of reader-response criticism, which seem to me quite relevant to the study of biblical narrative, with its essentially undeterminable history of composition and highly elliptical style. When we lack evidence in the text, it seems fair and good to look outside of it. Notwithstanding the fact that such an orientation will not help us to discover once and for all the text's original meanings and purposes, analyzing the reading experiences that are prompted by the text will throw light on important political and ethical aspects of reading the Bible in relation to various interpretive communities. The question here is, What does the Bible as scripture, as opposed to the Bible as literature, imply for its readers? As the writers of the Postmodern Bible say, "little concern has been given to how nonacademic real readers from many different locations actually read" (67), which would seem to be of utmost concern given that the bulk of Bible readers are not situated in an academic context. How, then, is the Bible differently constituted by the interpretational discourses that religious and/or academic readers bring to bear on it?

In proposing this alternative reader-response orientation, with an eye toward the text as readers in various sociopolitical settings might receive it, I do not wish to suggest

that Alter has made some disastrous methodological blunder. At worst, he ignores most readers' experiences of reading the Bible as a historico-theological document--as Sacred Scripture--which imposes upon them ethical demands. At best, Alter offers an enlightened counter-reading which (in this case) refuses the text's misogynist categories. It is further noteworthy that Alter's formalist approach redescribes the text as an autonomous literary art object; he thereby subjects the Bible to rational analysis, leveling "revelation" and annulling its special authority. What particular authority the Bible as literature has for Alter remains to be seen, although we have already pointed to some telling correspondences between Alter's view and traditional theological perspectives. In both cases, Genesis is rendered so as to maintain its integrity and offer a holistic vision of the universe. For reasons I will explore in detail later, the epistemological context in which we find Alter situated determines that the Bible as literature be constituted in particularly theological ways. Why Alter finally suppresses his own well articulated reading of the differences between P and J will become clearer in relation to the ideologies he tacitly commits to.

There are, however, other more specific problems with Alter's reading of Genesis 1-3 that I wish to touch on. For instance, Alter's interpretation of the first three chapters forecloses the possibility that more critical or liberative readings may be valid. His method has certain built-in methodological biases which, if we tease them out, will show what is excluded in his harmonization.

If Alter is able to read the redaction sequence as a kind of balancing act, through which an evenhanded symmetry or complementarity is achieved by the simultaneous affirmation and condemnation of woman, it is only because he has sufficiently polarized each story. That is, in order for the stories to appear to equalize each other, Alter must emphasize non-similitude. This points up a paradox at the center of Alter's methodology: he must intensify difference before he can work his special magic of assimilating difference to a higher level of identity. However, with respect to P's and J's treatment of woman, there are a variety of interpretations to choose from, not all of which posit a binary ratio--

such as equality versus inequality--between the stories. Such distinctions of Alter's are thus prone to be too reductive. Yet, in order for Alter's analysis to stand on both legs the Creation stories must faithfully stay within their respective categories; the binary structure must be maintained, the forbidden deconstructing fruit of the tree of knowledge renounced. But is J really sexist, and P sexually enlightened? Are these valid readings?

As we will see, Bloom (among other critics) reverses Alter's assumptions, and argues that J, who is engaged in a radical critique of patriarchy, is actually domesticated by juxtaposition with P. Other readers offer critical readings of Genesis 1, and refute the idea that P is egalitarian. Bringing such readings to the fore will challenge, or deconstruct, the binary distinctions required to sustain Alter's exquisite redactional tension and harmony. But before we investigate Bloom's competing account of J, which if acceded to will discredit Alter's explication, an excursus on the alternative renderings of P is in order.

One may conclude, *pace* Alter, that far from presenting an alternative perspective that champions the sanctified equality of male and female, the Priestly proem is *ideologically* of a piece with the second Creation story. On this view, which I will further elucidate, both P and J exhibit patriarchal prejudice. Many readers, however, are fond of pointing out the apparently subversive, sexually enlightened view offered at 1.26-27. God says, "Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness," and it is done: "And God created the human in his image, / in the image of God He created him, / male and female He created them."[39] Both sexes are created equally (in the image of God) and simultaneously, as the paragons of creation. In its immediate context, and perhaps in comparison to Genesis 2-3, these verses seem to represent an enlightened perspective. For the ancient world, anyway, such explicit candor with respect to sexual equality may surprise us. However, as Ilana Pardes suggests, it is only by taking Genesis 1 out of context that egalitarianism can be imputed to P, for when Chapter 1 is read in the context of succeeding Priestly material (P resumes in Chapter 5), verse 1.27 looks much less progressive.

An analysis of the resumption of P, then, will situate Chapter 1 in its larger context. Chapter 5, which reports the genealogical line of Adam, begins by recapitulating the creation of Chapter 1:

> This is the book of the lineage of Adam: On the day God created the human, in the image of God He created him. Male and female He created them, and He blessed them and called their name humankind on the day they were created. And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years and he begot in his likeness by his image and called his name Seth. (5.1-3)

The paragraph subsequently spins out a lengthy genealogical list, from Adam to Noah, encompassing ten generations in all. As Alter and others observe, this chapter "is linked thematically with the initial injunction to be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 23), insofar as it evidences the proliferation of God's creatures; fructification is in progress. Yet, moreover, 5.1 is near verbatim repetition of 1.27, and the repetition is a subtle recontextualization of that verse. As Pardes says, "the patriarchal presuppositions of the Priestly narrative become clear":

> No mother (or wife) is mentioned; no daughter's name forms part of the list. Surely the participation of females in these begettings is implied by the repetition of the verse "male and female created them" at the very opening of the chapter and by the explicit definition of *adam* as a generic name in 5.2 ("and he called their name *adam*"). But procreation becomes primarily a male issue once the generic term adam in 5.1-2 turns into the proper name Adam in 5.3, once the relentless listing of ancestors begins. From this point on [verse 3 and following], fathers (from Adam to Noah) are presented as the primary agents of the divine blessing. (190)

By a subtle sleight of hand, it seems, woman is no longer recognized as an effective image-bearer, nor even significant enough to be made a part of the genealogy; the rule of patrilineal descent is fully operative. Although the chapter begins by recounting the creation of man and woman, co-equal in God's image, by 5.3 only Adam (now a proper name) "begot in his likeness by his image"--only Adam passes on the divine blessing. What happened to the woman's part? Clearly, although Genesis 1 may have offered a kind of equality, it was not the kind to which material benefits accrue. As Pardes concludes,

> Going beyond Genesis 3 to examine the Priestly depiction of the realization of the divine plan is thus essential to the understanding of Gen. 1.27. Even if God, according to P, created man and woman simultaneously, this act, as

> Genesis 5 makes clear, does not quite prescribe equality between the sexes. To put it differently, the Priestly work may be acknowledging a certain symmetry between male and female on the cosmic level, but when dealing with the social realm, procreation turns out to be the perpetuation of male seed in male seed. (190)

P concedes a sort of intangible equality, cosmic but ineffectual, and does not therefore promote the kind of equality that counts--that is, equality on a material or social level.[40]

It should be obvious by now that Pardes' view is not consonant with Alter's harmonization of Genesis 1-3. On this newly contextualized account, if J has an intrinsic patriarchal bias, so does P, suggesting that the two stories are already in harmony with one another (harmony of a very different order from Alter's, whose use of the term connotes a union of complementary opposites). This view of P, even before it is placed alongside competing readings of J (like Bloom's), disables Alter's rapproachement. The prior condition of *dis*harmony, necessary to Alter's harmonization, is lacking.

If the Yahwist can be further shown to be resistant to patriarchal hegemony (Bloom's view) and the Priestly material positively male-centered (Pardes and others), then the Priestly text may be seen as a covert effort of revisionism. P, one recalls, was composed some four hundred years later than the J text it was conflated with. Therefore, as Schungel-Straumann suggests, one should keep in mind that Chapters 2-4 were not written to elucidate Chapter 1. Because of their sequence in the received text, it is natural to read them in this manner, yet the dating of the sources indicates that it is the other way around: that P was written to augment or re-interpret--or perhaps even to amend--J. Some feminist critics propose that this is so, suggesting that "Genesis 1 is meant as a theological correction of the J narratives" (Schungel-Straumann 65). Pardes, who finds the Yahwist's story more subversive because it at least exposes the rivalry of the sexes and represents transgression, says that the Priestly narrative is a response to the "unruly" (189) Yahwist. One might conclude from such analyses that Chapters 1 and 5 (like two bookends between which J has been made to stand upright, so to speak) were meant to contain or recuperate the rebellious Yahwist. This is precisely Bloom's view of the matter.

II

Bloom believes that P represents a backlash of the Priestly establishment against the masterfully ironic upstart, Lady J. For him, Chapter 1 is nothing but an attempt at narrative normalization on behalf of the "institution." It is the measure of some fraudulent redactor's guile that "the prim P" is placed in front of "the ribald J" (231) so as to censor her. The cosmic Priestly first chapter "represents a triumph of redaction over J's originality" (27):

> The Redactor unsurprisingly chose to begin what we now call Genesis with P's version of the Creation, since it was doubtless easier for him to assimilate than J's lively chronicle of the ultimate origins . . . . Shrewd arguments on the composite artistry of Creation accounts in Genesis as it has come down to us have been made by Alter and others, and yet the contrasts between P's cosmological fantasy and J's earthbound irony are quite overwhelming. I would suggest that what is now Genesis 1-24a was deliberately composed to replace a rather outrageous Yahwistic vision of a very combative cosmological Creation, so that the Redactor merely followed a pious tradition in precluding J's story of Eden with P's hymn to divine order. (28)

The "combative cosmological Creation" is supposedly lost to us,[41] and so Bloom takes the Garden story as the origin of J: "what we have as the start of the Book of J is not to be taken as her notion of how to begin. And yet it is a superb point of origin" (175). Notwithstanding the assimilation attempt, the stark energy of the Yahwist is discernible beneath its redactional strait-jacket.

Having evaded both "patriarchal misogyny and feminist resentment" (177), J maintains an ironic stance towards men and their God in the Garden story. Such is Bloom's analysis of J's version of Creation:

> Misogyny in the West is a long and dismal history of weak misreadings of the comic J, who exalts women throughout her work, and never more than in this deliciously wry story of creation. The lack of a sense of humour in believers and exegetes always has been and remains the largest barrier to the understanding of J. (178)

The Yahwist's creation story is essentially an "impish cosmological Creation" (175), "a seriocomic mishap" (185), which humorously ironizes and subverts the male and the divine

prerogative. The god Yahweh, for instance, is shown to be a "bungler" (183), since only through a process of trial and error does the deity figure out how to create humans properly. Says Bloom, "we should stand back here and contrast Yahweh as the artificer of the woman with Yahweh as the much more childlike and haphazard creator of the man" (180). J's irony especially comes through in her representation of an unsophisticated Yahweh forming man out of the muck: "Yahweh shaped an earthling from clay of this earth, blew into its nostrils the wind of life. Now look: man becomes a creature of flesh" (J 1).[42] Bloom sees in this an image of "a solitary child making a mud pie or building clay houses near water" (175); the vision of the god stooping down and exhaling into a clay figurine's nostrils seems to Bloom to be "powerfully grotesque" (28). The creation of woman, by contrast, is a "second and greater creation";

> woman is created from a living being, and not from clay. Presumably she is animate, and Yahweh need not inspirit her nostrils. Surely J's ironic point is that the second time around, Yahweh has learned better how the job ought to be done" (180).

So, instead of seeing woman as the divine afterthought and man as central to J--as exclusively inspirited by the vital power of God's breath--Bloom takes the fact that woman is created last to mean that she represents the pinnacle of creation. Frye reads the account the same way: "Eve . . . is the supreme and culminating creation in the J account" (191).

Bloom's analysis depends on the identification of a very special sort of irony. According to him, J is the inventor of an "irony of incommensurateness," whereby "incommensurate realities juxtapose and clash" (25) so as to do away with the illusion of incommensurateness. This irony is present, for example, when J is at her most blasphemous: such as when she is representing Yahweh as "at once human-all-too-human, even childlike, and yet Yahweh and none other, which is to say, wholly incommensurate even with himself" (26). On this view, anthropomorphism--which has traditionally posed such a problem for theologians (281-82)--exemplifies the summit of J's derisive art; by anthropomorphizing Yahweh, J is bringing the deity quite literally down to earth--into the Garden--thereby satirizing the abstract notion of his transcendence. Similarly, "Yahweh is

not to be conceived as holiness or righteousness but as vitality" (277), or what Bloom calls "zeal and zest" (292). J simply has no reverence for this impish character: "J's attitude toward Yahweh resembles nothing so much as a mother's somewhat wary but still proudly amused stance toward a favorite son who has grown up to be benignly powerful but also eccentrically irascible. Such a stance feels ironic" (26). In the Book of J, an ever-present irony of incommensurateness will cut down to size any conventional theological aspirations we may have for the text. J's irreverence--or is it Bloom's?--does not allow for anything like the conventional Judeo-Christian categories to be operative.[43]

This is not to say, however, that Bloom's alternative view (of even J's urbane irreverence) may not itself actually imply a set of theological assumptions: certainly, his invocation of conventional theological categories (incommensurateness, blasphemy, transcendence) inscribes the text within the boundaries of religious discourse or theological concern. His attack on orthodoxy thus paradoxically summons the very categories he seems to abhor in the context of institutionalized religion. Could he, then, simply be replacing Judeo-Christian morality with a seemingly amoral, but equally theological vision? David Stern believes so: he ironizes that "it seems poetically just that Bloom's own writing . . . should be misinterpreted by nearly everybody, misconstrued as a work of literary criticism about the Bible when in fact it is an audacious if flawed attempt at theology" (305). But what kind of theology could it be? Further analysis will, I think, bear out the fact that Bloom's defiant anti-normativity betrays ideological features that are more theological than they may first appear.

Yahweh and Adam, according to Bloom, are brought within the range of J's leveling irony, yet Eve escapes it. Adam is an effete companion who mindlessly imitates Eve (Hava, the homophonous rendering of the Hebrew by Rosenberg) by eating the fruit after she does. Unlike her male consort, Eve is "curious or imaginative," as her active acquisition of the fruit proves. Woman is thus privileged in this narrative: "Perhaps even more original, and more ironic, is the uniqueness of the creation of woman, since there is

absolutely no other story of the forming of the human female in all the surviving literature of the ancient Near East"; Bloom also cites the fact that "J gives six times the space to the woman's creation as to the man's" (28). Indeed, Bloom observes that there are "no heroes, only heroines" (32) in the Yahwistic source. As for the serpent, who in orthodox Christian tradition occupies the lowest rung on the allegorical chain of being, it ascends to a more venerable position in Bloom's analysis: the subtle or "smooth-tongued" serpent is not malevolent, but is rather just so much amoral nature. More precisely, his preternatural wisdom ("'Death will not touch you,' said the snake to the woman. 'The God knows on the day you eat from it your eyes will fall open like gods, knowing good and bad'" [J 5]) wins for him the highest rank in Bloom's view. In a kind of Gnostic inversion, then, Bloom reverses the traditional Augustinian hierarchy of being, placing the serpent and woman at the top, and man and God below.[44]

The resemblances between Bloom's antitheticalism and gnostic exegesis, as Stern points out, are significant: "Like the Gnostics," Stern suggests, "Bloom's goal is to retrieve an all-but-hidden divinity," and that divinity "is not Yahweh, but *his* creator, J" (309). The Sublime J, who is like Shakespeare the most "universal of authors" (BJ 318), has in part created us; because of her "facticity" or the degree to which she has invented the world we live in, *she* is our creator, and Bloom idolizes her. In effect, notes Stern, Bloom "has simply exchanged the Supreme Being for the Supreme Fiction--or the Supreme Fictionalist. Behind this adulation of the writer, students of literature will easily recognize a later version of the Romantic belief in poetry as personal religion, the worship of the imagination as an inner divinity" (310). A Romantic Humanism has thus replaced traditional theology in Bloom's thought; but there is also something Bloom calls "Yahwism" which tells of another aspect of J's purported ideology: "J chants the song of perpetual human becoming and overcoming, the chant of dynamic Yahwism, the exuberance of being" (BJ 321). Such is the Blakean energy--or what Bloom elsewhere labels Vitalism--that gives us another clue to the peculiar religiosity of Bloom's perspective.

According to Bloom, when the humans eat of "the tree of knowing good and bad" (Rosenberg's translation), they do not fall from a higher to lower level of being. In no sense have they sinned, and therefore no theology of Fall is supposed to be in the narrative; it is not a theodicy meant to explain the existence of evil in the world. Rather, says Bloom, "J has given us no candidates for culpability, except perhaps Yahweh" who, by setting the tree in the garden "as prohibition and temptation" (183), puts unfair expectations on his creatures. On Bloom's view, when the children of the Garden eat the forbidden fruit they simply move from innocence to experience, a wholly natural and inevitable progression for human beings. The capricious Yahweh, however, is ironically threatened that his creatures are becoming too commensurate with himself. The worried deity confirms the serpent's earlier remarks: "'Look,' said Yahweh, 'the earthling sees like one of us, knowing good and bad. And now he may blindly reach out his hand, grasp the tree of life as well, eat, and live forever'" (J 10). So Yahweh, exhibiting his jealousy, banishes man and woman from Eden, egotistically insisting on the difference between human and god. Bloom concludes, "nothing could be more incommensurate than Yahweh's punishments and the childish offenses that provoked them, but such incommensurateness is the center of J's vision, as always" (184). But while Bloom claims there are no "normative moralizings" here, that the Garden story is nontheological, we may want to reconsider the nature of J's vision of incommensurateness: does this not point to some order of theologized reality?

Bloom maintains that there is a major sociohistorical, and not a theological, subtext to J's Creation:

> For J's contemporaries, in what I take to be the final years of Solomon [David's son] and the early reign of his inadequate son, Rehoboam, it may have seemed less a straightforward fable of human origins than a sophisticated parable of the decline of David's kingdom from imperial grandeur to division and turbulence. For Eden and Adam can one read the heroic age of the Jews, and David as Yahweh's favorite? (187)

Indeed, according to Bloom, "Adam and his still nameless wife have the *vitalistic splendor* of David, the complete human being, Yahweh's favorite" (182; emphasis added). As Bloom says earlier,

> J's idea of the human founds itself upon the heroic image of David, though David is of course never mentioned in the Book of J. We are not told by J that Adam is molded in the image of Yahweh, but we can assume that J saw David as godlike or theomorphic, almost as if David truly had been the first Adam, and Adam in Eden a secondary man. (176-77)

Curiously, although Bloom claims that J has only heroines in her narrative, it appears that behind every blessed and "exuberant" character--male or female--stands the spectre of the heroic, theomorphic David. As Josipovici puts it, David is "the hidden referent throughout the narrative" ("By divers hands" 3). J's Creation story is thus supposedly an elegy to the fading Davidic dynasty. Moreover, it would appear to be an idolatrous homage to theomorphic vitalism in the form of David, which gives us another glimpse of the peculiar theological paraphernalia being smuggled in through the back door, despite Bloom's protestations to the contrary.

Now, of course, Bloom entirely eschews the *prima facie* difficulty of having two contradictory versions of the same event as in the received text. But his alternative reading of J's Creation raises other difficulties, not least of which is the issue concerning whether the text is "religious" or not. First, however, let us consider a certain contradiction emerging at the center of Bloom's historicization of the Book of J. Throughout his commentary, and not just in sections detailing the significance of Creation, Bloom refers J's representations of heroic vitality and exuberance, of the Blessing ("the augmentation of the ego rather than its abnegation before Yahweh" [228]), to the memory of the united monarchy under David. In effect, Davidic splendour ultimately informs everything that is excellent about Yahweh's creation, so that the Book of J is a tribute to the monarchy. Yet we may ask how this squares with Bloom's claim to J's ironic interventions on behalf of women. It would appear, in fact, that Lady J is not so much a woman's woman after all if her work is ultimately a commemoration of one of the most potent patriarchal institutions she would have known. Aren't Lady J's proto-feminist credentials suspect since she memorializes male hegemony? Or perhaps there is yet a deeper irony in all of this, in that J's pointed attacks against Yahweh in the text finally subvert *all* hierarchical constructions,

monarchical splendour notwithstanding. But Bloom does not fish in deep enough waters to find this out.

What Bloom does emphasize is that the Book of J positively does not represent a believer's devotion to a divine being; in no way, according to Bloom, is the J text "religious writing." In fact, just the opposite is true: J's representation of the impish deity is blasphemy. But how seriously should we take such claims? In partial answer to that question we might notice that Bloom's commentary is a prank of sorts. As a result, Bloom's Gnostic maneuver of inverting all "normative" meanings is suspect if only because it too predictably turns up the antithesis of theology; it is as if in the game Bloom is playing, the rules stipulate that at every point orthodoxy must be overturned, ironized. In fact, this *is* Bloom's rule of "misprision" or creative misreading coming through. Yet, Bloom's sense of the "ironic stance" of the author J is at times quite dubious, irony being one of the more elusive of literary properties. How can we determine what is irony for this ancient text? Who is to say that Yahweh's fashioning of man from mud is not the most reverent of images in ancient Judean cult mythology? This returns us to the issue of alterity: Bloom is certainly not immune from the criticism that he may be imposing his own disbelief on the text. However, given his valorization of "strong reading," a kind of aggressive revisionism which deliberately sets out to usurp precursor poems or criticisms, and which also "doesn't ever ask: Am I getting this poem right?" (Agon 19)--given Bloom's intentional swerving from accuracy and fidelity to the text, the charge of misreading has little force. Misreading, after all, is his business.

One might also object, however, that at the expense of a balanced reading of the ethical valences of the narrative, Bloom puts an inordinate amount of emphasis on peculiarities in order to call J secular. Certainly, Bloom is most gleeful when he is highlighting oddities such as Yahweh's breathing into the nostrils of the man--"nostrils," it should be noted, is Bloom's own touch, for the text does not specify how the procedure is done. He is also happy to imagine Yahweh as the divine equivalent of the comic Pigpen, a

puckish child who likes playing in the mud. It is further telling that Rosenberg's translation does away with the resonant moral language of "good and evil"; instead, as McVeigh says, "from savouring the fruit Eve learns the vaguely childish knowledge of 'good and bad'" (372). This is Bloom's own ironic and blasphemous vision coming through, no doubt, but it implies a serious and steadfast conviction of sorts.

As I suggested in the last chapter, Bloom presents a more or less arbitrary vision of J in order to make a full-frontal assault on orthodoxy. To this end, Bloom at times becomes lavishly rhetorical, and his rhetoric is chosen to *desacralize* the text. He is thus telling a strategic story about the text to oppose popular thinking about its significance. It is therefore important to realize that Bloom's project is pragmatically aimed at destabilizing the tradition. Insofar as he unsettles the reader's expectations of what constitutes ancient biblical literary tradition, he has succeeded. If by recognizing his strategy--the hidden initiative behind the Book of J--we in turn deconstruct Bloom, it is just one more irony that can be added to the story of J. Yet, as I suggested, such irony is purchased at the expense of a balanced reading that adjudicates the ethical imperatives of J.

That is to say, what is excluded from Bloom's insistent antitheticalism are important moral valences which many readers find in J. Bloom asserts that there is nothing for us to learn about trust or obedience in the Garden story: "J is not writing a moral tale but a children's story that ends unhappily" (185-86). But what does that mean? Certainly, the story is unhappy precisely because moral integrity has been compromised: trust has been broken, and, not insignificantly, when God's commandment is violated, a kind of exile or alienation ensues. By implication, obedience to the divine will would have resulted in the continued benefits of Paradise. So there is an elementary corollary set up here--elementary enough for a children's story--between obedience and well-being, and between disobedience and alienation or punishment. Is there not a theological lesson to be learnt here? Does this formula not have adequate moral suasion? The succeeding stories in Genesis recurrently insist on the correspondence between obedience and prosperity, or

their opposites: for example, Cain is exiled for fratricide, the Flood is the divine judgment against human evil, and the destruction of Babel represents a similar response on God's part to human insubordination. The expulsion from the Garden is thus only the first of a series of misadventures consequent upon human infidelity and disobedience. Consequently, as Thomas W. Mann argues, "the plot of the Pentateuchal narrative, to its very end, will be concerned with the attempt to find *another* way human beings can live with integrity before God, at home on the earth, and within the security of divine blessing" (19). On this view, Genesis is "the quintessential quest story" (19), charting humanity's attempt to regain Paradise. And a particular moral dilemma of obedience, entailing a proper response to the imperatives of an incommensurate divinity, is at the heart of the quest. That Yahweh does not allow for humans to become commensurate with himself thus points to a fundamental theological agenda implicit to the story. Contrary to Bloom, then, I am suggesting that "unhappiness" has an observable--though for many modern readers, perhaps undesirable--theological and moral scope in this narrative.

More particularly, as Frye notes, the Garden story reveals that patriarchy is a penalty for human rebelliousness; the Garden story shows that male domination is neither natural nor original, but is a corruption of a primeval harmony between the sexes. Yahweh, we recall, punishes woman saying, "To your man's body your belly will rise, for he will be eager above you" (J 8); or in Alter's less salacious translation, "And for your man shall be your longing, / and he shall rule over you" (3.16b). This is, as von Rad puts it, a forecasting of "humiliating domination!":

> Whence these sorrows, these contradictions, this denigration in the woman's life? It is not a small matter that our narrative absolves God's creation of this. Here a primeval offense receives its consequences, which faith recognizes as a punishment inflicted by God. (93)

The penalty for disobedience is the end of the ideal communal relationships between male and female; a sexual caste-system threatens to replace original harmony. We run into the familiar problem, however, of deciding whether the ambiguous verbs ("will" or "shall") in

this verse have descriptive or prescriptive force: Does the verse enforce a new divine mandate? Or is it meant to merely reflect the post-edenic social milieu? The verse is clearly problematic, and has dangerous social implications if unsubtly applied to the maintenance of male power and privilege. Yet, such retrograde ideological assimilation of J would be missing the subversive content of the verse: for patriarchy is plainly shown to be founded on human corruption, proper gender relations forestalled by human disobedience. Is this not then a kind of moral tale after all? Indeed, contra Bloom, I think it improper to ignore the searching moral significances of this story.

If Bloom's reading of J is an amoral one, it is only because he conceals an alternative set of ethical and even spiritual priorities which he deems superior. Blakean Romanticism, neo-Gnosticism, Neitzchean agonism, Emersonian Transcendentalism--whatever label best identifies Bloom, it will be seen that he replaces a "moralistic" biblical ethos with a nihilistic vision of a world, a vision he calls "monistic vitalism" (277); this is a vision filled with animated monads agonistically contending for power. Bloom thus finds in the Yahwist a dangerous antinomian ethic, and without compunction relishes a vision of a world in which each person is free to exert his or her own will to power. Yet, while such a vision is amoral, even immoral, it is not without enigmatic theological valences. Bloom's concluding words suggest something of that spirit which fuels his vision: "'Exuberance is Beauty,' William Blake's motto, sums up J and Shakespeare alike. Neither was a moralist, or God-intoxicated" (322); ironically, however, there is a certain basic commitment to spiritual energy (exuberance, beauty, sublimity, etc.) on Bloom's part--he is intoxicated with vitalism. We recall that, in Bloom's estimation, the strongest or most theomorphic individuals are the most vital: his vocabulary carefully excludes principled moral and theological teachings, but nevertheless he fills those very categories with qualities equally esoteric and theological. The sacred, I suggest, has in effect merely been removed from its traditional seat in the cosmic or transcendent realm, and made to inhere in the immanent

realm of humanity. This is the spiritual side of what Bloom calls "Hebrew humanism" (276), and the values associated with it are most intimate to him.

In the end, Bloom's refusal of the ethical is reckless, and results in a morally impoverished reading of the narrative at hand. As McVeigh concludes in reference to the next episode in Genesis 4, "the aestheticism of his [Bloom's] J dances mockingly around the arbitrary prohibitions and punishments of Eden, but it seems less ebullient in the barren landscapes where Cain lives and Abel dies. . . . Sophisticated laughter fades at the sight of blood" (375). The entail of violence and the cycles of recrimination which gain their momentum directly from the first transgression are held up for scrutiny in Genesis, and ought not to be ignored. When Paradise was lost, something fundamentally good had indeed been forfeited. Now, as we will go on to see, the rest of the narrative will be preoccupied with recovering Eden in the form of the Blessing; after Eden, Genesis becomes a quest story, in its attempt to reproduce the original perfection in the complicated realm of human history. We should thus take seriously (as Bloom would not) J's depiction of the origins of gender inequity and of patriarchal power by reevaluating the moral and political import of the Garden, by seeing in it an emblem of absence, of the missing parity of the sexes that has been lost. Of course, this view of J as subversive social commentary disqualifies Alter's reading as well as Bloom's. But what is lost in the way of structural symmetry, or in the tension of opposites, or in the way of ironic humour, is gained by enlightened ethical critique.

So what can we say for Alter and Bloom so far? In summary, both critics have a specific set of ideological interests that sustains their individual readings, and which their readings reciprocally sustain, but which also excludes other very important perspectives on biblical writing. Alter's formalist-structuralist criticism instantiates an interest in *in-the-text* meaning--to be specific, in a range of *definitive* meanings "discoverable" in Genesis. He seeks a nearly totalizing viewpoint above the text from which all of its problematic variables--solecisms, duplications, flat contradictions--can be seen as filling out a more

complete picture of reality, or as resolving into a coherent whole. Looking into the text, as if it were a window to the world, Alter seeks to decipher a preexisting code to which all readers, past or present, stand in equal relation. Thus, the relative objectivity and determinacy of meaning are presupposed by Alter, while contentious epistemological and historical questions are jettisoned. Bloom is likewise interested in an order of meaning which is determinate; yet, whereas Alter adduces formalist categories for the determination of significance, Bloom depends on source-critical historicism to excavate historical meaning. Bloom's usual iconoclasm is only thinly veiled, however, for underneath the camouflage of historicism lies an aggressive anti-normative heterodoxy which endeavors to replace moral theology with nihilism, or, more accurately, anarchic agonism. Excluded, then, from Bloom's combative mode is any serious reflection on the ethical issues raised in the narrative, and so he does not allow his own stance to be questioned by the text at hand. Equally problematic is the fact that both critics deny readers' actual experiences of the Bible and the kinds of homiletic (and other) uses to which it is often put. Instead, Alter and Bloom--and here they are not so different from one another--attempt to supply a definitive, original meaning which is ostensibly more or less at variance with "normative" traditions. What each critic suppresses, in this context, is a consideration of the varied subject positions readers occupy in relation to the text, and how the text mutates under different readerly conditions.

[23] Bloom indeed argues that the Yahwist is, "after Shakespeare, the greatest representative of the given" (Western Canon 4); in Bloom's estimation, the "given" categories of Western thought originated with J. Like all great canonical writing "that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" (3), J is a work of almost preternatural originality. This phenomenon Bloom elsewhere names "facticity," which is "a kind of brute contingency by which an author's strength blinds and incarcerates a tradition of belated readership" ("Introduction" 1). I am speaking more generally, but along similar lines, about the ideological immersion of our culture in biblical "facticity."

[24] Paul's interpretation of Genesis 1-3 is found in I Corinthians 11.7-9: "For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man." As Helen Schungel-Straumann argues, Paul selectively mingles information from each Creation story, and through the lens of his anti-female bias constructs a sexual hierarchy consecrated by divine authority (62-63).

[25] Tertullian continues, "Do you not know that every one of you is an Eve? The sentence of God on your sex lives on in this age; the guilt, of necessity, lives on too" (cited in Pagels' Adam, Eve, and the Serpent 63).

[26] Among feminist biblical scholars there is disagreement over whether the biblical texts themselves, or the patriarchal interpretive traditions of those texts, are to blame for the misogynist teachings. Whatever the case, Genesis is used as a prooftext to support male supremacy, and so ought to be handled with care.

[27] Particular forms of misogyny that have found their authorization in the Bible are well documented. See, for example, Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (New York: Harper, 1968); Elaine Pagels, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent (New York: Random, 1988); Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed. Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions (New York: Simon, 1973).

[28] I use the term "patriarchal" here and elsewhere to denote male-centered ideology. I avoid its customary usage in biblical studies, where the word is employed to identify chapters 11-50 of Genesis (the Patriarchal Tales, as they are called); instead, I follow the editors of The Oxford Companion to the Bible by using the rightfully inclusive term Ancestral Tales.

[29] As has been mentioned earlier, the *most* obvious inconsistency involves the deployment of different divine names by each writer. P always refers to the creator as *Elohim* (rendered "God" by Alter and in most other English translations) while J refers to the deity only as *Yahweh Elohim* (usually rendered "the LORD God"). Yahweh is the deity's proper name (God 29-30). While these differences are crucial to the source theorists, they do not concern Alter. Jack Miles, however, in his God: A Biography, does make much out of the discrepant nomenclature by assigning different character-traits to each name. He finds that where a particular name is used in the text, a specific set of biographical qualities is in the ascendant.

[30] Yet Frye goes on to assert, in reference to 3.16, that "patriarchal societies are explicitly said to be the consequence of sin" (192). The text for Frye, then, is not one-dimensionally patriarchal.

[31] As the Dictionary of Biblical Tradition states, "Eve, then, both participates in the sin of disobeying God and signifies the gift of continuing generational life" (252). These positive and negative functions of Eve are played out in the subsequent history of the text's interpretation, as witnessed most notably in 1 Timothy 2.13-15.

[32] Cited in Dictionary of Biblical Tradition, 694.

[33] Cf. von Rad, who says, "in this world, which is regarded quite anthropocentrically, man is the first creature" (77).

[34] Rosenberg, in the Book of J, opts to translate *vav* in a variety of peculiar ways so that the paratactic effect is occluded. In Appendix A, Rosenberg explains: "What is translated as 'and' and 'behold' in the older renderings . . . I have translated as 'so' or 'so it was,' 'now' or 'now look,' 'watch' or 'listen'--among other variants that allow a structure of shifting tenses, from past to present to past, and create the atmosphere for it" (329). These renderings also make for choppy sentences, and thus difficult reading. But this is (as I have been arguing) perhaps part of the defamiliarizing effect that Bloom and Rosenberg are after.

[35] Cf. Frye, Words 157.

[36] Significantly, Genesis 1 is believed to have been composed around the time of Israel's exile. As Luise Schottroff explains, "the ceremonious and distinct story of creation" in P "stems from the time when part of the tribes of Israel had been deported to Babylon. The Jewish country had been occupied by the Babylonian superpowers since 605 B.C.E. and the population lived a life of subjugation" (25). Campbell and O'Brien further specify that "the stability of Israel was under massive threat. In the exile, king, temple, and land were all lost; all that identified Israel as people of God seemed to have gone" (22n.2). Thus, this highly structured account of the creation of the cosmos was doubtlessly intended to console a people in misery who had experienced a great amount of chaos.

[37] "Genesis 1.2 tells us that 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' The word *rachaph*, here translated 'moved upon' or 'hovered,' also means 'to shake' and 'to flutter.' . . . The only use of *rachaph* concerning God other than Genesis 1.2 occurs when Deuteronomy 32.11-12 depicts God as the female eagle fluttering over her young. So although the enormous influence of Milton's Paradise Lost has taught us to see Genesis 1.2 as a dove image, the similar use of *rachaph* in Genesis and Deuteronomy makes it more probable that *the very first image in the Bible is of God as a mother eagle fluttering over the waters* as she gives birth to the universe" (Mollenkott 89-90).

[38] Norton offers a comparable alternative to another of Alter's harmonizations, in relation to a repetition which occurs in Genesis 42; this repetition, Norton says, "may be a reflection of the uncertainty of historical narrative, a deliberate rejection of the idea that the text can be a final and true statement of what actually happened" (383). I am similarly suggesting that, like historiographic metafiction, the text may be scrutinizing the limitations of representation. Precisely, in the immediate context of Genesis 1-3, the redactors seem deliberately to block our access to any order of truth or reference (historical, cosmological, or otherwise) by an obfuscatory maneuver which multiplies and relativizes textuality.

[39] As Alter points out, "in the middle clause of this verse, 'him,' as in the Hebrew, is grammatically but not anatomically masculine" (GTC 5). Commentators commonly applaud P because gender is undifferentiated here. However, this reading is made problematic in the context of other Priestly material, as I will explain.

[40] Compare similar debates among New Testament readers in relation to Paul's striking repudiation of religious intolerance, classism, and sexism in Galatians 3.28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." It is argued against the liberatory potential of verses like this that they are perhaps placatory gestures, and that they merely *spiritualize* equality, which places concrete oppressive social facts beyond critique (see Beyond God the Father 5).

[41] Bloom actually attempts to reconstruct the archaic combat myth that may have begun J. See 30-31.

[42] I cite J's text by section number; Bloom's commentary I cite by page number.

[43] Bloom's antitheticalism is very much present in his commentary on the Garden. For example, he argues that "J is the most monistic of all Western authors, even as Saint Paul is one of the most dualistic. There is for J no split between body and soul, between nature and mind. So far as I can tell, such monism was J's invention, whereas the creation out of clay was not" (176). Bloom also rejects "Pauline and Augustinian interpretations that find here a vision of a Fall, a vision that began in late Judaism in texts like 2 Esdras" (185).

[44] For detailed discussions of the Gnostics' inversions of the values of God and serpent in the Garden, see Pagels's Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, and especially The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Random, 1979).

CHAPTER 3

A fruitful son is Joseph,
a fruitful son by a spring.
Genesis 49.22

Carrying forward the central motif of the referral of the Blessing--as seen in the providential promise of human prosperity working itself out in the face of persistent adversity--is the treasured story of Joseph, the "fruitful son." I noted at the beginning of this study that the command "be fruitful and multiply" can be read as the keynote of the Book of Genesis, signaling as it does the book's preoccupation with sexual and textual transmission--the reproduction of the Blessing over time--which results in the proliferation of the divine image. As I observed then, fertility, propagation, and growth are God's express desires for his creation, and are doubtless fraught with complications for those who long for simple origins and ends. Indeed, my contention is that the onto-epistemological burden of the divine dispensation seems to be process and struggle, forgetting and remembering, translation and mediation of the sacred. To recall Derrida's formulation, "the sacred surrenders itself to translation, which devotes itself to the sacred; the one and the other are inseparable" ("Babel" 204). The original sacred text is forever lost to us, and, moreover, its fulfillment is continually deferred into the future--the significance of the Blessing is never totally realized, the Promised Land never arrived at in Genesis. As a result, arduous desert wandering, volatile human relationships, along with personal responsibility to the ethical imperatives of God, occupy essential places in the vision of Genesis, despite the uncertainty of destinations, rewards, or ends. In the story of Joseph and his brothers, the reproduction of the Blessing--hallmark of God's special relationship to humanity--will once again be imperiled, putting into jeopardy the attainment of the blessed life. Eden is lost again, so to speak, because of fraternal violence and filial irresponsibility. At once representing a family crisis and a spiritual setback, the Joseph

narrative presses home the central thematic issue of the survival of God's purposes in the world, insofar as it "concerns the survival of Yahweh's blessing on his family, and through them, the fate of the world" (Mann 67).

This particular story-cycle is the longest continuous narrative in the Book of Genesis, as it spans the last thirteen chapters (chapters 37-50) of the text. And it especially has the characteristics of a fairytale, as it follows the fantastic adventures and misadventures of the peculiarly ordained Joseph, whom we see sold into slavery by his own kindred, but eventually rising to achieve great prosperity and power in the foreign land of Egypt. At the climax of the story, Joseph, given up for dead by his family, is finally reunited with his father and eleven brothers, whom he chooses to relocate from a dusty camp in Canaan to some of the best land of Egypt. It is, then, as Bloom describes it, "a romance or a wonder tale" (BJ 224), an archetypal rags-to-riches story that tracks the stellar rise of the nearly infallible (because divinely aided) Joseph, whose name etymologically signifies his destiny, "Increase" (GTC 162). With family relations normalized by the end of the narrative, the integrity of Israel--Abraham's seed--will be established once again.

Woven into this larger narrative of Joseph's promotion over his brothers is an excursus, often mistaken for a disjunct interpolation, on Judah (one of Joseph's brothers) and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. This discrete but profoundly interrelated episode (in Chapter 38) relates the story of the scandalized widow Tamar who, according to levirate marriage, is unfairly neglected by her father-in-law.[45] Taking matters into her own hands, she goes about to secure offspring for herself by posing as a prostitute, and thus tricking Judah into sleeping with her. She successfully conceives by the unwitting Judah, and thereby ensures the continuance of an eminent lineage (see 49.8-12), from which ultimately descends King David. Thus, in the last section of Genesis we learn that, as Alter puts it, "the divinely appointed process of election cannot be thwarted by human will or social convention" (BN 10). In short, both the larger frame story of Joseph, and the inset tale of

Tamar, are centered on the issue of maintaining genealogical continuity despite filial treachery.

Customarily regarded as one of the most unified and even novelistic of biblical narratives (von Rad calls the Joseph story a *Novelle*), it is felt that this story-cycle manifests a degree of artistry unequaled by any of the preceding episodes in Genesis. It also stands out as the one portion of the text in which documentary layering is most difficult to detect. To be sure, the narrative is checkered by contradictions and erratic variations, yet on the whole there is a remarkable seamlessness and symmetry to this part of the text. In fact, we see nothing in these final chapters which resembles the staggering disjunctions of Genesis 1-3.[16] Both Alter and Bloom remark on the integrity of the narrative and attempt to account for its exceptional coherence; for this episode, then, source-oriented analysis is left aside by each critic in favor of synchronic, literary-critical interpretation. The specific authorizing myths that distinguish these critics from one another are dropped. Not surprisingly, however, each critic sees the story as cohering around a radically different set of thematic variables: predictably enough, where Alter isolates a moral-theological axis in the narrative, Bloom locates sophisticated non-theological aesthetic play. But before I take a closer look at Alter's and Bloom's compelling interpretations, it will be useful to consider in greater depth some of the general thematic concerns raised by earlier episodes in Genesis, episodes which I am unable to discuss in detail in this study, but which bear on the circumstances surrounding the Joseph family troubles.

In the last chapter, I left off discussing the principal five chapters of the protohistory of Genesis. These chapters belong to the Primeval History in Genesis, which as a whole encompasses chapters 1-11. Commentators generally agree that these opening chapters represent the first literary unit of the text, wherein we are given peculiarly opaque etiological tales which account for the origins of things (of life, of animal names, of pain in childbirth, of gender inequality, etc.), having universal human culture in their purview.

Upon turning to the Joseph story, however, we enter a much more narrowly focused narrative region known as the Ancestral Tales (chapters 12-50), the second literary structure in the text. Representing a shift away from the cosmic perspective, this latter section recounts the specific religious and cultural genesis of Israel anticipating its national confederation, and is particularly concerned with five generations of God's elect, those Mothers and Fathers of Judaism, descending from Abraham down to Joseph's sons. This is not to say that what happens to the elect in these chapters is not intended to have universal significance. Indeed, at the start of the ancestral cycle, when God singles out Abraham's seed for the special blessing, all of humanity is implicated: declares the Lord, "all the clans of the earth through you shall be blessed" (12.3). Thus, the cosmic and universal purview of the opening chapters is never quite lost in the subsequent ancestral materials. One might plausibly infer from this that the ancestral saga in its particularity is supposed to be prototypical of the larger movements of human history in general.

Just so, the combined stories of Joseph and his brothers, and of Judah and Tamar, continue the great theme of the legacy of the blessing; the narrative is thus intimately connected to the theological business, first introduced in Genesis 1, of the multiplication of the divine image over time. With its distinctly familial and genealogical focus, the narrative particularly tracks the grand destiny--and sometimes only precarious survival--of the chosen remnant, Abraham's seed. To be specific, it is another occasion to show how God's lasting two-part blessing/promise of life and land is operating generations later despite persistent struggle against adversity. This special Blessing, of which I have been speaking, was first delivered to Abraham at 12.1-3 and is iterated regularly thereafter (13.14-17; 15.18-21; 17 passim; 22.16-18; 26.3-5; 28.13-14; 35.11-12; 46.3-4); and, specifically, what the covenant promise entails is a twofold guarantee of numberless progeny and possession of the land of Canaan (Fokkelman 42). It is, then, the mark of God's special favor, a piece of Paradise regained were it to be fulfilled. Repeatedly, however, fertility and clan survival are endangered in the text, putting in doubt the

realization of the divine word. As Alter says, in the Book of Genesis "propagation is repeatedly promised but continually threatened" (GTC 42), so that the issues of genealogical stability and family bonds are right at the center of this book's priorities. Basically, transmission of the Blessing hinges on the essential matter of sexual reproduction. Yet, in Genesis various contingents of embattled humanity are beset by flood (the Deluge story, chapters 7-8), fire (destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, chapter 19) and famine (passim); and as if opposed by fate, women in each of three significant generations are barren (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel), and family feuds (for example, sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel; Rachel and Leah; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his eleven brothers) threaten to destroy the integrity of Abraham's line and thereby hinder the faithful transmission of the Blessing through them. Jack Miles thus characterizes the text this way:

> The Book of Genesis, at least until the story of Joseph, is a narrative of brutal single-mindedness. Barrenness, conception, birth; masturbation, seduction, rape; uxoricide, fratricide, infanticide—these are the terms of the action. The narrative is preoccupied with reproduction and threats to reproduction to the exclusion of nearly everything else in human experience. (God 90).

Miles may be overstating things for effect, but nevertheless it is instructive to note the near obsession with both fertility and lineal descent within the text, or, as Alter says, "the primary, problematic subject of the proper channel for the seed" (BN 6). In each crisis, however, God shows himself to be faithful to his elect; their ability to persist in search of the fulfillment of the divine promise is testimony to the sustaining grace of providence. This is, at any rate, the conclusion reached by traditional covenant theology.

But whatever conclusion one prefers, what remains certain is the fact that the promise of blessing is continually controverted by the circumstances characters find themselves in. Such is the case, once again, in the Joseph story, in which the family feud that began with Jacob is carried forward into the next generation (Mann 67). Ten sons of Jacob, beneficiaries of divine election (they are, with Joseph and Benjamin, the eponymous fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, God's covenant people), commit a wicked fraternal

crime: the brothers savagely attack their seventeen year-old brother, Joseph, and consign him to a life of slavery in Egypt. We learn from the start that Joseph's brothers are jealous of him, son of the beloved Rachel, because he is a tattletale, and, moreover, because he receives special favours (an "ornamented tunic" [Genesis 37.3]) from his father. Furthermore, Joseph has been imprudent enough to flaunt his dreams of mastery over his family. Little does anyone know, of course, that Joseph's youthful--and to all appearances, arrogantly self-aggrandizing--dreams will actually materialize, that in Egypt where he will become enslaved he will ascend to the heights of political power to become "regent of the land" (42.6), and eventually gain his brothers' obeisance. But this is yet twenty-two years into the future, and so Joseph's vicious brothers, disgusted with the "dream-master!" (37.19), as they derisively label him, one day cast Joseph into an empty cistern, sell him to slave traders, and falsify evidence of his death: "And they took Joseph's tunic and slaughtered a kid and dipped it in the blood, and they sent the ornamented tunic and had it brought to their father, and they said, 'Recognize, pray, is it your son's tunic or not?' And he recognized it" (37.31-33). Jacob infers from the blood-stained garment that his favourite son has been devoured by beasts, and mourns Joseph's death with characteristic dramatic flourish: "I will go down to my son in Sheol mourning" (37.35).

Thus, brother violates brother in another contest of fierce sibling rivalry. The iniquity of Cain finds expression in this forbidding episode of filial treachery, and so the entail of deceit, mistrust, and violence which took root in Eden prevails, again perpetrated against the proper reception of God's Blessing in the lives of his creatures. As Alter proceeds to argue, the ethical and theological implications of Joseph's brothers' misdeed will resonate throughout the narrative: in his analysis, cycles of violence in Genesis are consistently met by the recurrence of a regulative principle of restitution which has redemptive power. Antithetical Bloom, by contrast, takes issue with any view that sees the narrative as an expression of moral or theological judgments. Rather, the amoral stories of

Tamar and of Joseph showcase the struggle over "agonistic continuity" (222), usurpation, and personal triumph at any cost, the happy results of the will to power working itself out in family conflict. For Bloom, there is no redemptive moment to the story.

I

Alter states, "the Joseph story has both a moral-psychological axis and a theological-historical one" (BN 140). He then goes about to demonstrate quite convincingly that a pattern of recurrence or ironic repetition is a prominent organizing principle in the Joseph narrative: cycles of descent and ascent, measure for measure justice, and related reversals of fortune are in evidence everywhere. Acording to Alter, these U-turn comedic structures in the Joseph story have larger moral and theological applications. As he sees it, there is an observable "pattern of restitution" (BN 172) working itself out in the narrative. In the episode of Joseph's rigged "death," for example, Alter duly notes that Jacob is duped by the very same means (that is, a slaughtered kid and a brother's garment) he had used to deceive his own father years earlier (Genesis 27). The telling correspondences between the two episodes do not stop there, however, for in both instances particularly envious brothers have victimized a father's favored son (namely: Esau in Chapter 27; Joseph in Chapter 37). Conspicuous repetitions like this one also anticipate future stratagems: in Chapter 38, as Alter observes, Tamar deploys the same materials--a kid and a garment--to save herself from hypocritical Judah's wrath. He sentences his daughter-in-law to death for prostitution, and to save herself from burning, Tamar hastily sends the evidence of her rendezvous with Judah himself, commanding him to "recognize" evidence of his complicity. He is instantly mortified by her "triumphant revelation" (BN 9), remits her death sentence, and pronounces her "more in the right than I, for have I not failed to give her to Shelah, my son?" (38.26). Ironically, Judah, who was among the brothers who deceived Jacob with the bloody garment, is presently

condemned by the selfsame instruments of fate. Here we witness the biblical motif of the "deceiver deceived" (BN 10), in which a kind of retributive justice operates by way of significant recurrences. The residual significances of the blood-soaked tunic also appear to be operative in the episode involving Joseph and the wife of his Egyptian master Potiphar. Potiphar's wife viciously betrays Joseph by stealing his garment and falsely accusing him of rape: as Alter subsequently notes, "this is, of course, the second time that Joseph has been stripped of his garment, and the second time the garment is used as evidence for a lie" (GTC 227).[47] It is as if Joseph suffers the same injustice all over again, which is what the reappearance of the specified biblical motif suggests. More positively, the pattern ultimately suggests that Joseph will rise up from adversity, just as he was taken out of the empty cistern his brothers threw him in.

Other recurrences guide us through the narrative with similar effects. For example, when the brothers come to Egypt for the second time to buy grain, they carry silver and export goods with which to honour Pharaoh's viceregent--who is their "deceased" brother, Joseph. The irony here is that the gift to Joseph "includes three of the same items as those in the briefer list of export goods carried by the Ishmaelite traders (37.25) who bought Joseph from the brothers and sold him as a slave in Egypt. . . . [The] brothers are thus drawn unwittingly into a process of repetition and restitution for their fraternal crime" (GTC 253). A certain latent ethical principle of repetition, or a pattern of restitution, is thus again apparently governing the action of the narrative. According to Alter, this is a manifestation of the biblical rule of analogy, whereby "parallel acts or situations are used to comment on each other" (BN 7).

Such is Alter's reading of Joseph's biography, which Alter views (along with Frye) as a series of asymmetrical ups and downs, a comic structure oscillating between exile and return, penury and prosperity, with an ultimately happy outcome. As a young man, Joseph is flung down into a water hole by his brothers, which represents an absolute low point in his life. Then, Joseph is lifted up from the pit only to be "brought down" to Egypt by

Ishmaelite traders--a pattern of ascent and descent is already subtly established. But the wheel of fortune continues circling round when young Joseph, reduced to servitude, finds favour in Potiphar's eyes and is rewarded with stewardship of his household. By this point, it is clear that Joseph is not merely lucky, but rather specially marked by God's blessing:

> *And the LORD was with Joseph* and he was a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. And his master saw that the LORD was with him, and all that he did the LORD made succeed in his hand, and Joseph found favor in his eyes and he ministered to him, and he put him in charge of his house and all that he had he placed in his hands. And it happened from the time he put him in charge of his house that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake and the LORD's blessing was on all that he had in house and field. And he left all that he had in Joseph's hands, and he gave no thought to anything with him there save the bread he ate. (39.2-6; emphasis added)

Much more than a rags to riches story, then, the prosperity of Joseph is proof of the providential care of God. Before long, however, Joseph is falsely charged with raping his master's wife and finds himself incarcerated; having been flung into yet another pit, this time a prison, it is as if the injustice of his brother's iniquity has remanifested itself. Indeed, as we have seen, the circumstances in both cases are conspicuously alike. But the cycle of weal and woe, woe and weal carries on:

> And he was there in the prison-house, and God was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and granted favor in the eyes of the prison-house warden. And the prison-house warden placed in Joseph's hands all the prisoners who were in the prison-house, and all that they were to do there, it was he who did it. The prison-house warden had to see to nothing that was in his hands, as the LORD was with him, and whatever he did, the LORD made succeed. (39.21-23)

As Alter shows, certain thematic key-words in both passages (house, hand, all) point to a principle of analogous recurrence: again, Joseph is flung low, but with God's help, is able to rise up from adversity; "all" is put in his "hand," and he manages to become steward of a "house." As Alter says, "the grand recapitulation of verbal motifs makes it clear that the rhythm of blessing which is his [Joseph's] destiny is once more asserting itself" (BN 111).

That is, in Alter's view the text's purposeful structure (with its patterns of recurrence, motifs, and analogies) is metonymic of providential design itself.

Through a fantastic series of events, Joseph ascends to the very top of the food chain, in becoming vizier to Pharaoh. Having successfully divined Pharaoh's dreams, by predicting a seven year famine, Joseph is invested "regent of the land," and is put in charge of Egypt's economic development and food supply. Soon, "when the famine had grown harsh in all the earth" (41.57), the dreamer for whom success is guaranteed has his final vindication, for then his starving brothers come to Egypt from the north to buy grain. Jacob had commanded his sons, "get us provisions from there that we may live and not die" (42.2), explicitly declaring the theme of clan survival.[48] The irony of the situation is heavy, as the brothers who sold Joseph into slavery must now unwittingly depend on him for their lives. Joseph becomes their "provider" (42.6), a preserver of life, an epithet which will have explicit theological amplitude by the end of the narrative.

Upon meeting Joseph, who appears only to be a local dignitary, the brothers "bowed down to him, their faces to the ground" (42.6). Joseph's boyhood dreams are being fulfilled right then, and he realizes it: "And Joseph recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams he had dreamed about them" (42.8-9). The dreams are even precisely realized, as Alter explains: "the dream of the sun and moon and stars bowing down to him [is] linked more directly to his role as vizier, the dream of the sheaves of grain bowing down to him pointing more particularly to his role as provisioner" (BN 163). However, Joseph does not choose to reveal himself to his siblings but instead proceeds to abuse them in various strange ways. For reasons that are not specified in the text (and here is the primary site of interpretation in any analysis), fey Joseph conceals his identity and preys on his brothers' ignorance: he immediately "played the stranger to them and spoke harshly to them" (42.7). Alter offers some insight into the philological dimensions of this verse as they relate to the cyclical pattern of the narrative.

> The verb for 'recognize' and the verb for 'play the stranger' are derived from the same root. . . . Both uses pick up the thematically prominent

> repetition of the same root earlier in the story: Jacob was asked to 'recognize' Joseph's blood-soaked tunic and Tamar invited Judah to 'recognize' the tokens he had left with her as security for payment for sexual services" (GTC 245).

Yet again, a narrative asymmetry ties together past actions and their presently reverberating consequences. In particular, "recognition" is a keyword with greater thematic purport: Alter sees the action of the narrative, which is superintended by Joseph, as eventually forcing a kind of moral recognition on the characters. Alter thus infers that Joseph plays the stranger to precipitate character transformation, so that the brothers might recognize themselves before they recognize Joseph. Joseph attempts to force his siblings to self-knowledge, to facilitate moral regeneration.

As part of Joseph's inscrutable scheme, he falsely accuses his brothers of espionage. Subsequently, he devises a kind of trial for his brothers:

> In this shall you be tested--by Pharaoh! You shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you to bring your brother, and as for the rest of you, you will be detained, and your words will be tested as to whether the truth is with you, and if not, by Pharaoh, you must be spies! (42.15-16)

Joseph changes his mind and takes only one brother hostage, sending the nine others home so they may return to Egypt with Benjamin, Joseph's full brother, the only other offspring of Jacob's union with Rachel. However, just before the brothers depart for their father's house, Joseph has their money secretly put back into their bags, and, needless to say, the brothers are completely bewildered when they discover it later. What is Joseph trying to accomplish here? Knowingly, he has falsely accused his brothers of spying collectively, and then imprisoned one brother as warranty for another; yet, in a presumably benevolent mood he returns their money with the grain the brothers had purchased. Is Joseph at cross-purposes with himself? According to Alter, Joseph's purpose is primarily to "test" his brothers (Have they lied about Benjamin's well-being? Or did they persecute Rachel's other son too?); this is, then, "an ultimate test of the nature of their brotherhood with Joseph, a bond which they have denied by selling him into slavery and which they will

now be forced to recognize in a new way" (BN 161). And at the same time, Joseph avoids malice: the money in the bags is thus at once a gracious gift, and yet another means of unsettling his brothers. It is instructive, however, that Alter's determinations of motive here are necessarily inferential, since the text offers no explicit information in this regard.

To their father's great dismay, the brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin, Jacob's newly favored son, where they are immediately put through another bizarre course of events staged by the elusive Joseph. The brothers are directly invited to the vizier's palace for dinner, which of course causes them much anxiety. Standing on the doorstep to the royal residence, the brothers express fear that they will be enslaved for the possession of silver Joseph had secreted into their bags (43.19): ironically, then, the brothers who had a hand in determining Joseph's lot in Egypt appear to be on the threshold of being enslaved themselves. Yet again, matters have come around full circle, for the possibility of exact justice appears to be on the horizon. Yet, contrary to the brothers' expectations, Joseph makes no arrests, but kindly seats his unwitting kindred to dinner:

> And they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright, the youngest according to his youth, and the men marveled to each other. And he had portions passed to them from before him, and Benjamin's portion was five times more than the portion of the rest. (43.33-34)

The brothers are naturally astonished by both the aptness of the seating arrangement and the special treatment of their youngest brother; of course, unlike us, the brothers are as yet unaware of Joseph's hand in all this, and are thus objects of dramatic irony. In Alter's analysis, this is then "a kind of dramatization of the contrast between knowledge and ignorance . . . that has been paramount from the moment the brothers first set foot in Egypt" (GTC 258). Joseph is directing a kind of "ritual performance" (BN 172) intended to test whether the brothers will still take offense--as they did years earlier--at favoritism.

Joseph continues stringing his siblings along. When the brothers are set to return home to their father, for the second time Joseph orders the brothers' money put back in their grain sacks; further, Joseph has his silver divining goblet covertly placed in

Benjamin's bag. Benjamin is then hastily arrested for theft. The purpose of Joseph's machinations this time, says Alter, is to test whether the brothers will "allow Rachel's other son to be enslaved, as they did with her elder son" (263). Judah nobly steps forward to represent his wronged brother, offering himself and the others as slaves in Benjamin's stead so that their father, Jacob, will be spared the loss of his other beloved son. Judah pleads munificently, "Let me see not the evil that would find out my father!" (44.34). Thus, says Alter, "again, an unconscious principle of retribution asserts itself: the ten who condemned Joseph to slavery offer themselves as slaves to him" (GTC 263). This is in Alter's estimation "the final climactic turning of the extraordinary story" (BN 173), since it reveals a profound character change: "Judah, who conceived the plan of selling Joseph into slavery, now comes around 180 degrees by offering himself as a slave in the place of Benjamin" (GTC 265). This is also the brother, we will recall, who deprived Tamar of her levirate right. What is more, he had a hand in subjecting his father to the loss of his favorite son. Now, however, Judah redeems himself: "Judah appears now to accept [his father's] outrageous favoritism as part of what his father is, part of the father he must still love" (GTC 264); he has learned that "love is unpredictable, arbitrary, at times perhaps seemingly unjust, and Judah now comes to an acceptance of that fact with all its consequences. . . . he has admirably completed the painful process of learning to which Joseph and circumstances have made him submit" (BN 175). "Joseph's 'testing' . . . is thus also a process that induces the recognition of guilt and leads to psychological transformation" (GTC 265). In effect, the Joseph story is substantially the story of Judah's (and implicitly, all the brothers') self-development. The traps and trials devised by Joseph appear in retrospect to have been intentionally therapeutic, necessary for the brothers' redemption and "moral learning" (BN 159).

At this point in the story, after Judah's impassioned plea on behalf of Benjamin, Joseph can no longer continue the charade. So, after a bout of weeping, Joseph declares to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" (45.3). As if he only half-believed

what they had already told him about Jacob, Joseph wants to hear confirmation of his father's well-being. But his brothers, "dismayed before him" (45.3), cannot speak because of their amazement. Joseph proceeds magnanimously to console his siblings, explaining his foreordained purpose to them:

> I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. And now, do not be pained and do not be incensed with yourselves that you sold me down here, because for sustenance God has sent me before you. Two years now there had been famine in the heart of the land, and there are yet five years without plowing and harvest. *And God has sent me before you to make you a remnant on earth and to preserve life, for you to be a great surviving group. And so, it is not you who sent me here but God*, and he has made me father to Pharaoh and lord to all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (45.4-8; emphasis added)

In this rather ponderous "mission statement," Joseph surprisingly shows himself to have been privy to providential wisdom from the start, which in Alter's parlance is to live with a "divided consciousness" (BN 176), between imperfect and perfect knowledge. Joseph is able to claim he was actually "sent" to Egypt by God, and thus radically reinterprets the events of his life with reference to a higher, divine initiative.

Alter calls Joseph's summarizing speech "a luminous illustration of the Bible's double system of causation, human and divine," and although he prefers not see Joseph as a mere "mouthpiece of piety" (GTC 267), the line between human and divine agency is nevertheless blurred here; in fact, individual autonomy is in the last analysis subsumed by the divine initiative. As Alter puts it,

> The human figures in the large biblical landscape act as free agents out of the impulses of a memorable and often fiercely assertive individuality, but the actions they perform all ultimately fall into the symmetries and recurrences of God's comprehensive design. (BN 112-13)

In effect, in Alter's view the story is finally theological--it is about God's actions--as it conforms itself even to the image of God. Through a kind of double-vision, the Joseph story provides insight at once into the providential design for history (as in P's cosmogonic hymn to divine order and harmony) and, alternatively, into the perils of the refractory nature of human will (as in J's Creation account, an earthbound version of human caprice

and its consequences). This points up the fundamental "double dialectic between design and disorder, providence and freedom" (BN 33) in all biblical literature, according to Alter. As in the traditional theological view, then, the recalcitrant substance of human nature is ultimately appropriated to the ineluctable divine plan, redeemed for God's good purposes.

As Alter concludes, within the Joseph narrative of the received text there are subtle thematic reversals and repetitions, but also major revolutions of character, which have been woven together to form the fabric of a total redemptive plan. Joseph's last comforting words to his brothers once again recapitulate this grand design: "While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good, so as to bring about at this very time keeping many people alive. And so fear not, I will sustain you and your little ones" (50.20-21). Here is Alter's double causality again, which, in concert with the circular structure of the narrative, evidences theological ideology. Reversals of fortune, purposeful recurrences, revolutions of character--all these features of Alter's hermeneutic landscape instantiate traditional religious preoccupations with conversion, redemption, moral regeneration. Alter's interpretation therefore offers up the biblical text as a prooftext for the onto-theological tradition, though his interpretation may appear to be constrained by it also.

II

As I have argued, Alter's interpretation of Joseph's "plot" depends on a set of highly inferential determinations of motive, for as Sternberg explains, "the whole ado turns on one gap of motive that sustains the cat-and-mouse drama in both artistic and psychological terms: why does Joseph torment his brothers?" (286). This question is crucial. While Alter does entertain a variety of solutions, noticing that "a characteristic biblical reticence allows for overlapping possibilities of motive" (163), in the end he tends to fix on two possibilities: first, that Joseph is "testing" his brothers' credibility; second, that he is expediting his brothers' moral regeneration. Yet, the astute reader will observe

that at every point in Joseph's routine, the precise nature of his interests is difficult to discern, given that the narrator allows us no direct access to Joseph's psychology. Due to the minimalist aesthetic of the biblical writers, the narrator proceeds by understatement, and tends not to forground any such details, as Auerbach has famously argued in the first chapter of Mimesis. Instead, the biblical text is characteristically "fraught with background," pregnant with unstated significances, gaps that the reader must fill in. In effect, due to the Bible's economy of means of expression, we must to a high degree collaborate with the biblical writers to produce meaning.[49]

Making for more ambiguity with respect to motive is the fact that the brothers fully repent of their fraternal crime within earshot of Joseph: "Alas, we are guilty for our brother, whose mortal distress we saw when he pleaded with us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has overtaken us" (42.21). Joseph is moved to tears by this early confession, but nevertheless he does not relent. If it was moral recognition that Joseph desired for his brothers, why did he not accept their confession of guilt and reward them with the revelation of his identity sooner? Moreover, why does Joseph indirectly subject his father to so much distress (by causing him to suffer the loss of Benjamin, and by delaying self-disclosure)? Do the ends justify the means, in Joseph's estimation? Very likely. Yet, the really profound questions of motive are never addressed by the narrator: we are never informed of the precise mental state of Joseph (except to conclude from his crying or harsh speaking that he is generally sad or mad). Nor is the nature of Joseph's providential wisdom all that clear (is his "mission statement" at 45.5-8 mere retrospective prophecy, a figment of his still abiding narcissism, clear hindsight on the significance of events, or a genuine revelation of prior knowledge of God's purposes?). Depending on whether he had some sort of privileged access to divine foreknowledge or not, of course, Joseph will have experienced more or less anxiety or equanimity in regard to subordinating "means" to "ends," neglecting his father to teach his brothers, etc.[50] Yet, faced with such gaps and silences, products of the "reticence" of the biblical narrator, according to Alter,

we are, as Sternberg says, left with "a choice between inference and incoherence" which "no reader can afford to ignore" (286). What I wish to emphasize, then, is that the elliptical style, and the consequent margin of ambiguity, of the text functions something like a blank cheque which can be filled in with a range of hermeneutic values; this indeed permits Bloom, with characteristic mischief, to cash in a peculiarly antithetical interpretation of the Joseph story.

According to Sternberg, "motivations for Joseph's conduct have always proceeded along four main lines: punishing, testing, teaching, and dream fulfillment. Predictably enough, however, each line is wrong because all are right" (286). This critic therefore chooses to resolve the dilemma by taking all four explanations together to account for the psychological complexity of Joseph's determinations; Alter similarly moves toward a synthetic view of Joseph's motivations, seeing the text as "conveying a rich sense of how the present is overdetermined by the past" (BN 164). Each reader thus arrives at a sophisticated judgment of (what can be reduced to) the essentially redemptive nature of the Joseph story. Against this rather orthodox critical tradition, however, which suggests that Joseph is piously interested in retribution and the moral regeneration of his brothers, Bloom argues that "Joseph's game has been a matter of style and not of ethics; it has been a form of Yahwistic play" (BJ 236). In particular, it is an occasion for J to flaunt Joseph's superb vitality, since this character is "her surrogate for the beloved David" (240), the epitome of theomorphic heroism and hedonistic vitalism.

The narrative, according to Bloom, is about power, pragmatism, self-dramatization, and the ironic--and not spiritual or especially virtuous--consequences of agonistic play.

> J and her Joseph are both ironists and pragmatists. Does it make any difference whether the brothers have changed or not? And who could believe anyway in the moral regeneration of those butchers of Shechem, Simeon and Levi? Nor can we forget that Judah, the inevitable heir, he who will become Israel and will give his name to the Jews, joined in the plundering of Shechem. (236)

Bloom cannot believe Joseph would have wanted to redeem such vile offenders, and still less that their redemption is possible. Again, it can be seen how intently Bloom goes about to desacralize the biblical text, to dethrone normative religious belief: in this case, a key term of traditional theological discourse--redemption--is outright denied. The actual interest of the story, thinks Bloom, is to be found in "the relation between Joseph and Jacob rather than between Joseph and his brothers" (237). J is supposedly preoccupied with the elite, those "natural aristocrats" Joseph and Jacob, as opposed to the brothers who are "the ancestors of the unruly horde in the Wilderness" (237). It is a power struggle between incommensurate realties, once again, that putatively interests the secular writer J. We should not be surprised that Bloom locates the agon, and no gracious motives, at the center of this text's concerns.

Joseph, an actor in a drama of *his own* invention--not God's, according to Bloom--goes about to secure the Blessing very differently than had his father, Jacob. Joseph is extraordinarily charmed:

> He is a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams, which means, however paradoxically, that he is a pragmatist and a compromiser with reality. Jacob strives to achieve and keep the Blessing; he is precisely not a charismatic personality, though he makes himself into a very formidable personality indeed. Everything comes easy to Joseph, who will emerge from every catastrophe more suave and unflustered than ever. Jacob, despite his success, is an unlucky man; Joseph's luck is constant, reliable, and charmingly outrageous. (225-26)

In Bloom's view, then, God has nothing to do with each character's success: "Joseph is a representative of wisdom in a purely worldly sense" (226), and both he and his father are "expressionists of acute sensibility" (235), in Bloom's cryptic phrase. Here we enter the inferential realm of explicating motivation from action, of course, but Bloom has his reasons for preferring a vitalistic Joseph to an earnest and godly one. Bloom cites the fact that divinity is relatively absent in the Joseph story to insist that human autonomy is given free range in the world it represents: indeed, as most commentators point out, Joseph's story "is almost free of Yahweh's direct intervention" (226). By implication, argues

Bloom, "J's Yahweh allows his elite to do their plotting and willing for themselves, and is particularly off the scene in the story of Joseph" (234).

Certainly, between this part of the text and the stories of the patriarchs before it, there has been a genre shift. Miles concurs, saying, "the LORD God has gone into a brief eclipse" (God 67): "he subsides temporarily to something more like an assumption than a character" (78). Alter himself admits, "the dreams in the Joseph story reflect its more secular orientation in comparison with the preceding narratives in Genesis. They are not direct messages from God. . . . they may be literally portentous, but they require human interpretation" (GTC 209). Stressing as Bloom does the unique emphasis on human agency in the narrative requires no hermeneutic acrobatics. However, by specifying that it is the *charisma* of Joseph which stands behind his successes Bloom steps into the region of interpretation, betraying his own particular ideological agenda. Bloom is his own "god of the gaps," so to speak, when he says Joseph, the sublime manipulator, should take most, if not all of the credit for the magnificent consequences of his actions.

But what does Bloom do with Joseph's mission statement, wherein he refers his actions to providential design? Surely this points to the handiwork of God. Bloom concludes otherwise:

> We would lack literary tact if we confused Joseph's graceful suggestion that Yahweh sent him to Egypt to prepare the brothers' way before them (Gen. 45.5-8) with a serious theological reflection on J's part. It is a realistic touch that the gracious Joseph cannot forbear reminding his brothers that once they sold him down to Egypt; no one who is human could well say less. (238-39)

In Bloom's view, Joseph is using the story of God's commissioning him as a way--albeit an improbably circuitous way--to spite and cow his brothers, as "no one who is human" could resist flaunting his or her successes this way. The base aggressiveness that characterizes Bloom's own stance could be emblematized no better than this: there is never room in Bloom's combative criticism for magnanimous feats of human forgiveness, or interpersonal sympathy, only the "dark and daemonic ground" of the anxiety of influence

(Anxiety 25). One may particularly question what Bloom means by "literary tact" in this instance; it is not at all clear why a tactful reading of Joseph's words would not reach very different conclusions, such that Joseph's missiological pretensions exhibit egomaniacal tendencies, a god-complex, or, more generously, that they uncover a providential framework in the narrative. Either of these alternative views has the advantage of accounting for the esoteric content of Joseph's speech, rather than treating it as merely incidental to Joseph's supposed hidden agenda--an agenda, in other words, which has little to do with the manifest content of the speech.

Rosenberg, in his translation, conveniently expunges most references to Yahweh's providence in Joseph's life. It is, however, not clear why Rosenberg adopts this strategy, since Martin Noth's formulation of the documentary hypothesis--upon which Rosenberg depends--assigns all of Chapter 39 to the J writer. This may therefore be another instance of arbitrary modification on Rosenberg's part, betraying the fact that his editorial choices depend upon resolute ideological convictions rather than upon scholarly authority. Of course, Rosenberg's revisions and complete elisions of key verses describing Yahweh's intervention in the life of Joseph certainly lend support to Bloom's view of human autonomy and the secularity of the text: for example, Rosenberg omits all references to the providential origin of Joseph's dream interpretation; further, he replaces "God was with Joseph" with the differently weighted "Yahweh attended Joseph" (J 88 passim), thus enhancing Joseph's prerogative to act independently, subtly suggesting that divinity has become a mere servomechanism of human will. Indeed, such is Bloom's explicit contention in a related context, where he urges that Tamar's "will becomes the will of Yahweh" (223). Interestingly, however, Bloom appears not to have referred to Rosenberg's translation of the Joseph story; it is in fact relevant to observe that Bloom depends on a translation of the received text of Genesis for his analysis of divinity in relation to Joseph: "when she [the Yahwist] says of Joseph that *Yahweh was with him*, she is giving us a complex metaphor for Joseph's persuasiveness" (235; emphasis added).

Could the same reading be construed from "Yahweh attended Joseph"? Perhaps. Yet a more pressing question arises at this juncture (by no means an isolated case) where Bloom's commentary departs from Rosenberg's translation: Do we gauge Bloom's interpretation of J's Joseph with reference to a delimited Yahwistic source text (and if so, which rendering of the source, if not Rosenberg's?); or, do we compare Bloom's reading against a standard edition of the Book of Genesis? Put differently, if Bloom is going to sneak in portions of text from a popular translation of the received text of Genesis at his convenience, are we entitled to evaluate the tenability of his interpretation of *that* book, rather than the one he is pretending to analyze? This puts any serious reader of The Book of J in quite a quandary, it seems, since it is not likely that Genesis will cooperate with Bloom's anti-theological hermeneutic.

The splendidly charismatic Joseph (at once supreme aesthete, rhetorician, politician, romancer, ironist, pragmatist, according to Bloom) is positively *not* on some sort of divine mission, as Alter and the theologians believe; on the contrary, asserts Bloom, Joseph has set about on an "aesthetic enterprise" of egotistical proportions to become his family's "worldly saviour" (235). The brothers' self-development is merely incidental to Joseph's individualistic interest in the Blessing, or "more life," as Bloom defines it: "Since the Blessing in J is always the gift of more life . . . the Blessing is only secondarily an enhancement of justice" (227). Thus, Joseph's story is not a moral tale illustrating the wages of sin; patterns of retribution do not enter into Bloom's analysis. Predictably enough, then, Bloom jettisons the ethical in favor of the aesthetic. Moreover, whereas Alter argues for the ethical import *of* the aesthetic,[51] Bloom implicitly maintains that the ethical and aesthetic are fundamentally incompatible.

On Bloom's view, Joseph specifically wishes to usurp Judah, the eventual heir of their father's blessing, out of his place in the story of Israel. Here is the connection, for Bloom, between the Tamar debacle and the machinations of Joseph:

> Just as Tamar wills to write herself into the story of the Blessing, even so Joseph, who knows that he must yield the Blessing to Judah, compensates

> himself by writing a benevolent ending to the tale of Jacob and his twelve sons. It is as though Joseph, like his father before him, wishes to make himself absolutely central to the story of Yahweh and the children of Abram. J after all does not allow Yahweh to intervene directly in Joseph's story. (234)

Bloom thus views the stories of Tamar and of Joseph as finally eclipsing the significance of the brothers' story: Judah is only a bit-player in Chapter 38, a foil to the resourceful Tamar, and in subsequent chapters he diminishes entirely in comparison to J's Davidic Joseph. Tamar and Joseph, rather, are the true (though not official) bearers of the blessing. In fact, Bloom asserts that "one cannot conceive of a story of Judah and his brothers" (229), and so dissents from Alter's reading of the story which especially focuses on the moral development of that character. Judah's final self-renunciatory speech, we recall, was the climax of the Joseph story for Alter. Not so for Bloom, for whom such moral sentiment is inadmissible.

Both stories--Tamar's and Joseph's--thus take place on a level, human playing field that involves no supernatural contenders; such is the result of Bloom's exegesis. In Bloom's opinion there are no monumental historical or theological dimensions to the mastery of the Blessing; the agon is not about the survival of the covenant people and the preservation of God's purposes through them, but concerns the dazzling personal triumph of an heroic elite--which makes for an entertaining story indeed! Bloom consequently *individualizes* the biblical characters, and I think it is his penchant for casting interpersonal conflict in such stark terms that is of most value to our understanding of this biblical story. Joseph's ego-driven machinations are given proper emphasis by Bloom, who does not capitulate to pious tradition which would suppress the retaliatory impulse that doubtless informs Joseph's motives. Bloom rightly apprehends the all-too-human quality of the power struggle that takes place within this family. It is easy for Joseph to boast, after the fact, "God sent me"--which may be true enough --but the extempore, ad hoc nature of his practices against his family implies a more ordinary rationale. And his history of talebearing against his brothers, and of lording his dreams over his family (Chapter 37),

betokens a perversity of character in his adolescence which anticipates those not always so virtuous, future actions. There surely lurk some mercenary elements to his public piety.

Unfortunately, Bloom achieves this insight at the expense of removing the characters completely from the theological and moral frameworks that, according to Alter and the long hermeneutical tradition standing behind him, finally keep them accountable to one another and to God. As Alter concludes, "it is the inescapable tension between human freedom and divine historical plan that is brought forth so luminously through the pervasive repetitions of the Bible's narrative art" (BN 113). He posits an onto-theological foundation in the world of biblical literature, envisioning a set of working ethical ideals in the text to which characters are inevitably subject. Human autonomy, while duly represented in the narrative with all its aleatory consequences on display, is thus finally mobilized to delineate the ineluctable historical-theological horizon of the divine dispensation. Bloom's exhilarating reading of character could benefit from an account of the countervailing emphasis on providential design in the narrative, as communicated through structure and motif.

[45] Alter's note: "The legal obligation of *yibum* [levirate marriage], which was widespread practice in the ancient Near East, was incurred when a man died leaving his wife childless. His closest brother in order of birth was obliged to become his proxy, 'raising up seed' for him by impregnating his widow" (GTC 218). Judah puts off his filial responsibility by withholding Shelah, his only remaining son, from Tamar.

[46] According to source scholarship, the Joseph narrative is substantially the product of the relatively seamless redaction of the documentary materials J and E, with some passages belonging to P. Speiser comments, "An achievement of such literary excellence should be, one would naturally expect, the work of a single author. . . . The casual reader is hardly aware that he has a composite story before him; and even the trained analyst is sometimes baffled when it comes to separating the parallel accounts" (292). Still, there are some notable inconsistencies in this section of Genesis, three of which I have commmented upon previously: namely, the confusion over whether the Ishmaelites or Midianites obtain Joseph from the brothers; and, the disparities between reports concerning Egypt's food supply (Genesis 41.54-55; 47.12-13) and Pharaoh's disposition toward shepherds (46.34-47.6). Although these are counted unproblematic discrepancies by Alter (and are avoided altogether by Bloom), in my Conclusion I will finally pursue the notion that textual irregularities in the redaction are strategic, that the distortions they engender are purposeful and significant.

[47] The symmetries compound: in direct contrast to the sexual licentiousness of Judah in the previous chapter, Joseph's self-restraint stands out in approbatory relief: we have moved "in a pointed contrast from a tale of exposure through sexual incontinence to a tale of seeming defeat and ultimate triumph through sexual continence" (BN 10).

[48] Mann points out that the phrase "live and not die" recurs at 43.8 and 45.11 with minor variations, so as to suggest that survival, in all its material and spiritual dimension, is a main issue in the last chapters of Genesis.

[49] Students of biblical narrative are indebted to Auerbach for these observations, which subsequent critics have expanded upon and refined. His penetrating reflections on biblical style (see "Sermo Humilis" and Mimesis) directly or indirectly inform every contemporary literary discussion of the Bible.

[50] Joseph's project can be described with reference to Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical," of which the story of Abraham's binding of Isaac is the model, and whereby conventional morality is circumvented in order to fulfill one's divine commission.

[51] For Alter, the aesthetic embodies the religious and moral vision of the text: "the complex formal articulation of biblical literature is manifestly the means through which its moral, religious, and historiographical meanings are realized" (Biblical Literature 45).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I intend finally to flesh out my own sense of the dynamic interplay between textual fragmentation in the Book of Genesis and the nature of the divine dispensation it is perhaps deployed to represent. I am thus proposing a third reading, one that has been emerging over the course of my study, but which takes into account the (now inescapable) fractured, syncretic configuration of the biblical text and therefore neither conforms to Alter's sense of the fine narrative integrity of the whole, nor capitulates to Bloom's purgation of accretive impurities and subsequent truncation of the received text. Instead, I will indicate how textual discontinuities and narrative incoherence might operate on a thematic level; how two mutually contradictory creation stories, plus later duplications and inconsistencies, in conjunction with a delayed ending that necessitates subsequent intertexts, might serve to problematize origins and ends, subvert univocal sense and reference, and refuse narrative closure and narratorial omniscience. This reading, one that I acknowledge to depend on a particularly modern understanding of the composition of the Pentateuch, is offered self-consciously as a pragmatic alternative to both Alter's holism and Bloom's atomism.

But before I discuss these alternative possibilities in more detail, I need to probe Alter's and Bloom's methodological presuppositions one stage further. In particular, I will seek to uncover what each critic's presuppositions might mean for the status of the biblical text as sacred Scripture: What is the relation between orthodox hermeneutical stances toward biblical revelation and Alter's and Bloom's literary researches into the original significances of Genesis (its *sense*, for Alter; its *provenance*, for Bloom)? Revealingly, as I will show, Alter's (empiricist) and Bloom's (fideist) literary-critical projects actually tend to fortify the hermeneutic traditions of interpretation and indirectly sustain the inane dogmatism such traditions often engender. Against this background, I will make a cautious

step in the direction of a more reflexive reading of the manifest intertextual constitution of the Book of Genesis which does not lend itself to inflexible dogmatism or ideological manipulation, but which may provide for a tentative, careful, reflective faith nevertheless.

Alter and Bloom take a so-called literary approach to the Bible, as I have had occasion to demonstrate, and are thus principally oriented toward an appreciation of the aesthetic character of the text at hand, rather than toward exploiting its religious authority in our culture. In other words, a concern with narrative, character, and conflict (inter alia) dominates each critic's attention; conversely, historical reference and theological ideology are subordinated and sometimes completely abrogated as extraneous to the autonomous literary object. The biblical text is therefore explored through very untraditional perspectives, subject to inquiry of a kind doubtless not familiar to most Bible readers who primarily attend to its historical and theological import. Consequently, the Bible as literature orientation invites certain questions: What does the literary approach imply about the nature of the Bible? Are literary analyses hostile to belief? And are "literature" and "scripture" mutually exclusive categories?

While it may appear that close, rational scrutiny of biblical writing would undermine its unique religious or spiritual authority, as well as the idea of its inspiration, this is not necessarily or (at least) simply the case. In fact, Alter can be seen as arrogating to the realm of literature some of the very authority which traditionally adheres to sacred scripture; similarly, Bloom speaks of literature as an expression of the Sublime, and so merely substitutes traditional talk of holiness and the sacred with equally occult terminology, now in the service of literature in general. Despite Bloom's ostensible repudiation of belief, a certain religious concern is manifested in his discourse. Both critics, therefore, exchange the inspirationist notion of biblical perfection and infallibility for an analogous, but much more sophisticated, humanist ideal of literature's supremacy. In some sense, each critic is complicit with the Arnoldian substitution of religion with literature. To penetrate to the core of their assumptions about what is distinctive about

literature, it will be useful to reflect upon Alter's and Bloom's individual theoretical assertions about the nature of literary art and the purpose of criticism, in view of what we have already witnessed of each critic's praxis.

Bloom, of course, famously celebrates creative misreading: "how important it is," he insists, "that the critical imagination never fall into careless habits of accuracy. We must see the object, the poem, as in itself it really is not"; "strong reading doesn't ever ask: Am I getting this poem right?" (Agon 18-19). Bloom is not at all concerned with objectively determining a given text's meaning; instead, he exhorts a willful displacement of the text with a strong interpretation. Accordingly, strong criticism deliberately "usurps" the literary text: "Usurp what? A place, a stance, a fullness, an illusion of identification or possession; something we can call our own or even ourselves" (Agon 17). Bloom's own practice, as we have observed, is true to principle, for he mischievously hijacks the putative J, and wills her into being the paragon of sublimity and anti-normativity. This I have kept in mind when evaluating Bloom's responses to the text: Bloom possesses the Yahwist, and speaks his own anti-theological prejudices through her; his personal resentment of orthodoxy manifests itself in her heterodoxy. Can such heretical criticism be a testament to religious concern?

Bloom's method, which he himself associates with the "Gnostic way" (Agon 52), is expressly to sabotage the text and terrorize the traditions of its interpretation; specifically, his is a kind of gnostic exegesis which commits sacrilege by paying homage always to the Demiurge instead of Yahweh, or, in the immediate case of Genesis, by blasphemously idolizing the *secular* source of the *sacred* word of God. This is usurpation. It would seem, then, that Bloom entirely breaks down the authority of biblical revelation: not only does he dismantle Genesis into its hypothetical pre-Genesis sources, but he iconoclastically repudiates its moral-theological significances. As we have seen, the ethical and religious content of both the Creation story and the Joseph story are invalidated by Bloom. Notwithstanding this, however, even as he attempts to circumvent normative

religion, Bloom unwittingly reinscribes the sacred or theological back into his source-text. In fact, the zealousness of Bloom's blasphemy against religious orthodoxy perforce implies a corollary set of resolute faith-like convictions, the nature of which we can delineate as follows.

First, Bloom's self-professed association with Gnosticism reveals the extent of his belatedness in this regard. Like the Gnostics, Bloom follows a solitary way into the mysteries of the occult text in order to attain privileged insight; consequently, his criticism can be described as a kind of *gnosis*, or personal enlightenment. Tellingly, for the early Gnostics, *gnosis* resulted in a fideistic knowledge that was "not primarily rational knowledge" (Gnostic Gospels xix). Those who tire of Bloom's periodic irrationality and characteristic obtuseness will perhaps best be able to recognize the gnostic character of his readings: for Bloom (following Gnosticism's privatization of meaning) locates the site of interpretation in the Self, and no rational or referential criteria are finally sufficient to controvert his readings. In short, his personal pragmatism finds the text useful only insofar as it augments the Ego. Gnosticism and the Romantic-expressivist tradition clearly inform Bloom's humanist faith in the godlike character of the individual to wrest essential meaning from texts (cf. Stern's review). There is indeed an order of secular religiosity (if you will permit the oxymoron) in Bloom's thought.[52]

Second, Bloom makes extraordinary claims about the literary text itself, claims that win for the piece of biblical writing known as J an auspicious status as original, pure, and Sublime. As I suggested in Chapter 2, the terms of Bloom's argument against the orthodoxy of J summon a spiritualized and theologized reality from the text. Might Bloom's blindness here, toward the religious or theosophical dimension of his own perspective, allow for the most startling insights into the truly theological character of the Yahwist? Davidic Vitalism, theomorphic individualism, the Sublime, incommensurateness, the Blessing, more life--Bloom's discourse on the Book of J invokes the very esoteric transcendentalist categories by which such enigmas as divinity and

spirituality are often spoken. Perhaps, therefore, the Book of J is principally about those things, even despite Bloom's disavowals. For although Bloom is not exactly appealing to Judeo-Christian conceptions of divinity or holy Scripture, he is indeed speaking of some higher order of apotheosized reality and sacralized textuality which approximates the cosmology of the Judeo-Christian worldview. This is Bloom's neo-Gnosticism coming through again.

As David Stern rightly perceives, "like the Gnostics, Bloom's goal is to retrieve an all-but-hidden divinity" (309): in particular, Bloom is after a veiled author of the Sublime, and the inner divinity of the imagination she epitomizes. It is the *spirit* of the original, unadulterated Yahwist which obsesses Bloom. That is to say, Bloom is harkening after something holy, all-but-lost, and, moreover, something only the initiated, an educated elite (the new hierocracy), may access. In effect, the Book of J is invested with such formidable authority that a believer in the plenary inspiration of Scripture might even find solace in Bloom's conviction. It seems, in fact, that we are back to quite conventional ideas of the perfection of the biblical text, though Bloom ultimately directs his convictions not at the Hebrew or Christian biblical canon, but at the sacrosanct Western Canon. The unacknowledged insight here, perhaps, is that great literature is sacred (at least for Bloom), and that it can generate strong belief. Bloom himself appears to be seeking redemption there, and as we will see, a similar Arnoldian destiny for literature is implied by Alter.

Unlike Bloom, however, Alter asserts that there are "demonstrably imprecise readings--not just 'weak' readings but actually wrong ones" (Pleasures of Reading 208); thus, for Alter, the site of interpretation is the textual object, and not the Self. In his defense of literature against the "indeterminists," in The Pleasures of Reading, Alter speaks at length of the limits of interpretation: "A story or poem or play may mean many things," he asserts, "but in the words it uses and in the multifaceted information it provides us, it also gives us some grounds for identifying things it cannot mean" (228). According to this quite reasonable view, literary texts are constrained by their intrinsic verbal properties to

yield only a certain range of determinate meanings. By implication, however, the text is assumed to be virtually objective, and literary criticism a kind of positivistic science: unchanging significances are supposedly deducible from empirical textual objects or data, "the distinctive resources of literary expression" (206), such as character, style, allusion, structure, perspective (these are the titles of individual chapters in The Pleasures of Reading). The illusion that meaning is largely intrinsic to the text, embedded in certain "established forms" (BN 62), remains fundamental to Alter. Instructively, Alter's critical presuppositions about the literary object are also consonant with a certain species of Judeo-Christian biblicism; the anarchic potential of deconstructionism (among other theories which contest hermeneutical positivism) would likely appear as much a threat to the theologians as it does to Alter.

For Alter, in relation to Genesis, good reading entails the discernment of an immanent biblical poetic, a unique and original aesthetic--endemic to the Bible's "stubborn peculiarity" (Biblical Literature 24)--supposedly reconstructable from the formal-structural properties of the text, and accessible to anyone in any period. Hence my earlier charge that Alter's criticism of Genesis is decontextualized and verges on the ahistorical, since he virtually quarantines the literary object from "extrinsic" factors (intention, history, ideology, subjectivity) that impinge on its purpose or meaning; this, notwithstanding the fact that Alter delimits significance to the time of the redaction, for even the redactional moment is dehistoricized by Alter. In other words, Alter believes a peculiar, timeless biblical poetic (which the redactors created *in time*) is as decipherable now as it was to any sixth-century B.C.E. reader. We need not strictly know the various political, social, or subjective contexts out of which each strand and the final redaction emerged, and within which the whole is presently read, since a distinctive formal architecture, an innocent verbal context, sufficient for the determination meaning, inheres in the text. Like present-day biblicists, then, Alter reifies the word of God, supposing that it retains its integrity and

speaks clearly across cultural and temporal boundaries with identical potency and "presence."

Alter consequently essentializes the text and universalizes its significance. Again, he attributes to the literary text an invariant structure of meaning that perdures through time; a set of original significances that ultimately transcends the occasions of its writing or reading. Notably, popular religious exegesis is not finally different in this respect, since a hermeneutic of discovery, which seeks to lay bare stable, determinate meanings in the text (cf. Guarino 668; Postmodern Bible 249), is common to both Alter's criticism and to the hermeneutic tradition: for both, that is, truth and reference are perceived as deducible from a textual code to which every reader stands in equal relation. Furthermore, like the New Criticism, and the rabbinical exegesis (or Midrash) he models his own procedures after, Alter's hermeneutic is "functionalist" insofar as every disparate element of the text is adapted to every other, subordinated to a prior commitment to coherence and integrity (Eagleton 47-48; cf. Bruns). Alter's holistic, centripetal prejudice deems that contradictions must be harmonized, tensions subsumed. As in any faith-centered model of reading, textual difficulties and differences are referred to a higher level of hypostasized consistency (aesthetic logic, for Alter; divine inspiration, for believers).

So, while Alter's narratological criticism to some degree demystifies biblical writing (by subjecting it to reflective analysis and implicitly revealing the constructedness of meaning), as is becoming readily apparent, his redescription of biblical writing as literature carries with it another set of heavy ideological baggage. As Alter is at pains to show in The Pleasures of Reading, literature is itself a "special language" with "intrinsic purpose" (48). Literature in general is consequently re-mystified by Alter (as it is by Bloom): it is presumed to constitute a peculiar ontological order. And the logical corollary of this view is that biblical writing is restored to an elevated status. In both Bloom's and Alter's estimation, in fact, the aesthetic qualities of the biblical text sanction its new secular ascendancy; thus, the authorizing term in the phrase "biblical literature" is *literature*. Each

critic posits an aura of nearly sacred authority (not altogether different from that traditionally granted to biblical revelation) around the literary canon, which becomes a kind of secular scripture. Of course, the notion of the Bible's special revelation is annulled here; yet what is lost in exclusivity is gained in a new institutionalized secular authority (*vis-à-vis* the academy, instead of the seminary) and popular prestige.

As John Barton suggests, moreover, Alter's injunction to read the final form as a unity is easily appropriated to religious ends: "This literary dogma joins hands easily with a traditional Jewish or Christian belief that the books of the Bible just as they stand are divinely inspired, and that it is a form of impiety to probe behind them. Thus a highly secular and a highly religious response to scripture produces, strangely enough, the same effect" (Yearbook 297). Since he is committed to the autonomy of the text, and presumes the preservation of meaning over time, Alter might appear a latter-day apologist of biblical revelation. As Norton suggests, Alter's view of purposeful artistry is "reminiscent of the argument from inspiration" (379). Unity and integrity, so essential to Alter's criticism, are the same ideological postulates guiding the religious reader through the irregular textual terrain of the Bible toward consistent sense. Although one ought not to go so far as to charge Alter with neo-fundamentalism here (absurdly, he has been thus indicted),[53] the resemblances between populist religious bibliolatry and the *effects* of Alter's hermeneutic principles are telling. In neither case are textual discontinuities, or ideological and subjective aspects of the reading process, allowed to compromise or interfere with a final, definitive plain sense. A lack of critical self-reflexivity characterizes each kind of reading, in that each fails to examine the way in which readers constitute--rather than merely explain or decipher--texts.

Further authorizing biblical writing is Alter's claim that there exists a "horizon of perfect knowledge in biblical narrative" (BN 158); and in conjunction with this claim, that "every biblical narrator is of course omniscient" (BN 126; cf. 157-58, 163, 167, 184). Here we will recall Alter's view of the Creation narrative as presenting us with a

comprehensive ontology. Covertly, such analyses reinforce (if they are not already informed by) theological notions of the Bible's uniqueness and authority. How so? In Alter's view, omniscience is purposefully integrated into the design of biblical literature in order to facilitate a particular kind of readerly knowledge. In explanation of why the biblical writers employ the medium of prose fiction, Alter says that they

> were impelled to the creation of this new supple narrative medium at least in part because of the knowledge it could make possible. The narrators of the biblical stories are of course 'omniscient,' and that theological term transferred to narrative technique has special justification in their case, for the biblical narrator is presumed to know, quite literally, what God knows, as on occasion he may remind us by reporting God's assessments or intentions, or even what He says to Himself. (157)

Yet, as Alter goes on to explain, this leads to an odd paradox, since a presumably human narrator evidently encompasses the divine perspective:

> It is a dizzying epistemological trick done with narrative mirrors: despite anthropomorphism, the whole spectrum of biblical thought presupposes an absolute cleavage between man and God; man cannot become God and God (in contrast to later Christian developments) does not become man; and yet the self-effacing figures who narrate the biblical tales, by tacit convention in which no attention is paid to their limited human status, can adopt the all-knowing, unfailing perspective of God. (157)

The contradiction is suppressed. Omniscience is played down with indirection and narrative selectivity: "he [the narrator] is highly selective about sharing this omniscience with his readers. Were he to invite our full participation in his comprehensive knowledge, in the manner of a discursive Victorian novelist, the effect would be to open our eyes and make us 'become like God, knowing good and evil'" (158). The reference to the transgression of Adam and Eve points up just how paradoxical the notion of an all-knowing narrator really is in the biblical context and in orthodox tradition. But Alter chooses to analogize the contradiction away: that is, he solves the dilemma by viewing narrative omniscience as metonymic of divine wisdom, and as expressing "a supreme confidence in an ultimate coherence of meaning through language" (112). This narrative technique is an expression of faith, then, insofar as a horizon of perfect knowledge in the book reflects a belief in the ultimate coherence of human existence. But comprehensive

knowledge is withheld from us in the book, as in life, so that the reader is kept "guessing" (163). In effect, "the ambiguities of a fiction [are] made to resemble the uncertainties of life in history" (27). On this account, there is an almost a didactic purpose to the medium:

> the religious vision of the Bible is given depth and subtlety precisely by being conveyed through the most sophisticated resources of prose fiction. . . . Almost the whole range of biblical narrative . . . embodies the basic perception than man must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others. (22)
>
> The assurance of comprehensive knowledge . . . is shared with the reader only intermittently and at that quite partially. In this way, the very mode of narration conveys a double sense of a total coherent knowledge available to God . . . and the necessary incompleteness of human knowledge, for which much about character, motive, and moral status will remain shrouded in ambiguity. (184)

According to Alter, prose fiction and the literary technique of omniscient narration are deployed in the Bible to elicit from readers a certain existential concern, a consciousness of human finitude over against which stands the guarantee of a comprehensive providential design.

As the authors of The Postmodern Bible argue, such seemingly innocuous scholarly claims about the text conceal ideological allegiances: "In a few cases, narratological approaches [such as Alter's] are overtly complicit in undergirding the authority of the Bible, particularly by establishing on quasi-literary grounds a special kind of authority for the narrator" (112). It is argued, in particular against Meir Sternberg's narratological criticism, that an identification of narrative omniscience represents "a commitment to a certain view of biblical ideology masquerad[ing] as a theoretical literary judgment about the essential nature of the biblical literature"; in this case, "the Bible demands from the critic something perilously like religious commitment" (113). Alter's view of essential biblical coherence reveals a similar commitment to viewing the Bible from within a conventional theological paradigm. One wonders, therefore, if any textual inconsistency would count as evidence against his prior assumption of unity or coherence. In such cases, Alter renounces his originally acknowledged reading experiences, subordinating them to a personal fiction of redactional integrity and a critical convention of

objectivity, which is neither a value-free nor a particularly ethically enlightened reading strategy.

As may now have become obvious, then, we need not (and perhaps cannot, due to our own ideological investments, sociopolitical locations, religious predilections, etc.) share Alter's view of the god-like capabilities of the narrator/redactor. In fact, given the textual evidence and the biblical view of knowledge, a more appropriate conclusion, which I will finally outline, concerning narrative perspective might be reached. Moreover, an honest reappraisal of the postmodern reader's experience of the text, influenced as he or she is by the history of source-critical scholarship as well as by various developments in critical theory, will perhaps lead to a more tentative, self-reflexive approach to the Bible. I am one of those readers who, unable to ignore textual discrepancies and the responsibility entailed by reading the Bible ethically, will attempt to forge a new understanding of Genesis from within the academic context. Modernity has given us the particular liberty of being able to attend to the radically disruptive effects of documentary layering, and so I begin with an acknowledgement that mine is not an impartial, objective search for Meaning, but is an interpretation inevitably constrained and conditioned by (though not reducible to) my education. But I also read pragmatically, which is to say offensively, by aiming to use the text against fundamentalist biblicism, seeing Genesis as providing a kind of allegory of reading which exposes the difficulties of apprehending biblical truth itself. So I do not claim to offer a definitive interpretation that captures the real significance of this most enigmatic of ancient texts, but posit a possibility for enabling ethical critique (*vis-à-vis* the present text) of certain retrograde systems of belief/reading which are blind to their own historical and cultural specificity.

The problematic inconsistencies and repetitions that the redaction of duplicate narrative strands has produced can be said to function to avoid the antinomy of an omniscient narrator, and the transgression it would logically imply in this context. As I proposed in Chapter 2, the two Creation stories juxtapose and clash so as to resist closure.

Other conspicuous disjunctions in the narrative, where the edges of adjoining documentary strata protrude and disturb coherence, similarly impede the formation of a reliable narrative point of view. It is as if the redactors deliberately cited conflicting pieces of information in order to highlight the provisionality of each utterance, and (befitting the biblical worldview, in which God reigns supreme in wisdom) to emphasize how finite the human voice necessarily is. The irreducible heterogeneity of the text effectively warns us that there will be no transcendent, infallible narrative perspective on these primeval matters, no human participant in the divine wisdom.[54] In sum, the narrator (or, more precisely, the *narrators*--whomever we imagine "narrator" is *de facto* an assembly of multiple source-specific voices) is subject to the same human limitations as the characters in the book, leaving the incommensurate deity alone to be the privileged all-knowing Intelligence, as the stories themselves unnervingly emphasize he is. At least, this interpretation of Genesis is consonant with our academic critics' immediate experience of the text as a jumbled patchwork of incommensurate narrative materials.

Finally, let me articulate how the heteromorphous nature of Genesis finds further justification on broader thematic grounds, insofar as the narrative that has come down to us supplies a medium peculiarly befitting the transmission of the Blessing. One might ask if the biblical worldview would accommodate a self-subverting narrative and the refractions of meaning it engenders: Would not a denial of narrative reliability and univocal meaning threaten the moral-religious foundation of the biblical world? I affirm that, on the contrary, while a reading which sees the text as undermining its own authority might portend the end of easy dogmatic certainty and programmatic belief, my interpretation of the text agrees best with the biblical worldview as it is conventionally understood. In particular, the dominant theme of the deferral of the Blessing--what I earlier called the onto-epistemological burden of the divine dispensation--is aptly expressed by means of the present, irregular form of Genesis.

At the end of Genesis, we are told, "Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they took holdings in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly" (47.27); here is echoed that original divine blessing to "be fruitful and multiply." This central motif of progenesis--one I have been tracking throughout my analyses of the biblical stories--is invoked at the present juncture to celebrate the achievements of the Abrahamic line. Joseph the "fruitful son" has stabilized family relations; as a conduit of the blessing, Joseph (whose name means Increase, we should recall) has thus permitted the proliferation of Abraham's descendants, and the conveyance of the Blessing through them. In terms of the larger cosmic purview of the Book of Genesis, the irrepressible Hebrews have once again triumphed over adversity, and so God makes them increase as a sign of their success. Doubtless, that *is* the Blessing to these nomadic wanderers: the multiplication of themselves, which ensures their survival, is taken to be a sign of divine approval. In this, a strong this-worldly sense of purpose seems to dominate the Hebrew imagination: *being* in the world, and being creative in it, is of signal value. That is what it means to "be fruitful and multiply"--to be procreative, literally to fill the earth with the divine image *as flesh.*

Metaphorically, I want to suggest, the image as blessing is also multiplied on a metanarrative level in Genesis. The text itself literally increases, genealogically, document by document, like a patchwork composed of disparate pieces of material not always clearly related. As we have seen, the redactors' priority (as far as we can tell) seems to have been to preserve and then expand upon documentary materials, to enlarge old stories by splicing separate versions together or juxtaposing alternative accounts, generally accumulating text on text. And, significantly I believe, the redactors have left us evidence of their handiwork. Fittingly, this too is the legacy of the blessing: the creative proliferation of the divine image *as word.* Textual reproduction mirrors the plot of sexual reproduction, in a display of redactional vigour in which creativity is celebrated, perhaps as a tribute to the Creator Himself.

But as the narrator forbiddingly seems to emphasize, at the end of Genesis the family is in the foreign land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. So all is not celebration. God's elect have yet to enter the promised land of Canaan, the region vouchsafed to them generations ago. A formidable triumph over a threat to genealogical continuity in the Joseph story is subtly overshadowed by the fact that the divine promises have yet to be fully realized; the significance of the special relationship between creature and Creator has yet to be fulfilled. Thus, the Hebrews can only take so much comfort in their present situation at the end of the story, since they are destined to wander further into the unknown. As we know, in fact, the Israelites will suffer miserably at the hands of the Egyptians and then roam the desert in exile for years to come before glimpsing their destination. But that is the story of Exodus and the following Pentateuchal books. Genesis ends with the family taking up residence in Egypt, prospering, but without their land. Since it does contain the whole story, the book anticipates its sequel.

Like Israel's quest, then, the Book of Genesis is incomplete, its ending delayed, its significance yet to be fully realized. The text must thus increase beyond itself to allow its narrative momentum to carry forward into subsequent intertexts. Not until five books later, in fact, outside of the Pentateuchal narrative proper, in the Book of Joshua, will the conquest of Canaan be described. So many words are multiplied upon one another, stories upon stories, books upon books, until that time is brought to its completion. In the meantime, creativity and multiplicity takes the place of closure, destinations, and sure rewards. Moreover, as I discussed in the Introduction to this study, the biblical revelation is equivocal about beginnings; many problematic elements in Genesis 1-3 conspire against a clear view of the Origin Itself. The text that the modern reader encounters thus appears highly ambiguous with regard to origins and ends, and allows no solid ground upon which to rest our nostalgia nor our expectation. Instead, we are given a proliferation of images, in words and in flesh; we are left entrammeled in the narrative medium--in the trials of time--given up to a plot of precarious exploration.

Yet, that is perhaps where the blessing lies, in the sometimes tortuous reality of the present: on an obvious level, it is in the lives of those personages privileged to carry out the quest, in the process of their overcoming the greatest odds and multiplying their chances. On a related but more oblique level, the blessing is the story itself--a narrative of peripatetic wandering and persistent wondering--wrought from diverse textual traditions and the vast ambiguity of their redaction. On this view, Genesis is about reading itself, which is to say, the struggle to apprehend meaning that is never quite itself, in the present, or simply transparent. If my sense of the purpose of narrative discontinuity is credible, then it is possible that what sustained the Hebrew literary imagination was a concern with the journey, in the broadest sense; what was of especial value, on this view, would have been the nature of the quest, and the interesting questions that got raised along the way, even when a destination was urgently sought. At any rate, the disjunctive intertextual surface of Genesis seems to serve the ends of a life-affirming imagination that is speculative, open to the unforeseen creative effects of ambiguity. That this, ultimately, is likely only my own speculative imagination projected onto the text need not cause alarm, since the text is always to some degree about our own concerns, insofar as it is necessarily constrained within the pale of any reader's pre-understandings and predilections.

Genesis generates an undeniable amount of incoherence, and it is fascinating to meditate on its purposes. No biblical criticism can ignore that the text is problematic, and we have seen two critics wrestle with the problems. Yet, those who seek to explain the phenomenon with reference to a putative higher level of consistency (as does Alter), or by atomizing the text into its supposed constituent parts (Bloom), end up largely *explaining away* its radical idiosyncrasy; such readers forget their originally acknowledged reading experiences.[55] But what happens if we treat recognizable inconsistencies and accretions as an index of the text's thematic concerns? One option, such as the one I am proposing, is to view the polyphonic biblical narrative as providing appropriate form for content. For, as a result of the book's problematical incoherence and incompletion, stable meanings and

transparent reference, fixed origins and completed ends, consistently elude us. Reading is therefore made difficult, since meaning is asymptotic and opaque: in other words, a horizon of comprehensive knowledge and perfect being continually retreats into the future, exceeding our grasp. An informed reading experience can thus be likened to the characters' own continuing quest for the realization of the Blessing: no end to the story is yet nigh. The burden of abiding in the word of God, then, is living with a modest and sometimes perplexing amount of uncertainty, as character and as reader, not knowing where exactly one's story begins or where it ends. What seems to matter most about being in the world is the perpetuity of the Blessing, which is to say, continuous creativity allied with the ethical imperatives of God. Accordingly, a reader who is reflexively engaged with the limitations and possibilities, liabilities and advantages, of his or her own creative constructions and interpretive practices, and who thereby takes responsibility for that creativity, is reading ethically--one may even venture to say, biblically.

[52] It is relevant to observe Bloom's long-standing romance with Kabbalistic tradition, or Jewish mysticism, in this context; see Bloom's Kabbalah and Criticism.

[53] See "Art, imagination and the Bible" (1252) and The World of Biblical Literature (4) for Alter's responses to this accusation.

[54] Regina Schwartz reaches a similar conclusion regarding the unreliability of the narrator in her reading of the confused episode of Joseph's abandonment in Genesis 37, wherein E and J provide contradictory accounts: "The result is that there is no accurate, privileged account of what happened to Joseph. . . . This apparent lapse on the part of the otherwise painstaking editor/writer may be instead an invitation--to read the event as a memory. However much we try to reconstruct a coherent account from memory, details elude us, some are lost altogether, others displaced. We do not reconstruct, we construct" (50). I agree with Schwartz that incoherence invites speculation on the limitations of narrative point of view. However, whereas Schwartz proposes that the fragmented text embodies the fallibility of memory, I suggest it pertains more profoundly to human fallibility in general. I find little evidence to support the view that the text is representing retrospection or memory. Rather, because the presentative "look" often interrupts the narrative (e.g., "And God saw all that he had done, and, *look*, it was very good" [Genesis 1.31]) immediate, on-scene reportage is suggested. The stories are unfolding dramas.

[55] Cf. Postmodern Bible, 23, for a reader-response critique along similar lines.

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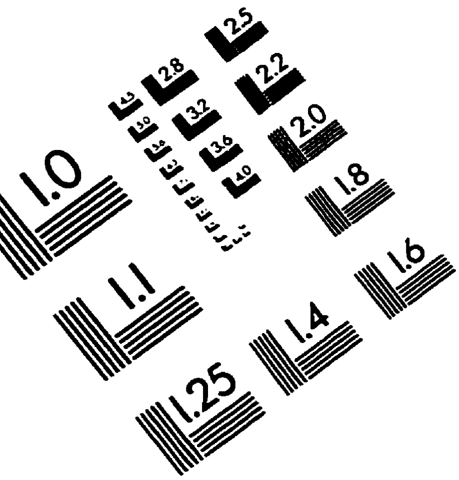
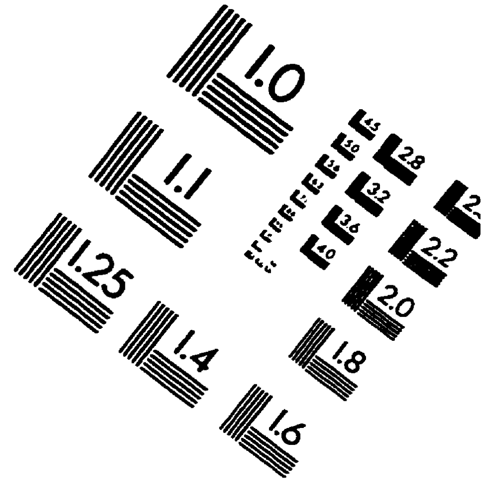
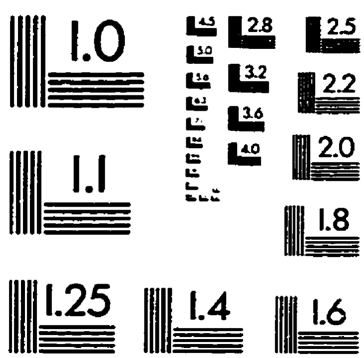
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)







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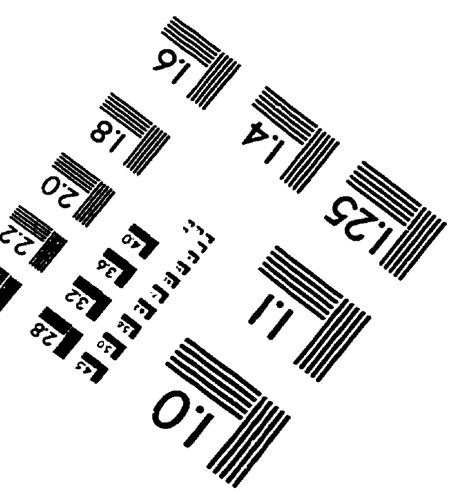

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