to protect him from the opposites latent in existence. But man—caught up in demonry, which the narrator symbolizes for us with his web of play and dream—withdrew at once from both the will of God and from His protection and, though without properly understanding what he was doing, nevertheless with this deed, unrealized by his understanding, caused the latent opposites to break out at the most dangerous point, that of the world's closest proximity to God. From that moment on, oppositeness takes hold of him, not indeed as a must-sin—of that, and hence of original sin, there is no question here—but as the ever-recrudescent reaction to the no-position and its irredeemable perspective; he will ever anew find himself naked and look around for fig leaves with which to plait himself a girdle. This situation would inevitably develop into full demonry, if no end were set to it. Lest the thoughtless creature, again without knowing what he is doing, long for the fruit of the other tree and eat himself into aeons of suffering, God prevents his return to the garden from which He expelled him in punishment. For man as a "living soul" (Gen. 2:7), known death is the threatening boundary; for him as the being driven round amid opposites, it may become a haven, the knowledge of which brings comfort.

This stern benefaction is preceded by the passing of sentence. It announces no radical alteration of that which already exists; it is only that all things are drawn into the atmosphere of oppositeness. When she gives birth, for which she was prepared at the time of her creation, woman shall suffer pains such as no other creature suffers—henceforth a price must be paid for being human; and the desire to become once more one body with the man (cf. Gen. 2:24) shall render her dependent upon him. To the man work, which was already planned for him before he was set in the garden, shall become an affliction. But the curse conceals a blessing. From the *seat,* which had been made ready for him, man is sent out upon a *path,* his own, the human path. That this is the path into the world's history, that only through it does the world have a history—and a historical goal—must, in his own way, have been felt by the narrator.

Composite Artistry: P and J

Robert Alter

A technique of placing two parallel accounts in dynamically complementary sequence is splendidly evident at the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible. There are, of course, two different creation stories. The first, generally attributed to P, begins with Genesis 1:1 and concludes with the report of the primeval sabbath (Gen. 2:1–3), probably followed, as most scholars now think, by a formal summary in the first half of Gen. 2:4: "Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created." The second version of the creation story, taken from the J Document, would then begin with the subordinate clause in the second half of Gen. 2:4, "When the Lord God made earth and heaven . . . ," going on to the creation of man, the vegetable world, the animal kingdom, and woman, in that order, and after the completion of creation proper at the end of Chapter 2, moving directly into the story of the serpent and the banishment from Eden.

Now, it is obvious enough that the two accounts are complementary rather than overlapping, each giving a different *kind* of information about how the world came into being. The P writer (for convenience, I shall refer to him in the singular even if this source may have been the product of a "school") 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. There are also, however, certain seeming contradictions between the two versions. According to P, the sequence

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of creation is vegetation, animal life, and finally humanity. Although the chronology of acts of creation is not so schematically clear in J, the sequence there, as we have already noted, would appear to be man, vegetation, animal life, woman. In any case, the most glaring contradiction between the two versions is the separation of the creation of woman from the creation of man in J's account. P states simply, "Male and female He created them," suggesting that the two sexes came into the world simultaneously and equally. J, on the other hand, 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.

Why should the author of Genesis have felt obliged to use both these accounts, and why did he not at least modify his sources enough to harmonize the contradictions? The scholars—who of course refer to him as redactor, not author—generally explain that he viewed his inherited literary materials as canonical, which meant both that he had to incorporate them and that he could not alter them. What of early Hebrew writings may have seemed canonical in, say, the fifth century B.C.E., or what that may have meant at the time is a matter of pure conjecture; but the text we have of the creation story has a coherence as significant form which we can examine, and I would argue that there were compelling literary reasons for the Genesis author to take advantage of both documents at his disposal—perhaps also rejecting others about which we do not know—and to take advantage as well of the contradictions between his sources. These reasons should become apparent through some close attention to the stylistic and thematic differences between the two creation stories.

Although P begins, according to the general convention of opening formulas for ancient Near Eastern creation epics, with an introductory adverbial clause, "When God began to create heaven and earth," his prose is grandly paratactic, moving forward in a stately parade of parallel clauses linked by "and" (the particle *vav*). Or, to switch the metaphor of motion, the language and the represented details of P's account are all beautifully choreographed. Everything 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. God is the constant subject of verbs of generation and the source of lengthy creative commands reported as direct speech. (By contrast, in J's version, there is a whole block of verses [Gen. 2:10–14] where God is entirely absent as subject; man, moreover, performs independent action and utters speech; and the only direct discourse in the whole chapter assigned to God is His command to Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge and His brief statement about man's need for a helpmate.)

The orderliness of P's vision is expressed in another kind of symmetry that is both stylistic and conceptual: creation, as he represents it, advances through a series of balanced pairings, which in most instances are binary oppositions. J also begins by mentioning the creation of earth and heaven (significantly, earth comes first for him), but he makes nothing of the opposition in the development of his story, while P actually builds his picture of creation by showing how God splits off the realm of earth from the realm of heaven, sets luminaries in the heavens to shine on the earth, creates the birds of the heavens above together with the swarming things of the seas below. Darkness and light, night and day, evening and morning, water and sky, water and dry land, sun and moon, grass and trees, bird and sea-creature, beast of the field and creeping thing of the earth, human male and female—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 splittings-off. God divides primordial light from primordial darkness, the upper waters from the lower, day from night, terrestrial light from terrestrial darkness. In the second half of the story, as we pass on to the creation of the animal realm, the verbs of division disappear, and with the fuller details pertaining to animals and man, the symmetry is a little looser, less formulaic. Nevertheless, bracketed pairs continue to inform the account of cosmogony, and there is also a noticeable tendency to recapitulate many of the previous terms of creation as the narrative proceeds. The conclusion in the first sabbath vividly illustrates the emphatic stylistic balance, the fondness for parallelisms and incremental repetitions that mark P's entire account (Gen. 2:2–3):

> And God completed on the seventh day His work which He had made.
> And he ceased on the seventh day from all His work which He had made.
> And God blessed the seventh day and He hallowed it.
> For on it He had ceased from all His work which God created to make.

We have here not only incremental repetition but, as I have tried to show through this rather literal translation, a tightly symmetrical envelope structure, the end returning to the beginning: the first line of the passage ends with God's making or doing, as does the last, while the end of the last line, by also introducing the seemingly redundant phrase "God created," takes us all the way back to the opening of the creation story, "When God began to create." In P's magisterial

formulation, everything is ordered, set in its appointed place, and contained within a symmetrical frame.

All this reflects, of course, not simply a bundle of stylistic predilections but a particular vision of God, man, and the world. Coherence is the keynote of creation. Things come into being in orderly progression, measured in a numerical sequence which is defined by the sacred number seven. Law, manifested in the symmetrical dividings that are the process of creation and in the divine speech that initiates each stage of creation, is the underlying characteristic of the world as God makes it. Man, entering the picture climactically just before it is declared complete on the seventh day, is assigned a clearly demarcated role of dominance in a grand hierarchy. In this version of cosmogony, God, as Einstein was to put it in his own argument against randomness, decidedly does not play dice with the universe, though from a moral or historical point of view that is exactly what He does in J's story by creating man and woman with their dangerous freedom of choice while imposing upon them the responsibility of a solemn prohibition.

J's strikingly different sense of the movement of creation makes itself felt from the outset in his syntax and in the rhythms of his prose. Instead of stylistic balance and stately progression, he begins with a subordinate clause that leads us into a long and sinuous complex sentence which winds its way through details of landscape and meteorology to the making of man (Gen. 2:4b–7):

> At the time when the Lord God was making earth and heaven, no shrub of the field yet being on the earth and no grain of the field yet having sprouted, for the Lord God had not made rain fall on the earth and there was no man to work the soil, but a flow would well up from the earth to water the whole surface of the soil—then the Lord God fashioned man from clods of the soil and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

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: here man *works* the soil, which cannot realize its full inventory of nourishing plant life until that work has begun; in P's version, man, more grandly and more generally, has dominion over the natural world. Man as J imagines him is more essentially bound to the natural world, formed out of a humble clod, his name, *'adam,* in a significant etymological pun, derived from *'adamah,* soil. He is one with the earth as he

is not in P's hierarchical sequence; but he is also apart from it by virtue of the very faculty of consciousness that enables him to give things their names, and by virtue of the free will through which he will cause himself to be banished from the Garden, henceforth to work the soil as an arduous punishment rather than as a natural function.

P is interested in the large plan of creation; J is more interested in the complicated and difficult facts of human life in civilization, for which he provides an initial explanation through the story of what happened in Eden. Man culminates the scheme of creation in P, but man is the narrative center of J's story, which is quite another matter. P's verbs for creation are "to make" (*'asoh*) and "to create" (*baro'*), while J has God "fashioning" (*yatzor*), a word that is used for potters and craftsmen, and also makes him the subject of concrete agricultural verbs, planting and watering and causing to grow.

J's concern with the mechanics of things is continuous with his vision of God, man, and history. The world is stuff to be worked and shaped through effort, for both man and God; language has its role in ordering things, but it is not, as in P, generative. If man's role as worker of the earth is stressed at both the beginning and the end of the Eden story, one might also infer that God's work with man does not cease with the fashioning into creaturehood of the original clod of earth. In this version of creation, there is moral tension between man and God—a notion not hinted at in P—and also, as God's solicitude for man's loneliness shows, there is divine concern for man. It is instructive that here no speech of God occurs until He addresses man and reflects on man's condition. The verb "to say," which in the first account of creation introduced each of the divine utterances through which the world was brought into being, here is used to designate *thought* or interior speech, the brief divine monologue in which God ponders man's solitude and resolves to alleviate it (Gen. 2:18): "And the Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I shall make him an aid fit for him.' "

The differences between our two versions are so pronounced that by now some readers may be inclined to conclude that what I have proposed as a complementary relationship is in fact a contradictory one. If, however, 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 the most adequate literary expression. Let me explain this first in the notorious contradiction about the creation of woman, and then go on to comment briefly on the larger cosmogonic issues.

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. On the one hand, the writer is a member of a patriarchal society in which women have more limited legal privileges and institutional functions than do men, and where social convention clearly invites one to see woman as subsidiary to man, her proper place, in the Psalmist's words, as a "fruitful vine in the corner of your house." Given such social facts and such entrenched attitudes, the story of Eve being made from an unneeded rib of Adam is a proper account of origins. On the other hand, our writer—one does not readily think of him as a bachelor—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. If this seems a fanciful inference, one need only recall the resounding evidence of subsequent biblical narrative, which includes a remarkable gallery of women—Rebekah, Tamar, Deborah, Ruth—who are not content with a vegetative existence in the corner of the house but, when thwarted by the male world or when they find it lacking in moral insight or practical initiative, do not hesitate to take their destiny, or the nation's, into their own hands. In the light of this extra-institutional awareness of woman's standing, the proper account of origins is a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in which man and woman are different aspects of the same divine image. "In the image of God He created him. Male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). The decision to place in sequence two ostensibly contradictory accounts of the same event is an approximate narrative equivalent to the technique of post-Cubist painting which gives us, for example, juxtaposed or superimposed, a profile and a frontal perspective of the same face. The ordinary eye could never see these two at once, but it is the painter's prerogative to represent them as a simultaneous perception within the visual frame of his painting, whether merely to explore the formal relations between the two views or to provide an encompassing representation of his subject. Analogously, the Hebrew writer takes advantage of the composite nature of his art to give us a tension of views that will govern most of the biblical stories—first, woman as man's equal sharer in dominion, standing exactly in the same relation to God as he; then, woman as man's subservient helpmate, whose weakness and blandishments will bring such woe into the world.

A similar encompassing of divergent perspectives is achieved through the combined versions in the broader vision of creation, man, and God. God is both transcendent and immanent (to invoke a much later theological opposition), both magisterial in His omnipotence and actively, empathically 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. The creation story might have been more "consistent" had it begun with Genesis 2:4b, but it would have lost much of its complexity as a satisfying account of a bewilderingly complex reality that involves the elusive interaction of God, man, and the natural world. It is of course possible, as scholars have tended to assume, that this complexity is the purely accidental result of some editor's pious compulsion to include disparate sources, but that is at least an ungenerous assumption and, to my mind, an implausible one as well.