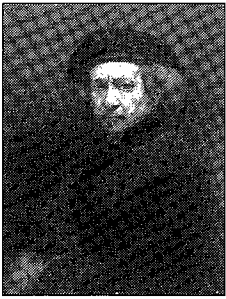


stead of satisfying the vogue for classical themes done in classical style, Rembrandt chose biblical subjects that appealed to his own moral preoccupations, and these he painted in a style that his contemporaries found “unfin-



Self-Portrait (1659)

ished” and much too realistic. His commissions dwindled, and payments were frequently withheld. He supposedly retorted, “If I want to give my mind diversion, it is not honor I seek, but freedom.” Rembrandt thus faced a choice that few artists had known before but that many were to experience af-

ter him: whether to paint for one’s wallet or for one’s soul. Almost inadvertently, Chapman concludes, Rembrandt had invented a new idea: “the artist as an independent, self-governing individual.”

THE BOOK OF J. *Translated by David Rosenberg. Interpreted by Harold Bloom. Grove Weidenfeld. 340 pp. \$21.95*

Harold Bloom acknowledges that there are “profound reasons for not regarding the Bible as a literary text comparable to *Hamlet* and *Lear*.” But his commentary on poet David Rosenberg’s translation of the oldest strand of the Pentateuch—what scholars call the J text—makes a powerful case that it is just that, a sublime work of literature. The Yale critic proceeds to claim that the author of the “Book of J” was neither Moses nor a scribe but a woman, a “sophisticated, highly placed member of the Solomonic elite” (c. 950–900 B.C.E.) who wrote in “friendly competition with her only strong rival among those contemporaries, the male author of the court history narrative in 2 Samuel.”

On these bold premises, Bloom constructs a scholarly *tour de force*, not only detailing the various revisions of the text (beginning with the E revision, c. 850–800), but also challenging the misreadings of the Bible that have been bequeathed to us by the Jewish and Christian tra-

ditions. But if the Yahweh of J is not the God of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims—or even of secular critics—who is he? According to Bloom, he is a literary creation, an impish character “who behaves sometimes as though he is rebelling against his Jewish mother, J.” Yahweh, as the Tower of Babel episode shows, is the representation of the irony of mankind’s longing to be godlike: “We are godlike or theomorphic, or can be,” writes Bloom, “but we cannot be Yahweh, even if we are David . . . We are children always, and so we build the Tower of Babel. J’s Yahweh is a child also, a powerful and uncanny male child, and he throws down what we build up.”

The question that this provocative reading of the oldest part of the Bible raises is obvious: What do we make of Yahweh’s demotion—or promotion—from divinity to literature? It is clearly Bloom’s project, developed in his many books, to subsume the sacred within the highest order of poetry, the poetry of the sublime. His project descends from the great poet William Blake, who saw the sacred as the imagination’s supreme creation.

Bloom is not a biblical scholar who has uncovered new source material; he is a critic giving the J text the interpretation that is most resonant and meaningful for him. And just as Bloom can read religion out of the Bible, so may future scholars learn to read Bloom’s Blakean romanticism out as well. Whether they succeed, however, does not diminish the playful vigor of the interpretation. It is an altogether fitting accompaniment to Rosenberg’s startling translation of the poem that describes the primordial spiritual relationship: “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.”

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN: *The Duty of Genius. By Ray Monk. Free Press. 672 pp. \$29.95*

The interest in Ludwig Wittgenstein is almost as mysterious as the man was himself. In addition to countless memoirs by friends and acquaintances, there have been poems, paintings, musical arrangements, five television specials, and, most recently, a hefty fictionalized biogra-