

players, Reese does a remarkable job of mapping the baffling, venerable, multilayered bureaucracy that serves the pope.

On the larger questions of church governance in the 21st century, Reese is less penetrating. For instance, he correctly points out that the Vatican has, like other large bureaucracies, developed a life of its own. But he does not explore whether the curia's growing power has begun to eclipse that of the college of bishops—or whether the Vatican will allow local churches and episcopates greater control over their own affairs, including the appointment of bishops. The reluctance to address these thorny issues is regrettable, not least because of their relevance to the

Vatican's current troubled relationship with the Catholic Church in America.

On the prospects for change, Reese offers little in the way of realistic prediction. In passages studded with phrases such as “there is a need” and “it might be better,” he makes his own wishes clear: more collegiality, more lay involvement, more openness in the Vatican's way of proceeding (not to mention larger doses of faith, hope, and love). But despite his careful reportage, he does not give a sense of how many in the Vatican share his sentiments, and how many continue to regard the church as a fortress against a threatening world.

—Thomas M. Gannon, S.J.

Arts & Letters

GENESIS:

Translation and Commentary.

By Robert Alter. Norton. 324 pp. \$25

GENESIS:

A New Translation of the Classic Biblical Stories.

By Stephen Mitchell. Harper Collins.

161 pp. \$20

We credit episodes from the Book of Genesis with a vivid and irreducible simplicity, so etched are they into the minds of countless Bible readers. Yet biblical scholarship reveals the text itself to be full of knots and snares. The more attentively it is inspected, the more elusive it becomes, like a Seurat painting that dissolves into dots when approached.

The stories in Genesis are the work of at least four different writers—probably more. These authors are distinguishable by style and narrative practices, including the various names they give to God (Yahweh, Elohim). Perhaps five centuries, the interval between the tenth century B.C. and the fifth, separate the earliest portions of Genesis from the latest, and it was only in the fifth century B.C. that an editor, sometimes known as “the redactor,” wove together the various strands of received narrative. Those who believe in the divinely inspired character of the Bible would have God directing the redactor's choices. To nonbelievers, the redactor is more akin to Homer, who also gave a final masterful shape to

materials that had existed independently for centuries.

These two new translations of Genesis, each with its own individual eloquence, seem directed to different audiences. Alter, professor of literature at the University of California at Berkeley, includes a running commentary on his translation. At times, those comments—philological, literary, historical—leave room on the page for no more than half a dozen lines of translation. This is a Genesis for patient readers at ease with ambiguity and irresolution.

Alter is especially good at conveying the feel of a language that routinely juxtaposes phrases or sentences without the use of subordinating conjunctions (the practice is called “parataxis”). The insistent “there-ness” of Genesis (as of Homer) derives in good measure from the power of parataxis. In a world described by language that lacks the habit of grammatical subordination, every event is a defining event.

Mitchell, an accomplished translator of poetry and religious texts, offers “a new translation of the classic Bible stories” intended for readers who want a swift, uncluttered narrative. The whole of each elegantly designed page is translation; notes and comments are saved for the back of the book.

More significantly, Mitchell omits some parts of the biblical text and rearranges others, because he wants to strip from every

story the later accretions that, for him, mar its original form. He unwinds the various strands of Genesis and labels them—this is original, this an addition, this a repetition, this a stylistic lapse, and so forth. (Much the same thing went on in Homeric scholarship a hundred years ago, when editors who thought they knew best sought a proto-*Iliad* and a proto-*Odyssey* buried beneath layers of later narrative embellishment.) The result is a compact and vigorous narrative but not quite the Book of Genesis, which is less tidy than Mitchell would like it to be.

Alter, conversely, wants to understand *why* the redactor included the various passages that Mitchell relegates to the back. The two diverge over the very shape of the biblical text. Traditionally, Genesis ends with the death of Joseph, who is buried in a coffin in Egypt (no doubt mummified). For Alter, the book traces an intended, and literarily astute, arc from the boundless chaos of its opening to the mortal confines of its close. Mitchell, by contrast, ends his Genesis several paragraphs sooner, with the death of Jacob. For him, the portion that includes Joseph's death is among the "dull or awkward" accretions best dispatched to an appendix. There may be a sound scholarly argument for doing so, but (to judge by Alter's version) it is not a winning argument.

—James Morris

LUSH LIFE:

A Biography of Billy Strayhorn.

By David Hajdu. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 306 pp. \$27.50

Bookish, penetratingly original, and obsessively cultured, composer Billy Strayhorn (1915–67) was once described by a friend as "a miniature, black Noel Coward." This sensitive and nuanced biography relates how Strayhorn grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Pittsburgh, enduring the cruelty of an embittered father and dreaming of becoming a concert pianist. Although devoted to European classical music, Strayhorn suffered from a growing isolation (compounded by his homosexuality) that made such high-art aspirations elusive. A chance introduction to Duke Ellington in 1938 gave the young Strayhorn the opportunity to realize his musical ambitions and to lead the urbane, sybaritic life he yearned for. Relocating to Manhattan, he took a privileged place in the Ellington organization as the bandleader's

silent composing partner.

The question of Strayhorn's contribution to American music is vexed by the general failure of the academic music establishment to come to terms with Ellington. But even if Ellington's legacy were well understood and appreciated, there would still be uncertainty about Strayhorn's role. The two men's working relationship was so close that their music is often inseparable. But not always: Ellington's melodic, rhythmic, and timbral inventions were intimately connected to the varied musical personalities of his band members. To that palimpsest Strayhorn added his own distinctive layer—dark, rich instrumentations and astringent dissonances that remain startlingly unique even when folded into the Ellington musical persona.

Hajdu, an editor at *Entertainment Weekly*, does not attempt to isolate Strayhorn's contribution. Apart from a thoughtful exegesis of Strayhorn's signature song "Lush Life," his comments about music are confined to the occasional evocative adjective. But the narrative contains intriguing clues. After one recording session, for instance, Strayhorn asked the trumpeter Clark Terry, "Did you enjoy your part?" "Big band" arranging is not thought of as polyphonic. But as this remark suggests, Strayhorn's distinctive sound is partly due to the uncommon melodic independence of each inner voice.

If Strayhorn's name is little known outside jazz circles, it is partly because he sacrificed fame for the freedom that comes with relative obscurity. As one close friend recalls, "He liked somebody to hide behind." Life under Ellington's protective wing was not without cost, however. Ellington's serene, aristocratic image was part bluff: like many creatures of show business, he was superstitious and sketchily educated. But Ellington also took his responsibilities as a public figure seriously. As Hajdu writes, the bandleader devoted "vast resources of ingenuity and will to project an image that promoted pride in and respect for black identity." Ellington could be manipulative, and Strayhorn could not always find the proper mix of anonymity and autonomy. But the resignation and sadness that haunted Strayhorn's later years (and that pervade the conclusion of this book) have less to do with this imperfect relationship than with the inability of the larger culture to find a place for an artist who refused to be anything other than himself.

—Scott DeVeaux