CHAPTER 3

Be This Fish
Creation in Process

The universe in its persistent becoming is richer than all our dreamings.
—STUART KAUFFMAN[1]

Fishy Grace

A popular theologian of the late third century was preaching on the watery deep of the creation story. He was riffing on a verse from the first creation story: "Let the waters produce living things, and living things were born" (Gen. 1:20). "Imitate the fish," he proclaimed. Though this creature does not appear high on the pecking order, food chain, or hierarchy of creation, "it should appear to you a miracle." Bishop Ambrose turns the fish into a metaphor of all our struggles amidst chaos.

> He is in the sea and he is on the waves; he is in the sea and swims with the swell of the water. On the sea the storm rages, the winds scream out, but the fish swims; he is not swallowed up because he is used to swimming. To you, this world is the sea. Its currents uncertain, its waves deep, its storms fierce. And *you must be this fish,* that the waves of the world do not swallow you.[2]

In the wild waters of the world, the fish does not go under. It is in its element. Amidst the unpredictable it swims in grace. For us, says Ambrose, developing his allegory, "it has been reserved that water should regenerate you

to grace." If it were my sermon I might continue: even when life seems to be flowing along calmly, its rhythms pleasingly supportive, currents of uncertainty ripple through my day. Waves of anxiety warn of some gathering storm amidst my relations or my obligations. The tempest may dissipate. Or it may blow in. It may be personal, it may be professional, it may be political. An undertow of chaos tugs at every moment. How I try to ignore, control, or flee that chaos.

What if instead we learn to swim right *through* its swells? This fishy grace is not just for the calamitous storms, when the monsters of the deep make their appearance. If we can practice our strokes during the calmer seas, we may be prepared to keep on swimming through raging storms. For Ambrose the oceanic regeneration is distilled into the baptismal font, with its ancient uterine form. His sermon was preached at a baptism: not a sprinkle upon a baby's forehead, then, but a ritual of spiritual rebirth following a rigorous training process. But in this chapter it is not the sacrament of baptism that will occupy us as such, but the cosmic con/text of Genesis 1, the genesis within which all generation and regeneration unfolds. That ancient narrative naturally enough often forms the starting point for the linear unfolding of a systematic theology.

We are pursuing a more wayward process. Therefore we come only now—soon enough!—to the current question of the universe and the ancient testimony to its creation. Its "in the beginning," its "God said," its "it is good," its "in the image of God" permeate the Western imagination of what we *are*. But we are also haunted by the waters of the deep. The mysterious imagery of a bottomless chaos from which the ordered world emerges has played, for reasons that will become apparent, a very minor role in theology until recently. Yet it plays a major role in the Genesis narrative: hidden in plain view! Our truth-quest, with its critical fidelity to scripture and its engagement of the most trusty knowing we can find about our shared reality, puts its hermeneutics to the test in this reading of Genesis 1. For in the primal waters is hidden, like treasure, a key not just to *what we are* but to *who we are becoming*. Recall that the very word *genesis* means literally "becoming."

Under the sign of "creation in process," we will consider more or less in sequence the mystery of the lost chaos, its mystical relation to the luminous dark, a vivid pagan creation myth that Genesis echoes and shifts, and the current scientific metaphor of "self-organizing complexity" as a device for rereading the emergence of the species in Genesis. We end in a "seascape of grace." But only after facing the bi-gendered "image of God" and the ecological meaning of the "dominion" text.

At stake in the hermeneutics of the bottomless deep, the *tehom* of Genesis 1:2, is mystery itself. So a theology of becoming both resists the literalizations

of our knowledge—whether they are scientific or theological—and insists upon our creaturely knowing-together, our creativity, and our responsibility as spokespeople for what we may call the *genesis collective*.

Ex Nihilo or Nihilism?

The grace of the fish lies not in escaping the watery chaos but in moving with its currents. Such grace does not transcend the water (like the absolute), nor does it drown (like the dissolute): our little fish, swimming bravely on, is an icon of the resolute! If we want to practice this oceanic grace, we need here to open the way and the channel theologically. So as Ambrose was preaching from the already ancient symbols of Genesis to his living context, we also read the currents of the beginning chaos as our *current* element.

In other words, the chaos—the turbulence, the uncertainty, the storms, and the depths of our actual life-process—is all signified by the watery deep, the *tehom*, of Genesis. And from that womby chaos, in the symbolic codes of many ancient peoples, including the Hebrews, the universe itself is born. The first creation narrative of Genesis is of course also giving perpetual birth to the biblical canon itself.

The narrative itself has long suffered from two kinds of interpretive absolutism. The literalist interpretations, unlike the Ambrosian allegory, reduce it to a bit of primitive pseudo-science. Then it lends itself to every form of religious war against secular science, whether the six-day creationism that simply junks the spacetime of astrophysics, or the more sophisticated "intelligent design" campaign that tries understandably to resist neo-Darwinian reductionism but in doing so allies itself with the U.S. politics of fundamentalism.

Beyond the problems of biblical literalism, theology in general interprets the text as proof of God's creation of the world from absolutely nothing. Certainly the *creatio ex nihilo* is one possible interpretation of the text and of the universe. Both Testaments picture a creation through divine speech, a dramatic beginning of this universe rather than a static or cyclical creation. Theologians rightly argue that the radical novelty and contingency of the creation—as creation, and not just inert eternal stuff—sets it off from a purposeless universe. Yet theology usually then presumes that the *ex nihilo* version of the creation is the only alternative to nihilism.

But something is fishy in the history of interpretation! For we learn from biblical scholars that the *ex nihilo* doctrine has no basis in the letter of the text itself. The Bible narrates instead various versions of a more mysterious process: that of creation from the deep, known as the watery chaos. It inspires an alter-

native both to the absolutes of a top-down, once-for-all act of creation—and to the dissolutes of a mechanistic reductionism. The third way of an open-ended process of creation emerges in resistance to the presumption of a preprocessed creation. We may call this doctrinal alternative the *creatio ex profundis*.[3]

If in this chapter we reflect on the creation from the watery deep as a drama, big bang and all, that never stops, the immensity of the universe drip-drops into our every moment. As the theological tradition recognizes, the primal creativity persists: *creatio continua*. But our particular theology may either alienate us from this continuing creativity or empower us to participate in it actively, indeed interactively. The first chapter of Genesis can be locked down as a report on the absolute origin from nothing. It can be locked out as mere prescientific ignorance. But what if instead we open it up, almost like a parable, to suggest unexpected meanings for our lives in process now? As Ambrose suggests, the waters of genesis and regeneration, of creation and of new creation are inseparable. Every beginning is a beginning-again. We begin again with the poor harassed text—over-used and under-understood, constantly being literalized and being debunked—of all beginning.

A Magnificent Mess

Try to bracket everything you've been taught about God and creation as you reread the opening verses of the Bible. Notice that there is no nothingness, but a whole lot of not-quite-somethingness.

> *(1) When* Elohim *began to create the heaven and the earth—(2) the earth was* tohu va bohu *and darkness was upon the face of* tehom *and* ruach *was pulsing over the face of the waters—(3) then* Elohim *said let there be light . . .*

The second verse is the one of which the French Jewish translator and commentator Rashi wrote a thousand years ago: "This verse cries out, 'interpret me!'"[4] Poignant—the text itself is crying out to be interpreted, begging for what would later be called "hermeneutics." Genesis 1:2 opens close to home, but unrecognizably so.

If "earth" exists it can only be as the energy of a potential planet, its condition uninhabitable: *tohuvabohu*. That phrase, sometimes translated "waste and void" but better translated "waste and wild," was devised for its onomatopoetic rhythm and rhyme. "It is easy to specify the minimal redundancy, the initial repetition, incipient dawn above the waters of chaos; it is the echo," writes a French philosopher of science, thinking of chaos theory. "Languages like to articulate it in various ways; tohu-bohu or brouhaha."[5] French dictionaries

contain the word *tohubohu,* and French moms scold kids for making one. The playful poetic repetition of the Hebrew may be of the essence of its meaning: for matter, as we are learning from a new physics, *is* at base rhythm. Indeed, superstring theory "suggests that the microscopic landscape is suffused with tiny strings whose vibrational patterns orchestrate the evolution of the cosmos."[6] The earth *tohuvabohu* suggests a rhyme that has not yet found its reason. And that is just—the beginning.

In the third metaphoric pair of the second verse, the *ruach Elohim*, the spirit/breath/wind of God, also pulses. Remember the whirlwind of Job, and John's uncontainable spirit blowing in truth, flowing as living water. The Hebrew *mrhpht* (often translated just "moved" or "hovered") connotes rather a spirit-rhythm as in the beating wings of a seabird, the oscillation of breath, or the ebb and flow of ocean. (Some scholars suggest that the verb *vibrate* best captures the range of its motile meanings.[7]) Flow in nature is a function not of a smooth continuous motion but of pulsation, as in the in- and out-take of breath keeping your supply of oxygen steady, as in the pump and pulse of your heart keeping your blood streaming, as in the ebb and flow of waves keeping the ocean moving.

It is the ocean that provides the primal metaphor of Genesis 1, as the *tehom*—the oceanic deep, later translated into Greek as *abyssos,* chaos. But the waters are also the more actualized sea, the *mayim*, over which the spirit vibrates, in exquisite attunement. Poetry synchs with the primal rhythm so much more effectively than our stilted propositions and theological abstractions. Or music: in the opening of Mahler's Third Symphony, a grand creation narrative in music, it is an eerie oscillation in the bass register that signifies the minimal gesture of genesis.[8]

There is surprising aquatic complexity in this brief text. Those spirit-waters (*mayim*) seem to flow from

> A careful reading of Genesis does not associate the formlessness, emptiness, darkness, the deep, or the waters with evil. . . . The creation story is a birth story, a story about the nativity of the earth and its creatures, including women and men. . . . A wildness, a free natural growth, is therefore part of all that lives.
>
> —KAREN BAKER-FLETCHER[9]

the darker waters of the deep, the *tehom.* Neither of these waters are identical with the terrestrial ocean that is produced by being divided from the deep above (an ancient cosmological picture, somewhat egg- or womb-like, of the darkness of the night sky and of the oceans as the two differentiated halves of the deep). These waters express the widespread myth of a primal chaos, an infinity of unformed and unfathomable potentiality. However we interpret them, the *tohubohu* of matter and the waters of the deep do not suggest some empty *nihil.*

If the cosmological intuition of the priestly writer of Genesis is not primitive ignorance, just waiting to be debunked by modern science and defended by modern fundamentalism, it is theopoetics more than theoscience. But does it therefore say nothing about the actual universe? Should we separate the stuff of science from the stories of religion, like the two halves of the deep?

What a wasted opportunity, just as science itself begins to outgrow its modern reductionism. "Story?" asks the biologist Stuart Kauffman. "Surely story is not the stuff of science. I'm not so sure. . . . If story is not the stuff of science yet is about how we get on with making our ever-changing livings, then science, not story, must change."[10] For not everything in science can be deduced. In its postmodern mode it recognizes itself as a model wrought of metaphors, relatively stabilized, on whose vibrant basis rigorous hypotheses and testable deductions can be made. Science is also on the mystery. Scientific reductionists have as difficult a time, of course, with such a paradigmatic shift as do religious absolutists. If we do not mistake the ancient biblical stories as pseudo-factual primitive science, if we do not abstract them into mere dogmas, we let the interpretive and inspiring power of the ancient stories come back into play, in our struggle to find our difficult way.

Lost Chaos of Creation

We may read the premodern poetry of Genesis as though it contains the intuitive germ of a postmodern science. We can read here, for instance, an inspiration for a chaos theory of creation. For it is in the chaos math and science of the last several decades that the West has begun to realize the meaning of "chaos"—of an iterative nonlinear process, not of pure disorder but rather of an alternative order, a process unfolding unpredictably and yet with organization, like the bifurcation of a tree's branches, the motion of a whirlwind, the spiral of galaxies. The iteration of a fractal algorithm depicts not a predictable continuity of sameness, but a rhythm of repetition with a difference. Fractal "self-similarity" unfolds at different scales, like the whole enfolded in each part, the macrocosm

in the microcosm. Thus it captures with greater precision than had been geometrically possible the vortex of a whirlwind. It models the way the veins of a leaf replicate the form of the branches, and each branch with its twigs iterates the form of the tree. Or similarly, the rocks, and the peaks, and the mountain range as a whole are iterations of pattern at different scales.

The algorithms of chaos mathematics depict not some formless disorder but the complex forms of flow, too complex precisely in their fluidity, to be captured in linear formulae. They recur in the branching patterns of our lungs and of our circulatory system. Chaos theorists find this principle depicted in a head of broccoli, a population growth-pattern, in Hokusai's famous painting, *The Wave*—each drop of the curling froth of a great wave is itself a micro-wave. So perhaps the notion of creation from the vibratory field of the *tehom*, the primal chaos, expresses—precisely as poetic metaphor—a rhythm and a truth of the universe itself.

> A planet like the Earth is bathed in the flow of energy from a star, which makes the whole surface of the planet an open, dissipative system. All life on the surface of the Earth makes use of this energy to maintain itself far from equilibrium, on the edge of chaos.
>
> —JOHN GRIBBIN[11]

Or when we hear in recent astrophysics of a mysterious new "dark energy" pervading, indeed pushing outward, the universe, we might wonder at the resonance with the ancient intuition of "darkness upon the face of the deep." Such resonances themselves iterate if we let them. They do not threaten to collapse the distinction between the disciplines of science and theology, practices incommensurable in style, history, and intention. They do, however, encourage some healing interdisciplinary conversation. The conversation between religion and science is still developing, but there were always anticipatory forms of it. For instance, a great reformer such as John Wesley insisted that his ministers keep up with science, called then "natural philosophy." He directed them to ask themselves: "Do I understand natural philosophy? If I have not gone deep therein, have I digested the general grounds of it? Have I mastered Gravesande, Keill, Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia*, with his 'Theory of Light and Colours'? In order thereto, have I laid in some stock of mathematical knowledge? Am I master of the mathematical ABC of Euclid's

Elements? If I have not gone thus far, if I am such a novice still, what have I been about ever since I came from school?"[12]

Yet an abyss remains between the sensibilities of science and the language of faith. Theology cannot simply blame scientific reductionism for this breakdown in communication. The schism is symptomatic of the spiritual disease of supernaturalism: the attempt to dissociate spirit from matter. Hence we noted earlier that the religious absolute can have a *dissolute* effect on the world: truth out of touch. When theology insists upon creation/genesis from a mere void, it can render the embodiment in which we live every moment of our actual lives close to nothingness. Materiality becomes empty of value, little more than surface of carnal temptations and meaty decay to be passed through with as little contamination as possible.

Panentheism

Yet for the peoples of the book, the goodness of creation, human and nonhuman natures together, is a nonnegotiable value. It cannot be traded against any supernatural hope. The core doctrine of Christianity, the incarnation, celebrates the embodiment of God in the world. And the Hebrew story of creation illustrates God the Spirit pulsing intimately, touchingly, upon the face of the uncreated waters. The fluidity of an emergent universe is the process of a becoming world. For a theology of becoming/*genesis* matter matters to the spirit. Spirit *matters:* it takes on flesh. It is not just a matter of the single incarnation, but of an enfleshment always and everywhere taking place, and always differently.

> [God's] goodness fills all his creatures and all his blessed works full, and endlessly overflows in them. . . . God is everything which is good, as I see, and the goodness which everything has is God.
>
> —JULIAN OF NORWICH[13]

This is the implication of Wesley's return to the mystical Christian sense that God is the spirit of the world, the *anima mundi*. "God is in all things, and . . . we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature." From this all-presence he draws ecological as well as theological inferences: "we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical Atheism."[14] Similarly, in traditions

close to process theology, the universe may be named "the body of God."[15] This is not to *identify* God as spirit with the body of the world, as in pantheism ("all is divine"). Instead, process theology speaks of "panentheism," to retrieve the classical vision that "all is *in* God." Such radical incarnationalism does not diminish the distinction between the material world and divine mystery but rather intensifies the open-ended interaction between them.

In a documentary by Bill Moyers about the greening of evangelical Christianity,[16] an Appalachian churchwoman is seen speaking at a demonstration against the coal-extraction process called "mountain top removal." This voracious destruction of an entire landscape is decried—not so surprisingly—as a desecration of God's creation. But one is startled to hear her announce: "The earth is God's body."[17]

Environmental spirituality, or ecotheology, as well as conversations with natural science, are examples of emerging ways to *re*associate theology with what matters. Might we awaken our culture from the sense that the matter at hand is some dull, opaque stuff, some lifeless and unfeeling substratum that we with our computer-like brains can manipulate however we please? The materialities of our lives—in the mysteries of the subatomic and the astrophysical energies, in the urgencies of the flesh, the subtleties of moods, the formation of social roles, the distribution of resources, the endangerment of the carrying capacity of the earth, the sacraments of the church—bespeak our most *spirited* interactions.

Over Our Heads

On the face of the deep: a profound potentiality for theology itself faces us. Its very darkness is mysterious to some, terrifying to others. Indeed, many theologians have identified this chaos with evil itself. Karl Barth interpreted the deep as the nothingness to which God said a primordial "no" by the very act of creation: on them, "even the Spirit of Elohim is condemned . . . to the complete impotence of a bird hovering or brooding over shoreless or sterile waters."[19] For him Genesis 1:2 reads as a parody of pagan mother-goddess imagery. Yet for most Jews and Christians it reads differently, as a mysterious fold within a dignified liturgy of cosmic beginnings. In much of the theological heritage, the relation of the divine spirit to the dark waters seemed far from menacing.

Augustine, like his mentor Ambrose, deploys the deep for a baptismal theology: "This is the spirit which from the beginning 'moved upon the face of the waters.' For *neither can the Spirit act without the water, nor the water without the Spirit.*"[20] As the genesis-flow moves in Augustine's imaginary between creation

and baptism, it cannot refer only to the creation as a cosmic singularity or point of origin, but rather to the ongoing process of creation. The elemental interaction of airy spirit and living water infuses the process of genesis as a whole, and so of every new creation, every renewal of life, every new beginning—like that "living water" of regeneration we glimpsed in the story of the woman at the well.

> Thou has thy mighty wings
> outspread
> And brooding o'er the
> chaos shed
> Thy life into the impregn'd
> abyss
> Thy vital principal infused
> And out of nothing's
> womb produced
> The heav'n and earth and
> all that is
>
> —CHARLES WESLEY[18]

To return to our sermon: when you make a fresh start—perhaps just getting up after a night of dark dreams, or starting to write after a spell of blockage, or loving after a time of loneliness, or living after a great loss—you have faced the dark waters. But are they evil? Or are they rather more ambiguous, chaotic, turbulent, surging with still unformed potentials along with deformed pasts? There may be evil mixed in, as often in what Augustine called a fallen world there will be. But the tehomic depth, for all its chaotic risk, is not evil. The open-ended interactivity of the process of creation exposes us to suffering and evil. And to great good. And sometimes it will take great discernment to tell the difference. It will take great spirit. We are always in over (our) heads.

Yet the spirit continues to move upon our waters. The *ruach*, this breathing, pulsing, hovering spirit—your spirit somehow, yet somehow more and other than "you"—have you felt it moving? Have you found yourself drawn into its rhythm, into the creative brooding, the oscillation of risk and promise? If so, then this creation metaphor is neither opaque in its darkness nor neon in its illumination.

A Luminous Darkness

In the mystical tradition the interplay of darkness and light takes on another intensity. It becomes symbolic of the interplay of unknowing and knowing in our language about the ultimate: in our theology. Nicholas of Cusa, the

fifteenth-century mystic with radical intuitions about God and the universe, was a polymath who kept current with the latest mathematics and science. Announcing that there is no center in the universe, he was ahead of Copernicus and Galileo, who merely claimed that the sun and not the earth was its center. Over a century later, in the more defensive era of the Counter-Reformation, Giordano Bruno got burnt at the stake for espousing in a more flamboyant tone similar ideas about the infinity and omnipresence of God in the "contracted infinity" of the universe. In the first chapter we noted that for Cusa the only predicate that can literally be applied to God is the negative "infinite." In this tradition of negative theology the darkness is not evil but mystery, the space of the unknowable that nonetheless calls us, reveals something of itself to us, invites our response. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa writes in the second century: "When therefore Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, Moses approached the dark cloud where God was."[22] Pseudo-Dionysius, who coined the phrase *negative theology*, invokes God in a poem as the "luminous darkness."[23]

> According to the theology of negation, nothing other than infinity is found in God. Consequently, negative theology holds that God is unknowable either in this world or in the world to come, for in this respect every creature is darkness, which cannot comprehend infinite light, but God is known to God alone.
>
> —NICHOLAS OF CUSA[21]

In their writings these authors wander knowingly, in reverent adventure, on the mystery. In terms of the sign of creation, they could not directly question the orthodox doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. But we might now ask: Is the uncreated "darkness on the face the deep" the very bottomlessness of the divine? A depth of which finite creatures can have no knowledge—only an inkling, a hint garnered at the edge of awareness, where our most radiant capacity trails into oblivion? Where our deductions break down, our certainty dissipates, our cognitive fuses blow? Thus Cusa writes of negative theology: "this whom it worships as inaccessible light is not light as is corporeal light, whose opposite

is darkness, but is most simple and infinite light, in which darkness is infinite light; and that this infinite light always shines in the darkness of our ignorance but the darkness cannot comprehend it."[24] That darkness of our unknowing is not sin but an inevitable limitation.

So exegetically we may read the "darkness on the face of the deep" as that darkness from which at another moment *Elohim* differentiates the light: "God separated the light from the darkness" (1:4). In other words the original dark *is* also original light, a depth that contains both darkness and light, or more precisely, transcends that distinction: it would be none other than the "luminous dark." It is like a picture of the immensity of the universe—vast darkness indeed—through which ripple invisible waves of light-energy. Only with certain instruments, or within the galactic neighborhoods of stars, as with our sun, can the light be distinguished. But Genesis is a theopoetics, not an astrophysics, of light born from this dark.

Still, one may retort: Why does God call the light good, and not the dark? Doesn't that prove that Barth is right on this—darkness biblically is evil?

I don't see how. *Elohim* exclaims with delight at the light—it is the new thing, the unfolding of a new order, the explication by word of this universe. How does that make the *implicate* order, the mysterious potentiality, from which it comes *bad*? Is the womb evil because the infant snatched lovingly from it is "good"?

Besides, surely we can no longer blithely use the adjective *dark* as synonymous with "evil." The light-supremacism of our spiritual traditions has reinforced white-supremacism, making it easy to associate dark skins with spiritual darkness, with chaos and evil.[25] We have missed the bright white evils of *order*: for example, in the unparalleled orderliness of fascism, of totalitarianism, and more currently, of the slick transnational homogenization of the face of our world. The corporatocracy erects throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America the idols of white beauty. People of color—the variegated shades of our embodiment as human creatures—thus internalize bodily ideals they can never match: "not quite, not white." Such inflicted order violates the very process and mystery of creation. The depth questions of mysticism appear on the surfaces of our living relationships. Truth touches upon our very skins. Spirit *matters.*

Of Wombs and Warriors

We are reading the face of the deep. We touch its ancient tracery of wrinkles. The semitic relative of the Hebrew *tehom* is the Sumerian *Tiamat,* meaning also salt water, deep, chaos. Both are grammatically feminine. But in the cuneiform

of the oldest creation epic, the *Enuma Elish,* Tiamat is very much a woman. She is the Grand Mother, the creator-goddess, of a tradition the Hebrews would have encountered during their Babylonian exile. Before the beginning, Tiamat mingles her waters with her mate Apsu, "abyss." From their union the gods precipitate. She is the fluid matrix in which this new life develops. As the story goes, the children then begot a third and boisterous generation.

Now begins the trouble (interesting how most narratives of origin tell of some kind of "fall"). Apsu wants to kill the noisy grandchildren: "By day I cannot rest, by night I cannot sleep; I will destroy them . . . and then let us sleep!" Agonized, Tiamat protests, sounding a way of nonviolence poignantly at odds with her writers' culture: "Why should we destroy that which we ourselves have brought forth? Their way is indeed very painful, but let us take it good-naturedly!"[26] He goes on with his scheme. The grandchildren kill him first. After a bout of mythico-clinical depression, Tiamat gets in touch with her anger. Breeding monsters, the poet transmutes her into a symbol of pure evil: quite a demotion! The loving mother of reality is turned into the monster of the deep.

Evil can now for the first time be identified with femininity: "it is only a female thing you fear," sneers the great warrior god Marduk at his peers, who were afraid to confront her. He successfully manipulates their terror, frames Tiamat as primal terrorist, and slaughters her. He then rises to rule the universe he constructs from her bleeding corpse. Creation, in other words, is a work of matricide. However, he produces the world in a sequence that Genesis echoes. The text of Genesis 1, after all, had been composed in response to the Babylonian exile and all the loss it meant for the Jews. Babylon's rulers were honored as incarnations of Marduk. While the city-state of Babylon was becoming the paradigm of aggressive empire building, its poets crafted the paradigm of creation by destruction.

Given the parallels, may we read the Genesis *tehom* as an allusion to Tiamat, and *Elohim* to Marduk? Biblical scholars draw on divine warrior motifs in Isaiah and the psalms to make a case that the biblical God does create through violence, that the chaos is evil, and that God creates and redeems *not from nothing* but from the struggle with the sea monster, sometimes called Leviathan.[27] Some Jewish and Christian interpreters thus discover in Genesis 1:2 a quiet replay of creation by murder. Is *this* then the mystery of the lost chaos? Must it be hidden because it echoes a bloody patriarchal warrior myth?

Certainly there are biblical texts that demonize the deep and its monsters: "You divided the sea by your might/you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. / You crushed the heads of Leviathan" (Ps. 74:13-14). This is a poignant

theopolitical response to invasion by Babylon. Such a fearful response is perfectly human. The psalmist hopes—as the poets of Babylon also hoped—for the most powerful force of all, the strong arm of the Divine Warrior, to come to the rescue. To save us from all that we fear. From imperial enemies out there and intimate threats within. Fear of whatever shadows our light, whatever transgresses boundaries, leaks across categories, sneaks out of closets, whatever she-sea might suddenly flood our fragile confidence. Fear of the "female thing." Of all things too deep and too fluid: we may call this fear *tehomophobia*.

The primal feminine waters metaphorically iterate the salt waters of the womb. And the heroic warrior-ethos of the occident is based on a cosmic matricide. Of course, the Hebrews mimicked and mirrored the patriarchy of the ancient environment. Not only does biblical monotheism inevitably make God male, but the divine warrior recurs in the Bible in misogynist form. Preeminently he appears in the Christian Apocalypse, where Tiamat the horror of Babylon appears transmogrified into the Whore of Babylon. Thus salvation entails "no more sea."

Robin Morgan's feminist stanza—"I am a monster/and I am proud"[28]—runs like a chant at the back of my mind whenever I hear of great warriors, gods or men, slaying their various dragons. So it is not insignificant that the text of Genesis 1 does not even hint at violence, let alone matricide. And there may be a certain mockery of the pagan myth, if in a different sense than Barth meant it. The priestly narrative can be read as parody of the imperial model of creation by violence that had wreaked such horrors upon Israel. The text implicitly counters any ideology that demonizes chaos to justify a brutal *order*. So in Genesis the watery chaos does not signify an evil to be conquered by a good God reigning high and dry above it. It is more like the very womb of the world. Thus Job's whirlwind God returns to the same scene:

> Were you there when I stopped the waters / As they issued gushing from the womb? / When I wrapped the ocean in clouds / and swaddled the sea in shadows? (Job 38)[29]

Similarly, the great creation poem, Psalm 104, celebrates the oceanic: the monster Leviathan is exalted as a "playmate of God," where "the great sea monsters" are a source of joy to the creator, no scarier in Genesis 1:23 than all the fishy life that "swarms in the sea." This biblical counterculture does not romanticize the chaos. But like the whirlwind, like Genesis 1, it celebrates the fishy grace of the deep: we may call this alternative sensibility *tehomophilia*. Embracing the depths of life, in which are mingled the depths of divinity itself, we participate in an open-ended creativity. We no longer huddle within the frozen order of an absolute power, waiting to be saved from the creation itself. We are called into

a process of interaction with our fellow creatures—and with the one who calls us forth.

Genesis and Genetics

Already in the beginning, we are called to take responsibility for our worlds. In the story, we are created as collaborators in the creativity, in the image of the creator. Yet this cooperation in creation is not solely human. On the contrary, it is first of all the earth and the sea that are called to *put forth* or *bring forth* the species that will inhabit them. Both earth and sea are depicted as entities response-able to the divine invitation to generate life. "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it" (Gen. 1:11). And it does, with all that botanical specificity repeated, beginning to overwhelm this short, liturgical chapter, and insistently so. It is surely no coincidence that the much longer *Enuma Elish* lacks any reference to the flora and fauna of creation, but leaps right from the stars and planets to the humans, who appear alone, created to be slaves of the gods.

> The extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies with ever fresh vigor. The whole show has been on fire from the word go!
>
> —ANNIE DILLARD[30]

"And God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:13). An intuition comes through here of divine pleasure in the results: As though God's suggestions, the content later to be called "the word," and even later "the lure," have yielded not altogether predictable fruit. God *sees,* not *says*, that it is good. The element of surprise, of real perception of something new, has been theologically too little perceived. Then "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures . . ." (1:20). So they do, those mysterious waters, responding to zoological cues. And oh it is good. Once again, the earth brings forth—narrated with more of the loving, repetitive lists

of biodiversity. And that is how the creation takes place, through the co-creative action of the creatures: ". . . the waters dance in cocreative activity with God."[31]

If we quit looking for an omniscient report, we may discern in the text a quasi-evolutionary intuition into what biologists call "emergence." The various populations thrive within the earth and the sea from which they emerge. The earth and the sea appear as super-organisms, anticipating the twentieth-century Gaia Hypothesis of the earth as a single complex ecosystem rather than just the sum of mechanisms more characteristic of modern taxonomies. They are creative creatures of integrity and responsiveness.

Is God the composer calling forth an ensemble to play with? An ensemble of ensembles? *Elohim* calls forth art, like the music of a jazz ensemble, with multiple solos and constant reintegration, with ever more complex riffs on the elemental themes, sounded in the depths. Primal themes, like $E = mc^2$ and the law of gravity, seem to express the law or *logos* of this universe. Then when biology happens, ACGT—the letters representing the four nucleic acids comprising the gene—sound the primal theme. The variations on those four will branch out into the thirty thousand genes making up the human genome (close in number and constitution to a chimp) and account for the unfathomable diversity of life. No wonder the science writer Matt Ridley cannot help exclaiming, "In the beginning was the word!"[32]

The *logos* of John 1.1, echoing the Elohimic utterance of Genesis, here becomes a metaphor for genes. If ACGT is itself a primal theme upon which we creatures riff at a collective level way beneath consciousness, is it not also a possible metaphor of the divine word? Here genesis and genetics are one. Yet only a reductionist science, imagining a deterministically programmed genome, will shut down the open-ended interactivity. As Ridley demonstrates in his aptly titled *Nature Via Nurture*, "genes are not puppet masters or blueprints. Nor are they just carriers of heredity. They are active during life; they switch each other on and off; they *respond to the environment*."[33] Our genes not only order our potentiality, but absorb the influence of formative experiences. Contrary to the nothing-buts of either genetic biology or social environment, our embodied life is an intensely relational process.

For as John 1 riffs on Genesis 1: without the word "not one thing came into being." Neither text suggests that the word is *all* that it takes! For without the co-creativity of the earth and sea and all the other creatures in the evolutionary process, this particular world would also not be made. But then we are speaking theologically, not scientifically, imagining our relationship as creatures to the creator.

Self-Organizing Creation

The metaphor of a God who speaks, who calls, who creates intentionally, surely implies some notion of a designing intelligence. But are we then ipso facto implicated in a theology of "intelligent design" (ID)? Advocates of ID claim that complexity of the universe and of living things can only be explained by an intelligent cause, not a random process such as natural selection. While in attempting to make scientific arguments, they avoid explicit theology, "God" in the classical sense of the first cause is of course the designer. I actually agree with the ID advocates when they announce: "We are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged."[35] A 1950s-style neo-Darwinian reduction of life to the interplay of chance and natural law is a theological conversation-stopper. Yet as Ridley suggests, such reductionism is also an increasingly marginal kind of biology. Besides, as the first chapter was at pains to communicate, the reassertion of a theological absolute is not the best response to a reductionist dissolute.

> The creative Wisdom of all things has established marvelous and ineffable harmonies by which all things come together in a concord or friendship or peace or love or however else the union of all things can be designated.
>
> —JOHN THE SCOT[34]

The ID proponents project the old picture of a Creator-God, sitting in heaven planning and directing the structure and course of the universe. Not only is such creationism too anthropomorphic. It does not account for the spontaneous interactivity of the creatures with each other and with the creator. It reinscribes the notion of a supernatural master plan delivered by an omnipotent and unilateral providence. The problematic moral presuppositions of such a view of divine power, beyond its sheer noncredibility to so many thoughtful people of faith, will be the subject of the next chapter. For now suffice it to say that with its monarchical view of God, it cannot take into account the self-organizing complexity by which life in fact emerges. Such theology offers a preplanned, preprocessed creation, rather than a creation in process.

One scholar of science and religion, reflecting on the above divine commands to bring forth, suggests that God *continually creates* through self-orga-

nizing systems. Drawing on Ilya Prigogine and Stuart Kauffman in their work on the emergence of complexity and order in nonlinear systems, Ian Barbour proposes that God acts as a "structuring cause," influencing the range of possibilities within which creatures act. Many share his understanding of God as "designer of a self-organizing process."[36] Or one might privilege the biblical metaphors of divine *logos* or *sophia*, word or wisdom, to express the ancient intuition into what Whitehead, in his philosophical reconciliation of science and religion, considers God: the ground of order and novelty, offering an "initial aim" or "lure" to each emerging occasion. Rather than Intelligent Design we might speak of Creative Wisdom. The wisdom does not impose order but calls forth self-organizing complexity.

Contrary then to any vision of a linear designer-universe, the creation is not portrayed in Genesis as God's solo-performance. One can only read there a process of cosmic collaboration. Not a thing-like creation but a complex interactive process is called forth: we may call it the *genesis collective*. Emerging from the mysterious *tehom*, the very matrix of differentiation, creatures become, like infants, increasingly other from the mother, capable of relationship—but never altogether separate. Genesis involves generations of forth-coming, multiplying creatures. The gathering cooperation unfolds as a rhythm, a cosmic liturgy: divine lure, creaturely improvisation, and divine reception—ooh, good!

When the level of order, of what biologists call "self-organizing complexity," reaches a new level, so does the risk of chaos! But since complexity theory teaches that creativity in the universe—the evolutionary leaps in organic versatility—emerges "at the edge of chaos," this risk also expresses the creative wisdom. The creation called forth in genesis is a *kosmos*, in the Greek sense of a decorative order. But unlike classical, symmetrical aesthetic, this cosmos unfolds an art of flows, waves, disruptions, and surprises. A disciplined improvisation is called forth in creatures—at great risk. Genesis names not a static and settled cosmos, but something more like what James Joyce playfully dubbed "chaosmos." In the interplay of formlessness and form, chaos and order, emergence and collapse, the possibilities in what process theology calls the "divine lure" find actualization. The genesis collective thus continues, moment by moment, amidst all its losses, to emerge.

> How manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all.
>
> —PS. 104:24

Male, Female, and Talkative

Out of the corner of my eye I see a familiar creature jumping up and down, crying, "What about *me*?" I've been trying to defer that one's entry, for it has dominated every discussion of creation so far, and is usually impatient to get past all those seedy, fishy, fruity, creeping, and crawling things—to me-me-me! The human. Well, ok. Even in the interest of widening our theological, cosmological, and ecological attention span I cannot really keep us out of the discussion any longer.

The primal art does seem (to *us*, I must add) to reach a new level in the creation of the human. For we are able to participate in the self-organizational complexity of the genesis collective with a self-conscious creativity. That self-consciousness is both our gift and our curse. It can fill us with ourselves—me-me-me—and therefore cancel out the *imago dei*: the consciousness of the multiplicity of creation that we share with the creator. So here begin all the painful self-contradictions of human history: self-organizing complexity tangling us up in ourselves.

The creation narrative of Genesis itself, that one little chapter, has had an extraordinary and indeed self-contradicting impact on human self-organization. For instance, the same microtext encodes *both* the possibility of gender equity among humans—*and* the exploitation of nonhuman species to the point of extinction:

> *Then God said, 'Let us make humankind* [adam] *in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in [God's] image . . . ; male and female [God] created them.* (1:26-27)

This fleeting reference to "our image," doctrinally known as the *imago dei,* is the single most influential articulation of human identity in the Bible. We who are *adam*—humanity—derived from earth, *adamah*, we are created "in the image" of *Elohim*, earth-and-sky-maker. The human is properly translated: the *earthling*. Humble human humus. But how could the earthling come in the image of something that does not have a body or a sex, something that remains always invisible? The visible "image [*eikon*] of the invisible God"? (Col. 1:15) The incarnation is imagined as the "second Adam," an image of the attempt to correct what would go wrong with the first when it got clogged with its "me-me-me." As to that obstruction, we might consider the difference between a stereotypical male ego and feminine dependency, a separative Adam and a soluble Eve. If the third way is that of a "connective self," it requires the reimagining

of our embodied interactivity.[37] The incarnation saves us precisely through our carnality, through the materiality that we share with all creatures, through the sexuality we share with many. *Saving* is the opposite not of *damning* but of *wasting*. The human experiment has long been at risk of wasting itself—a mystery of divine embodiment already working before any concept of "the incarnation" arises—the very materialization of the universe from the deep can be read as the birth of a cosmic body from the womb of the infinite. The universe as the body of God makes our creation in God's image all the more plausible—but no more mysterious. For we cannot discern God apart from the creatures, in whom God is ubiquitously, infinitely present. If, like Job, we may say "now my eye sees you" (42:5)—it may be after the whirlwind has cleared it of our anthropomorphic projections. What we see is: the rest of the creation. For our entire capacity to discern is creaturely. To discern divinity is not to see or hear something separable from the creation—except by theological abstraction.

However, part of our capacity is language. The primary genre of human creativity for the peoples of the book is doubtless language. So for us God's speaking *is* God's creating. *Elohim* creates *us* as an analogy to "themselves." Yes, the word *Elohim* is actually the plural form of *eloh*, God. The notion of *one* God was gradually folding the many gods into itself. But really only gradually. Worried interpreters try to make sense of this "we" as a council of angels, or an anticipation of the Trinity. And then (as though to keep us on this mystery of many in one) a plural grammar is inscribed in the all-important moment of the *imago*: "let *us* make . . ." The royal *we* was not Hebrew usage. This "we" of the creator suggests, as does the Trinity much later, that God is not a *simple* but rather a *multiple* One. Multiplicity is a many folded together as a complexity. The divine multiplicity hints at a complexity in the creator that unfolds into what William James, an ancestor of process theology, called "the pluralistic universe." *Elohim* here still resists "the logic of the One" that will come to dominate more conventionalized monotheism. A tehomic theology of creation celebrates rather than fears the fecund mystery of this multiplicity.

In the image of this divine Many-one, we humans aren't just anyone! Our multiplicity is assured through our sexual difference. The text does not require each human being to procreate. Genesis 1 is no more homophobic than it is tehomophobic. It describes a species that like other animals multiplies sexually. What distinguishes us is not our procreative equipment. It is this: that in the image of the We-God, we are created, male and female, without any difference of power or rank. Again, the chapter seems to counter the misogynist Babylonian epic, in which no such equality is declared. "For feminist readers of scriptures, no more interesting and telegraphic comment exists on the nature of being

human and on the nature of God."[38] Try as some do to collapse the first into the second creation story, that of Eden with its troubling view of the woman, the message of Genesis 1 remains unambiguously gender-egalitarian.

Kabash the Earth?

At the same time, the same text seems to telegraph a formidable anti-ecological code. Both genders are granted "dominion" to "fill and subdue" (the Hebrew verb is *kabash!*) the earth. That *dominion* has been read as a warrant for *domination*. It is the prime shibboleth now justifying our exploitation of the earth and its elements. It is the password legitimating our overheating of that upper atmosphere called "the heavens" in Genesis, and our devastation of other species, to the point of not using, but using them *up*—at the rate of whole populations, and possibly dozens, going extinct every day.

Could there be a greater mockery of the narrative of Genesis 1? The rumor that dominion lets us do whatever we please to other earth-creatures conveniently bolsters an economics of unrestrained global growth—the corporatocracy we mentioned in our opening chapter.[39] Here the religious absolute of dominion merges with the secular dissolute of amoral corporate greed. For instance, just as many evangelicals begin to embrace creation-care, the Southern Baptist Convention put out a statement rejecting government-mandated limits on carbon dioxide and other emissions as "very dangerous" because they could lead to government interference in business and "major economic hardships" worldwide.[40] Yet the convention supports precisely the economic policies of predatory global corporations that are causing the major economic hardships. As in the Cornwall Declaration cited earlier, this contradiction shows how religious absolutism fuses with a morally dissolute greed. This anti-environmentalism is particularly histrionic at this moment, as it is attempting to stop the tendency toward a greening of more conservative evangelical Christians.[41]

Could this exploitative, exterminist domination possibly be what the authors of Genesis had in mind?

Well, if not, you may wonder, why "dominion"? Indeed, why the command to "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and *kabash* it?" My old teacher John Cobb, a prophet of the Christian ecological movement, smiles when this is put to him. "Yes," he says, "this is the only commandment of the Bible that we have managed to obey!"[42] Certainly the priestly narrator was writing in the context of expansive empires, with their entrenched patterns of domination. Despite some lingering fears of snakes, wolves, and other predators in the countryside, humans were already established as the dominant species. So could the purpose

of the text conceivably be to flatter humans for being at the apex of creation and to encourage their destruction of the wild things God just deemed so "good"? Well, respond the anti-environmentalists, only humans are "very good." The answer to that is sorry, that isn't what the Bible says. It says, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (1:31). *We humans* are not very good; we are *part of* a very good genesis collective. Indeed, the under-quoted text immediately following the over-quoted declaration of our dominion, announces that we, just like the other animals can have every kind of plant to eat. Our Genesis 1 dominion is strictly vegetarian!

How could dominion in the con/text of Genesis 1 mean anything but *to call this gifted and aggressive earthling to responsibility?* Does not our "right" of dominion mean precisely *responsible care-taking?* But aren't we also invited into creativity, novelty, excess, "life abundant"? Surely. But then wouldn't the life-loving wisdom be calling us to a creativity that must be fundamentally opposed to an amoral, greed-driven, productivity? How can our creativity in the image of God mean anything but an emulation of the cooperative process of creation itself? Would the creative wisdom want us to help save or to help waste the world? In the image of the creator we are invited to a *creative response-ability*—an ability to respond in appreciative relation to the others, human and nonhuman. To respond not just dutifully but resourcefully, in the flow of creativity and in the beauty of grace.

Seascapes of Grace

Much has been lost, inconceivably and irreversibly lost. We grieve our losses so that we ourselves will not get lost. Already in the grieving the generativity of genesis, the flow of becoming, begins. The undertow of *tehom* can be painful. The pull of new beginning may seem to add insult to injury: to rub in our faces not just in dead actualities but the lost possibilities, all that might have been but cannot be.[44] The waters wear a dark face: we are mirrored mysteriously back to ourselves, deformed and aswirl. We are out of our depths. Faith does not mean "you can be anything you want to be." The world is not your oyster. It is your ocean.

> In a droplet—say how can this be?—The whole ocean of God flows into me.
>
> —ANGELUS SILESIUS[43]

Theology is here and there beginning—just beginning—to discern the face of the deep as the edge of our life's chaos. "Recovering the luminous possibilities of seascape,

dwelling at the edge of the sea's mysteries—not forgetting its tragic aspects—is one way of experiencing the graced possibilities of sacramental poetics." So theologian and ecological activist Mary Grey reflects on that moment of the Easter Vigil, the moment of the rising sun/son, when the candle symbolizing the resurrection is unsqueamishly plunged into the baptismal font: here the tradition has not lost "the fertile promise of the watery depths of chaos."[45]

Amidst the undulations of uncertainty and the riptides of loss, can we discern the possibility that is *good* for us? So many potentials end up dead in the water. The *creatio ex profundis* may still seem fishy. When the *ex nihilo* loosens its absolute grip, does the dogma of an all-controlling providence also lose its traction? The next chapter will explore the question and the reconstruction of divine power.

If the world is the great ocean, as Ambrose preached it, life remains a creative risk. But we may trust in the divine process. If we unclench the needy greedy ego and let it "let be." In spirit and in truth, it will not do our swimming for us, but may guide us within a depth that even now bears and births us. There is in the process of genesis a generosity that never ceases to offer regeneration.

"And you must be this fish, that the waves of the world do not swallow you."

Ha Shem

. . . . . .

While creation groans
With constant plea
From bayou to bay
And from bay to the sea
And the winds prophesy
What a meager repentance
Such blasphemous offerings
And what mocking remembrance
Of secret waters
Rippling with mirth
Spirit hovering
Over depths
Meeting earth
Dancing in love
With wind
From above
Panting
Then Pulsing
'Til the first cry
Of birth
Alpha
And
Omega
Thus speaks
Ha-Shem.

—KAREN BAKER-FLETCHER[46]

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CHAPTER 4

After Omnipotence
Power as Process

The power of God is the worship he inspires.
—ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD[1]

Power Flashes

Flashback 1: Taking a lunch break, I turned on the radio for company. On NPR's *Fresh Air*, Terry Gross was interviewing John Lind, the director of the Presidential Prayer Team, an Internet organization born in response to the collapse of the Twin Towers.[2] Their mandate is to pray for the president—that he may be upheld in wisdom, strength, and guidance under pressure. Sounds like a good idea. Asked if he believes that God chose this president, he hesitates for a moment (the PPT denies that it is partisan). "Yes," he says. President Bush is the right man for the crisis. Pressed, he admits they are also praying for this president's reelection. "What if the other candidate wins?" Gross asks. "Would that also be God's will?" "Yes. God's will is God's will."[3]

Flashback 2: Way back in the twentieth century. I was fourteen. Between classes, I was walking with a much older schoolmate (he may have been almost seventeen!). I was drawn to his gaunt soulfulness. I was trying to interest him in visiting my youth group at the United Methodist Church. I told him that our weekly discussion group is really interesting—that we talk about God and relationships and stuff. (Maybe I had an upcoming hayride in mind.) He interrupted me explosively. "Don't talk to me about God! My little sister died when