It’s startling, coming back to the book of Job, to notice just how different Job is from the figure one thinks the book is going to be about. Job is one of those books which bulks so large in the popular imagination that one imagines one has read it thoroughly when one has not, as, say, people who know that it’s about a whale and a quester think they already know all they need to know about *Moby Dick*. Now the received version of Job, the one we think we know all about, is very different from the story one might actually read in the Bible. But that received version is so fixed in our minds that we might actually lose sight of the book it is a summary of, even perhaps re-reading the book itself with blinders on.

The received version of Job sees him as a patient and self-abasing yes-man who takes everything a suspicious and rather sadistic God sees fit to heap on his head. The phrase “as patient as Job” conveys to our minds rather a milquetoast figure who keeps repeating things to the effect that “Well, God’s will is a mysterious thing,” or “Whatever God wills is all right with me,” while the Lord collapses his house upon the heads of the poor man’s children. Now a resilient and creative mis-reader might take all this patience as a kind of inner strength and courage, as if Job were as tough as an old oak tree that has stood under the blast of many storms. But something about the air of apology and self-abasement that hangs over the folk figure renders this view of the folk figure a little implausible.

The opening of the book of Job itself partly licenses this view of Job and of his story, although the bulk of the book disputes that version vigorously. Apparently the Job story, as Stephen Mitchell explains in the translation I will be following here, is considerably older than the Biblical version, so that the version we have now is a late, sophisticated version, concerned to work a transformative turn on the preceding versions, much in the way that the Shakespeare Hamlet that we know have seems to be an attempt to deepen and revise an earlier Hamlet, a slash and gouge revenge tragedy of the crudest kind, like Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* or Shakespeare’s own *Titus Andronicus*.

The book of Job opens and closes with sections in a prose, folk-tale style which seem to reflect something of the prevailing received forms of the Job legend. Job is himself a gentile, from the land of Uz, which seems to be Edom. Mitchell thinks that the author may have been gentile as well, noticing arguments to that effect by Abraham ibn Ezra, the medieval rabbinic commentator, and the frequent use of “arabisms” and other non-Hebrew forms in the text. In the prose sections the lord appears as a rather dim but also rather ruthless autocrat, somebody with a great deal of weight to throw around but no particular insight and no particular morality. Indeed,
if he resembles anybody else in literature, he resembles Zeus of the *Iliad*, who, like the lord here, is nominally in charge of a world he does not understand, and who, like him, is perpetually unleashing tragic fates upon mortals for purposes that to him seem to be little more than extended if rather cruel practical jokes.

The Lord is sitting in his celestial court, receiving the reports, as it says, of the various angels, who have “come to testify before the Lord.” The Accusing Angel, called Satan in the King James version, comes before the lord as part of this company. To understand this figure, we must separate him in our minds from the Satan who tests Jesus in the New Testament, or, even more, from the metaphysical principle of evil, or from the dark character who stands for that principle in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. This Satan, as the scholar Rivkah Scharf has argued, is not a principle of evil separate from and opposed to God, but a figure who seems to embody God’s own doubts, his toughminded skepticism about human motives. He seems to be rather a ruthless secret policeman, J. Edgar Hoover to the Lord’s Richard Nixon, perhaps Lavrenti Beria to the Lord’s Joseph Stalin.

Despite all the things Satan will shortly do to Job, the author characterizes Satan with a light hand. He has a caustic wit, and an insight into human self-deceits that puts him in a class with that other great literary cynic and humorous ironist, Mephistopheles of Goethe’s *Faust*. Notice the cutting and worldly tone of his accusations of Job, after the Lord practically throws Job in his way:

The Lord said to the Accuser, “Where have you come from?”
The Accuser answered, “From walking here and there on the earth, and looking around.”
The Lord said, “Did you notice my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him: a man of perfect integrity, who fears God and avoids evil.”
The Accuser said, “Doesn’t Job have a good reason for being so good? Haven’t you put a hedge around him—himself and his whole family and everything he has? You bless whatever he does, and the land is teeming with his cattle. But just reach out and strike everything he has, and I bet he’ll curse you to your face.”

Now God has made Satan a kind of special prosecutor, and given him the power to wreak whatever harm he pleases in order to see what Job is made of. Satan is not presented, however, as a figure of great dark evil here, but as one of those cynics who toadies to authority in situation comedy and believes, since authority is none too bright, that he can always manipulate it. He’s a cynical, servile, and vindictive figure, rather like Major Burns in M*A*S*H*, a rather small-bore hatchet man with an unearned belief in his superior insight into human folly. One measure of his cynicism is the brisk and rather formulaic way he disposes, in four short parallel sentences, of, in order, Job’s oxen (and cowherds), his sheep (and shepherds), his camels (and drovers) and his children. However bad all these calamities may be for Job, the briskness of the narration suggests that the narrator, no less than Satan himself, is playing it for laughs. Job’s response is grave if self-abasing. He tears his robe, shaves his head, and lies down in the dust, proclaiming “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken, may the name of the Lord be blessed.” The final measure of Satan’s cynicism, but also perhaps of his insight (since cynicism always presents itself as insight into people and knowledge of the world), is his claim to God that the only reason Job is able to play the prescribed part so
well is that in taking from him not only his possessions but his children Satan hasn’t yet really
gotten to Job himself in any essential way. The Lord remarks that Job “is holding on to his
innocence, even after”—notice that God says this straight out—“you made me torment him
for no reason.” Job will think differently, Satan suggests, if you humiliate him personally, if you
cover him from head to foot with boils. And this proposal is perfectly all right with the Lord,
peeved as he may be with Satan about what he already knows to be an injustice he has been too
lazy to correct.

Now Job as we see him in the prose folktale portion of the book seems to be playing the role
right out of the traditional script. We’ve already heard his rather mouselike reply to what the
Lord, through Satan, has done to him. Even before this, it’s fair to say that there was something
servile about the quality of Job’s piety. Now course from the beginning of the story we know
that Job behaves with perfect integrity. But it’s a little more than that. For instance, when his
sons and daughters have been feasting, he is always sure to have them purified afterwards, just in
case they had any bad thoughts. He is the kind of man who is always looking over his shoulder
to see whether he is pleasing authority, just the kind of man to whom it always become clear that
authority hasn’t really deserved all that respect. He is, indeed, a man rather like the ironically
named “comforters” later, who come to him to persuade him that everything that has happened
to him must have somehow been his fault. Now William Blake took the view that this servility,
because it’s not the right way to approach God, did in fact make everything that happened to Job
somehow his fault. It’s an interesting idea, and developing it is perhaps a good way to sock it to
the comforters, which is what Blake was most concerned to do. But Blake’s idea has to be wrong,
because the Lord says so himself: he did all those bad things to Job, after all, because he made a
bet about it. Even so, one well understands why Job’s wife, hearing her husband patiently resolve
to bear everything God heaps on him, turns to him and exclaims, in effect “Are you a man or not?
Why don’t you just curse God and die rather than just take all this.”

Much as we like to dislike Job’s comforters, perhaps to put from our minds the many times
we have unintentionally resembled them, they don’t enter the story as bad sorts. Indeed, for
seven days and seven nights (which I guess is biblical for “a very long time”) they keep silence
with him, joining in his mourning. What stirs them to the defensive and intellectually dishonest
behavior we stigmatize them for is not Job’s grief per se, but the curse with which he finally
breaks his silence.

It is this curse which marks the transition from the prose folktale to the verse drama in which
the key portions of the story are rendered. Job curses not God but life, or more specifically the
day of his own birth.

God damn the day I was born
and the night that forced me from the womb.
On that day — let there be darkness;
let it never have been created;
let it sink back into the void
Let chaos overpower it;
let black clouds overwhelm it;
Let the sun be plucked from its sky
Let oblivion overshadow it;
let the other days disown it;
let the aeons swallow it up.
On that night — let no child be born,
no mother cry out with joy.
Let sorcerers wake the Serpent
to blast it with eternal blight.
Let its last stars be extinguished;
let it wait in terror for daylight;
let its dawn never arrive.
For it did not shut the womb’s door
to shelter me from this sorrow.

Why couldn’t I have died
as they pulled me out of the dark?
Why were there knees to hold me,
breasts to keep me alive?
If only I had strangled or drowned
on my way to the bitter light.
Now I would be at rest,
I would be sound asleep,
with kings and lords of the earth
who lived in echoing halls,
with princes who hoarded silver
and filled their cellars with gold.
There the troubled are calm;
there the exhausted rest.
Rich and poor are alike there,
and the slave lies next to his master.

Stephen Mitchell, whose translation this is, wisely compares this curse to Oedipus’ great lament in Oedipus at Colonus: it is better not to be born at all, Oedipus said, or if one has to be at all, it is better to die immediately. In a late poem spoken in the voice of Tess, the title character from his novel Tess of the D’urbervilles, Thomas Hardy has Tess wish to “unbe.” I asked a student of mine about this line, once, why Hardy didn’t have Tess just say “die,” or have her say that she wished she had not been born. He replied that to wish to “unbe” is not simply to wish not to have been, but to wish to actively blot out one’s life and one’s world, to scroll all the way back to the beginning of the file, erasing it one character at a time.

It’s interesting to me that what gets Job started is the question of being, not the question of God. He curses not God, but his own birth, the fact of his being and the fact of being in general. I had at first thought that Job had simply wished to blot his own life out because he lacked the courage to curse God (you see that I took Job’s wife’s view of it all); Job’s curse diverts rage into self blame, I thought, seeing the curse as a product of the timid masochism that marked Job’s behavior in the folktale portion of the book. But on reflection I think there’s more to it than that. For one thing, the question of how Job judges being and how Job judges God are really forms of the same question. It’s obscured in this story by the fact that this God is a literary character, not
God, and it’s all too easy to hold him to the kind of account we might hold any literary character without remembering what he is supposed to represent. If we really could assign all of the painful mystery of life to the foolish wagering of a literary character, how much easier it would be for all of us. Indeed, that is often enough the kind of use we do make of God:. Once we imagined God as a literary character in order to explain suffering away. (God’s in charge and works in mysterious ways, we said.) Now we imagine God in the same way in order to take the rap for that suffering, so that there is someone to blame when life turns ugly, since it’s always easier to have someone to blame than to have to see life for what it really is. When we use the phrase — I image that we’ve all said it — “I refuse to believe that a world in which such horrible things happen every day could have been made by a God,” we don’t use that phrase in a neutral, propositional way. We use the tone we use when we are showing someone a thing or two, the tone we use when we are punishing someone. And using that tone reveals that we don’t really believe what we say; the stern tone betrays the fact that in some way rather than actually not believing in God we are punishing God by telling him that he doesn’t exist, which is of course something no real atheist would think of doing, just as no real unbeliever can really blaspheme. Take away the somewhat self-serving moral economy of that phrase, and the question we are really asking about God is the question Job is asking about being, which is: “Why is there something rather than nothing? Is it better that there is something rather than nothing, or would nothingness have been better?” The interesting thing about phrasing the question this way, rather than in the traditional language of theodicy, the style of argument which attempts to account for God’s behavior and the moral order of the universe — to vindicate the ways of God to Man, to use Alexander Pope’s phrase — is that once we stop looking for management so that we can register a complaint we are forced to ask whether with all its irrationality and hardship and unpredictability and lack of moral economy life is still a good thing or not. And that’s the real question theodicy ought to be asking, anyway.

That Job starts by answering this question in the negative of course rather takes the comforters aback. But they don’t immediately begin subjecting Job to outraged looks and accusations. Indeed, in the first of the three rounds of debate they go through (Mitchell seems to have segmented the debate as if it were a boxing match — the first round, the second round, and so on), they treat Job with a great deal of tact. Eliphaz the Temanite, the first of the comforters to speak in all three rounds, gently assumes that Job’s grief has gone to his head, and reminds him of the kind of thing he has said to other people who have faced trouble (the Comforters know Job very well because he has been rather like them).

Eliphaz knows that Job is a pious man, and he asks him to remember that piety is a thing that can give comfort in adversity. His first hint that maybe there is in fact some reason for what Job is going through is rather delicate, conceding that Job is essentially a righteous man, but arguing that all men, even righteous ones, are mortal and fallible. He doesn’t accuse Job of anything specific, but he does note that he is human and being human is being imperfect. He puts it all in the form of a dream vision of a terrifyingly perfect and exacting God — exactly the God whose wrath we hear in Jeremiah and Amos, and Eliphaz has something of their eloquence:

Now a word, in secret, came to me,  
a whisper crept in my ear,  
at night, when visions flash  
and ecstasy grips the mind.
Terror caught me; panic
shook my bones like stick.
Something breathed on my face;
my hair stood stiff.
I could barely see—a spirit—
hovering on my chest—
a soft voice, speaking:
How can man be righteous?
How can mortals be pure?
If God distrusts his own servants
and charges the angels with sin,
what of those who are built of clay
and live in bodies of dust?
They are snapped like bits of straw;
their lives are blown out like candles . . .
they vanish, and who can save them

Eliphaz does not even — not yet, anyway — demand that Job trump up a confession in order to get an easier deal from the divine special prosecutor. He asks Job only to pray, to put his case before God, who lifts up the despised and leads the abandoned to safety, even as he traps the wise in their cleverness and ruins the plots of the cunning:

You are lucky that God has scolded you;
so take his lesson to heart.
For he wounds, but then binds up;
he injures, but then he heals.
When disaster strikes, he will rescue you
and never let evil touch you.
In war he will save you from bloodshed,
in famine from the grip of death.
When slander roams he will hide you;
you will laugh in calamity’s face.
In league with the stones of the field,
in concord with savage beasts,
you will know that your house is protected
and your meadows safe from harm.
You will see your family multiply,
your children flourish like grass.
you will die at the height of your powers
and be gathered like ripened grain.

It’s quite a beautiful speech, and generous in intention despite its assumption that Job must have done something wrong. And it does describe what happens to Job in the long run. But its as thoroughly wrong as it is possible to be, because we know better, we know what God’s motives were, and they were not to punish Job for some transgression of which he was not aware. And
Job at least knows enough not to take Eliphaz’s speech with the slightest seriousness. He jeers at Eliphaz’s vision, made up as it likely is on the spot to suit the occasion, remarking that it’s no use their scaring him with nightmares. And he points out that Eliphaz’s argument is illogical on its face: if Job were indeed guilty of the kind of unnoticed transgression Eliphaz has in mind, then God’s punishment is wildly out of proportion to the crime.

    You too have turned against me;
    my wretchedness fills you with fear.
    Have I ever asked you to help me
    or begged you to pay my ransom,
    to rescue me from an enemy
    or save me from an oppressor?
    Teach me, and I will be silent;
    show me where I am wrong.
    Does honest speech offend you?
    Are you shocked by what I have said?
    Do you want to disprove my passion
    or argue away my despair?
    Look me straight in the eye:
    is this how a liar would face you?
    Can’t I tell right from wrong?
    if I sinned, wouldn’t I know it?

    Job is far from patient. He’s enraged, and rightly so, and he won’t let the comforters shut him up just because they are afraid what he says will reflect poorly on God. His complaint is all the more urgent because he is mortal:

    Remember: life is a breath;
        soon I will vanish from your sight.
    The eye that looks will not see me;
        you may search, but I will be gone.
    Like a cloud fading in the sky,
        man dissolves into death.
    He leaves the whole world behind him
        and never comes home again.
    Therefore I refuse to be quiet;
        I will cry out my bitter despair.
    Am I the Sea or the Serpent,
        that you pen me behind a wall?

    It is hard to imagine a more sweeping argument against God than the one Job goes on to make, or a more just one, even in this century, dark as it has been. Job’s god is great but not good, someone who is not only consciously but shamelessly unjust, because he knows he can overawe any critic:
I know that this is true:
no man can argue with God
or answer even one
of a thousand accusations.
However wise or powerful
who could oppose him and live?
He levels cliffs in an instant
rooting them up in his rage;
he knocks the earth from its platform
and shakes the pillars of the sky;
he talks to the sun—it darkens;
he clamps a seal on the stars.
He alone stretched out the heavens
and trampled the heights of the sea;
he made the Bear and the Hunter,
the Scorpion, the Twins.
His workings are vast and fathomless
his wonders beyond my grasp.
If he passed me, I would not see him;
if he went by, I would not know.
If he seized me, who could stop him
or cry out “What are you doing?”
He will never hold back his fury;
the Dragon lies at his feet.
How then can I refute him
or marshal my words against him?
How can I prove my innocence?
Do I have to beg him for mercy?
If I testify, will he answer?
Is he listening to my plea?
He has punished me for a trifle;
for no reason he gashes my flesh
He makes me gasp with terror;
he plunges me into despair.
For in strength he is far beyond me;
and in eloquence, who is like him?
I am guiltless, but his mouth condemns me;
blameless but his words convict me.
He does not care; so I say
he murders both the pure and the wicked.
When the plague brings sudden death,
he laughs at the anguish of the innocent.
He hands the earth to the wicked
and blindfolds its judges’ eyes.
Who does it if not he?

It’s this argument that really changes the tack the Comforters take, because they rightly view it as an attack upon God’s righteousness. To defend their sense of what God is, they resort to increasingly harsh strategies, from arguing that Job cannot know what purpose God has in mind (“Have you listened at God’s keyhole and crept away with his plans?” Eliphaz retorts at one point — adopting the very strategy, a series of increasingly outraged rhetorical questions, that the Lord himself will adopt later, when he speaks out of the whirlwind), to, as their desperation increases, making up increasingly outrageous sins to which they insist Job confess. Eliphaz, always the quickest of the comforters out of the gate, give us a little list: Job has cheated his friends, stripped his debtors naked, stolen food from the hungry, let the destitute starve, spat on the widow and orphan, and laughed in the beggar’s face — all of the kind of rich-man crimes of which Amos will accuse Israel as the invasions from the north begin to impend.

Job himself raises the stakes as well, detailing the positive pleasure God takes, another arrogant rich man, in his wickedness:

Why do the wicked prosper
and live to ripe old age?
Their children stand beside them;
their grandchildren sit on their laps
Their houses are safe from danger
secure from the wrath of God.
Not one of their bulls is impotent;
not one of their cows miscarries.
Their grandchildren run out to play,
skipping about like lambs,
singing to drum and lyre,
dancing to the sound of the flute.
They end their lives in prosperity
and go to th grave in peace.
yet they tell God, “Leave us alone;
we can’t be bothered about you.
Why should we pray to God?”
What good will it do us to serve you?”

Is the lamp of the sinner snuffed out?
Does misfortune knock on his door?
Is he really driven like chaff,
blown like straw in the wind?

One man dies serenely
lapped in safety and comfort,
his thighs bulging with fat,
the marrow moist in his bones.
Another dies in despair,
    his life bitter on his tongue.
But both men rot in the ground,
    and maggots chew on them both.

Job is well aware that the comforters are not in any way his equals. What he really longs for is to put his case to God. It isn’t that he believes that God will acquit him — he is not like those starving Russian peasants who used to say to each other “if the Czar only knew!” He knows full well that God will bribe the jury, because he is the jury. But it matters to him to speak the truth to God, and to speak it to him in a face to face way, and he knows that somehow even to God it is better to speak the truth than to speak pious fictions. Notice how in this speech the “you” he addresses modulates from Zohar the Namathite to God:

Listen now to my arguments:
    hear out my accusations.
Will you lie to vindicate God?
    Will you perjure yourselves for him?
Will you blindly stand on his side,
    pleading his case alone?
What will you do when he questions you?
    Can you cheat him as you would a man?
Won’t he judge you severely
    if your testimony is false?
Won’t he crush you with terror
    and chill your bones with fear?
Your answers are dusty answers;
    your words crumble like clay.

Be quiet now— let me speak;
    whatever happens will happen.
I will take my flesh in my teeth,
    hold my life in my hands.
He may kill me, but I won’t stop;
    I will speak the truth, to his face.
Listen now to my words;
    pay attention to what I say.
For I have prepared my defense,
    and I know that I am right.
Grant me one thing only,
    and I will not hide from your face:
do not numb me with fear
    or flood my heart with your terror.
Accuse me—I will respond;
    or let me speak, and answer me.
Job comes from a long line of people who have experienced hand to hand combat with God. Most of them learn that God doesn’t fight fair in that way. Remember that Jacob is a scamp, who cheats his brother more than once, and has to flee for his life. But when he wrestles with the angel, it’s the angel who uses the dirty tactics and dislocates his hip. But it would be wrong to say that Jacob loses out in his quarrel, because he gets from that struggle what people often get from interminable but determined efforts, a new name, Israel, a name which means “he who struggles with God.” One of the great contributions of ancient Israel to the history of religion was the idea that wrangling with God is a form of intimacy with him. Faith of this kind is not obedience and submission but an intense if quarrelsome intimacy. I want to argue that this kind of wrestling with God is not the opposite of faith, but a form of it, perhaps even the only form of faith, since the obvious alternative, submission and obedience, seems more like dogmatism than like faith.

At any rate, when Job asks to wrestle with God one to one he gets what he bargained for. The voice that confronts Job out of the whirlwind makes no apologies for anything he has done (indeed, how could he?) but he speaks with a robustness that is itself a kind of integrity, with keen irony and an unstoppable vigor and abundance which, if it is not its own excuse, is at least unmatched for dramatic poetry by anything else in the Bible. Here are the opening words of the Lord’s great tirade, that enormous Niagara of rhetorical questions in which, as perhaps only in Whitman in secular poetry, the poet’s vision of the grandeur and force (if amoral force) of nature keeps exact pace with the poet’s own rhetorical power:

Who is this whose ignorant words
smear my design with darkness?
Stand up now like a man;
I will question you: please, instruct me.

Where were you when I planned the earth?
Tell me if you are so wise.
Do you know who took its dimension,
measuring its length with a cord?
What were its pillars built on?
Who laid down its cornerstone,
while the morning stars burst out singing
and the angels shouted for joy!

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?
when I closed it in with barriers
and set its boundaries, saying,
“Here you may come, but no farther;
here shall your proud waves break.”

Have you ever commanded morning
or guided dawn to its place—
to hold the corners of the sky
    and shake off the last few stars?
All things are touched with color;
    the whole world is changed.

Have you walked through the depths of the ocean
    or dived to the floor of the sea?
have you stood at the gates of doom
    or looked through the gates of death?
have you seen to the edge of the universe?
    Speak up, if you have such knowledge.

Where is the road to light?
    Where does darkness live?
(Perhaps you will guide them home
    or show them the way to their house.)
You know, since you have been there
    and are older than all creation.

This is great poetry. But if what Job is seeking is for an answer from God, he isn’t going to
get one from this. However, even if the Lord had such a thing, which of course he doesn’t, would
it be satisfying to us? Would it persuade us? Is it even something we really want to hear about?
I submit that the very last thing we ever want, from religion or from science, is an explanation of
why the world is as mad a place as it is. Certainly the fashion for seeking for the structure of God’s
will has passed. But new and scarcely less reputable fashions have replaced that one. Instead of
Calvinist theology, say, people reach now for Darwinian biology, or Manchester economics, as
ways of explaining why the miseries of the world are not only necessary but wholesome. But it
won’t wash, for those are scientific theories of nature or of human nature, and they say nothing
about the moral order of the world because they don’t and can’t address the question of that
moral order. If someone speaks to you in the language of Darwinian biology about progress and
advancement, as if evolution were some kind of progress force rather than merely a natural and
morally neutral state of affairs, you can be sure that that person has left biology far behind and
is dealing in spilt religion, thinly plated with a shiny coating of science. And the same goes for
Manchester economics. And the same would go for Marxian economics or Freudian psychology
if either of those two things had any standing as descriptions of the natural or human world, which
they don’t. All of those things are descriptions of the how of the world, not of the what for of
the world. They tell you something about its structure, but nothing about its meaning or purpose.
We are satisfied with those things as descriptions of the meaning or purpose of the world only
because we have long confused ourselves about what it is to ask about those things.

These global theories — let me lump them together under the name of “dogmatic mod-
ernism”— continue to have an unearned prestige, particularly because they phrase themselves
against a kind of religious thinking which has deserved the discredit it now suffers. Against
naïve and dogmatic religion, dogmatic modernism can claim at once to be harder of head and
softer of heart. The world is not about the righteousness of the divine plan, it is all about sur-
vival or progress or something like that, and the ugliness in the world is the price of survival
or progress. Notice that it’s still a theory of the same kind, a theodicy, although it is described
in the idiom of science rather than in the idiom of religion. What won’t such a theory justify? As Hannah Arendt said, it may be true that one can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs, but one can break a great many eggs without making an omelette. The difficulty with dogmatic modernism is that it always finally resolves into worship of force — success in the ecosystem, success in the market, success in history. If one points out that there is something amoral about that test, the dogmatic modernist concedes that: morality, on such a view, is the consolation of the weak. That would be a more persuasive argument had the dogmatic modernist not covertly given success not merely biological or economic credit but also a kind of moral credit. If we’re really going to worship Moloch we might as well be honest enough to say so.

Dogmatic modernism also gets unearned credit for softheartedness. That credit would be well earned if the only alternative were belief in God the explainer and justifier of all things unjustifyable. But who in the world really believes in that kind of God anyway? What we want least of all is any habit of thought that enables us to explain away suffering and to diffuse away our own moral responsibilities in the face of it. The idea of God is not to be used to explain away the irrational suffering of the world, it is to be used to nerve ourselves up to bear it bravely and face it with courage, either the courage to oppose it or the courage to bear it, as circumstances permit.

Does anybody really believe that life makes sense, that virtue is rewarded? Of course not. But does anybody really hate life on that account? No, we love life whole, and love it as it is. The question the book of Job poses is obscured by seeing it as a question about how we feel about God. It’s really a question of how we feel about life, and since how we feel about life is what we mean by how we feel about God anyway, they are forms of the same question, once that question is properly understood.

Every deep relationship involves accepting something or somebody whole, with all their faults and darkness. If I love only your virtues, then I love you in what is somehow never more than a self-interested way. Any real moral intimacy involves taking on some portion of darkness in the other and acknowledging it. Any person that we love we love knowing their vices and faults. Any institution we love we love knowing the darkness of its history — seeking perhaps some way to enlighten that darkness, perhaps, but facing it also as the price of seeing our love as something real rather than as something abstract. Do you love people only when they are good? What kind of person are you if you do? You love people whole because wholes are what people are, and it is to people, not to virtues, that we are called to stand in relationships of moral intimacy. And we (or at least I) love this ironic, bombastic, in some ways very shady Yahweh whole as well, because we love life whole. And to love it whole is not to love it in a self-abasing way but to love it with the clarity of intimate insight.

Notice in Yahweh’s tirade the way he describes the world. It is not the world of abstract glory — stars and planets and little flowers and the cycle of life and so on, the watchmaker’s world we examine when we start to exalt a watchmaker God. Nor is it the world of sentimental Nature, that pleasant green blur we sometimes immerse ourselves in on Sunday afternoons in the conservation land or the state park. It is instead a world of intense particulars, each bristling with its own private life — the world exactly and carefully enumerated in Whitman or in the creation hymn. Notice how everything Yahweh enumerates here has a fierce little disorderly life of its own:

13
Does the rain have a father?
   Who has begotten the dew?
Out of whose belly is the ice born?
   Whose womb labors with the sleet?
(The water’s surface stiffens;
   the lake grows hard as rock.)
Can you tie the Twins together
   or loosen the Hunter’s cords?
Can you light the Evening Star
   or lead out the Bear and her cubs?
Do you know all the patters of heaven
   and how they affect the earth?
If you shout commands to the thunderclouds,
   will they rush off to do your bidding?
If you clap for the bolts of lightning,
   will they come and say “Here we are”?
Who gathers up the stormclouds,
   slits them and pours them out,
   turning dust to mud
   and soaking the cracked clay?

When we are called to love Yahweh we are called to love the person whom this intense interest
in particulars reveals. What Yahweh’s hymn of praise to nature reveals is a sharp and knowing
and particular love of wholes. When Yahweh created the beasts of the earth and saw that they
were very good, he didn’t mean that they were moral but that they were intensely alive.

Do you hunt game for the lioness
   and feed her ravenous cubs,
when they crouch in their den, impatient,
   or lie in ambush in the thicket?
who finds her prey at nightfall,
   when her cubs are aching with hunger?
Do you tell the antelope to calve
   or ease her when she is in labor?
Do you count the months of her fullness
   and know when her time has come?
She kneels; she tightens her womb;
   she pants, she presses, gives birth.
her little ones grow up;
   they leave and never return.
Who unties the wild ass
   and lets him wander at will?
He ranges the open prairie
and roams across the saltlands.
He is far from the tumult of cities;
he laughs at the driver’s whip.
He scours the hills for food,
in search of anything green.

Is the wild ox willing to serve you?
Will he spend the night in your stable?
Can you tie a rope to his neck?
Will he harrow the fields behind you?
Will you trust him because he is powerful
and leave him to do your work?
Will you wait for him to come back,
bringing your grain to the barn?

Do you deck the ostrich with wings,
with elegant plumes and feathers?
She lays her eggs in the dirt
and lets them hatch on the ground,
forgetting that a foot may crush them
or sharp teeth crack them open.
She treats her children cruelly,
as if they were not her own.
For God deprived her of wisdom
and left her with little sense.

When she spreads her wings to run,
She laughs at the horse and rider.

Do you give the horse his strength?
Do you clothe his neck with terror?
Do you make him leap like a locust,
snort like a blast of thunder?
he paws and champs at the bit;
he exults as he charges into battle.
He laughs at the sight of danger;
he does not wince from the sword
or the arrows nipping at his ears
or the flash of spear and javelin.
With his hooves he swallows the ground;
he quivers at the sound of the trumpet.
When the trumpet calls, he says “Ah!”
From far off he smells the battle,
the thunder of the captains and the shouting.

So what does this mean? That vitality is enough to forgive everything? If that were so, then
why not just worship Zeus, or worship nature, or worship any kind of successful rapacity? But the
Lord here is clearly not asking for forgiveness and isn’t really even attempting to justify himself at all. He is simply sounding exactly like himself. Now the Lord had opened his tirade with a rebuke of Job, whose ignorant words, he said, “smeared my design with darkness.” What ignorant words were these? They certainly could not have been Job’s rebuke of the Lord’s injustice, in the first place because we know that Job was right about that, and in the second place at the end of the book the Lord ridicules the comforters for defending him, telling them, “you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.” My view, and I think it’s Mitchell’s view as well, is that what God rebukes in Job is not his accusation, but his desire for nonbeing, his wish that he had never been born. For clearly the big lesson of Yahweh’s tirade is that being, above all and despite everything, intensely matters.

When the novelist Reynolds Price was diagnosed with the spinal cancer that wound up paralyzing him — it was supposed to be a fatal tumor at the time, because the techniques that wound up saving Price’s life had not yet been invented — he says, in his wonderful book A Whole New Life, that he considered briefly the painful and very dark future that he was then facing, and then, completely involuntarily, he found himself saying to himself, “All right then, bring it on.” That strikes me as the most fundamental and most deeply religious response: “All right then, bring it on.”