

About Angels, About God, About Poetry, by V. Ulea, with illustrations by Irene Frenkel. 116 pp. Livingston Press at The University of West Alabama, 2003, \$14.95. Reviewed by Esther Cameron.

THIS PROVOCATIVE and witty trilogy consists of three "treatises" by a fictive scholar, presenting a philosophy of creation meant to be taken with playful seriousness. The work is innovative and yet, as a commentary on the first few chapters of Genesis, well within the "midrashic" tradition that plays with the text, discovering new meanings and ascribing different motives to the characters. The reproductions of Irene Frenkel's visionary pencil drawings and oil paintings add an extra dimension to the work. A Russian version of this work received three awards at the Zeljonaia Volna festival in Odessa this summer.

In the current debate about creation, the belief in a deterministic and insentient evolution is often opposed by a creationism that insists on teleology ("intelligent design"), with little ground in between. Ulea's (or her fictional scholar's) thesis, however, is that the universe "has been created exactly in the same way as a poetic work." God did not create the universe the way man makes a utilitarian object with a definite purpose. Creation develops in ways not always expected by Him, and God Himself may be developing in the process: "The difference between man's and God's philosophy is essential:/ Man attempts to link successfully the beginning and the end;/ God develops a propensity and forms a potential/ For what He Himself may not fully apprehend." "In creation, a creator becomes a part/ Of his deed – it's a mutual process."

This view gains support from modern theories of an indeterminate universe; in fact, Ulea states that the work was inspired by an ongoing dialogue with the propounder of one such theory, Professor Aron Katsenelenboigen of the Wharton School. A prose dialogue between Ulea and Aron closes the work. Broadly, the work could be taken as a plea for flexibility, a caution against rigid beliefs. The first "treatise," *About Angels*, portrays the angels as the representatives of rigidity in the cosmos. Created before man, they can neither change nor invent, though they may fall and become agents of evil ("like... a Marxist wandering in a shopping mall"). Adam, God's second idea, was still obedient and unimaginative. The agent of change and creativity is, of course, Eve: "God found Adam's center of curiosity while he took a nap,/ And drew it out instantly under general anesthesia./ The center of curiosity is linked to tickling,/ Most of which is located in ribs./ So Eve appeared at the end of the evening,/ Holding her smile in the kind, plump lips." Eve, the antithesis of the angels' static rigidity, becomes the mother of all life by "push[ing] the system away from monotony."

The second treatise, on "God," daringly attempts to describe the process of creation as if from within God – an attempt based on the self-knowledge of the poet. "No creator escapes a struggle with darkness." In keeping with the chaos from which creation emerged, this chapter offers the wildest speculations. God himself may evolve from a more primitive spiritual being – a ghost or a genius. He creates the world in order to get "feedback." He "believes in the diversity He invented." The third treatise continues the basic analogy, with more ironic notes based on the experience of the contemporary poet. My favorite poem in the collection is "God and Editors": "Indeed, "Where's the logic?" the editor would say,/ Rejecting the manuscript, 'You first created light/ And then the celestial bodies – only on the fourth day!'/ And he would be absolutely right."

The work's thematic balancing between order and spontaneity is neatly reflected in its form – slant-rhymed lines of flexible length. Naturally, the reader is prompted to question and contradict. For instance, one might point out that most of the poetic masterpieces of the past were written in rigid poetic forms. (Ulea's scholar might then counter that precisely the Bible uses verses of flexible length!) One might also ask whether the philosophy expounded here takes evil seriously enough. Irene Frenkel's stunningly-drafted artwork tends to underline that question: despite their playfulness and rich diversity, the images seem pervaded by a sense of suffering and wrongness, recalling the traditional view that we might have done better, after all, to leave that apple alone. Yet as the poem "Order and Reality" reminds us, "the most restricted yield easier to temptation." *About Angels, About God, About Poetry*, is a plea for the "Golden Middle" between skepticism and fanaticism, for the open space within which development may still be possible.

REVIEWED BY ESTHER CAMERON, PH.D.
MADISON; WI