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THE MANY WORLDS AND DEEDS OF GILGAMEŠ

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Abstract

This is the story of a king who, under any circumstances, would not be a man. Assyriologists, resourceful by profession, seem genuinely puzzled by a problem in elementary arithmetic: how can Gilgameš, or indeed anyone else, be meaningfully introduced as two-thirds god but one third human? While we may never know with any certainty the (ancient) answer, I offer that this (modern) question is still worth asking in so far as this depiction already means, in its basic form, that Gilgameš was not anyone. Hence, my research hypothesis is that a man (of ancient Mesopotamia) who is more than a man believes that he belongs in more than one world, and therefore longs to transcend our ordinarily experienced world. Applying Rita Sherma's "hermeneutics of intersubjectivity" to a close reading of the Epic of Gilgameš shows how and why the complex, intricate, and subtle structure of the many-worlds system (the city of Gilgameš and its hinterland, the wilderness of Enkidu, the Cedar Forest of Humbaba, the realm where the gods live, the garden of the Jeweled Trees, the gate of the Twin Peaks, the realm of Uta-napishti the Distant, and, last but not least, the monumental wall of Uruk, that is, the world of human history and memory) discloses the multilayered personality of its eponymous hero. Gilgameš, stretched between the human and divine realms across the narrative horizon, becomes sacred from holy (in the sense of Benveniste) only at the very end.

Keywords: animal; divine; Enkidu; Gilgameš; human.

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1. The coming of Enkidu

Sumerian proverbs, the earliest recorded proverbs in the world, are remarkable in many respects. Surprisingly enough, even at a cursory glance, the curious minded scholar might also retort that many of these proverbs are remarkable, first and foremost, for not being proverbs at all. *Not* in our modern sense. Indeed, Sumerologists traditionally, albeit controversially², label them "proverbs" mainly because they are included in so-called "proverb collections", *i.e.*, because they were originally recorded and then more or less faithfully recopied over centuries and millennia down to the end of the cuneiform civilizations in (usually lengthy) lists³ rather than individually, and because most of the items included in these lists seem to fit, satisfactorily enough, our own, modern, Western concept of proverb. I will only briefly note that

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² "A point sometimes overlooked is that while 'proverb collections' may be a literary genre, 'proverbs' as such are not" (Alster, 2005, 22).

³ Sumerians are famous for their fascination with lists, to the point that Freiherr von Soden theorised a 'will to order' (*Wille zur Ordnung*) to be responsible for their 'list literature' (*Listenwissenschaft*): Freiherr von Soden, 1965, *cf. id.*, 1995, 145-148.

sometimes a text is relevant for what it is not, rather than for what it is (like any other artefact indeed), and that sometimes a text reveals something by the simple fact of *not* saying it. Take the following proverb (actually, “more of a minifable than a proverb”, quips Civil, 1999-2000, 182):

The fox said to his wife: “Come! Let us crush Unug between our teeth like a leek; let us strap Kulaba on our feet like sandals!” Before they had yet come within a distance of 600 uš from the city, the dogs began to howl from the city. – “Geme-Tummal! Geme-Tummal! Come with me to your place! Wicked things are howling at us from the city!”⁴

Unug (Akkadian *Uruk*, Biblical *Erech*, Greek Ὀρχόη, modern-day *Warkā* in southeast Iraq), the historical city-state of the legendary hero-king Gilgameš⁵, is the most famous of all Sumerian cities, the world’s “first city”, as Liverani memorably called it⁶, and the heart of the first “world-system” (Algaze, 1989); Kulaba is its cultic district⁷; 600 uš is c. 216 km⁸. Geme-Tummal the vixen, then, together with her unnamed “husband” – indeed, who are they? Should we rather say, perhaps, *what* are they? Most notably, and obviously, they are *not* human. Or are they? They are husband and wife, appear to speak, to eat leek, to wear sandals, and to be familiar with human names of places... They are what humans sometimes *are*, although they should not be so by most moral standards. They are arrogant and aggressive (let alone craven, rather unsurprisingly). They irrepressibly recall Bunnell’s conceptual distinction between *homo sapiens amans*, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, both *homo sapiens aggressans* and *homo sapiens arrogans*, a distinction that would lead Maturana and Verden-Zöller to conclude *a contrario* that “it is the conservation of living in language in the biology of love and intimacy that made us human beings” (Maturana Romesín and Verden-Zöller, 2008, 68).

⁴ Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.6.1.02#>, 2 February 2024.

⁵ “As we shall see, there apparently really was a king of Uruk by this name, who lived sometime between 2700 and 2500 and was later remembered for building the city’s inimitable walls and temple” (Tigay, 2002, 3-4). *Contra*, see Robson, 2004. Or could we date perhaps a historical Gilgamesh even a couple of centuries earlier? ‘In the light of the contemporary name Pabilgames-Utupada, the matter deserves some consideration now’ (Marchesi, 2004, 197). As for the name, “Some believe that Bilgames is the Sumerian name of Gilgamesh, and use the former when dealing with Sumerian texts and the latter with Akkadian ones. However, this is a mistaken assumption based on a misunderstanding of the Sumerian spelling of the name” (Rubio, 2009, 74, n. 28; cf. Rubio, 2012, 12). The meaning of his name is also disputed. “The problem of finding the historic Gilgamesh is complicated by the fact that the name Gilgamesh is almost certainly a later epithet for the hero, not a name he bore in life; it may mean ‘heroic ancestor’” (Snell, 1997, 18). “Nonliterary texts indicate that by the Fara Period (ca. twenty-sixth or twenty-fifth century), Gilgamesh was regarded as a god and that offerings were made to him in Early Dynastic Lagash (before the middle of the twenty-fourth century) and in several towns under the third dynasty of Ur (Ur III, ca. twenty-first century), whose kings claimed Gilgamesh as their brother” (Tigay, 2002, 13-14).

⁶ Liverani, 2006. This obviously means the world’s first focal point of a major civilization rather than the world’s first urban settlement; indeed, various other Ancient Near Eastern urban settlements predate Unug by millennia, the earliest of them Çatalhöyük, in south-central Turkey (“for the present discussion, it has to be assumed that the start of Çatalhöyük dates to close to 7100 BC, at least 200 years later than previously estimated”, Bayliss, Brock, Farid, Hodder, Southon and Taylor, 2014, 315, cf. Orton, Anvari, Gibson, Last, Bogaard, Rosenstock and Biehl, 2018); even in Sumer proper, Eridug rather than Unug is often considered the first urban settlement (or, “city”), both by Sumerian sources and by modern-day archaeologists, cf. Black, Cunningham, Robson and Zólyomi, 2004, 330. Yet, there is evidence that Eridug was *not* the oldest city of Sumer, either with Sumerian sources or modern-day archaeologists. Not in the sense that *Unug* was; at best Unug would thus become a distant third. Since Nibru rather than either Eridug or Unug would be the oldest city of Sumer on mythological grounds (Espak, 2015) – and Tell el’Oueili rather than either Eridug or Unug would be the oldest city of Sumer on archaeological grounds (Huot, 1985). It might perhaps also be noted that Liverani seems to follow the lead of Kramer (1981) with this, may I say, “fortieth first”. And yet, turning at this juncture to Aristotle’s terms (cf. *Metaphysics*, 5, 2, 1013a), if Liverani’s title’s formal cause goes back to Kramer, its material cause goes rather back to Rawlinson. “Sir Henry Rawlinson states his belief that Warka is Erech, and in this he is supported by concurrent testimony” (Loftus, 1857, 160-161).

⁷ “The cultic area of the city of Unug, often used to mean Unug in its entirety” (Black, Cunningham, Robson and Zólyomi, 2004, 366). “According to literary tradition Gilgamesh was originally the king not of Uruk, but rather the *en* priest of Kullab” (Frayne, 2009, 55). “In Ur III and Old Babylonian Sumerian literary compositions about early legendary kings, Enmerkar is called ‘en of Uruk’ and Gilgamesh is ‘en of Kullaba’ (Uruk was the result of the merger of two settlements: Eanna and Kullaba)” (Rubio, 2009, 33).

⁸ Cf. Nissen, Damerow and Englund, 1993, 65 – and Gyllenbok, 2018, vol. 1, 566.

But let us rather return at this juncture to the Ancient Near East. Smith (2001, 6) quipped: “In general, to be divine is not to be human”. Is the reverse true, in the Ancient Near East? *In general, to be human is not to be divine?* Not necessarily so. I might even go to the lengths of rather rewriting this sentence as: In general, to be human is not to be animal... Indeed, favourable contrast with the order of being placed immediately below seems trend-setting. Thus, Enkidu, who straddles the border between animal and human as Gilgameš straddles the border between human and divine, is born (or rather, created) straight into a life of animality:

All his body is matted with hair,
he bears long tresses like those of a woman:
the locks of his hair grow thickly as barley,
he knows not a people, nor even a country.

Coated in hair like the god of the animals,
with the gazelles he grazes on grasses,
joining the throng with the herd at the water-hole,
his heart *delighting* with the beasts in the water (George, 2020, I 105-112)⁹.

The reader might be reminded at this juncture of Daniel 4:25-30 – or of Tigay:

It has often been suggested that these descriptions reflect the seminomadic Amorites who, from their homeland in the Syrian desert, infiltrated southern Mesopotamia and came to dominate it in the early second millennium. Stock descriptions of the Amorites in the Ur III period mention their habitat, shelter, diet, and dress, and the phraseology generally includes a reference to “not knowing” (Sumerian *nu-zu*, Akkadian *ul/lā idû*) some feature of civilization (2002, 200-201)¹⁰.

This would be rather ironic indeed for the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgameš*, in so far as Daniel’s Nebuchadnezzar is a king of Babylon – and in so far as Babylon first rose to fame under such Amorites kings as Hammurabi (Lambert, 2011, 71). But it could be worse. And worse it was, four millennia later, as characterisation took an even more problematic turn. So wrote indeed Jacobsen, the leading historian of Mesopotamian religion, in his *magnum opus*:

In the case of the “Coming of Enkidu” tale, the motif of the hairy wild man who lives with the animals and is lured into human society by a woman is found in many forms in the folklore of Asia, and has been studied in detail by Charles Allyn Williams in his dissertation, *Oriental Affinities of the Legend of the Hairy Anchorite* (Urbana, 1925-26). His data show that the basis of the story is wonder at the orangutan, which was seen as a “wild man” deliberately shunning the company of other men. Its origin must therefore be looked for in the Far East (Jacobsen, 1976, 214).

Enkidu and the orangutan? In all honesty, Jacobsen’s bold hypothesis did not carry the day. It hardly could have. Neither was this *bold* hypothesis his first: one should perhaps remember at this juncture his theory of ‘primitive democracy’ (Jacobsen, 1943; 1957; to put it very briefly: that Sumerian city-states in

⁹ “Italics are used to indicate insecure decipherments and uncertain renderings of words in the extant text”, *ibid.*, xv. Later on, Enkidu is characterised as ‘the child of nature,/ the savage man from the midst of the wild’ (I 178-179). Some more details about text and translations are here in order. The foremost authority on the Gilgameš Epic is Andrew R. George, who has been working on it since he was 30 (he is now 68). He gave in 2003 a monumental, fundamental, critical edition of the text, after an award-winning English translation, now in its second (2020) edition. ‘Andrew George’s edition of the Epic of Gilgameš is the most substantial text edition in the history of Assyriology and sets a lofty standard of excellence in all respects’ (Foster, 2005, 64). He is Emeritus Professor of Babylonian at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and a Fellow of the British Academy. The best extant translation is George’s, followed by Foster’s (also in its second, 2019, edition). Both translations are excellent, and, among English translations of the *Epic of Gilgameš*, which are of very variable reliability, they are, may I say, in a league of their own.

¹⁰ Four millennia later, this “phraseology generally includ[ing] a reference to ‘not knowing’ some feature of civilization” is still a staple of hunter-gatherers’ characterisation, *cf.* Sahlins, 1968.

the Early Dynastic Period were instances of primitive democracy), a transformative theory both unsubstantiated and contested (Beckman, 1998; Rubio, 2009, 33-34). But let us return to the argument of Tigay (2002, 202), and his ultimate rejection of the Amorite connection:

The late version of the epic itself implies that Enkidu is modelled on the primordial man, for it terms him a “primordial man”, *lullû amēlu* (I, iv, 6, 13, 19). As an epithet of men, *lullû* appears in Akkadian almost exclusively with reference to man when he is first created. And indeed, Mesopotamian literature describes the life of the primordial man as animal-like (*ibid.*).

Talking of Enkidu in terms of “primordial man” might seem to follow the same trend as Jacobsen’s hypothesis of the “orangutan”. This hardly needs to be so. Indeed, we should avoid confusing modern and ancient concepts of “primordial human”. Tigay himself cites Williams, Jacobsen’s source, in its connection to Enkidu, but drops all references to the orangutan (*ibid.*, 208, n. 46). I see instead the coming of Enkidu in terms of journey (or, initiation), including five ascending steps: first, he is humanised; second, he is civilised; third, he is urbanised; fourth, he is recognised as friend; and fifth, he is adopted in the family. He takes the first of these steps at the water-hole; the second, at the shepherds’ camp; the third, in the streets of Uruk; the fourth, on the threshold of the wedding house¹¹; and the fifth, in the temple, the Palace Sublime. The first is taken through the gift of intimacy; the second, through the gift of companionship¹²; the third, through the gift of leadership¹³; the fourth, through the gift of friendship¹⁴; and the fifth, through the gift of love¹⁵. The first of these gifts to Enkidu is given by Šamhat, a cultic prostitute¹⁶; the second by the shepherds; the third, by the menfolk of Uruk; the fourth, by Gilgameš; the fifth, by ‘the august Wild-Cow, the goddess Ninsun’ (George, 2020, I 36), the mother of Gilgameš, and by Gilgameš at her exhortation. Enkidu travels through five worlds even before they leave (he leading Gilgameš) for the Cedar Forest: from the world of the wild where he is created, through the area around Uruk, then through the streets of Uruk, into the royal world of Gilgameš, and into the divine presence of Ninsun.

Enkidu starts his journey as the polar opposite of Gilgameš. The story of the making and early life of Enkidu, wild man of wilderness (*edin*, from the Sumerian, meaning ‘steppe’, as opposed mainly to the arable land around cities, and possibly connected to the Hebrew *Eden*) is set immediately after, and in response to the highly contrasting story of Gilgameš and of his ‘tyranny’ over “Uruk-the-Sheepfold”¹⁷. At this stage, Enkidu is emphatically *not* Gilgameš. The *alter ego*, so to speak, is still very much *aliud*, different in every respect (except for their build, although, again, Enkidu is ‘shorter of stature, and bigger of bone’). It seems logical enough that the polar opposite of the sophisticated king Gilgameš¹⁸ should be, as Tigay argued, a “primordial man” (a motif for which there is ample evidence in Mesopotamian literature). And yet, Enkidu soon becomes very similar to Gilgameš, since, otherwise, the injunction to Aruru would remain ineffective (‘Let him be a *match* for the *storm* of his heart,/ let them vie with each

¹¹ “The depiction of space in the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is dominated by one particular figure: the threshold” (Helle, 2021b, 185).

¹² ‘[When at night the shepherds lay sleeping,]/ [he struck] down wolves, he [chased off lions.]/ Sleeping lay the senior shepherds,/ their shepherd boy Enkidu, a [man wide] awake’ (George, 2020, II 59-60).

¹³ ‘A crowd was *milling about* before [him,]/ the menfolk were thronging [around him.]/ Like a babe-in-arms they were [kissing his feet]’ (George, 2020, II 105-107).

¹⁴ “‘Why, my friend, [did your eyes] brim [with tears,]/ your arms fall limp, [your strength *ebb away*?]’/ Said Enkidu to him, [to Gilgameš:]/ ‘My friend, my heart is aggrieved’” (George, 2020, II, 186-189).

¹⁵ ‘Enkidu, whom [I *love*,] I take for my son,/ Enkidu in [brotherhood,] Gilgameš shall favour him!’ (George, 2020, III, 126-128).

¹⁶ ‘[Go, my son, and] fetch [Šamhat the harlot,]/ [her *allure is a match*] for even the mighty!’ (George, 2020, I 140-141). “Šamhat is used as personal name here; it means ‘voluptuous woman, prostitute’, in particular as a type of cultic devotee of Ishtar in Uruk” (Dalley, 2000, 126, n. 14).

¹⁷ ‘By day and by night his tyranny grows harsher,/ Gilgameš, [the *guide of the teeming people*!]/ It is he who is shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold’ (George, 2020, I 69).

¹⁸ “King Gilgameš himself, the paragon of urban life” (Helle, 2021a, 168).

other, so Uruk may be rested!’, George, 2020, I 97-98). What sets them both apart from all other men (and humans, indeed, there being no giant woman in the *Epic*) is precisely their build, the basis for their bond forged in wrestling each other. In a world of usual-sized people, Gilgameš recognises Enkidu as his ‘equal’¹⁹. And what sets them both apart from all others is precisely what makes them bond²⁰. It is only the death of Enkidu that will make them yet again radically dissimilar, as his creation had. The emotional tension between Enkidu and Gilgameš provides the driving force of the *Epic*. It also provides its symmetrical structure.

Though the structure of two acts where the second mirrors and expands the first has already been noted for the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, I believe that it has not previously been shown that this is in fact a general feature of Babylonian epics. With the probable exception of *Anzu* and *Adapa*, I would argue that all Babylonian epics can in fact be divided into two mirroring acts (*ibid.*, 12; slightly edited for fluency).

This brings to mind Cousineau’s work on the “symmetrical imperative of writing” (Cousineau, 2021; Cousineau, 2023, this volume). Among the many symmetries that structure the *Epic of Gilgameš*, let us mention here at this juncture only the two speeches, the speech of Enkidu against Gilgameš (set between the first and the second stages of Enkidu’s transformative experience, namely, the stages of his being humanised and of his being civilised) – and the speech of Gilgameš against Humbaba (set between the last but one and the last stages of Enkidu’s transformative experience, namely, the stages of his recognition as a friend and of his adoption in the family). Speaks Enkidu:

‘I will challenge him, for [my strength] is mighty,
[I will vaunt] myself in Uruk, saying “I am the mightiest!”
[There] I shall change the way things are ordered:
[one] born in the wild is mighty, strength he possesses’ (George, 2020, I 220-223).

Speaks Gilgamesh:

‘I will conquer him in the Forest of Cedar:
let the land learn Uruk’s offshoot is mighty!
Let me start out, I will cut down the cedar,
I will establish for ever a name eternal!’ (George, 2020, Y 184-187)

The challenge of Enkidu to Gilgameš ends in (honourable) defeat, and the beginning of their friendship. The challenge of Gilgameš to Humbaba ends in (dishonourable) victory²¹, because it is held to contribute to the death of Enkidu, and hence, also, to the psychological breakdown of Gilgameš. One might almost say that, in the *Epic of Gilgameš*, *húbris* that is sanctioned by the gods is fine; *húbris* that is not sanctioned by the gods is not fine. “*Hubris*, arrogance in word or deed or even thought”, in Dodds’s standard definition²², is thus epitomised by the Sumerian couple of foxes (see above) in a comic key – and by Enkidu and Gilgameš in a tragic key. Beyond their mutual streaks of arrogance and aggressivity,

¹⁹ “‘You lifted it up, set it down at my feet,/ and I, Ninsun, I made it your equal./ Like a wife you loved it, caressed and embraced it: a mighty comrade will come to you, and be his friend’s saviour’ (George, 2020, I 265-268). ‘And I, Ninsun, I shall make him your equal./ A mighty comrade will come to you, and be his friend’s saviour,/ mightiest in the land, strength he possesses,/ his strength is as mighty as a rock from the sky’ (George, 2020, I 290-293).

²⁰ Wells (1904, 240-241) captures the psychological mechanism of becoming aware that one is no longer the only giant.

²¹ ‘In affairs like law suits or even in arguments, by losing quickly one will lose in fine fashion. It is like *sumō* [wrestling]. If one thinks only of winning, a sordid victory will be worse than a defeat. For the most part, it becomes a squalid defeat’ (Yamamoto, 2005, 139).

²² Dodds, 1951, 31. *Ibid.*: “*hubris* has become the ‘primal evil’, the sin whose wages is death, which is yet so universal that a Homeric hymn calls it the *thēmis* or established usage of mankind, and Archilochus attributes it even to animals.’

Enkidu and Gilgameš are saved by their love for each other²³, that is, they are saved by their love until they go against the gods.

A fearsome ‘child’²⁴ of fearsome wilderness²⁵, Enkidu wanders through its liminality together with his herd, together with his herd returning at the water-hole, that threshold to the world of humans, where he is spotted by ‘a hunter, a trapper-man’ (George, 2020, I 113). It is unclear (and mostly, irrelevant) whether Enkidu leads his herd, or follows it, as they appear, time and again, as one. Suffice it to say that Enkidu acts as protector of the wildlife, the hunter watching him in fear, his work undone²⁶. Next, there are two of them to watch Enkidu, namely, ‘hunter and harlot’ (George, 2020, I 170). Šamhat, by exposing her nudity to the gaze of Enkidu, makes him cross the threshold into the world of humans. After she does her ‘work’ (George, 2020, I 192) and humanises him, a fortnight later, she will lead Enkidu by the hand, ‘like a god’, to the shepherds’ camp²⁷. And in the shepherds’ camp, an outpost of civilisation (though not of “progress”, modern theme):

Enkidu ate the bread until he was sated,
he drank the ale, a full seven jugfuls.
His mood became free, he started to sing,
his heart grew merry, his face lit up.

The barber groomed his body so hairy,
anointed with oil he turned into a man.
He put on a garment, became like a warrior,
he took up his weapon to do battle with lions (George, 2020, P 100-111).

Now, Enkidu does not protect wildlife anymore – he protects *against* it. This is the second ‘threshold’ that Enkidu crosses, this time not to humanity, but to civilisation, delineated by the quaternary cluster of food (‘bread’), drink (‘ale’), ‘oil’, and ‘garment’, that symbolises in the Ancient Near East human civilisation (Liverani, 2004, 9-10). Enkidu now is ready for Uruk. Is Uruk ready for Enkidu?

He going [first,] with Shamhat following.

He went right into Uruk-the-City,
and a crowd gathered around him (George, 2020, P 175-177).

²³ Is this homosexuality (or rather, bisexuality)? Is this homoeroticism? Or are they, more simply, brothers-in-arms (by Ninsun’s adoption of Enkidu, they also being brothers *tout court*)? As with David and Jonathan in the *Bible*, or with Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*, the issue of the precise nature of the love between Gilgameš and Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgameš* (in the five extant Sumerian compositions involving Gilgameš and Enkidu, the former is simply a servant of the latter, and *not* a loving friend) serves as a litmus paper of our ideologies. In neither of the three cases there is conclusive data for a positive answer, so all this remains in the realm of speculation. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. However, absence of evidence is not evidence of presence either. However, unlike the *Bible* or the *Iliad*, there is a high likelihood that new fragments of the *Epic of Gilgameš* will continue to emerge in the future, either from the mounds, or the museums (or both), and hence, it is possible that we might finally acquire, in this specific case, conclusive data for a definite answer. Cf. Jacobsen, 1930; Tigay, 2002, 184, n. 22; Ackerman, 2005; and Helle, 2021a, 170-178.

²⁴ ‘When the hunter saw him, his expression froze/ but he with his herds – he went back to his lair.// [The hunter was] troubled, subdued and silent/ his heart [was vexed,] his features gloomy/ In his heart there was sorrow, / his face resembled [one come from] afar’ (George, 2020, I 116-121).

²⁵ Fear of the wild was fundamental in Ancient Mesopotamia. Was fear of the wild more visceral than the fear of the gods? The question is probably misleading, in so far as “wild” populations, since the Gutians on, were regularly seen as agents of divine retribution. In Ancient China, fear of the gods was more directly articulated, see Nylan and Trenton, 2021, 19.

²⁶ ‘Over the hills he [roams all day,] / [always] with the herd [he grazes on grasses,] / [ever] his tracks [are found] by the water-hole, / [I am afraid and] dare not approach him.// ‘[He filled in the] pits that I [myself] dug, / [he pulled up] the snares that I laid. / [He set free from my grasp] all the beasts of the field, / [he stops] me doing the work of the wild’ (George, 2020, I 126-133).

²⁷ George, 2020, II 36. “Statues of Mesopotamian gods were sometimes led in procession by worshipers. Enkidu, escorted by Shamhat, now resembles one of these” (Foster, 2019a, 13, n. 2).

This is the third threshold that Enkidu has crossed. It would be difficult indeed to overstate the role of cities in ancient Mesopotamia. “Later literary texts see cities as the very matrix of civilization, representing the order needed for the development of organized existence. They appear in such texts at the beginning of creation and are closely connected to kings” (Snell, 1997, 19). If the reader is reminded at this juncture of πόλεις, he/ she is not wrong. Man, said Aristotle, is a city dweller²⁸. One cannot help here but remember Snell’s poignant introduction to his picture of the urbanisation process in “the Land” (*i. e.*, Sumer), with peasants coming to the cities, at the putative time and place of king Gilgameš – together with his casual comment: “it is this willingness to take risks that makes us human” (Snell, 1997, 11). Indeed, even the greatest of the Greeks can on occasion be plain – *wrong*... And in that Land that Moderns like to call the ‘cradle of civilisation’, there was a city like no other. A city in a Land of cities²⁹, clustered together with such density that one woman or man blessed with good eyes could sometimes see from one onto the next – and yet, not just a city in a Land of cities, but also “the world’s oldest megacity” (Fassbinder, Ostner, Scheiblecker, Parsi and van Ess, 2019, 1970), “the Venice in the desert”³⁰, or *Uruk*. It is here, in this megacity, exalted as a high place of good life, that Enkidu has entered. The text is fragmentary, and again, like in the wild, we do not know whether Enkidu leads the menfolk’s adulatory crowd, or (more likely, again) follows it to the wedding house. The crowd and its “champion” (as with the herd and its protector) here, may I say, appear as one.

Enkidu with his foot blocked the door of the wedding house,
not allowing Gilgamesh to enter.
They seized each other at the door of the wedding house,
in the street they joined combat, in the Square of the Land.

The door-jambs shook, the wall did shudder (George, 2020, II 111-115).

If this fourth threshold is a literal *threshold* (the threshold of the wedding house), and if the first and third thresholds were places (the meeting at the water-hole and the entering of the city), the fifth threshold, the threshold to cult, like the second threshold, the threshold to culture, will be an immaterial threshold.

Taking each other hand in hand,
Gilgamesh and Enkidu went to the Palace Sublime.
Into the presence of the great Queen Ninsun,
Gilgamesh rose and entered before [the goddess, his mother.] (George, 2020, III 19-22)

Enkidu was animal, is human, and will be divine. More accurately, he will be like Gilgameš, straddling the border between human and divine.

In addition to words for “divine”, Akkadian uses a special sign (called a “determinative”) to mark divinity. The special sign for divinity applies not only to deities but also to many other phenomena such as demons, stars, the images of monstrous creatures, the determined order (*šimtu*), and legendary human heroes of old, such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu (Smith, 2001, 6).

Since his very first appearance in the text of the *Epic*, Enkidu bears this special sign (a star stylised) before his name. “You are handsome, Enkidu, you are just like a god!”, tells him Šamhat once he is humanised (George, 2020, I 207). But Enkidu’s journey reaches its end in his adoption by the goddess Ninsun:

²⁸ “Καὶ ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον” (Aristotle, *Politica*, 1253a3). A literal translation would be: “and that the human being is by nature a living being living in a city”. The traditional translation and its “political animal” are, actually, anachronistic.

²⁹ “Southern Mesopotamia was a land of cities” (Adams, 1981, 2).

³⁰ “Our magnetometer prospection now covers an area of *c.* 70 ha and revealed a network of waterways, ship canals, harbours and moles, water gates and landing places that gave access to different city quarters. The water network crosses the city from north to south, provides water for the irrigation of gardens inside the enclosed city, and protects the inner city from floodwaters” (*ibid.*).

Enkidu, whom [I love,] I take for my son,
Enkidu in [brotherhood,] Gilgamesh shall favour him! (George, 2020, III 127-128).

For Enkidu, this end of the journey is the beginning of a new journey, that he will go on with Gilgameš. They will journey from the Palace Sublime into the heart of darkness that is the realm of Humbaba. And it is specifically in the context of this upcoming journey that the adoption of Enkidu by ‘the august Wild-Cow, the goddess Ninsun’ takes place. As for them, the regents duly advise Gilgameš:

“Who goes in front will save his comrade,
who knows the road shall [guard] his friend”.

‘Let Enkidu go before you (George, 2020, III 218-220).

2. *The Forest of Cedar*

And yet, upon seeing the Forest of Cedar, Gilgameš urges Enkidu: ‘Take my hand, friend, and we shall go [on] together’ (George, 2020, V 45). And, almost immediately after:

[The one who] walks alongside is the prudent man.

“‘[Let him who] goes first be on guard for himself and bring his comrade to safety!’”
It is they made a name [for days] long in the future!’ (George, 2020, V 48-50)

So, ‘we shall go [on] together’, and ‘[The one who] walks alongside is the prudent man’ – but “[Let him who] goes first be on guard for himself and bring his comrade to safety!’”. What does this mean indeed? Does Enkidu go first? Does Gilgameš go first? Do they go together? Or does it not matter anyway, as long as ‘It is they made a name [for days] long in the future!’? Or have their personalities merged (see Helle, 2021a, 177-178)? This ambiguity, that a fragmentary text helps little resolve, also reflects the ambiguity that had already shown in the psychological and physical reaction of Gilgameš at the sight of the Forest of Cedar:

They stood there marvelling at the forest (George, 2020, V 1-6).

And then –

As the cedar [cast] its shadow,
[terror] fell on Gilgamesh.
[Stiffness took] a grip of his arms,
and tremors beset his legs (George, 2020, V 27-30).

There, on the threshold of the lofty Forest, Gilgameš and Enkidu ‘marvel’. It must be for a reason that the Forest of Cedar is depicted as such “a rich and riotous place, full of music and aromas, so when the heroes turn this lush jungle into a wasteland, the epic offers the closest Babylonian literature comes to an ecological critique”³¹.

The cedars drip their aromatic sap in cascades, a trope that gains power from cedar incense’s position in Babylonia as a rare luxury imported from afar. The abundance of exotic and costly materials in fabulous lands is a common literary motif. Perhaps more surprising is the revelation that the Cedar Forest was, in the Babylonian literary

³¹ Helle, 2021a, 216. The devastation that Gilgameš and Enkidu wreak resonates ominously into our Anthropocene, when very little was left of the famed, lofty cedars of Lebanon (*vd.* Beals, 1965). Intensive felling of cedar trees by the Phoenicians extended, for economic and geopolitical reasons, northward during the 8th century BC, to the Amanus mountain range, *vd.* Watson-Treumann, 2000-2001.

imagination, a dense jungle inhabited by exotic and noisy fauna. The chatter of monkeys, chorus of cicada, and squawking of many kinds of birds formed a symphony (or cacophony) that daily entertained the forest's guardian, Humbaba (al-Rawi and George, 2014, 74; slightly edited for fluency).

A symphony – or a cacophony? The dual nature of “Humbaba's jungle orchestra” (*ibid.*) helps explain the dual nature of the Forest, that fascinates and terrifies. ‘They saw the Mountain of Cedar, seat of gods and goddesses’ throne’ (George, 2020, V, 6). Such place is numinous, a concept coined by Otto (1958, 6-7), filled with *mysterium tremendum* (*ibid.*, 12-24) and with *fascinans* (*ibid.*, 31-40). Indeed, the numinous, for Otto, is the ‘wholly other’ (*ibid.*, 26), *das ganz Andere* (Otto, 2014, 31). Hence, for instance, one of the earliest extant literary texts in both Mesopotamia and the world reads:

To the city, to the city, O man, approach! Do not approach!
 To the city, to the Keš temple, O man, approach! Do not approach!
 To its goddess Tu, approach! Do not approach! (Biggs, 1971, 203, D recto ii)

Helle offers a different argument:

His forest is less like the lair of a monster and more like the court of a king. The air is scented by resin oozing from the cedars and filled by the music of birds and beasts. But these similarities only make Humbaba and his home all the more monstrous by creating a state of near-resemblance, with monkeys as musicians and natural scents instead of artificial censers. The uncanny rift between animals and humans is what makes Humbaba a monster, and his forest a dark mirror of Uruk³² (Helle, 2021a, 216).

It certainly speaks volumes to our (as yet, still incompletely) urbanised world that smelling “natural scents instead of artificial censers” is given as a symptom of monstrosity. But it is also true that Uruk was for many centuries the vanguard of this urbanisation that engulfs us now. Presumably, Helle's phrase, “the uncanny rift between animals and humans”, is a not-so-faint echo of Mori's concept of the “uncanny valley” between robots and humans (*vd.* Mori, 2012). Robots aside, to me Humbaba's monstrous nature, hybrid indeed, as Helle writes (“Humbaba mixes animal and human traits, making him both and so neither”, *ibid.*), is not *thus* hybrid:

‘[Hear me, O elders of Uruk-the]-City!
 [I would tread the path to ferocious Humbaba,]
 I would see the god of whom men talk,
 whose name the lands do constantly repeat (George, 2020, Y 180-183).

Thus speaks Gilgameš to the elders of Uruk, when he tells them of the designs he formed on the Forest of Cedar and its guardian, appointed by Enlil, the supreme god. Before that, he had also told Enkidu, who had answered:

‘That is a journey [which must not be made,]
 [that is a man who must not be looked on.]
 He who guards the [Forest of Cedar, his *reach* is wide,]
 Humbaba, his voice is the Deluge (George, 2020, V 218-221).

Humbaba thus is a man and a god (like Gilgameš – and also, like Enkidu since his humanisation by Šamhat, and since his adoption by Ninsun). And he is a god whom the Igigi (the great gods of heaven) would not oppose, a god who ranks in his Forest second to only Adad (the Storm God, venerated as a

³² “Not only are sounds extremely important in conveying a warning about entering the Cedar Forest, but at least some of the visual images are not what they seem. For example, Tablet V:8, 23 seemingly presents a rosy picture of the Cedar Forest. At the same time, these lines are open to indirect negative understandings” (Miglio, 2023, 90, n. 28).

supreme power especially in Syria and Lebanon, George, 2020, Glossary). And, for a moment, his Forest of Cedar, may I say, will change into the heart of darkness:

They seized hold of Humbaba in the midst of the forest,
his terrible auras did fill the forest.
They grabbed his auras in their hands³³.

After the fight is over, death, plunder and destruction will follow. One question also follows, left unanswered, that Enkidu asks Gilgameš:

‘[My friend,] we have reduced the forest [to] a wasteland,
[how] shall we answer Enlil in Nippur?
“[In] your might you slew the guardian,
what was this wrath of yours that you went trampling the forest?”’ (George, 2020, V 303-306)

3. *The Bull of Heaven*

The *húbris* of Gilgameš and Enkidu is great and growing. And the very reasons of their expedition to the Forest of Cedar³⁴ are not altogether clear. Indeed, it was traditionally one of the royal duties of Gilgameš³⁵ to fell cedar where cedar was and bring it to his city, a most precious and much-needed commodity that the extraordinarily flat alluvial plain that forms Mesopotamia lacked. But there are other reasons, in addition to the felling of cedar that are either given or suggested (*vd.* Helle, 2021a, 165-166 and 206), some of them less than accurate, sowing progressively confusion. And the cedar needed for felling did not have to lead to the killing of Humbaba and his seven sons, to the devastation of the Forest. The very reasons of the expedition of Gilgameš and Enkidu to the Forest of Cedar are not altogether clear – not because they are too few, but too many. Is *húbris* at this juncture mostly driven by their aggressivity? Perhaps. Or perhaps, by their fear, as Enkidu says³⁶. Likewise, the very reasons of Gilgameš’s rejection of Ištar are not altogether clear. As scholars have suggested various reasons (*vd.* Karahashi and López-Ruiz, 2006, 100-101), one fundamental fact remains: Gilgameš and Ištar are not unlike.

The stories about Ishtar make the outlines of Babylonian culture easier to see, as we follow her violating its rules. In this sense, Ishtar is a lot like Gilgamesh, who has the same instinct for breaking every boundary he bumps into. Like Gilgamesh, Ishtar is constantly excessive, short-sighted, and destructive. We might reasonably assume that they would be a well-matched pair – but the epic makes us think again. Gilgamesh refuses Ishtar’s offer of marriage with gusto and malice, and in return she sends the Bull to kill him. So much for romance (Helle, 2021a, 212).

Gusto and malice, perhaps – but certainly, also an outpouring of scorn. The problem is the following: Gilgameš is the king of Uruk, Ištar is the main goddess of Uruk. There are likely to be several ways to turn down an offer of marriage. Heaping verbal abuse for no less than fifty-six lines of text (George, 2020, VI 24-79) is hardly the nicest, or the most diplomatic. Yet, this is Gilgameš’s answer to the foremost goddess in the Mesopotamian pantheon.

One of the king’s most important duties was to secure a good relationship between the city and its gods. The king was effectively the main priest of his city, and he was expected to build temples, give offerings, obey omens, hold festivals, and perform regular rituals to keep the gods well-disposed. If the relationship between city and god was

³³ George, 2020, V 147-149. “The Mesopotamians believed that divine beings were surrounded by blinding, awe-inspiring radiances” (Foster, 2019a, 19, n. 4).

³⁴ *Vd.* the dissenting opinion of Dalley (2000, 126, n. 20), who translates *erēnu* as ‘pine’ instead of ‘cedar’.

³⁵ “The cedar forest motif is retained in Mesopotamian historical literature in the form of the ritual claim of kings, from the old Akkadian period on, to have gone to the cedar mountain and to have cut cedars there” (Shaffer, 1983, 307, n. 3).

³⁶ *Vd.* George, 2020, V 179-183 and V 200-204.

damaged, the consequences would be catastrophic. At worst, the god could decide to abandon the city and so surrender it to obliteration.

The degree to which Gilgamesh mismanages Uruk's relationship with Ishtar makes it the most egregious of his royal crimes. Not only does he fail to pay homage to Ishtar; he insults her bitterly. His crime is not simply turning down a marriage proposal; Gilgamesh endangers the entire city with his insults (Hell, 2021a, 205-206).

Is *húbris* at this juncture mostly driven by his arrogance? Perhaps. Or perhaps, by the echo of an ancient theological, cultic, or political struggle (vd. Tigay, 2002, 68-71), and the tradition that makes Gilgamesh "en³⁷ of Kullaba" (that is, "lord of Kullaba") should be relevant in this connection. One way or the other, this time, it is not Gilgamesh and Enkidu that enter a numinous place ('They saw the Mountain of Cedar, seat of gods and goddesses' throne'). It is the numinous, instead, that enters their world, in the form of the Bull of Heaven (*i.e.* the constellation Taurus), coming to wreak havoc, as they had also done in the Forest of Cedar. After Gilgamesh, advised and helped by Enkidu, kills the Bull of Heaven, too, Ištar 'wails in woe', and Enkidu grossly insults her (George, 2020, VI 151-157). It is true that, on a normal day, Ištar could teach masterclasses in both arrogance and aggressivity. However, not at that moment. Behold "Gilgamesh's rock-star welcome on his return to Uruk" (Helle, 2021a, 162), together with Enkidu:

They washed their hands in the river Euphrates,
took each other by the hand and in they came.
As they drove along the streets of Uruk,
the people were gathered to gaze [on them.]

Gilgamesh spoke a word to the serving girls of [his palace:]
'Who is the finest among men?
Who the most glorious of fellows?'
'Gilgamesh is the finest among men!
[Gilgamesh the most] glorious of fellows!' (George, 2020, VI 167-175).

The reader might be reminded, yet again, of King Nebuchadnezzar. '26 Twelve months later, as he was walking on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon, 27 the king said, "Babylon the great! Was it not I, with my great strength, who built it as a royal residence for my splendor and majesty?"' (Daniel, 25-27).

The night after they killed the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu had a dream:

Enkidu began to speak to Gilgamesh: 'My brother, this night what a dream [I had!] The gods Anu, Enlil, Ea and celestial Shamash [held assembly], and Anu spoke unto Enlil: "These, because they slew the Bull of Heaven, and slew Humbaba who [guarded] the mountains dense-[wooded] with cedar," so said Anu, "between these two [let one of them die!]"

'And Enlil said: "Let Enkidu die, but let not Gilgamesh die!"' (George, 2020, VII).

Enkidu dies and Gilgamesh declares: 'clad in the skin of [a lion I shall wander] the wild' (*ibid.*, VIII 91).

4. The quest for immortality

And so, he does.

³⁷ 'En', in Sumerian, means 'lord'. 'Lord of Kullaba'. En-ki-du, the name of Gilgamesh's companion, means 'Lord of the pleasant place', for instance.

As his identity crumbles in Enkidu's wake, Gilgamesh becomes less of a man in several ways. First, he becomes more of an animal. [...] In addition, Gilgamesh tries to become more of a god. His ambitions go from the heroic to the divine. It is one thing to seek eternal fame – any hero worth his salt will do that – and quite another to seek eternal life. Gilgamesh had always been two-thirds god, but now he wants to dispense with the human element entirely. Again, his transformation is reflected in the physical landscape through which he travels. He moves from the city, where humans live, through the steppe, where animals live, to the land beyond the Tunnel of Darkness, where gods live (Helle, 2021a, 179).

Our ordinarily experienced world was not all that there was for ancient Mesopotamians. Our ordinarily experienced world is not all that there is even for some of us, namely, for those of us who still feel a connection to Otto's numinous, that is, the sacred, holy, and divine. But in the world before the waves of secularisation (or beyond them, or in the midst of them), there was (there is) a different world. So was in Egypt (Hornung, 1982, 251). And, in ancient Mesopotamia:

Since the historian can thus fairly confidently accept that the ancients believed certain things about their gods and acted on these beliefs, it is also worth his notice that these beliefs were not mere isolated oddities but that they formed parts of a coherent whole, a distinct "mode" of experiencing things and events, one which may suitably be called the theocratic mode of experiencing (Jacobsen, 1994, 147).

There is a conceptual distinction between "cultic" and "cultural" texts. The former are an expression of the "theocratic mode of experiencing" – while the latter are an expression of the "normal secular mode".

All of existence, things and events alike, thus had to the Sumerians two sides, could be experienced in two different modes. This comes out clearly when Gudea obtains the dream he seeks and wakes up. We are told that "Gudea woke up, it had been a dream, he shuddered, it had been an unearthly dream". His first reaction is in the normal secular mode, a dream like any other dream. Then his shudder makes him aware that it was an experience in the theocratic mode (Jacobsen, 1994, 148).

Gilgameš does transcend the world that he experiences during the daytime in the dreams that he has at night³⁸. He dreams twice of the coming of Enkidu, before this happens. He dreams five times of their fight with Humbaba, before this happens. Gilgameš also strives to transcend our ordinarily experienced world by becoming immortal, but, regarding this, he will be frustrated. And yet, from beyond the gate of the Twin Peaks, the path of the Sun and the garden of the Jeweled Trees, at the edge of the world, from the realm of Uta-napishti the Distant, Gilgameš does bring something back to Uruk:

Said Uta-napishti to him, to Gilgamesh:
'Let me disclose, O Gilgamesh, a matter most secret,
to you I will tell a mystery of gods' (George, 2020, XI 8-10).

And thus end the wanderings of Gilgameš –

who scoured the world ever searching for life,
and reached through sheer force Uta-napishti the Distant;
who restored the cult-centres destroyed by the Deluge,
and set in place for the people the rites of the cosmos (George, 2020, I 41-44).

5. *The wall of Uruk*

But not before he builds the monumental wall of Uruk. Archaeology bears witness to it ("the city wall has a length of c. 9 km and is up to 8-25 m wide", Fassbinder, Ostner, Scheiblecker, Parsi and van Ess, 2019,

³⁸ Literally, "to see a dream"; like, for instance, in Japan (*yume o miru*) – or in ancient Greece, see Dodds, 1951, 105-106.

197), and it was built in the same period of time in which Gilgameš is supposed to have lived. Thus, Gilgameš gains access to yet another world, that is, the world of human history and memory.

He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,
he brought back a tale of before the Deluge.

He came a far road, was weary, found peace,
all his labours were [set] on a tablet of stone.
He built the rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse³⁹.

A myth (the “tale of before the Deluge”⁴⁰), rituals (“the rites of the cosmos”), and a symbol (“Uruk’s wall”): this, I would argue, is a marked improvement for Gilgameš, formerly specialist in *húbris*. It is thus that Gilgameš stretched between the human and divine realms across the narrative horizon, becomes sacred from holy (in the sense of Benveniste, 1969) only at the very end. “*Gilgamesh* is ancient Iraq’s most enduring literary legacy” (Robson, 2004), “a found foundation” (Helle, 2021a, 125), “that great foundation stone of world literature” (Ziolkowski, 2012, x).

6. Conclusions

Why is the *Epic of Gilgameš* read today? Is it because this *Epic* is “the dramatized account of a failed initiation” (Eliade, 1978-1988, I, 80) – or because the deeds of Gilgameš “fit very well into the Faustian spirit of Western civilization” (Coulano, 1991, 52)? Is it because of the importance of hedonistic values in the *Epic* (Tigay, 2002, 213)? Is it because of the permanent conflict between the individual and the collective (George, 2012, 241)? Is it because Gilgameš is *not* us (Helle, 2021a, vii-viii)? Is it because of its mythical content (Kirk, 1970, 135) – or because “Gilgameš is the world’s first literary hero and the proto-hero for all heroes of the ancient world that follow” (Pryke, 2019, 5)? Various readers of the *Epic of Gilgameš* might wish to give various answers to the indiscreet question why they read it: one, several, or none of the above. I personally feel closer to what I might call the Kirk-Pryke line of reasoning, in so far as I argue elsewhere that Sumerian literature is defined by the specific difference of being framed as distant in space (“of yonder”), time (“of yore”), manner (“of wonder”), or any combination thereof. The *Epic of Gilgameš* corroborates my hypothesis in the context of Akkadian literature. And there is much more to be done. “The full meaning of any literary text, image, or ritual then can only be fully grasped when analyzed not only as a narrative in itself but in its intertextual and intermedial relationships with other cultural forms of expression and with ‘myth’ as the underlying ‘hypotext’” (Pongratz-Leisten, 2020, 33).

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³⁹ George, 2020, I 7-12. Centuries before the presumed time of Gilgameš, “the overall settled area of Late Uruk period Uruk amounted to about 250 hectares, equalling thus the Greek polis of Athens around 500 BC” (Charvát, 2002, 128). This area would more than double by the time of the wall’s building: “the inner city covers an area of c. 555 ha” (Fassbinder, Ostner, Scheiblecker, Parsi and van Ess, *ibid.*).

⁴⁰ “But the story of the Flood was also extraordinary because it was seen as the outermost limit of history. In the Babylonian worldview, time was split in two: there was a time before the Flood (*lām abūbi*) and a time after the Flood (*arki abūbi*), and even an ancient king like Gilgameš belonged to the latter. What made the Flood special was that the destruction it wrought was all-englobing. Everything was destroyed and everyone not on Uta-napishti’s ship killed, so the time before the Flood could not be known in any way: the storm had erased all records, monuments, and witnesses of the past’ (Helle, 2021a, 191)”.

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