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Some Literary Motifs in the Composition of the Gilgamesh Epic *

By JACK M. SASSON

SOMETIME early in the second millennium B. C., let us say *ca.* 1800, a scribe in the temple of Isin compiled a list of all the kings who had ruled over Sumer. Supporting himself upon archives of hoary antiquity, this priest began his story 273,444 years, three months, and three and a half days before his own time. Then it was that the gods, concerned with events on earth, sent kingship down as a gift to mankind. Since its introduction, eons ago in heaven, this institution was responsible for creating order out of chaos. The gods had every reason to believe, therefore, that their human chattel would benefit in the same manner.

Our priest reckoned that 241,200 years were expended by five

* To Cyrus H. Gordon, in appreciation. The following essay attempts to present, admittedly through subjective glasses, current thinking concerning the Gilgamesh cycle. Some of its content has been presented by various scholars at the *VII Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (Paris, 1958). The section on irony was read by me independently at the American Oriental Society, New York, March 27, 1969. I would like to thank Professor and Mrs. Andras P. Hamori of Princeton for having been kind enough to read a first draft and offer a number of helpful suggestions. It would be unfair to attribute any errors in judgment to them.

In general, translation of the Akkadian follows E. A. Speiser's rendition in James Pritchard, *Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, II (Princeton, 1955), 72-99, 514-5. Where it differs, however, the translation is mine. That of the *Odyssey* is derived from Lattimore's Harper Torchbook edition.

cities, headed by eight rulers who successively inherited kingship, before the arrival of a cataclysmic Flood which engulfed mankind. To quote him:

The Flood swept over (the land). After the Flood had swept over (the land) and kingship had descended from heaven (a second time), Kish became (the seat) of kingship. . . . Twenty-three kings reigned 24,510 years, 3 months, 3½ days. Kish was defeated (in battle), (and) its kingship was carried off to Eanna.

In Eanna, Meskiaggasher, the son of (the sun-god) Utu, reigned (both) as lord (and) king for 324 years—Meskiaggasher entered the sea (and) ascended the mountains; Enmerkar, the son of Meskiaggasher, the king of Uruk who had built Uruk, reigned 420 years as king; Lugalbanda, the shepherd, reigned 1,200 years; Dumuzi, the fisherman, whose city was Kua, reigned 100 years; Gilgamesh, whose father was a (demon) (?), reigned 126 years; Urnungal, the son of Gilgamesh, reigned 30 years; Udulkamma, the son of Urnungal, reigned 15 years, Labasher reigned nine years; Ennundaranna reigned eight years, Meshede reigned 36 years; Melamanna reigned six years; Lugalkidul reigned 36 years. (Total) twelve kings reigned 2,310 years. Uruk was defeated (in battle), (and) its kingship was carried off to Ur.¹

In the above quotation, the duration of successive reigns grows progressively shorter as we descend into historical times. No doubt, the compiler was in possession of more reliable documentation. Indeed, it is to the era of Uruk that datable inscriptions have been uncovered by modern archaeologists.

Meskiaggasher inaugurated the dynasty of Uruk. Relative chronology allows scholars to date this semi-legendary personality to 2700 B. C. His successors all belong to an era which has been rightly called "the heroic age of Sumer." We possess a number of texts, most of which date to *ca.* 2000 B. C., devoted to the praise of Enmerkar and his lieutenant and companion-in-arms Lugalbanda. Well known also are legends associated with Dumuzi. With the possibility that an earlier, pre-diluvian hero of the same name inspired the Sumerian poets, this Dumuzi was considered the prototype of the perfect ruler. Married to the goddess Inanna, whose ire he kindled, Dumuzi disappeared into the underworld six months out of every year, bringing sterility and hunger into the land he left behind. Un-

¹ S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians, Their History, Culture and Character* (Chicago, 1963), p. 328. The name Uruk is substituted throughout for Kramer's Erech. For the translation "demon" rather than Kramer's "nomad" as a designation for Gilgamesh's father, see W. Lambert in *Gilgamesh et sa Légende*, (Paris, 1960), p. 48.

fortunately, the figure of Dumuzi has been so neatly shaped into theological garb that almost no historical reconstruction can fully satisfy.²

Comparatively few difficulties exist, however, when attempts are made to extract bits of facts from the material dealing with Gilgamesh. We shall approach the evidence from the epigraphical, onomastical, archaeological, and mythological points of view.³ The first consists of confirmations which are derived from historical inscriptions. For example, a senior contemporary of Gilgamesh, also mentioned in the Sumerian King List, has left posterity a vase bearing his name, Enmebaragesi, in archaic cuneiform.⁴ From the early second millennium comes the Sumerian King List, a definitely historical text when read with proper control.⁵ Also stemming from the same era is the Tummal inscription recording that Gilgamesh reconstructed an old shrine at Nippur.⁶ Finally, there exists a number of omnia dealing with Gilgamesh. However, together with later incantations addressed to him as judge of the underworld, these omnia are of negligible historical worth.⁷

A second line of evidence to prove Gilgamesh's existence can be gathered by study of personal names found on tablets dating to the Early Dynastic period at Fara of 2600 B. C. It has been shown that the King List, portions of which are cited above, bore the type of names which was current in early times.⁸ Just as reliable and precise in ascertaining the genuineness of Gilgamesh is the data gleaned from archaeological finds. Gilgamesh lived at a time when the Sumerian cities were sprouting all over Southern Mesopotamia. Such a development was due to an increased material prosperity, resulting directly from the application of a successful technique of irri-

² For a general background of this era see Kramer, *The Sumerians*, pp. 43 ff.

³ W. Lambert, in *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, pp. 48-51.

⁴ D. O. Edzard, "Enmebaragesi von Kiš," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, LIII (1959), 9-26.

⁵ The. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King-List*, *Assyriological Studies*, 11 (Chicago, 1939).

⁶ Kramer, *The Sumerians*, pp. 46-9; for the difficulties created by this inscription see Kramer, in *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, pp. 59-68.

⁷ W. Lambert, in *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, pp. 39-57.

⁸ Jacobsen, *Sumerian King-List*, pp. 187-90.

gation. Being naturally cantankerous, the Sumerians reaped negative benefits from this close proximity. It is clear from the number of burnt layers in almost every excavated city of the Early Dynastic era that acts of hostilities were frequent. Precisely during the "heroic age of Sumer," a period in which Gilgamesh is presumed to have lived, great fortifications were raised. It has been suggested by the Russian scholar Diakonov that much can be attributed to the struggle between the northern hegemony of Kish and the southern coalition centered at Uruk. As we shall see, the epic credits Gilgamesh and his direct ancestors with constructing the heavy defenses of Uruk.

The fourth and last argument is derived from the study of the Gilgamesh saga as it is known to us both from Sumerian and Semitic sources. At the present stage of cuneiform research, it is quite impossible to determine the exact time span which existed between the Gilgamesh of flesh and bones and the hero of the poetic creation. Even the earliest Sumerian text dates to the beginning of the second millennium, some six hundred years after the probable reign of our hero. But two elements can be invoked to bridge this gap. As one studies the *Chanson de Roland*, the Arthurian cycle, 'Antar and 'Abla, and other folk epics in which both historical and poetical episodes can be controlled to some degree, it is observable that complex and lengthy songs were created, often within a generation or two after a given event. Therefore, it is possible that some episodes extolling Gilgamesh may have circulated, in oral form at least, a few decades after the protagonist's death. The other element is open to serious contention and lies in the domain of artistic interpretation. In the Mesopotamian iconographic *répertoire* two types appear frequently. A royal figure, conventionally called the "king-priest," is frequently shown triumphing over a Medusa-faced person. This figure, it is important to note, is sometimes accompanied by an acolyte. The second type is that of a male hero usually depicted as vanquishing an assortment of demons and beasts. Among the latter, representations of ferocious bulls and lions predominate. It has been argued by some that these two types, attested from the Early Dynastic period, are visual translations of famous moments in the career of Gilgamesh: his victories over Humbaba, demiurge of the Cedar-forests, and the Bull of Heaven.⁹

⁹ F. Amiet; G. Offner, in *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, pp. 169-73; 175-81.

As it is still preserved for us, the material in Sumerian dealing with Gilgamesh consists of five legends, each complete within itself.¹⁰ *Gilgamesh and King Agga of Kish* is probably the most "historical" text. It speaks of Gilgamesh's stouthearted refusal to submit to the mighty king of a neighboring kingdom and of his eventual triumph over the forces which threatened Uruk.¹¹ *Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living* is by far the masterpiece among the fragments in existence. Its mood is somber throughout, for it treats a poignant theme. These are the words of Gilgamesh to Utu the sun-god:

Utu, a word I would speak to you, to my word your ear!
 I would have it reach you, give ear to it!
 In my city man dies, oppressed is the heart,
 Man perishes, heavy is the heart,
 I peered over the wall,
 Saw the dead bodies floating in the river's water.
 As for me, I too will be served thus, verily it is so!
 Man, the tallest, cannot reach to heaven,
 Man, the widest, cannot cover the earth.
 Brick and stamp have not yet brought forth the fated end,
 I would enter the "land," would set up my name;
 In its places where the names have been raised up, I would
 raise up my name.
 In its places where the names have not been raised up,
 I would raise up the names of the Gods.¹²

In order to accomplish this task, Gilgamesh and his servant Enkidu travel to the Cedar-forest, the land of the Living. There they attack and kill Humbaba, its monstrous guardian. But not before some of the most felicitous imageries in cuneiform literature were preserved on clay.

Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World, sometimes called *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu-tree*, begins with an act of creation. This is not especially remarkable, for to the Mesopotamian, as well as to the Hebrew, almost every existing element, be it animate or inanimate, resulted from a genesis that was tailor-made to fit its special nature. This, incidentally, helps to explain the many acts of creation,

¹⁰ Kramer, *The Sumerians*, pp. 183-205; L. Matouš, in *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, pp. 83-94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-90.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 193.

often clashingly different, that have been preserved in almost every Ancient Near Eastern civilization. To return to our story, a *huluppu*-tree, some sort of willow, had been nurtured by the goddess Inanna. Sadly enough it soon became the haunt of repulsive creatures. Gilgamesh is called upon to banish these intruders and is rewarded with some symbols of kingship produced from the *huluppu*'s wood. When these objects accidentally fall into the Netherworld, heroic Gilgamesh sends his companion Enkidu to regain them. The latter's descent into Hades offers the Sumerian poet a chance to describe life among the dead.¹³ *The Death of Gilgamesh*¹⁴ and *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* are two additional tales from the Sumerian which exist in an extremely poor state of preservation.

Because of the episodic nature of the Sumerian material at our disposal, we are faced with yet another difficulty. Did the Sumerian poets know of a cycle of tales whose protagonist was Gilgamesh, or were they content just to chant his praises in a series of single, complete adventures? In other words, was there as early as Sumerian times a unified epic with a major theme woven within the succession of encounters? With the possibility that future discoveries may force drastic revision in current opinions, the answer will have to be "No!" A meticulous reading of the Sumerian fragments summarized above will show very little internal evidence to suggest that even the humblest idea was followed or elaborated. As a matter of fact, one suspects an ulterior motive to have influenced the forging of some of these songs. This is best noted in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, where the act of creating the *huluppu*-tree and the subsequent conversion of some of its wood into symbols of kingship requires as many lines as the visit of Enkidu to the underworld.

It is nearly inescapable, one is forced to conclude, that man's first written epic was wrought by a Semitic genius who probably lived during the time of Hammurapi. To be sure, our poet must have been acquainted with some important emendations brought about by an Assyrian predecessor some generations earlier. The following will be no more than an educated guess, but it is ventured that some of

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-205.

¹⁴ Kramer, *ANET*, II, 50-2.

the more bombastic episodes of far-away conquest, such as the expedition to the Cedar-forest to destroy Humbaba, may have been patterned after historical events which occurred around 2350 B. C. Then Sargon of Agade, a Semitic dynast, deeply penetrated the Amanus ranges and Anatolia. His exploits were remembered with special relish by the Assyrians, one of whose famous kings took the same name. The intensely nationalistic Babylonians, on the other hand, never quite forgave Sargon for having rejected Babylon as a capital city in favor of Agade. For this reason, they would be loath to devise exploits for their Gilgamesh based upon the career of Sargon. It would be another matter, of course, to accept a ready-made adventure and to incorporate it within existing collections.¹⁵

A question might be raised at this point. If the adventure of Gilgamesh in the Cedar mountain is of Assyrian origin, how does one explain its presence in *Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living*, a Sumerian text? It should be brought to attention that despite its preservation in Sumerian, a language which became obsolete as a mode of oral communication in the late third millennium, *Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living* dates from the era of Hammurapi. By then, Sumerian was employed by priests and scribes much as Latin is used today in the Catholic church. I would like to hazard a guess which might be realized through stylistic evidence that *Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living* was a translation from the Semitic Akkadian into an ornate Sumerian.

To return to the old Babylonian poet. He seems to have introduced two elements into the collection which he inherited both from Sumer and Assyria. One of these, the transformation of Enkidu from the status of a passive servant to that of an active and often competitive companion, is probably the most inspired literary achievement in the annals of Mesopotamian creative thinking. In the Sumerian rendition Enkidu was conceived as a static servant whose every move depended upon the whim of his master. In the Babylonian version, however, Enkidu stands, at least at the outset, as Gilgamesh's oppo-

¹⁵ It seems unlikely to me that these exploits were patterned after rulers of the Ur III dynasts of ca. 2100 B. C. We know of no certain occasion in which the rulers of this Neo-Sumerian empire penetrated so far westward.

ment. We will have occasion to explore the possibilities resulting from this literary conception a little later in this essay.

The other theme introduced by the Semitic bard is the quest for immortality, or more precisely, for rejuvenation. This theme has been encountered tangentially in the Sumerian version, but this occurs precisely in the text which is suspected of being a rendering from the Semitic. No doubt, the important role which Shamash, the Sun-god, plays in the Babylonian renditions has something to do with inspiring this theme. As the god of Justice, a notion which included the apportioning of life, Shamash came to prominence among the Semites. His cult was particularly strong during the Old Babylonian era of *ca.* 1750 B. C.

The development of these two motifs, reinforcing each other, necessitated rearrangement of the available material and permitted the forging of a new pattern, that of a unified epic. Such a statement should, of course, be taken with a liberal dash of salt, for it treads upon tortuous territory: the origins of literary creativity. We can, however, stand on firmer ground when we consider the techniques employed by the poet to translate inspiration into the written word. In this paper, I would like to concentrate on one literary device, irony, and will attempt to demonstrate a subtlety on the part of the Semitic poet which might rank him with Homer, with slight exaggeration of course.

Before I do so, however, it might be beneficial to bring the epic into sharper focus by offering a short *resumé* of the content of its eleven tablets. After some introductory material Tablet One opens in Uruk, where Gilgamesh is king. He is an extremely obnoxious young ruler who does not hesitate to exact a variety of painful tributes, among them the *droit de seigneur*, from his troubled citizens. At the demands of the latter, the deities elect a goddess to create Enkidu. She shapes him out of clay from the EDIN, the steppe. As his name implies, Enkidu is Pan-like, hirsute, yet a noble savage. In a dream the sensual Gilgamesh learns of this remarkable creature and feels attracted to him "as though to a woman." He sends a hierodule to tame him, a task which the latter achieves within seven days and nights, an admirable display of efficiency. The second tablet discusses the meeting of the two. Gilgamesh and Enkidu grapple with each other, snorting like bulls. Although victorious, Gilgamesh admires

the strength of his opponent. As a result, and not unlike Roland and Olivier, the two become fast friends. Tablets Three to Five sing the praises of the duo in preparing for an expedition to the Cedar-forest and in successfully dispatching its keeper, Humbaba. Filled with desire for the handsome Gilgamesh, the goddess Ishtar invites his attention in Tablet Six. When the former rake of Uruk rejects her in no uncertain terms, the furious goddess of vengery sends the Bull of Heaven to attack our heroes. In a bravura performance reminding us of Minoan bull-fighting, the animal is killed. For this affront, Enkidu is chosen to pay the price. Tablet Seven and the fragmentary Eighth relate in moving terms the death of Enkidu and the mourning of Gilgamesh. It is at this point that Gilgamesh, confronted with the ugly realities of death, embarks on a journey to avoid its encroachments. Tablet Nine begins the odyssey which will lead him into the underworld and, in the Tenth Tablet, to the edge of the Seas. There he encounters the divine barmaid Siduri, who directs him to the dwelling of Utnapishtim. Alone among mortals, Utnapishtim had been granted the gift of immortality. The very famous Eleventh Tablet contains the flood narrative. As a motif, the deluge was known to the Sumerians, who, however, apparently never associated it with the exploits of Gilgamesh. The Old Babylonian poet, our evidence indicates, was responsible for incorporating it into the Gilgamesh cycle. Tablet Eleven ends with Gilgamesh realizing that he was fated to die. A twelfth tablet was added sometime in the first millennium B. C. but it remained as a noticeable appendage.

One more digression. Since, in addition to the basic Assyrian recension of the Gilgamesh Epic, we will rely on Old Babylonian and Hittite renditions, a feeble defense of the use of such wide-ranging material should be offered. In studying the epics and sagas of various nationalities, both of the distant past and the relative present, a theory that oral poetry was the medium of transmission has been presented, notably by Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and members of their schools.¹⁶ One should not, they exhort, conceive of singers memorizing a fixed

¹⁶ See primarily Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Atheneum paperback, 1965), which contains bibliographic material. A compactly written essay by the same writer, "Homer and Other Epic Poetry," can be found in *A Companion to Homer* (London, 1963), pp. 179-214.

text only to repeat it verbatim, nor suppose any reliance on the poets' part upon written material. Rather, the singers' technique consisted of remembering narratives whose basic content remained constant for numerous generations. The passing of time and the temperament of individual poets would often result in radical changes in the construction of each line. Thus while the essential themes remained unaffected, the various renditions of an epic often displayed narrative inconsistencies, expansion or contraction of given scenes, and transposition of long episodes. Such alterations are clearly apparent when fragments of the Gilgamesh Epic, stemming from different periods and locales, are compared. Despite the more than a millennium separation, broken occasionally by discoveries at Ugarit, Boghaz-Köi, Megiddo, and Sultan-tepe, the Gilgamesh Epic, as it is pieced together by the modern scholar, deserves to be considered as a thematically integrated poem, scarred here and there by gaping lacunae. This said, we can turn to the topic at hand.

Of irony's many qualities, I shall describe the Semitic poet's employment of two devices which have commonly been called 'dramatic irony' and 'irony in the use of character.' In some sense, dramatic irony is almost always playful, intellectual, and esoteric. Passages containing the ironic elements operate on two seemingly independent levels. On the one hand, the characters are shown by their utterances or deeds to be unaware of having fallen victims to a rush of events beyond their control. On the other hand, the audience, forewarned of subsequent developments by an omniscient author, evaluates differently the same passage. This discrepancy between the ultimate reality, as it is known to the audience, and the immediate situation, as it is understood by the characters, constitutes dramatic irony, well-known to us from the works of the Greek dramatists, of Shakespeare, and of Ibsen, among many others.

The Gilgamesh Epic actually opens by offering a capsule summary, a sort of Miltonian argument, of the complete drama that is to unfold:

Let me proclaim to the land (the feats) of him who has seen the deep
 Of him who knows the seas, let me inform it fully
 He has (seen/visited) the
 The wise (one) who knows everything.
 Secret things he has seen, what is hidden to man (he knows)
 And he brought tidings from before the Flood

He also took the Long Journey, wearisome and under difficulties
All his experiences, he engraved in a stone stela.

The poet thus assures his listeners that he will be telling a "true" tale since its essence is derived from Gilgamesh's own inscription. He also reminds them that his hero will come back from a long journey, weary and worn, and lightly suggests it to have been an unsuccessful enterprise. Lest the audience be caught in a despairing mood, one which could inhibit its response to his story-telling, the Mesopotamian bard quickly adds praises of Gilgamesh's earthly, tangible achievements.

Of ramparted Uruk, the wall he built
Of hollowed Eanna, the pure sanctuary.
Behold its outer wall, whose cornice is like copper
Peer at its inner wall, which none can equal
Seize upon the threshold, which is from old
Draw near to Eanna, the dwelling of Ishtar,
Which no future king, no man can equal.
Go up and walk on the walls of Uruk,
Inspect the substructure, examine the brickwork:
Is not its core of baked brick?
Did not the Seven (Sages) lay its foundations?

The above passage can be considered as the poet's editorial comment upon Gilgamesh's search for immortality. It is futile, he seems to argue, to be content with more than earthly accomplishments. When this notion is alluded to again, it comes at the end of the Epic, after the long and fruitless odyssey is over. One cannot but admire the poet's cleverness in choosing a resigned Gilgamesh to utter the following:

Go up, Urshanabi, walk up on the ramparts of Uruk.
Inspect the base terrace, examine its brickwork.
(See) if its core is not of baked brick,
And if the Seven Wise Ones laid not its foundation!

Nor is the audience allowed a lapse of memory, for the poet repeatedly calls attention to Gilgamesh's eventual failure. Before every new venture, the hero is made to hear the truth about the success of his forthcoming enterprise. But the blinded and tragic protagonist fails to perceive it. In the first cluster of episodes, it is Enkidu who ironically is chosen to deliver the poet's messages. In two in-

stances before the warriors' meeting with Humbaba, an encounter which could be considered as the prolegomenon to Enkidu's death, this brave companion has a series of premonitions. The first occurs immediately after Enkidu and Gilgamesh, appreciating each other's vigor: "kissed each other and formed a friendship" (III:i:19-20). "My friend," says Gilgamesh, "why do your eyes fill with tears? (Why) is your heart ill, as bitterly you sigh?" "A cry, my friend," replies Enkidu, "chokes my throat. My arms are limp, and my strength has turned to weakness" (III:ii:33-43). As the two approach the lair of Humbada, Enkidu has a presentiment once more: "Let us not go down into the heart of the forest," he implores Gilgamesh. "In opening the gate, my hand becomes limp" (IV:vi:24-5).

But fate is not to be cheated, and the poet digs deeper into his bag of literary tricks, producing a fresh and sharper collection of ironical episodes. As the fateful confrontation with Humbaba draws even nearer, it is Gilgamesh's turn to be forewarned. In one remarkable statement intended to give courage to Enkidu, he is made to say: "Who, my friend, can scale heaven? Only the gods dwell forever with the Sun-god. As for mankind, numbered are its days; whatever they achieve is but wind. Even here you are afraid of death" (III:iv:5-9). It becomes Gilgamesh's tragedy that having enunciated the facts of mortal life, he did not perceive and learn from them. Moreover, Gilgamesh fails to heed significant warnings. Nocturnal messages were valued by all ancient civilizations as vehicles in which the gods counseled their creations. For this reason, Gilgamesh requested and was granted a series of three dreams. As it is conjectured by Oppenheim, the first contains an admonition to leave the mountainous area of the Cedar-forest. In the second, a mountain collapses upon our hero, but miraculously he manages to escape injuries. In the third, the catastrophe is complete.¹⁷ With almost cynical irony, however, the poet assigns Enkidu the task of *favorably* interpreting these visions of obviously calamitous portent. Thus, an encounter with Humbaba which will bring great unhappiness to both the heroes is inexorably encouraged. Finally, when the monster evokes a re-

¹⁷ A. L. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East*, Transaction of the APS, N. S. XLVI (1956), 216.

sponse of mercy in the heart of Gilgamesh, the audience, by then thoroughly prepared, watches helplessly as Enkidu seals his own fate by counseling: "To the word which Huwawa (has spoken), hark not. Let not Huwawa (live)" (Hittite V:28-30).

The examples offered above have all been chosen from one single, albeit major, episode. It can be demonstrated, however, that the Mesopotamian lyricist was able to invoke irony as one of many devices intended to bind his many tales into a single integrated cycle. This is done by carefully choosing the secondary characters and assigning each a task which heightens the contrast between reality and aspiration.

Except for Utnapishtim's wife, who originally may have played a larger role than the one she is assigned in Tablet Eleven (cf. XI:258-60), four females are prominent in the epic: two divinities, Ishtar and Ninsun, and two attendants of the gods, the hierodule and the divinized Siduri, barmaid to the immortals. Before we enter this topic, however, it might be of interest to say a few words concerning the characterization of Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Departing radically from his Sumerian counterpart, the Semitic poet seems to have consciously attempted to fashion one personality who would combine the idiosyncracies of his two major protagonists. At the outset, Gilgamesh is described as a king of unequalled potential and of boundless, though undirected, energy. He is haughty, spoiled, and egocentric. Once Enkidu is given what Oppenheim calls an *éducation sentimentale*—in itself a master touch of irony, for Enkidu's sexual excess is destined to end Gilgamesh's—he becomes gentle, experienced, calm, and concerned with "justice." Not unlike the friendship which developed between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, as the story unfolds we witness a rapprochement in temperament, a meeting of the minds between the two friends. So that, as Enkidu lies on his funerary couch, punished for acting with the impetuosity and hubris characteristic of Gilgamesh, the latter has been tamed to the point of embodying his friend's gentler spirit within his own. It is not accidental, I think, that Gilgamesh then recognizes, in IX:5 and X:i:10, that his fate will henceforth be to roam over the steppe, precisely the region, foreign to the urbane Gilgamesh, where Enkidu was created. To be sure, the poet strews all sorts of hints that despite the apparent differences in their early behavior, Enkidu was con-

ceived as *alter ego* to Gilgamesh. His creation in the hands of the goddess Aruru was to have been a *zikru*, a replica of Gilgamesh (I:ii:31). Instead, she decided to fashion him in the image of the god Anu, perhaps to instill in him a divinity equivalent to, once the hierodule's instruction is completed, yet different from, Gilgamesh's. Exceedingly handsome and strong (II:v:25), Enkidu "looks like Gilgamesh to a hair; though shorter in stature, he is more massive in frame" (II:v:15-8). Repeatedly he is said to be Gilgamesh's equal (II:v:24-7). In his dreams, Gilgamesh encounters his "double" and responds to him not as a stranger, but as one who is uncannily familiar. Witness also the important events in Tablet Eleven. Gilgamesh had just been tested by Utnapishtim and his wife. He was to remain awake for six days and seven nights, a period which, incidentally, equals the length of Enkidu's consortings with the hierodule. But Gilgamesh fails, for "sleep fans him like a whirlwind." It should not be doubted that sleep and ritual bathing were often considered to be *rites de passage*, transitions from one state to another. In this case Gilgamesh, upon his reawakening, was to undergo a transformation, one that duplicated wild Enkidu's metamorphosis toward civilization. To quote the epic (XI:234-46):

Utnapishtim (said to him,) to Urshanabi, the boatman:
 "Urshanabi, (may) the qua(y) reject you, may the ferry landing
 refuse you forever!
 May you, who used to frequent its shore, be denied its shore.
 The man before whose face thou didst walk, whose body is covered
 with grime,
 The grace of whose body the pelts have hidden,
 Take him, Urshanabi, and bring him to the place of washing;
 Let him wash off his dirt in water like a clean (priest),
 Let him throw off his pelts and let the sea carry (them) away, that
 his body may come to look resplendent,
 Let the band around his head be replaced with a new one.
 Let the garment he wears be his best garment.
 Until he gets to his city,
 Until he finishes his journey,
 May (his) garment have no crease, but may it (always) be new."

Lastly, just as the people of Uruk petition the gods for relief from Gilgamesh's rapaciousness, so do the hunters beg for respite from Enkidu's repeated interference with their trapping activities (I:iii:1-12).

Characteristic of this earliest of epics, incidentally, we meet with the rudiments of all subsequent *Doppelgänger* narratives, very popular in western culture, in which two dramatized personalities are forged into one, "two characters (are made) to complement each other both physically and psychologically and who together are projections of the crippled or struggling personalities of a third character with whom the author is primarily concerned."¹⁸

In interpreting the omens of Enkidu's arrival into Uruk, the divine Ninsun is chosen by the poet to fulfill an important function. In an unfortunately damaged section, it is she who solicitously binds Enkidu's fate to that of her son, Gilgamesh (III:iv:17-21): "'Mighty Enkidu, you are not my womb's issue. I (have) herewith adopted you with the devotees of Gilgamesh, the priestesses, the votaries, and the cult women.' An *indu*-tag she placed round the neck of Enkidu." It is not without a certain amount of irony, I think, that this relationship is broken as a direct result of another goddess' ire. When, after killing the Bull of Heaven sent by Ishtar to punish Gilgamesh for his insolence, Enkidu flings the animals right side toward the proud deity, he draws upon himself the brunt of celestial retribution. To be sure, this is not the only act of defiance in which Enkidu becomes involved. VIII:ii:12 specifically credits him with the killing of Humbaba, a deed which has recently been confirmed by a Sumerian text published by Van Dijk.¹⁹ In that version, Enkidu adds salt to the wound by foolishly taunting Enlil, Humbaba's protector. He who was created by the gods to control violence, please note, is now forsaken by them for glorying in it.

More pointed is the Mesopotamian poet's skillful use of the other two females. The role of the hierodule in civilizing Enkidu is well-known. In a sense, the harlot's instructions destroyed the innocence of the 'noble savage' by presenting him with the realities of human life. It was through her unflinching devotion to duty that Enkidu was made to realize the amenities and the advantages that only a civilized man can extract out of existence. Faced with imminent

¹⁸ Quotation from Claire Rosenfield, "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double," in *Stories of the Double*, ed. Albert J. Guerard (New York, 1967), p. 314.

¹⁹ *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, pp. 69-81.

death, Enkidu manages to gather enough strength with which to curse this woman who had led him away from the idyllic life of an uncivilized creature. But the Sun-god Shamash urges him to withdraw his powerful malediction, reminding him of the many benefits which were showered upon him by the ardors of the hierodule (VII: iii: 35-48):

Why, O Enkidu, [Shamash rhetorically asks] do you curse the harlot
 Who made you eat food fit for divinity,
 And gave you to drink wine fit for royalty,
 Who clothed you with noble garments,
 And made you have fair Gilgamesh for a comrade?
 And has (not) now Gilgamesh, your bosom friend
 Made you lie on a noble couch?
 He has made you lie on a couch of honor,
 He placed you on the seat of ease, the seat at the left,
 That the princes of the earth may kiss your feet.
 He will make Uruk's people weep over you (and) the courtesans
 mourn for you,
 Will fill (the) people with woe over you.
 And when you are gone,
 He will invest his body with uncut hair,
 Will don a lion skin and roam over the steppe.

To eat, to drink, to be well clothed, and have lasting companionship were among the gifts that the gods gave to mankind. Beyond that nothing more can be obtained. How foolish of Gilgamesh to want more, the so-to-speak "existentialist" poet seems to say. When Gilgamesh appears, haggard and bedraggled, with "woe in his belly, his face (like) that of a wayfarer from afar" (Assyr. ver. X:i:8-9), he had plainly forsaken these pleasures which an assiduous hierodule, sent ironically enough by Gilgamesh himself, had taught Enkidu, his *alter ego*. Instead, Gilgamesh now sought rejuvenation. To bring Gilgamesh back to his reality, the poet elects another pragmatic personality, Siduri, barmaid of the gods. The following famous passage reminds the king of Uruk that eating, drinking, clothing, and companionship are the only achievable goals of man (O. B. X:iii):

Gilgamesh, for what purpose do you wander?
 You will not find the life for which you search.
 When the gods created mankind,
 Death for mankind they set aside,
 Retaining life in their own hands.

You, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full
 Be happy day and night.
 Throw a party every day,
 Dance and play day and night!
 Let your garment be sparkling fresh.
 Your head be washed; bathe in water.
 Pay heed to the little one that holds on to your hand
 Let your spouse delight in your bosom.
 For *this* is the task of mankind.

It is likely that the Gilgamesh Epic, consisting of eleven tablets, became canonical by the second half of the second millennium B. C. A twelfth tablet *may* not have been added until the Neo-Assyrian period. I underscore the word *may*, for, in some ways, the twelfth tablet appears to fulfill a function not unlike that of Book XXIV of the Odyssey. Much before Neo-Assyrian times, however, the Gilgamesh saga was carried beyond Mesopotamia. We possess fragments of the epic from the Hittite capital of Boghaz-Köi, and from the cosmopolitan city of Ugarit. Undoubtedly, it was also known to the Hebrews. Recently a small tablet containing a few lines has been found at Megiddo in Israel. Indirectly the epic may have influenced the Biblical description of Adam's fall. The Flood narrative, it is probable, reached the Hebrews through Hurrian or Urartian intermediaries. Direct borrowing of Gilgameshian motifs are, understandably, exceedingly difficult to identify in the Bible. One wonders, however, whether Gen. 49:5-6 does not preserve a memory of the Mesopotamian heroes' battles with Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. This passage contains the blessings, if one might call them such, of Jacob for his two violent sons, Simeon and Levi: "Simeon and Levi, are a pair/ Their weapons are tools of lawlessness/ Let not my person be included in their council/ Let not my being be counted in their assembly./ For in their anger, they slew a man/ and in their delight, they maimed a bull."²⁰

From the Levant and from Anatolia, the fame of Gilgamesh spread westward, finding its way into Mycenaean Greece. Whether carried by loquacious merchants, artisans, or, as seems more likely to me, members of the priestly classes, his deeds were sung. It is important to note that these personalities belonged to a class known to

²⁰ Immanuel Benziger, *Hebräische Archaeologie*, II (Tübingen, 1907), 395 ff.

the Odyssey as *dēmioergoi*. Book XVII: 382-5 contains the following reply that Eumaeus directed toward the uncouth Antinous: "For who goes visiting elsewhere so as to call in another stranger, unless he is one who works for the people, either a prophet, or a healer of sickness, or a skilled workman, or inspired singer, one who can give delight by his singing? These are the men who all over the endless earth are invited."²¹

The route taken can only be guessed at. For reasons that space does not permit me to explore, one can speculate that a Syrian port-city such as Ugarit played a major role. It is from there that the famous horde of cylinder seals found in Beothian Thebes was probably shipped.²² Of some forty-six seals, thirteen were inscribed with cuneiform Akkadian, one with Hieroglyphic Hittite. An example of the first variety bears the following inscription: "According to the god Marduk, may he who holds this, live." This talisman, datable to the Middle Kassite period of ca. 1400 B. C., is engraved to depict a nude male, flanked by vines and wild goats of enormous horns.²³ Despite the absence of legendary material to confirm an exact identification, scholars have associated this theme with an unknown episode in the life of Gilgamesh. In this manner it may be surmised that further knowledge concerning the Mesopotamian hero reached Greece.

The notion of preserving epics upon clay tablets spread from Mesopotamia toward the Mediterranean quite early. Ultimately, it may have sparked a desire among Greeks to preserve their heroic lore. Across from Ugarit, in Cypriot Enkomi, a fragment was found among Mycenaean-influenced ruins datable to ca. 1200 B. C. Although the Cypro-Minoan inscription of over twelve closely packed lines is un-

²¹ On such personalities in the Middle Bronze Age see my "Instances of Mobility Among the Mari Artisans," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, CXC (April, 1968), 46-54. For those of the Later Bronze Age, at Ugarit, see C. H. Gordon, "Ugaritic Guilds and Homeric Demioergoi," *The Aegean and Near East: Studies Presented to Hetty Goldman* (New York, 1956), pp. 136-43.

²² Cf. my "Canaanite Maritime Involvement in the Second Millennium B. C.," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXVI (1966), 126-38.

²³ Jean Nougayrol, in *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellenique*, 1964, 778-9. On the seals the best illustrations are still to be found in the *Illustrated London News*, November 20, 1964 (Archaeology section #2207).

deciphered as yet, the pattern of writing strongly suggests that the content was poetic.²⁴ *A priori*, there is absolutely no valid reason, I think, to prevent the Mycenaean Greeks from either recopying or translating passages from the *geste* of Gilgamesh. I should also hasten to add that in the light of the Parry-Natopoulos-Lord theory of oral poetry this argument may rightly be considered as irrelevant.

Scholars would certainly be pleased should a shovel uncover a collection of Mesopotamian tablets in Mycenaean territory. Undoubtedly this would settle many disputes. Until that happy event, we shall be content to point out that, increasingly, Near Eastern and Classical researchers have speculated on the influence of the Gilgamesh cycle on the Homeric poems.²⁵ Basing his work on the studies of many predecessors, T. B. L. Webster, for example, demonstrated the possible dependence in the conception of Achilles and Patroclus upon the model of Gilgamesh and Enkidu.²⁶ Specifically, he points out that the protagonists of each epic would become unthinkable without their respective mothers and companions—shades of modern times. More erratic are Robert Graves's attempts to connect the labors of Hercules with those of the king of Uruk. Gilgamesh's search in the land of the Scorpions, his descent into Hades, his meeting at the edge of the Seas with the barmaid Siduri, and his visit with Utnapishtim have all been compared, with various degrees of success, to episodes in the *Odyssey*, namely, the involvement with the Laistrygonians, the *rencontre* with Circe and Calypso, and the meeting with Tiresias. These "parallels," as they are labelled, will gain in credibility only when motifs, important as crafts of the Mesopotamian poet, are found to play equally major roles in the design of his Greek counterpart.

²⁴ Dikaios, in *Bericht über den V Internationalen Kongress für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Hamburg, 1958* (Berlin, 1962), pp. 72-3, Plate 20, No. 3.

²⁵ The list is now quite long. See *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, which contains an excellent bibliography, supplemented in this book's review by L. Matouš in *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, XXI (1964), 3-10, and R. Borger, *Handbuch der Keilschriftliteratur*, I, (Berlin, 1967), 555-7. The works of Cyrus H. Gordon are particularly useful (e. g., *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilization* [Norton Paperback, 1965] and "Homer and the Bible," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, XXVI [1955], 43-108).

²⁶ See Chapter III of his *From Mycenae to Homer* (Norton Paperback, 1964).

Somewhat shyly, I have as yet not posed a fundamental question. Why was the epic written? For what purpose have songs, apparently created and elaborated by wandering minstrels, been neatly preserved and collected in royal archives? To focus this question, let me draw attention to the Finnish Kalevala. As is well known, this huge collection of lays existed mostly in the mouths of singers until a burst of national spirit led the scholar-poet Lönnrot and his colleague Euro-paeus to arrange, unify, and practically canonize its content.²⁷ Can one hope, then, to uncover the circumstances which turned the tales of Gilgamesh into a visual experience?

I am afraid that there is no single answer to this basic inquiry. Many cuneiform compositions of venerable inspiration have been found to be products of a budding Mesopotamian scribe's practice sessions. But this cannot fully explain a cycle of at least twelve tablets. Some scholars have thought in the unlikely terms of a religious allegory, contending that a struggle between worshippers of the Sun-god Shamash was joined with the followers of a decadent Ishtar. Others looked for political motivations in considering the poem to offer subtly an exaltation of the Neo-Sumerian Ur III monarchs, Ur-Nammu and Shulgi. This theory gains somewhat by the existence of a Sumerian text which describes the welcome offered to Ur-Nammu by Gilgamesh, then one of the "ushers" of the Netherworld. In a similar vein it is speculated that the epic was written by the kings of Isin and Larsa, principalities of the early second millennium, in order to perpetuate the glorious memory of the Agade period.²⁸

On the other hand, those who regard the epic mainly as a product literary in nature have analyzed it either as an object lesson in moral behavior, or as a "meditation on death in the form of tragedy." Gertrude Levy summarizes the opinion of many when she sees the epic as incorporating the experiences "of loss and segregation, the temptations of love and fear, the vision of death and the return of the hero to the starting point, by the knowledge of acceptance and defeat."²⁹ Undoubtedly, Gilgamesh's awareness of his mortality and

²⁷ See the Foreword in the English translation of F. P. Magoun, Jr., *The Kalevala* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

²⁸ For a bibliography to these theories, see L. Matouš, *Bibl. Orient.*, XXI, 5.

²⁹ *The Sword from the Rock*, (London, 1953), pp. 21-2.

his subsequent search for rejuvenation lie deeply imbedded in the fabric of the last three tablets. But it is questionable whether this is indeed the theme that caused a written epic to cut across the boundaries of time and place. Could it not be incidental to a more relevant and less abstract outlook on the part of the essentially pragmatic Mesopotamian? Again, I do not have an answer, but with certain reservations I favor the approach of Louis Orlin of Michigan University. In an as yet unpublished paper, Professor Orlin has attempted to show that the whole epic, and not just a portion of it, is "centrally concerned with the theme of the education of a king to his humanity, a theme of such central concern in Mesopotamian perspectives that, *per se*, it accounts for the popularity of the story of Gilgamesh in all historical periods"³⁰ of the ancient Near East. Indeed, is Homer's *Iliad* any less of a *paedeia*, an education for kings, if not in how to behave, certainly in how *not* to behave among equals?³¹

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³⁰ Manuscript kindly lent to me by Professor Orlin, p. 20.

³¹ New fragments of the Gilgamesh cycle are occasionally discovered, the latest one outside of Mesopotamia having been found in Ugarit. The main collection of cuneiform texts is still R. Campbell Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, (Oxford, 1930). James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, second edition, contains translation of the Semitic version by E. Speiser. A portion of the Sumerian material is translated therein by Kramer. A good translation with an equally good study is obtainable in paperback: A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, (Phoenix, 1963). Of translations in European languages, the best available is A. Schott-W. von Soden's *Das Gilgamesh-Epos* (Stuttgart: Reclams Universalbibliothek, 7235/35a, 1958). Important studies are those collected in *Gilgameš et sa Légende*, P. Garelli, ed., (Paris, 1960). A. L. Oppenheim's brilliant article, "Mesopotamian Mythology, II," *Orientalia*, XVII (1948), 17-58, is still basic. I have profited much from reading it and I am indebted to many of its ideas. See also his *Ancient Mesopotamia*, (Chicago, 1965). The following serious studies have appeared after the completion of my manuscript: B. Landsberger, "Zur vierten und siebenten Tafel des Gilgamesch-Epos," *Revue d'Assyriologie*, LXII (1968), 97-135. Hope N. Wolff, "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXIX (1969), 392-8. John A. Bailey, "Initiation and the Primal Woman in Gilgamesh and Genesis 2-3," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXIX (1970), 137-50.