

The Birth of Poetry and the Creation of a Human World:

An Exploration of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

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“Dust-cakes still-see Gilgamesh-

Feed the dead. So be their guest.

Do again what Auden said

Good poets do: bite, break their bread”.

Seamus Heany, Audenesque. “For Joseph Brodsky”

Abstract

The Gilgamesh Epic tells of a distraught young king who traveled to the very end of the world in search of the wisdom needed to accept human mortality and the courage to lead a compassionate and fruitful human life. He finds this wisdom in the Story of the Flood that in this context represents a myth of creation and of redemption.

The myth is built around a mysterious word of guidance and compassion that the god of wisdom whispers in the ear of his faithful human servant to warn him of the coming Flood. This word not only saves the servant’s life, but it inaugurates an unending conversation between heaven and earth. It endows the servant with an immortal soul and it opens a truly human world to him and his descendants.

It is this same creative and salvific word that saves King Gilgamesh’s life and that permits him thereafter to play a constructive role in the building and governing of his city.

Summary of the Epic

What appears most remarkable about the Gilgamesh Epic at first sight is its extraordinary antiquity and the fact that it is the very first epic bequeathed to us by history. The oral traditions that preceded the written form of the poem date back to the Third Millennium BC, and the earliest written accounts of the life of Gilgamesh date from the end of the Second Millennium. The oldest extant written version of the epic dates from around 1750 BC. It antedates the Iliad and the Odyssey by more than a millennium, while the separate folktales that form the original source material of the epic began to circulate in written form only a few centuries after the invention of cuneiform writing around 3000 BC.

The particular version used as the basis for this essay concerns the so-called Sinleqe'unnenni edition, discovered in the ruins of the palace of King Assurbanipal at Nineveh by Austin Layard in 1839. It dates from around 1000 BC.

When we begin to read either the Babylonian or the later Sinleqe'unnenni version of the epic we cannot help but be astonished at the superb literary quality, the philosophical intricacy and the psychological depth of these very ancient literary works. It seems remarkable that at the very beginning of our literary tradition we find a work of such unequalled quality and depth. Unlike the more gradual developments we see in other cultural endeavors such as pottery, weaving or architecture, poetry seems to have sprung to life complete in all respects. Even the oldest fragments of the Gilgamesh poem are lacking neither in subtlety of style nor in the grandeur of their vision. At every turn we find revealing descriptions of the human condition and astonishing insights into the human soul. These descriptions and insight appear as relevant today as no doubt they

were at the time they were written. Despite the fact that they were written more than three millennia ago, they have lost none of their power to move and transform the human heart and soul.

The epic as a whole can be understood as an exploration of the mysterious paths that lead mortal human beings from infancy to maturity and from savagery to civilization. That path leads today as it did in the days of Gilgamesh from narcissism and self-preoccupation to participation in communal life, and from a fascination with the word that commands and materially changes the natural world to the poetic word that orients us towards our neighbors.

The poem centers on two characters who each bridge in their own distinctive ways the great divide that separates a primitive or savage life in the forest from a cultivated life in the city. The story of Enkidu tells of the gradual transformation of a purely natural into a cultural being. It tells how a natural creature that ate grass and roamed the steppe learned to inhabit the city and how someone who lived with a herd of wild gazelles became the favorite companion of a king.

The Epic of Gilgamesh tells the story of how a headstrong and selfish young king gradually became transformed into an exemplary and wise ruler.

The poem can be read as a meditation on the mysterious path of humanization and civilization that leads from a brutish life in the wilderness to a fully human, cultivated life in the city. That path leads at the same time from mere naked egoism and natural narcissism to neighborliness and responsible citizenship.

This process of humanization and civilization is reflected in the development of language. In Enkidu's case that development leads from mere animal sounds to human speech. In Gilgamesh's case this development leads from his sole interest in the word of

command, with which he subjects and abuses his people, to his discovery of the poetic word that reveals a truly inhabitable and fully human world. Gilgamesh's heroic journey can be understood as at first completely dominated by his search for a powerful and absolute word that would conquer death and make him immortal. What he finds instead is a poetic word that brings order to his life and that gives it new meaning. This word is first spoken by the god of wisdom to warn his human friend Utnapishtim of the coming Flood. It is a word of wisdom that speaks of a neighborly love that governs heaven and earth. It is this word that brings peace to Gilgamesh and that permits him to stop roaming the wilderness like a hunted animal and to begin to dwell on earth in a fully human way. It is this poetic and mythic word that teaches him how to govern himself and his city with love and justice.

The epic understands humanization and civilization in terms of a voyage that leads from a savage life in the forests and the steppe to a truly human life in the city. This journey leads from the terrifying discovery of death and from a panicked flight into the wilderness to the discovery of a consoling and poetic word that reveals the ultimate foundation of human dwelling. It is this latter discovery that leads the hero out of the wilderness and that permits him to return to the city. This fateful discovery is announced in a myth of creation that tells how a god established a threshold between heaven and earth and thereby separated and linked together the two realms in a neighborly way.

What differentiates a group of citizens from a herd of animals roaming the prairie is the fact that life in the city is marked by thresholds that distinguish one realm from another. It is in respecting these distinctions and in crossing these thresholds in a proper and ceremonial way that it becomes possible for the king and his subjects to live together in an orderly and civil way. Humanization and civilization refers here to the long process

by which we learn to dwell and learn to respect the threshold that separates our own domain from that of our neighbor.

Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu repeat in their voyage humanity's passage from an original, savage state based on violence and contained by natural barriers to a new poetic, civic and religious order that is based on neighborliness and the principle of the threshold.

A place of human habitation offers a refuge from a natural world ordered only by brute force. It opens the prospect of a fully human life guided by self-restraint and regard for the domain of one's neighbors. Human inhabitation separates a self from another, while simultaneously drawing a distinction between and inside and an outside, an exterior and interior. Yet, it also creates a new relationship of self to other that takes the form of host and guest. At the same time it binds the outside to an inside and the interior to an exterior by creating a new dialectic of coming and going, of journeying and returning home.

It is in this way that the establishment of a human habitation lays the foundation for a relationship between host and guest, artist and performer, reader and writer. Only a creature that knows how to dwell can paint, dance, think and write.

It is therefore not surprising that the Gilgamesh Epic opens and closes with scenes describing and praising the walls and portals of the city of Uruk. The poem thereby acquires the aspect of a place of dwelling that one enters and leaves by passing and honoring a gate. The poem becomes an inhabited place that the reader or listener enters in the manner of a guest seeking the company of the gods and the heroes who dwell within.

The proper reading and interpretation of such a poem starts with accepting the rules of the house and with entering into a relationship that binds a host to guest.

The epic begins and closes with a paeon to the walls and portals of Uruk, the city ruled by King Gilgamesh:

“Climb upon the walls of Uruk and walk about;
Inspect the foundation terrace and examine the brickwork,
If its brickwork be not of burned bricks,
And if the Seven Wise Men did not lay its foundations.”
(Heidel, 1946, I, 16-19)

We learn however that the young king does not want to be restrained by the walls and the laws of the city. He refuses to be bound by the threshold that founds the city. The beginning of the poem presents him as a tyrant who oppresses his people.

“He walks around in the enclosure of Uruk,
Like a wild bull he makes himself mighty, head raised (over others)
There is no rival who can raise his weapon against him.
Gilgamesh does not leave a son to his father.
He does not leave a girl to her mother,
The daughter to the warrior, the bride of the young man.
(Kovacs, 1989, pp. 4,5)

The oppressed citizens appealed to Anu, the patron saint of the city, and to Aruru, and the goddess of creation. They desired the goddess to create someone who would be equal in strength and perseverance to their king who might befriend him and curb his

excesses. It is of note that the citizens did not merely seek an external material force to crush or thwart Gilgamesh's excesses. They do not seek someone who might overpower and humiliate their king. They ask instead for someone who might as a friend persuade him to obey the law of the threshold and thereby draw him inside the circle of civilization.

The gods responded favorably to their request. Aruru formed a lump of clay in the image of the god Anu and then threw it on the steppe, thereby giving birth to Enkidu

When Enkidu was fully formed he at first roamed the steppe with a herd of gazelles. He grazed the fields with them and drank alongside the animals at their watering holes. He was then seduced away from the steppe by scheming hunters from the city who placed a beautiful temple priestess near the spot where Enkidu used to drink from the river with his herd. He was immediately taken by her charm and followed her as she gradually led him away from the prairie and from his animal existence. She introduced him to the customs of the human world and accompanied him on his journey from the wilderness to the city.

After an initial combat Gilgamesh and Enkidu conclude a friendship and then embark on a series of spirited adventures in which their combined strength invariably leads them to victory. They finally came to think of themselves as invincible and as ultimately exempt from any human law or natural limit. They committed acts of outrageous sacrilege and afterwards paraded through the streets of Uruk asking the curious crowds who had come out to greet them:

“Who is the most handsome among the heroes?

Who is the most glorious among men?”

And the people dutifully answer back:

"Gilgamesh is the most glorious among the heroes

Enkidu the most glorious among men".

(Bottéro, 1992, VI, 181-185)

In the mean time the gods convened to decide how they should respond to the disgraceful conduct of the two young men. They determined to spare Gilgamesh's life but resolved that Enkidu should die in expiation for their joint sacrilege. The decision re-emphasizes the theme of the Epic, which concerns the divine and human accompaniment of a rebellious young king on his way from savagery to civilization and from narcissism to generosity and wisdom. Enkidu plays a predominant role in life as well as in death in the *paideia* or the education of the king.

Enkidu becomes ill and departs this world and Gilgamesh is overcome with grief at the loss of his friend. This grief is made particularly bitter by his growing awareness of his own vulnerability and mortality.

Gilgamesh for Enkidu his friend,

Weeps bitterly and roams the desert.

“When I die, shall I not be like Enkidu?

Sorrow has entered my heart.

I am afraid of death and roam over the desert”

(Heidel, 1946, ix, 3-5).

Unable to accept his human fate Gilgamesh embarked on a last heroic journey to discover the secret of immortality. He now placed all his daring, strength and combative skills in the service of a final heroic quest for a literal immortality. He was willing to endure any hardship, meet any enemy, surmount any obstacle and travel to the very end of the world and beyond to find the secret of a life untouched by death. When he reached the very end of the world he crossed the waters of death that delimit the earth in search for an island of immortality.

In his youth Gilgamesh had been told the story of an immortal couple living just beyond the end of the world in a place inaccessible to ordinary mortals. This couple had survived the Great Flood that at one time had engulfed the entire earth and destroyed all living things. The couple was carried above the waves by an Ark that they had built beforehand in accord with divine instructions given them by Enki, the god of water and wisdom. When the Flood receded they began life anew for themselves and for all the plants and animals they had brought with them on their giant ship. The gods eventually granted them eternal life and permitted them to live on an island of eternal life just beyond the borders of the mortal earth.

Gilgamesh conceived of a plan to reach this remote island to learn the secret of eternal life. After many harrowing adventures the young king reached its shores and met the Babylonian Noah, who in the Epic bears the name of Utnapishtim.

Thus the stage is set for Utnapishtim's account of the Mesopotamian story of the Flood. To understand this part of the poem we must be mindful of the fact that Gilgamesh had not come to the island to listen to mythic tales about damnation and redemption. He had come to find access to a commanding word or a technical procedure that would give

him power over life and death and permit him to live forever. What he finds in its place is an ancient tale and a poetic and mythic word that does not permit him to alter his mortal human condition but that, on the contrary, makes it possible for him to fully assume it. This mythic and poetic word opens to the young king the full horizon of life's possibilities and permits him for the first time in his life to fully accept his role as a king and a leader of his people. It is this mythic and poetic word that in the end makes a callous youth change directions and embark on a different road in life. He chooses a path that leads from the edge of the human world and from a fantasy world of limitless power back to the very center of life and to his own city of Uruk. He abandons his impossible quest for a limitless and ultimately inhuman life and seeks instead to implicate himself fully in building a human world.

We may think of this poetic word as a bridge permitting the king to breach the gap between savagery and civilization, between a life of mere narcissism to one of wisdom and celebration of human life.

The Mesopotamian story of the Flood

When we read the Mesopotamian story of the Flood for the first time we are amazed to discover that we already are familiar with its broad outline and that even in many minor details it resembles the Biblical story of the Flood.

Curiously, it was the discovery of this part of the Gilgamesh Epic that caused a sensation in England when its discovery was announced by George Smith before a meeting of the Society for Biblical Archeology of 1872. His subsequent publication of the *Chaldean Account of the Deluge* provided the impetus for further excavations at Nineveh,

which in turn led to the discovery of additional tablets of the Epic. (Sanders, N.K. 1960, p. 10)

Subsequent archeological work has shown that the oldest extant account of the Flood story appears in the Sumerian “Poem of Atrahasis”, sometimes referred to as “The Supersage”, that dates from the seventeenth century BC. (Bottéro, J. 1998, p. 199)

In the various Mesopotamian versions of the story of the Flood certain elements remain constant. All of them mention a divine wrath that sought to destroy all forms of life on earth. But they all speak also of a divine mercy that eventually relented and spared the life of a human couple together with that of the many plants and animals they had sheltered on the Ark.

In the polytheistic Mesopotamian version of the myth it is the Assembly of the gods that collectively decides to end all forms of terrestrial life. The Mesopotamian Noah tells his story in the following way:

You know the city of Shuruppak
Seated on the bank of the Euphrates,
The old town frequented by the gods
It was there that a desire took hold of them
To bring about the Flood.
(Bottéro, 1992, xi, 11-15)

It is difficult to know what prompted the gods to take such drastic action. The Sumerian version of the epic is silent on the god’s motivation but the ancient Akkadian myth of Atrahasis tells of the gods having become disturbed by the noise made

by an ever-increasing human population. In particular, the gods complained about human speech that sounded to them “like the mooing or bellowing of cows”. (Bottéro, 1992, p. 262)

The gods realized that their plans for the destruction of the earth would best succeed if the population were kept in complete ignorance and unable to take precautionary measures. All the divinities present at the council were therefore sworn to secrecy. Yet one of the gods present there broke his pledge to save the life of a human couple he had befriended and could not bear to see perish in the Flood. It was this divine friendship for a single human couple that saved humanity and that forever after changed the relationship between heaven and earth.

The divinity who saved humanity was the god of wisdom, of water and of civilization. The Sumerians knew him by the name of Enki and the Akkadians spoke of him as Ea.

This god of wisdom did not flaunt his disobedience to the Council of the gods but proceeded discretely with stealth and ingenuity. It is not exactly known in what manner he warned his human friend and transmitted instructions on how to survive the Flood. Yet it becomes clear that Utnapishtim was told very precisely how to build the Ark and how to gather the animals, the plants and the seeds that he was to take along on his journey. He is counseled in the following way:

“Tear down the house. Build the ark.

Abandon riches; seek life.

Load the seed of everything in the ark”.

(Bottéro, 1992A, xi, 24-28)

It is possible that the god whispered this message near the reed wall of Utnapishtim's house while the latter was asleep. Perhaps the god conveyed the message in a dream. Or perhaps the god conveyed it by stirring the reeds alongside the river.

What is important is that the word that passed between heaven and earth was not a sharply defined or a clearly enunciated or even an easily understood word. The saving word might have been spoken in a dream, or perhaps it sounded like the wind blowing through the reeds. It was a barely audible word at the very limit of human hearing and understanding. It was an ambiguous and poetic word that did not form part of the routines of life, of firmly established relations and clearly understood purposes. It was perhaps at first no more than a divine desire to speak and a human desire to listen and to understand. Perhaps it was at first no more than a fervent impulse to address and an urgent desire to listen to a mysterious *alter* of the self.

When Utnapishtim slowly deciphered the message from the god he grew alarmed. How was he to build a giant ark according to the precise measures given by the god without seeking the assistance of his neighbors? And when he addressed his neighbors, how was he to explain the purpose of his project? Utnapishtim directed the following prayer to his divine benefactor:

My Lord, I will do as you told me to do

But how will I explain my actions

To the people of the town and to the elders?

(Bottéro, 1992A, XI, 34,35)

Enki\|Ea counsels him to pretend that he has fallen into the disfavor of Enlil, the sovereign of the earth, and that he therefore has decided to live on the water and move closer under the protection of the water-god. He is to tell his neighbors that his leaving will be to the good of all concerned.

Enlil will make richness rain down on you

The choicest birds, the rarest fish.

The land will have its fill of harvest riches.

At dawn bread

He will pour on you--showers of wheat.

(Gardner and Maier, 1984, p. 227)

In his notes to this passage John Gardner (1984, p. 230) points out that Utnapishtim's speech to his neighbors is entirely based on a play of words. He carefully chooses his words in such a way as to allow him to speak the literal truth, yet in a way that prevents his neighbors from fully understanding his message. The line: "At dawn bread" can be understood both as "Dawn will bring you bread" (*kukku*), or as "Dawn will bring you darkness (*kukk*). In a similar way, the last line "showers of wheat" (*kibtu*) can also be read as "showers of misfortune". (Gardner and Maier, 1984, p. 230; note 36-47)

Again we note that the word that saves the human world is not a final and indubitable word, a word that unambiguously says what is true and false or what exists and does not exist. What we find instead is an ambiguous, poetic and metaphoric word that means different things to different people and that reflects the relational and circumstantial context in which it is uttered.

We might understand this metaphoric word as uniquely expressive of a new cosmic unity that is about to be born and that will place heaven and earth into a new relationship to each other.

We think here of the Greek verb *metaphorein* which refers to the labor of carrying something from one distinct place or situation to another. Such labor implies crossing thresholds and creating unity between distinct domains by means of an exchange of gifts and words. Such “metaphorical” labor serves the ultimate purpose of making the earth intelligible to the heavens and the heavens intelligible to the earth. It makes the coherence and unity of the cosmos dependent upon a never ending cultural task of listening and responding to an interlocutor who can neither be ignored nor ever fully understood.

For us Moderns, the unity of heaven and earth is no longer experienced as a “metaphoric” unity that summons us to the never-ending cultural task of reconciliation and translation. For us this unity is experienced as a natural fact that requires no further reflection on our part and that does not require to be maintained by means of an exchange of words and of gifts.

This unity of heaven and earth, and by extension that between self and other, is no longer a poetic mystery that lies at the root of our cultural, intellectual and emotional life. For us it has become a natural fact that is best expressed by means of unambiguous literal words and that finds its most lucid expression in mathematical and natural scientific explanations and formulations.

The story of the Flood tells us in detail how Utnapistim constructed his Ark and how he loaded it with all his earthly possessions. He gathered his family and kin and brought in the beasts of the field, both wild and tame. He brought along craftsmen so that

the technical skills of the old world could be transferred to the new. When he had gathered this micro-cosmos of a human world within the ark the storm broke loose and engulfed the earth. The Ark floated for six days and nights above the raging waters. On the seventh day Utnapishtim sent out a dove, then a swallow and finally a crow. The dove and the swallow found at first no place to perch but in the end the crow found dry land and did not return to the Ark. The flood receded, the couple was safe, and the gods rejoiced at their survival. They admitted the human couple into their company and granted them eternal life.

We should note that the Babylonian gods were not perfect in the sense that their own thoughts and actions were always fully transparent to themselves. Neither their deeds nor their thought were unambiguous or infallible. Like the Greek gods they made mistakes that they later regretted and for which they paid a price. When the Flood is raging and destroying the earth the gods quickly begin to regret what they have done.

The gods themselves were terrified by the Flood,
They shrank back, fled upwards to the heavens of Anu
Curled up like dogs, the gods lay outside his door.
(Gardner and Maier, 1984, xi, 113-116)

The love-goddess Inanna/Ishtar in particular seems to have regretted her role in sending down the Flood. In her anguish she asks herself:

How could I speak evil in the Assembly of the gods?

How could I cry out for battle, for the destruction
Of my people?
I myself gave birth to my people
Now, like the children of fish, they fill the sea
(Gardner and Maier, 1984, xi, 120-124)

Although the poem makes no explicit mention of the fact, it appears that the gods were ultimately relieved when they discovered that their destructive plans had been foiled. They rejoiced when they learned that Utnapishtim and his wife were safe and that a new cycle of life had begun on earth. They granted eternal life to the new ancestors of mankind and eventually permitted them to retire to an island just beyond the outer limit of the mortal earth. It is on that island that Gilgamesh met the immortal couple and received the life-giving mythic and metaphoric word that would give new meaning to his life.

The Story of the Flood and the Epic of Gilgamesh

It is possible to understand the evolving relationship between Gilgamesh and the citizens of Uruk as modeled on the evolving relationship between the gods and their mortal subjects as it is portrayed in the Babylonian story of the Flood. The Gilgamesh Epic contains only a shortened version of the myth and offers no details about what led to the rift between heaven and earth and what motivated the gods to take their vengeful decision. We find additional helpful information in another Old Babylonian text, the *Atrahasis*, which contains a more detailed version of the Flood story. A comparison of

Atrahasis with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* clearly suggests that the former was an important source used by the editor of the latter. (Saggs, 1962, p.384)

The myth of the Flood of the poem *Atrahasis* describes the early relationship between heaven and earth as a kind of utilitarian arrangement. Human beings produced food by hunting and working in the fields and the gods consumed a part of what they produced in the form of sacrifices. It portrays an early relationship between mortals and immortals that had the character of a forced exchange between producers and consumers in a world in which there was as yet no question of a genuine exchange of gifts or of a true conversation between heaven and earth. This early arrangement between gods and mortals resembled that existing between masters and their slaves. In such a relationship the masters are bound to be annoyed at any sign of life in their slaves which does not flatter them or bring them a material advantage.

We are reminded here of Gilgamesh's early exploitative and callous behavior towards the citizens of Uruk. The beginning passages of the Epic describe a relationship between the king and his people that resembles in many respects that existing between the gods and mankind prior to the Flood. It appears thus possible to read the Gilgamesh Epic as a variant of the earlier creation story as recorded in the *Atrahasis*.

We also note that the story of the Flood plays a determining role in both narratives in so far as it crystallizes a previously deficient relationship and serves as a pivotal event that brings about a radical change. That change leads from a relationship based on power and exploitation to a radically different one based on conversation and on a never-ending exchange of gifts. That change speaks of the birth of a world of the threshold out a world that only knew the principle of power and of the natural, physical limit. It speaks of a world of neighborliness born of a world based on mutual exploitation.

Seen from this perspective the story of the Flood tells of the birth of a primordial and poetic word out of a world that knew only words of command. That word is uttered by Ea/Enki at the moment when he bridges the divide between heaven and earth and addresses an individual human being out of friendly and personal regard for him.

That same word is reborn in the Gilgamesh Epic when the hero begins to understand the myth of the Flood and decides to abandon his quest for a literal immortality and returns to Uruk to rule his city and to counsel his people. Gilgamesh' concern for and loyal return to the citizens of Uruk can be seen as a repetition of the divine gesture of Enki/Ea who came down to earth to save and guide his beloved subject Utnapishtim.

We recall that the saving, primordial and poetic word spoken by Enki/Ea and addressed to Utnapishtim came in the form of a whispered message about building an Ark. Utnapishtim addressed that same primordial and saving word to Gilgamesh in the form of the Story of the Flood. Gilgamesh, in turn, directed it to the citizens of Uruk in the form of a poem. It is in reading this poem today that we bear witness to the saving words exchanged between Enki/Ea and Utnapishtim and between Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh.

Enki/Ea, the god of water, wisdom and civilization.

In the course of his many years of adventurous exploration Gilgamesh struggled with numerous demons and encountered several deities. Yet the dominant influence on

his life remained that of the god of water, wisdom and civilization. As we briefly mentioned above, this deity who was known to the Sumerians as Enki and was later adopted by the Akkadians under the name of Ea. Both the early Sumerians and the later Babylonians saw him as closely allied with water and wisdom and as the founder of their civilization. His chief attributes were thought to be those of a mediator, who was able to bring together within one harmonious and viable whole the various materials, qualities and creatures that made up the human world.

We may think of him as a god both agile and wise, capable of resolving conflict and instituting a civil order whose beneficent influence permitted large groups of people of different origins and languages to live together in relative harmony. He was the god who set up boundary stones and established the limits and borders of cities and states. (Kramer, 1970, p. 174) He established city walls, thresholds and portals that laid the foundation for a civic order and a specific human way of dwelling on earth. The limits he established can be crossed only through a cooperative effort between insiders and outsiders in which both are bound by an established sequential ceremony. Most importantly, these limits can be destroyed but cannot be successfully crossed by means of violence. They elicit speech and ceremony and belong entirely to the order of gift exchange and conversation. As such they form the cornerstone of any civilization.

Such limits can count only for beings that have access to language and who by that fact are destined to cultivate and to inhabit the earth.

Enki/Ea was the god who set the ground rules and established the parameters of a human world that could be fully inhabited and where the human spirit could soar.

To properly understand this god we must ask why he was the sole deity to oppose the rash verdict of the assembly of the gods. We must also pay attention to the particular manner in which he defeated the destructive designs of the other gods.

To place this inquiry into its proper context we need to highlight the difference between a modern and an ancient way of conceiving the universe. The Sumerian term for “universe” is a compound word “*An-Ki*” that literally translates as “Heaven-Earth”. The whole of reality makes its appearance here, not in the form of a material thing or place, not as a modern “universe”, but as a composite whole whose chief dynamic is the commerce between two essentially different realms, *An* and *Ki* or “heaven” and “earth”. The principle that unites this “Heaven-Earth” is not, as it is for us, secured beforehand by a natural order. This unity is maintained by what for want of a better term we might call an unceasing “cultural labor” or gift exchange and conversation. This fundamental task of unifying the separate parts of the cosmos is governed by ceremonial rules rather than by natural law as we conceived of it in imitation of the modern natural sciences.

These ancient ceremonial rules formed the basis of all intersubjective relations and belonged to a very different order than the rules or laws that govern a modern natural scientific universe.

The cultural labor that assured harmonious relations between heaven and earth was guided by principles established once and for all by the gods. These principles were originally transmitted by wise men whom the gods sent down to earth with the specific mission to teach mankind the arts of civilization.

It turns out that the same Sumerian and Babylonian principles that maintained harmonious relations between the divine and the human realm also served to hold together a family, a neighborhood or a city. These principles incarnate in the threshold

continue to this day to help maintain friendship and safeguard cooperative human ventures of all types and varieties. Yet today these principles have become less evident and are in danger of losing their broad religious and philosophical underpinnings.

Modernity has taught us to think of our world as but a natural and material thing. It encourages us to think of human relations as ultimately governed by laws pertaining to a natural and material order. We profess to think that our search for coherence and truth in human relations forms part of a larger quest to understand and control a material and natural universe. To “understand” human behavior within this context means to insist that it be governed by the same material laws that govern the whole of a natural universe. That conviction ruled Gestalt psychology as much as it did behaviorism and it forms the basis of psychoanalysis as much as it does that of cognitive science. We view human relationships in the image of a material universe and seek a science of human relations that will ultimately reflect the material order of a natural universe. Quite to the contrary, the poem maintains that the whole of the natural and physical universe can and should be understood in terms of the rules and principles that adhere to sound familial and neighborly relations. To the Mesopotamians these interpersonal relations and principles form the absolute basis of a livable and understandable world. The attempt to understand that interpersonal foundation in terms of material relations and physical principles would have appeared to them a perverse and useless exercise in obfuscation. The unity of “*An-Ki*” or that of the “Heaven/World” therefore does not have natural law or material objects or physical forces as its ultimate foundation. This unity is not a natural fact but a moral and civic achievement. It is secured and made coherent by applying the same principles of conduct that hold families, friends and neighborhoods together.

From the poem's perspective all human behavior, no matter how private, local or personal, always has cosmic implications. All such conduct invokes principles that either promote or destroy the coherence of the human world. Such a way of thinking imposes heavy burdens on neighborly relations and makes the maintenance of civility a fundamental task of civilization.

The maintenance of civility and neighborliness is never an easy matter at any age. It demands certain sacrifices and often exacts a heavy price. To enter into dialogue with one's neighbor carries the risk of being opposed and contradicted, of being ridiculed and dismissed. Human relations are constantly under the threat of abrupt endings, of disagreeable confrontations and violence.

Seen from this angle the Flood comes to represent the ultimate expression of an ever-present temptation to withdraw from dialogue and to rid oneself of one's neighbor. The Flood becomes here the categorical image of violence and of a "final solution" that brings an end to a conflict, but that at the same time signals the end of a human world.

We have seen how the myth of the Flood as it is told in the Gilgamesh epic portrays Enki/Ea as the sole divinity to oppose the destructive plan of the Council at Shuruppak. It is his unique and personal word of concern and affection that holds together the divine and the human world. It is his word that brings coherence to the cosmos and that ultimately opens it up to human habitation.

If we compare the various myths relating to the god of wisdom and water we become aware of his far-reaching involvement in human civilization. If we were to describe him in contemporary terms we could name him "the god who gathers and interrelates beings and things in ways that makes the world humanly inhabitable". Our Mesopotamian ancestors thought of him specifically as the god who brought water and

earth together in judicious proportions and who in that way assured the fertility field and farm, of flock and herd. He was for that reason closely associated with farm equipment of all type, from the plow to the yoke and the pick-ax. (Kramer, 1963, p. 173) The Sumerians wrote on small hand-held clay tablets by pressing a hollow stylus on the wet clay. The god who brought earth and water together also played an important role in this regard. In the poem *Enki and the World Order* the god describes himself in the following terms:

I am the record keeper of heaven and earth

I am the ear and the mind of all the lands

(Kramer, 1963, p. 175)

The god who brought clay and water into a harmonious and productive relationship was also implicated in the production of bricks, and hence, in the building of thresholds, walls, houses and temples.

But the central element in his iconography is that of water, understood as an element uniquely associated with the generous and fruitful penetration of an otherwise unresponsive and infertile earth. The same poem describes the god's creative association with the river Tigris in the following way:

The Tigris surrendered to the god as to a rampant bull

He lifted his penis, brought the bridal gift

Brought joy to the Tigris like a wild bull

(Kramer, 1963, p. 179)

The central feature that unites all these diverse activities of the god is that of bringing together and combining various elements in ways that makes the world fertile and inhabitable.

We should recall in this context that the successive Mesopotamian civilizations all trace their origins back to two founding peoples, the Sumerians and Akkadians. These peoples were as different from each other as are water and earth and they spoke languages as unlike each other as are contemporary French and Chinese.

To create a harmonious whole out of such disparate elements requires an immense amount of tact and discretion. It is therefore interesting to note that of all the characteristics attributed to Enki/Ea, such as his inventiveness, resourcefulness or cleverness, the most fundamental appears to be that of tact.

Elena Cassin (1987, p. 30) has remarked that the wisdom of the god should be understood as uniquely associated with the element of water. This element reveals itself to the delighted eye, but it also reveals itself in a most profound way through touch and hearing. We appreciate the marvelous play of light on a lake or a river, but we are closest to water when we hear it cascade, stream or trickle, or when we feel its freshness when we drink or bathe.

Correspondingly we note that the wisdom of the god is not one acquired by a distant overview or revealed to a penetrating glance. It belongs rather to a very different realm of attentive listening and of being in touch. The intelligence of the god moves like water through a dark terrain. It nimbly slides past all obstacles, avoids confrontation, finds ever-new ways of approaching the other and getting in touch. The god's intelligent exploration interconnects and fructifies whatever it touches on its path.

It is the god's tact that enables him to bring together water and earth, earth and sky, stylus and clay. It permits him to combine fire, water and earth, and to create the bricks that build foundations and to form the walls that encircle the towns. Seen from his perspective all of architecture becomes a tactful bringing together of heterogeneous elements in a manner that creates an inhabitable whole.

But the most important gift the god made to human civilization was his whispered first word that he addressed to Utnapishtim and that brought together the *ultimately* different realms of heaven and earth. With that first intimate and whispered word he set the pattern for all subsequent forms of building and constructing and all manners of human assembly.

The creative "First Word" and the destructive power of the "Last Word".

If we approach the story of the gods assembled at Shuruppak within this light we see their decision to unleash the Flood as a destructive act that stands in sharp contrast to the creative initiative of Enki\Ea. In retrospect the Assembly of the gods can be understood as temporarily overwhelmed by the temptations of narcissism and isolation, which in last instance is always an inducement to violence.

The poem tells us that the gods "were taken by the desire to cause the flood" (Bottéro, 1992 A, XI, 14), or, in another version that "the gods stirred their hearts to make the Flood" (Gardner and Maier, 1984, p. 226).

For a moment the denizens of the heavens appeared overcome by the desire to simplify their lives and to rid themselves of their neighbors. Their *last word* and their final solution stands in stark opposition to Enki/Ea's poetic *first word*, that opens a human world by linking heaven to earth and that binds the self to other. The Flood announces the ultimate reign of the *last word* in so far as it brings an end to all conversation and all relationship between heaven and earth and between self and other. This last word opens a terrible void that swallows up and drowns all human words and erases all human and divine actions. It creates a space and time where nothing further can be said or done, where henceforth nothing can be approached, loved or understood. The countervailing force against this nihilistic last word, is the hesitant, primordial and poetic word of the god Enki/Ea, the god of dialogue and civilization.

We note that the *first word* is at first barely distinguishable from the murmuring sound of water, or from the wind stirring through the reeds. This word does not necessarily stir vocal chords or pass human or divine lips. Rather, it is "pronounced" and "heard" wherever a divine or human presence begins to *inhabit* a natural site and transforms it into a personal domain from where it becomes possible to address and extend a welcome to a neighbor. This creative word manifests itself whenever a natural sound becomes *inhabited* by a personal presence and wherever a natural sight drops its mask of material indifference and shows us a human or a divine face. It is heard and seen wherever a mere object begins to show the features of a personal presence that desires an *alter* to complete itself. It is "spoken" at the moment when a merely mindless, faceless body of water suddenly addresses the passer-by, when it begins to sparkle and gurgle and invites the voyager to feast the eye and to drink from its riches. It is "heard" on a sunlit path when a tree beckons the traveler to take shelter, to withdraw within its shade, to lean

up against the trunk of the tree, to make himself at home and to open that home to the surrounding world.

This *first word* links one inhabited domain to another. It represents a word of recognition and of welcome that invites a response and initiates a conversation. It opens a conversation whose exchange back and forth weaves a foundation upon which it becomes possible to build a house, a temple or a city. It creates the ground on which it is possible to build a civilization. Within such a world, opened by hospitality and founded on conversation, a “here” discloses itself to a “there”, the heavens opens itself to the earth, and a “self” makes itself known to an “other”.

We note that this first word that is whispered in the reeds is not a word addressed to everyone. It concerns a secret and it is destined solely for the ears of Utnapishtim. The truth of that word differs essentially from the truth of a public pronouncement or of a factual assertion.

The primordial or poetic word contains a secret because it invites dwelling. It is inherently *a word that makes place for the self and the other*. It is a metaphoric word that simultaneously establishes a “here” *and* a “there” while constructing a bridge between the two. The word that passes between Enki/Ea and Utnapishtim, and between the Babylonian Noah and Gilgamesh, assigns a specific role and a specific domain to speaker and the listener. It creates a separate but interactive space for the host and the guest. At the same time it binds these domains together by means of a pledge of loyalty that underwrites the truth of the word. That word assigns different domains the gods and mortals, but it also makes them *cohabitants* of the same cosmos. The unity of this cosmos is guaranteed by the “troth”, the pledge of loyalty, conveyed by the primordial or poetic

word. This word is a pledge that establishes a host and guest relationship within which it becomes possible to be true to one another and thus to build a human world.

It is in this sense that the primordial word whispered by the god lays the foundation for a human world in which it subsequently becomes possible to establish familial and neighborly relations, to practice hospitality, to develop the sciences, to give birth to societies and nations. It is this fragile word that founds a world in which the truths of the sciences and the truth and falseness of human relations can be established and ascertained. In the end it everything can be seen to depend on this fragile word. In the end it becomes clear that what we cherish in life finds its ultimate support in a promise and a pledge of “troth” that “betrothes” and unifies a human world.

We briefly mentioned above that the account of the Flood from the eleventh chapter of the Gilgamesh Epic bears much resemblance to that recorded in the Akkadian poem called *Atra-hasis* or *The Supersage*. In that latter account we hear the gods refer to human speech as resembling the “bellowing of cows”. When the gods complained about the excessive noise that disturbed their sleep they were speaking of human speech. (Bottéro, 1992B, p. 261ff.)

The Babylonian story of the Flood can therefore be read as a myth that tells of the genesis of a conversation between gods and mankind. It tells of the birth of a word that is the birth of the human soul as well.

The story begins with a conflict between heaven and earth during a time before there was any conversation between gods and men and before there was established a relationship of hospitality between heaven and earth.

The angry complaint about the noise made by the human population cannot help but remind us of young and inexperienced parents who are distraught by their newborn

infant's crying. The myth tells of a beginning dialogue that is under threat of ending in despair and violence. It tells of a time prior to the establishment of a true dialogue between heaven and earth when human language sounded like the bellowing of cows that disturbed the sleep of the gods. The myth tells how this bellowing sound provoked distress and anger in the gods that led them to pronounce their fatal "last" word. It then proceeds to tell us how this initial catastrophe was miraculously transformed into something altogether new and marvelous by the god of water and wisdom. It tells how a tentative and divine *first word* bridged the distance between heaven and earth and opened a true conversation between mortals and immortals. This conversation in turn laid the foundation for all other conversations and formed the basis of a subsequent Mesopotamian civilization.

This reflection makes us take note of the similarities existing between the figures of Gilgamesh, of Atrahasis and Utnapishtim. Like the other heroes, Gilgamesh journeyed to the very end of the world and entered regions where no other mortal could follow him. He crossed the dangerous waters of death and thereby repeats the perilous journey of Atrahasis and Utnapishtim aboard the ark. Like them he left one world and crossed an ultimate boundary to reach another. Like them he linked the primordial world from before the Flood, when there was as yet no room for conversation, with a new world founded on conversation.

Gilgamesh therefore stands within the great lineage of the founders of the Mesopotamian civilizations. Like Atrahasis and Utnapishtim he became the blessed recipient of a vital secret and a whispered word that permitted him to confront his mortality and to float above the destructive waters of the Flood. Instead of succumbing to

despair and disappearing in the waves he became the constructive agent of a new civilization.

The Return Home

Gilgamesh's journey led from the death of his friend and the collapse of his world to the *last word* of the Flood. On his way to the island of Utnapishtim he crossed the perilous "waters of death" and thereby repeated the gesture of Utnapishtim as he floated in the Ark above the deadly waters of the Flood. He has reached the end of his journey and like the Babylonian Noah he is waiting for the waters to recede and to begin human life anew.

Gilgamesh has come at the end of a self-defeating quest for a magic potion or the commanding power of a final word that would ease his suffering but that would sever all his links to the human world. He now feels a growing ambivalence about his original quest and wants to change directions. This change of direction becomes clear when we listen to the first words he addresses to Utnapishtim after he arrives on the island:

You look no different from me
Only, you no longer have the heart to fight
You lay on your back doing nothing.

(Bottéro, 1992 , xi, 5-7)

Gilgamesh had come to the island in search of a magic solution to his human fate. Instead of pursuing the life of a mortal man he seeks a literal admission to a realm beyond all pain and loss. But his first encounter with Utnapishtim convinces him that he cannot be content to while his time away on an island that like an Ark floats above the struggles and the turmoil of human life and death. He still has it within him to fight human battles and to savor human victories. The true object of his quest is now no longer that of a magic potion or an infallible or “last” word with which to resolve all questions, still all pain and end all conversations. He feels a new love stir within him for the city and for the infinite variety of human interactions it protects and nurtures. He has become fascinated by the strange power of the “first” word to bring people together and to reveal their world.

But before he can draw closer to that mysterious poetic word he must first shed any last remnant of the illusory hope of escaping his human mortal fate. To help Gilgamesh purge himself of any remaining illusions Utnapishtim slyly proposes that he undergo a trial to test his aptitude for immortal life. The old man plausibly argues that anyone wanting to conquer death must prove his valor by first conquering sleep. He challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for six days and nights and the young king accepts in the full confidence of his powers. But as soon as travel-weary guest has made himself comfortable he promptly falls into a deep sleep from which he does not awaken until the end of the trial period.

The old couple chuckle as they look upon their sleeping guest:

“Look at this hero

Who wanted life without end

Sleep has quite suddenly descended upon him

Like a mist.

(Bottéro, 1992A, xi, 203-205)

Gilgamesh does not wake up until the end of the period of his trial. The wife of Utnapishtim bakes him a loaf of bread each day that she places in a row on the floor next to where he lies asleep.

She baked bread for him, set by his head

And the days he slept she scored on the wall.

(Gardner Maier, xi, 213-215)

When Gilgamesh awakens at the end of the term of his trial he does at first not want to believe that he has slept six days and seven nights and protests that he has dozed off for no more than a few minutes. He is then confronted with the seven loaves his hostess had placed beside him. The older loaves have already begun to spoil and Gilgamesh is again confronted with the ineluctable physical reality of death and decay. Again he is forced to face his human fate:

The Great Abductor has taken hold of my body

Death has installed himself in my bedroom

Wherever I direct my steps, death will await me

(Bottéro, 1992A, xi, 231-234)

For a brief moment it appears as if Gilgamesh may again fall prey to the despair he experienced when he lost his friend Enkidu. At that time he had fled away from the city into the wilderness and consoled himself with the vain hope of finding a magical solution to the threat posed by his own mortality. This illusion transported him back to the inhuman world of before the Flood when there was as yet no conversation between heaven and earth and when human speech still resembled the bellowing of cows. He found himself back in a world ordered by brute force in which masters exploited their slaves and conquerors oppressed their victims and where no durable place had as yet been found for true neighborliness.

But this time Gilgamesh charts another course. His path now leads him back to the city as he gradually divests himself of his illusions and accepts the limits that are imposed on human life. It is this divestment and this acceptance that finally gives Gilgamesh full access to human life. Where earlier he had seen only natural obstacles to the fulfillment of his desires he now becomes aware of thresholds that invite him to share his life and to inhabit the earth. The challenges of mountain passes and of difficult river crossings briefly recede to make place for the very different challenges posed by the majestic gates that open upon the city and by the portals that give access to the domains of gods, kings and ordinary citizens.

The process by which the young king sheds his illusions is a very gradual one. It begins with Utnapishtim account of the myth of the Flood. This is followed by a ritual bath and a complete change in Gilgamesh' appearance. Utnapishtim orders the guide Urshanabi to lead Gilgamesh to a bathing place and to prepare him for the homebound journey:

This man you brought here,
Whose unruly hair makes him
Offensive to look at.
Who wears animal skins that
Spoil the sight of his handsome body
Take him with you to a place of bathing.

(Bottéro, 1992A, xi, 237-240)

He further orders the guide to take the filthy pelts off the king's body and to cast them into the sea. He then must wash his hair till it is "as clear as the snow", and replace his worn headband with a sparkling new one. He orders that he be dressed in a clean and fresh garment that must be well maintained and still look new when the king will later enter the city.

In a separate but telling incident, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of a magic plant that grows on the bottom of the sea and that will restore youth to a feeble old man. The king ties stones to his feet, dives to the bottom of the sea and harvests the miraculous plant. But soon thereafter, while he is taken a bath and leaves his tunic on the grass nearby, a snake is attracted to the fragrance of the plant, finds it and makes off with it. The snake becomes thereafter capable of shedding its skin and restoring its youth once it has reached old age. The myth thereby draws the distinction between two forms of vital and spiritual renewal. It recognizes, on the one hand, a specifically human form of renewal and restoration that follows the cultural pattern of washing, combing and bathing. By contrast, it recognizes a natural or animal pattern of renewal that takes the form of shedding skin or hair.

At this point Gilgamesh surrenders the last remnant of his illusions. He stops thereafter looking for remedies for life's afflictions that do not apply to the human condition and whose use would place him outside the human realm. He is now truly ready to enter the city and make himself at home within the limits imposed by the life of civilization.

Gilgamesh's homecoming cannot be separated from his discovery of the poetic word that was revealed to him through the story of the Flood. It was this discovery that lit the path of his homebound journey and that permitted him to feel finally at home in the city. We may define this poetic word as the word that *makes place* for both a self and a separate other person or thing. This poetic word interposes a fruitful distance between self and other, and between self and world. It thereby creates a contained and inhabitable place where self and other can enter into each other's presence and where all things can truly manifest themselves.

Gilgamesh's outbound journey can be understood as a search for a technical and magical understanding of the world that teaches him to transform and to control his natural environment. Left unchecked this outbound journey eventually turns into a mad quest for absolute power over life and death. By contrast, Gilgamesh's homebound journey can be understood as a search for the poetic word that brings self and other into a *self-revealing* relationship to each other.

We may think of the outbound journey as a movement to conquer the world, but it is only in the homebound journey that the human world can reveal itself and that the self and the other can be understood.

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