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THE MAYFLY ON THE RIVER

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE DESTINY IN THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Andrew R. George

The passage which frames the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, by appearing at both the beginning and the end, holds up the city as the object of our gaze. This article explores the symbolism of this and other passages of the poem through sensitive reading and literary comparison, and develops a deeper understanding of the wisdom that Gilgamesh brought home from his encounter with the Flood hero. Contrasts emerge between motion and stasis and between man as individual and man as society.

The Babylonian narrative poem that today we call the Epic of Gilgamesh underwent a long evolution. The earliest-known manuscripts are Old Babylonian and date to about the eighteenth century BC. Subsequent centuries witnessed the proliferation of variant versions of the poem, its growing use as an academic tool in scribal schools, and its diffusion outside Babylonia to Syria, Anatolia and Palestine. Towards the end of the second millennium, an attempt was made to standardize the text. The many dozens of manuscripts of the poem from the first millennium range in time from the eighth to the second centuries, and in place of origin from Nineveh and Ashur in northern Mesopotamia to Babylon and Uruk in the south. They show that the standardization was highly successful. With the exception of a few relics of older versions kept in Assyrian libraries, all first-millennium tablets bear witness to a remarkably stable text. Textual variants mostly arise from alternative choices of words and spellings, with few more substantial differences. The poem was known in this late period as “He who Saw the Deep”, after its incipit.

In the first millennium, Babylonian scholarship attributed the poem “He who Saw the Deep” to a man called *Sîn-leqi-unninni*, otherwise known only as the supposed ancestor of a family of late scribes. How big a part he played in fixing the text of “He who Saw the Deep” is uncertain, but his name is a convenient identifier for whatever intellect it was that produced the standardized text that was the vehicle for the Gilgamesh narrative in the first millennium. His was an intellect that had more than an editorial impact on the poem. Modern readers of Gilgamesh are often more receptive to the poetry of the earlier, Old Babylonian fragments. *Sîn-leqi-unninni* does not have a great reputation as a poet. But close reading of his poem reveals a profound thinker, who gave the poem

a structure and tone that were certainly the result of a deliberate and consistent policy to focus less on heroic grandeur and glory and more on human frailty and failure. The confident exuberance of the Old Babylonian poem is clearly audible in its prologue, which began with the words “Surpassing All Other Kings”. By contrast “He who Saw the Deep” begins at once as a melancholy reflection on the trials and tribulations of human existence, for which wisdom is the only compensation. In this change the poem reflected an evolution of religious thought, from glorious certainty in divine goodwill to doubt that the well-being of mankind counted for much in the unknowable plans of heaven. This evolution is also seen elsewhere in Babylonian literature (Lambert 1960, 14-17; Jacobsen 1949, 231).

Since its rediscovery by modern western scholarship, the poem “He who Saw the Deep” has usually been read as the story of an individual, the hero-king Gilgamesh, and his struggle against his mortal doom as a human being. The gods send to Gilgamesh, a tyrant in Uruk, a friend called Enkidu. The pair go on adventures but offend the gods, so that Enkidu must die. Gilgamesh travels to the ends of the earth in a vain quest to avoid death. His tale can be read symbolically as the story of any human life. Modern readers easily identify with Gilgamesh as individual to individual, and recognize his existential struggle as their own, but magnified to an heroic scale. The preoccupation with the individual reflects a salient feature of modern western society, in which the rights and place of the individual are dominant in social contexts and the community is expected to serve the interests of the individual. But there is another social entity in the Babylonian life: the community as a whole.

In many traditional Asian societies the individual is subordinate to society, and the well-being of the community takes precedence over the well-being of the individual. We do not know that this was also so in Babylonia, but we should certainly be alive to the possibility that it might have been, for Babylonian culture shared much with Asia. The poem’s disapproval of Gilgamesh’s tyrannous treatment of his townspeople as *kukittu* (Tablet I 67), which means roughly “improper behaviour”, can be seen in this light, not as a political rejection of the institution of kingship itself, but as a condemnation of a perversion of that institution whereby the community suffered by the antisocial action of a single individual instead of benefiting from him playing his proper role.

Concentration on the individual figure of the hero magnifies the risk of ignoring what the poem has to say about human society as a collective. In the following I shall explore one aspect of the poem’s contrast of the individual human being and the collective mankind. In particular I shall further the case for a view already expressed in my critical edition (2003), that *Sîn-leqi-unninni*’s poem differentiates the mortality of the individual from the collective immortality of the human race. This will be done with the advantage of more text from Babylonia and with a grateful nod to great minds of Heian-period Japan, nineteenth-century Russia and twentieth-century France.

With the publication in 2006 of a twelfth-century tablet from Ugarit on the Syrian shore, the last lacunae in the opening stanzas of “He who Saw the Deep” were finally filled. The poem begins like this:

He who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,
 who knew the proper ways, was wise in everything!
 Gilgamesh, who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,
 who knew the proper ways, was wise in everything!

- 5 He everywhere explored the seats of power,
 knew of everything the sum of wisdom.
 He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,
 brought back a tale of before the Deluge.
- 10 He came a far road, was weary but at peace;
 all his labours were set on a tablet of stone.
 He had the rampart built of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
 of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse.
- 15 See its wall like a strand of wool,
 view its parapet that none could copy!
 Take the stairway of a bygone era,
 draw near to Eanna, seat of Ishtar the goddess,
 that no later king could ever copy!
- 20 Climb Uruk's wall and walk back and forth!
 Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!
 Were its bricks not fired in an oven?
 Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?
- [A square mile is] city, [a square mile] date-grove, a square mile is clay-pit, half a square mile the temple of Ishtar: [three square miles] and a half is Uruk's expanse.
- 25 Open the tablet-box of cedar,
 release its clasp of bronze!
 [*L_i/f*] the lid of its secret,
 pick up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read out –
 the travails of Gilgamesh, all that he went through.
- Gilgamesh I 1-28

The translation is taken from my Penguin translation (George 1999, 1), with ll. 1-6 and 24-27 supplemented from the Ugarit tablet (George 2007a). The poem continues with the Old Babylonian incipit, “Surpassing All Other Kings”, so it is very probable that we should read ll. 1-28 as a self-contained prologue. As such, it sets out the main concerns of the poem in its standardized, first-millennium form. I would make three comments at this point, only one of which is new.

First, the prologue in its fully recovered form clearly asserts the experience of the poem's protagonist as a life of pain and hardship (*mānabtu* “travail”), a life which when taken to the heroic extreme brought the compensation of unsurpassed wisdom – not, as the Old Babylonian incipit avers, the reward of unsurpassed glory.

Second, when the poet enjoins the reader to climb Uruk's wall and admire its structure and antiquity, the final focus is not the wall, but the city, in lines which announce their presence, their topic and their seriousness with a stark dissonance, by abandoning verse for prose. This is no lapse, for this very same passage of prose is repeated at the end of the poem as its very last stanza (from which ll. 22-23 are reliably restored). There can be no doubt that, as the framing device for the entire poem, this passage bears the full intent of the poet, and the choice of prose as its form can only be a strategy to draw attention to that burden. I shall return to this burden later.

The third comment here is, I think, a new insight. It arises from a consideration of the prologue's formal structure and a point of philology. The first ten lines tell in the shortest possible style the adventure that Gilgamesh was best known for: he made a long journey to the ends of the earth in search of immortality and returned exhausted, not with the object of his quest but with words of wisdom from a primeval time. The next ten lines have become eleven, for l. 17 rehashes l. 14 and looks like an awkward interpolation.¹ They move on to the topic of the great wall, ancient and enduring, that provides such a contrast with the ephemeral lives of its antediluvian creators, the Seven Sages, and especially its renewer, the hero Gilgamesh.

The hinge of this transition, from Gilgamesh's frantic adventure to the solid immobility of the wall, is a succession of four clauses relating his homecoming (ll. 9-10). Placed deliberately at the midpoint of five four-line stanzas, these clauses contain the following four verbs: *illikamma* "he came", *anib* "he was exhausted", *šupšub* "he was put at ease", and *šakin* "it was set". Formerly I understood the last of these, the stative *šakin*, to be active in meaning, "he set". But now I see that the usual force of the stative conjugation is more probable, and that *šakin* joins the two other statives, *anib* and *šupšub*, in the intransitive-passive, as an emphatic announcement of inaction.² Gilgamesh returns home, collapses exhausted, and can do no more. It is not he who places his story on the tablet of lapis lazuli. That is done for him, intransitive-passive *šakin*. After so long in motion, now he has arrived at a condition of stasis. The uneven distribution of the four clauses across the two lines of poetry – three crammed into l. 9, one alone in l. 10 – serves to emphasize further the transition from journey to homecoming, from restless activity to calm inaction. The journey has come to a halt.

Confirmation that Gilgamesh's homecoming brings a transition from motion to rest comes from two sources. One is the end of the poem. It will be considered first. The poem's conclusion has often been considered unsatisfactory, even poor, by Assyriologists and other commentators alike. In his study of Gilgamesh and Homer as twin examples of newly humanistic poetry that he called "heroic epic" the classicist Gerald Gresseth collected many such reactions, commenting on the mismatch between the poem's reputation and its perceived effect: "Reading these judgements on the meaning of the *Gilgamesh Epic* one cannot help wondering how it is that a work which is universally recognized to be the greatest epic before Homer can in the end be so dissatisfying" (Gresseth 1975, 3).

The modern dissatisfaction with the Babylonian poem's conclusion has been detrimental to understanding. Lack of confidence in the poem's message is surely what induced Nancy Sandars in her eclectic prose text, first published by Penguin Classics in 1960, to add on to the end of it a Sumerian composition about Gilgamesh's death (Sandars 1964, 115-117). In the Babylonian poem Gilgamesh does not die, but the wide currency of this early Penguin Classic, in which Sandars made sure that he did, misled those who trusted it. Thus in 1984 Charles Rowan Beye, professor emeritus of classics at the City University of New York, thought he detected a contrast between the ways in which the poem's narrative handled the deaths of its two leading characters: Enkidu's was essential for the development of the plot, but Gilgamesh's was a structural device functioning "like the

1. This is all the more so if both lines end *lū umaššalu mamma*, as proposed by Nemirovskaya 2008.
2. On *šakin* in Gilgamesh see now Hirsch 2010, 27.

words ‘The End’” (Beye 1984, 15-16).³ The British journalist and literary critic Christopher Booker’s more recent exploration of traditional plot, entitled *The Seven Basic Plots*, was similarly misinformed, for he considered that its depiction of its protagonist dying of old age made “the epic of Gilgamesh ... highly unusual in the history of storytelling” (Booker 2004, 601).

The reason for the general dissatisfaction with the poem’s end, and thus for Sandars’ misleading addition of the hero’s death, is not a failure of composition but a failure of literary-critical analysis. Understanding comes from a sensitive reading impartially undertaken, aptly described by Valerie Cunningham, a historian of English literature, as “honest seeking” (2002, 154), *i.e.* reading that is aware of literary theory but not dominated by its tyranny. Such a reading is what will be attempted next.

I shall quote the end of the poem in full, because much of it forms a doublet with the prologue. Prologue and epilogue are the matching book-ends of the poem, vital parts of a carefully structured frame that gives all the more reason to seek in them the poem’s most urgent and essential message.

320 At twenty leagues they broke bread,
 at thirty leagues they stopped for the night.
 When they arrived in Uruk the Sheepfold,
 Gilgamesh spoke to him, to Ur-shanabi the boatman:

 “O Ur-shanabi, climb Uruk’s wall and walk back and forth,
 “survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!
325 “Were its bricks not fired in an oven?
 “Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?”

 “A square mile is city, a square mile date-grove, a square mile is clay-pit, half a square
 mile the temple of Ishtar: three square miles and a half is Uruk’s expanse.”

Gilgamesh XI 319-28

Here the transition from motion to stasis is not flagged with stative verbs but is nevertheless implicit. Gilgamesh and his companion come to Uruk, in motion (l. 321 *ikšudūnimma*). But upon that arrival, Gilgamesh moves no more. All he can do is enjoin his companion to go up on to the wall and view the city, in words that repeat the poem’s prologue. He has no energy for that himself (I 9 *anib*). And he has no need, for his words reveal that he has already gained the insight that he urges on Ur-shanabi. I shall return to this insight later. The important point for the moment is that, having reached the end of his adventure, Gilgamesh comes to a stop. And so, therefore, must the poem.

The view that Gilgamesh makes a transition from motion to stasis is reinforced by comparative reading. Assyriology is traditionally a historicist discipline, founded on the evidence of known facts.

3. Beye was at least partly aware of the complex history of Gilgamesh, for he noted, “Although the Gilgamesh narrative has not been discovered anywhere transcribed as one continuum, its essential unity cannot be denied” (1984, 8 n. 5). As works of literature, the Babylonian poem of Gilgamesh and the Sumerian poem of the Death of Bilgames (Gilgamesh) are entirely separate compositions, in different languages and with different agenda. Together they exhibit an “essential unity” in no greater wise than would a combined *Iliad* and *Aeneid*.

Historically, it has not paid much attention to the less empirical, more subjective field of comparative literature. But in the study of ancient literature there is much to learn from reading eclectically, for it is axiomatic that all reading is enriched and conditioned by the reader's knowledge of and response to other texts. Babylonian literary compositions can gainfully be explored from comparative perspectives. Literary studies have already deployed Gilgamesh alongside the masterpieces of such authors as Plato, Ovid, Dante and Goethe (George 2003, 54 n. 137, Hirsch 1992). In this essay other great writers and thinkers are introduced to their company. They come from perhaps unlikely quarters, medieval Japan, imperial Russia and twentieth-century France. The Russian comes first.

Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* owes nothing to Gilgamesh, for it was finished in 1868, eight years before George Smith published the first attempt at translating the major Babylonian poetic narratives into a modern language. Nevertheless, there is common ground. *War and Peace* is in part the story of a man, Count Pierre Bezuhov, who searches vainly for meaning in life. In that respect it is a literary analogue of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The respective protagonists share prominence in social station and spiritual malaise. Both lack nothing in material comforts but are deeply unhappy with their lives. Like Gilgamesh in his quest for immortality, Pierre Bezuhov seeks fulfilment everywhere but in vain. He tries carousing, gambling, marriage, politics, Freemasonry, religion, intellectual pursuits: nothing gives him the answer he is looking for. Gilgamesh embarks on more heroic tasks, but equally in vain.

The two searchers after meaning become wise through contact with a teacher. Gilgamesh, in revolt against death, travels across the Waters of Death to the Babylonian counterpart of the Isles of the Blessed, intending to win immortality from the flood hero, the immortal Uta-napishti. There he learns from the instruction of this ancient sage, and then, his eyes opened, from his own conspicuous failures. A series of exclamations punctuates what can be understood as his passage from revolt to submission. When Uta-napishti demonstrates to Gilgamesh his powerlessness before sleep, Gilgamesh faces up at last to the inevitability of death and cries out in anguish (XI 244-245), "There in my bed-chamber Death does abide, / and wherever I turn, there too will be Death!" When later a snake robs him of the Plant of Youth and even the compensation of rejuvenation slips beyond his grasp, he realizes the full vanity of his quest, and despairs that it would have been better if he had never made the voyage (XI 317-318): "Had I only turned back, and left the boat on the shore!"

The mental journey that led Gilgamesh first to anguish and despair and thence to wisdom is completed by the first-millennium prologue's description of him at his return (I 9): "He came a far road, was weary but at peace". That second verb of stasis, *šupšub* "at ease, peace", signifies Gilgamesh's final reconciliation with his mortal destiny.⁴ Because the prologue gives foreknowledge of this, the end of the poem does not repeat it, but consists only of a third, more elaborate exclamation, beginning "Climb Uruk's wall!" The three exclamations witness a refocusing of Gilgamesh's attention, from the stark encounter of Death and himself, to his failure to escape that encounter, to the city of Uruk and its wall. Thus his preoccupation with his personal existential

4. This may not be the case in other versions of the line: the tablet from Ugarit reads *šupšunq* instead of *šupšub*; see George 2007a, 247.

crisis gives way to an impersonal topic, in which suddenly self-reference is completely lacking. I shall return to this psychological development later. For the moment what is important is that, at the end, the poem reveals that Gilgamesh has learned to reflect not on the struggle inside himself, but on that which is external to him.

In *War and Peace* Pierre Bezuhov learns from an old soldier called Platon Karatayev. Pierre and Platon meet in prison in 1812, as Moscow burns, and march together as captives in Napoleon's retreat from Russia. In his uncultured simplicity Platon is a little reminiscent of Enkidu, the friend whose death aroused in Gilgamesh his terror of dying, but the comparison will not be explored here. Platon's only possession, apart from his dog, is an unthinking happiness. His combination of unflinching cheerfulness and uncomplaining surrender to life's vicissitudes has a profoundly liberating effect on Pierre. Eventually Platon falls sick and lacks the strength to go on, and a French guard shoots him where he sits. Platon offers no resistance to death, but accepts it as he has accepted life. Pierre is rescued by Cossacks a little further down the road, and convalesces in Orel, attended by servants from home. Here, in enforced idleness, his gloom lifts at last. He finds himself surrendering to life as Platon had. He does not wish to do anything more than just observe what is going on around him:

“Well, what next? What am I going to do now?” And immediately he would answer himself: “Nothing. I am going to live”.⁵

In this passive frame of mind Pierre achieves happiness and peace with himself. The development derives from a sudden revelation, and this was clearly personal to Tolstoy, for he spends many words of the novel in explaining this revelation – too many, in fact, to be quoted here in full, but the following excerpts will serve well enough to make a comparison between Pierre's new state of mind and Gilgamesh at the wall of Uruk:

The very thing that had haunted him in the old days [before 1812] and that he constantly sought in vain – an object in life – did not exist for him now. That search for an object in life was over not merely temporarily, for the time being – he felt that it no longer existed for him and could not present itself again. And it was precisely this absence of an aim which gave him the complete and joyful sense of freedom that constituted his present happiness ...

All his life he had been seeking over the heads of those around him, while he had only to look straight in front without straining his eyes ... now he had learnt to see the great, the eternal, the infinite in everything; and therefore – to see it and revel in its contemplation – he naturally threw away the telescope through which he had hitherto been gazing over men's heads, and joyfully feasted his eyes on the ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable and infinite life around him. And the closer he looked, the more tranquil and happier he was. The awful question that had shattered all his mental edifices in the past – the question *Why?* – no longer existed for him.

Pierre achieves happiness when forced by great events to exchange a life of unceasing activity for passive captivity, and gradually then to learn to enjoy submissive inaction. When he emerges

5. This and the following quotations from Tolstoy are taken from Rosemary Edmonds' translation of *War and Peace* Book 3, Part 4, Chapter 12 (Tolstoy 1957, 1308-1309).

from his voyage of change, he does nothing; he does not want to do anything; everything is done around him. He has reached a point of stasis similar to Gilgamesh at his return from the ends of the earth. Both heroes have shed the self-absorption that made them unhappy. The reader understands of both that now they are, like Platon Karatayev, indifferent to the prospect of death.

In the passages just quoted Tolstoy makes very clear his view that meaning in life does not derive from what one does, but from what goes on around one, the human society of which one is a part. The secret is passive enjoyment of human life observed in all its mystery: “ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable and infinite”, as he puts it. And these words, especially, lead me to visit again the strange passage of prose that concludes the Babylonian poem of Gilgamesh.

In writing a commentary on Gilgamesh for my critical edition, I was forced to confront the implications of the poem’s final lines. The conventional view was that Gilgamesh found personal consolation in the wall of Uruk as his enduring monument. If he must die, then he could leave behind no more impressive memorial to his individual existence than this most lasting structure (it still stands today). But then why does the poem not end with XI 326? The wall is indeed a mighty symbol of the permanence of some human achievement, in contrast to the transience of human life. But it is not the last word. That lies in XI 327-328.

My insight was that the wall is a stage from which Gilgamesh’s companion will gain a view of the city, for it is with the life of the city that the poem concludes: “The epilogue of the epic tells its audience a self-evident truth: gaze on the generations that surround you and learn that human life, in all its activities, is collective and not individual. The symbol of that life is the great city that we contemplate from the wall” (George 2003, 527; also 2007b: 58). The Uruk that Gilgamesh urges Ur-shanabi to look upon is divided into four: city, date-grove, clay-pit and temple. These terms do not describe the city topographically; they organize its contents thematically. For me they symbolized four fundamental activities of human existence: raising of family, production of food, manufacturing, and intellectual and spiritual life.

This insight gains new strength from Roland Barthes’ essay on “La tour Eiffel”, first published in 1964. Barthes saw that contemplating a panorama from a height provokes the intellectual observer to a structural decipherment of what is viewed. The panorama “requires to be divided up, identified, reattached to memory” (1997, 11), so that what is seen from an unfamiliar angle is deciphered, made recognizable and organized in the mind. Barthes’ structuralist gaze gave the Eiffel Tower the same function as the wall of Uruk, a platform with an urban view. His decipherment of the Paris he observed from that platform led him to make the same intellectual leap as the poet of Gilgamesh: to compartmentalize and rearrange the panorama of a great city in terms of four basic “functions of human life” (as he puts it):

The visitor to the Tower has the illusion of raising the lid which covers the private lives of millions of human beings; the city becomes an intimacy whose functions, *i.e.*, whose connections he deciphers; on the great polar axis, perpendicular to the horizontal curve of the river, three zones stacked one after the other, as though along a prone body, the functions of human life: at the top, at the foot of Montmartre, pleasure; at the center, around the Opéra, materiality, business, commerce; toward the bottom, at the foot of the Pantheon, knowledge, study; then, to the right and left, enveloping this vital axis like two protective muffs, two large zones of habitation. (Barthes 1997, 12-13).

Barthes' human functions are "pleasure" (in the brothels of Pigalle below Montmartre), commerce, intellectual life and dwelling. The Babylonian poet's four categories are city (dwelling), date-grove (agriculture), clay-pit (industry) and temple (learning). If one allows a match between modern commerce and ancient industry, the two symbolic lists differs in one category only: Gilgamesh includes food production where Barthes saw sexual gratification. Perhaps it is unsurprising that a resident of a modern European city should consider the pursuit of individual sensual pleasure more essentially human than the social necessity of agriculture.

As will be seen below, the fourfold division of the city of Uruk also encourages interpretation in terms of psychological theory. In the context of a contrast between individual and community, however, it is more important that at the end of Gilgamesh, as at the beginning, the individual reader is prompted to look down from the wall of Uruk, like Barthes from the Eiffel Tower, and reflect on all human endeavour. In ancient Mesopotamia the ideal city was believed ancient and eternal, built by the gods and enduring forever. The exact same history and destiny were attributed to mankind, whose life the cityscape explicitly represents. In a world where no final apocalypse was contemplated, where indeed the gods had been chastened by the flood and thereafter vouchsafed the future of mankind for all time (George 2003, 527), the human race stretched forth in the imagination into an unending and infinite future.

The ending of the poem, then, abrupt and anticlimactic though it is, makes a grand statement about man and mankind. Essentially it subordinates the concerns of man the individual to those of man the collective. A recent analysis of the poem from the perspective of narrative analysis makes the same point, observing that the "quest for personal gratification must gradually give way for what is good for the community" (Altes 2007, 192). It is not an accident that this carefully structured poem begins with a poetic stanza on the hero Gilgamesh and ends with a prose stanza on the city Uruk. The change in topic, from individual to collective, is reinforced by the change in form.

To my knowledge there has been only one response to this new interpretation of the final stanza. In a very full (but exclusively philological) review article Michael Streck curtly rejects it, and reasserts the conventional view. For him the lines of prose do no more than stress the great size of the wall that is the hero's monument (Streck 2007, 422: "die Angabe der Stadtausdehnung dient meiner Ansicht nach lediglich zur Betonung der Größe der Stadtmauer"). This indeed they do, but I think the poem deserves to be explored for a greater profundity.

The prologue of "He Who Saw the Deep" insists that Gilgamesh returns from his quest wise, as wise as no man before or since. The words that he speaks at the very end of the poem are certainly intended as a distillation of that wisdom. For me they achieve a greater meaning if one considers the city wall in "He Who Saw the Deep" to play a supporting role to the city, rather than the other way around. Of course, the wall is a powerful icon full of hermeneutic potential (e.g. Dickson 2009, Zgoll 2010), and in an older version of the poem it may not have been subordinate to the city, but that we cannot know. As it is, the wall gives way to the city. And is it not so, that the poem, through Gilgamesh's speech to Ur-shanabi, directs our gaze on to what Tolstoy later called the "ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable and infinite life around him?" Had not Gilgamesh, like Pierre Bezuhov, used all his life a figurative telescope to search the horizons restlessly for meaning and truth? "All his life he had been seeking over the heads of those around him".

The goal of philologists is to find single answers, as it were positive truth, and Babylonian literature has benefited much from their labour in its reconstruction and elucidation. Literary-critical analysis is not a positivist activity that concludes in terms of right and wrong, susceptible of proof and falsification. Were it so, the book would have been closed on Shakespeare and Goethe long ago. This is not to say that there are limitless possibilities in interpretation. As Robert Alter put it, “the principle of many readings does not mean any reading” (Alter 1996, 221). Literary-critical response to Gilgamesh has been very limited, not just because such daunting barriers lie between the reader and an alien literature like Babylonian narrative poetry. The proprietorial attitude of Assyriologists towards the texts they decipher and their privileging of philological method in exegesis are further obstacles. The very different methodologies of philology and literary criticism, temperamentally opposed as they are, can nevertheless be complementary tools in reading Gilgamesh. Here I contend that my analysis of the poem’s final words is valid, and restate it reinforced by the literary analogy of Pierre in *War and Peace* and the intellectual parallel of M. Barthes on the Eiffel Tower.

The prologue and epilogue combine subtly to show Gilgamesh, like Pierre, come at last to the conclusion that in the end what he had been looking for was to be found at home, in the passive observation of the life that surrounds him and of which he is part. “And the closer he looked, the more tranquil and happier he was”. Or, as the poet of Gilgamesh puts it with those verbs of stasis, *anib u šupšub* “he was weary but at peace”. The theme of passive observation as a source of contentment is not an innovation of the Standard Babylonian poem of Gilgamesh. Probably the most well-known fragment of the Old Babylonian poem is the episode in which the tavern-keeper (in the later poem identified as Shiduri) encounters Gilgamesh at the end of the earth, as he seeks a way to find the only human being ever made immortal, the survivor of the Flood. She gives him this advice:

“The life that you seek you never will find:
 “when the gods created mankind,
 “death they dispensed to mankind,
 5 “life they kept for themselves.

“But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
 “enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
 “Make merry each day,
 “dance and play day and night!

10 “Let your clothes be cleansed,
 “let your head be washed, may you be bathed in water!
 “Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
 “let a wife grow glad in your repeated embrace!

“For such is the destiny [*of mortal men,*]
 15 “that the one who is alive”

OB Gilgamesh VA+BM iii 2-15

In these three-and-a-half stanzas Shiduri sums up the conventional wisdom of a culture that had no expectation of bliss in an afterlife: enjoy yourself while you can, make those who depend on you

happy. The idea is expressed in similar terms elsewhere, notably in the biblical book Ecclesiastes 9.⁶ What is important for the present discussion, however, is a philological point, the morphology of the verbs of the third stanza: *ubbubū* “they are cleansed”, *mesi* “it is washed”, *ramkāta* “you are bathed” of ll. 10-11 all refer to attributes of Gilgamesh, and all are stative, not active. The cleansing will happen to him, and he will passively accept it. In ll. 12-13 he is required only to gaze benignly (*subbi*): the child and the woman are the active forces here (*šābitu* “holding”, *liḫtaddām* “keep growing glad” in your embrace). In Ecclesiastes, by contrast, the man is the active force: “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest ... Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might”.

The message in Old Babylonian Gilgamesh, as in the later poem “He who Saw the Deep”, is that contentment derives from passively observing human life of which one is a part. Shiduri’s summary in the first couplet of the fourth stanza (ll. 14-15) is unfortunately broken, but speaks of destiny and being alive in the same sentence. It probably asserted that the divinely ordained purpose of human existence is simply to be alive. Many thinkers since the Enlightenment, and especially since Darwin, have come to the conclusion that the purpose of life is living. In modern literature it is enough to invoke just one example. The study of marine animals in the Gulf of California in 1940 led John Steinbeck to espouse this exact idea, as later recorded in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951): “There would seem to be only one commandment for living beings: Survive! . . . Life has one final end, to be alive” (Steinbeck 1960, 289-290). Whether or not Shiduri’s advice ended with a similar thought, it is nevertheless significant that the last preserved word in l. 15 (*balṭu*) is again a stative verb (or adjective) on the theme of being alive. For Shiduri, as for Pierre Bezuhov, it was enough only to look on (*subbi*) and live.

To return to the Standard Babylonian poem: on his journey home from the sage Uta-napishti, Gilgamesh recognizes with sudden insight that his quest to the ends of the earth can bring only despair. As remarked above, he laments that it would have been better not to have gone. His quest was a personal disaster. But, as we have seen, in its hero’s homecoming the poem turns from the individual to the collective population, from the mortal to the immortal. For Gilgamesh, at a standstill, life is over and ends in failure, even before he is overtaken by death, the greatest human failing. But the collective life – symbolized by the city – goes on forever.

What I have described above as the “grand theme of man and mankind”, the theme of individual fate contrasted with collective, is not limited to the prologue and epilogue of “He Who Saw the Deep”. It is also central to what the sage flood hero, Uta-napishti, tells Gilgamesh at their meeting. His sermon is the first stage of the instruction that Gilgamesh undergoes in Uta-napishti’s presence. It contains an elegy of lyrical beauty. If it is Šin-leqi-unninni’s doing, it belies his reputation as an inferior poet:

“Man is snapped off like a reed in a canebrake!
 “The comely young man, the pretty young woman –
 “all [too soon in] their [prime] Death abducts them.

6. There is a large literature comparing Shiduri’s advice with Eccles. 9: 7-9; see most recently van der Toorn 2001, Shields 2007.

305 “No one at all sees death,
 “no one sees the face [of Death],
 “no one [hears] the voice of Death,
 “Death so savage who hacks man down!

 “At some time do we build a household,
 “at some time do we start a family,
 310 “at some time do brothers divide their inheritance,
 “at some time do feuds arise in the land.

 “Ever has the river risen and brought us flood,
 “the mayfly (Akk. *kulīlu*) floating on the water.
 “On the face of the sun its countenance gazes,
 315 “then all of a sudden nothing is there!”
 Gilgamesh X 301-22

The first three stanzas set out with great clarity the contrast between the individual's fate and the collective destiny of men. The individual is scythed down suddenly like a harvested reed, an image found elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern poetry. A Hebrew poet combined it with a lament for the pain of life that echoes another theme of Gilgamesh (Job 14: 1-2): “Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower and is cut down”. The third stanza makes a rarer observation, that men endure forever through the cycle of generations. The fourth stanza restates the same contrast between man and men as a metaphor, in which the brief-lived insect *kulīlu* symbolizes the individual and the eternal river stands, as elsewhere, for the current of time. Like the insect, men too have only a brief share of time alive on earth. The image gains poignancy and depth from its allusion to the Babylonian flood story in the poem of Atram-ḥašīs. There, when the god Enlil drowns all mankind in the great Deluge, the corpses of men fill the rivers “like *kulīlu*”, an intertextual echo pointed out by Stephanie Dalley (1989, 38 n. 41 and 133 n. 121).

Translations demonstrate a lack of consensus among Assyriologists as to the exact zoological identity of the principal element of Uta-napishti's metaphor, the *kulīlu*. Long ago the archaeologist and historian Margaret Drower observed at first hand mayflies (*Sialis lutaria*, Arabic *klil* cognate with *kulīlu*) riding in large numbers on the flooding Tigris. Her observation has been well publicized (e.g. van Buren 1939, 108; Heimpel 1976-1980, 106; Kilmer 1987, 176-177; George 2003, 875-876). Despite this, some of the most careful scholars still render *kulīlu* as “dragonfly” (e.g. Schott – von Soden 1982, 90 “Libellen”, Westenholz – Westenholz 1997, 124 “guldsmēd”, Foster 2001, 83). However, the word employed by the most recent German translators (Maul 2005, 137; Streck 2007, 418) is *Eintagsfliege*, literally “one-day fly”, a good reminder of why the mayfly is so apposite to Uta-napishti's image. It lives for a very short time, from a few minutes to a day, and, having no functional digestive system, exists only to copulate and die. Dragonflies are comparative Methuselahs, for they can live for a month or two.

In championing the mayfly over the dragonfly, but leaving aside philology and natural history, support may be drawn from another literary composition, almost as far removed from Babylonia in time and place as Tolstoy. There is a very prominent and instructive mayfly metaphor in the Japanese *Genji-monogatari*. This sprawling work of the Heian period, in English usually entitled “The Tale of Shining Genji”, is attributed to the gentlewoman Murasaki Shikibu (fl. AD 1000). It tells

mainly of the life and loves of a great nobleman, but the narrative does not end with Genji's death, for it is impelled forward by its own momentous force. The hero being dead, and his loves long gone, the tale turns to the amorous exploits of his son, the Commander (Kaoru). Kaoru was not Genji's true son, for his conception made Genji a cuckold, but his inclinations were similar. One story dwells on his wooing of a lady who suddenly disappears. Having lost her, and thinking she must be drowned, Kaoru sits in twilight as mayflies flit back and forth, and the sight of them causes him to reflect on her too brief presence in his life with a short poem:

There it is, just there, yet ever beyond my reach, till I look once more,
and it is gone, the mayfly (*kagerou*), never to be seen again.⁷

The chapter is entitled *Kagerou* "The Mayfly", in honour of this verse. Murasaki glosses the poem by having Kaoru add a prose afterthought: "'It might not be there at all,' they say he murmured to himself". Here, as in Gilgamesh, the mayfly symbolizes the brevity of human existence and also, because of its evident characteristic of being there one moment, and gone the next, it symbolizes the finality of death, which acts to wipe individual men out as if they had never been, drowned in the river of time. "All of a sudden, nothing is there!"

The prologue of the poem of Gilgamesh implies that his visit to the flood hero, the sage Uta-napishti, made Gilgamesh wise, and that he brought this wisdom back with him to Uruk. Other Babylonian traditions acknowledge his reputation as one whose return from his quest brought knowledge of the ideal order of the antediluvian age, when human life was as the gods had originally planned it. Uta-napishti's sermon, which ends with the elegy quoted above, makes clear the distinction between the fragile brevity of a man's life (the mayfly) and the infinite repetition of mankind's generations through past and future time (the flooding river). For the poet of Gilgamesh, perhaps Sîn-leqi-unninni, perhaps another, the wisdom attained by his hero, the archetypal searcher after immortality, permits the hero to see that mankind's destiny – eternal life – is the essential compensation for the pain of individual oblivion. Acceptance of this as the truth of the human predicament thus brings final peace and reconciliation even to those, like Gilgamesh, who go most in fear of death.

It is no accident that Gilgamesh, like Pierre Bezuhov, achieves a calm state of mind only after vain struggle. For both, the change from activity to passive participation, from motion to stasis, is a mark of wisdom. It brings the end of the self-centred aspirations of ambitious youth and signals the onset of contemplative and reconciled age. Gilgamesh's journey is often described as a story of learning to accept reality, a "story about growing up" as Thorkild Jacobsen memorably put it (1976, 219). Jacobsen's insight was informed by a theory of preadolescence and adolescence developed by the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, and identified in Gilgamesh a reluctance to leave the preadolescent (Peter Pan) stage of development characterized by a special intimacy with one of the same sex.

Given the poem's propensity to be read in these archetypal terms of growing up and growing old, it is unsurprising that Gilgamesh's quest has also been interpreted in Jungian terms. In this

7. Taken from Royall Tyler's translation of *Genji-monogatari*, Chapter 52 (Murasaki 2001, 1073).

respect it is one of many stories that can be seen to tell of a transfer of focus and motivation from “ego” to “Self”, where the former is the conscious individual and the latter a deeper, unconscious personality, the “archetype of totality” which “connects us with everyone and everything outside us” (Booker 2004, 305). The journey from ego to Self, often prompted by some mid-life crisis, is the process that Jung called “individuation”, by which he meant a balancing of ego and Self in one indivisible and individual whole. Jung knew Gilgamesh well and corresponded with Freud about the archetypal nature of the poem’s characters and mythology (Ziolkowski 2011, 29-30). The classic Jungian study of Gilgamesh was published posthumously by the Swiss psychologist Rivkah Schärf Kluger, who was encouraged in this work by Jung himself (1991). For her the poem “as a whole shows in its inner structure a process of transformation in the collective unconscious, an anticipation of the individuation process, represented in the hero” (1991, 207). In other words, Gilgamesh underwent a psychological transformation that prefigured Jung’s ideas of individuation. More recently the analytical psychologist Elizabeth Gordon writes of Gilgamesh,

... the epic seems to echo Jung’s theories about the “Stages of Life” (Jung, 1931). Jung insisted particularly on the importance of the second half of life as the time when the ego needs to sacrifice its heroic endeavours and to acknowledge the authority of the Self. This, he felt, involved a redirection of the libido which, in later life, needs to focus more on questions of meaning and purpose and rather less on career, power, and activity. Like the Hindu philosophers before him, Jung felt that fulfilment in old age depends primarily on spiritual development. (Gordon 2003, 61-62)

The journey to the Self is a path ending in self-realization (Gordon 2003). Self-realization involves a recognition of the participation of the individual in the collective, the ego in the Self: “the more fully we realise our own individual identity, the more we come into contact with that ego-transcending level of the psyche which links us to the wider world” (Booker 2004, 305).

Another study of Gilgamesh written under the influence of Jung’s psychology is Horst Obleser’s *Gilgamesch: ein Weg zum Selbst* (1998). As Jung would have it the city is a symbol of the Self. The city symbolizing the Self occurs as a goal in other stories but is not always attained (Booker 2004, 306). In Gilgamesh the hero’s return to Uruk *ipso facto* indicates, in Jungian terms, his arrival at the Self and attainment of individuation. In this context Obleser makes an observation that resonates with what I have independently argued, in 2003 and above, that in its fourfold division the city of Uruk is a symbol of collective humanity. As he sees it, this fourfold division of Uruk is a detail that invites comparison with the Indian *mandala* symbol, a geometric combination of circle and square that Jung interpreted as a pictorial expression of the Self: “Die so beschriebene Vierung der Stadt ... stellt in ihrer Mandalaform ein Symbol des Selbst dar, wie es verwirklicht ist, wie es nur nach einer langen Suchwanderung und vielen schweren Prüfungen erreicht werden kann” (Obleser 1998, 222). Obleser’s identification of Uruk, with its four unequal divisions, and the regular symmetry of the *mandala* may be a step too far for many. It is nevertheless clear that Jung’s theory of psychological development from ego to Self fits well a poem that describes its hero’s latter career – from mid-life crisis brought on by Enkidu’s death, through his solitary quest to his homecoming to Uruk – in terms of a change of focus from individual to collective.

The Jungian response to the poem of Gilgamesh accords with an insight gained through literary-critical analysis, that the poem tells a story about finding a new balance between individual and

collective, a story that asserts a belief that a human life gains meaning as part of a greater whole. Steinbeck's reaction to intensive study of marine ecology was a profound reflection on the human species, leading him to write on one occasion in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* that "it is through struggle and sorrow that people are able to participate in one another" (1960, 176-177). The path from ego to Self is not an easy journey. The poem of Gilgamesh agrees: this realization is attained, this wisdom won, only by hard experience of life and death.

This essay has sought to demonstrate that a contrast between individual fate and collective destiny, and the resolution of that distinction, lie at the heart of the most profound parts of the poem of Gilgamesh. It would be a surprise if such a universal theme did not find literary expression by other great imaginations in history. Tolstoy, as one would expect, summed up the eternal truth succinctly. Simple but innately wise, Platon Karatayev tells Pierre Bezuhov in jail, "Suffering lasts an hour but life goes on for ever!" They are words that once again oppose individual fate and collective destiny, the mayfly and the river. It is my contention that in the shade of Uruk's wall the hero Gilgamesh, come at last to a standstill after a life of suffering (*mānabtu*) and seeing before him the teeming metropolis, might very well have said the same.

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