

The Epic of Gilgamesh: Thoughts on genre and meaning*

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The Assyriologist's approach to the literature (and other written documentation) of ancient Mesopotamia is conventionally philological. Through a close reading of the text, involving the meticulous dissection of its vocabulary, grammar and syntax, he produces an understanding of it and extracts meaning from it. This empirical method of literary study, which has been called the "positivist approach" (e.g. by Black 1998), owes much to historicist methodology and little to the often subjective techniques of modern literary-critical method. Editions of Babylonian literary texts are necessarily founded upon the philological approach and should remain so, at least while the pioneering work of reconstruction remains at a comparatively early stage. The Epic of Gilgamesh is a case in point. I am fortunate enough to have recently completed a philologically based critical edition of this masterpiece of Babylonian poetry (George 2003), and know that, as more text comes to light and our knowledge of Akkadian language and grammar is refined, so the techniques of philological enquiry will continue to be the principal tool that Assyriologists will employ in the task of understanding how the poem reads and what it says.

At the same time, Assyriologists are aware that the academic study of literature has steadily developed an array of other critical methods, many of which have not been much utilized in discussing the literatures of ancient Mesopotamia. A few have been vocal on

* This paper is not at all the one I gave as keynote speech to the symposium on Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria on 21 July 2004. That paper, entitled "The present state of Gilgamesh studies", was a summation that looked more back than forward; it contributed little that had not already been said in George 1999 and 2003. The present contribution makes a different approach. It is offered here with great gratitude to Dr Joseph Azize and Dr Noel Weeks for their kindness in making possible my visit to Sydney and for their hospitality during the week of the symposium. It was written during a period as a visiting scholar in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, where I was privileged to browse in the libraries of the Institute, Princeton University and Princeton Theological Seminary. It is a pleasure to acknowledge here the generous support of the Institute's Hetty Goldman Fund.

this specific point (e.g. Moran 1980, Michalowski 1996), while others have called for a greater engagement with, and understanding of, other academic disciplines generally (e.g. Veldhuis 1995-6, Leick 1998).

With regard to Gilgamesh, some have already risen to the challenge. Rivkah Harris has brought social-scientific method to bear on the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh (Harris 1990, 2000: 32-49), Neal Walls has elucidated the poem from the angle of what is called by literary critics “queer theory” (Walls 2001: 9-92), and Jack Sasson has written on irony (Sasson 1972). Scholars specializing in literary analysis have approached the poem using literary-critical methods (e.g. Bailey 1976 on theme, Blenkinsopp 1975 on structure and function, Maier 1984 on narrative and genre, Lindahl 1991 on oral aesthetics, Mandell 1997 on liminality, etc.); comparatists have focused on oral patterns and narrative structure (Bynum 1978: 228-39, Lord 1990, Wolff 1987), on the motifs of heroic life (Wolff 1969) and the second self or double (Keppler 1972: 23-6, Van Nortwick 1992: 8-38), on the transformation of epic stories (Damrosch 1987), on motif sequence (Miller and Wheeler 1981), and on literary constructions of male friendship (Halperin 1990). This paper considers the epic from another critical perspective of the study of literature, the issue of genre, and touches also on the study of mythology. Far from being a comprehensive application of modern theories of genre, it is an exploration of those areas that seemed most likely to yield insight. In this opportunism I pitch camp with the late Jeremy Black, who asserted, in writing about modern literary-critical theory and Sumerian literature, that “it seems legitimate . . . for those wishing to deal with dead, alien, fragmentary, undateable and authorless literature to pursue a pragmatic approach led by elements of any theory which seem pregnant and responsive to that literature’s special character and circumstances” (Black 1998: 43).

Literary genre and Assyriology

The study of genre is well established as a literary-critical tool, even to the extent of having its usefulness and validity questioned, a sure sign of maturity. In the field of ancient Mesopotamian literary criticism, however, recourse to genre studies is more of a novelty. The principal modern statement on genre theory and Assyriology was made by Tremper Longman III, as the introduction to his study of what he called “fictional

Akkadian autobiography” (Longman 1991). His lucid exposition of the technical vocabulary (“genre”, “form” and “mode”) is particularly useful, as is his assertion that the purpose of the study of genre goes beyond mere classification. Longman reiterates E. D. Hirsch’s influential assertion that the meaning of a text is bound up with its genre, “thus providing impetus for the researcher to identify the type of literature he is in the process of interpreting” (Longman 1991: 17).

Some other modern text editions have also included short forays into genre-related issues (e.g. Michalowski 1989: 4-8, Tinney 1996: 11-25). The most vocal contributor to the discussion, however, has been Herman Vanstiphout, who has repeatedly addressed issues of generic theory from the standpoint of Assyriology, with particular reference to Sumerian literature of the Old Babylonian period. He began by identifying generic analysis as a useful tool in the continuing process of understanding the “meaning” or “point” of ancient literary texts, and by noting the obstacles that are specific to the field of ancient Mesopotamian literature (Vanstiphout 1986). These were the lapse of time between then and now, the fragmentary nature of most compositions, the absence of any native description of literary genre, our ignorance of historical context and *Sitz im Leben*, a trend toward a homogeneous literary style that did not mark generic distinctions, and a relative absence of formal schemes in literary composition. Despite these difficulties, Vanstiphout observed that the durability of clay tablets ensures their survival in great numbers and so makes it possible to observe the evolution of literary compositions, and, in doing so, to note subtle changes in the development of their respective genres. The example he chose to illustrate was lamentations over cities. Though he has had second thoughts in the matter of this example (Vanstiphout 1999a: 706-7 fn. 16), the relationship between text and genre, and its development over time, remains a productive field of study.

Vanstiphout returned to the study of genre in ancient Mesopotamian literature in 1995, convening a meeting of the Mesopotamian Literature Group devoted to the issue. Unfortunately, the proceedings remain unpublished (Vanstiphout forthcoming) and important contributions to the topic contained therein are known to me only as citations (e.g. Alster, Cooper, Groneberg, Kilmer forthcoming). As an Assyriologist attempting to explore genre without the guidance of this book, one feels a little like Gilgamesh’s first

victim, the ogre Huwawa. When assailed by thirteen winds, he found himself immobilized, able neither to charge forward nor to kick backward. Some avenues of attack, however, are indicated by three further studies of genre that have appeared in the interval.

Vanstiphout's third contribution on genre examines three related questions: how conscious were the people of ancient Mesopotamia of genre, how their consciousness of genre generated new genres, and how genre should be used in reconstructing from the "immanent poetics" of the texts themselves a "literary system" (Vanstiphout 1999a). In this last area of enquiry, he comments that a text's "overt adherence, natural or artificial, to a group of kindred texts is an important aspect of immanent poetics" (Vanstiphout 1999a: 711). The intentional production of "kinship" among texts is a literary technique that can be detected in the evolution of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, as will be seen below. Another important observation was to note a literary technique that "consists of the deliberate and sometimes elaborate use of a certain style or mode of discourse in the larger context of a piece which is not at first sight akin to it", a device that he illustrates by reference to the Sumerian tale of Lugalbanda (Vanstiphout 1999a: 705). In the terminology used by Longman, the larger piece exhibits "genre", while the passage included within it in different style exhibits "form".

The issue of genre and form recurred in a paper published in the same year, where Vanstiphout proposed that the Babylonians possessed an "explicit, conscious and articulate generic system", and set out to explore it (Vanstiphout 1999b). In doing so he returned to the phenomenon of generic evolution, suggesting this time a lineal development of the short commemorative building inscription into longer, hymnic texts and praise poetry directed at the temple and city, which in turn helped model other praise poetry directed at king and god. More interestingly, from the present perspective, he identifies the Tale of the Fox as an example of a new genre ("satirical animal epic") springing from a fusion of the twin genres of animal fable and rhetorical dispute poem. The new genre "makes conscious use of no less than five established types of literature" (Vanstiphout 1999b: 88), i.e. includes five such forms. This is a feature of literary creativity that one might call the embrace of one generic form by another. As will be

argued below, something similar can be seen in the Gilgamesh epic, which incorporates in narrative and speech passages and set pieces that are redolent of many different genres.

A collection of papers on Genre and Narrative in Ancient Historical Texts includes a paper on ancient Mesopotamia by Piotr Michalowski (Michalowski 1999). Given a brief to examine the intersection of historical writing and other literary genres, Michalowski elaborated a thesis about the development of the Epic of Gilgamesh that occurred independently to me at about the same time; I shall return to it below.

Just recently Nathan Wasserman concluded his book on literary style with a description of the Old Babylonian literary system (Wasserman 2003: 175-84). There he points out some of the methodological difficulties that the analysis of genre throws up in studying the Old Babylonian corpus, including the problems that arise if one proposes the Epic of Gilgamesh as somehow “paradigmatic” of Old Babylonian epic as a genre. Wasserman finds that different groups of genres (“genre-families”) have their “own distinctive stylistic profile based on different syntactic and stylistic devices”; one of these genre-families is narrative poetry, which he classifies as “epic (undifferentiated . . . from myths)”. The distinctive stylistic profile of Babylonian “epic” is one of the reasons why the poem of Gilgamesh has always been classified by modern scholars with other long narrative poems such as Atram-hasis, Etana and Erra, even if this generic association was originally based more on intuition than on objective analysis.

Function and genre

In investigating the specific topic of Gilgamesh and genre, as generally in Assyriology, it is proper to begin with the ancient evidence. Even if this does not lead us very far, it will give an insight into what folklorists, especially, have called the native or ethnic categories of literary genre (e.g. Dundes 1984: 5). Two avenues of initial enquiry can be pointed out, (a) function and (b) taxonomy. The first can be dealt with summarily, for we are very poorly informed about the function of almost all the traditional literature of ancient Mesopotamia. It is common to postulate that Sumerian and Babylonian narrative poems had a background in oral entertainment, particularly in performance at court. In fact the only secure context that we have for most of this literature is the scribal school. Narrative poetry was one of the types of writing and knowledge to which

apprentice scribes were exposed, and almost all our manuscripts stem from exactly this pedagogical environment. There are exceptions, like the Babylonian Creation Epic (*Enūma eliš*), which was much studied and copied out by student scribes but also recited before the god Marduk by his priestly attendant on at least two occasions during the cultic year at Babylon (George 2001: 103). For the most part, however, the realm of pedagogy is the only proven context of the written literature. This is as true for Babylonian literature (George 2003: 37) as it is for the earlier literary corpus in Sumerian (Veldhuis 2003: 40-2). Much of it, to be sure, originally had other contexts and found in pedagogy a secondary function.

The function of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh in pedagogy was, first and foremost, its use as a copy book in the Akkadianized syllabus that supplanted the overwhelmingly Sumerian syllabus of the Old Babylonian period in the mid-second millennium and endured little changed to the end of cuneiform writing. Evidence is scarce for the early centuries of this era but plentiful in the mid- to late first millennium. In the late second millennium the poem was encountered by novice students (as at Nippur) and was also studied by advanced students alongside folktales, fables, collections of wise sayings and professional lore of divination and exorcism (as at Emar). During the later period student scribes seem also to have been exposed to Gilgamesh at two different stages in their education, first as novices and again only after they had passed through the second part of their studies, during which they were inculcated with the current political and religious ideology. Elsewhere I have summarized this situation as follows: “in the late second and the first millennium the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh had two functions in training scribes. It was a good story and thus useful, in small quantities, for absolute beginners. And as a difficult classic of traditional literature it was studied at greater length by senior pupils nearing the end of their training” (George 2003: 39). It was both the familiarity of the legend and the difficulty of its language that gave this profound poem life in the classroom. In addition, like the other literary texts copied at Emar, it was imbued with a philosophical morality that was probably believed good for students’ intellectual development.

Where texts remained part of a tradition for centuries, it is inevitable that the uses to which they were put changed over time. According to one analysis, in which bilingualism

is seen as indicative of “learnedness”, narrative poems were among the least academic of Old Babylonian literary texts (Wasserman 2003: 179). It is safe to assume that the pedagogical function observed for the poem of Gilgamesh was a secondary development. It was also beyond Shakespeare’s imagining that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* should find their widest audience as set texts in countless school examinations. Here, then, function is not leading us in the way of genre, but it does open up an insight into one “reception” of the poem: even as their teachers were transfixed and fascinated by it, many Babylonian scribal apprentices surely found the poem old fashioned, irrelevant and boring (for a fantasy of two such encounters in the eighth and second centuries see George 2004).

Ancient labelling and genre

Let me turn now to the question of taxonomy, that is, classification by label. Over its long history as a written text the Epic of Gilgamesh was known by at least two names, in Old Babylonian as *Shutur eli sharri* “Surpassing All Other Kings” and in Standard Babylonian as *Sha naqba imuru* “He Who Saw the Deep”. These are the incipits of various versions of the poem and say nothing that pertains to genre. In first-millennium catalogues and colophons the poem is known either by these titles or as *ishkar Gilgamesh* “the series of Gilgamesh”. The term “series” is one of organization. Just as there was a Babylonian series called *An = Anum* that comprised various lists of gods and other items conventionally arranged on seven tablets, and another called *Urta = hubullu* that listed legal terminology on two tablets and the realia of the material world set forth on twenty-two more, so there was a series of Gilgamesh called *Sha naqba imuru* comprising the epic poem on eleven tablets and a prose fragment making a twelfth. This is no help either. If we could pursue the matter with an ancient Babylonian and ask him what the Epic of Gilgamesh was, we would probably receive the answer *shiru* or *zamaru*, which both mean “song”. A logogram that can be read as either Akkadian word is the descriptor attached to the Epic of Gilgamesh in the colophon of a tiny tablet fragment found at the Hittite court in Anatolia (Otten 1957-71 on Bo 372/v, now *KBo* XIX 116: 2’); in Akkadian, the language of the Babylonians and Assyrians, both *shiru* and *zamaru* are terms that signify a poem whose origins lay in performance. As such they are true generic terms, but ones of such wide application that we learn from the colophon only what we

already knew — that the epic is a poem — and what we already suspected — that the poem was once sung.

There is some evidence, nevertheless, that the Babylonians differentiated more closely between written texts of various genres. Some ancient catalogues of Sumerian literary compositions exhibit a loose organization of entries, sometimes by place in the curriculum of the scribal school (Tinney 1999), but also perhaps by genre, so that here tales of Gilgamesh or Lugalbanda or Enki are listed together, there dispute poems or scribal diatribes fall in a cluster (Tinney 1996: 17-18, Vanstiphout 2003: 19 fn. 80). This is to be expected, for the grouping of similar items is endemic in the list-culture of ancient Mesopotamia and, where the items listed are literary compositions, an organization that loosely reflects generic distinctions will surely occur. But what is missing here, as in the colophons of the Epic of Gilgamesh, are descriptive nouns that express these distinctions. Sumerian and Akkadian are poor in generic terminology, and many have noted the lack of a native poetics (e.g. Black 1998: 24-8, Veldhuis 2003: 32). In Sumerian, generic terminology developed to distinguish between compositions that were performed in different manners or to different musical accompaniment (e.g. *ér.shèm.ma*, *balang*, *tigi*) (Wilcke 1976: 250-64). Akkadian possesses words that surely make generic distinctions also but, again, these labels are mostly performative and not literary (Groneberg 2003 and forthcoming, Kilmer forthcoming). The written culture of the Babylonians is not given to analysis or prescription of the kind developed by classical writers.

Comparative study suggests that it would also be unwise to expect the surviving Sumerian and Akkadian terminology to be systematic. Classical Arabic poetry succeeds the Sumero-Babylonian tradition as the next large body of literature to come from Mesopotamia. While there is certainly a much more developed sense of genre in pre-modern Arabic than in Babylonia, a recent study of the language of generic classification used by medieval commentators to describe classical poetry found more chaos than order (van Gelder 1999). Part of van Gelder's conclusion is that "to read Arabic literature correctly there is no need to have a well-defined generic system at one's disposal. The classifications of ancient and modern scholars do give some insight into the minds of these scholars and show at least that they, the medieval Arab critics in particular, were

fond of classifications. It is, however, a ‘venerable error’, as Fowler puts it, to presume that classification is the goal of studying genres” (van Gelder 1999: 25). The reference is to Alastair Fowler’s influential work on genre theory and literature (Fowler 1982). Vanstiphout concurs on the first point, concluding his most recent paper on genre with a warning against “trying to force our generic system” on to the literatures of ancient Mesopotamia (Vanstiphout 1999b: 94). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that understanding of literature can be deepened by classification from a modern perspective. To be considered alongside the categorizations of the ancients are the typologies of modern scholarship, which have been identified as “analytic”, as opposed to “native” (Dundes 1984: 5), “critical” and “analytical” as opposed to “ethnic” (Roest and Vanstiphout 1999: 131, Tinney 1996: 11-15, Ben-Amos 1976) and, borrowing the terminology of linguistics, “etic” as opposed to “emic” (Longman 1991: 14).

Modern labelling and genre

In modern times it has been customary in Assyriology to classify texts *ad hoc*, in a way that accommodates what is extant without imposing on it a modern or classical generic scheme that is anachronistic and unsuitable (e.g. Edzard and Röllig 1987-90). The most recent scholarly anthologies of Sumerian and Akkadian literature have for the most part shunned the conventional generic labels (Jacobsen 1987, Foster 1993, Black *et al.* 2004). This is no doubt because so few ancient compositions match such labels satisfactorily. Less fastidious scholars have tended to group together Gilgamesh and other Babylonian poetic narratives that tell of the deeds of gods and heroes under the vaguely generic titles “myths”, “epics” or “myths and epics”. This is especially visible in the titles of some anthologies and retellings of Babylonian literature, past (e.g. *Assyrisch-babylonische Mythen und Epen*, Jensen 1906) as well as present (e.g. *Myths from Mesopotamia*, Dalley 1989). It can also be seen in the modern names given to ancient works, for example the Creation Epic (i.e. Babylonian *Enuma elish* “When On High”) and *Das Erra-Epos* (i.e. *Shar gimir dadme* “King of All Settlements”).

The two terms “myth” and “epic” are unequal. Epic is traditionally a literary genre, referring since the time of Aristotle to a type of long narrative poem of heroic content, especially one that induces pathos (Bynum 1976: 49-54). Its use outside literature to

mean “long and action-packed” (e.g. “an epic journey”) is secondary, a vulgarism. Myth is not a literary genre; it is a generic category of the created world reflected in literature but not confined to it. Neither word has any ancient counterpart in Mesopotamia. While “epic” is a term from a critical tradition alien to ancient Mesopotamia, and thus both anachronistic and suspect, in my view it can be conveniently and meaningfully adopted for the Babylonian poem of Gilgamesh, as it can too for other non-western narratives (Michalowski 1999: 77). But is it correct to call Gilgamesh a myth?

When it comes to narratives that record the deeds of gods and heroes the modern taxonomy of genre customarily makes a division not between myth and epic but between myth and legend. Indeed, anthologists of Mesopotamian mythology and literature from fields other than Assyriology normally refer not to Babylonia’s “myths and epics” but to its “myths and legends” (e.g. Spence 1916, Bratton 1970). Like myth, legend is also a generic category of the created world reflected in literature but not confined to it. This raises another question. Those who study mythology recognize the close relationship between myth and legend but do not agree on the boundaries between them. Folklorists, in particular, bring a very rigorous formalistic distinction to the issue (e.g. Bascom 1965, Dundes 1996): for them myths are narratives, generally sacred and held to be true, about origins and thus neither of current time nor of the world we know. Legends are narratives, sacred or secular, set in historical time and the familiar world and featuring human protagonists. They are also held to be true, if not by all narrators and every audience then at least by someone somewhere (Dégh and Vászonyi 1976). On the folklorists’ analysis, the tale (not the poem) of Gilgamesh is certainly a legend, not a myth.

Scholars in fields more nearly related to Assyriology can have different views. The classicist G. S. Kirk set out a less strict distinction between myth and legend, arguing that much of what folklorists would classify as legend overlaps with myth and succinctly defining myth (and implicitly also legend) as a “traditional oral tale” (Kirk 1973). By this token he felt able to classify the *Iliad* as myth, despite its secular character and historical context; similarly the Epic of Gilgamesh features prominently in his important monograph on myth (Kirk 1970). Several scholars, including mythographers and historians of religion, have made studies of Gilgamesh — its narrative, motif sequences

and themes — that treat it as myth (e.g. Campbell 1968: 185-8, Miller and Wheeler 1981, Doty 1993: 73-85). T. H. Gaster was of the opposite opinion. He distinguished between “myth”, which for him had some ritual use, and “tale”, which did not, and categorized Gilgamesh as the latter, “since there is no evidence that it was ever anything more than a collection of heroic legends told for entertainment or edification” (Gaster 1954).

I do not intend to enter deeply into a discussion of myth and legend here; the definition of myth, in particular, is especially disputed. To the “positivist” Assyriologist, some theories of myth are hardly more than intellectual vanity (on the history of modern mythological theory see e.g. Honko 1972, Detienne 1991, Segal 1996, Doty 2000). When dealing with the long-dead intellectual culture and religious thought of ancient Mesopotamia, Assyriologists, being philologists and empiricists by training, will feel more at ease with the stricter approaches of folklorist, classicist and Hebraist. In any case the definition of myth and legend and the distinction between them are not a goal here; as already noted, there is more to the study of genre than native and modern schemes of classification. In any case, does it really matter? In roughly dividing Sumerian literature into three categories — narrative, hymnic and paradigmatic — Niek Veldhuis remarked that a “distinction between ‘mythical’ texts about gods and ‘epic’ texts about heroes seems to be of little relevance” (Veldhuis 2003: 29).

Myth, legend and narrative poems

Here it is necessary to stop and consider what we are dealing with. Folklorists consider myth and legend to be unadorned tales of oral origin. William Bascom uses the term “prose narratives”, a category in which he places folktale as well as myth and legend (Bascom 1965). The qualification “prose” deliberately excludes poetic forms of verbal art, and implicitly warns us that, in the folkloristic definition, elaborate poetic narratives of the kind that survive from ancient Mesopotamia (and Greece and Rome) are not themselves properly described as myths and legends. Nevertheless, the Sumerian and Babylonian poems certainly contain myths and legends (sometimes also folktales) and are our primary sources of ancient Mesopotamian mythology. The non-literary nature of myth and legend has also been expounded by the classicist G. S. Kirk, who claimed to detect a general consensus among non-academics: “by ‘myths’ most people mean

‘primitive’, unsophisticated and non-literary tales, tales that are told in non-literate cultures, that are repeated and developed by anonymous storytellers rather than being invented by an individual author with pen in hand” (Kirk 1973).

Traditional oral stories were surely the raw material that furnished the narratives and plots of highly literary Sumerian and Babylonian poems like Enki and Ninmah and Anzû, Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh. These compositions were themselves traditional, at least by the time we obtain sight of them, but are well removed from non-literary myth, for they are literary narratives embellished by poetic imagination. Unsurprisingly, our first reaction, when considering the origin of poems like these, has usually been to speculate about their oral origins. The folklorists’ approach suggests that beyond and behind these posited traditional oral poems lurked still-older narratives, a fund of simple non-literary prose narratives that were myths, legends and folktales in pure form. It can be surmised that this fund of stories was extremely ancient, and by diffusion in remote prehistory came to be a shared inheritance that informed the mythologies of many separate historical cultures.

It may be interjected that not all long narrative poems from Babylonia that treat the deeds of the gods spring from an ancient oral tradition. The Creation Epic (*Enūma elish*) is an obvious case in point. This text, which tells of the rise of Marduk of Babylon to be king of the gods, and of his organization of the cosmos with his city in the middle, was clearly composed by a learned poet as a written composition; the sources that informed it are well known, as is the mythology, some of which formerly pertained to the god Enki, some to Ninurta (Lambert 1986). Old myths were thus deliberately given new clothes by the composition of new narratives based on them. The question arises, were there ever any new myths?

Some make such a claim for the poem of Erra. On formal grounds an elaborate poetic composition like Erra cannot itself be a myth, for it is not a traditional prose narrative; nor would folklorists allow its subject matter to be categorized as myth, for it tells of a real war in the familiar, historical world. The history, however, is mythologized: there is no human protagonist, only the gods Erra, Ishum and Marduk, who interact to bring about in the cities of Babylonia first chaos and war and then peace. In the bleak view of the poem’s author, Erra is clearly a personification of the greatest power in the land, and

that power is the destructive force of war. His interaction with the other divine powers forms a deliberate allegory. The plot is unique, and so were the circumstances of its composition. Unless its conclusion is a literary conceit, this poem was set down in writing by a single author, Kabti-ilani-Marduk, immediately after it came to him in a reverie, much as Coleridge experienced with his “Kubla Khan”.

Though the poem of Erra was comparatively late (probably ninth century) and highly innovative, inspired by recent history and a written composition from the beginning, nevertheless it essentially embellishes a very old myth. This myth, in which the gods themselves make war on the human race, found earlier expressions in the Sumerian Curse of Akkade, which was also no traditional oral tale, and the related genre of city laments. The myth in question seeks to set on a divine plane the human propensity for self-inflicted catastrophe, and is an appropriate response in the aftermath of the horrors of war. There is no reason to doubt its extreme antiquity.

With regard to the matter in hand there are two important conclusions: (a) narrative poems like the Creation Epic, Anzû, Etana and Gilgamesh are neither “myth” nor “legend”, though they may articulate, incidentally or as their main substance, literary versions of myths and legends (and folktales); and (b) while Mesopotamian myths, legends and folktales are essentially oral and ancient, new poems that retold or alluded to such narratives continued to be composed as written compositions by members of a highly sophisticated literate elite as late as the first millennium BC.

Matters arising

For all the particular problems posed by the Mesopotamian material, nevertheless some interesting points arise from theoretical discussion. First, the comparative methodology that informs folklorists’ definitions of myth, legend and folktale points to a dichotomy between modern and ancient understandings of the poem of Gilgamesh. An influential critical approach to works of literature bids us consider them as independent created worlds, self-contained fictions to which we can bring our own understanding and from which we can take our own meaning. From such a perspective we should put aside all thoughts of historicity in considering the hero of the Babylonian epic; as a literary construct, the character Gilgamesh is not a real Babylonian at all, but an example of the

traditional “hero” figure. The traditional hero is a literary type first described by Lord Raglan (1936). The adventures Gilgamesh undergoes and the quest he embarks on are equally examples of a type of story that attaches to such heroes everywhere (e.g. Campbell 1968, Smith 1997). In addition, our approach to the poem in which he appears as the protagonist will be conditioned by a sense, natural in a sophisticated modern audience, that the story it tells, even if there could be a kernel of historical or objective truth in it, is essentially fiction. It is this inherent scepticism that informs the literary approach to myth and legend articulated by Northrop Frye in an essay on the *Koine of Myth*: “a myth, in nearly all its senses, is a narrative that suggests two inconsistent responses: first, ‘this is what is said to have happened,’ and second, ‘this almost certainly is not what happened’” (Frye 1990: 4). These are attitudes of modern literary-critical reading and they have their uses. It is important, nevertheless, always to bear in mind that, like any created work, the poem of Gilgamesh existed in its own world, as well as in ours.

The history of literature offers further insight into the question. In ancient Mesopotamia, where there was no concept of literature *per se*, there were traditional stories of oral origin that were fictions — folktales like the Poor Man of Nippur — but almost no fiction in the sense of creative writing from the imagination. Imaginative fiction, first poetry and then prose, has been claimed as a Greek invention, marking a transition from poetry as mode of transmission to something to be valued for aesthetic reasons, as art (Finkelberg 1998). Later still, the Hellenistic Greek novel owed a distant debt to the ancient Near East (Anderson 1984), but was clearly a new genre. With Finkelberg’s thesis in mind Niek Veldhuis has argued that the Sumerian tales of Gilgamesh, as tendentious retellings of traditional tales, cannot be considered fictional narratives (Veldhuis 2003: 37-8). There is scope for disputing the claim for a Greek invention of fiction. The short Babylonian tale of Ninurta-pāqidī’s Dog Bite looks very like a piece of imaginative writing, for it is not an illiterate folktale but a satirical students’ skit created in the learned bilingualism of pedagogy (George 1993, Michalowski 1996: 187). The Sumerian story of the Slave and the Scoundrel seems to be an older example of the same genre (Roth 1983). However, the existence of these compositions, and other like them, is not enough to claim fiction as a traditional written

genre in Mesopotamia, where the mainstream of creative writing involved reworking traditional texts, retelling traditional stories and rewriting history. Throughout its evolution, from oral prehistory to fossilized classic, the Epic of Gilgamesh was just such a traditional text: not a work of fiction but an old story retold.

The folklorists' approach leads us to expect that the story of Gilgamesh (not the poem), whether myth or legend, was surely held by its ancient audiences to be true. A classic statement concerning belief in myth as "true history" in traditional societies is Raffaele Pettazzoni's essay on the Truth of Myth (Pettazzoni 1954). In its own world the tale and person of Gilgamesh were not fictional but part of history, and the poem was thus a story about a real king. We can find confirmation of this in the ancient historiographic traditions represented by king lists and omen apodoses, which cite Gilgamesh as a post-diluvian king of Uruk (or Ur) who cut down the cedar forest, sought immortality from Zisudra (or Ziusudra) and ruled the whole world (George 2003: 101-19). Even nearing the end of Mesopotamian civilization, when Berossus wrote his history of Babylonia for Antiochus I Soter (Verbrugghe and Wickersham 1996), he did not distinguish between mythical stories of the origins of the world, the episode of the flood and accounts of historical kings. There is no evidence that intellectual Babylonians adopted a sceptical approach to myth and legend or rationalized them as allegory, even though by the time of Berossus these had long been the reactions to myth of Greek philosophers. Far from doubting Gilgamesh's historicity, Babylonian culture cited him and his story as among the most important and memorable elements of early history.

The career of Gilgamesh, passed down by the king lists, omens and exorcistic texts as well as by narrative poetry, was to the Babylonians a historical reality. The ancients did not distinguish between Gilgamesh the hero, Gilgamesh the king and Gilgamesh the god. This was the mightiest king of the post-diluvian age, a heroic warrior who failed in his great quest for immortality but was compensated by becoming a god in the netherworld and controller of the eventual passage there of all human dead. As a king Gilgamesh was part of the reality of history. As a god he played a conspicuous role in funerary, commemorative and exorcistic ritual, and was equally real. To their ancient audience his heroic exploits, however they came to be told, were no less true.

Second, a telling insight from comparative study can be gained from Paul Radin's observation that the Winnebago Indians, formerly of Iowa and now of Nebraska, traditionally distinguish between narratives about divine beings in the remote past, called *waika*, and narratives about human protagonists known to human memory, *worak*; the former always end happily, the latter always in tragedy (Bascom 1965). The native categories of *waika* and *worak* broadly coincide with the folklorists' definitions of myth and legend. In Babylonian narratives one sees something similar: narratives about deities find resolution in the production or restoration of order, while narratives about human heroes recount their failures. These outcomes are predictable, for they are intrinsically related to the different natures of gods and men: all-powerful immortals will always have a second opportunity to succeed (and a third); the brief lifespan of men brings with it an inevitable predisposition to failure. What may be called the Winnebago distinction concurs with the folklorists' criteria: those Babylonian narratives that end in resolution (e.g. Anzû, Nergal and Ereshkigal, *Enūma elish*, Ishtar's Descent) are based on myths, while those with negative or unresolved endings (Gilgamesh, Adapa, Etana, Naram-Sîn) are based on legends.

The Winnebago distinction does not work for Sumerian narratives, however, for several of the poems about heroes have positive endings (Bilgames and Akka, the two Enmerkar poems, the Lugalbanda cycle). This speaks for them belonging to some less serious genre. Dietz Edzard sensed this but was unable to determine whether to call them epics or fairy tales, seeing in them a bit of both (Edzard 1994). Warning against trying to impose modern literary typology on this ancient material, he surrendered and settled for "narrative". A more methodologically grounded search for fairy-tale motifs in the Gilgamesh poems, Sumerian and Babylonian, found plenty but did not pass any judgements on genre (Röllig 1999). Given that trickery and magic are frequent features of the Sumerian narratives, one suspects that they contain legends retold not as "truth" but for entertainment, in a form embellished with motifs elaborated for that purpose.

In the Babylonian corpus the distinction between myth and legend is not always simple. Even more than Gilgamesh, the story told by the poem of Atram-hasis is hard to attribute solely to one or other category, myth or legend. Despite the participation of the eponymous human hero in a key role, most of the action takes place in the primordial,

antediluvian age, not in the current world, and all of it occurs before the present status of man is permanently established by the invention of death. The text must be explained as a composite of myth and legend. The narrative of the gods' rebellion and the creation of mankind tells a myth, one that occurs independently in other texts (e.g. Enki and Ninmah). The story of the successive decimation of men and the flood is legend, nothing less than the antediluvian history of the human race. Another version of this legend was passed down in a text of a more historiographic genre, the fragmentary Dynastic Chronicle, whence eventually Berossus transferred it into Greek. At the end of Atram-hasis, divine intervention leads to the invention of death; this, with its aetiology of female infertility, perinatal mortality and regulated chastity, is a myth of human organization, a "social myth" of the kind recognized by Eliade (Segal 1996: 87). With the poem of Atram-hasis one clearly sees that Babylonian narrative poems are literary constructs that may contain more than one traditional tale, drawn from myth, legend or both.

Gilgamesh as an anthology of genre

Turning back to the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is not a novel idea that, like Atram-hasis, the poem is a literary construct, one that tells a tale embellished with various old stories or "prose narratives", including myth, legend and folktale. In fact, the situation is more complex than that, and more interesting accordingly. The homogeneity of the plain Babylonian literary style employed in epic narratives like Gilgamesh, studied by Hecker 1974, disguises the wide variety of genre embedded in the poem. An awareness of features other than style reveals passages in many different forms (for the distinction between "genre", which categorizes the whole text, and "form", which classifies units within the text, see Longman 1991: 10). Something similar has been observed for another long narrative poem, the pair of Sumerian compositions about Lugalbanda (Vanstiphout 1999a: 705), and for the Tale of the Fox (Vanstiphout 1999b). In Gilgamesh these forms vary from praise poetry to folktale. In this way the poem becomes, as it were, an anthology of genre. A cursory analysis reveals the following forms (passages from the Standard Babylonian version cited after George 2003):

1. The poem originally began with a *hymnic praise poem* in five quatrains (I 29-48).

2. To this was later prefaced a much more sombre prologue in the form of the *poet's address to his reader* in the second person singular (I 1-28).
3. Ninsun's great monologue to the god Shamash is couched firmly as *prayer* (III 46-115).
4. The episode of Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven contains a long passage of *invective* in which Gilgamesh rejects and rebukes Ishtar (VI 24-79). Part of this invective is the *folktale* of Ishtar and Ishullanu (VI 64-79). This episode as a whole (Tablet VI) has stylistic features that may mark it out as an independent composition. One modern response is to view it as a "comic interlude" (Mitchell 2004: 41); certainly it contains elements of exaggeration and ridicule that would be at home in *burlesque*.
5. Enkidu's death-bed delirium is punctuated by formal *curse* (VII 90-131) and *blessing* (VII 151-61).
6. Another distinctive episode is Enkidu's description of the netherworld, still in large part lost, a *dream account* (VII 165-252) belonging to a genre of Mesopotamian literature that found a final expression in the Neo-Assyrian Vision of Kummâ (Livingstone 1989: No. 32). Other dream accounts occur earlier in the narrative and are analysed as literary forms by Bulkley 1993.
7. Following the death of Enkidu comes one of the great *laments* of ancient literature (VIII 3-56), discussed from a generic perspective by Müller 1978.
8. Thereafter Gilgamesh has occasion to reiterate three times a long reminiscence of his dead friend, which is essentially an *elegy* (X 47-71, 120-48, 220-48).
9. Uta-napishti's climactic speech contains, as well as the *mythological-legendary narrative* of the Flood (XI 9-206), also a *meditation* on the nature of man and god (X 301-18). This monologue, with its clearly didactic intent, belongs in moral tone and philosophical attitude with what is often called "wisdom literature".
10. The poem sometimes incorporates within direct speech what seem to be *proverbs* (e.g. III 4-5, IV 247, VII 75-6).

The appearance in the foregoing list of the term "wisdom literature" raises a further issue of genre that has been much debated. As the prologue of the Standard Babylonian

version of Gilgamesh has become better known, some have gone so far as to propose that the poem be read as a work of wisdom literature (Moran 1987, 1991, Buccellati 1981, George 1999: xxxv-xxxvii, 2003: 4, Blenkinsopp 2004). This position needs clarification, for the notion of wisdom literature in ancient Mesopotamia has come under recent attack.

Gilgamesh and the “wisdom mode”

The most prominent application of the term “wisdom literature” to Babylonian literature occurs in the title of W. G. Lambert’s anthology of texts gathered under the title *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Lambert 1960). Lambert was aware of the problems that attended this usage, but retained it as a “convenient short description” for a group of texts considered to hold subject matter in common. These texts are formally heterogeneous, so much so that Bendt Alster argues against the use of the term “wisdom literature” in ancient Mesopotamia (Alster forthcoming, see Vanstiphout 1999a: 711-12, Roest and Vanstiphout 1999: 137). Veldhuis is similarly reluctant to use the term of the Sumerian texts often categorized as “wisdom”, which he rightly describes as a “mixed bag” (Veldhuis 2003: 29).

While there can be no good sense in speaking of wisdom literature as a genre, which as a technical term is clearly wrong, there remains the feeling that Lambert’s position held some truth, that many texts can be grouped as “wisdom” on other grounds. This they can, not by virtue of formal characteristics, but because they share moral tone and philosophical attitude. Longman’s clarification of genre, form and mode is again useful here. Of the last he writes, “the ‘mode’ of a work refers to characteristics of emotional or tonal nature that transect various genres or forms” (Longman 1991: 10). Many works described as “Babylonian wisdom literature” do, indeed, display a shared mode. We might call this the “wisdom mode”. Parts of the Epic of Gilgamesh already displayed this mode in the Old Babylonian period, from which time comes one of the most quoted passages of the poem, the wisdom of the tavern-keeper that so reminds people of Ecclesiastes (van der Toorn 2001).

One body of ancient Mesopotamian literature that used the “wisdom mode” is what has been called variously “*narû*-literature” (following Hans Güterbock), “pseudo-autobiography” (A. Kirk Grayson) and “fictional autobiography”. These are compositions

of a didactic nature that Longman argued can be studied as a genre (Longman 1991). It was noted some time ago, when the prologue of the last version of the Epic of Gilgamesh became fully readable, that the new prologue adapted lines from one of the best-known pieces of *narû*-literature, the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn, introducing a literary device that had the effect of converting the poem of Gilgamesh into third-person autobiography (Walker 1981, Michalowski 1996: 187-8).

The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh has for many decades been well enough known in its various versions to provide a suitable object for the study of the evolution of an ancient Mesopotamian literary composition across two millennia (Kupper 1960, Tigay 1982, George 2003: 3-70). Enough now survives of the various early second-millennium versions of the poem to get a sense of the literary style and attitude of the Old Babylonian fragments (Moran 1995). It has recently begun to dawn on students of Babylonian literature that the composition evolved not just in terms of the development of its language and narrative, and in the accrual of new lines and passages, but also in terms of its mood and outlook (e.g. Moran 1991, Harris 2000: 32). This was certainly the result of the editorial work that led the Babylonians to identify Sîn-leqi-unninni as the poem's author. Elsewhere I have argued that he it was who gave the poem its final shape, turning the epic from a paean to Gilgamesh's glory into a "sombre meditation on the doom of man", and saw in the result the same mood of "despondent resignation" that informed the Poem of the Righteous Sufferer (*Ludlul bel nemeqi*), the Dialogue of Pessimism and other new literature of the mid- to late second millennium (George 2003: 32-3). The increasing introspection of this literature was a result of changing attitudes to man's relationship with the gods (Lambert 1960: 14-17). Benjamin Caleb Ray has also made a comparison between Gilgamesh, *Ludlul bel nemeqi* and the Dialogue of Pessimism, though his point is that these three texts have in common a subversion of conventional wisdom (Ray 1996). I do not suppose that Gilgamesh was the only text of the Babylonian scribal tradition that evolved to meet a changed intellectual and religious climate, but it is certainly the most prominent one.

Genre and the last Gilgamesh poem

At about the same time Piotr Michalowski explored the relationship between Gilgamesh, the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn and other texts (Michalowski 1999). Drawing attention to way the new prologue altered the epic's underlying ideology, he writes of a "restructuring ... conditioned by changes in worldview". Most germane to the present enquiry, he uses literary-critical terms drawn from the study of genre, speaking of the late redactor as one who "performed a remarkable feat by realigning the generic ascription of the composition". Michalowski does not specify the genres in question, perhaps because it is unsatisfying to say that what had been an "epic narrative" was recast as *narû*-literature, and maybe that is not quite what he meant anyway. Out of the old heroic poem sprang forth a unique composition, stylistically similar to other narrative poems about gods and men ("epics"), structurally related to *narû*-literature and in mood allied with "wisdom literature".

From another perspective John Maier characterized the evolution of the poem of Gilgamesh as a move from the epic genre not quite to tragedy but rather to romance (Maier 1984: 37-42). Neither term sits easily with this ancient material. David Damrosch argued that textual expansions newly introduced in the late version of the poem assimilated what was formerly a historical epic to the "mythic epic tradition" of the creation and flood (Damrosch 1987: 88-118). But we know less about the contents of the fragmentary Old Babylonian poem of Gilgamesh than we should like. Both responses, like Michalowski's, reflect an awareness that the last poem of Gilgamesh is essentially quite unlike any other ancient Mesopotamian text.

Sha naqba imuru, the last poem of Gilgamesh (elsewhere I call it the Standard Babylonian version), is, in this analysis, *sui generis*. Or is it? Alastair Fowler's study of genre in western literature led him to observe (among a good many other things) that literary genre is not stable, but develops as new compositions innovate, and that genres can interact to modulate each other (Fowler 1982). David Damrosch has written similarly concerning generic development in the bible and other literature (Damrosch 1987: 36-47). These are useful points in considering Babylonian narrative poems and their genres. The Epic of Gilgamesh, by its own evolution, helped move the genre in a new direction, from a vigorous, exuberant past to a more scholarly, introspective future. In putting on

the clothes of the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn, as it were, the poem of Gilgamesh introduced a new modulation of the narrative genre: epic cast as autobiography.

Fowler also reiterates a distinction made by C. S. Lewis, that epic poetry typically develops from a “primary” to a “secondary” stage. He applies Lewis’s distinction to other genres too, but has this to say about epic: “Primary epic is heroic, festal, oral, formulaic, public in delivery, and historical in subject; secondary epic is civilized, literary, private, stylistically elevated, and ‘sublime’” (Fowler 1982: 160). Examples of primary and secondary epic are, on the one hand, Homer and *Beowulf* and, on the other, the *Aeneid* and, at first sight, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Though the fit is not exact, the distinction between primary and secondary may be applied to the Gilgamesh poems, with the less ponderous Old Babylonian versions examples of epic in its primary stage and the heavily redacted *Sha naqba imuru* an example of the secondary stage. The theory supports the notion that the Old Babylonian versions of Gilgamesh are close to the poem’s oral roots as a piece of public entertainment. As a scholar’s meditation addressed to a single individual, the last version certainly fits the criteria “civilized, literary, private”, even if signs of elevated style are few.

In considering the development of epic from Virgil to Milton, Fowler found good reason to expand Lewis’s model, and identified a third stage in the development of a genre, the tertiary form (1982: 163):

This is reached when a writer takes up a kind [of genre] already secondary, and applies it in quite a new way. The tertiary form may be a symbolic reinterpretation of the secondary . . . It is also characteristic of the tertiary phase that it should be informed by interpretation of generic features. The secondary kind may savor the primary kind aesthetically, and so in a sense “reinterpret” it. But the tertiary takes individual conventions as material for symbolic developments that presuppose allegorical, psychological, or other interpretations of them.

He goes on to note that a single composition can represent both secondary and tertiary stage simultaneously. There are those who propose to find in the last poem of Gilgamesh a manual for secret initiation, spiritual growth or mystical enlightenment (e.g. Prévot

1986, Parpola 1993: 192-5, 1998, Dalley 1994), conjectural positions for which hard evidence is scarce (George 2003: 51, 68). Should it turn out that the poem came to be put to such symbolic uses, then *Sha naqba imuru* will also be an example of epic in Fowler's tertiary stage. A more secure candidate from Babylonia, however, is the poem of Erra. This composition took the genre of Babylonian epic still further away from its oral origins than *Sha naqba imuru*, for, born of an individual poet's private inspiration, it uses narrative poetry as a vehicle for an almost allegorical reinterpretation of an old myth. Erra has the form and style of epic, but its eponymous protagonist is an antihero, while the god Marduk, the paradigmatic young hero of the Creation Epic, appears as aged and feeble. In addition, the poem of Erra is so pervaded by direct speech that one could speak of it as epic modulated by dialogue. Unsurprisingly for a poem so far removed from the primary stage of epic, there has been a reluctance to classify it as epic at all.

Gilgamesh, message and meaning

If the interpretation of a text is bound up with its genre, where does that take us with Gilgamesh? Michalowski's investigation of the relationship created between Gilgamesh and other texts by the poem's last redactor led him to observe that "historical meaning resided neither in generic labels nor in any specific textual mode, but in the interstices between texts, and in the manner in which texts were synchronically manipulated" (Michalowski 1999: 88). The poem, newly recast, "brought to the fore two contemporary concerns: writing and commemorative history". Indeed so, but these concerns were perhaps secondary results of the redactor's work. According to Benjamin Foster, the intention of all the great narrative poems in Akkadian was to "deepen knowledge" (Foster 1993: 43). The prologue added to the last Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh makes it very clear that the audience is expected individually to learn from the story of Gilgamesh's labours. One lesson is not hard to find, for this is a story of a superhuman hero who must ultimately, like the rest of us, accept that it is the lot of man to die. At the last, Gilgamesh himself sobs out the final truism:

"In my bed-chamber Death abides,

"And wherever I might turn [my face], there too will be Death."

SB Gilgamesh XI 245-6

But this realization, important though it is, is only the most obvious lesson one can take from the poem. The theme of mortality was embedded in it from the beginning, and no doubt was central to the plot even then; what more to offer has the poem in its last version? To my mind the introduction of a conceit borrowed from the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn functions primarily to emphasize the new mood and actively didactic tone of the poem. Gilgamesh, formerly a lofty hero and majestic warrior-king, becomes a figure that, above all, suffers, a person with whom any man can identify. In this way he turns into a character more akin to the subject of the Poem of the Righteous Sufferer (a first-person autobiography) than to the mighty monarchs glorified in an earlier epoch — Shulgi and Sargon, for example. When the poem was restructured as a third-person autobiography in the format of *narû*-literature, it became more explicitly a vehicle for wisdom. The evolution of the poem's message lies in the manner and emphasis of its delivery, rather than in a preoccupation with new concerns. One may add, as a caution, that this is a provisional position, based largely on reaction to the different openings of *Shutur eli sharri* and *Sha naqba imuru*. We really know too little of the Old Babylonian poem to make definitive statements.

It is the habit of readers of literature to look for meaning in a text, as well as message. Some texts, however, do not surrender easily, others not at all. The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh belongs among these, for though the poem reveals profound truths, the story it tells concludes without explicit moral. Benjamin Caleb Ray has criticized some Assyriologists for trying to perceive a universal meaning in the poem (Ray 1996). In particular, he draws attention to the ending, which he finds “deliberately inconclusive” in that it contains no statement of what the hero achieved by his exhausting quest. Scholars have found their own answers here, and Ray cites three typical ones: “Despite the views of most scholars, Gilgamesh's praising of the walls does not express any opinion about life and death, neither Held's heroic realism, Foster's superior wisdom, nor Jacobsen's sober common sense” (Ray 1996: 316-17).

The inference that Gilgamesh became wise in his quest is drawn, rightly, from the prologue and not the epilogue. The epilogue, in fact, does not focus on Gilgamesh and his

accomplishments at all. As I have written elsewhere, the last stanza, that has seemed to many anticlimactic and unsatisfactory, transfers the emphasis from the hero to the wall of Uruk only as a means of directing our attention to the city below. It is the ancient and enduring city that the poet invites us to gaze on, and to find in this gaze a subtle reiteration of Uta-napishti's wisdom: "man the individual is mortal, but man the race is immortal" (George 2003: 527-8).

While this understanding of the final stanza seems more coherent to me, it does not provide a triumphant and overwhelming revelation of meaning. It may be foolish to expect one. One of the most profound commentators on Gilgamesh has been the poet and scholar Herbert Mason, whose moving verse adaptation of the story, published more than thirty years ago, is still, as a piece of literature, the best of this minor genre (Mason 1972). In an afterword Mason observed that Gilgamesh, like other great classics of world literature, does not "preach"; instead it "shows". In other words, the poem does not itself give guidance but provides instead an experience. Like *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the poem of Gilgamesh just *is*; as Shakespeare later "held a mirror up to nature", so three thousand years before him Gilgamesh shows us our own reflection. Each of its readers will discover within it different truths that convey different meanings. What is certain is that this poem, at least in its last version, bids us meditate on the human condition, the nature of life and death, and from that meditation comes a multitude of understandings. Perhaps that, after all, is what was intended.

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