Chapter Eight

The Search for Life

Gilgamesh the Poet

Gilgamesh composes two moving poems in *Gilgamesh*: his rejection of Ishtar’s proposal in Tablet 6 and the Great Elegy in Tablet 8. Soon after he loses his friend his rhetoric changes radically. He will be reduced to repeating over and over again the loss he is suffering and his desperate search for consolation. His two poems indicate a great degree of conscious control over language, such as is implied in his ability, finally, to write out his experiences. When his speech changes during the search for “life,” *Gilgamesh* makes clever use of the Sumerian poetic tradition of exact repetition. The one poet known from a Sumerian Gilgamesh text is Lugal-gaba-gal in “Gilgamesh and The Bull of Heaven.” In that text the poet in the poem praises Gilgamesh for the defeat of The Bull of Heaven in exactly the same words as the episode was narrated. Lugal-gaba-gal is represented as an oral “singer of tales” much like others in the ancient world (and in parts of the modern world as well).

In Tablets 9 and 10, though, Gilgamesh is driven by anger and nissatu, his speech reduced to neurotic “rumination” on his troubles. Daniel Goleman, in his section of *Emotional Intelligence* on “Passion’s Slaves,” finds some few benefits of melancholia. Mainly, according to Goleman, melancholia “enforces a kind of reflective retreat from life’s busy pursuits, and leaves us in a suspended state to mourn the loss, mull over its meaning, and, finally, make the psychological adjustments and new plans that will allow our lives to continue.”

(Like most therapists Goleman does not find in melancholia the Greek notion that the melancholic genius, in his or her withdrawal, awakens in the imagination creative and visionary possibilities that may be expressed in the arts and in other activities.) Goleman discusses, not major depression, which may require medicinal assistance, but “subclinical depression,” and finds few benefits other than the retreat from active life we find frequently in bereavement. “Rumination,” in particular, is a problem. The inability to socialize may lead to more intense depression. In Goleman’s words, “Rumination can also make the depression strong by creating conditions that are, well, more depressing.” The rage and sorrow that builds up in Gilgamesh drives him, like Herakles, up mountains and through a deep hole, without the light of Shamash (until he emerges into the light), and even that light is not enough to console him.

Later ages would tell of fantastic voyages through exotic lands and seas to find Solomon's ring or the Fountain of Youth (or both).

The Sudden Change

Tablet 8 shows Gilgamesh, with one conspicuous exception, is complete control—of his faculties and of his public role as king of Uruk. He delivers a moving and beautiful elegy over Enkidu, orders the craftsmen to construct a statue-substitute for the lost friend, and displays treasures for the gods as Enkidu makes his way to the underworld. These are
large, generous and probably excessive gestures. The excess is hardly recognized (and readily excused if noticed) because of the “heroic” dimensions of the two men.

Even Gilgamesh’s covering of the body, circling it, tearing his hair and ripping his fine garment, which may seem excessive in the modern West, were acceptable—and expected—mourning rituals. They do provide a hint of what follows. In Tablet 9 the public Gilgamesh disappears. The identification with the lost lover, an extreme form of empathy, propels Gilgamesh in a different direction.

To this point in the story Gilgamesh is always seen with others or described as with others. Whatever we gain of an interior life is largely gleaned from dialogues, especially with Enkidu. Their fears and anxieties come and go in turn, he one providing strength for the other as, for example, they travel to the Cedar Forest of Humbaba. Like the citizens of Uruk, we readers see Gilgamesh and Enkidu as virtually identical, as doubles. There is always a recognition that the two men, however alike, are not equal. Gilgamesh always has the edge on his peer. Enkidu is, of course, a fictional construct whose “evolution” traces the evolution of the Gilgamesh “epic.” From the earliest Gilgamesh hymn, where even a servant is absent, Enkidu grows in stature from a servant and attendant to Gilgamesh, to a comrade in arms, and finally a “friend.” Enkidu is the more “natural,” earth-bound and, lacking empathy for the enemies Humbaba and Ishtar once she challenges Gilgamesh, less ethical than the more sensitive Gilgamesh. But since Gilgamesh is largely seen, as it were, from the outside in these adventures, a private Gilgamesh hardly appears.

When the private man appears, sorrow-ridden, at the very opening of Tablet 9, he is on the move. The poet seems to have anticipated the ambivalence of Freud’s melancholia. Along with the complete identification with the lost Enkidu—the Enkidu of his pre-civilized, wild and animal spirits—the lion-skin clad Gilgamesh enters the wilderness in search of—what? The extraordinary energy, libido, which marked Gilgamesh from the start, is even more excessive, though it is directed inward.

The journey through the wilderness is an interior debate. The “real” world has disappeared. In its place is a fantastic, mythical landscape, like later storytellers will describe in adventures of Alexander the Great and other seekers for the key of Solomon and such like sources of “life.” It is difficult to tell the direction of his wanderings, and Gilgamesh obsessively tells the story of losing his friend and his need to find the answers to the great questions of existence. In his search he largely ignores the others he finds along the way, beginning with the Sun God Shamash. (Where the Humbaba adventures was both prompted by Shamash and directed under the protection of the Sun God, Gilgamesh no longer has such protection.)

Gilgamesh has gone far beyond the public rituals of mourning. In his taking on the skin of a lion and killing lions and bulls in the wilderness, Gilgamesh exhibits the signs Freud would have interpreted as identification, ambivalence and, especially, rage. Others will see him in this way, especially the wise ones, Siduri and Utnapishtim. When he finally reaches his goal—at least the destination of his travels—he expects to see the famous one,
Utnapishtim, as a heroic figure like himself. That is, he expects a fight. Along the way, in addition to killing animals, Gilgamesh unwittingly destroys the very Stone Things he needs to complete his journey.

He is the model of Herakles in these mad rushes.

**Total disclosure:**

My first encounter with *Gilgamesh*, many decades ago, was already dominated by the dark journey of Gilgamesh, with its incantatory repetitions. Gilgamesh, totally isolated from others, in complete darkness, unprotected, in a way that suggests hallucination, has always been the most riveting episode in the poem for me.

Even in translation the lines are strangely moving. As a transliteration of the cuneiform signs into Akkadian shows, even though there are parts of lines still missing, Gilgamesh travels 12 *bēru*, or “double-hours,” that is, for a full day, in utter darkness. Although he takes the harrānu or path of the Sun God, there is no Shamash to protect or guide him. For the first seven “double-hours” the darkness is “dense,” and there is no light. Gilgamesh can see nothing ahead of him or behind him.

At 8 “double-hours” we find him hurrying. Still there is total darkness. At 9 “double-hours” a wind from the north apparently hits him in the face. At 10 he was getting near—what? At eleven, only one “double-hour” remained. Finally, after 12 “double-hours” walking Gilgamesh emerges before (or in advance of) the sun.

A brilliant light will then reveal a beautiful grove of trees—made of precious stones, but somehow alive.

1 *bēru ittalak* ....  
*shapat ekletumma ul ibashshinuru*  
*ul inamdinshuana palasha arkatusu*

2 *bēru ina kashadishu* ....  
*shapat ekletumma ul ibashshinuru*  
*ul inamdinshuana palasha arkatusu*

3 *bēru ina kashadishu* ....  
*shapat ekletumma ul ibashshinuru*  
*ul inamdinshuana palasha arkatusu*

4 *bēru ina kashadishu* ....  
*shapat ekletumma ul ibashshinuru*  
*ul inamdinshuana palasha arkatusu*
Imagine my shock many years later to discover that the one individual from antiquity who quotes a line from *Gilgamesh* was a tormented prophet of Ishtar, a woman moved by the same passage in *Gilgamesh* that affected me (and still affects my reading of the poem). I cannot claim to know how it should be interpreted, but it has been a key part of the poem as I have attempted to find artistic unity to the whole.

It is a bizarre piece.
Early and Late Versions

Tablet 9 has a number of gaps, some larger than in the passage cited above, but about fifteen lines on an Old Babylonian tablet from Sippar helps to restore a conversation between Gilgamesh and the Sun God Shamash.

The Old Babylonian Sippar version of the advice Siduri (or Shiduri) gives Gilgamesh at the beginning of Tablet 10 differs in detail and “wisdom” from the version in Gilgamesh. Because there is much repetition in Gilgamesh’s retelling of the loss of Enkidu, much of Tablet 10 has been restored. The Old Babylonian Sippar text also has a version of a dialogue between Gilgamesh and Urshanabi, the boatman who will help Gilgamesh cross the dangerous waters to his destination, his encounter with the wise Utnapishtim. (He is called Sursunabi in that version.)

It would appear, then, that the death of Enkidu was known earlier than Gilgamesh. The sad journey Gilgamesh takes to find “life” was known in some form, with the characters Siduri and Urshanabi playing important roles, in the Old Babylonian period. The very difficult early work, “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” appears to have a journey at the end that parallels Gilgamesh’s search in Gilgamesh, but there is no companion for Gilgamesh in that piece.

The Hittite text that was used to clarify episodes in the first half of Gilgamesh also provides important clues to the second half, especially the Assembly of the Gods that condemns Enkidu. It also contains brief accounts of Gilgamesh’s wanderings, his encounters with Siduri and Urshanabi, and may clarify the mysterious “Stone Things” Gilgamesh destroys along the way.

With all the gaps in Tablets 7-10 the narrative nevertheless shows considerable coherence as both Enkidu and Gilgamesh are thrown into a tragic turn that completely changes the tone of the story. It is not clear how early the sage Utnapishtim, who Gilgamesh thinks has the answer to his great question about “life,” was brought into the story.

Sorrow Enters the Heart

For the first eighteen lines of Tablet 9, Gilgamesh, in a soliloquy weeps for Enkidu and indicates his fear of death. He states his purpose: a journey through the wilderness to find Utnapishtim (who, with his wife, were the only humans to escape death). On a mountain pass he sees lions and is fearful. He prays to Sin, the Moon God, for protection. At night he receives a dream, which gives him strength. He takes his axe and knife and kills the lions.

A gap in the text is usually filled in with the Old Babylonian document thought to have come from Sippar, the home of Shamash. It provides something of a sad farewell to the Sun God, whose path through the darkness he will take but whose protection is no longer evident. Gilgamesh speaks to Shamash, telling the Sun God of his plan. Shamash discourages the journey: Gilgamesh will never find the life he seeks.
The discouraged Gilgamesh asks if, at his death, he will lie sleeping through the ages. Will there be light for him? He asks when the dead may see the light of the sun.

**At the Twin Peaks of Mashu(m)**

After the gap in the text of some twenty lines, Gilgamesh has arrived at the twin mountains of Mashu, which guard the rising sun every day. The place is guarded by a scorpion-man and his wife, both terrifying creatures. They recognize that Gilgamesh is part human and part divine, in fact “two-thirds god, one-third human.”

The scorpion-man also discourages the journey. No one has traveled the path Gilgamesh seeks. The scorpion-man does, though, provide him with information about the journey (much of which is lost) and opens the gate of the mountains.

Gilgamesh takes the path of the Sun God, the passage transliterated above.

In *Gilgamesh* 9.32-40 Gilgamesh approaches the gateway to Shamash’s passageway through the mountains. The passageway is guarded by the terrifying Scorpion-man and his wife. The description of the site reads in Akkadian:

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shá sha-di-i she-mu-shú ma-shu [x x x]
ana sha-ad ma-a-shi i-na ka-shá-[di-shu]
shá UD-mi-sham-ma i-n-as-sa-ru a-se-[e u e-re-ba]
 e-lu-shu-nu shu-pu-uk AN-e ta-[ri-ish-ma]
shap-lish a-ra-le-e i-rat-su-nu kash-da-át
GÍR.TAB.LÚ.U.LU i-na-as-sharru KÁ-shu
sha ra-ásh-bat pu-ul-hat-su-nu-ma im-rat-su-nu mu-tú
GAL-tu mi-lam-mu-shu-nu sa-hi-ip hur-sa-a-ni
ana a-she d UTU-shi u e-reb d UTU-shi i-na-as-shar ru d UTU-shi-ma
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Most of the cuneiform signs are read with their syllabic value in Akkadian. Some Sumerograms appear: UD = day (ūmu), An = sky, heaven (shamû), GÍR.TAB (scorpion) and LÚ-U–LU (man) = scorpion-man (girtablilû), KÁ = gateway, mouth, door (bābu), GAL = to be great, grow, raise (rabû), and d UTU = the god Shamash (= shamshu, the sun).

There is a good deal of wordplay in this sequence of lines, some of it evident, e.g., in the alliteration of *sh*- sounds and other repetitions. Between the parallel lines 38 and 45, the center (line 42) identifies the terrifying Scorpion-man. In such chiastic pattern, the central line carries special emphasis (and often makes the key predication).

Although the first line in the passage is broken at the end, the alliterative punning on words that begin with /sh/ is obvious, and such delight as is found in much Semitic may
account for what we are likely to think just odd, calling the twin peaks Twins (because they are twins):

\[
\text{sha shadi shemushu mashu...} \\
\text{ana shad mashi ina kashadishu} \\
\text{sha ummishamma...}
\]

John Gardner and I translated the lines without calling much attention to the punning. Rather, we wanted to give the impression of awe at Gilgamesh’s approach to one of the most difficult ordeals in his journey. The clay tablet on which this passage was written was divided into six columns, and this passage opened the second column. Almost all scholars who translate *Gilgamesh* simply ignore the division of tablets into columns, arguing, with some justification, that a continuous narrative allows the reader to move rapidly through the story. Lines that are missing can be mentioned in passing. We were of the opinion that just as the division of *Gilgamesh* into eleven (or twelve) tablets made aesthetic sense, the division of tablets into columns suggested events and episodes were carefully structured. We thought that this passage, at the opening of a column, gave it special emphasis.¹⁷⁹⁹

[*Gilgamesh*] came to the mountains whose name is Mashu;
approached the twin peaks
that guard each day the coming and going of Shamash.
Their tops reach the vault of heaven;
below, their feet touch the underworld (*Arallu*).
Scorpion-people guard its gate,
whose terror brings awe and whose glance is death.
Their grim aura overwhelms the mountains.
In the going of Shamash and in the coming of Shamash, they guard him.
When Gilgamesh saw them, in fear
and trembling he covered his face.
He made a decision and went up to them.¹⁸⁰⁰

The image of the twin mountains called Twins was captured as early as the Agade period late in the 3rd millennium. Two of the images cut into cylinder seals show this feature clearly.
The seal impression reconstructed here\textsuperscript{1801} shows the god Shamash ascending between two somewhat unequal peaks. The guardians of the gate wear the horns that Shamash wears. The horns mark the figure as divine. The two figures are similar in many ways, but they both have masculine and feminine aspects. The figure on the left is more conspicuously male than the figure on the right. (Neither is half-human and half-scorpion, and their emblematic elements, though different, are not scorpions. Shamash is identified clearly by the sun rays that issue from his shoulder and by the \textit{shasharu}, a pruning-saw.\textsuperscript{1802}

Another from the same period is The Greenstone Seal of Adda discussed earlier (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{1803} In that scene the central Utu/Shamash rises between mountains with the help of two great deities. Inanna is the winged goddess to the left, perhaps in association with the tree growing upon one peak; she holds a bunch of dates. The god of waters is Enki/Ea; fish in the waters that issue from his shoulders and with an eagle. On the side of Inanna is her male/female counselor and messenger, Ninshubur, and Inanna’s emblematic lion. On the side of Enki is his two-faced counselor Isimud. One possibility is that The Sun God is rising from the depths (symbolized by Enki and the fish) to the height of heaven (Inanna and the tree tops), maintaining life in the process.

In the Seal of Adda The Sun God again has rays rising from his shoulder and a raised pruning-saw.

**The Dark Journey**

The Scorpion-Man sees that Gilgamesh possesses the “flesh of the gods.” He warns Gilgamesh that no one has done what he wants to do. Finally he tells Gilgamesh that the Great Gate of the Mountain is open to him. When Gilgamesh hears this, he takes what the Scorpion-Man has said to heart, and sets out of the “path of the Sun God.”

At one double-hour...
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At two double-hours...
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At three double-hours...
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At four double-hours...
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At five double-hours...
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At six double-hours...
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At seven double-hours...
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At eight double-hours he was hurrying.
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

At nine double-hours...the north wind
...his face.
The darkness is thick, there is no light.
He cannot see behind him.

On reaching ten double-hours
...was very close.
On reaching eleven double-hours, there was one double-hour left.
At twelve double-hours Gilgamesh was ahead of the Sun God.
...a bright light.
As soon as he saw them, he went straight to...the trees of the gods.
A carnelian tree was in fruit,
Its bunches of grapes hanging down, lovely to look at.
A lapis tree bore foliage,
The fruit it bore gorgeous to see.
The cuneiform for the first lines of this passage (transliterated earlier) was transliterated by Simo Parpola in a way that indicates to the specialists that the tablet was written with logograms, which have to be read in the particular language, instead of spelling out each syllable.

\[ KÁ.GAL.KUR\ mu \ [x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x] \]
\[ ^4GIŠ.GÍN.[MAŠ\ an-ni-ta\ ina\ še-me-e-šú] \]
\[ ana\ zik-ri\ GÍR.[TAB.LÚ.U18.LU\ x\ x\ x] \]
\[ KASKAL.^4UTU\ i-[x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x] \]
\[ 1\ KASKAL.GÍD\ it-[ta-lak\ x\ x\ x\ x\ x] \]
\[ šá-pat\ ek-le-túm-[ma\ ul\ i-ba-áš-ši\ nu-ru] \]
\[ ul\ i-nam-[di-in-šú\ a-na\ pa-la-sa\ EGIR-su]^{1804} \]

Even with the exact repetition of phrases through the twelve “double-hours” Gilgamesh walks through, ironically, the “path of the Sun God,” the text is still so damaged that many lines cannot be fully reconstructed.

The signs written in capital letters are logograms that indicate how they might be read in the Sumerian language. The author and his readers of the tablet would, however, read them in Akkadian.

\[ KÁ = bābu\ (gate) \]
\[ GAL = rabû\ (great) \]
\[ KUR = mātu\ (land)\ or\ shadû\ (mountain),\ also\ a\ sign\ of\ the\ underworld \]
\[ ^4GISH.GÍN.MASH = the\ name\ Gilgamesh \]
\[ GÍR.TAB.LÚ.U18.LU = Scorpion-Man \]
\[ KASKAL = bēru \]
\[ ^4UTU = Shamash,\ the\ Sun \]
\[ GÍD = arāku\ (to\ be\ long) \]
\[ EGIR = arkatu\ (back,\ rear\ part) \]
Jeweled Trees
Keith Dickson has pointed out an important connection between trees in *Gilgamesh* and the narrative topography of the work. The two journeys of Gilgamesh outside Uruk end with trees. The first takes him to the Land of the Cedars, where he encounters Humbaba; the second takes him to the Grove (*qishtu*) of the Gods, where he sees bejeweled trees. The first is located to the west; the second is far to the east. Dickson observes that the trees represent the destinations and mark “the poles of his world.”

Dickson finds three “epistemic spaces” in *Gilgamesh*: the Wilderness, the City, and what he calls the Otherworld. The first two have been discussed thoroughly. Each space involves encounters with beings and with objects. “Each space, along with the others it contains, in fact functions as the embodiment and expression of a distinct matrix of ideas and relationships mapped out by Mesopotamian culture in the process of organizing and understanding its world.” The Otherworld is a good way to describe the “radical otherness” of the space Gilgamesh enters when the Scorpion-Man opens the door to the mountains Mashu.

Dickson follows Tzvi Abusch in the suggestion that the journey to Siduri, whose beer-hall is reached just after Gilgamesh passes through the Grove of the Gods, may have been Gilgamesh’s original destination. *Gilgamesh* extends the journey through dangerous waters, including the Waters of Death, to the place where Utnapishtim and his wife live, an unusual spot at the source of rivers (11.204). One might consider that the dark journey through the mountain is already part of the Otherworld, but that world certainly consists of the Grove of the Gods, Siduri’s dwelling, the treacherous waters, and the dwelling place of Utnapishtim. As the servant of Enki, Utnapishtim is appropriately sent off after the Flood to a place neither here nor there: a place where Utnapishtim and his wife live forever—for Mesopotamian a godlike state—but is removed from the Grove of the Gods. Utnapishtim and his wife are “like” gods, but they are not gods. And they are no longer humans, that is, mortal.

Scholars have been finding more and more traces of Gilgamesh in stories outside Mesopotamia and beyond antiquity through the Middle Ages, especially in stories about Alexander the Great. The Bible-influenced traditions, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, tend to morph these into quests to find Solomon, and they often involve Moses as well as the Green One in the search. While the journey that takes Gilgamesh and Enkidu to their great heroic victory over Humbaba was popular in the ancient world, Gilgamesh—in the form of Buluqiya, likely a version of Sumerian “Bilgames”—gained greater fame in these journeys through “other” places in search of “life.”

The description of the Grove of the Gods is unfortunately so broken up that only a few features can be discerned. The living trees are made of precious stones and some are laden with fruit, leaves, thorns and briars that are also jewels. Clearly this is an “other” place where even the opposition between living and non-living is overcome.

The Grove of the Gods may have a connection with another stage in Gilgamesh’s journey. Siduri warns Gilgamesh that his quest is futile—and then immediately provides him with
what he will need to reach Utnapishtim. That we see Siduri before Gilgamesh sees her and are thus given her take on the man who is approaching her is important. To Siduri he appears murderous, and she takes care that he not attack her. His tale of woe, repeated once again, moves her to give Gilgamesh the key information he needs.

I think Siduri’s reversal, prompted by empathy even in the presence of such a formidable person, is matched by a sudden, impulsive act on the part of Gilgamesh himself. Instead of seeking out the Boatman Urshanabi, Gilgamesh attacks the mysterious Stone Things. With axe and knife he creeps up on them and falls upon them “like an arrow” (10.96). He struggles with one, apparently pinning him down, and in his fury smashes the Stone Things and throws them into the river. Andrew George thinks the Stone Things were to crew the boat. Benjamin Foster, following the Hittite version of the story, thinks they are Stone Images. The Stone Things may be anchor stones. Possibly all three interpretations are linked in what the Gilgamesh poet only describes as “things of stone.”

The possible connection with the Grove of the Gods is found in the first mention of the Boatman Urshanabi. Siduri tells Gilgamesh to present himself to Urshanabi (10.89). The Stone Things are with Urshanabi in the “heart” of the Grove. He is doing something with a tree, pine or cedar, an urnu. For many years the urnu was thought to be a snake, since there is such a term; but it appears now that the urnu is a small or young erênu—the cedar that is so important in the Humbaba episode. Among the trees in the Grove of the Gods is a cedar (9.185). The connection between the two trees is not often recognized because, as is often the case in Gilgamesh, the cedar in the Grove of the Gods is written with Sumerian signs GISH.ERIN (to be read as Akkadian erēnu), while the Akkadian urnu is written out directly.

It appears that Urshanbi is in the midst of the grove busy stripping off the young cedar. On might guess that he will use it (as a mast? as one the Stone Things for protection?) for another of his journeys to Utnapishtim. After taking Gilgamesh to Utnapishtim Urshanabi will learn that it will be his last trip. Gilgamesh’s rash act of smashing the Stone Things will require another way to make the boat trip—and will close any possibility that others might make the journey after him.

The violent attack on the Stone Things is, as I read the story, a most significant event. At the beginning of the journey that takes him from Uruk into the mountains and eventually to Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh kills bulls and lions and eats their flesh. We already know that he has stripped and taken on the skin of a lion. He tells everyone he meets that he has killed the animals. When he emerges from the absolute silence and darkness of his solitary journey through the mountain, he is seen by Siduri as a savage killer. When she gives him the advice he needs to continue the journey, he immediately ignores her advice to present himself to Urshanabi and instead destroys the very Stone Things he needs. He will make amends for his rash act, but it marks him as one who cannot quite see or hear the truth and is absolutely isolated from any community. Freud would interpret his rage as the promptings of melancholia in its ambivalence over the object of his self-destructive acts.
Even so, Siduri can face him and advise him much as Shamhat had faced the savage Enkidu. Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu at those key points could be seen technically as idiotic, that is, without language, without comprehension. Siduri’s advice will, however, help him along. Urshanabi will also help him, and eventually Utnapishtim and his wife will offer him a way back—to Uruk and to himself.

**Heroic Frenzies: Gilgamesh and Siduri**

The woman who observes Gilgamesh is, as we have seen, Siduri, keeper of a tavern at the farthest reaches of land, where the land meets the sea. In the first eighteen lines the poet narrates her observations and her inner thoughts. She sees his wild appearance and intuits his deep sorrow. Thinking him a killer, she bars the door and goes up on the roof.

Gilgamesh threatens to smash the door, but Siduri asks him to tell his story. Once again, in exactly the same words, Gilgamesh explains the reasons for his sorrow and his intention to find Utnapishtim. As with the others, Siduri discourages him, since there has been no passage across the sea since olden times; only Shamash makes the perilous journey. And the Waters of Death are before him.

She does, though, give him the advice his needs to continue the journey. He will need the help of Urshanabi, the boatman, and the mysterious Stone Things he uses to make the crossing.

**Siduri the Brewer**

Tablet 10 opens with Gilgamesh at the “lip of the sea” where dwells Siduri, “the Brewer” (sābītu). Andrew George, who refers to her as Shiduri, a “wise old goddess,” prefers to call her a “tavern-keeper.” Like many Mesopotamian terms, sābītu is difficult to translate into modern English. She owns a tavern that includes a brothel, usually, but it is difficult for us to see the ritual and sexual connection with dispensing wisdom, which she does in the text. The house she keeps is often sacred, usually related to Ishtar and the “sacred marriage” between Ishtar and her lover Dumuzi. Prostitution, over which Ishtar ruled, was practiced there. And Siduri’s name is sometimes—though not here—written with the divine determinative (dingir).

Before Siduri, Gilgamesh had already been discouraged by others, possibly by Shamash. After Siduri, Gilgamesh meets with Urshanabi the Boatman and then Utnapishtim. Siduri sees him coming and bars the door against him, worrying that he looks like a killer (muna’iru). He repeats his lament to her as to the others, and asks for directions to Utnapishtim. At first she discourages him.

> “Gilgamesh, there has never been a crossing, and no one from the beginning of days has been able to cross the sea. None but Shamash the Hero crosses the sea; apart from Shamash the Hero, no one crosses. Painful is the crossing, troublesome the way, And midstream the surface of the Waters of Death is impassible.” (10.79-84)
Then, suddenly, like Circe in *The Odyssey* (X.503-40), who provides Odysseus with advice on crossing the river of death to consult with the prophet, Siduri provides Gilgamesh with a secret that will allow him to cross the Waters of Death.

“Even if you, Gilgamesh, cross the sea, when you arrive at the Waters of Death, what would you do? There, Gilgamesh, is a certain Urshanabi, Boatman to Utnapishtim. The Things of Stone are with him. In the heart of the grove he picks clean a young cedar. Show yourself to him. If it is possible, cross with him. If it is not possible, come back” (10.87-91)

While the references are still rather obscure, it is clear that Siduri enables Gilgamesh to complete the journey.

The secret lore she gives him is often disappointing to modern scholars, who know that an earlier (Old Babylonian) version of the Gilgamesh stories has her give very different advice. Instead of chasing after immortality, Gilgamesh should enjoy ordinary life: a full belly; dancing and playing; fresh garments; clean living; and the child he holds on his knee—and the spouse who delights in him. That very practical advice is an important dimension to ancient “wisdom.” The late version, *Gilgamesh*, however, seems rather to focus on a different sort of “wisdom,” secrets of the gods and special bits of information for solving apparently insoluble problems.

The preference for the advice Siduri gives Gilgamesh in the *Old Babylonian* version rather than the advice she gives in *Gilgamesh* Tablet 10 persists even in light of the care the later version swerves from the older advice. Stephen Bertman provides an eloquent argument for that persistent view. In his conclusion to a collection of essays on the healing power of ancient literature, “A Timeless Journey,” Bertman includes his own translation of the Old Babylonian advice as the keynote to the wisdom of the Gilgamesh epic itself. “Though the hero Gilgamesh cannot save his best friend’s life, he can nevertheless follow a goddess’ advice to

“Eat and drink your fill..., and celebrate day and night. Make every day a festival; day and night dance and play. Let your clothes be sparkling fresh; rinse your hair and bathe. Mind the little one that holds your hand, and let your wife enjoy your embrace. For this is the proper business of man.”

Bertman’s observation comes, significantly, between his views on the Homeric worldview found in the *Odyssey* and its reflection in the biblical *Ecclesiastes* (9:7-10). He finds in Siduri’s advice “a sentiment that that the author of *Ecclesiastes* shares.”

While such advice was set aside by the author of *Gilgamesh* centuries after it had been written, Bertman is certainly not alone in seeing the older advice as central to the Gilgamesh legend. Bertman’s argument turns on a recognition, by way of the Greeks, that “life was not custom-made to serve our egoistic needs.” “However much we might want this or that to be true, the universe has its own agenda and isn’t interested in our petty
opinions or wishes. The only thing we can do in confronting that fact is to live, live fully with all of our heart and all of our might within the constraints that life imposes.”

This is surely wise advice, though it does not explain why Gilgamesh moves away from it.

A Later Version
An Elamite version of Gilgamesh’s quest has Siduri (or Shiduri), clearly a divine being, as the object of the hero’s search. He asks her to make it possible for him to give birth! Of course he is told that his request is impossible, but he is persuaded that life offers other things for him especially. While the kind of wisdom Siduri dispenses differs from version to version, it is evident in the Standard Version of Gilgamesh that Siduri is but one of several important figures along the path. The central place she has in other versions gives way to Utnapishtim.

The Elamite story, from the 1st millennium BCE, may well reflect the earliest Gilgamesh story, “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” in having Gilgamesh journey to one wise figure, a healer. Tzvi Abusch and others have suggested that Siduri was the original object of Gilgamesh’s search, then Utnapishtim was introduced (without the Flood story) and finally the Flood story was included. Utnapishtim’s wife may actually preserve the earliest motif, since the wise one in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” offers the hero a plant that is apparently gained and then lost, such as is found in Tablet 11.

We can see in Utnapishtim’s wife and Siduri a process that involves both splitting and displacement. Utnapishtim’s wife is a vestige of that different, earlier divine figure, surely a goddess who holds the key to life and is approached for her transformative powers (much like Enlil in the flood story). In all versions of Gilgamesh’s quest, he is given not the “life” he seeks, but some compensation. In “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgameh,” the compensation appears to be leadership of the community—he is anointed with “first-quality oil”—rather than “a life of long days.” In “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” her hero carries off an “herb-pot of life.” In a meadow the pot is set aside on the banks of a river—and presumably lost, as the plant in the Standard Version is lost. In that text it is not clear who is offering the “herb-pot of life” (úgur-zi) (and the “tree”—or bush [gish-ti]—of life); it is one who is a “wise physician” (a-su-gēshtu).

Instead of the central life dispensing, “wisdom”-dispensing goddess, the Standard Version gives us Utnapishtim. His wisdom consists of the “secret” of the gods that is the scandal during which the most powerful of the gods, Enlil, and the mother goddess (significantly identified with Ishtar), learn through experience. The god Ea with the assistance of his mortal follower, Utnapishtim, foils the plan of the other gods. Utnapishtim tells the story directly to Gilgamesh in the manner of a good storyteller, prompting the listener to pay close attention to the wisdom the story contains.

Utnapishtim’s story of the flood takes up almost two hundred lines of Tablet 11. The account of the flood shares so many details with the later biblical account that it is not surprising that this section of Gilgamesh created a sensation in the 1870s when George Smith found the tablets at Nineveh. Some lines are so close to the Bible that they provide
the best parallel to biblical texts among the many cuneiform texts that have been discovered since then. The very prominence of the flood story in Tablet 11 creates a problem for a unified reading of *Gilgamesh*. It seems clear—and the recently recovered Early Dynastic Gilgamesh hymn confirms—that the early versions of Gilgamesh do not contain the flood story or the sage Utnapishtim. The flood story itself is known from a fragmentary Sumerian text and several versions of *Atrahasis*, an Akkadian poem from the Old Babylonian period in which the flood is the last of three attempts by the gods to destroy humankind. In each attempt Ea and his man, known by the epithet *atra-hasīs*, i.e., “exceedingly wise,” find a way to thwart the powerful Enlil. In all versions of the story Enlil and Ea are finally reconciled. One way of looking at the story is to see that the powerful Enlil ultimately learns from his mistakes—and rewards the sage with his special status. *Gilgamesh* confirms what is nearly universal in Mesopotamian thought: that humans were created mortal; that some part of them will live on after death; but that such life in the underworld is difficult and tenuous at best—never a situation sought by humans.

Thus the story Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh, even though it ends with the translation of Utnapishtim and his wife into a unique god-like status, offers Gilgamesh no hope for a similar transformation. “In your case, now,” Utnapishtim asks, “who will assemble the gods for you so that the life you seek you may discover?” (11.197-98). It is a rhetorical question, of course. Utnapishtim follows it with the challenge mentioned above: see if you can remain awake for a week. Gilgamesh immediately falls asleep for a week. The episode will be taken up in detail in the next chapter.

The Flood story is so well integrated with other pieces of narrative related to Utnapishtim and his wife, and the whole is so well integrated with the Standard Version as a whole that it is difficult to think of *Gilgamesh* without it. Yet in displacing another, earlier version in which Gilgamesh travels a difficult course in search of life—even without a reference to Enkidu, by the way—the Standard Version retains certain vestiges of the other. The wife of Utnapishtim is one such fragment of the powerful goddess who is eclipsed by Utnapishtim in this version. Siduri, split off and displaced, is another trace of that other story.

Between Siduri and Utnapishtim, who provide the beginning and ending of Tablet 10, is a third figure important to Gilgamesh’s quest. The Boatman Urshanabi makes the trip back and forth daily to Utnapishtim, and he is the only one capable of making the journey (excepting The Sun God Shamash). Siduri can only send Gilgamesh to Urshanabi and tell him of the Things of Stone; Urshanabi knows how to make the dangerous trip. Gilgamesh, given Siduri’s advice, immediately ignores a key part of it, attacks and smashes the Stone Things and creates a great problem for himself. Urshanabi will be necessary for Gilgamesh to continue—and he loses his right to make the trip after taking Gilgamesh to Utnapishtim.

Tablet 10 is apparently organized as a large chiastic structure, with Siduri observing Gilgamesh at the beginning and Utnapishtim observing him at the end. The center is
dominated by a dialogue between Gilgamesh and the Boatman. The exact center is missing, but it appears that the Boatman gives Gilgamesh the “signs” or marks of his destination in the part of the text that is missing.

The end of Tablet 10 sets up Tablet 11. The end of Tablet 9, as was suggested above, performs a similar function in setting up Tablet 10.

**The Esh-Dam or Ashtammu House**

The building where Siduri is found is itself worth a brief consideration. Richard Henshaw’s study, “What Happened in the èš-dam/aštammu-House?,” surveys this curious institution from Early Dynastic times through the Neo-Assyrian period. The Sumerian èš-dam (Akkadian ashtammu) was a sanctuary (èš) of the dam or “spouse.” From the earliest period it is associated mainly with Inanna/Ishtar. One list mentions seventeen èš-dam of Ishtar. And it is one of the sacred me given to Inanna by Enki in “Inanna and Enki.”

While there are many references to the èš-dam, because the institution mixes eroticism and holiness it is a difficult concept for us in the modern West to understand. And it may have been degraded over the years. It was certainly a place associated with sex and beer. The two figures who are most frequently found there are the harimtu and the sābītu. Just as Enkidu first curses the harimtu who civilized him and then blesses, that is, exalts her, many texts consider her a prostitute and her place, either in the street or in the èš-dam dangerous. Love songs of Inanna and Dumuzi sometimes place them there, and at times it is linked to the gipar.

Finding the sābītu, a female brewer, in the ashtammu is not surprising, because it is as much a beer hall as a place of sexual encounters. In *Gilgamesh* the wise Siduri looks out from what was likely an èš-dam. People drink and eat in the place, and certain festivals take place there as well. It can be located outside the walls of the city and thus participate in the liminal status of such places as city gates, doors and other signs that mark the movement from one state to another.

The association of beer-drinking and sexual activity is not difficult to understand, but the connection with “wisdom” and holiness, suggesting transformation and changes of destinies, is less easy for us to grasp. Possibly the best illustration in literature outside Mesopotamia is again Circe in the *Odyssey*, who can turn men into swine, but who not only sleeps with Odysseus on his way home but provides him with the secret knowledge that enables him to return home.

**The Gaze of Siduri**

Already at the very end of Tablet 9, as we have seen, as Gilgamesh walks around the Grove of the Gods, he is being watched (9.196). Immediately in Tablet 10 the watcher is identified as Siduri. Sixteen lines are given over to a description of Siduri, the way she sees Gilgamesh, and her emotional response as he advances toward her, like a killer.
We have seen earlier Keith Dickson’s analysis of the different view of Enkidu in the wilderness. Dickson follows Gilgamesh on his travels and also notes a sorrow in the heart of Enkidu as he is transformed into a civilized being. Dickson suggests that “the sorrow that results from the sight of otherness is a sorrow closely linked to self-consciousness and to awareness of death.” It is with Siduri’s Gaze that the implications of his analysis become clear.

Siduri sees a wild creature, “a man dressed like a lion,” whose animal skins contrast strikingly with the veils and hoods that give us a brief glimpse at what she looks like. She, as other do, notices Gilgamesh’s face, wasted by sorrow and exhausting travel. Dickson makes a most significant observation, that the one who used to see others is now the one who is observed by others. A great “switch in focalization” has taken place. Where in the First Prologue, Gilgamesh is the one with vision, who was able to “see everything,” he is now seen from the outside, “the one who is radically and even repellently other, both alien and alienating.” Like Enkidu had once been, Gilgamesh is a “savage.” Gilgamesh “is clearly an interloper” in the world he has now entered, and he will soon fail the Sleep Test and lose the Plant of Rejuvenation.

As in the case of the trapper, Dickson observes, Gilgamesh “has seen something that transfigures him into an emblem of grief, an icon or planned likeness, and also a cautionary sight for all others to see.” His face is “a transparent medium to what lies beneath...and...a kind of mirror of the heart.” Dickson concludes that as others now see him with a “penetrating gaze,” and he has become “the strange one stumbling into a land that can never really be his home.”

Face to Face: Gilgamesh and Urshanabi, Gilgamesh and Utnapishtim
Keith Dickson leaves Gilgamesh on shore with Siduri. The quest of Gilgamesh has from the start has had the object of meeting Utnapishtim. Siduri gives him an important piece of information to continue the journey. While he proceeds in the wrong way, destroying the Things of Stone, Gilgamesh is made right again by the Boatman Urshanabi, and together they eventually meet with Utnapishtim himself.

At each station in Tablet 10 Gilgamesh repeats his sad tale: the friend who died and the difficult path he has traveled to find Utnapishtim. Siduri tells him his search is futile, but then gives him the advice he needs to continue the journey. Although Gilgamesh repeats the story in virtually identical language, Urshanabi’s response differs from Siduri’s, and Utnapishtim’s differs from both of them. Since Gilgamesh has on his own destroyed the Things of Stone, Utnapishtim hears the story and tells Gilgamesh that his own hands have prevented his crossing (10.156). His advice comes at the center of the long tablet. Gilgamesh is told to cut three hundred punting poles for the crossing. Gilgamesh complies and the two launch the boat, crewing it themselves. Gilgamesh uses the punting poles to cross the Waters of Death. When he uses up all the poles, he strips and holds is arms aloft to make a mast or yard-arm (10.183-83).
It is at this point that Utnapishtim sees the boat and thinks (speaking to himself) about the two in the boat. He notices that the Things of Stone are broken, and the one who is approaching is no man of his.

Several lines are very fragmentary, but when the text resumes Gilgamesh is retelling his story. There is one exception. Now that he has finally reached Utnapishtim Gilgamesh anticipates that the “Door of Sorrow” (recalling the images, perhaps, of the door Enkidu had crafted and later cursed) will be barred shut and sealed with tar and pitch (10.262-63). Then there will be dancing once again, and he will again be joyful and “carefree.” The lines complete the rhetorical pattern we have been tracing that opposes “sorrow” (nissatu) to “joy” (hadû).1833

That, at least, is Gilgamesh’s hope.

**Gilgamesh Reaches Utnapishtim**

Finally he meets the famous Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh once again recounts his travels.

> “I turned, wandering over all the lands.
> I crossed inaccessible mountains.
> I traveled over all seas.
> Real sleep has avoided me.
> I have worn myself out in sleeplessness; my flesh
> is filled with sorrow.
> What have I gained?
> I had not arrived at the house of the bar-owner
> when my clothing was used up.
> I killed bear, hyena, lion, the panther, the leopard,
> the stag and ibex—wild beasts
> and creeping things of the wild.
> I ate their flesh; covered myself with their skins.
>
> Now have the Door of Sorrow be closed behind me.
> Seal its door with tar and pitch.
> No longer have them stop their play
> For me, happy and carefree...” (10.251-65)

Twice in this sad account Gilgamesh refers to his nissatu (10.256, 262). First he repeats the sorrow in his flesh. When he asks that the Door of Sorrow be sealed, he envisions a return to “play” (mēlulu), as we saw him in Uruk at the beginning of the story, and to the “joy” (hadû) that characterized him then. (He would recover the “joy” of the Joy/Woe Man.)

Utnapishtim is, like Gilgamesh, a liminal figure,1834 human but given a kind of immortality, who listened carefully to the crafty god Ea1835 at the time of the Flood. Where Gilgamesh is part human, part divine, part human and part animal, male with female
features, Utnapishtim and his wife, who both figure prominently in *Gilgamesh*, survived the Flood and preserved the seed of all living things. Alone of humans they are granted life “like the gods.” To Gilgamesh’s agonized question, “overwise” Utnapishtim offers this answer:

Do we build a house forever?
Do we make our nests for all time?
Do brothers divide their inheritance forever?
Does hostility last forever between enemies?
Does the river rise ever higher, bringing on floods?
The dragonfly, its face looks upon the face of the sun, then, suddenly, there is nothing.
Those possessed and the dead, how like brothers they are!
Do they not both draw the picture of death?
No dead one has ever greeted a human in this world. (10.308-18)\(^{1836}\)

The last line is particularly striking. It is unique in Mesopotamian literature and to some it suggests that the dead are not dwelling in a kind of half-life somewhere. (Alternatively, the line could anticipate the very thing that seems to be denied here, when in Tablet 12 the god Ea opens a “hole” for the spirit of Enkidu to pass from the underworld into the presence of Gilgamesh on earth.)

There is no permanence. The points seem obvious enough, but the whole episode in which Gilgamesh finally reaches Utnapishtim may be laced with irony. Certainly we do build houses to last and plan inheritances to provide continuity between generations. There is considerable wordplay used by Utnapishtim, and it seems to develop even through the final lines of Tablet 10.

The last four lines of the tablet have Utnapishtim claiming that the collection of gods, the Anunnaki, who are usually associated with the underworld, held an assembly and a figure with them, Mammitum, called “the maker of destiny,” established the cosmic pattern of Life and Death. They established both Death and Life, but did not “make known” the “day of Death.” (The verb, *idû*, is “to know,” but has the range of meaning that includes “to proclaim.”)

Packed into this episode is the now-familiar comparison and contrast between two kinds of knowing, by eye and by ear. The line in which two persons, *shallu ē mitum*, are “like brothers” and together draw the likeness of Death, has usually been translated as “the sleeper” (as in Benjamin Foster’s rendering\(^{1837}\)) and “the dead.” Stephanie Dalley has a question mark after “the sleeping,”\(^{1838}\) Andrew George, though, reads the phrase, and thus the two lines very differently.

“The abducted and the dead, how alike is their lot!
But never was drawn the likeness of Death....” (ll. 316-17)\(^{1839}\)
While most have read a form of the verb “to sleep” (šalālu) here, Simo Parpola and George read rather šalālu, “to carry off or plunder,” hence “abducted.” One might propose, as I do here very tentatively, that it could be salālu, which means “clear out” something, including “clearing out” the body in demonic possession. A sleeper does in some ways resemble a dead person, and “sleeping” or not sleeping is a persistent theme in Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is characterized as the one who cannot sleep, and in the next tablet, Utnapishtim will devise a test for Gilgamesh, challenging him to remain awake for a week. (He promptly falls asleep and sleeps for a week.)

There is a passage about the sleepless gods just before Utnapishtim’s eloquent claim that there is no permanence, and this passage (10.281-85) might well clarify the line about the dead and a sleeper, an abducted person, or one possessed. Sadly, the passage is so fragmented that it is hard to see how it fits or what it means. It is a night scene. The moon travels, and the gods stay awake, remain wakeful, “unsleeping,” this from “olden times.” Why the gods remain awake during the night is not clear to me. One might suggest that the gods protect persons while demons are active.

There is another broken passage about temples of gods and goddesses who may lack provisions, but it, too, is difficult to follow. Then comes the contrast between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. While, from Utnapishtim’s perspective, Enkidu was “taken away to his fate,” Gilgamesh has exhausted himself in sorrow.

The elaborate punning by Utnapishtim throughout this long address, even with the gaps in the text, takes off from Gilgamesh’s “Door of Sorrow” speech. For the last time Gilgamesh recounts his exhausting journey, but the speech ends with the hope that meeting Utnapishtim will transform his woe to joy. That is, of course, while Utnapishtim’s advice at this point is so devastating to Gilgamesh.

Utnapishtim plays with a great variety of alliteration, mainly involving [l]s: s/sh/s\-l-l, lilu (night), lalû (abundance), lillu (idiot), lilû (a demon), lilû (storm demon), lullû (primeval man), amēlūtu (humankind), kulīlu (dragonfly), and others. Between night scenes and descriptions of the dead, the speech is filled with darkness and dread.

This may clarify a great crux in the passage. Until recently, Utnapishtim was understood to refer to the birth of Gilgamesh, with his father a lillu, suggesting he was a storm demon (Sumerian lil, which generated the male and female night demon, the better known of which is the liliu, Lilith). The Sumerian “Birth of Gilgamesh” has such a lil menacing the infant Gilgamesh, for reasons that are not made explicit in the text. Now the tendency is to see comparison between a lillu “idiot” in the Greek sense of one who has no language, and Gilgamesh. Where the “idiot” (10.270, 272) has no sense because he lacks the “word” of counsel and is totally alone, Gilgamesh has been given much.

Gilgamesh encounters three figures in Tablet 10. While his energy is not diminished as he finally reaches his goal, we see him changing in three encounters. The responses of Siduri, Urshanabi and Utnapishtim to the sudden appearance of Gilgamesh indicate the changes taking place. With Siduri Gilgamesh is so wild that at first she sees only a killer.
But she is moved to help him in his quest. He savagely attacks the Things of Stone, but when he meets Urshanabi, the Boatman shows no fear. Gilgamesh has calmed down enough to follow Urshanabi’s instructions, and the two are able to make the crossing successfully. With Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh is still filled with grief and sorrow, but he is able at least to express his hope for some relief. Utnapishtim shows no fear in the hero’s approach and sees nothing of the savagery we had seen earlier.

The advice given Gilgamesh by Utnapishtim should logically—according to the narrative logic of at least one earlier Gilgamesh poem—bring *Gilgamesh* to an end. In “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” the protagonist eventually finds a “wise physician” who gives Gilgamesh a plant of life (*gish ti*), which he promptly loses. The poem ends with something like the wisdom offered here by Utnapishtim: a special status, but not a long life. But the *Gilgamesh*-poet goes beyond this. Between the initial contact with Utnapishtim and receiving a special plant, *Gilgamesh* adds one thing after another, adding complexity upon complexity, until Gilgamesh returns home. The laying on of brick-like narrative structures repeats the fronting of material in the first half of *Gilgamesh*.

As often happens with these ancient texts, key phrases are missing at the point where the *lillu* is introduced. Utnapishtim makes a point about the unique situation of Gilgamesh, that he combines the flesh of gods with his humanity. A line follows with a reference to Gilgamesh’s father and mother, the line that gave rise to the theory that his father was a *lil*-demon. (His human father, Lugalbanda, mentioned three times in *Gilgamesh*, in Tablets 1, 4 and 6, appears to have been deified.) Scholars are divided about the reference here. Stephanie Dalley and Andrew George, for example, see the gods acting to fashion Gilgamesh like his mother and father. Benjamin Foster, on the other hand, suggests that the gods themselves have acted like mother and father to Gilgamesh (82). All three see this passage leading into a comparison between Gilgamesh and the *lillu*, who they consider a “fool.”

The contrasts involve Gilgamesh given ghee where the *lillu* gets only the dregs of beer; good quality flour instead of bran and grist; a fine garment vs. the rags the *lillu* wears; an old rope rather than a sash. The one item that needs no comparison is the throne Gilgamesh is given in an Assembly. It is not clear who has given Gilgamesh the throne (the gods? elders of the city?). But the throne must signify the special status Gilgamesh has been given.

The passage turns to the plight of the *lillu*. He has no advisors and lacks counsel (*milku*). Literally he hears no “word” (*amatu*) of counsel. Whoever or whatever the *lillu* is, he is impoverished—the way those in the underworld are often described—and more importantly, alone. He can hear nothing and, in the context of the night scene, perhaps can see nothing either.

It is at this point that the text breaks down. When the signs are clear again, Utnapishtim is comparing Gilgamesh’s desperate, solitary and sorrowful journey with someone,
undoubtedly Enkidu, taken away to his fate (shimtu). By his ceaseless toil, Gilgamesh is pushing himself to the end of his days.

Utnapishtim sees humanity as “snapped off like a reed in a canebrake” (in George’s translation). There is an important qualification. Death (even?) takes away the beautiful young man and the beautiful young woman. The verb is missing in this double line. George reads a verb that means Death “abducts” them.

Enkidu was, of course, young when death seized him, and Gilgamesh is still young, apparently. If Utnapishtim is combining the tragedy of an early death with the special status Gilgamesh has been given (and Enkidu was given through his friendship with Gilgamesh), then this passage points to the Hero’s Dilemma.

One needs to see and hear clearly. The motif of the eye and ear, with an emphasis on the ability to hear wise words, is actually introduced in Tablet 10 at the very beginning, and is reinforced when Utnapishtim is first seen. Tablet 10 begins and ends with two characters renowned for their “wisdom.” Siduri, as we have noticed, is first seen by the reader, and so is Utnapishtim. They are placed in the unusual situation of seeing Gilgamesh before Gilgamesh sees them. And they are both marked by an interiority that is quite unusual in this poem.

They see something and think. Each wise person, Siduri and Utnapishtim, talk to their “selves.” Siduri talks to herself (amata [izzakar]), speaking a word and taking counsel with her self (itti ramanishma shi [imtallik]) (10.11-12). When the narrative later in the tablet cuts to Utnapishtim, he, too, watches Gilgamesh from afar, and talks to himself, speaking a word, and taking counsel in his mind (10.184-85). Gilgamesh at first either fails to take in their “wise” words or refuses the implications that he should stop looking for an answer to his existential dilemma.

For Utnapishtim, no one sees the face of Death and no one hears the voice of Death (10.304-305). The long tablet of more than 320 lines ends with the same emphasis. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that the Annunaki gods and the maker of fate, Mammitum, establish both Life and Death, but they do not disclose (ul uddū) the day of Death.

There is no permanence. Then, to bring Gilgamesh to the simple but profound truth, to “seek life” (she’i napshâti) (11.25), Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the Flood. The Flood story of Tablet 11 is strikingly similar to the biblical Flood story. Yet its values are very different. “Wisdom” is the key, not the piety of a Noah.1842

Tablets 10, 11 (and possibly 12) are marked by innovations. The twists and turns of the narrative become increasingly unexpected. The poet adds episodes like bricks that gradually expand the structure through successive facings to the edifice (as had happened in the first half of Gilgamesh, where episodes were successively added to the front of the building). Tablets 11 and 12 have long posed questions about the architectonics of Gilgamesh. It remains to be demonstrated that the innovations form an aesthetic whole.
Mirror Neurons and Empathy

The *Gilgamesh* poet describes the inner life of Siduri and Utnapishtim as talking to oneself. It is safe to say that even the most astute of the Mesopotamian *āshipu* had little knowledge of neuron firings. The scientist who has been called the Marco Polo of neuroscience, V. S. Ramachandran, has used mirrors to alleviate phantom-limb pain in persons who have had limbs amputated. He thinks he may have found a connection between the unconscious movements of the vocal chords people have when they think to themselves and empathy. Ramachandran has even dubbed the neurological mechanisms, mirror neurons, “Ghandi neurons,” because they are “dissolving the barrier between you and me.”

As a colleague was investigating schizophrenia, where sufferers often report that they are hearing voices, Ramachandran suspected that there might be damage to the mechanism in that vocal chords that normally sends a message to the brain that the voice is merely a thought. No one is actually speaking it.

Mirror neurons fire “both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another animal” (especially when the other animal is of the same species). It has been difficult to study mirror neurons in humans, but they have been observed in primates. Ramachandran was not the first to suspect that the mirror neuron system is active in empathy. When Rhesus macaques, for example, observe an experimenter grasp an apple and bring it to his mouth or grasp an object and set it in a certain place, mirror neurons “fired vigorously.”

Certain brain regions are active when humans experience emotions such as happiness, disgust, and pain when they see other persons experiencing emotion. Possibly the mechanism is similar to the macaques observing the apple, but the connections remain speculative.

The proximity of areas homologous to the macaques’ mirror neuron system to Broca’s area of the brain, which has been studied extensively for its connection with language, has led to the hypothesis that “human language evolved from a gesture performance/understanding system implemented in mirror neurons.”

When Erasmus was observed not speaking to himself while he was reading, the observer thought the great man was mad. We have since trained ourselves to read without visibly betraying the enhanced vocalization we may use, a practice based on our thinking to ourselves. Anecdotes about people reading in the ancient world suggest Erasmus would have appeared odd in those early times as well as in the Early Modern Period.

Ramachandran let his interviewer, John Colapinto, in on his most ambitious hypothesis: that mirror neurons play a role in consciousness itself, the mystery that has perplexed philosophers and scientists for centuries. He told Colapinto that he and his colleagues are developing a theory that is nothing less than an “allocentric” view of the world. The theory holds “that the mirror-neuron system is used for modeling someone else’s behavior, putting yourself in another person’s shoes, looking at the world from another person’s point of view. This is called an allocentric view of the world, as opposed to the egocentric view. So I made the suggestion that at some point in evolution this system
turned back and allowed you to create an allocentric view of yourself. This is, I claim, the dawn of self-awareness."\(^{1847}\)

Siduri, Utnapishtim and the *Gilgamesh* poet would likely have agreed.

In “The Roots of Empathy,” Daniel Goleman points out that psychologist E. B. Titchener began the modern use of “empathy” in its technical sense (then called *motor mimicry*) in the 1920s.\(^{1848}\) From its introduction into English, *empatheia*, a “feeling into,” had been used in aesthetics, where it meant the “ability to perceive the subjective experience of another person.”\(^{1849}\) (Titchener’s *einfühlung* became the anglicized “empathy.”)

Aesthetic theory regarding empathy developed late in the 19th century, especially in the analysis of aesthetic objects by Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer in German and “Vernon Lee” (Violet Paget) in English.\(^{1850}\) Goleman prefers “attunement,” which as we have seen earlier, begins very early in infancy, when one infant becomes upset hearing another infant’s crying. And Goleman claims that “Making love is perhaps the closest approximation in adult life to the intimate attunement between infant and mother....Lovemaking is, at its best, an act of mutual empathy; at its worst it lacks any such emotional mutuality.”\(^{1851}\) For our purposes, as the ethical dimension of the Gilgamesh stories become increasingly prominent, Goleman’s claim that altruism has its roots in empathy is important. He traces the progression of empathy in childhood, and sees empathy behind many aspects of moral judgment and action, including what John Stuart Mill called “empathic anger,” a “guardian of justice.”\(^{1852}\) He contrasts the well-attuned life to the morals of a sociopath, that is a life without empathy.

**Notes to Chapter Eight**

\(^{1796}\) Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 70.

\(^{1797}\) Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 71.


\(^{1799}\) Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh, Translated from the Sin-leqi-unninni Version*, 198. The upper part reaches to the *shupku* of An (or heaven), a term that means a foundation or substructure of a terrace, a mountain base, or the foundation of heaven; the lower part, its “breast” extends into Arali, a special term for the underworld; *irtu* usually means “breast” or “chest,” the breasts of a woman, but also to retreat in battle, a cut of meat, the breastplate of an animal’s harness, the front of a chariot, building, or bow, and the edge of the sea. *See A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, ed. Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate.
Compare this with Gardner and Maier, 198; George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation*, 71; and Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 67.

After Tessa Rickards’s illustration in Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 183.

Black and Green, 183-84.

After “The Greenstone Seal of Adda” (B.M. 89115). See above, Fig. 2, and Kramer and Maier, *Myths of Enki, The Crafty God*, 122.


See Keith Dickson, “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh*,” 175.


Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 76, patches in the Hittite version, where Urshanabi is called Sur-Sunabi and the Stone Things are called Stone Images. For a translation of the Hittite text, see Gary Beckman in Foster, 164-65. Tablet III of the text from Hattusha follows the second half of *Gilgamesh*, from the Assembly of the Gods where Enkidu is condemned to die, through Gilgamesh roaming the mountains, where he kills wild cows and lions, and ends up on his way to meet Ulla, “The Distant One.” Along the way Gilgamesh greets the Sea politely, but it cursed in turn, is given the task by the Moon God to turn two of the lions Gilgamesh has slain into images for the temple of the Moon God, and is challenged by Urshanabi for (apparently) destroying the stone images. Gilgamesh asks Urshanabi why Urshanabi is quarreling with him. Gilgamesh then complies with Urshanabi’s advice to cut poles for the journey. The end of the tablet is too broken to translate, but it does include the encounter with a figure like Utnapishtim. Beckman points out that no Hittite Gilgamesh materials includes the Flood, the Sleep Test, the plant that is lost, or Gilgamesh’s return to Uruk. These omissions in the Hittite material suggests that they have been added in the late *Gilgamesh*. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation*, does not use the Hittite material here, but he includes several fragments from Hattusha, 132-35.

A version of these remarks appears in “Gilgamesh of Uruk,” *The Epic Voice*, ed. Hodder, 15-52.


George places a text involving Gilgamesh and Shamash before this episode, at the very beginning of the journey, and he does not calculate the missing lines later in the tablet in the way R. Campbell Thompson had. These changes would indicate that Shamash was the first to discourage Gilgamesh, and that Shamash largely disappears as a protector of Gilgamesh at this point.

Just as Siduri is sometimes read Shiduri, Urshanabi is sometimes Ur-Shanabi and Ur-shanabi, and Utnapisthim is Uta-napishtim and Uta-napishti. Here as elsewhere I retain the conventions used by scholars in the past to allow continuity in a community of interpreters.

George sees more of the line than do others, and adds that Gilgamesh is a “killer of bulls.”

See Gardner and Maier, 214-15, where the comparison with Circe (Odyssey X.455-65, 503-40) is made, and the contrast between Siduri in Gilgamesh and the Old Babylonian version is mentioned, following Tigay, 95-103. We followed the tradition there in referring to Siduri as the “Barmaid,” which does not quite capture the status and importance to the temple of a “brewer,” in this case, a female brewer.

George considers The Stone Ones the companions of Urshanabi and reads, not \textit{urnu} “snakes” but \textit{“picks a pine clean”} (79).

For a particularly thorough analysis of Siduri’s advice and her importance to the narrative, see Tzvi Abusch, “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial,” Part I, 1-14. Like other scholars, Abusch much prefers the Old Babylonian version of Siduri’s advice to the Standard version. I think the essence of the OB Siduri’s advice has been displaced and forms the wisdom of the controversial Tablet 12.


For a discussion of the earliest Gilgamesh texts, from ED III, see Douglas R. Frayne, “The Birth of Gilgameš in Ancient Mesopotamian Art,” 39-49. “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgameš” does not clearly specify how the “herb-pot of life” is obtained, or lost, though a line does indicate a field-meadow where the herb-pot is set on the banks of a river.


Keith Dickson, “Looking at the Other in Gilgamesh,” 175.

Dickson cites Jean Bottéro’s suggestion that the hoods and veils indicate that Siduri is married, “Looking at the Other in Gilgamesh,” 176.

Dickson, “Looking at the Other in Gilgamesh,” 177.

Dickson, “Looking at the Other in Gilgamesh,” 178.

Dickson, “Looking at the Other in Gilgamesh,” 178.
Andrew George inserts a brief Old Babylonian tablet purportedly from Sippar (between 10.106 and 10.112) in which one of the men stand over the other, and Ur-shanabi “looks him in the eye” and asks Gilgamesh’s name; Gilgamesh provides his name and the information that he comes from “Uruk-Eanna,” has “wound a way around the mountains,” and identifies “the hidden road where rises the sun,” 79-80. Note that none of the three names, Siduri, Urshanabi, and Utnapishtim, are written with the DINGIR sign.

CAD 12:5, crediting George for the reading instead of the older paddi’u.

While Utnapishtim is clearly a liminal figure, perhaps what Susan Ackerman calls a Ritual Leader, Ackerman gives his wife more attention than she does Utnapishtim, 148-50. Gilgamesh, of course, receives the most attention, 117-21. For the role of the female figures in *Gilgamesh*, see Maier, “Gilgamesh of Uruk,” 15-51.


Here, as elsewhere, I have drawn upon translations and commentaries more recent than the Gardner/Maier translation, especially those of Benjamin Foster and A. R. George. George reads the final lines of this passage much differently than we had, “The abducted and the dead, how alike is their lot!/ But never was drawn the likeness of Death,/ never in the land did the dead greet a man” (87). Foster, 83, still reads a comparison between the sleeper and the dead.

Foster, 83.


George, in his edition of *Gilgamesh* and in a subsequent article, though he prefers to call *Gilgamesh* an epic poem, emphasizes the “wisdom” features of the story, “The Epic of Gilgamesh: Thoughts on Genre and Meaning,” *Gilgameš and the World of Assyria*, ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 37-65. Earlier, Vanstiphout developed a very reasonable argument for accepting the genre as “epic,” not because of traditional feats of arms and the use of epic conventions, but because the epic highlights the personal psychological development of the hero, 68-71.


“Mirror Neuron,” en.wikipedia.org, for a discussion and bibliography.


Colapinto, 87.

Goleman, 98.

Goleman, 98.

Goleman, 100-101.

Goleman, 104-105.