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## THE STRUCTURE OF THE GILGAMESH EPIC

N.K. SANDARS, in the Introduction to his English translation of the *Gilgamesh Epic* (Penguin Books, 1960, reprinted 1962), describes it as 'the finest surviving poem from any period until the appearance of Homer's *Iliad*' (p. 8). And there will be general agreement with this judgement. Yet there have been surprisingly few attempts made to provide an analysis of its structure that sounds satisfactory. I suspect that this may be due on the one hand to the caution of scholars which keeps them from adventuring on ground where hypotheses have to be advanced on not completely solid evidence; and on the other to the haste with which writers who are not specialists in Semitic literature but want to use the material of the poem relevant to their own interests (e.g. depth psychology) accept or advance interpretations which cannot survive any close examination of the text. Hence, I think, the Epic has not been generally appreciated for its own sake, but has tended too often to be discussed either because of incidental features, such as the family-resemblance between its Deluge story and that in Genesis, or because of certain themes taken in isolation from their precise place in the structure of the poem. Sandars's *Introduction* not only avoids this, but also provides the right kind of background information and sensible comment which the reader requires in order to appreciate the poem. But even he considers that from a structural point of view, it is merely 'divided into loosely connected episodes covering the most important events in the life of the hero' (op. cit. p. 30). In his account of the story, he does bring out the central features of the episodes and provides a generally illuminating commentary on them. However, I think the poem has a much greater unity of structure, corresponding to a greater coherence of conception, (despite its being a compilation) than would appear even from Sandars's most useful introduction.

This is what I have tried to show in this essay viz., that Gilgamesh's life-journey is a 'progress'. Hence I have only repeated as much of the interpretation of particular episodes or figures as was necessary to bring out the place of each in the overall structure of the epic or, in other words, to show how each serves to advance the organically de-

veloping plot. Indeed, the general account of the structure of the epic which I give is not unlike that of Sandars; what I am adding consists mainly of the remarks intended to show that the succession of the episodes is not arbitrary, or even merely 'loosely-connected', but constitutes a sort of spiritual ascent from one level of experience to another, and that even apparently independent episodes, like the Flood narrative, serve (and not merely by 'accumulation') to develop the philosophic plot of the poem. In stressing this, I am aware that I may have made the Epic appear much more sophisticated than it in fact is. The picture of the human condition reflected in the substance of the poem is more brutal than will appear from my analysis of its structure. This, I think, has been conceived in *four* different ways:

1. R. Largetment holds that the composition of the poem is a function of the Liturgy: 'Certaines grandes mythes, telles que *Gilgamesh* et *l'Enuma Elish* sont composites, groupant artificiellement des themes divers dont le lien est constitué non pas par la trame interne du recit mais par le cadre externe des cérémonies au cours desquelles elles doivent être récitées'. (*Histoire des Religions*, Bloud & Gay, Vol. 4 p. 153).

The general thesis that myths are related to rites for which they provide a kind of metaphysical substructure – the myth describing a primordial event which is realised anew through its ritual reenactment – has been sufficiently demonstrated by such students of comparative religion as Mircea Eliade and Van der Leeuw. But it is perhaps going too far to identify purely and simply 'mythology' with 'metaliturgy' as M. Largetment does. (p. 164).

This essay will try to show that, at least in the particular case of the *Gilgamesh* epic, the episodes are not 'grouped artificially' but constitute a coherent progression built around a central theme to which the subsidiary themes are related in a harmonic fashion. This is, of course, not to deny that the sources of several episodes are divers; but the different elements have been cleverly orchestrated to form a unified whole. The 'anthology' is constructed around a central axis of thought.

2. Many have asserted that the epic is a Solar Myth. Thus F. Hommel confidently claims that: 'The twelve cantos of this magnificent poem stand in evident relation to the twelve signs of the Zodiac'. (Article '*Babylonia*', *Dict. of the Bible* (ed Hastings) p. 221). The relation, if it exists, is at least not as 'evident' as Mr. Hommel states, though the same claim, without any attempt at detailed demonstration is made by such authorities as Sir James Frazer, E.O. James, etc. Despite the fact that *Gilgamesh* is a servant of the sungod and that *Shamash* plays a considerable role in the poem, to interpret the whole poem as a solar

myth seems difficult: Gilgamesh's adventures appear to follow a different pattern to the sungod's. Further to identify the sections of the poem with parts of the sun's course hardly appears to illuminate its sense. Moreover, M. Virolleaud (*Legendes de Babylone et de Canaan*, p. 44) argues that the Zodiac is a much later invention and it is anachronistic to appeal to it for an explanation of the construction of the epic. The relation between the Gilgamesh Epic and Solar Myths is certainly more complex than that of a species to a genus. Some critics (e.g. de Liagre Böhr, *Das Problem Ewigen Lebens im Zyklus Und Epos des Gilgamesh*, Opera Minora, p. 234-262) claim there is evidence of a latent antagonism between different groups of gods reflected in the poem. It would, however, be misleading to try to over-rationalise the theology of the epic, and it might divert attention from the main theme which is concerned with Man.

3. The simplest account would be to assert, as Dr. Coutenau does, that the epic is merely an adventure story told purely for its entertainment value in the fashion of the Arabian Nights (L'Épopée de Gilgamesh p. 279). M. Coutenau easily disposes of some fanciful interpretations, and then concentrates on describing the historic and cultural context in which the poem was composed and, more questionably, on attempting to identify its geographical and other allusions with empirical data. Certain details which sound puzzling at first become in this way more comprehensible. But the point of view that the poem is inconsequential with regard to construction, will be automatically refuted should it prove possible to show that the poem has a sense and a structure (of whatever kind they be). To grasp its total significance, far from detracting from the imaginative appeal of the epic, may help to explain why it had such a hold on the minds of many peoples who lived far apart in space and time from the original milieu in which it was first composed.

4. The fourth point of view is that expressed by P. Grelot (RSR, Avril-Juin 1958, p. 202): 'On se tromperait lourdement si on lisait l'épopée de Gilgamesh comme une oeuvre gratuite. Toute une conception de l'existence s'y exprime ... l'épopée est en somme la traduction dramatisée d'une doctrine de la 'condition humaine' qui s'impose à la pensée mésopotamienne à l'époque même où les scribes sacerdotaux construisaient la synthèse d'histoire sacrée recueillie dans le Pentateuque.'

The doctrine of which the epic is a dramatised form is perhaps best presented in these four lines:

*Only the gods live forever with the Sun  
Mere man, his days are numbered.  
Whatever he may do, it is but wind:  
Already here thou art afraid of death. (III 142-5)*

To illustrate this doctrine, the poem describes throughout its length, Gilgamesh's search for an ever more abundant life which, however, is doomed to final frustration by death. C.G. Jung has said that 'The Epic of Gilgamesh describes the psychology of the power-complex with an unequalled mastery' (*L'homme à la decouverte de son âme*, p.205). This is true only if by 'power' is understood the control of the vital forces of man; for it is with these that Gilgamesh is concerned.

The Epic can be divided into two parts in each of which one term of the life/death antithesis is dominant.

The first six cantos describe essentially three victorious combats of Gilgamesh. In each, a crisis provoked by the gods threatens him with a paralysis of his vital energy. These threats, of increasing dimensions, are successively turned into stimuli towards more ambitious purposes. The challenge to the continuation of the kind of life he is leading at the crucial moment is met by a response consisting of a new search after a different and more intense kind of life. The possible (but hypothetical) interpretations of these three combats – against Enkidu, against Humbaba and against the Bull from Heaven – will be sketched later on.

The seventh and eighth cantos mark a turning-point in the poem. After his rejection of Ishtar's proposals, Gilgamesh is faced by a new crisis – provoked again by a direct intervention of the gods – which is of a different order to his previous ordeals. Gilgamesh is for the first time confronted with Death in a personal way. The special relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh will help explain why Gilgamesh is affected so personally by the death of his friend. There are long passages of lamentation and a description of the underworld, borrowed from another poem, Ishtar's descent into the underworld. From this point onwards there is, as it were a change of sign, from positive into negative: the erotic preoccupation which had run like a constant thread in the varied texture of the poem unifying together passages dealing with civilisation, social disorder, the fascination of foreign lands, relations between the gods and men and between men and animals, yields to an equally dominant obsession with death. After the departure of Enkidu, Gilgamesh is concerned not so much with the lust for life, the intensification of his existence, as with its indefinite continuation through the defeat of death. The same theme is continued but in a different key. The following cantos, describing essentially Gilgamesh's journey to the 'ancestor' Utnapishtim who holds the secret of immortality, consists again of three ordeals which Gilgamesh undergoes to reach his destination. The chief interest of this second part is its symbolic geography, the significance

of the setting of the paradisiac life from which mortals are excluded. It culminates in the account of the Deluge – again a borrowed story, like the evocation of the underworld, which is fitted into this broader context – Gilgamesh's failure in his enterprise, and (in the existing versions) his return to Uruk. Each of these episodes will be examined in turn to bring out the links between them and their place in the general structure of the epic.

#### PART ONE: LUST FOR LIFE

##### 1. *The Struggle with Enkidu: from animal to human life.*

(a) Gilgamesh: the germ of corruption in his constitution.

The poem opens with a presentation of Gilgamesh in a rather paradoxical light. The gods have dowered him with all the gifts ever given to men, with an apparently inexhaustible energy. But precisely because of this superabundant energy, his rule has become tyrannical and intolerable. He is 'the shepherd of his people'. But the shepherd has become a menace to his sheep. This unbalance in Gilgamesh is reflected in the ambiguous attitude of his people, as expressed in this opening passage, towards him. His inner disorder is producing social disorder in Uruk.

What is the source of this disproportion between his ambitions, the object of which is still for the moment obscure, and the proper fulfilling of his function as a human ruler? It is to be sought in the first place, perhaps, in the constitution of Gilgamesh himself.

The Gilgamesh round whom the myth was spun appears to have been a historical person: he appears third in the list of the first dynasty of Uruk and apparently had come to power through his own prowess. But it is the hero of the myth who is more interesting to us than the historical person.

His name has not been adequately explained: some have thought it an abbreviation of Gibilgamesh, Gibil being the god of fire. Jepsen interpreted it as 'the suffering and joyful man' – a beautiful and significant name but an uncertain interpretation. Not much light on Gilgamesh's nature can therefore be obtained from his name.

His parentage is more illuminating. He is the son of Ninsun a priestess of Shamash, (the sungod and god of justice, who is Gilgamesh's patron) and an expert in the explanation of dreams through her being linked with Adad, patron of diviners. However his father was not Ninsun's consort Lugulbanda, but Lilla, believed by Dr. Coutenau and other scholars to be a demon. Hence Gilgamesh, we are told, is only two-thirds a god, while a third of him is human.

This human third in his make-up contains the germ of corruption, for the slightest particle of humanity implies mortality, as later on the Scorpion-man points out to his wife. This theandric character of Gilgamesh is, it seems, at the root of his restlessness and unbalance. His power may be great enough to enable him to pour scorn on a goddess, but (unless he were to be completely deified) the human element in him contains the seed of mortality and will prevent him from attaining the fullness of life without end to which he aspires.

Yet his power is so expansive that his people complain about it to the gods. This power expresses itself chiefly through his sexual energy. Uruk protests that he 'leaves no virgin to her lover.' (I ii 16, 17) And this is the best test of his power; for 'among primitive peoples virginity belongs to the powerful, both because the average man does not trust his own power to take it himself and also because it belongs by right to the most powerful' (van der Leeuw *La Religion dans son essence et ses manifestations*, p. 225). Thus Gilgamesh's universal deflowering of the virgins of Uruk is the expression of the absolutism to which his power aspired.

(b) Enkidu: Rival into Brother.

The gods agree with the people of Uruk that Gilgamesh's power must be restored to its relative status. The method chosen to bring this about fits in very well with Mesopotamian conceptions of cosmic government. Aruru, the creator of the human race, is asked by Anu to 'raise a rival' for Gilgamesh. The Mesopotamians held that no individual monarch was inviolable; for within the Pantheon itself any god might become supreme, and this would carry as its consequence the dominance of his human steward as ruler of his city over other rulers. Whenever a particular god or city became for some reason, unfit, it was 'smitten with weapons' and a rival raised to replace it as the holder of supreme honour. The gods' decision to raise a rival to check Gilgamesh's abusive power is quite normal; it is the peculiar character of the rival raised in this instance which is of special interest.

'The goddess shaped in her heart an image of Anu, the great god of heaven; she then dampened her hands, modelled the clay and spat on it. Thus she shaped Enkidu, the strong, the hero, progeny of clay, fashioned by Ninurta.' Enkidu is the direct and immediate creation of the god Aruru and of Ninurta, the god of war who had also assumed the personality of Ningirsu, lord of wells and irrigation works. He is Gilgamesh's 'primitive brother', he is made up entirely of brute strength. It does not seem excessive to consider Enkidu as representing, partially, Gilga-

mesh's alter ego: 'He is like Gilgamesh to a hair' (II v 15); but Enkidu's whole being consists of the animal energy which is part of Gilgamesh's make-up. Enkidu 'with the gazelles eats grass ... with the animals his heart delights at the water.' This familiarity and affinity with the wild animals does not necessarily class Enkidu as a subhuman creature. Wild animals were not necessarily considered very inferior to men. The fear which they inspired, on the contrary, the threat they represented to town-life, led to their being dowered with a sacred character. Indeed Mesopotamian deities were originally given animal forms. Enkidu through his association with them belongs to a milieu which is at once sacred and outside, potentially even hostile to, civilisation.

(c) The call of civilisation.

The poem describes how Enkidu is drawn from this state of externality and implicit hostility into urbanised life. The process is accomplished in three stages each of which is illustrative of the poem's philosophy.

(1) The first person to establish contact, in the name of civilised humanity, with Enkidu is a hunter. This is not due to accident or merely to the desire for verisimilitude. Van der Leeuw has said: 'The savage animal belongs to the desert, to those domains of this world where peace does not reign. To domesticate is a religious act; it initiates them to other powers than those of the desert ... Hunting is not an utilitarian institution, but rather a compassion between man and animal, a co-operation the aim of which may be either domestication or the sacred meal' in which latter case it is to be seen rather as 'a conflict of forces' (op. cit. p.67) In the Gilgamesh epic, however, the hunter serves only to establish communication between Enkidu and Gilgamesh to whom he reports the existence of this creature in the desert.

(2) The next stage is the despatch of a hierodule who, through the instrumentality of 'that which is feminine in her' is to continue the process of his humanisation. Her role is again not simply a question of psychological realism, but has a symbolic value. 'Woman as hierodule, represents the community' remarks van der Leeuw (p. 225), referring to the Babylonian custom by which women had once a year to have intercourse with a stranger with the aim of increasing the power of her own community. Through his intercourse with the hierodule, Enkidu's strength is symbolically integrated into that of the urban group. The beasts depart from him, and he needs little persuasion to let himself be led to Gilgamesh and to enter the city of Uruk, glowingly presented to him by the hierodule.

(3) Enkidu's initiation into civilised community is accomplished by his struggle with Gilgamesh. At the 'door of the family house', at the threshold of one of those sexual orgies with which Gilgamesh was threatening the social order of Uruk, at this place of transition between outside and inside, Gilgamesh matches his strength against an indignant Enkidu, and triumphs.

At first it seems as if Gilgamesh's victory has frustrated the purpose of the gods; for the intended but defeated rival at once becomes his friend and 'servant'. It turns out, however, that the design of the gods has been fulfilled all the same in a paradoxical fashion; for the very fact that Enkidu has ceased to be an enemy and has become a friend produces a change in the behaviour-pattern of Gilgamesh himself. Henceforth, the combined energy of Enkidu and Gilgamesh is devoted to 'attack the lions so that the shepherds could rest at night.' (II iii 28-29). Enkidu has fulfilled the divine plan not by defeating Gilgamesh but by being himself defeated; not through the destruction of Gilgamesh's power, but through its conversion to higher ends.

Thus, for the first time we see this dialectic worked out in the poem. Before the appearance of Enkidu, Gilgamesh gave the impression of inner division and ambivalence, of an immensely gifted person devoting his gifts to inferior purposes. When Enkidu appears, he seems to embody exactly the lower tendencies of Gilgamesh. But once Enkidu has placed his powers 'in the service' of Gilgamesh, their action together appears perfectly 'integrated'. They turn away from the purely sexual exploits which were disturbing the social peace of Uruk to the protection of its honest inhabitants from the devastations of the animal world and the threat of beastliness against civilisation. The process of domestication and socialisation of the animal-man, with its twofold psychological and social dimensions, renders possible a fuller enjoyment of life for all. Gilgamesh's personal search has taken a new direction. Enkidu's conversion from barbarism to civilisation is coupled with a conversion of Gilgamesh's energy from disordered sexual ends to profitable social purposes. The social order of Uruk is restored at the same time as Gilgamesh's psychological balance through the simple transformation of Enkidu from a rival into a 'brother'.

## 2. *The struggle with Humbaba: the foreign threat to life.*

(a) Gilgamesh's struggle with and triumph over Enkidu is followed by a more bitter struggle and remarkable triumph over a creature still more redoubtable and 'divine', *Humbaba*: the giant employed by Enlil as

guardian of the Cedar Forest. The importance of this episode is evident from the length at which it is treated; it occupies three tablets.

Its motive and meaning are not made explicit in the poem; it is rather the mysteriousness of the enterprise which is dwelt upon. Gilgamesh and Enkidu having freed themselves from their more brutal tendencies and fused their forces decide: 'Let us destroy all the evil in the land!' This vast and ambitious aim is actually concretized in the decision to destroy Humbaba, 'whose mouth is fire and whose breath is *death*.' This agent of Enlil is obviously considered by them to be a force threatening the life of the land, but its nature is cryptic. Gilgamesh sets out 'to fight a battle which he does not know, to travel a road which he does not know.' (III ii 13-14). He knows only that it is the will of Shamash, his patron-god, and a path leading to glory.

In an attempt at unravelling the enigma of this expedition in the light of its geographical and cultural setting, Virolleaud (p. 39-43) tentatively suggests that the episode may represent a conflict between two cultures and two religions – that of the lowlands against the highlands. Gilgamesh and Enkidu leave their land and travel a considerable distance to reach the Cedar Forest which Enlil had appointed Humbaba to guard; they are filled with a mixture of fear and admiration at the tall trees which rise to the heavens. Because there are no forests in Mesopotamia the fearful mystery which forests naturally possessed was enhanced through their association with the forces threatening the life of the nation, lurking in foreign lands. Whether this sociological explanation is at its basis, or not the episode provides an early indication of the division within the Pantheon, of the respective domains of the different theocracies to which Shamash and Enlil belong, which again appears in later sections of the poem, as Grelot and de Liogre Böhr maintain. The themes which become dominant later are skilfully suggested in undertones from the start: subtly we are made to feel that the sungod's servant's triumph against the emissaries of the greater gods will, in the end, turn out to have been temporary.

The difficulty of the exploit is strongly stressed. Gilgamesh addresses a solemn prayer to Shamash for protection: his mother reproaches Shamash with having given her son a 'restless heart'. The prudent elders of Uruk advise him to stay at home. Enkidu himself is reticent – and we might well infer that this doubt corresponds to a certain hesitation within Gilgamesh's 'lower self'. (Cfr. IV, v where Gilgamesh needs encouragement) This hesitation acquires considerable importance later on.

Not only is Enkidu's hand paralysed as he seeks to open Humbaba's gate — a well-known symbol of force — as a punishment, or at least a consequence of his previous hesitation, but later he attributes the death he feels approaching to Shamash's displeasure at it. Enkidu, as again will be clear later on, has not been fully conquered by civilised life. He recoils before work and the need of effort to ensure sustenance. This persistent hankering after the gloryless ease of animal-like life prevents him from rising to the maximum human stature of 'god-like' heroism. His hesitation is both a symptom of loss of vital power and a cause of still further loss. At any rate it is not through his brute strength but through the superior determination of Gilgamesh that Humbaba will be defeated. The humanity of our heroes, which contains the seed of their mortality, is kept constantly before our eyes even in their most heroic exploits.

(b) The rejection of Ishtar.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu eventually secure a dramatic triumph over Humbaba who seeks to preserve his life at the price of his liberty; but Enkidu insists that he be put to death. This victory brings on the recurrent crisis through which Gilgamesh has to pass, and at the same time it brings out the close connection of the episode with the theme of sexual love as a source of life which gives its unity of feeling to this part of the poem. Again it comes with a delightful paradoxical turn typical of the masterly conception and construction of the Epic.

The last lines of the Humbaba episode are missing; but its sequel is that Ishtar throws herself at Gilgamesh's feet and begs him to become her husband. Gilgamesh insultingly refuses her, recalling at length her deceptions. His triumph has brought the temptation of regression into his former style of life in which he sought self-expression through sexual excess. But now the man who regularly violated all the virgins of Uruk has become capable of rejecting Ishtar herself. He has risen above the deceitful pleasures she offers. He describes her in terms recalling those used in exorcisms of the demons 'Lamashtu' which so terrified the Mesopotamian imagination. A complete reversal of perspective has taken place in his psychology: the 'life' he is still more ardently seeking than ever before is to be found not through the conquest of Ishtar, for she offers pleasures which do not last, but through her total rejection. This marvellous metanoia is nonetheless fraught with danger as the denouement is to demonstrate. Through the final katharsis Gilgamesh has come close to the limits of what is attainable by mortal human beings.

### 3. *The Struggle against the Celestial Bull.*

(a) The gods allow Gilgamesh a further outrage against their designs before deciding to impose a more thorough check on his soaring ambitions. Ishtar obtains from Anu the despatch of the 'Celestial Bull' against Gilgamesh and it makes a ravaging descent upon Uruk – but it, too, is finally killed by Gilgamesh. The killing of the Bull, whose associations with procreation are too well-known to require underlining, is described as if it had a quasi-sacrificial character. His heart is placed before the sun-god and an offering is made to Lugulbanda.\* Meanwhile Ishtar organises lamentations and pronounces a terrible curse on Gilgamesh before the assembled people. Gilgamesh replies defiantly telling Ishtar that he would tear out her own thigh, if he could, as he had done to the bull. Such an act of hubris could scarcely pass without provoking divine punishment. Gilgamesh's expressed contempt for Ishtar, who represents within the framework of nature-cults the image of fertility, after his slaying of the Bull, is followed precisely by a loss of vital-force. Again this takes place in an at first surprising way – through the death of Enkidu.

#### (b) The death of Enkidu.

Ishtar had indeed asked for the death of Gilgamesh himself. This had provoked disagreement in the council of the gods – which in Mesopotamian eyes will be reflected in and responsible for disorder in human affairs. Eventually they decide that it is Enkidu who is to pay the penalty. The decision seems strange at first blush, but there are three considerations which should be kept in mind.

1. For the early Mesopotamians, justice was always somewhat arbitrary: the good life held the promise but not the certainty of tangible rewards.

2. Enkidu himself, as has already been hinted, regards his death as the punishment of his constant tendency towards regression into a sub-human life. When his dreams reveal prophetically to him his oncoming death, he again expresses his regret at having been seduced into the civilized world and his nostalgia for wild primitive life. Enkidu had found work hateful, the demands of human life exacting, and its sacrifices costly. He curses the hunter and the harlot who had been respon-

\* M. Virolleaud asserts that Shamash plays no part in this episode and 'on dirait que Shamash se détourne du roi d'Ourouk qui vient d'encourir le ressentiment d'Ishtar et qu'il prend, lui Shamash, fait et cause pour la déesse' (p.44) This is contradicted by VII, 10-14 if Speiser's translation is accepted.

sible for his departure from the desert. Yet he recognises that this is an error; for Shamash later persuades him to turn the curse into a blessing; after all, a 'glorious' death, is better than a bestial death because one will live forever in the memory of the people. It is vacillation which in his weakness and weakness is itself a foretaste of death.

3. Some lines from the second tablet (V. 28 foll.) are worth remembering: 'For Ishhara the bed is laid out. Gilgamesh (---) at night (---) As he approaches Enkidu stands in the street to bar the way to Gilgamesh (---) in his night.' It was for this very purpose that Enkidu had been specially created and by now it has been thoroughly fulfilled: his *raison d'être*, as it were, has ceased to exist; nor is it so unnatural that his death should be a satisfactory means of Ishtar's receiving revenge. More profoundly, Enkidu was created with reference to Gilgamesh; through out his existence he is vitally linked to Gilgamesh; frequently they are called 'the two brothers'. It is comprehensible that his destruction should affect Gilgamesh deeply, for Enkidu had become almost part of himself. Through Enkidu's intermediary, the gods are also striking at Gilgamesh according to the principle which they enuntiate later in the context of the Deluge: 'Punish man lest he get too wild. But do not be too severe lest he perish' (Likewise before despatching the Bull, the gods had made sure that only part of the population would perish and that famine would not quite destroy Uruk as a result). There are other verbal parallels between the collective punishment of an over-bearing Humanity, through the destruction of a large part of it by means of the deluge, and the individual punishment of an overbearing Gilgamesh, through the destruction of Enkidu: for instance, both the gods and Gilgamesh (in the periods of six days and six nights of mourning which are observed in either case) lament over the fact that 'mankind had turned into clay' and that 'Enkidu had turned into clay', respectively, i.e. reverted to the inchoate state to which they belonged before creation. A whole tablet (VIII) is devoted to Gilgamesh's lamentations over Enkidu whose death involves Gilgamesh very personally indeed: 'Since he is gone, I find no life'. For to quote van der Leeuw, 'Death, as a weakening of power does not affect only the deceased but all those related to him — the deceased has carried power away with him; one must now communicate to life a new power'. It is this *new* power which Gilgamesh will seek throughout the rest of the poem. With the loss of Enkidu, Gilgamesh loses his previous desire of enjoying life at the purely human level; he can no longer be satisfied with a perishable glory; he needs nothing less than immortality.

It is, however, less death itself than the dream-vision of the underworld which Enkidu had revealed to him that frightens Gilgamesh: the complaint which he repeats to the celestial creatures met later on is that the glory which Enkidu had obtained in their joint enterprises did not imply a glorious afterlife. Annihilation would be better than a continued existence in a house from which no one ventured forth, a house of darkness where dust was food and clay served for sustenance unless nourishment was received from the living. Yet there lived the mighty rulers of the past, all the former representatives of Anu and Enlil – even Etana, the King who had ascended the skies on the wings of an eagle – deprived of the crowns, and serving instead of being served. Human glory was not enough to exempt one from such an existence which was a curse rather than a blessing. This disillusion with 'fame and a name' which had become his chief spur to action after his disillusion with sexual adventure leads him into a search for the thing which he now feels matters supremely: the means of an indefinite prolongation of his life. The vision of the underworld is once more not a picturesque description supplied for its own sake; it is the decisive argument which convinces Gilgamesh of the vanity of the human glory he had been pursuing, as the aim of life, in the previous episodes of the poem. Having already seen how each of these episodes was, by its subject-matter, closely connected with the central theme of the Epic and how the succession of episodes marked a progression leading finally to this dramatic crisis, which constitutes the turning-point of the poem, the whole of the first part, i.e. the picture of the most glorious earthly life and the payment which it receives in the afterworld, can be seen to have been necessary to provide the starting point of the second part.

#### PART TWO: THE DEFEAT OF DEATH

The second Part of the poem is occupied mainly by the account of Gilgamesh's journey to the dwelling-place of his ancestor Utnapishtim who holds the secret of immortality. He has to pass through three regions before getting there.

##### 1. *Mount Mashu and the scorpion-men.*

Gilgamesh begins by travelling Westward and following the course of the sun (IX, iv, 46) so that the sun-god can converse with him throughout the day's length. But Shamash's words are by no means encouraging: 'Gilgamesh where are you running to? The life you are seeking you will

not find!' Despite this pessimistic augur from his patron-god, Gilgamesh persists. He reaches Mount Mashu (i.e. Twins), the mountain which marks the limits of the inhabited world, not far from the circular ocean which surrounds the earth, Gilgamesh has thus travelled much farther than in his expedition against Humbaba and has arrived at the door of the divine domains. Mountains were, for the Mesopotamians, by nature, sacred; their peaks were the first to be created in the sense that they were the first to appear out of the chaos of the primordial waters. But the Mountain of Twins is not an ordinary mountain. 'Its summit supports the vault of heavens' and its base reaches down to the lower regions. It is the Western door of the world, the gateway through which the sun sets. These gates are guarded by the scorpion-men, two strange and huge creatures whose 'brilliance inspires fear and whose gaze is mortal'. Grelot likens them to the secondary gods who open the portals of the Mountains for the Sun rising between twin-peaks in archaic Mesopotamian glyptics.

Though, as the line just quoted indicates, the normal passage would involve death, the door of the mountain is opened for Gilgamesh and he follows a dark passage – apparently that of Shamash at night. T.H. Gaster (*Les plus anciens contes de l'humanité*, p. 57) concludes that Gilgamesh's route must be that which Shamash follows to reach the East for sunrise. But, as has been said before, the poem seems to have little direct likeness to solar myths. Grelot points out that Gilgamesh emerges by the banks of the Ocean, having crossed the limits of the world accessible to humans: 'Nobody has ever carried out this voyage; none have ever traversed the mountain paths' (IX iii 8-9), and concludes that the symbolical geography of the epic here derives its sense from empirical geography, since the 'Western Mountain' constituted for the Mesopotamians the final boundary of the known world. The point that interests us is that Gilgamesh has begun to travel outside the land of mortals. He walks in the Mountain for twelve double hours, and at the beginning we are told, 'Dense is the darkness and there is no light'. Gradually light filters through until at the twelfth double hour it is broad daylight. Grelot concludes (on evidence that is not explicit in the poem) that this is a land of perpetual day. At any rate, it is a celestial region, the marvels of which make the mortality of Gilgamesh all the more striking and painful. Night, the image of death, does not darken the land of the immortals. Gilgamesh's dazzlement shows that he is a stranger here; it is not the home of humans but of gods.

## 2. *The Garden of Precious Stones and the Barmaid Siduri.*

Having traversed the dark mountain, Gilgamesh finds himself in the land of delights – a marvellous garden where trees grow precious stones such as the lapislazuli, the blue-stone which enjoyed great prestige in Mesopotamia because of its cosmological significance: it is an image of the starry night and of the lunar god Sin, through connection with whom the stone is related to generation (Eliade p. 157) Other trees produce what look like bunches of grapes – the source doubtless of the ambrosiac drink which the celestial barmaid Siduri, whom Gilgamesh meets here, prepares for the gods. This garden is, however, not 'paradise', for Gilgamesh, after the tunnel of Night, has still a more difficult ordeal to go through before reaching Utnapishtim's dwelling-place – the crossing of the ocean of death. Largement relates the garden to the 'sacred wood' usually found on one of the seven storeys of the ziggurat, the symbolism of which is, according to him, the basis and central significance of *all* Mesopotamian mythology. If there is a reference to the Temple here, it fits in perfectly with the general drift of this part of the poem which is to stress that it is recourse to the will of the gods, through cultivating their friendliness, and not any human achievement however glorious, which might (perhaps) obtain the prize of immortality. At any rate, Siduri greets Gilgamesh with the leitmotiv of the advice which the celestial beings he encounters throughout the journey keep showering upon him: 'Gilgamesh, where are you running to? The life you are seeking you will not find. When the gods made man, they decreed death for man' (X iii, 3-5) Instead she urges him to rejoice in drink, women and the delights of the passing hour. It may be noted that this hedonistic advice is often offered to heroes in mythology as a *test*. Gilgamesh passes through it well; Siduri takes pity on him because of his determination and refers him to the boatman Urshanabi.

## 3. *The Waters of Death and the Boatman Urshanabi.*

'Difficult is the passage and deep the waters of death which block the approaches' of the place where Utnapishtim dwells (X. ii, 21-25) Once more we are told that no human had ever crossed this ocean, but Gilgamesh, as advised, obtains the help of the boatman Urshanabi. The name 'Urshanabi' means 'servant of Ea': Shanabi meaning 'two-thirds' which was one of the names Ea, 'son of the depths of the ocean and god of Wisdom', A curious incident here takes place: close to the boatman are the 'shut-abne' – two stone-images which seem to belong to the

boat and to be endowed with a magic power which helped the boat cross the waters of death. Perhaps their point in the poem is to stress that it is the power of the gods and not human achievement which determines the efficacy of means towards ends in this domain. Gilgamesh in a sudden fury breaks them to bits. It is tempting to see in this burst of impatience his obstinate refusal to accept this fact. Staffs have therefore to be used, for to touch the water is death, and the voyage lasts a month and a half. The poem continues to insist on the inaccessibility of the island to humans and on its distance (e.g. XI, i), calling Utnapishtim himself 'the distant'. The island is situated 'in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers', (XI, 195) i.e. at the source of the rivers which give fertility to Mesopotamia. Utnapishtim (whose name means 'faithful to the signs of the gods') according to de Liogre Böhr, belongs to a different heroic universe to that of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is the faithful servant of Shamash, while Utnapishtim is a favourite of Ea. He is a figure borrowed from a different age and ideological context to embody the impossible dream of mortal men; he is the exceptional survivor from primordial times who renders more dramatic the destiny which his descendant cannot escape. It is precisely to establish this point that Utnapishtim gives his account of the deluge, the place of which in the poem, like that of the dream of the underworld, is not an accident.

#### 4. *The Deluge.*

Mircea Eliade describes the place which the Deluge occupies in general in the mythological view of the world thus: 'Emptied of its creative seeds and forces humanity would become etiolated, decrepit and sterile. Instead of the slow regression into subhuman forms the deluge leads to an instantaneous reabsorption in the waters in which sins are purified and out of which a regenerated humanity will be born' (op. cit. p. 176) Though this is doubtless true in general, the Deluge in the Gilgamesh epic occurs to illustrate in concrete fashion something different. Just as the Epic does not have for its framework a solar myth, and yet the nature of the sungod is not irrelevant to the fortunes of his servant Gilgamesh, in a rather similar fashion the death-and-rebirth aspect of the Deluge, though not without interest in the context of the poem, is not its central feature in this instance. The Deluge finds its place very fittingly in the dramatic schema of the poem because it shows that Utnapishtim has secured immortality in virtue of a particular conjunction of events which was hardly repeatable and perhaps even unique. A special decree of the gods was responsible in a context of events which does

not resemble that of Gilgamesh. Utnapishtim had received a reward for his exceptional fidelity to the gods amidst an unfaithful people. A special favour of the gods spared him. He constructed his ark according to specific divine instructions. The saving ship was not an ordinary one: it is called an 'Ekallu', which means 'the great house' i.e. temple or palace. Its dimensions and shape recall the storeyed temples of Babylonia which makes Largetment think that its aim is to extol the salvific power of the temple (art. cit. p. 153) Before landing Utnapishtim offers a sacrifice 'on the summit of the Ziggurat of the mountain'. 'The gods caught wind of the odour, the gods inhaled the good odour; the gods like flies clustered on the offering'. (XI, 157) Utnapishtim becomes one of their company: 'Previously Utnapishtim was a human; now Utnapishtim and his wife have become like us the gods'. (XI, 193-4). Gilgamesh, though he is the servant of Shamash, is not on such friendly terms with the greater gods Anu, Enlil and Ea. As Utnapishtim tells him: 'As for you, who will assemble the gods for your sake, so that you may find what you are looking for?' (XI, 197-8) The exploits of man are not enough to ensure this free gift of the gods. The deluge story is thus not a digression from the main theme, or incidental to it, but it brings out the contrast between the kinds of man Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh were, between the devout and obedient fidelity to the instructions of the greater gods of the older hero and the somewhat Promethean character of the younger who wishes, as it were, to steal the secret of immortality by his own endeavours. From this follows the consequent contrast between their fates.

##### *5. The failure of Gilgamesh and his return to Uruk.*

Utnapishtim is certain that Gilgamesh's search is vain and to prove it he imposes on him an impossible test. Gilgamesh's first hope is for immortality. In order to gain it, he is invited to lead as a trial the sleepless life of the immortals: 'Do not lie down for six days and six nights'. But Gilgamesh has hardly sat down crosslegged than, fatigued by his efforts, sleep, the image and presage of death, overwhelms him. Yet prompted by his wife to pity for Gilgamesh and admiration for his bravery in arriving thus far, Utnapishtim agrees to reveal an alternative secret - that of regeneration. Gilgamesh must 'wash his dirty fleece in water, cast off his skins to be carried away by the sea, dress a cloak of good health'. Next he is told, 'There is a plant immersed in the 'Apsu'; its root is like that of the 'nerprun'; its thorn like that of the rose pierces the hand'. Its name is 'the old man becomes young'. Gilgamesh is asked

to pluck it from the depths of the sea (XI 258-270) The Plant of Life is an idea easily arrived at: there are herbs which cure disease; by natural extension a plant is imagined which cures death itself and restores not only health but also youth. Equally naturally, the plant of life rises out of the water, the primordial and regenerative element. Gilgamesh succeeds in this supreme exploit; but he does not eat the herb immediately for he proposes to take it away with him and plant it in Uruk. He intends to convert a *personal* into a social benefit; it shows he still misunderstands the special character of divine gifts.

The poem now proceeds to an ironic but not despairing conclusion. On the first evening of his return journey, Gilgamesh seeks to refresh himself in a pool of water and while he is bathing the plant is stolen by a serpent. Because it crawls on earth, whence it is thought to be born, the serpent has been always especially associated with the mysteries of death. Because of its likeness to the phallus and the rarity of its carcass, it has been related to the mysteries of regeneration. The Epic provides an amusing, if somewhat acid, explanation of how the serpent obtained the secret of regeneration at the expense of man. It is a grim touch of humour which well illustrates the spirit of the epic: how chance, like a conjuror, magnifies in a tragicomic way a minor fault into a major disaster.

De Liogre Böhr has argued that the present conclusion is not the original one which described the death of the hero crowned with glory but still a perishable man. At present the last lines take us back to the introduction: the rhetorical device of 'inclusio' points the moral of the story: Immortality can only be secured through apotheosis, which depends entirely on the will of the gods. Humans must be content with merely human achievement. Gilgamesh had been accompanied on his return journey by a sailor, cursed by Utnapishtim, who becomes an eternal exile in this world. Gilgamesh proudly conducts the immortal spirit round the great walls he had constructed for his city Uruk. The pessimism is bitter-sweet. After the restlessness and élan of his excursion into the world of the immortals he returns to his commitments in the everyday life of men. The ending is not totally unhappy or devoid of hope: the initial sexual and social unbalance has been put in order and his ambitions moderated within human limits.