Psychoanalytic and Anthropological Considerations of Gilgamesh

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A Lost Illusion

By

Dieter Bürgin

Translated from German by Sophie Leighton,
London

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‘Story-telling reveals meaning while avoiding the error of naming it’
(Hannah Arendt, 1996, p. 22).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Written neither from an Assyriological, nor a historical or theological perspective, this book stems from a psychoanalyst's fundamental interest in one of the earliest narratives of humanity to have survived in written form. What does this story tell us about conscious and unconscious experience and about people's socio-cultural relations and relational structures in comparison to ours today?

The ancient Orient refers to a cultural realm that is defined by the use and dissemination of cuneiform script, while Mesopotamia specifically—with the principal languages Sumerian and Akkadian—designates the region between the River Euphrates and the River Tigris (Krebernik, 2012). The neopolitical revolution, characterised by a settled way of life, agriculture, and animal husbandry, brought village settlements and the domestication of plants and animals, as well as the manufacture of vessels. A large, half-moon-shaped landscape stretched from the Levant across south-east Anatolia to the Persian Gulf, where the rainfall was too low for rain-irrigated agriculture, which is why the fertile emerging country had to be artificially irrigated for arable use. In around 3500 BC, the first city-states developed in Southern Mesopotamia, each with its own prince or king. Subsequently, ancient oriental rulers assumed the title of gods. In around 3300 BC, cuneiform script was invented. It was initially used mainly for administrative purposes, that is, for documentation relating to inventories and lists of possessions, taxes, state treaties, or legal codices (such as the Code of Hammurabi [2004]). In around 2650 BC, the first traces were found of a Sumerian and Akkadian literature, which encompassed myths, epics, and incantations or hymns. This was followed by the Akkadian Empire with the Akkadian language. At that time *oral stories* about Gilgamesh were composed.

Myths can be attributed with many meanings. They often involve battles against (over-)powerful adversaries, quests for immortality or eternal youth, or journeys in the underworld. Their heroes are brave, and their births are usually miraculous; they often originate from a divine mother (sometimes also a divine father).

Mesopotamian myths are among the earliest preserved texts. They are likely to date from the period 4000–3000 BC, when the first cities were built and kings were accorded divine status.

The polytheistic world view of that time is not all that easy to empathise with today. The gods may have played a greater role in everyday life, as they were made responsible for events; they often intervened in the course of everyday life or relationships, and they gave counsel.

In these myths, action generally progresses slowly and peacefully; it is reported in a linear and uni-layered way. The dreams that are told usually anticipate future events. Repetition is an important mode of expression. Repetitions serve to reinforce the intensity of the tale and mostly they result in an action. Numbers, especially sevens, seem to be highly significant in the mythic texts. It may have been a primary goal of the myths to ‘fire the imagination of those who listen or read’ (McCall, 1990, p. 78).

The Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh epic*—inscribed on clay or stone tablets—was formed of the *Sumerian poems* that emerged in around 2500–3000 BC. These were self-contained individual stories (e.g. Gilgamesh and Akka, Gilgamesh and the Netherworld; Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven; Gilgamesh and Huwawa; The Death of Gilgamesh). They were extensively and sometimes directly worked into the Old Babylonian version (circa 1800 BC) and into the Ninevite version (in 600–1000 BC).

Old Babylonian time, the kingdom of Hammurabi, begins circa 1800 BC. Akkadian becomes the literary language. In around 1700 BC, some heterogeneous sections gave rise to the *Old Babylonian version* of the Gilgamesh epic. From the Old Babylonian period—between 1800 and around 1595 BC—there are eleven cuneiform script tablets that deal with the themes of the Gilgamesh epic. The tale of the Flood-hero Atrahasis was integrated into the tale of Utanapishti. From the mid-Babylonian period (c. 1650 to c. 1025 BC) there are known to be eighteen, mainly very fragmentary, texts, while from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian period (around 900–539 BC) there are around seventeen texts that do not all correspond to the standard version. The scribes of King Assurbanipal (669–627 BC) assembled the clay tablets dating back to the period of Sumerian culture, i.e. to the third millennium BC, into a unified composition.

In around 1200 BC, the *Ninevite version* was conceived—probably by *Sîn-leqi-unninni*—in which the material had been shaped as a unified artwork with an internal drama. Around 116 clay tablets have been preserved. Since the compilation of this *twelve-tablet epic*, there has been no further fundamental development. The Ninevite twelve-tablet version was discovered in the library of the Assyrian King Assurbanipal in an excavation mound in the former capital, Nineveh. However, it is only preserved in fragments—almost one fifth is missing—although it can be completed from tablet fragments of other versions. Undoubtedly, new tablet fragments are continuing to emerge. It remains possible that at some later date a complete version of the epic will become available. It can justifiably be said that all these cuneiform script tablets deal with *the oldest preserved narrative texts of humanity*. The most recent copies of the epic originate from the period approximately 150 years before Christ, and the last securely handed-down cuneiform text can be dated to 75 BC.

Interestingly, no traces have been found of a translation into either Greek or Aramaic, even though Gilgamesh's name appeared in Greek in an Aramaic Qumram text from the beginning of the second century AD. The epic came to an end with the demise of cuneiform script. Nevertheless, cuneiform clay tablets of the epic were scattered across large regions of the ancient world, such that there are many recognisable intersections with the texts of the Old Testament, the Odyssey and even the *Tales of the Thousand and One Nights*.

Until the period of the Akkadian dynasty (c. 2350–2150 BC), Mesopotamia consisted in a multiplicity of competing city-states. The rulers were constantly occupied with the insurgents of various Babylonian cities and shifting coalitions. Only the summation of their quarrels led to the formation of an absolutist centralising state. The administration and the military were directly subordinate to the kings. As large economic centres with temples and palaces as well as legions of craftspeople, the major cities had to carry out detailed accounting. Script was first introduced for producing alphabetical lists (such as the list of Sumerian kings), then later also for the names of years and kings' inscriptions, as well as finally for literary texts. The rulers increasingly claimed to be gods or to have been instated by them. More particularly, the deification of deceased rulers was the order of the day.

The major steps of cultural development in Old Mesopotamia are summarised in Table 1:

Old Mesopotamia:

6000–4000 BC	Ubaid culture
4000–3500 BC	Early Uruk
3500–3000 BC	Late Uruk with regional centres
3000–2500 BC	Early dynasties with city-states
2500 BC	Regional states
2500–2000 BC	First larger 'kingdoms'

(modified from Scott 2017)

Table 1

Trade, denser settlement, and the social hierarches that ensued required a form of accounting. It was not until late in the history of humanity, i.e. around 3200 BC, that script was invented as a kind of memory aid on cylinder seals with engraved symbols. After scarcely 200 years, a system developed from this that could record not only objects but the names of things. As the bearer of verbal meanings, script strikes 'a special relationship with the world of language as well as with the world of the image' (Loprieno, 2007, translated quotations). A first alphabet was created by scribes and soon the first documents emerged. (In the Sumerian poems of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is often still addressed as Gilgamesh's servant.)

The Akkadian language superseded Sumerian. The *Atrahasis epic*, which grapples with the history of humanity and the cosmos from the beginnings up to the present day, as well as with the question of meaning, was composed in Akkadian and was later substantially incorporated into the Gilgamesh epic. The images of wildness, despotism, and tyranny contrasted with civilisation and justice/morality. The representations of women, once chiefly goddesses, mutated into those of mother, whore, or goddess. A revolt against the human condition, especially in relation to the question of whether to accept death or rail against it, became a major theme.

The first excavations in Uruk were carried out by Harry Layard in 1844. In 1891 the first collection of texts was produced by Paul Haupt. Peter Jensen then put forward the first translation in 1900.

The first German translation of the Gilgamesh epic by Albert Schott appeared in 1934 in Reclam's Universal-Bibliothek and its sixth edition was published in 1989. The first major German-language free adaptation by Raoul Schrott was published in 2001 (all three versions together, i.e. the Sumerian poems, the Old Babylonian version and the Ninevite standard text).

Since then, new fragments have been discovered, and the knowledge of Akkadian grammar and vocabulary has increased. Andrew R. George created a completely new foundation in 2003 with a monumental new edition of all the texts. New translations became necessary. In 2005, Stefan Maul put forward a new translation of the original Babylonian texts only. The earlier practice of filling lacunae in the Ninevite version with texts from the Old Babylonian transmission was also abandoned in Röllig's German translation (2009), which refers only to the Ninevite version, a product of the late period of Babylonian–Assyrian culture from the first millennium BC. A complete textual reconstruction is not yet possible even today despite the vast work of Andrew George. Around one third of the original text is still missing. Six Sumerian Gilgamesh tales that resemble earlier sections of the Gilgamesh epic are briefly summarised by Röllig.

Of the Ninevite version, which was the main focus particularly between the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium BC, over 200 fragmentary clay tablets have so far been excavated. Although it is accepted that one author has compiled a lot of material and assembled it into the epic, the transitions from one episode to another are often relatively crude. The entire text can be summarised into *twelve main tablets*. The twelfth tablet is a supplement that largely corresponds to a translation of the Sumerian poem 'Gilgamesh and the netherworld'. Nevertheless, it reveals a poetic style with firm, formulaic phrases, and repetitions.

The following explanations are based on the translations of George, Maul, Schrott,[1] and Röllig.

The Gilgamesh epic describes the human being's basic dispositions, and therefore aspects of the human condition (twelve-tablet version or Old Babylonian fragments). The first texts were found in the mid-nineteenth century during excavations in Nineveh. This showed that the Bible was not the oldest source to have reported the Flood and it was more clearly understood that Old Testament texts fall within the sphere of influence of Mesopotamian writings. From a historical viewpoint, the Biblical material, especially the books of the Old Testament, is neither Christian nor Jewish but 'a collection of ancient Eastern texts—a long-term memory-sediment of the Western world' (Gerhards, 2013, p. 9, translated quotation).

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[1] Schrott compiled texts from three developmental periods: the Sumerian poems and the Old Babylonian version, as well as the Ninevite standard text, and constructed from them a new self-contained entity.

The Gilgamesh epic has been transmitted in several fragments in the *Akkadian* language from the Old Babylonian period. First came a series of Gilgamesh tales in the *Sumerian* language. Their main theme can be characterised as the *futility of the quest for physical immortality*, or the problem of living in the face of one's own mortality.

The tale of Gilgamesh is the story of a psychic development. The epic has an educational value since, whether told or read, it allows transient identifications by the recipients with the epic's characters. It was evidently highly popular and widely circulated in the Middle East from around 2000 to around 600 BC. Myths of this kind also have a therapeutic potential because they are the powerful, creative expression of human experiences and longings, making life easier to live and transmitting values (Pruyser/Luke, 1982).

There are *many connections with the Book of Genesis*. At several points a comparison of the ancient Biblical story with the Gilgamesh epic can be made: first, eternal life is connected with the enjoyment of a legendary magic plant—the plant of life in Gilgamesh and the Tree of Life in the Bible (Gerhards, 2013); second, incarnation is a process that starts from earth or clay; third, there is the Flood. The Gilgamesh epic seems to have been written largely by a single author, while the texts of the Old Testament (with priestly and non-priestly elements) were produced by a wide variety of people and probably originate from the 3rd century BC.

By envisioning what it means to be human, the epic amplifies the possibilities for insight into the human realm and into the basic questions of humanity.

Through its expressions about humanity, this ancient oriental literary masterpiece attains a worldwide literary significance.

In the Gilgamesh epic, the human condition is determined by an order established by the gods. We could refer to a pre-diluvian and a post-diluvian order. Gilgamesh takes on a bridging role between these two orders. In the Gilgamesh epic, little is said about the order of creation but instead about the pre-diluvian order (seven wise men laid the foundations for the city wall of Uruk; Gilgamesh learns from Utanapishti about the orders before the Flood). The city of Uruk may have been understood as a common mid-point and cradle of human civilisation. *Uruk's city wall* is 9.5km long and consists of a strong 5-metre adobe wall with at least 900 half-towers. It comprises an area of approximately 5.5 km^2. It seems that only Rome under the Emperor Hadrian was a bigger city than Uruk.

Gods and men were regarded as complementary beings. In physical terms, a resemblance was assumed between human beings and gods; they were made of the same material. But only the gods were viewed as immortal. The image of the human being could only have been partly conceived in an individualistic way. The individual was firmly integrated in the community. Nevertheless, the gods can be divided into pro-human and anti-human ones. Each group limits the other's power. As *projective surfaces of intrapsychic conditions,* they illustrate the *contradictoriness of the human inner world,* the chaotically conflict-laden elements and perhaps also the individual's relationship to the community. The gods constitute the personified powers of fate to which the human being is powerlessly subjected as part of the human condition.

The existing ancient Assyrian *topographical representations* may have emerged from a block of mainland that formed a round, flat plate surrounded by an orbital salt-water ocean (Schrott, 2001).

Representations of the underworld were complex and heterogeneous. Death separated the body from each individual dead spirit that entered the underworld and remained banished there for eternity. The dead soul's situation improved in accordance with the number of offspring the living person had brought into the world. A death by fire was considered bad because this completely dissolved the dead soul. The dead souls' needs were thought about in a similar way to those of the living person. Social status in this life was essentially transferred into the afterlife. Often a king's entire retinue was buried with him. The city of the dead lay under the ground. Ereshkigal and her husband Nergal lived there as queen and king. On the way to the city of the dead, seven gates watched over by gatekeepers had to be passed. An underworld river that had to be crossed with the help of a ferryman is also described. The city of the dead was regarded as a gloomy, rather dusty, and muddy place in which dead souls could only derive any happiness from the memory of their offspring.

Storytelling is one of the human being's primal needs. This is how experiences are addressed and shared. In the history of humanity, it may have been common for experiences undergone over a long period to be passed down by oral tradition, i.e. as unstructured narratives, and later potentially also by certain signs insofar as these were suitable for the purpose. Only the recorded past, chiselled in stone, allowed access to narrative, and then only within the bounds of literacy.

We know nothing in regard to this earliest handed-down epic about the motives for having written it down or the authors who engraved it into the clay or stone. This is exactly why it holds a special fascination. To many people it triggers a special emotion, in which the past is envisioned in an eerie way.

In a letter to Katharina Kippenberg in 1916, Rilke wrote: ‘Gilgamesh is tremendous: I have familiarised myself with the original text edition and I think it one of the finest that can be encountered. From time to time, I tell it to someone or other, the whole account, and every time I have the most astounded listeners. Burckhardt’s summary is not entirely felicitous; it lacks some of the greatness and significance—I feel: I tell it better. And it engages me’ (1954, pp. 191–192, translated quotation).

Rilke also wrote to Helene von Nostitz (1916): ‘as a summary of an ancient Assyrian poem … I have immersed myself in the precise scholarly translation (by Ungnad) and in these truly tremendous fragments I have experienced some of the greatest proportions and figures to have been conjured up by poetry in any era. What I would really like to do is tell it to you … the little Insel volume… unslain though the actual power of the five-thousand-year-old poem. In the (presumably excellently translated) fragments things happen and are seen and are feared on a really massive scale, and even the extensive textual lacunas seem somehow constructive, by keeping apart the wonderfully massive fragments. This is the epic of the fear of death, arisen in the mists of time among human beings, as the first living creatures for whom the separation of death and life had become definitive and fateful …I have been living for weeks almost entirely under its spell’ (p. 99).

Independently of the process of literary creation, an orally transmitted text, once written down, underpins the exegesis of those that follow it. It can no longer be erased or altered, and it forms a starting point. If it is directly told, the narrator can be asked questions.

Thought relies on images, metaphors, and figures. The sum of visual impressions is not initially perceived in the form of distinct images but as ‘environment’. Only with time are outlines more precisely worked out and turned into shapes. With time, the outlines of defined persons or things stand out as recognisable figures from what is real. It is about discerning similar things from the abundance of the dissimilar. Nowadays images have become an ever-changing medium of communication. The boundaries between text and image are blurring. Some landmarks in the development of *homo sapiens* are set out in Table 2:

Emergence of *homo sapiens*	200000 BC
Migration of *homo sapiens* from Africa	60000 BC
First settled populations	12000 BC
Domestication of plants and animals (animal husbandry)	9000 BC
First cities	6000 BC
Protected village agriculture with a variety of crops	5000 BC
Cuneiform script and small fortified states	c. 3200 BC
Cuneiform script as written language	c. 2600 BC

(modified from Scott, 2017)

Table 2

Graphic images that convey a reference to a phonetic reality were an early form of writing. Language gives a thing a name that evokes the idea of that thing. It is characterised by the fact that on the one hand it clearly names a thing, and on the other by the fact that what it omits also constantly harbours a secret.

It was not until the Neolithic Age that houses were built, and languages were spoken. Between 30,000 and 40,000 BC, multiform manifestations of symbol-formation emerged. Whether the cave-paintings of that period indicate any kind of language though is entirely unclear. Chiefly by the development of language (coupled with a certain 'subjection to the instincts' of the human being—Sloterdijk, 2015, p. 147, translated quotations), *homo sapiens* has truly separated himself from the animals, i.e. from the higher primates, although he has approximately 99% of genetic material in common with the chimpanzee.

Homo sapiens has the capacity to reflect on humanity and the possibilities of human existence. Humanity is realised in the most culturally diverse manifestations. Any statement someone makes must be read against his socio-cultural background because this has fundamentally characterised his development and his thinking. Every image of the human being arises against the backdrop of the scientific insights at the time and its historical dimension. Writings from the earliest times and corresponding myths convey *ancient knowledge of humanity*. Not until the Upper Palaeolithic Age (i.e. 35–40000 years ago) were richer testimonies of human art preserved. The use of tools, burials, and jewellery-making may be even older. Wooden spears have been known for 400,000 years. This means that *homo erectus* already had the capacity for forward-looking, plan-based thought and action, as well as possibly for conceptual thought and verbal communication. Certain forms of spirituality and later religion evidently tried to inscribe human existence in something all-encompassing that transcended human limitations. Communities with a shared spiritual-religious foundation probably provided more stability because an all-encompassing whole that—owing to a limitation perceived by all participants—comprised a world of commonly shared ideas and beliefs that were the same for them all. The intrapsychically incomprehensible unconscious of human beings was turned round 180 degrees, projected into the external world and made into an inaccessible world of spirits, ancestors, demons and gods. A collective illusion may therefore have helped the survival of a group. The investment in the supernatural may have served the survival of the collective. But it also concealed the horror of chaos and formulas had to be found to explain it.

As a rational animal, *homo sapiens* is capable of ‘imagining things that do not exist, that no longer or do not yet exist, or that should not exist’ (Gerhards, 2013, p. 52). Nietzsche postulated that what brought the human being his victory in the battle with animals simultaneously brought about his difficult and pathological development: ‘Man is the animal whose nature has not yet been fixed’ (2003, p. 88). By this he may have meant the incompleteness, openness to the world, and detachment from the instincts of *homo sapiens*. Gerhards (2013) lists among the human being’s characteristics: 1. openness to the world and tendency to surpass boundaries; 2. self-referentiality; 3. creativity and the adoption of social roles; and 4. responsibility. The surprising lack of genuine instincts in the human being contrasts with the adjustment of animals in specific environments. The human being’s adaptation is so extensive that he can populate the whole earth. The urge to find new horizons can also be observed in the earlier human migration from Africa. The perception of limitations brings about a constant striving to overcome and transcend it, to drive thought and imagination ever further and to seek corresponding realisations.

Despite his connectedness with the world, the human being is dependent on participating in a community and is characterised by this. That is why even the first three years of life assume such a fundamental importance. The human being is and remains a social being.

Insuperable limitations, as well as the connectedness to the spatial and temporal coordinates of physical-bodily persons, make it necessary to cross boundaries in thought and in the imagination. This may also be manifested in modern human migration patterns from Africa to the North.

Finding himself with an ego and a self in the specific way of being of his own existence forces the human being further to shape this *Da-Sein* into an essential *So-Sein*,[2] i.e. to strive for a meaning of life with regard to death. As Sartre wrote: ‘existence precedes essence … man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself’ (2007, p. 22).

Given the possibility of choosing between various forms of existence, the human being does not simply live, but leads his life or must lead it, and is not simply given over to essence. He is compelled to self-determination and therefore also to responsibility (at least towards himself). He must compensate for what is not given to him instinctively by nature with his own ideas and creativity. As living space is not simply given to *homo sapiens*, he must play a part in shaping and preserving it with cultural creativity. From the pre-existing environment, he forms a recreated nature as an aid to living, an appropriate living space, his cultural world, and so becomes the creator of his own living universe. In his own culturally determined context of existence, *homo sapiens* finds his spiritual home. He builds structures and institutions for the purpose of stabilisation and simultaneously becomes partly enslaved to them. The creation of such institutional forms corresponds to an existential inevitability of tolerating himself and others. He hovers in a precarious equilibrium between his own needs or personal desires and the culture that pre-exists in the form of specific people and a particular environment and is partly further developed by him, as well as between personal and/or social chaos and corresponding order, abundantly accruing to him from his inner world and the external cultural realm. He finds himself in a specific historically and socio-culturally determined family with a greater or lesser sense of belonging, has received names allocated by family members and must fulfil roles that the main people of reference have designated for him. He can give into the external pressure or instigate a self-shaping in a creative engagement. The transmission of experience and knowledge, a ‘tradition’ in the actual sense, facilitates—mainly in the form of written or visually recorded forms—a powerful advance in *knowledge and culture* and founds *identity.* But writing swiftly became an *explicit expression of power* through the development of a stable *orthography* that supported the power monopoly of institutions such as churches, schools, and administrations (Loprieno, 2007).

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[2] ‘*So-Sein’* means just being as one is, an exemplar of the human species, in a particular timespan and formed in a specific socio-cultural environment, with one’s own history and a personal kind of development, with one’s own basic assumptions, emotional states, and intentions. All of this can be summarised as: *here I am and I can’t help being as I am.*

Assessments and determinations by other members of the socius are necessary to avoid getting lost in self-mirroring, but they also generate the fear of impairments to our own developmental possibilities. The brain as a set of machinery that searches for meaning simultaneously produces in the psyche curiosity and the capacity for culture. The capacity for language and the possibility of reflective thinking allow meaningful considerations on the past, present, and future, especially in exchanges with other people. This also leads to the inevitable confrontation with our own responsibility. The perception of being at the mercy of many invisible forces that no living creature has available alone can become an overwhelming threat. The belief that a representation, an idea, an affect, or a thought are right for ever brings security but also constraints. The potential illusoriness of provisionality and the uncertainty of the individual's own or collective insights or feelings, operates at the margin of experiences of meaninglessness and the engagement with excessive demands and blows of fate with which the individual is confronted. The acceptance of what is unavoidable, immutable, and absurd can contribute to resignation and self-sacrifice or instead to a creatively reconciling, possibly humorous, disposition. In every case, from the end of his adolescence the individual is still assigned the task of shaping his own life with all its endeavours, costs, and difficulties throughout his life.

Ideas can be visualised by audio-representations. With script, the reader also arose, as a revolutionary figure, followed by the researcher and the historian, as well as the autodidact. Mental visualisation became connected over the centuries with the visual and actual making of pictures. Many centuries were occupied by the process of making visible what was previously invisible (Sloterdjik, 2015).

The structures that people had invented for living together were characterised by their wishes and longings. As intersubjective orders, they fulfilled the psyche of increasingly large communities. The oral transfer of rules pertaining to the orders was simple among hunter-gatherers. The more settled people became, especially after the agricultural revolution, the more data they had to master. The agricultural revolution that began around 12,000 years ago gave rise to the building of towns. 'In the first cities of ancient Sumer, about 6,000 years ago, the temples were not just centres of worship, but also the most important political and economic hubs' (Harari, 2017, pp.

182–3). Only the methods of 'storing and processing information … through material signs' (Harari, 2014, p. 122) smoothed the way for the emergence of larger communities such as towns, kingdoms, and empires. The *invention of writing and money by the Sumerians around 5000 years ago* allowed the construction of huge kingdoms, as the entire human community could be organised according to the form of an *algorithm*.

The development of writing in around 3500 BC by the Sumerians (cuneiform script) was an epoch-making step. What was written down served extensively for recording dates and figures. As a *partial* writing system, information from clearly defined domains could be captured in that way. Script was only used to record dates and figures and served primarily fiscal purposes. But now techniques for understanding, seeking, and processing such information recorded in writing became necessary. It was only later that this clearly developed into a *complete* writing system that 'can replace spoken language more or less completely' (Harari, 2014, p. 157). Only with a complete writing system could *stories be recorded as established narratives* and passed on independently of people. Whereas the human being's basic skills have probably scarcely changed since the Stone Age, the *weaving of stories has become ever denser* (Harari, 2017). The invention of script facilitated the *emergence of powerful fictional agencies* as well as that of *a privileged elite that could read and write.* By means of written language, even the *common shared reality could be transformed,* e.g. by the invention of 'sacred writings' that apparently provided answers to all the questions that arose. Children retain over many years the omnipotent and egocentric standpoint that everything only happens on their account. So, it becomes ever more important to distinguish between *commonly shared reality and (guided) fiction* as well as between *belief and knowledge (as the respective state of error)*.

Alphabetical script, i.e. the Greek script, which consists of a limited number of characters and co-writes vowels, later represented a further milestone of textualisation, as it allowed an almost context-free understanding of texts. The figures 0–9 formed from around the 9th century AD a writing system that allowed mathematical data to be processed with great efficiency. Invented by the Indians and imported and finally circulated in writing by the Arabs, this facilitated—in a similar way to the binary system of our times—an asymptotic increase in scientific secondary-process thinking. The script invented by human beings therefore clearly has a powerful repercussion on humanity and on our ways of thinking and understanding.

In many ways we are used to describing the human being from the aspects of *suffering* and *misery*, i.e. people as broken figures. Being human is consistently illumined in the litany of misery from the negative aspect. Miserabilism has long served to make the world beyond and God attractive as the only alternative to miserable existence. We cannot do what we want, and we may not do what we can.

The *individual* begins to glide and drift in his development. He is pitched as it were into the unknown and into the future. He changes over the generations. Nevertheless 'we ourselves can make something out of what has been made out of us' (Sloterdijk, 2015, p. 173). In modern society, with its loss of orientation concerning its own goals, we can observe a disturbed experimentalisation of life that gives rise to the virtue of indifference, a plea for *laissez-faire*, and an ethic of irresponsibility.

'The individual is the point of experience between his own past and his own future' (2015, p. 162). 'I am already there and at the same time I embody my own not-yetness' (p. 162) '…I temporise myself as a surprise for myself' (p. 162). … If the transcendent is transferred into himself, the individual relates to himself as his own transcendent other.

Condemned to self-improvement, we are constantly interested in efforts at optimisation. Wherever on earth the greatest differences pertain between winners and losers, the world beyond is to be characterised by a form of egalitarianism (all are the same or the situations are simply reversed). If the human being is conceptualised as a kind of intermediate being between the animal and the divine, there is a persistent danger of a slide into bestialisation or—as one's own futurising—the hope of realising qualities attributed to God (Sloterdijk, 2015).

Founders of religions or early rulers trace a seamless lineage from God. In this perplexity over origination, there are no clearly delineated fathers. Sons of this kind are auto-didacts. The logic of succession is arbitrarily changed, transformed, and reinterpreted. Family trees are constructed and superseded. A family model can hardly be constituted.

About writing down stories: people often seek out mortal danger to reach an unattainable original experience that might establish a meaning for their life. Sorrow about the finitude of things and life is the mood that generates stories. 'Writing is more than just writing something down' (Bichsel, 1982, p. 60, translated quotations). Writing does not happen from inside to outside but from outside to inside. Things, people, worries, feelings, and thoughts receive their import by being described. But, once described, they are difficult to get rid of again, they are then somehow no longer erasable. The actual meaning of what someone does himself, i.e., his behaviour is often not disclosed to the person who acts but only to the backward glance of the person who finally tells the story that has taken place.

Something similar can be observed in the *formation of psychoanalytic theory*. It is critical that it is formulated in writing and so becomes accessible to discussion and modification. At the same time, however, it acquires a fixed quality by being written down that keeps it at a distance from living specialist dialogue. *'Language can never render what actually is;* it can only describe reality' (Bichsel, 1982, p. 12). *'I can tell a story; therefore, I am'* (p. 84). 'Telling a story addresses something self-evident: that time exists and that we must live our lives as time. To tell a story is to engage with time, and the fact that we have to experience our lives as time is to do with our life being finite….' (p. 10). *Time is an indispensable element of every story, of anything that can be narrated.*

'Anything that does not remind us of stories we recognise only as an event' (pp. 82–83). The great stories of this world have already been told and written. '*A story is always also a story about a story'* (p. 8). 'It is the strong who live the stories' (p. 57). Do the stories in which we live function for us as a kind of aid to living? This question can also be posed for the representation of psychoanalytic interactions, which mostly assume the form of stories in order to be transmissible.

'The story of the story that cannot be written is the story of the life that cannot be lived' (p. 20). 'Someone who does not live life must tell it to himself' (p. 57). 'How can one ... approach the idea that a story could be invented, that a story is only true when it is congruent with reality?' (p. 15).

Authors of stories that have been written are fascinated by the impossibility of living and describing and do not wish to overcome that. They therefore write stories as possibilities. 'Stories will not save our lives though. They only make them bearable ... someone who gives into telling stories does it not to save his life but to live his life' (p. 84). So, there is something comforting about being allowed to tell a story.

About reading what has been written. 'In the moment of reading it is always "the Other" who determines my behaviour' (p. 29). 'Only someone who experiences reading as an alternative world becomes the reader' (p. 38). 'Readers are sometimes people who can deal with questions without immediately calling for the answer', who thus live more in questions than in answers (p. 31). A reader has fellow readers, confidants, and fellow-travellers and can have exchanges about what is being read. So, the person changes from being the solitary reader to the public co-reader and conversation partner.

'*Representation* seems to me in fact to be a fundamental element of artistic creation or, more precisely, of creativity in general. In this regard, I will gladly adopt the way this was expressed by the anthropologist Jensen, who wrote, "The human being is by his nature a creature that represents"' (de M'Uzan, 1977, p. 5).[3] The earliest representational activities develop continuously right into the domain of fantasy activity. In an *act of emotion*, the subject becomes aware that he can become the organising force and producer of a new order. He experiences this as something essential yet inexpressible that changes his sense of his own identity in relation to his position in the world. Similar moments of emotion may also belong to some traumatic experiences, for example, if images proliferate and submerge or overwhelm the person concerned. An author's representations of the form of a *mirror-image-like* doubling tend to replicate the disturbed narcissistic integrity. Creative representations, if they are offered as a gift to a counterpart, as an adaptation to suspected or real demands from the external world, can already distort the expression of one's own self, for what may be displeasing or shocking is often eliminated. Creative acts can sometimes extend to the reparations of either object-representations or self-representations.

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[3] Quotations translated from *De l'art à la mort*, 1977.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF THE GILGAMESH EPIC

One third of the clay tablets is still missing. Andrew George put forward a new translation in 2003, having collected fragments from all over the world. In its present form, the work may have emerged in the last third of the second millennium BC. There must have been an earlier form (1800 BC) that was the basis for today's version. Its origins probably date back to around 3000–2500 BC. The oldest parts are written in the Sumerian language, the newer ones in Babylonian. *Sumerian* is the oldest comprehensible Semitic language of the Mesopotamian region. The Sumerian language was superseded by *Akkadian*. This later split into *Babylonian* and *Assyrian*. Both were ultimately superseded by the *Aramaic* language.

2.1. The epic's protagonists

Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk, was two thirds god and one third human. The previous king of Uruk, Lugalbanda, was thought to be the father of Gilgamesh. Lugalbanda was revered as a god after his death.

The *list of Sumerian kings* includes Gilgamesh, whose father is said to have been a 'lesser daemon' or a 'stranger', a 'nobody' (Schrott, 2001, p. 310). Therefore Gilgamesh initially seems to have been a historical figure. Accordingly, a 'lesser daemon' had overpowered Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun and produced Gilgamesh with her while she was asleep. Lugalbanda would therefore have been Gilgamesh's father in name only.

Gilgamesh owes everything to women—to his mother Ninsun, who interpreted his three dreams; to Siduri, who helped him further; and to Utanapishti's wife, who finally provided him with the youth-restoring plan—but he nevertheless displays a clearly *misogynistic* attitude.

Undoubtedly poetically elevated, Gilgamesh may originally have been a historical person in the 27th century BC. He was an accomplished warrior, and he explored the world to its very edges, restored shrines that had been destroyed by the Flood and established orders of worship for his whole kingdom. He must have been rapidly chosen for divine status because around 100 years after his supposed reign he was already described as a deity. He still had to move to the underworld after his death, but he was appointed a judge there.

Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, is Uruk's powerful patron goddess, who brings Gilgamesh to insight through many detours. First Ishtar curses Gilgamesh, who from then on no longer behaves like a triumphant king but only like a human being marked by misfortune.

Anu is the sky god who is revered along with his daughter, the goddess lshtar, in Uruk.

Enkidu is Gilgamesh's friend and companion, created by the gods. Enkidu has neither parents nor siblings nor friends, nor a family of his own. He is an adversary, a moderate man, an offshoot of silence and he came into being by his creation, but to consciousness by Shamhat. He is a dream interpreter who helps to capture Gilgamesh's dreams from outside the magic circle of flour that keeps evil spirits away. The name Enkidu means 'master of a beautiful or pleasant place' in Sumerian. Enkidu built the door for the temple of Enlil that stood at the summit of the Pantheon. (Only Enki, the fertile and inventive water-God, held a similarly high rank to Enlil). He made the door from the wood of the stolen cedars—the scent of cedarwood was especially well suited to creating a pleasant olfactory atmosphere in the temples. Outside the epic he is not mentioned.

The trapper is the ancestor of all trappers who catch wild animals in the plains. He represents the predator human being, the animal trapper who does not fight.

Shamhat is a prostitute from Uruk, and a loyal servant of Ishtar the goddess of love. The prostitutes belong to the cultic staff of Ishtar's temple.

Shamash is the sun god, who has taken Gilgamesh and Enkidu under his special protection.

Ninsun is Gilgamesh's divine mother, who interprets dreams and can see into the future.

Humbaba is the fearsome guardian of the cedar forest. He tried to insult and mock Enkidu for having no parents. The original relationship between the two of them is unclear. Humbaba bears all the traits of a demon that has rayauras or robes. His head, pulled in a hideous grimace, may well have been horrifying.

The Bull of Heaven is a powerful, winged, human-headed bull with immense strength, who works in the service of Anu in heaven until Ishtar makes use of him.

The scorpion-people are frightening, bird-legged creatures with a human upper body and a scorpion's lower body who guard the entrance to the path of the sun at the end of the world.

Siduri is a heavily veiled tavern-keeper, in whose manifestation her mistress Ishtar, the goddess of love and the guardian of bars and prostitutes, runs a tavern in the other world, in order to show the right path to Gilgamesh. Her name refers to a foreign origin and it means 'young woman'. She provides people with fermented beer and openly works as a prostitute.

Urshanabi is Utanapishti's ferryman.

Utanapishti is the Babylonian Noah, who survived the world Flood in his ark and attained immortality.

Utanapishti's wife brings Gilgamesh hope of eternal life with seven loaves of bread.

The serpent frees the path to knowledge for Gilgamesh.

2.2. Condensed history of the Gilgamesh epic

Gilgamesh's arrogant behaviour triggers a social crisis in Uruk. The gods intervene by creating a *Doppelgänger* who is transferred by a woman from his animal state into a human one. Gilgamesh and his *Doppelgänger* quickly become friends and plan a great adventure that brings them into conflict with the gods, which is why one of them, Enkidu, is condemned to die from an illness. From now on Gilgamesh fears death and seeks immortality. He sets off to find Utanapishti, the survivor of the Flood (Noah), the only human being to have been guaranteed immortality. Gilgamesh finds him, undergoes a transformation in the encounter with Utanapishti and his wife; he then looks for the plant of eternal youth and finds it, but he loses it to a serpent and returns, marked and somewhat chastened by life, with his new companion, the ferryman Urshanabi, to his mother Ishtar in Uruk.

2.3. Summary of the individual tablets (with reference to Maul, 2005)

Tablet 1

At first Gilgamesh, the hero, is praised (1, 1–48). In the quest for eternal life, he gained access to realms beyond the passable earth. The people of Mesopotamia owe their knowledge of the distant, inaccessible lands, the world's seas and the whole cosmos, the paths in distant regions and thus trade and commerce to their king, Gilgamesh. In the course of many adventures and detours, the prince, initially completely self-seeking, finds his true destination. He rebuilds the temples that were destroyed by the Flood, restores the structuring rituals of the past and thereby eases the difficult communion of gods and human beings (I, 43–44). At the end of the life journey described in the epic, he has become a provident king.

Gilgamesh is a giant who is inordinately handsome (I, 49–62.) He is only one third human and two thirds god (I, 48). As a young lad, he seeks only his own pleasure. By force of arms, he requires the young men of his city Uruk to be ready to play ball with him at any time (I, 63–70). The young women must also be solely at his service (I, 71–72). No sustaining relationships can therefore develop between the generations or the sexes. The women complain and their complaints reach Ishtar, the goddess of love and patron of Uruk (Gilgamesh's city) (I, 73–78). This puts not only the goddess of love into an ill humour, but also Anu the father of the gods and Enlil the king of the gods (I, 79–93). They decide to put an end to Gilgamesh's power and summon the mother goddess Aruru to create a being equal to him in the hope that this might restrain Gilgamesh (I, 94–98). In the undisturbed wilderness, Aruru creates Enkidu, a prehistoric man who is not inferior to Gilgamesh in size or beauty (I, 99–108). This hairy naked creature is brought up by wild animals of the plains and lives among them as if he were one of them. A trapper at a watering-place can no longer catch a single animal because the powerful Enkidu knows how to protect his herd (I, 113–121). The trapper complains to his father about the continual failure (I, 122–133). His father advises him not to use muscle power but cunning to defeat Enkidu. Shamhat, a prostitute and a priestess, is to attract Enkidu and lure him away from the herd (I, 134–145). Gilgamesh recommends the same thing when he learns of this situation (I, 146–166). So Shamhat and the trapper wait at the watering-place. When Enkidu approaches, Shamhat reveals her flesh and offers herself to Enkidu. They make love for seven days and seven nights. Afterwards, wild animals move away from Enkidu. The wild creature who has become a human being through the love goddess's priestess