

CHAPTER One

Mythos, Logos and Gilgamesh

The contemporary occidental view of *myth* contrasts with the Greek third century B.C. view of Aristotle within his *Me ta phusica*, literally, *beyond*, or *after*, the *physics*, contemporarily translated as *Metaphysics*. But, the relevance of Aristotle's view to contemporary society clarifies when we relate it to the 5000 year old Oriental, Sumerian *myth* of Gilgamesh.

Myth expresses a reality which exceeds the grasp of the human mind to know through concepts.

...it was their curiosity that first led men to philosophize and that still leads them. In the beginning, they were curious about difficulties close at hand. Then they progressed little by little in this respect and raised difficulties about matters of greater consequence; for example, about behavior or the moon and the sun and the stars and of all *becoming*. But whoever is perplexed and wonders thinks himself ignorant. Hence, even the lover of myths (*thaumazein*) is in a way a lover of wisdom (*philosophhein*), for a myth (*muthos*) is made up of wonders. Therefore inasmuch as men philosophized in order to escape ignorance, it is evident that they learned in the pursuit of knowledge, and not for some useful end. (*Book Alpha*, 982b10-22)

This *wonder* which provokes both the *lover of myth* and the *lover of wisdom* is about that which is *primary*, Aristotle tells us, is of *that which is first*, as the *cause of being itself*, the *source of life itself*. The Greek word here is *arche aitia*, the *first principle*, or, *first cause*. The knowledge of this *first principle*, as the *principal being* about which humans seek *knowledge (episteme)* *for its own sake*, not for some practical use. Aristotle describes the search for such knowledge *lady wisdom*, as *sophia* or *myth*, as *mythos*. But, in both cases, this knowledge is prompted by ignorance and sought out of love, a specific kind of love as *philos*, that is, the *love of friendship*, a friendship with *sophia*, *lady wisdom*, so Aristotle calls this science *First Philosophy*. Thus, according to the Greeks (and in this case, specifically according to Aristotle), the *love of myth* and the *love of wisdom* have the same end, namely, the desire to know the *first cause* of all the beings we humans experience through our senses.

A fascinating fact faces us within the Greek language relative to *mythos* and *logos*. Both of these expressions mean *word*, whether the *mythical* word or the *logical* word. The difference, however, reflects the fact that Greek culture recognized that human beings not only were *speech* animals and, thus, produced language through *logos*, but that a spiritual reality existed which exceeded reason's ability to grasp conceptually and could only be acknowledged through *mythos*. So, the Greeks recognized *myth* as the *word by which humans express the reality experienced of an incomprehensible presence*, whereas *logic* as the *word which humans express to themselves and to others of their experience of a comprehensible reality*.

This fascinating fact takes on a further dimension if we view it from the perspective of the word the Greeks (including Plato and Aristotle) used to express what we translate as truth, namely, ***alethein***. This Greek word has four meanings plus the meaning of what is called the *alpha privative*, that is, the prefix ***a***. This prefix ***a*** means not; the Greek verb ***lethein*** means: to forget, to hide, to bury and to cover up. Thus the Greek word which we translate as a positive term truth, actually has four negative meanings: not to forget, not to hide, not to bury and not to cover up.

Using this Greek view of truth as our basis, they viewed myth as the word (or story). That is, they used

The Greek word *mythos* expresses in word a reality whose presence is as sacred as it is invisible and incomprehensible.

mythos as the word to express in a story the meaning of that which they could not grasp through conceptual knowledge, but had experienced in their search for the meaning of life. Myth, then paralleled science in that myth acknowledged a reality within nature which transcended the human understanding of nature whereas science intellectually grasped the understandable, or intelligible realities. Myth, therefore, and science alike (as the celebrated drawing of the atom by Neils Bohr) create paradigms and uses those paradigms to explain what human beings can not feel, taste, touch, see or hear, paradigms like “atoms”, like “gravity” and so many other “scientific” terms, yes, even within the esoteric world of mathematics the paradigm of the infinite, calculus - a Latin word coming from the Greek word ***xale***, meaning a small stone, thereby indicating a number so small that it is infinite.

Thus, mythology became an alternative to what the Greeks called philosophy. Both mythology and philosophy, therefore, were equivalent in their attempts to understand the first principles of being. Camus comments on this Greek use of myth within his Myth of Sisyphus, specifically, the essay, The Myth of Sisyphus: “Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them”. Camus echoes the second chapter of ***Genesis*** wherein the sacred writer describes ***Yhwh*** as breathing life into dust and thereby creating man, then woman in ***Yhwh***’s image and likeness. The Hebrew word is ***zelem*** and means image of the spiritual source. So, to Camus, myths allow humans to breath a life of meaning into the varied and apparently chaotic world of being which we perceive and, thereby, enable us to understand what we can not grasp through conceptual knowledge. The Sumerians breath just such life into human existence through the myth of Gilgamesh.

The Jesuit biblical scholar, author of The Two-Edged Sword, A Study of the Old Testament, comments in Myths and Realities, Studies in Biblical Theology:

In these (Egyptian and Mesopotamian) religions, then, natural forces were personalized; and the great gods of these religions were nature-gods. As far as the history of religions can trace the idea of the divine, the simplest and most primitive apprehension of the existence of powers which are uncontrollable by man is formed from the perception of natural forces... The philosopher is not theistic because he does not share the modern concept of nature as a closed and unified system... But he realizes that he is still in the

presence of a force which he cannot control. He cannot locate this force within the limits of observed natural forces and so must go beyond them, beyond the limits of the material universe; he must conceive a deity which is transcendent, and find a rational solution of the antinomy of a closed system, observed by the natural sciences, and a transcendent agent, postulated by the primary principles of reason. So Aristotle describes his Prime Mover, and so St. Thomas describes God in his Five Ways. In modern philosophy, as in the religion of the ancients, man still goes to God through “nature”. (pp. 88 & 90)

Yet, Aquinas adds an interesting twist to our understanding of religion in

The denotative meaning of the word “religion” is: to re-read, to re-choose and to re-bind.

general. Agreeing with Cicero, Aquinas reflects upon the linguistic origins which Cicero speculates about within his *De Natura Deorum*, *On the Nature of Gods* about the Latin word **religio**. Aquinas assigns three roots to be part of the Latin word **religio**, coupled with the same prefix, **re**, meaning, *again*. Those three roots are verbs *lègere*, *to read*, *legère*, *to choose* and *ligère*, *to bind*. So, Aquinas observes that the essential meaning of this word religion is that humans *reread* the book of nature in relation to the *source of life itself* (as well as their own lives), *re-choose* the relationship they have to this *source of life itself* and then, *rebind* themselves to that *source of life*. Aquinas calls this the natural virtue of religion, resulting from what he calls the *passive relation* resulting from the creative act of **Yhwh** as described within the first two chapters of **Genesis**.

Religion, in other words, is not closed-ended. A truly religious person continuously re-reads, re-chooses and re-binds self to *the source of life itself*. As with any other commitment involving love within human life, religion is a continuous daily, even hourly recommitment of ourselves to *the source of life*. Any other “kind” of religion, namely, denominational religion, he comments, results from man, citing the Jewish religion, originating from Moses’ understanding of **Yhwh’s** instructions and, yes, even, Jesus Christ, the “Word made flesh”, whose Divine Nature communicated through His Human Nature. Even the friendship with and then death of Enkidu requires Gilgamesh to re-read, re-choose the meaning for life and then he re-binds himself to this new found meaning the blind Utnapishtim brings Gilgamesh to understand.

Gilgamesh is the earliest myth the occidental world has uncovered thus far and is of oriental origin. The question is: what does this first oriental myth tell the Sumerians about the meaning of the world over seven thousand years ago? Well, diverse sources answer this question differently.

The *Grolier Encyclopedia* states: “The Epic of *Gilgamesh* is a long Akkadian poem about a human being’s futile quest for immortality”. Various language scholars and archaeologists describe *Gilgamesh* differently: “...a revolt against death...” (Professor Thorkild Jacobsen); “...a Babylonian creation inspired by the search for an answer to questions about the goal of human existence.” (John H. Marks). *Epic*, from the Greek word **epos**, means word, or story. All scholars, however, agree on two points: first, that this is the oldest epic the occidental world thus far has found, being more than fifteen hundred years older than the Homeric *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Secondly, this epic is fragmented,

perhaps, even several different poems scholars have pieced into what we now call *Gilgamesh*. I would add two things: first, this is the first oriental African, black cultural epic which the occidental world has accessed; secondly, it is the first oriental “religious” work we have available for study.

Gilgamesh seeks immortality through the love of friendship.

Theodore Gaster calls *Gilgamesh* “...the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* of the ancient Near East” and Alexander Heidel calls it “...the *Odyssey* of the Babylonians”. This *epic* is a story coordinated from five different poetic origins surviving from Sumerian literature as old as three thousand years and a civilization which thrived as long ago as five thousand B.C. The *Gilgamesh* stories were originally discovered in the ruins of Nineveh, Assyria on 3, December 1872 at an excavation site first begun in 1849. These five separate poems describe some five different accounts of Gilgamesh: *Gilgamesh* and the Bull of Heaven; the Death of *Gilgamesh*; *Gilgamesh* and Agga of Kish (a city in northern Babylonia); *Gilgamesh* and the Land of the Living; *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu and the Neither World. The Sumerians did not write these five events into one poem, so what we now read as one epic is the result of occidental scholars working from some fourteen separate cuneiform tables uncovered in 1872 from a library cite of the seventh century B.C. built by Assurbanipal, the last great king of the Assyrian Empire. These five different stories reflect some five different ethnic groups which geographically occupied the area.

Assyria originally was the name of the territory east of the Tigris river, Babylonia being the country in the lower Tigris-Euphrates Valley, extending from the present Baghdad, Iraq to the Persian Gulf. Thus, Assyria was within the area now occupied by Iran and Iraq on current maps. By 6000 B.C., villages stretched from Assyria along a fertile plain just below the Armenian hills to the Euphrates River and beyond; about 5000 B.C., the occupation of Babylonia began by people who started at the Persian Gulf and gradually moved up river. About 3100 B.C., this became the city of Sumer, lasting until 200 B.C. About the same time, Assyrians took over the eastern part of northern *Mesopotamia* (a Greek word meaning literally, *between the rivers*). Assyrian civilization peaked under Ashurnasirpal II, between 883-59 B.C. and with the ascendancy of Ashurbanipal, between 668-26 B.C., declined so that by 621 B.C., the Medes and Babylonians destroyed Nineveh, ending the Assyrian Empire.

The order of events within this epic as now arranged is uncertain, however, the order of episodes seems consistent. These cuneiform (*cuneus*, and *forma*, Latin, meaning *wedge* and *shape* respectively) tables were written by five different oriental ethnic groups: Sumerian, Babylonian, Parthian (Iranian), Persian (Iraqi) and Assyrian all living in ancient Mesopotamia, in or near the Sumerian city of Uruk (the *Old Testament* calls it Erech; we presently name it Warka), about 156 miles southeast of today’s Baghdad, Iraq between five thousand and fifteen hundred B.C.

One of the fourteen, the eleventh tablet, written about 2000 B.C. and found in the seventh century B.C. library of Assurbanipal, king of the Assyrian Empire, contains a description of a “deluge”, paralleling the famous flood found within the *Old Testament*, (*Genesis, Chapter 6, vs. 9-Chapter 8 vs. 22*) written after the Babylonian Exile of the

Jews ended in 538 B.C. To date, archeology finds that five cities were named as existing before this Deluge. After this catastrophe, “Kingship once more descended” from the gods to men - again, this parallels the *Old Testament*, *Book of Samuel* where Hannah sings in thanksgiving for being pregnant with Samuel, the anointed King sent by *Yhwh* to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Covenant (*1 Samuel 2:11*).

Gilgamesh as King is two-thirds divine and one-third human and Enkidu as peasant is one-half animal and one-half human.

So, the *Gilgamesh* epic provides a second and separate account of some devastating flood upon the earth as does the *Old Testament*. A semi-historical “Sumerian King-List”, written about 2000 B.C. lists Kish as the first dominant city, but then Uruk defeated Kish and assumed supremacy. *Gilgamesh* is named in this King-List as the fifth ruler of the first post-diluvial dynasty of Uruk. Although Sandars’ edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is an improvement over the Mason edition, neither probes the five different stories within the *Epic* from a comparative *mythology* viewpoint, so neither presents a coherent view of these stories in relation to the *epic* itself. Actually, the five different stories become coherent if we view the *epic* from the perspective of the *myths* to which the five ethnic groups refer. Claudius Aelianus, a second century A.D. Roman author writes:

When Seucchorus (Enmekar, king of Uruk) reigned over the Babylonians, the Chaldeans said that the son who would be born of his daughter would wrest the kingdom from the grandfather. At this he was alarmed and, expressing it as a joke, became an Acrisios (King of Argos, Greece) to the girl; for he guarded (her) closely. But without his knowledge - for fate was more ingenious than the Babylonian - the girl became a mother by an obscure man and bore a child. (Her) guards, in fear of the king, threw it from the acropolis; for it was there that the aforementioned girl was imprisoned. But an eagle quickly saw the child fall and before the infant dashed upon the ground, got underneath it and received (it) on (his) back, and carrying it to an orchard, he set it down cautiously. The caretaker of the place, seeing the beautiful child, loved it and reared it; it was called *Gilgamos* and reigned over the Babylonians. (*De Natura Animalium*, xii. 21)

The five stories find unity through this *Gilgamos*, or *Gilgamesh*, a king, as the royal character and his friendship with Enkidu, a “nature-boy”. The setting, however, is very important, since Uruk is a city situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in ancient Babylonia. This setting is one productive and supportive of life, plant, animal and human, surrounded by the dry desert scorched almost lifeless by the sun. Indeed, just as the Jesuit, McKenzie wrote, “In modern philosophy, as in the religion of the ancients, man still goes to God through ‘nature’”, so this myth implies both in ancient and contemporary times the awareness of God as love comes to man through nature, that is, through the friendship between riches (royalty, the *sacred*) and poverty (peasantry, the *profane*) - recall here Plato’s myth of *Poros* and *Penia*! *Myth* is the human being’s acknowledgement of the presence of the *sacred*, God, within and through the *profane*! Of course, most interesting is the final line of the first section of *Gilgamesh* wherein the

writer(s) comments: “They looked upon each other and became human”. One reflection upon this comment is that becoming human occurs through the love of friendship and this love of friendship manifests a *sacred* presence within the *profane* world wherein both the royalty of a king and the animality of a peasant life.

This myth dramatizes the struggle to be human, both immortal and mortal.

This mythic story ends the first paragraph with a statement which provides the clue in the interpretation of the Gilgamesh myth and the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, namely, “It is the story of their becoming human together”. Of course, this relationship is one of friendship, so this story concerns how the love of friendship relates to becoming human as well as how this love of friendship, as the blind Upnapishtim reveals to Gilgamesh manifests the presence of the sacred and, thus, becomes the place wherein humans “meet” the source of life, or, what we might call “God”!

Gilgamesh, as the King of Uruk lives on a life-giving plain surrounded by a death dealing desert. *Gilgamesh* has the Goddess *Ninsun*, the wife of the God *Lugalbonda* as his mother, but “the high priest of *Kullab*” as his father, so *Gilgamesh* shares in mortality and immortality, being two-thirds god and one-third human - perhaps this “god man” presents us with the results of what Thomas Aquinas calls a “promise” of the *New Testament* revelation wherein Christ receives His divinity from *Yhwh* and His humanity from Mary. So, as king of Uruk, *Gilgamesh* shares in the divine power of the gods, yet, he becomes an arrogant person because of this divine power and tyrannizes the citizens of Uruk. He disregards the value of human life and tramples even upon the rights of newly married persons because *Gilgamesh* requires that he make love to the new bride prior to the husband, until, that is, *Gilgamesh* meets Enkidu, perhaps indicating the humanizing aspect of the love of friendship. *Gilgamesh* has two dreams and his Goddess mother, *Ninsun* interprets *Gilgamesh*’s dreams as foretelling his meeting with Enkidu, “...your friend...who will lift you out of tiredness”. Of course, tiredness was not the least of *Gilgamesh*’s experiences. As the first part of the text indicates, *Gilgamesh* lived a life without direction and, thus, treated his people in an arbitrary manner and a life of boredom and, thus, asserted his royal right to sleep with any virgin before her marriage vows might be fulfilled by her husband. Enkidu also experienced a certain exhaustion, as a result of “becoming a man” by sleeping with the prostitute and thereby lost his unique personal relationship with the animals with whom he drank water, ate food and ran “wild”.

Gilgamesh, the mythical human struggles with the presence of transcendence within himself living within a mortal body.

The king meets Enkidu on his way to pick a wife as his princess; they wrestle, but Enkidu,

a nature-man whom the plants and animals consider their natural leader, forces the powerful king, Uruk’s divine leader to a draw and so this divine-man and this human-animal experience the equality of humanity and become friends. They work together through two separate adventures, the entry into the forest of Humbaba to cut down the cedar tree and, as a result of Ishtar’s wrath, the effort to defeat the Bull from Heaven. After the Bull from Heaven is killed, Enkidu flaunts the goddess Ishtar who then causes

him to die from the wounds he received in his fight against the Bull. Enkidu's death changes the heart of *Gilgamesh* since his "...soul has been converted to a thing which sees how much it costs to lose a friend (he) loved". The arrogance of royalty dissolves into the humility of friendship. *Gilgamesh* then sets out "...to find the secret of eternal life which he might carry back to give his friend". *Gilgamesh*, therefore, initially seeks eternal life only as a means to bring back his friend Enkidu from the dead.

Although every translator and editor of this epic claims that it is the story of *Gilgamesh's* search for immortality to avoid death, I do not agree, notwithstanding the fact that the Mason translation/edition uses the word death some sixty-three (63) times. Indeed, after the wounded Enkidu kills the Bull of Heaven and is dying, the text reads:

Gilgamesh, though he was king, had never looked at death before...Tears filled his eyes as he appealed to Ninsun, his mother, and to the Elders not to explain (death) but to save his friend...(pp. 6-7)

On the contrary, the divine-human, *Gilgamesh* feels the mortality he sees his friend, Enkidu lose and begins the search to recover that immortal love of friendship he shared with Enkidu. So, the third part (III) of Mason's text describes *Gilgamesh's* search as follows:

His life became a quest to find the secret of eternal life which he might carry back to give his friend.(p.8)

This same purpose is repeated four (4) more times, until Utnapishtim, a blind wise man comments to *Gilgamesh*:

Friendship is vowing toward immortality and does not know the passing away of beauty...because it aims for the spirit.

Then again, Utnapishtim says:

I think love's kiss kills our heart of flesh. It is the only way to eternal life which should be unbearable if lived among the dying flowers...

Gilgamesh, as king, was consumed with his power and wealth, so he lived by a "heart of flesh". Yet, *Gilgamesh* did seek out the blind wise one, Utnapishtim. Now, the love of friendship awakens *Gilgamesh* to his spiritual nature, his divine part so, although Utnapishtim criticizes *Gilgamesh* for seeking for his friend externally by asking if people had seen Enkidu by "naming" him, Utnapishtim also credits *Gilgamesh* for seeking the friendship he experienced in Enkidu by asking a "blind" wise person:

Two things encourage me to hope, he said; that one can come this far to bring life to a friend and that you understand how we must borrow light from the blind. (p. 11)

Therefore, *Gilgamesh* must stop looking for Enkidu outside through his “heart of flesh” by the light of his eyes and turn within to find that friendship in his “heart of spirit”.

Gilgamesh, as friend,
tasted mortality as a result of
the death of Enkidu, but that

**Gilgamesh had tasted the immortality of
friendship through Enkidu.**

taste was bitter sweet, since that taste awakened the awareness of spirituality and, therefore, sweetness of immortality through the love evoked within him by his friendship with Enkidu. Henceforward *Gilgamesh* lived from a “heart of spirit”. This experience of love became a participation in the eternal which *Gilgamesh* had sought to find so he might reawaken his natural, dead friend Enkidu - just as that friendship had reawakened the arrogant King *Gilgamesh*’s awareness of being human. Thus, the Old Man, Utnapishtim redirects *Gilgamesh* from this “outside” loss of Enkidu to an “inside” search for life’s meaning through the awareness of the love of friendship and the death of the love of self-importance, saying:

Many years ago through loss, I learned that love is wrung from our inmost heart until only the loved one is and we are not.

Yet, *Gilgamesh* did not yet understand, as he gives way to the exhaustion resulting from his search and sleeps for seven days. Although the life of friendship was available as natural and internal to him, yet he was dead to such a life until he was awakened to it by Enkidu. Then, Utnapishtim sent *Gilgamesh* back to Uruk, telling him about the “...plant in the river”. *Gilgamesh* recovers the plant, only to lose it to the serpent because he again succumbed to his tired mortality. Even when *Gilgamesh* returns to Uruk, he seeks to reawaken his love of Enkidu by asking a blind man if he remembered Enkidu’s name, but he did not. *Gilgamesh* then loses himself in the external, physical achievements of his citizens “...and for a moment - just a moment - all that lay behind him passed from view”. But, let us return to the beginning. Remember that the setting of this over 7,000 year old myth is between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, a sacred place because life originates and thrives here, thanks to the nurturing of its fertile soil. The myth has two central characters, *Gilgamesh*, the king of Uruk, two-thirds god and one-third man and Enkidu, the animal-man. “It is the story of their becoming human together.”

This story is called a myth. Myth is a Greek cognate, meaning word (from mythos); the Greek cognate logic (from logos) also means word. However, the characteristics of these “words” are very different and represent to the Greeks the abilities and limitations of human reason. The logic word delivers knowledge, that is, the ability of human reason to grasp meaning, and, thereby, to categorize and express that meaning to self and to others. The mythic word, on the contrary, names a presence which eludes the grasp of human reason and, although present, can not be known by human reason. Immediate examples would be “truth”, “goodness” and “beauty”. The presence of such realities are discovered indirectly by reason, “truth” by the fact that humans recognize error, “goodness” by the fact humans see bad, or evil, “beauty” by the fact humans discover the ugly - so when humans pronounce an error, evil or the ugly, they are making

a comparative judgment according to a standard which human reason recognizes to be present but which reason can not appropriate as knowledge.

Gilgamesh, therefore, is a myth, a story unveiling the presence of a sacred reality within the mundane or profane

Just as the *Old Testament* specifies that the love of *Yhwh* is written in the hearts of humans, *Gilgamesh* finds divinity written in his heart through friendship.

lives of the King of Uruk and the “wild” Enkidu. That sacred reality appears through the love of friendship thanks to which the mortality of being human participates reveals the immortality of being divine. This sacred presence is found within the human person, as dramatized by *Gilgamesh* and as described by Utnapishtim, the blind wise man who sees what physical human eyes can not see.

Many years ago through loss I learned that love is wrung from our inmost heart until only the loved one is and we are not.(Part III)

Whereas *Gilgamesh* proceeded to travel throughout the world in search of someone who might bring back the dead Enkidu, Utnapishtim reveals that his search should be directed within where the presence of Enkidu exists because of the presence of this love called friendship. Such a presence made “time and space...uneventful now” because this love is immortal and manifests a union with the divine which lasts forever.

I think compassion is our God’s pure act which burns forever and be it in Heaven or in Hell doesn’t matter for me because Hell is the everlasting gift of His presence to the lonely heart who is longing amidst perishing phantoms and doesn’t care to find any immortality if not in the pure loneliness of the Holy One, this loneliness which He enjoys forever inside and outside of His creation. It is enough for one who loves to find his Only One singled in Himself and this is the cup of immortality. (Part III)

Thus, Utnapishtim directs *Gilgamesh* to the awareness that the love of friendship which as the King, God and man he found through Enkidu, the animal man, he has found the presence of the sacred, God as the source of love itself within himself - so this epic seems to reiterate the text within *Deuteronomy* (6:4-13) wherein *Yhwh* states that the presence of *Yhwh* is written in the hearts of humans.

So, the myth authors contrast *Gilgamesh*, as two-thirds god and one-third man with Enkidu, the human animal. Scholars suggest that *Gilgamesh* typifies the civilized, Enkidu, the natural human being. *Gilgamesh* appears to be aware of being “more” than natural, whereas Enkidu is happy to be as he is. A conflict exists in *Gilgamesh*, a conflict which requires “proof”, verification, so *Gilgamesh* challenges Enkidu. Several theories are proposed to explain this conflict between *Gilgamesh* and the “forest” one, Enkidu. However, one theory which scholars thus far have not mentioned is that this conflict is a symbol of the human being struggling within him or herself, specifically, the mind struggling with the human body.

If we look at this myth of *Gilgamesh* as the mind, *human royalty* struggling with the body, *human embodiment*, we see

So, the Wise balance the presence immortality with the reality of mortality.

Gilgamesh as a *myth* calling for humans to come to terms with the search for some absolute within this world of embodied relativity. Coming to terms with this human situation means simply to accept the incarnation of spirituality within this material world, that is, the spiritual soul within an enlivened human body. This interpretation is reasonable because the noble human mind (participating in immortality) finds within its human embodiment an appetite for values such as truth, goodness and beauty which it cannot achieve because whatever is within the human mind comes through the lowly human senses(and thus, participates in mortality). So, as the noble human mind struggles with its human embodiment until an equality, or balance is reached, mutual respect is found and friendship results. This truth which human beings desire transcends anything which the human senses can provide for the mind's knowledge and participates in something more than the mind can achieve. So, as the mind wrestles with the body and the struggle turns into a draw, the mind and body befriend each other and a bond of friendship develops, the mortal evoking the immortal and the immortal embracing the

Sometimes, however, a jealousy develops between the human desire for Truth (the immortal and the unchangeable) and the human mind's dependence upon the senses within the human body (the mortal and the changeable). A battle ensues between the mind and the body, between thinking and sensing, between knowing and feeling. Yet, the lowly human body (*Enkidu*) wins precisely because the kingly human mind (*Gilgamesh*) depends upon the senses of the human body and the two become fast friends. Death, however, takes the human body (*Enkidu*) and the mind within the soul, as immortal (*Gilgamesh*) wanders about mourning the death of the human body with which the soul had established a friendship. The irony of this search, as the Old Man, *Utnapishtim* tried to tell *Gilgamesh*, is that the presence of the soul within the body, just as the presence of the love of friendship within *Gilgamesh's* soul, means that the body and *Gilgamesh* share in the eternal. Thus, despite the death of the body and the death of *Enkidu*, neither dies absolutely but love transcends both, notwithstanding the fact of mortality and the consequent inevitability of death.

The human dilemma is: whether life can be lived without mortality and whether mortality exists without immortality?

This mythic conflict compares to the contemporary conflict alleged between the mind

and the body, science and myth, reason and the senses. Of course, this alleged conflict is nothing new from the so-called "enlightenment" period to our contemporary times. Yet, the *Gilgamesh myth* manifests something old and continuous, that is, the inability of human beings to accept the "mixed" life, namely, the mind's dependence upon the body, the dependence of knowledge upon the senses, reason's dependence upon the human experience and even reason's dependence upon myth to explain a presence which conceptual knowledge can not grasp and experimentation can not capture for empirical analysis.

Humans seek to control reality through knowledge, yet, face the fact that the very knowledge humans achieve results from principles no rational method can deduce and seeks *Truth* which no human can master. In other words, the human faces the fact that s/he faces an ever present mystery, which it can never control or resolve. So, the one persistent problem which hounds the human being is the reality of difference within self and the world versus the urge to achieve unity not through knowledge but through love, a reality humans can not grasp through knowledge but can only live through actions - no writer portrays this human difficulty better than Albert Camus within his *Myth of Sisyphus*. written in 1942.

The mind's first step is to distinguish what is true from what is false. However, as soon as thought reflects on itself, what it first discovers is a contradiction...The mind's deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his soul..The truism "All thought is anthropomorphic" has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought..If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing them up and summing themselves up in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the *myth* of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation. That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia's existence does not imply that it is to be immediately salified. For if, bridging the gulf that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (whatever it may be), we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its own assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, Chapter One, *An Absurd Reasoning*, pp.12-14)

Indeed, Camus personalizes this quest of what he calls "absurd reason" and even describes the search *Gilgamesh* makes after the death of Enkidu. *Gilgamesh* "knew" what he felt between himself and Enkidu, however, the search to recapture this "knowledge" returned to the heart within him, to that love of friendship which does not die with death:

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: 'I know that!' This heart within me I can feel and I judge that it exists. This world I touch and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge and the rest is construction. For it I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all the aspects it is able to assume, all those likewise that have been attributed to it, this upbringing, this origin, this ardor of these silences, this nobility or this vileness. But aspects cannot be added up. This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my

existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. (*Myth of Sisyphus*, Chapter One, “An Absurd Reasoning”, pp. 14-15)

This citation of Camus’ description of this human dilemma

Anu, the God of the Heaven and the Heart holds power over all being and gives birth to Ea, the Goddess of Earth and of Wisdom!

certainly sheds light upon the struggle between *Gilgamesh* and *Enkidu* as well as provides a contemporary commentary upon the struggle of *Gilgamesh* to understand himself and his feelings throughout the epic. Utnapishtim, the “blind” wise person sums up *Gilgamesh’s* search for immortality through the love of friendship by describing love:

You have known, O Gilgamesh what interests me, to drink from the Well of Immortality which means to make the dead rise from their graves, the prisoners from their cells, the sinners from their sins. I think love’s kiss kills our heart of flesh. It is the only way to eternal life which should be unbearable if lived among the dying flowers and the shrieking farewells of the overstretched arms of our spoiled hopes. (p. 11)

Utnapishtim centers his trust and his life in the “heart of spirit”, the “Well of Immortality”. Furthermore, Utnapishtim even describes *compassion* to be “God’s pure act which burns forever...” and states “It is enough for one who loves to find his Only One singled in Himself and that is the cup of immortality”. So, this 5,000 B.C. *Gilgamesh* myth equates love of friendship with *compassion* as “God’s pure act which burns forever...” and identifies such love with the “cup of Immortality”.

Indeed, Camus’ use of Sisyphus provides us a Greek example of the black Assyrian *Gilgamesh*:

Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death into chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

It is said also that Sisyphus, being near to death, rashly wanted to test his wife’s love. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square. Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, led him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him. (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 119-20)

Originally then, the Greek God *Hermes*, literally, *messenger* (of the Gods), later the Roman God *Mercury*, God of commerce and a messenger of the gods, at once quick-

witted and rapidly changeable, who sent the immortal God Sisyphus to earth as a man who became wise in the ways of men. But when Death recalled him, Sisyphus decided to stay because he came to love the warm sun and the beautiful land. Sisyphus faced his immortality as a god and his love of mortal reality as a man, leaving the former in favor of the latter, yet, ultimately, he had to face the consequence of his choice.

Thus, Sisyphus gives us insight into *Gilgamesh*, since the comments of Camus allow us a basis from which we may study the *Epic of Gilgamesh* so we may realize that this poem is younger than 5000 B.C. Therefore, when we look at our reflections within a mirror, recognize the immortality of the *Truth* we seek and the love we find, yet, see the mortality which we face, we can consider *how we love* so we may face death without regret.

One explanation remains, that is, the parallel between the Assyrian Bull of Heaven and the Greek God Dionysus, son of Zeus. The Assyrian *Anu*, the God of the Heart held the power over all being and begot *Enki* or *Ea*, the Goddess of Wisdom who provided water to bring forth life on the earth. It is quite reasonable that *Ishtar* persuaded *Anu*, the father of gods to send the Bull of Heaven, as the “death giver”, since *Anu*, beginning with the primeval sea, gave birth to the cosmic mountain, 08/01 consisting of *heaven*, *An*, and *earth*, *Ki*, separated by *Enlil*, God of the Air. Thus, a drought occurred to punish both *Gilgamesh* and *Enkidu* for invading the life-giving rain forest and, perhaps for wasting the gift of life which is friendship for oneself.

The Greek God *Dionysus*, son of Zeus was a “horned child”, thus, paralleling the Bull of Heaven. *Dionysus* became alternately a goat, a stag, a bull or a ram according to the place of his worship. *Dionysus* spread the “vine”, both wine vines and beer hops about the earth, over Europe, Asia and North Africa, to India by way of Persia, a symbol, perhaps of the immortal taste of a divine beverage as compared to mortal (indeed, at that time) death-dealing water - historically, water has resulted in more human deaths than all plagues and diseases! One of *Dionysus*' titles was *Dendrites*, literally, tree-youth and was celebrated as the Spring Festival when the trees burst into leaf and the whole world is intoxicated with desire, celebrating the liberation of life from winter's death grasp. *Dionysus*, furthermore, appeared as three animals, a Serpent in the Winter, a Lion in the Spring to be killed and eaten as a Bull, a goat or a stag in the Summer, as the people shared in the life nature gave to them. Obviously, the oriental city of Sumer and the “occidental” city of Athens shared their views of nature's and human's views of mortality seeking immortality through the love of friendship in the myths they sang at the feasts where they gathered to celebrate the rebirth of life in Spring from the death of Winter!

Gilgamesh

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Part I

The story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu “is the story of their becoming human together”. This statement is the essence and the purpose of this myth by showing that the love of friendship enabled two people, one a royal person as king, the other a nature boy as peasant to become human because each saw self in the other’s eyes; thus, these two different people see how each though different are “equals”.

Gilgamesh was king of Uruk, “a city set between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in ancient Babylonia”; Enkidu was a peasant who was something of a nature boy. The myth, some five to seven thousand years old and whose chards were found in Baghdad of contemporary Iraq describes Gilgamesh as two thirds God and one third human, but the people look upon him as a representative of the Mesopotamian God on earth, as did most primitive peoples look upon their kings and/or medicine men. Enkidu, as half animal and half man ran with the animals of nature who “hailed him as their equal and king”.

The story describes Gilgamesh as a King who claims the first right to sleep with the wife of every citizen male who marries and Enkidu as a nature boy who rescues animals from traps humans set for them and whom the animals consider one of them. When Enkidu learns how Gilgamesh takes advantage of the newly married women, he travels from the steep and stands between Gilgamesh and the house of the newly married woman, opposing his advance; Gilgamesh “lunged at Enkidu” and “their feet danced the dance of life which hovers close to death”. Gilgamesh “...stood still exhausted...turned to Enkidu who leaned again his shoulder and looked into his eyes and saw himself in the other, just as Enkidu saw himself in Gilgamesh”. “They began to laugh and clutched each other in their breathless exaltation”.

Part I also contrasts Gilgamesh’s lack of self-knowledge and alienation from himself and nature with Enkidu’s loss of innocence and confrontation with the human world as well as his new found alienation from nature and himself. As king, Gilgamesh is aloof, alone and tired; as part of nature, Enkidu has animal friends and is filled and surrounded with life.!

Text as assembled from some twenty-seven shards¹

Part I Text

Gilgamesh was king of Uruk², a city set between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in ancient Babylonia. Enkidu was born on the Steppe where he grew up among the animals. Gilgamesh was called a god and man; Endidu was an animal and man. It is the story of their becoming human together.

As king, Gilgamesh was a tyrant to his people; he demanded from an old birthright, the privilege of sleeping with their brides before the husbands were permitted. Sometimes he pushed

his people half to death with work rebuilding Uruk's walls and then without an explanation let the walls go unattended and decay. He left his people dreaming of the past and longing for a change. They had grown tired of his contradictions and his callous ways; they knew his world was old and cluttered with spoiled arts they defended but could not revive.

Enkidu was ignorant of oldness. He ran with the animals, drank at their springs, not knowing fear or wisdom. He freed the animals from traps the hunters set. A hunter's son, one day, saw Enkidu opening a trap: the creature was all covered with hair and yet his hands and the dexterity of men's. He ran beside the freed gazelle. Like a brother, they drank together at a pool; like two friends, sharing some common journey, not needing to speak but just continue.

Gilgamesh was a godlike man alone with his thoughts in idleness except for those evenings when he went down into the marketplace to the Family House to sleep with the virgins, or when he told his dreams to his mother, Nissun.

The hunter listened to his son's description of Enkidu and was both angry and afraid. He told his son to go to Uruk, to tell what he had seen to Gilgamesh and to ask him to send a prostitute who would sleep with Enkidu and make the animals ashamed of him. Gilgamesh would understand, for he was king. The hunter's son made the day's journey to Uruk, told what he had seen to Gilgamesh, showing him his father's anger and his fear and praising the strength of the strange creature who had come to his father's plains, freed the animals from the traps, lived as one of them and threatened the livelihood of men. Gilgamesh listened but he had heard so many stories of the Wondrous Creatures of the Forest and the Steppe that he could hardly be aroused; he sent the prostitute but then forgot what he had listened to.

The hunter left the prostitute alone at the spring. When evening came, Enkidu appeared among the animals, drank with them and rested at their side. When he awoke, he saw a creature unlike any he had seen before standing near the water, its skin smooth, tan and hairless except for its head and between its legs. He wanted to touch it, but then it made sounds he had never heard, not like the sounds of his friends, the animals and he was afraid. The prostitute came close to him and the animals withdrew. She took his hand and guided it across her breasts, between her legs, touched him with her fingers gently, bent down and moistened him with her lips, then drew him slowly to the ground.

When Enkidu arose again, looking for his friends who had gone, he felt a strange exhaustion, as if life had left his body. Enkidu felt the absence of the natural animals. He imagined the gazelles raising the dry dust, like soft brush floating on the crests of sand, swiftly changing direction and the serpents asleep at the springs, slipping effortlessly into the water; he imagined the wild she-camel vanishing into the desert. His friends had left him to a vast aloneness he had never felt before. The lions returned to the mountains, the water buffalo to the rivers, the birds to the sky!

Gilgamesh awoke anxiously from a dream and said to Ninsun³: "I saw a star fall from the sky; the people of Uruk stood around and admired it; I was jealous and tried to carry it away, but I was too weak and I failed. What does it mean? I have not dreamed like this before". She said: "Your equal is the star which fell, as if a sign from Heaven had been sent which is too heavy,

but which you will try to lift, drive away and fall.” “But, I have never failed before”, he interrupted her, surprised himself at his anxiety. “It will be a person”, she continued, speaking in her somber monotone, “a companion who is your equal in strength, a person loyal to a friend who will not forsake you and whom you will never wish to leave”. Gilgamesh was quiet at this interpretation of his dream. That night he had a vision of an ax. “What does this mean”, he said on waking? “The people stood around the ax when I tried to lift it and I failed. I feel such tiredness; I cannot explain”. Ninsun said: “The ax is a man who is your friend and equal; he will come, a graceful man who will lift you out of tiredness”. “Oh, Ninsun, I want your words to be true. I have never known such weariness before, as if some life in me has disappeared, or needs to be filled up again. I am alone and I have longed for some companionship. My people also have grown tired of my solitude”.

The prostitute slept beside Enkidu until he was used to her body. She knew how gradually one stops desiring to run with old companions. One morning, she awoke and said to him: “Why do you still want to run with animals?” You are a human being now⁴, not like them. You are like a god, like Gilgamesh. I will lead you to Uruk where you belong to the temple of Anu where Gilgamesh rules over his people, is strong and you will recognize yourself in him, as in a clear stream you see your own face, a man’s face. Enkidu listened to her words, to the unfamiliar names of Anu, Gilgamesh and he felt weak. He let her clothe him in the portion of her scarlet robe and lead him to a shepherd’s house where he was welcomed and taught to eat bread and to drink the liquohat the shepherds drank. Enkidu’s soul felt new and strange; his face was hot with sweat and somehow gay. The prostitute shaved the long hair off his body; she washed him with perfumes and oils and he became a man. At night, he stood watch for the shepherds against the lions as they could sleep. He captured wolves for them and he was known as their Protector.

One day a man who was going to Uruk stopped to eat at the shepherd’s home. He told them he was hurrying to the marketplace to choose for himself a virgin bride whom Gilgamesh by his birthright would sleep with before him. Enkidu’s face was pale; he felt a weakness in his body. At the mention of their king, he asked the prostitute why should be his birthright. She answered: “He is king”.

Enkidu entered Uruk. The prostitute walked behind him, the marketplace filled with people. When they heard Enkidu was coming, people said, “he looks like Gilgamesh, but he is shorter and also stronger; he has the power of the Steppe, the milk of the animals he sucked. They hailed him as the equal to their king.

At night when Gilgamesh approached the market square to go into the Family Home, where the bride was to be chosen, Enkidu stood blocking his way. Gilgamesh looked at the stranger, listened to his people’s shouts of praise for someone other than himself, and lunged at Enkidu. They fell like wolves at each other’s throats, like bulls bellowing and horses gasping for breath that have run all day, desperate for rest and water, crushing the gate they fell against. The dry dust billowed in the marketplace and people shrieked. The dogs raced in and out between their legs; a child screamed at their feet which danced the dance of death and quiet suddenly fell upon them. When Gilgamesh stood still exhausted, he turned to Enkidu who leaned against his shoulder, looked into his eyes and saw himself in the other, just as Enkidu saw himself in

Gilgamesh, In the silence of the people, they began to laugh and clutched each other in their breathless exaltation⁵.

Part II

The reaction of Gilgamesh is typical of the reaction of those who “fall in love”, namely, let us now go out and “conquer” the world. Then Gilgamesh wanted “to kill the Evil One, Humbaba” so they might “prove ourselves more powerful than he” - the “King” seeks to prove that friendship is more powerful than “evil”. But, Enkidu “was afraid”, “...but he was not as strong as Gilgamesh in argument and they were friends”. “Don’t be afraid, said Gilgamesh. We are together. There is nothing we should fear”. But, Enkidu wanted to know why Gilgamesh wanted to “raise his, Humbaba’s anger?”

Gilgamesh put the adventure to the vote of the “Elders of Uruk” and “their voices gave the confidence his friend had failed to give; some even said that Enkidu’s wisdom was a sign of cowardice”. Gilgamesh laughed and said “You see, my friend...the wise of Uruk have outnumbered you”.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu go to meet with Ninsun, Gilgamesh’s mother who burned incense to Shamash, saying: “You inspire him to end the evil of the world which you abhor and yet he is a man for all his power and cannot do your work”.

Enkidu is wounded by Humbaba, but Gilgamesh kills Humbaba with his ax, then Istar, the Goddess of Love and War, proposes to Gilgamesh but he rejects her. Istar then pleads with the God Anu to send the Bull of Heaven to kill both of them, however, Enkidu kills the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu, however, is dying from the wound received from Humbaba and says: “Enlil said I must die, for you are two-thirds God and should not die”. Gilgamesh becomes fearful of his “own solitude”: “I can’t imagine being left alone. I’m less a man without my friend...Gilgamesh, though he was king, had never looked a death before”. Enkidu complains that whereas “everything had life to me...the sky, the storm, the earth, water, wandering, the moon and its three children, salt, even my hand had life. It’s gone. It’s gone...Because of her. She made me see things as a man and a man sees death in things. That is what it is to be a man”.

Text as assembled from some twenty-seven shards

Part II

Text

Gilgamesh spoke then: We go to kill the Evil One, Humbaba. We must prove ourselves more powerful than he. Enkidu was afraid of the forest of Humbaba and urged him not to go, but he was not as strong as Gilgamesh in argument and they were friends. They had embraced and made their vow to stay together always, no matter what the obstacle. Enkidu tried to hold his fear but he was sick at heart: “I feel the weakness I felt before come over my body as if I tried to lift my arms and found they were hollow.” “It is Humbaba who has taken your strength,” Gilgamesh

spoke out, anxious for the journey. “We must kill him and end his evil power over us”. “No”, Enkidu cried, “it is the journey that will take away our life”. “Don’t be afraid,” said Gilgamesh, “We are together; there is nothing we should fear”. “I learned,” Enkidu said, “when we lived with the animals never to go down into that forest; I learned there was death in Humbaba. Why do you want to raise his anger?” Only half listening, Gilgamesh thought aloud about the cedars he would climb – “How can we climb those cedars?” Enkidu tried to sway his thoughts: “Humbaba never sleeps; he is the guardian whom Enlil⁶ has commanded to protect the sacred trees by terror. I have learned his sound is like a flood’s sound, slowly forming in the distance, then enveloping all other sounds. Even the cries of animals cannot be heard. Trees are hushed; the wind still moves them back and forth but noiselessly, as when one senses violence gathering its force, soon no sound apart from it, not even one’s own thoughts in terror. I have learned from his mouth springs fire that scorches the earth and in a moment, nothing remains alive, no tree, no insect, as in a dream which makes one wake and cry. Out of the pain one cannot find the source of, out of nothing; one makes and everything has vanished. I have learned Humbaba is the face of death; he hears each insect crawling toward the edge of the forest. He twitches and the forest dies. Do you think he could not hear two men?”

“Why are you worried about death?”, sighed Gilgamesh, “only gods are immortal anyway. What men do is nothing, so fear is never justified. What happened to your power which once could challenge and equal mine? I will go ahead of you and, if I die, I will at least have the reward of having people say: ‘He died in war against Humbaba’. You cannot discourage me with fears and hesitations. I will fight Humbaba; I will cut down his cedars. Tell the blacksmiths to build us two-edged swords and double shields and tell them I am impatient and cannot wait long.”

Then Gilgamesh and Enkidu went together to the marketplace to notify the Elders of Uruk who were meeting in their senate. They too were talking about Humbaba, as they often did, edging always in their thoughts toward the forbidden.

Gilgamesh addressed them: “The one you speak of, I now must meet. I want to prove him not the awesome thing we think he is and the boundaries set up by the gods are not unbreakable. I will defeat him in his cedar forest. The youth of Uruk need this fight; they have grown soft and restless.”

The old men leaned forward a little remembering the old wars; a flush burned on their cheeks. It seemed a little dangerous and yet they saw their king was seized with passion for this fight. Their voices gave the confidence his friend had failed to give. Some even said Enkidu’s wisdom was a sign of cowardice.

“You see, my friend,” laughed Gilgamesh, “the wise of Uruk have outnumbered you.”

Amidst the speeches in the hall which called upon the gods for their protection, Gilgamesh saw in his friend that pain he had seen before and asked him what it was that troubled him. Enkidu could not speak; he held his tears back, barely audibly he said: “It is a road you have never traveled”.

The blacksmiths brought Gilgamesh his weapons and put them in his hand. He took his quiver, bow and ax, and two-edged sword and they began to march. The elders gave their austere blessing and the people shouted: "Let Enkidu lead; don't trust your strength. Enkidu knows the forests, the one who goes ahead will save his friend. May Shamash⁷ bring you victory". Enkidu resolved to lead his friend who was determined but did not know the way. Now, Gilgamesh was certain with his friend beside him.

They went to Ninsun, his mother, who would advise them how to guard their steps. Her words still filled his mind as they started their journey, just as a mother's voice is heard sometimes in a man's mind long past childhood, calling his name, calling him from sleep or from some pleasurable moment or a foreign street when every trace of origin seems left and one has almost passed into a land of one's life, when one feels almost god enough to be free from voices. Then her voice calls out like a voice from childhood, reminding him he once tossed in dreams he still could smell the incense she had burned to Shamash, saying: "Why did you give my son a restless heart and now you touch him with his passion to destroy Humbaba and you send him on a journey to a battle he may never understand to a door he cannot open. You inspire him to end the evil of the world which you abhor and yet, he is a man for all his power and cannot do your work. You must protect my son from danger".

She put out the incense and called Enkidu to her said, saying, "You are not my son but I adopt you and call upon the same protection now for you I called upon for Gilgamesh." She placed a charm around his neck, saying, "O, let Enkidu now protect his friend".

These words still filled their minds as the two friends continued on their way. After three days, they reached the edge of the forest where Humbaba's watchman stood. Suddenly, it was Gilgamesh who was afraid; Enkidu reminded him to be fearless. The watchman sounded his warning to Humbaba. The two friends moved slowly toward the forest gate. When Enkidu touched the gate, his hand felt numb; he could not move his fingers or his wrist. His face turned pale like someone's witnessing a death; he tried to ask his friend for help, the friend whom he had just encouraged to move on, but he could only stutter and hold out his paralyzed hand.

"It will pass," said Gilgamesh. "Would you want to stay behind because of that? We must go down into the forest together. Forget your fear of death. I will go before you and protect you." Enkidu followed close behind so filled with fear he could not think or speak. Soon they reached the high cedars and stood in awe at the foot of the great mountain. Pleasure seemed to grow from fear of Gilgamesh. As when one comes upon a path in the woods unvisited by men one is drawn near the lost and undiscovered in oneself. He was revitalized by danger. They knew it was the path Humbaba had made. "Some call the forest 'hell'; others call it 'paradise'; what difference does it make?, asked Gilgamesh?

Night was falling quickly and they had no time to call it names, except, perhaps 'the Dark' before they found a place at the edge of the forest to serve as shelter for their sleep. It was a restless night for both. One snatched at sleep and sprang awake from dreams; the other could not rest because of pain which spread throughout his side. Enkidu was alone with sights he saw brought on by pain and fear, as one in deep despair may lie beside his love who sleeps and seems so unafraid, absorbing in himself the phantoms they cannot see, phantoms diminished for one

when two can see and stay awake to talk of them and search out a solution to despair or lie together in each other's arms or weep and in exhaustion from their tears, perhaps find laughter for their fears. But alone and awake the size and nature of the creatures in his mind grow monstrous, beyond resemblance to the creatures he had known before the prostitute had come into his life. He cried aloud for them to stop appearing over him, emerging from behind the trees with phosphorescent eyes brought on by rain. He could not bear his voice, but knew he screamed and could not move his arms but thought they tried to move as if a heavy weight he could raise or wriggle out from underneath had settled on his chest. Like a turtle trapped beneath a fallen branch, each effort only added to paralysis. He could not make his friend, his one companion hear. Gilgamesh awoke but could not hear his friend in agony; he still was captive to his dreams which he would tell aloud to exorcise: I saw us standing in a mountain gorge, a rockslide fell on us. We seemed no more than insects under it and then a solitary graceful man appeared and pulled me out from under the mountain. He gave me water and I felt released.

"Tomorrow, you will be victorious," Endidu said, to whom the dream brought chills, for only one of them, he knew would be released – which Gilgamesh could not perceive in the darkness for he went back to sleep without responding to his friend's interpretation of his dream. "Did you call me", Gilgamesh sat up again; "Why did I wake again? I thought you touched me. Why am I afraid? I find my limbs grow numb as if some god passed over us, drawing out our life. I had another dream: this time the heavens were alive with fire, but soon the clouds began to thicken, death rained down on us, lightning flashes stopped and everything which rained down turned to ashes. What does this mean, Enkidu?"

"That you will be victorious against Humbaba," Enkidu said, or someone said through him because he could not hear his voice or move his limbs although he thought he spoke and soon he saw his friend asleep beside him. At dawn Gilgamesh raised his ax and struck at the great cedar. When Humbaba heard the sound of falling trees, he hurried down the path they had seen but only had traveled. Gilgamesh felt weak at the sound of Humbaba's footsteps and called to Shamash, saying, "I have followed you in the way decreed; why am I abandoned now?"

Suddenly the winds sprang up. They saw the great head of Humbaba like a water buffalo bellowing down the path, his huge and clumsy legs, he flailing arms thrashing at phantoms in his precious trees. His single stroke could cut a cedar down and leave no mark on him. His shoulders, like a porter's under building stones, were permanently bent by what he bore; he was the slave who did the work for gods but whom the gods would never notice. Monstrous in his contortion, he aroused the two almost to pity. But pity was the thing which might have killed. It made them pause just long enough to show how pitiless he was to them. Gilgamesh in horror saw him strike the back of Enkidu and beat him to the ground, until he thought his friend was crushed to death. He stood still watching as the monster leaned to make his final strike against his friend, unable to move to help him and then Enkidu slid along the ground like a ram making his final lunge on wounded knees. Humbaba fell and seemed to crack the ground itself in two and Gilgamesh, as if this fall had snapped him from his daze, returned to life and stood over Humbaba with his ax, raised high above his head watching the monster plead in strangled sobs and desperate appeals, the way the sea contorts under a violent squall: "I'll serve you as I served the gods," Humbaba said, "I'll build you houses from their sacred trees".⁸

Enkidu feared his friend was weakening and called out: “Gilgamesh! Don’t trust him.” As if there was some hunger in himself that Gilgamesh was feeling the turned him momentarily to years for someone who would serve, he paused and then Gilgamesh raised his ax up higher and swung it in a perfect arc into Humbaba’s neck. He reached out to touch the wounded shoulder of his friend and late that night reached again to see if he was yet asleep, but there was only quiet breathing. The stars against the midnight sky were sparkling like mica in a riverbed; in the slight breeze, the head of Humbaba was swinging from a tree.

In the morning, when they had bathed and were preparing to return to Uruk, Ishtar came, their city’s patroness, Goddess of love, fruitfulness and war. She brought to Gilgamesh his royal robes and crown and hinted that the gods had grieved Humbaba’s loss: “Why should you be chosen as the one they blame?”, she said in her coyness; “I might persuade my father Anu⁹ to relent, if you marry me¹⁰. That is the way your kingdom will know peace”. Gilgamesh shook off what were to him unwanted dreams: “What would I gain by taking you as wife?. Just as you loved the lion and gave him pits to fall in and the horse whose back you wounded with the whip.” He shouted back at her: “You love brings only war; you are an old fat whore. That is what you are, though once beautiful, perhaps and could deceive but who has left in men a memory of grief. We outgrow our naivete’ in thinking goddesses return our love. I am tired of your promises, tired as Ishullanu who brought you dates, innocent until you pressed his hand against your breasts and turned him to a mole who lived beneath the surface of your earth, unable to dig out to air, feeling in his darkness for the same soft touch. He subsided in his insults and turned away to his friend Enkidu. “

Ishtar stuttered she was so enraged and flew to the protection of her father. In his customary calm, wise Anu noted that her sins had been declaimed this way before. She shook in greater rage and said she had no time to listen to reminders from old gods, only to ask him to make for her The Bull of Heaven to destroy this man: “I will send him something he would never wish to dream. There will be more dead than living on this earth, drought that nothing will relieve”. Anu listened to her and then reminded her: “Men need survival after punishment. Have you stored them enough grain?” She knew her father’s weakness for details and said: “I thought of that; they shall not starve, but a little hunger will replace their arrogance with new desire.” Then Anu acceded to her request. The Bull of Heaven descended to the earth and killed at once three hundred men and then attacked King Gilgamesh.

Enkidu found strength to protect his friend; he lunged from side to side, watching for his chance to seize the horns. The bull frothed in its rage at this dance and suddenly Enkidu seized his tail, twisted it around until the bull stood still, bewildered, out of breath and then Enkidu plunged his sword behind its horns into the nape of the bulls’ neck; it fell dead. The goddess stood on Uruk’s walls and cried aloud: “Grief to those who have insulted me and killed the Bull of Heaven!”.

When Enkidu heard Ishtar’s curse, he tore the right thigh from the bull’s flesh ,hurled it in her face and shouted: “I would tear you just like this if I could catch you!” Then, he withdrew among the prostitutes and mourned with them the Bull of Heaven’s death.

That night the wound Enkidu had received in his struggle with Humbaba grew worse. He tossed with fever and was filled with dreams. He woke his friend to tell him what he had heard and saw: “The gods have said that one of us must die because we killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Enlil said I must die for you are two-thirds god and should not die. But Shamash spoke for me and called me ‘innocent’. They all begin to argue, as if that word touched off a universal rage. I know they have chosen me”, as tears flowed from his eyes, “My brother, it is the fever only”, said Gilgamesh. Enkidu cursed the gate into Humbaba’s forest which had lamed his hand and cursed the hunter and the prostitute who had led him from his friends, not sensing Gilgamesh’s fear at the thought of his own solitude: “I cannot imagine being left alone; I’m less a man without my friend”. Gilgamesh did not let himself the gods had chosen one of them to die. The fever reached its height and like a madman, talking to a wall in an asylum, Enkidu cursed the gate as if it were the persons he could blame: “I would have split you with my ax, if I had known you could wound. Shamash, who called me ‘innocent, I curse your heart for bringing me to suffer this.” He thought he heard Shamash arguing, if the prostitute had never come to him, he never would have known his friend who sat beside him now trying to find the gesture to reverse the gods’ decision or relieve a close companion’s pain.

Gilgamesh, although he was king, had never looked at death before. Enkidu saw in him a helplessness to understand or speak, as if this were the thing the other had to learn and he to teach. But, visions from his sickness made him also helpless as a teacher. All he had to give was being weak and rage about the kings and elders and the animals in the underworld that crowded sleep. About the feathers which grew from the arms in the house of dust whose occupants sat in the dark devoid of light with day as food, the fluttering of wings as substitutes for life. The priest and the ecstatic sat there too, their spirits gone, each body like an old recluse, no longer inhabiting its island. Like shells one finds among shore rocks, only the slightest evidence of life survived.

Gilgamesh knew his friend was close to death. He tried to recollect aloud their life together which had been so brief, so empty of gestures they never felt they had to make. Tears filled his eyes, as he appealed to Ninsun, his mother and to the Elders not to explain but to save his friend who once had run among the animals, the wild horses of the range, the panther of the Steppe. He had run and drunk with them, as if they were his brothers and sisters. Just now he went with me into the forest of Humbaba and killed the bull of Heaven.

“Everything had life to me,” he heard Enkidu murmur, “the sky, the storm, the earth, water, wandering, the moon and its three children, salt, even my hand had life, but it’s gone. It’s gone. I have seen death, as a total stranger sees another person’s world, or as a freak sees whom the gods created when they were drunk or on too much wine and had a contest to show off the greatness of the harm they could do, creating a man with no balls or a woman without a womb, a crippled or deliberately maimed child, or old age itself, blind eyes, trembling hands, contorted in continual pain, a starving dog too weak to eat, a doe caught in a trap wincing for help. Oh death the contest rules the one who makes the greatest wretchedness wins. For all of these can never fit into the perfect state they made when they were sober. There are the things I have witnessed as a man and weep for now, for they will have no witness if friends die. I see them so alone and elpless. Who will be kind to them?”

Enkidu looked at Gilgamesh and said: “You will be left alone, unable to understand in a world wherein nothing lives anymore as you thought it did¹¹. Nothing like yourself, everything like dead clay before the river makes the plants burst out along its beds, dead.” He became bitter in his tone again: “Because of her¹²; she made me see things as a man and a man sees death in things. You’ll know when you have lost the strength to see the way you once did. You’ll be alone and wander, looking for that life that’s gone or some eternal life you have to find”. He drew closer to his friend’s face. “My pain is that my eyes and ears no longer see and hear the same as yours do. Your eyes have changed; you are crying; you never cried before. It’s not like you. Why am I do die, you to wander on alone? Is that the way it is with friends?” Gilgamesh sat hushed as his friend’s eyes stilled. In his silence, he reached out to touch the friend whom he had lost.

Part III

“Gilgamesh wept bitterly for his friend...The only nourishment he knew was grief, endless in its hidden source, yet never ending hunger...for the heart has changed and the soul has been converted to a thing that sees how much it costs to lose a friend it loved...For being human holds a special grief of privacy within the universe that yearns and waits to be retouched by someone who can take away the memory of death”. Of course, thanks to the blind man Upnaptishim, the answer to Gilgamesh’s grief and loss is the fact that the love of friendship itself as a virtuous presence within Gilgamesh is also the presence of his beloved, Enkidu. So this love of friendship, thanks to which Gilgamesh and Enkidu became “human together”, as a continuous and undying presence also manifests a sacred presence of God’s love.

“Gilgamesh wandered through the desert alone as he had never been alone when he had craved but not known what he craved...Death had taken the direction he had gained. He was no more a king but just a man who now had lost his way...His life became a quest to find the secret of eternal life which he might carry back to give his friend...He yearned to talk to Utnapishtim, the one who had survived the flood and death itself, the one who knew the secret”.

Gilgamesh met Utnapishtim, “...(who) was the only one whom he had met on his journey who did not add to his fatigue” and said to him: “My friend has died so many times in me, and yet he still seems so alive, like a younger brother, then suddenly like soft tissue, a dried leaf. I was afraid. Is there something more than death? Some other end to friendship?”

“Utnapishtim raised his hand and touched the shoulder of the younger man to put him at his ease. Two things encourage me to hope...that one can come this far to bring life to a friend and that you understand how we must borrow light from the blind...Friendship is vowing toward immortality and does not know the passing away of beauty...because it aims for the spirit. Many years ago through loss I learned that love is wrung from our inmost heart until only the loved one is and we are not”. This “passing away of beauty”, indeed, this absence of the beloved itself becomes that lack, that emptiness, yes, even that *yin* thanks to which the sacred presence of God (or the *Tao*) may find an opening and literally shine forth into this profane world in which humans live and die. In and out, between their legs, a child screamed at their feet, that danced the dance of life which hovers close to death. Quiet suddenly fell upon them when Gilgamesh stood still exhausted. He turned to Enid who leaned against his shoulder and looked into his eyes, saw himself in the other, just as Enid saw himself in Gilgamesh.

Utnapishtim then tells his story to Gilgamesh, a story of a universal flood which destroyed all life except “...food and wine and precious minerals and seed of living animals we put in it. My family...” (See *Genesis*, 6:5-22 for a parallel story of Abraham who lived in Canaan about 1850 B.C. and written between 700 and 500 B.C.)

Utnapishtim then tells Gilgamesh about a plant in the river: “Its thorns will prick your hands as a rose thorn pricks but it will give to you new life.” Gilgamesh finds, then loses the plant to a serpent.

Text as assembled from some twenty-seven shards

Part III

Text

Gilgamesh wept bitterly for his friend; he felt himself now singled out for loss apart from everyone else. The word *Enkidu* roamed through every thought, like a hungry animal through empty lairs in search of food. The only nourishment he knew was grief, endless in its hidden source, yet never ending hunger. All that is left to one who grieves is convalescence. No change of heart or spiritual conversion, for the heart has changed and the soul has been converted to a thing that sees how much it costs to lose a friend it loved.

It has grown past conversion to a world few enter without tasting loss in which one spends a long time waiting for something to move one to proceed. It is that inner atmosphere that has an unfamiliar gravity or none at all where words are flung out in the air but stay motionless without an answer, hovering about one's lips or arguing back to haunt the memory with what one failed to say until one learns acceptance of the silence amidst the new debris or turns again to grief as the only source of privacy alone with someone loved. It could go on for years and years, and has, for centuries, for being human holds a special grief of privacy within the universe that yearns and waits to be retouched by someone who can take away the memory of loss.

Gilgamesh wandered through the desert alone as he had never been alone. When he had craved but not known what he craved; the dryness now was worse than decay. The bored know nothing of this agony, waiting for diversion they have never lost. Death had taken the direction he had gained. He was no more a king, but just a man who now had lost his way, yet, had a greater passion to withdraw into a deeper isolation. Mad, perhaps insane, he tried to bring Enkidu back to life to end his bitterness, his fear of death; his life became a quest to find the secret of eternal life which he might carry back to give his friend¹³.

He has put on the skins of animals and thrown himself in the dust; now, he longed to hear the voice of one who still used words as revelations. Gilgamesh yearned to talk to Utnapishtim, the one who had survived the flood and death itself, the one who knew the secret. Before his loss, when he approached at night the mountain passes where the lions slept, he raised his eyes to Sin¹⁴, the moon god and prayed; now, he expected help from no one. He tried to fall asleep despite the sounds of movement through the trees, his chest was tight with needless fear Enkidu

would have calmed. When he arrived at the mountains of Mashu, whose peaks reach to the shores of Heaven, and whose roots descend to Hell, he saw the Scorpion people who guard its gate, whose knowledge is awesome, but whose glance is death. When he saw them, his face turned ashen with dismay, but he bowed down to them, as the only way to shield himself against effusions of their gaze. The Scorpion man then recognized in Gilgamesh the flesh of gods and told his wife: "This one is two-thirds god, one-third man and can survive our view; then he spoke to him: "Why have you come this route to us? The way is arduous and long and no one goes beyond".

"I have come to see my father, Utnapishtim who was allowed to go beyond. I want to ask him about life and death to end my loss. My friend has died and I want to bring him back to life". The Scorpion interrupted him and laughed, being impatient with such tales and fearful of sentiment: "No one is able to explain; no one has gone beyond these mountains. There is only death; there is no light beyond, just darkness and cold and at daybreak a burning heat. You will learn nothing we do not know; you will only come to grief." "I have been through grief." Gilgamesh screamed; "even if there will be more of pain and heat and cold, I will go on; open the gate to the mountains". "All right, go," the Scorpion man said, as if in anger with a child who had not reached the age of reason. The gate opened and his wife added: "Be careful of the darkness".

Gilgamesh saw his going frightened them. They only seemed secure. He entered the Road of the Sun which was so shrouded in darkness he could see neither what was ahead of him nor behind him. Thick was the darkness and there was no light. For days he traveled in this darkness without light to guide him, ascending or descending, he could not be sure, going on with only the companionship of grief in which he felt Enkidu at his side. He said his name, "Enkidu, Enkidu" to quiet his fear through the darkness where there was no light and where he saw neither what was ahead nor behind until before him, when it seemed there was no end to loneliness, a valley came into view, sprinkled with precious stones and fruit-filled vines.

Gazing into the valley, he felt overcome with pain as a man who has been in prison feels his chains at his release from fear. He spoke Enkidu's name aloud, as if explaining to the valley why he was there, wishing his friend could see the same horizon, share the same delights: "My friend, Enkidu died; we hunted together; we killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. We were always at each other's side, encouraging when one was discouraged or afraid or did not understand. He was this close to me; he held his hands together to describe the closeness. It seemed for a moment he could almost touch his friend and could speak to him as if he were there: "Enkidu, Enkidu"; but suddenly the silence was deeper than before in a place where they had never been together. He sat down on the ground and wept: "Enkidu, Enkidu". As when we can recall so vividly we almost touch, or think of all the gestures we failed to make.

After several minutes, he stood up, explaining only to himself why he had come – "to find the secret of eternal life; to bring Enkidu back to life" – recognizing now the valley was deaf to loss known only to himself! This private mumbling made both time and distance pass until he reached the sea and came upon a cottage where a barmaid named Sidurl lived. He beat the door impatiently and when she called: "Where are you going traveler?" and came to see; she saw him as half-crazed. "Perhaps, he is a murderer," she thought and drew away from him in

fear. “Why do you draw back like that”, he asked; “has grief made me so terrible to look at?” “Who are you? You are no one I know”. “I am Gilgamesh who killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven with my friend”. “If you are Gilgamesh and did those things, why are you so emaciated and your face half-crazed?” “I have grieved; is it so impossible to believe?,” he pleaded. “My friend who went through everything with me is dead”. “No one grieves that much,” she said; “your friend is gone so forget him. No one remembers him; he is dead”. “Enkidu, Enkidu”, Gilgamesh called out, “help me; they do not know you as I know you”.

Then she took pity on him and let him enter, lie down and rest. She gave him her bed to fall into and sleep and rubbed his back and neck, legs and arms when he was coming out of sleep, still muttering about the one “who went with me through everything”. Like those old people who forget their listeners have not lived through their past with them, mentioning names no one knows. “Enkidu, Enkidu whom I loved so much, who went through everything with me died, like any ordinary man. I have cried both day and night. I did not want to put him in a grave. He will rise, I know, one day, but then I saw he was dead. His face collapsed within several days, like cobwebs, I have touched with my finger”.

She whipped his face with a moist cloth saying, “Yes, yes, yes, yes”, as she made him cooler, trying to help him forget by the steady softness of her flesh. She moved her lips across his chest and caressed the length of his tired body and lay over him at night until he slept. “You will never find an end to grief by going on,” she said to the one half sleeping at her side, leaning to wipe the perspiration from his face. His eyes were open though his whole self felt asleep, far off alone in some deep forest, planted in his flesh through which he felt his way in pain without the help of friends. She spoke to a child who could not understand all the futility that lay ahead, yet whom she knew would go on to reap, repeat, repeat the things men had to learn. The gods gave death to men and kept life for themselves. That is the only way it is. Cherish your rests; the children you might have; you are a thing who carries so much tiredness. When he arose, she washed his body, dressed him and spoke of pleasures he could find with her, instead of going on in foolishness. But he, when he was fully awake, threw off the clothes she had put on and dressed again in the dark pelts he had come so far wearing. Her presence seemed to suffocate him now. He wanted to throw off each pleasure-filled touch and moment of forgetfulness to bathe away her memory. To bathe was now more urgent than to sleep. “Tell me only the way to Utnapishtim, if you know; I am going on”.

No one has crossed the sea of death to him. She begged him: “Stay here and sleep; begin your life again. You have come so far; you need much sleep”. He was fully awake and with desperate energy said: “Tell me the way”. “All right,” she sighed. She had despaired of him already. “You must find Utnapishtim’s boatman, Urshanabi. He has stone images which will show the way. If it can be arranged for you who are so blind with love of self and with rage to reach the other side, it will be through his help, his alone. If it cannot be, then turn back. I am still fool enough to take you in.” She turned in anger back to her house and slammed the door, not listening as he screamed at her: “I am not blind with self-love but with loss”. He felt his head split with the pain of making himself heard by her, by all the world. It was as if his mind exploded into little pieces. He struck at everything in sight; he hurried with his ax drawn from his belt down to the shore to find this Urshanabi. Coming upon some stones which stood in his way, he smashed them into a thousand pieces.

Urshanabi, a lean old man with gray hair, browned by the brackish water of his river, laughed at the stranger's folly and even danced to mock the crazed man's act. "You have destroyed the Sacred Stones which might have taken you across!" Gilgamesh sat on the ground, his head resting on his drawn up knees, wondering how much fatigue a man could stand. He raised his head to speak: "I know I have broken them; what difference now. I only want to speak to Utnapishtim but I have to reach his shore. Can you help me?" "Perhaps," the boatman said, "but I have questions to ask first. Why are your cheeks so thin, your eyes so full of grief? What have you known of loss that makes you different from other men?" "Don't ask me to retell my pain," he said, "I only want to bring him back to life". "Whom", asked Urshanabi and he laughed at the presumption of this quest. "He was my friend," pleaded Gilgamesh, unconscious once again of audience and pain. Recounting flowed from him like music played by someone else. "My younger brother who saved me from the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba, who listened to my dreams, who shared my pain. Why did he have to die? He would have stayed with me in death; he would not have let me die alone; he was a friend." Gilgamesh stopped, realizing he had not come this far to hear himself recall the failure of his grief to save but to find an end to his despair. "Which is the way to Utnapishtim? I must know. Is it the sea, the mountains? I must go there". "I told you," Urshanabi said, "the stone images are destroyed. If you had been as reverent with them as with your friend, they might have helped you cross." "What else? What else is there? There must be something else", pleaded Gilgamesh. "You are exhausting me," the boatman said, "I do not think you will be serene ever, or at peace enough for others not to be exhausted by your presence, until, at last, you lose by your own hand the very thing you crave to hold alone." "Don't moralize at me! I have no love for images, old gods, prophetic words. I want to talk to Utnapishtim. Tell me how".

"Take your ax in your hand," said Urshanabi, "Go down into the forest, cut down a boatload of long trees and set them with bitumen. They will be your poles to push yourself across the sea of death." When Gilgamesh heard this, he went to work and when the poles were cut and set with bitumen, the two men boarded Urshanabi's ship and sailed the channel toward the sea of death. Now, Gilgamesh was alone. The boatman's voice could still be heard, but faintly, from the shore: "Don't let the waters touch your hand. Take a second, a third, a fourth pole when each is rotted by the sea of death". When Gilgamesh had used each pole but one, he pulled his clothes off his body and with this last remaining pole made a mast, his clothes as sail and drifted on the sea of death¹⁵.

Utnapishtim stood on the other shore. His old and rugged features worn by the seas and deserts he himself had crossed. He wondered why the Sacred Stones had been destroyed, why the boat was only drifting and who the man was who resembled loss itself? Before the ship had touched his shore, he thought: "I am afraid that nothing here can help him". The eyes of Utnapishtim seemed so full of hospitality, when Gilgamesh awoke from the exhaustion, as if some faces could be doorways into life one has an image of but never sees. The vista was a strange and beautiful release.

Utnapishtim was the only one whom he had met on his journey who did not add to his fatigue. Gilgamesh was speaking but only to relieve his weight of grief, not to demand an understanding: "My friend has died so many times in me and yet he still seems so alive, like a

younger brother; then suddenly, like soft tissue, a dead leaf. Is there something more than death? Some other end to friendship? I came to you whom they call "The Distant". I crossed the mountains and the sea. I was like a blind man, but not one from whom someone in search can draw light. I am so tired, so tired; I have killed bear, hyena, stag, ibex for food and clothes. I barely crossed the sea of death."

Utnapishtim raised his hand and touched the shoulder of the younger man to put him at his ease. "Two things encourage me to hope," he said, "that one can come this far to bring life to a friend and that you understand how we must borrow light from the blind" (My own right eye was damaged long ago and my left is slowly decaying). Friendship is vowing toward immortality and does not know the passing away of beauty (though take care!) because it aims for the spirit. Many years ago, through loss, I learned that love is wrung from our inmost heart until only the loved one is and we are not. You have known, O Gilgamesh, what interests me: to drink from the Well of Immortality which means to make the dead rise from their graves, the prisoners from their cells and the sinners from their sins. I think love's kiss kills our heart of flesh. It is the only way to eternal life which should be unbearable if lived among the dying flowers and the shrieking farewells of the overstretched arms of our spoiled hopes. I think compassion is our God's pure act which burns forever and be it in Heaven or in Hell does not matter for me because Hell is the everlasting gift of His presence to the lonely heart who is longing amidst perishing phantoms and does not care to find any immortality if not in the pure loneliness of the Holy One, this loneliness which He enjoys forever inside and outside of His creation. It is enough for one who loves to find this Only One singled in Himself and that is the cup of immortality!"

Gilgamesh looked into the face of the older man in whom he saw this loneliness. He could still feel the touch of Utnapishtim's hand. Time and space were uneventful now. Nothing inclined him to impatience. They talked together, walked and sat on rocks. The older man seemed pleased to have his company as if an absent son or other loss had been slightly returned to him. In time, the younger felt he knew him well enough to say: "You sometimes seem to have a downcast look, as if the life you have found here still has failed to bring you peace. How did you come to find this world and reach this life?" "I did not come out of desire like you," said Utnapishtim, "I was the choice of others." They walked along the shore and the older man told his story.

There was a city called Shurruk on the bank of the Euphrates. It was very old and so many were the gods within it. They converged in their complex hearts on the idea of creating a great flood¹⁶. There was Anu, their aging and weak-minded father, the military Enlil, his adviser, Ishtar, the sensation craving one and all the rest. Ea, who was present at their council came to my house and frightened by the violent winds that filled the air, echoed all that they were planning and had said, "Man of Shurruk," he said, "tear down your house and build a ship. Abandon your possessions and the works you find beautiful and save your life instead. Into the ship; bring the seed and all the living creatures." "I was overawed, perplexed and finally downcast. I agreed to do as Ea said but I protested; what shall I say to the city, the people, the leaders?" "Tell them," Ea¹⁷ said, "you have learned that Enlil, the war god despises you and will not give you access to the city anymore. Tell them for this Ea will bring the rains."

“That is the way gods think,” he laughed. His tone of savage irony frightened Gilgamesh, yet, gave him pleasure, being his friend. They only know how to complete or echo. “But who am I to talk?” he sighed, as if disgusted with himself. “I did as he commanded me to do. I spoke to them and some came out to help me build the ship of seven stories each with nine chambers. The boat was cube in shape and sound. It held the food and wine with precious minerals and seed of living animals which we put in it. My family then moved inside¹⁸ and all who wanted to be with us there: the game of the field, the goats of the Steppe, the craftsmen of the city, a navigator. Then Ea ordered me to close the door. The time of the great rains had come. O, there was ample warning, yes, my friend, but it was terrifying still. Buildings blown by the winds for miles like desert brush. People clung to branches of trees until roots gave way. New possessions, now debris, floated on the water with their special sterile vacancy. The riverbanks failed to hold the water back. Even the gods cowered like dogs at what they had done. Ishtar cried out like a woman at the height of labor: ‘how could I have wanted to do this to my people!’ They were hers, notice! Even her sorrow was possessive. Her spawn that had killed too soon. O, gods are terrible to look at when they weep, all bloated like spoiled fish. One wonders if they ever understand that they have caused their grief. When the seventh day came¹⁹, the flood subsided from its laughter, like hair drawn slowly back from a tormented face. I looked at the earth and all was silent, bodies lay like alewives dead and in the clay. I fell down on the ship’s deck and wept. Why? Why did they have to die? I could not understand. I asked unanswerable questions a child asks when a parent dies – for nothing. Only slowly did I make myself believe – or hope – they might all be swept up in their fragments together and made whole again by some compassionate hand. But my hand was too small to do the gathering. I have only known this feeling since when I look out across the sea of death. This pull inside against littleness – myself – waiting for an upward gesture. O, the dove, the swallow and the raven found their land; the people left the ship. But I, for a long time, could only stay inside. I could not face the deaths I knew were there. Then I received Enlil, for Ea had chosen me; the war god touched my forehead; he blessed my family and said: ‘Before this you were just a man, but now you and your wife shall be like gods. You shall live in the distance, at the rivers’ mouth, at the sources’. I allowed myself to be taken far away from all that I had seen. Sometimes even in love, we yearn to leave mankind. Only the loneliness of the Only One who never acts like gods is bearable. I am downcast because of what I have seen, not what I still have hope to yearn for. Lost youths restored to life, lost children to their crying mothers, lost wives, lost friends, lost hopes, lost homes, I want to bring these back to them. But now, there is you. We must find something for you. How will you find eternal life to bring back to your friend?”

He pondered busily, as if it were just a matter of getting down to work or making plans for an excursion. Then he relaxed, as if there were no use in this reflection. “I would grieve at all that may befall you still, if I did not know you must return and bury your own loss and build your world anew with your own hands. I envy you your freedom.” As he listened, Gilgamesh felt tiredness again come over him, the words now so discouraging, the promise so remote, so unlike what he sought. He looked into the old man’s face and it seemed changed, as if this one had fought within himself a battle he would never know, that still went on. They returned to Utnapishtim’s house and to his aged wife who seemed to Gilgamesh in her sufferings and her faithful silence like a servant only there to hold the door. He hardly knew her as a person; he had talked only to Utnapishtim, been only with him, was she all he needed as companion? Yet, when he fell asleep and Utnapishtim remarked to his wife with hostile irony: “look at the strong

man who wants life; sleep follows him like his shadow". She said to her husband: "Touch him again and wake him so he can return in peace to his home". She had learned to read her husband's moods. "Men are deceitful and incapable of peace. I know", he said; "can't he even stay awake with me? Sleep is like death only slothful people yearn for". "Bake loaves," he ordered her, "and put them at his head. One for each day he sleeps. We'll see how long it is before he wakes." Over her strong protest, the trial was set. After some days, Utnapishtim woke, the younger man who thought he had barely gone to sleep. "You have slept for seven days," he said; "look at the dried out loaves my wife has baked. How will you bear eternal life? It is not easy to live like gods." "What can I do to win eternal life? The younger pleaded. "Wherever I go – even here – I am drawn back to death".

Austerely, Utnapishtim called out to the boatman on the other shore and scolded him for sending Gilgamesh across. "Return him to your shore," he called; "bathe him and burn these pelts he wears which can only remind him of his friend. Let him be fresh and young again. Let the band around his head be changed. Let him return to his city not tired. His people need the sight of something new and the appearance of success". His words sounded bitter. "I came for wisdom only", shouted Gilgamesh. "Don't hurt an old man further with your praise; I have nothing to give you that will save".

Urshanabi crossed in his ship and obeyed. He took the pelts from Gilgamesh and though the grieving man was too disheartened to protest, when they were taken from him and burned, he cried out as if a festered wound had just been pierced. When it was over he stood in the bow to leave with only inner traces of his journey. Utnapishtim contemplated him, unable to speak, as if he were afraid of some desire to retain. He looked down at the ground, away from Gilgamesh. His wife whispered to him saying: "He has come so far. Have you forgotten how grief fastened onto you and made you crave some word, some gesture, once?" Utnapishtim's face grew tight, then relaxed, as when one is relieved of inner pain by one who sees more deeply than oneself. He looked at the younger man who had come into his consciousness. "Youth is very cruel to an old face", he said in a hushed voice; "It looks into its lines for wisdom so touchingly but there is nothing there to find".

Gilgamesh wanted to reach out to tell him he was wrong, sensing suddenly the hours one might spend alone in contemplating oldness as he himself had spent alone in his spoiled youth, seeing nothing there but time. "I know your pain too well to lie," said Utnapishtim. "I will tell you a secret I have never told, something to take back with you and guard. There is a plant in the river. Its thorns will prick your hands as a rose thorn pricks, but it will give you new life". He heard these words and tried to speak, but rushed instead to the old man and embraced him. The two men held each other for a moment, then Utnapishtim raised his hands as if to say: "Enough". Gilgamesh looked back at him, then hurried off to find the plant. He tied stones to his feet and descended into the river. When he saw the plant of rich rose color and ambrosial shimmering in the water like a prism of the sunlight, he seized it and it cut into his palms. He saw his blood flow in the water, then he cut the stones loose from his feet and rose up sharply to the surface and swam to shore. He was calling out, "I have it! I have it!" Urshanabi guided the ecstatic man away to the other shore and when they parted Gilgamesh was alone again, but not with loneliness or the memory of death. He stopped to drink and rest beside a pool and soon undressed and let himself slip in the water quietly until he was refreshed,

leaving the plant unguarded on the ground. A serpent had smelled its sweet fragrance and saw its chance to come from the water; he devoured the plant, shedding its skin as slough. When Gilgamesh rose from the pool, his naked body glistening and refreshed, the plant was gone and the discarded skin of a serpent was all he saw. He sat down on the ground and wept.

Part IV

Part IV might be called an “epilogue”, a summing up of the major theme of the *Myth*. Gilgamesh obviously has not absorbed or learned from Upnapishtim’s monologue on the meaning of friendship and the nature of love as being a bonding of two into one which is a presence, given his interpretation of the blind man’s not remembering the name Enkidu, namely, “...it is impossible to keep the names of friends whom we have lost”. But, upon reflection, how many of us understand the meaning of friendship and the nature of love?

Text as assembled from some twenty-seven shards

Part IV

Text

In time, he recognized this loss as the end of his journey and returned to Uruk. Perhaps he feared his people would not share the sorrow that he knew. He entered the city and asked a blind man if he had ever heard the name Enkidu and the old man shrugged and shook his head, then turned away, as if to say it is impossible to keep the names of friends whom we have lost. Gilgamesh said nothing more to force his sorrow on another. He looked at the walls, awed at the heights his people had achieved and for a moment – just a moment – all that lay behind him passed from view.

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¹ The underlined text is my emphasis of content which deserves careful thinking and reflection and was not in the translator’s original text.

² Uruk (*Sumerian Unug*, *Biblical Erech*, *Greek Orchoë* and *Arabic Warka*), was an ancient city of *Sumer* and later *Babylonia*, situated east of the present bed of the *Euphrates*, on the line of the ancient Nil canal, in a region of marshes, about 140 miles SSE from *Baghdad* about 2700 B.C. The modern name of *Iraq* is possibly derived from the name Uruk. At its height, Uruk probably had 80,000 residents living in 600 hectares of walled area, the largest city in the world at its time.

³ The Sumerian deity, city goddess of Kullab in the southern herding region. As Ninsun's name, Lady Wild Cow, indicates, she was originally represented in bovine form and was considered the divine power behind, as well as the embodiment of, all the qualities the herdsman wished for in his cows: she was the “flawless cow” and a “mother of good offspring” whose son was Gilgamesh. Of course, as a cow, she was the source of life giving milk and thus, of wisdom.

⁴ I find it interesting that this 2,500, plus year old myth states that as a result of having relations with a prostitute, Enkidu is “now a “human being”! Perhaps, the profession oldest next to marriage, as Eve with Adam, results in making an animal a “human being”! I suppose that makes pimps the “god” of redemption!

⁵ Some 5,500 years later, a philosopher by the name of Jean Paul Sartre writes a play, titled *Huis Clos, No Exit* whose theme is the human eyes without eyelids and hell. The point and purpose of this play is to dramatize a

biological fact, namely, that the human eyes are both the mirror of the soul and the mirror to the soul, so humans see each other's image upon the cornea of the eyes and that the condition of one's soul is visible to the look of the other.

⁶, Enlil ("lord wind") is the god of air, wind and storms in ancient Sumero-Babylonian mythology so Enlil is the foremost god of the Mesopotamian pantheon, sometimes referred to as Kur-Gal ("great mountain"). In the Sumerian cosmology he is the child born of the union of An heaven and Ki earth. Enlil separated from the pantheon of gods and carried off the earth as his portion. In later times he supplanted Anu as chief god. His consort is Ninlil with whom he has five children: Nanna, Nerigal, Ningirsu, Ninurta, and Nisaba. Enlil possesses the Tablets of Destiny so he has power over the entire cosmos and the affairs of man. He is sometimes friendly towards mankind, but can also be a stern and even cruel god who punishes man and sends forth disasters, such as the great Flood which wiped out humanity with the exception of Atrahasis. Enlil wears a crown with horns, symbol of his power. His most prestigious temple was in the city Nippur, where he was the patron of that city. His equivalent is the Akkadian god Ellil.

⁷ Shamash was a Sun god according in Sumerian mythology. Since the sun could see everything on Earth, he represented also the god of justice. That is why Shamash was depicted as a ruler seated on a throne. Shamash and his wife, Aya, had two important children. Kittu represented justice, and Misharu was law. Every morning, the gates in the East open up as Shamash appears and travels across the sky then enters the gate in the West. He travels through the Underworld at night in order to begin in the East the next day. In Babylon, located in the south of Mesopotamia, the symbol of Shamash was the solar disk, with a four-pointed star inside it.

⁸ Scholars compare this battle between Gilgamesh and Humbaba with that between David and Goliath, notwithstanding the difference of time, the *Myth of Gilgamesh* coming from what is now Iraq about 5,000 B.C. and the first book of Samuel being written about 700 B.C. about events performed by David and others about 790 B.C. The confrontation between David of the Israelis and Goliath of the Philistines are detailed in *1 Samuel, Chapter 17, lines 32-58*. (This reference and any others, including quotations come from: *The Jeerusalem Bible (Doubleday) 1966*).

⁹ Actually, there are two Anu, one an Irish fertility goddess and two, this Sumerian God of the Air and thus of the sky, son of the first pair of gods, Ansar and Kisar, and so "God of Gods" and the father of Ishtar.

¹⁰ This situation echoes the story of the Greek Goddess of Love, Athena and Odysseus as Homer describes it within the *Odyssey*.

¹¹ Enkidu's monologue on "death", although a reflection of a pagan mind is profound. Truth is that the experience of death is life changing. No longer does one look upon self or the world in which one lives in the same way; one might say that the experience of death is like the experience of salt in one's food: never again is the taste of food or life the same. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh's life changes and his search for his friend finds its climax when he meets Upnaptishim.

¹² Contemporary psychology does not have the clarity of vision which Enkidu exhibits here. We might compare Enkidu's loss of innocence to the prostitute to the so-called original or initial sin of Adam and Eve exposed in the *Old Testament, Book of Genesis: 3: 1-24*. Enkidu reflects that the death he experienced after sexual intercourse with the prostitute was the experience of dying to his natural innocence; he lost his virginity and that loss is his original experience of dying. The authors or author of the Myth describe this as the experience of being a "man"; Genesis would describe this "man" as fallen man. Genesis describes both Adam's and Eve's first thought as the awareness of being naked! This first thought and awareness fascinates me because both were naked prior to whatever act of disobedience they shared, whether picking and eating an "apple" or something else, so what has happened? Well, as they both self-reflect, they perceive that being naked shows each is sexually different and they "cover up", so their loss of innocence is witness to their rejection of difference as something wrong – Aurelius Augustine of Confessions fame, comments that the human being is the source of the "evil", or "privation of a due good" in the human world. Here we find the first example of this discovery of "evil" in the human world; as we study the Tao we find Lao-tzu calling such "evil" the improper use of words which humans create and use.

¹³ Of course, Mircea Eliade within his *The Sacred and the Profane* details primitive peoples' continued awareness of the sacred within the profane world in which humans live. An analogy I use is the awareness of "love", as sacred and "like" as profane within the human being's relationship with self and others. "Love" is the vertical which penetrates the "like" and its horizontal, world of change within which humans live. Whereas "love" bestows value, "like" merely appreciates value and "like" without "love" takes away and appropriates the value it appreciates.

¹⁴ Sin was the moon-god occupying chief place in the Sumerian astral triad whose other two members, Shamash the sun and Ishtar the planet Venus, were his children. Thus it was, in effect, from the night that light had emerged....In his physical aspect Sin—who was venerated at Ur under the name of Nannar—was an old man with a long beard the color of lapis-lazuli. He normally wore a turban and very evening he got into his barque—which to mortals appeared in the form of a brilliant crescent moon—and navigated the vast spaces of the nocturnal sky. For this reason he was considered to be ‘He whose deep heart no god can penetrate’ and was full of wisdom. At the end of every month the gods came to consult; his wife was Ningal, ‘the great Lady’. He was the father not only of Shamash and Ishtar but also of a son Nusku, the god fire." (*Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, 1960, p 54-56*) The worship of the Moon god "Sin" was widespread and common during the time of Abraham and Abraham was asked to leave Ur of the Chaldees, in Babylon where the moon god Sin was worshipped and migrate to Canaan and worship Jehovah.

¹⁵ This river of death recalls Greek mythology and Hades the underworld. Some claim the existence of up to five rivers surrounding Hades. In the Iliad, the river Styx is the only river of the underworld; in the Odyssey it is coupled with Cocytus and Pyriphlegethon, which flow into the chief river Acheron. The river Lethe made the shades of the underworld forget their former lives. But the river Styx was always the best known, and the most sacred. To the Gods, there was no oath more sacred than to swear by the river Styx. Some said the river was so foul that to drink of it brought instant death. Some said it bubbled with fire. This river Styx served as a crossroads where the world of the living met the world of the dead, and the world of the mortal met the world of the immortal. Indian Buddhism provides a similar metaphor. After the mother and father have raised the children, they enter the forest, each living in a hut and devote their remaining lives to contemplation; upon death the cross from the mortal side to the immortal shore of the river separating the mortal from the immortal shores.

¹⁶ Again, we have what seems to anticipate the flood described in the *Old Testament, Book of Genesis*, chapters six through eight. Scriptural scholars agree that *Genesis* did not appear in written form until after 538 B.C. when the Babylonian Exile of the Jews ended, although many other of the *Old Testament* books were already completed, so, considering that this inclusion of a flood in the *Myth of Gilgamesh* antedates *Genesis* by some four thousand and five hundred years!

¹⁷ Ea, the Sumerian god of the waters, parallels Neptune of later times. He was one of the three primal gods of Sumer: Ea- god of water; Enlil- god of earth; and Anu- god of heaven. Each god had a wife or consort, and the wife of Enlil was Ninlil. Linguistically, it is interesting that the LIL root in his and her name leaped over 3500 years to survive in the names Allah and Allat, the god and goddess of Mecca in Muhammed's day.

¹⁸ Again, Utnapishtim appears to be in the role of Noah from *Genesis*, a fascinating parallel and prediction!

¹⁹ The *Genesis* story describes the flood lasting “forty days on the earth” (*Genesis: 7:17*) Of course, “forty” is a sacred number both within the *Old and New Testaments*; the Jews were exiled in Egypt for forty years (*Exodus: 13: 11-16 and following; see footnote c after “D. The crossing of the sea of reeds.”*), traveled through the desert for forty years and Christ is described as fasting for forty days (*Luke: 4: 1-13*) .