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The Hero ‘Who Saw the Deep’

Gilgamesh’s Wonder, Fear, and Grief

Gilgamesh, the old king hero of Uruk, echoes primary human quests and emotions by displaying fundamental features of the psyche. He elicits the humanity in all of us as he heroizes and de-/reheroizes himself throughout his great journeys and through emotions which emerge and vanish while he is wandering. Within the semantic arc of hero-warrior and hero-wise man, he reconfirms the emotional trinity, composed of wonder, fear, and grief, as well as imaginary thinking; in this way, Gilgamesh echoes the nature-nurture ties as human sense makers.

Yet to what extent does the hero Gilgamesh exemplify spaces of life and fiction? The old and new emotional events derived from the interplay of a trinity of emotions are deeply rooted in the old Babylonian bonds of real everyday life with emotions and poetics. The hero of deeds becomes a sage hero who, rather than ensuring physical protection, provides us with meaning, dilemmas and a wide range of feelings. By forging a culture of questioning, by expressing a rich range of emotions, and also by teaching us how to make friends, he continually provides a plentiful substratum for the poetics of emotions. Gilgamesh provides access to the heroic cosmology, from the old Indo-European epic paradigm to Asian ‘non-heroic’ sages. Gilgamesh – this *Ungeheuer*, as Rilke used to call him.

Hero of deeds and emotions

Why look back through almost five millennia of time and space at Gilgamesh, this old hero of fiction and history? Because he continually displays fundamental features of our psyche; he enables us to rediscover ourselves, emotionally and intellectually. By heroizing and deheroizing himself throughout his great journeys – fighting against Humbaba and trying to reach immortality – he sparks emotional heroization and deheroization in us. Yet one dimension of his multifarious

adventure has also been interpreted as follows: “he experiences friendship with Enkidu and death as the inevitable limit of life” (Zocco 17).¹

Actually, it is supposed that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (hereafter referred to as *The Epic*) – this very first imaginary palimpsest of human life, often referred to as the Standard Babylonian Epic² – “was not composed as poetry at all” (Harris xiii); it is believed to have had a “possible cultic use” (Tigay 51) alongside other functions such as “entertainment and edification” (52). Its mythic structure likely added an additional perspective in those days. An assumption could be made that everyday life had been based precisely on these *polis-poiesis* entanglements. Thus, both the real and imaginary spaces of Gilgamesh’s heroic and non-heroic life in *The Epic* exemplify the human need for both pragmatism and aesthetics. Notwithstanding, between the historically attested king on the Sumerian King List and the fictional hero of *The Epic*,³ Gilgamesh is familiar to us as a fictional hero whose great heroic deeds are replaced by emotions. As a matter of fact, Gilgamesh, the cruel ruler who, at the beginning of *The Epic*, is enclosed in the inner kingdom of his ego, becomes a warrior hero when Enkidu shows up. Meeting and fighting with Enkidu heralds the end of his tyranny, while their newly forged friendship marks his new journey into the world.

But what makes Gilgamesh human and a unique hero in his journeys? Tyrannical rule and fighting against rivals? A sense of friendship and love? His adventures in the Netherworld and his search for immortality? His strong emotions about terrestrial and eternal life? Wonder? Fear? Grief?

First of all, Gilgamesh is more than an epic hero. The spectrum of his heroism is broader than in the Ancient Greek epic where heroes enjoy immortal glory among mortals as warriors (bound to gods by their semi-divine origins) and are closer to the earlier mythical roots of the hero.⁴ As the image of the hero and the ‘non-heroic’ hero have been distilled through five

thousand years of culture and poetry, Gilgamesh proves that “cultural activity began and remains deeply embedded in feelings” (Damasio 1).⁵ Foster described Gilgamesh as a man “who feels more deeply than ordinary men” (Helle, Emotions 6). All his experiences, *Erlebnisse*, and emotions – seen from a classical perspective – reappear in many forms in other narratives, from the Homeric world to present-day literature.⁶ Often within the Indo-European poetic imaginary, “emotions tend to be represented as external forces that come to one, enter one, or seize one” (West 87). Emotional shifts follow the changes in the hero’s character. In fact, Gilgamesh, beginning as a hero of deeds, shifts towards embracing the character of the post-hero who is then reheroized; he turns from a warrior into a wise man who finds his way back home and to enjoy the rest of his life; different emotional colours follow or accompany his new experiences. The hero from the beginning of the story, who beat the dreadful Humbaba in the second part of the *The Epic*, is no longer the same; he becomes the hero ‘who saw the Deep’, a hero with a shamanistic sense of seeing the world (especially after the ninth tablet) – his emotions shine differently, more softly, not as audaciously as they did when he encountered Humbaba. By wandering along new paths, the old hero undertakes the next difficult task of self-reheroization. The warrior becomes a sagacious, enlightened hero; the emotional horizon of his Lebenswelt changes as well. The hero of deeds, characterized by a warrior’s emotional ties, now yearns for eternal life; his emotions are rebuilt in line with his ‘non-heroic’ hero persona, that of a man who seeks and speaks about meanings of life like a Nietzschean Zarathustra. In this way, the heroic psyche displays rich emotional records and stories; the real-life hero becomes a fictional hero, entering into new, complex imaginary and emotional negotiations between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional’.

Yet can emotions be heroized? If heroes are also made up of strong emotions, they become constituents of heroic iconicity. The dictum ‘great deeds – strong emotions’ depicts epic heroes like Gilgamesh as emotionally moving creatures. It seems to be an oxymoron in itself but Gilgamesh, from today’s perspective, serves as a generic resource of ‘heroization of emotions’ as a unique identification marker of the hero.

To put it briefly, an emotion becomes a mark of both heroism and heroization of the hero through the memory of deeds and appropriate emotions. As a part of heroic deeds, the emotional horizon also becomes a part of the hero’s character. From this viewpoint, there is no hero

without emotions or beyond the horizon of emotive reception; in the case of Gilgamesh, that would be a hero *sui generis*. In fact, every hero depicts a *sui generis* attitude which is supposed to sublimate the effects of deeds and emotions as a single entity.

Gilgamesh reconfirms these strong, ancient ties between a hero’s deeds and emotions, turning the culture of life and artistic emotions into a perpetual interplay. Here we find meanings and sensitivities derived from the dialogic action between the hero and the other, nature, self, society, and animal. This dialogic interplay implies that the layers of emotions are echoing life stories, reaching beyond the superficiality of melodramatic, momentous emotions.

The highly subtle manner of this shifting mapping urges a kind of Homeric question; we must hazard a guess at whether only one author (Sin-leqi-unninni) created the text or if it was many authors.

The plan of the integrated epic thus testifies to the working of a single artistic mind, and the work of this person is so creative that he deserves to be considered an ‘author’ rather than an editor or compiler. (Tigay 42)⁷

The emotional resonance is delivered as if from one authorial instance who is highly emotionally attached to the narrative. By and large, *The Epic* as a whole forms a coherent structure with regard to the emotional narrative strategy.

Journeying and feeling

When “in the Epic of Gilgamesh, primal experience of humankind is told” (“im Gilgamesch-Epos Urerfahrungen der Menschheit erzählt werden”; Negele 10, translation KR), these experiences include a wide range of human feelings. In order to have such experiences, the hero has to be on a journey, as a great wanderer.

First of all, the story of Gilgamesh is rooted in the presence of wonder as a generic source of poetic images and events. Here, wonderment simply makes sense. Fear and grief are bound to it, together forming the big picture of the Gilgameshian landscape and journey. Moreover, the trinity composed of these three ‘primitive emotions’ helps Gilgamesh build both his rational and irrational states of mind, deriving meaning from the never-ending human endeavour.

The emotional architecture of *The Epic* becomes an encompassing poetic state of mind,

from wonder, fear and grief to many other joyful and sad, mournful feelings. Does Gilgamesh display more fear or more desire toward life? Does desire for life transcend into fear of death, and is he on the path of searching for immortality?

Fear and wonder transpose the arc of human sensitivity that builds meanings. Hence, these emotions become intelligible entities; by offering many viewpoints and playing a role in the story, they build the epistemic landscape of Gilgamesh's inner world. *The Epic* reaffirms the human being's place in the world, as well as the human fascination with words, emotions and ideas. The human being depicted here displays a bipolar world view on several occasions. By representing urban and barren landscapes, respectively, Gilgamesh and Enkidu embody

the cooperation of city and steppe, especially for what the representative of the city hopes to accomplish in the steppe, far from the city's power. (Fleming/Milstein 26)

To some extent, the Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship displays "a clear polarity between nature and culture" (Nortwick 15). Yet the geo-poetic delineation of emotions and behaviours of the heroes (wilderness against civilization) is gradually internalized as an inner quest of Gilgamesh's. He disregards 'the horizontal' of life in favour of 'the vertical'. In fact, this shift in his heroic trajectory is anticipated in the opening verses of *The Epic*, where he is introduced as a man 'who saw the Deep':

He who saw the Deep:

the country's foundation, 1 1
[who] knew ..., was wise in all matters! 2
(George 1)

Obviously, the Deep holds more meaning for Gilgamesh, the 'wise hero' of the vertical, than the water's depths into which he will plunge. For him, plunging into the Deep entails plunging into the aspirations and emotions of life, while looking for the conditions and meanings of eternal life. On the other hand, he who plunges sees the Deep. Gilgamesh has been plunged into deep desire and along a meandering path; he has touched the wonders through his wanderings; he has known fear, he has known grief, he has felt joy, bliss and mourning, but images of wonders have always remained his initial motivation.

Gilgamesh's rich experiences 'unearth' a strong categorization of the story as an assemblage of *mythoi* turned into the amalgam of real and imaginary. Fantastic becomes real and real becomes fantastic (especially in tablets IX-XII).

In addition, myth appears here as an emotional and intellectual creator of life – as one of its core elements. By nature, epics always contain an aura of myth and fantasy about the distant past, rendering them emotional and intellectual interpreters of the world.⁸ Myths know how to wonder, how to explain, and how to say nothing. Gilgamesh's psyche is derived from myths and turns him into a worshipped historical as well as fictional hero. The wonderment, for him, is provided by his genealogy: he is two-thirds descended from gods and one third human. The archetypal hero is always a part of journeys and miracles, and bound up with deities and nature, the animal and the human.

The 'transformation' of animals into humans is also exemplified by Enkidu's savage comportment and his eventual behavioural metamorphosis into a nurtured human being. It is the harlot's wonder and the force of her love that finally weaken Enkidu, the wild man, and make him go to Gilgamesh. The wonder of making love for six days and seven nights draws him out among the people, where he finds himself astonished and displays strange behaviour: he does not even know how to eat bread or drink ale. There are two stages of Enkidu's transition from an animal to a human being. "First, one must learn to think like a human being, and second, one must learn to think like a member of society" (Helle, *New Fragment*).

Though not at the forefront of the story, wonder dwells in the background of *The Epic*. After appearing in Gilgamesh's dream, Enkidu appears in reality and is irritated by Gilgamesh's evil rule in Uruk and his cruel *droit de seigneur*. As a result, Enkidu decides to fight Gilgamesh. Surprisingly, just after the combat, they form a bond of friendship. And when Gilgamesh introduces Enkidu to his mother, Ninsun, he admires and describes him as the 'mightiest', like 'a rock from the sky'. Great foes become great friends. Their initial enmity takes the shape of a gift of grace as it turns into an imperishable emotional-intellectual liaison of friendship which, among other things, "involves dialogue and togetherness" (Scruton 156). These two features are irreplaceable within the emotional culture of friendship, which has been deeply ingrained into world literature and 'human scripture'. Their wonder, fear, and rage were transformed into a sentiment of admiration for each other. It is precisely these sentiments of their amicable bond that shine when they prepare to go and fight the ogre Humbaba. Enkidu warns Gilgamesh:

'Humbaba, his voice is the Deluge, Y 110
His speech is fire,

and his breath is death! 112/13
 Why do you desire to do this thing? 114
 An unwinnable battle is Humbaba's ambush! 115
 (George 18)

Their revealing discourse is evidence of the common emotional state of the two friends. The urge they feel for adventure is greater than the risk. The peak of yearning for heroic glory is evident: "Gilgamesh wishes to defeat the monster Huwawa in order to establish his name forever" (Smith xii). Nevertheless, Enkidu asks Gilgamesh's senior advisers to try to change his mind. They tell him:

'You are young, Gilgamesh,
 borne along by emotion, 11 289
 All that you talk of you don't understand. 290
 (George 22)

But Gilgamesh, this man of emotions, is determined to go to the Forest of Cedar to fight the ferocious Humbaba in order to win glory. After questioning whether fear would make him change his mind, he and Enkidu depart for the Forest and Enkidu finally asks him:

'Where you have *set your mind*
 begins the journey Y 273
 Let your heart have no fear,
 keep your eyes on me! 274
 (George 29)

In this way, they keep each other's fear at bay. Over the course of their journey, Gilgamesh becomes obsessed with the good omens he has seen in a dream, as they provide emotional plenitude and certainty. Back in reality, Gilgamesh asks the mountain to deliver him another dream. Gilgamesh and Enkidu use fantasy discourse as a peaceful shelter from reality. They build a house in their dreams and live between the real world and fantasy, waiting for action, a marvellous life under the shade of the cedars, sweet and full of delight. This time spent waiting becomes highly emotive time; they experience wonder, mystery, fear, and desire. Even the weather changes miraculously. A marvel of nature takes place above the heroes' heads:

Black became the clouds of white, V 135
 raining down on them death like a mist. 136
 (George 42)

This natural wonder is further compounded by the coming of thirteen winds in favour of the heroes, who are under the protection of the gods. Finally, the combat ensues and the identification

with wonder is realized through the words of the hero:

[Said] Gilgamesh to [him,] to Enkidu: Ish 10'
 "Now, my friend, we must
 impose our victory. 11'
 The auras slip away in the thicket, 12'
 – the auras slip away, their
 radiance *grows dim*." 13'
 (George 45)

Gilgamesh and Enkidu must use their awakened forces in alliance with the gods and nature. They must win before their auras and the protection afforded to them by the gods slip away. Just in time, they kill the Bull of Heaven, but their bad luck begins afterwards.

This great win has a very high price. The gods hold a council and decide that Gilgamesh and Enkidu have fought too cruelly, so one of them must die as punishment. An illness is inflicted upon Enkidu and he succumbs. After losing his best friend, Gilgamesh forgets the glory of winning the battle. His great lament for the death of Enkidu begins. The force and tone of his grief is commensurate to that of Achilles' for his friend Patroclus. Gilgamesh's lamenting song is captivating:

'O Enkidu, [whom] your mother, a gazelle, VIII 3
 and your father, a wild donkey, [did raise,] 4
 whom the wild [asses] did rear with their milk, 5
 whom the beasts [of the wild did teach]
 all the pastures 6
 O Enkidu, may the paths [of] the
 Forest of Cedar 7
 mourn you [without pause]
 by day and by night! 8
 'May the elders of teeming Uruk-the-
 Sheepfold mourn you! 9
 may the crowd who gave us their
 blessings [mourn you!] 10
 May the high [peaks] of hills and
 mountains mourn you, 11
pure 12
 May the pastures lament like your mother! 13
 (George 63)

This wonderful, enchanting, mournful song continues for eight more quatrains. Gilgamesh wants to share his grief with all the people who have known him, with all the flora and fauna that are familiar to him – rivers and pastures, mountains and fields.

By building a heroic statue of Enkidu, he turns his mourning into admiration. He summons

the coppersmith, the goldsmith, the blacksmith, the lapidary, and the jeweller to fashion a statue with features of gold, lapis lazuli, ivory, alabaster, and silver. His heartbreak reflects strong feelings of loss, intertwined with wondrous, extraordinary scenes, as follows:

[Six days I wept for him and seven nights.] X 58
 [I did not surrender his body for burial.] 59
 [until a maggot dropped from his nostril.] 60
 (George 78)

Not surrendering Enkidu's body for burial also ritualizes Gilgamesh's grief.

It is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views, to repeat all the circumstances that attend it, [...] to go back to every particular enjoyment, to dwell upon each [...]; in grief *the pleasure* is still uppermost (Burke 34-35),

precisely because this is 'the tragic pleasure' of the lost world. On the other hand, his grief is infused with wonderment. Gilgamesh is shocked by how his beloved friend has turned into clay 'just like that'.

By becoming aware that death is a strange regime in the realm of maggots, he grows fearful of death and decides to wander the wilderness in search of the eternal. "It is his grief over this loss that in part drives Gilgamesh's second journey, but even more so he is driven by his fears that he too will die" (Ackerman 34). Consequently, "the death of his friend sends Gilgamesh in search of immortality" ("Der Tod des Freundes bringt Gilgamesch dazu, das ewige Leben zu suchen"; Sallaberger 12, translation KR). From this very moment, Gilgamesh begins to fear death. His grief for the loss of Enkidu first emerges as a fear of losing his own beauty, and then evolves into a fear of ephemeral life. From an Accadian perspective, immortality tends to be identified with truth, "the pursuit of truth is not an approach to an unattainable utopian wishful thinking" ("Das Streben nach Wahrheit ist nicht die Annäherung an eine unerreichbare utopische Wunschvorstellung"; Radner 13, translation KR).

For Gilgamesh, 'true life' takes on a greater meaning than it did for his dead friend, Enkidu. Yet his fear of death, as a permanent feeling, also increases his feelings of wonder, amazement, and love. He finally has no choice but to wander through the wilderness and cross the ocean to seek the path of his forefather Utanapishtim, the survivor of the flood, in order to find eternal life.

Gilgamesh's walk along difficult paths and through darkness, fuelled by a desire for life, is very Dantean. His thrilling journey is populated with different settings and emotions, and he eventually arrives under the brilliance of the trees of the gods. But "Gilgamesh does not only leave the here-and-now world of Uruk to travel through a strange space. He also travels in time" (Maier 28) in search of immortality.

Gilgamesh listens to Utanapishtim recount his great experiences from the day of Deluge:

Even the gods took fright at the Deluge, XI 114
 They left and went up to the heaven of Anu, 115
 Lying like dogs curled up in the open. 116
 The goddess cried out like a
 woman in childbirth. 117
 (George 92)

Gilgamesh expresses a strong desire to follow his path, even though wherever and whenever he will turn, 'there too will be Death'. He gets enthusiastic when Utanapishtim tells him about the plant of heartbeat, which can bring him youth. In the sea, he at last discovers this plant and manages to take hold of it, but suddenly, a snake sneaks up silently and grabs the plant from him. Gilgamesh again experiences disappointment and grief, and a return to the emotions of everyday life.

By becoming a hero who, even for a short moment, possessed the medicine for eternal life, Gilgamesh becomes a source of unlimited imaginal and emotional life, of wonders, fears, and desires. He should, according to Utanapishtim, find *energeia* to rebuild life in his beloved *polis*, Uruk. He has no choice in the matter.

Moreover, also enclosed within this terrestrial scope of perception is the image of the divine, through the internalization of the emotional-intellectual relations between humans and deities. After failing to seize the plant of immortality, the sense of Gilgamesh's old, common, everyday life comes back; it now appears the only one, the best possible and feasible one. "Indeed Gilgamesh would be much less impressive if he succeeded in finding immortality" (Bowra 128). Eternity, as a horizon that belongs to deities, melds at the very end of the story into the tangible demands of everyday life. Remaining by Gilgamesh's side is his 'old friend' – grief – which becomes familiarised as a lamenting tone of the heroic in literary culture from this point onward for centuries.

On the other hand, mourning and melancholia in Gilgamesh's life go beyond the modern concept of self-destructive savagery, proposed by Freud.⁹ Here, mourning and grief are strongly

attached to the sense of loss; loss of the beloved man, in this case, turns the focus toward the hero himself, as a worthless being. However, this perspective changes. In addition, the events of Gilgamesh's lifetime evoke in us the image of a jar full of wild, mild, bitter, and sweet juices and wines. He often invokes the scent of these drinks as an echo of his first home. Not accidentally, he is advised by a tavern keeper in the very middle of his journey:

'O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering? Si iii 1

'The life that you seek you never will find: 2
when the gods created mankind, 3
death they dispensed to mankind, 4
life they kept for themselves. 5

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full, 6
enjoy yourself always by day and by night! 7
Make merry each day, 8
dance and play day and night! 9

'Let your clothes be clean, 10
let your head be washed, may you
bathe in water! 11

Gaze on the child who holds your hand, 12
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace! 13

(George 24)

According to the tavern keeper, home is the destiny of the mortal man. And Gilgamesh shouldn't seek other options, but should instead accept this and go back home. When his journey comes to an end, he has to reinvent the meaning of his own life within the tangible sphere of his everyday reality, sharing joy, bliss and grief with his people. This very point of return to his terrestrial, emotional relations with his family and friends echoes the poetic power of feelings as primary sense-making agents, personal events, and poetic experiences.

In due course, for Gilgamesh, wondering becomes wandering and vice versa. But at the very end of his journey, when he decides to go back to Uruk to live with his beloved (and eventually dies there), he gets restless and feels the need to wander again, sensing grief or some kind of nostalgia for the unattainable. Life becomes both a mournful and joyous song all in one. He tries to transcend the emotional emptiness distilled from the sense of the unattainable to reach a refuged reality of everyday life and emotions.

For Gilgamesh, walking away knowing, understanding, and feeling both fantasy and real life all at once becomes an even greater motivation to live on after the end of his quest for immortality. To some extent, this terrestrial awakening opens

a path to the secret of bliss itself, which is in his hands.

Bound with wonder

Looking back on this hero's marathon, are there any perceptible distinctions between the fictional and non-fictional horizons of wonder, fear, and grief?

In general, Gilgamesh's amalgamated factual-aesthetic order is arranged flawlessly and to the extent that one might speak of a fluid, interchangeable interplay between natural and aesthetic emotions and behaviours. Gilgamesh, as a historical king and as a fictional hero, yearns for eternity but finally returns to his very common life, as everyone must.

In 'real life', just like in *The Epic*, fear and grief, along with wonder, become cornerstones of poetics. Usually, wonder is a sublimation of other emotions.

Wonder, the most neglected of primary aesthetic experiences within modernity, involves aestheticization of delight, or of the pleasure principle rather than the death principle, whose agent within aesthetic experience is the sublime. (Fisher 2)

The aesthetics of wonder often have different features than the aesthetics of thought; wonder retains some originary features of *poiesis* which are not simply translatable into the poetics of thought. When a wonder occurs, it is, "at least in part, an *experience*" (Solomon 78) or an *Erlebnis*, which becomes an 'event' where dimensions of showiness and drama meld together. This is the perfect milieu for planting and cultivating the seed of a hero.

Wonder also brings sense and meaning to human events, phenomena and ideas; it has crucial emotional ties to poetic phenomena and human perception. One might say there is no hero without some level of wonder; heroic wonderment usually dwells in wandering. The hero also instinctively internalizes fascination and danger, and finds extraordinary ways of manifesting the "animating force of astonishment"¹⁰ in his relationship with the world – and with us. This is why his adventure becomes our adventure.

The hero Gilgamesh greatly exemplifies this relationship. In *The Epic*, fear and grief remain perhaps the best accessories to wonder, by essentially retaining their status as primary emotions, always ready to provoke other effects. However, simply catching the feeling of wonder

is not enough for a hero to lead a satisfying life. "We are always taken somewhat by surprise" (Tymieniecka xiii) but this emotion can only cause an emotional interplay in alternation with other emotions.

In the case of Gilgamesh, his spontaneous switching between wonder, fear, and grief creates a vivid conversation between a 'culture of wonder', a 'culture of fear', and a 'culture of mourning' as a trinity of emotional siblings in the same family of life and poetry. Wonder affirms or rejects joy and amazement but is close to fear and deep sorrow as well. A kind of 'natural state' of wonder might be easy to achieve when catapulted into other affections and emotional events. To summarize, the Gilgameshian culture of emotions finds the easiest and most convincing way, psychologically and aesthetically, to transcend into the poetics of emotions. Within this psychological-poetic space, emotions such as wonder, fear, and grief come into play spontaneously. It is exactly this space where poetics recognize ethics and politics, *dulce* recognizes *utile*, and affection recognizes the newly arriving cognitive impulses. An interrogation of such a relationship between emotions, ideas, and events is currently being re-actualized through neuro and cognitive endeavours, through 'paleopoetics' and 'neopoetics'.¹¹

Although heroes are sometimes considered memoryless, it seems that heroic culture cannot forget its tragic roots; catharsis becomes an agora of intense emotions and deeds epitomized as a result of previous events. He who epitomizes these roots of emotional deeds becomes a new hero. Heroes like Gilgamesh radiate such power and command admiration. To radiate power is the main *raison d'être* of an 'old hero' such as Gilgamesh, which also makes him a 'new hero'—and a 'new-old friend' as well. Heroes know just when to appear out of nowhere as unexpected friends.

Gilgamesh's journey

Nowadays, Gilgamesh conjures up the language of poetics that goes beyond the run-of-the-mill, (post)modern frontiers of literature *per se*. He simply tells the tale of fundamental humanity.

Gilgamesh links East and West, antiquity and modernity, poetry and history, and its echoes can be found in the Bible, in Homer, and in *The Thousand and One Nights*, (Damrosch 3),

as well as in Goethe and Rilke.

This work, pressed in Akkadian cuneiform script and bound up between fiction and history, has remained a map of feelings and ideas of humanity. There is almost no great human mind who has not been touched by the 'heroic hands' of Gilgamesh. If the version of Gilgamesh we have today indeed "lacks more than one third" (Maul 11), we can only imagine, without access to the complete work, how much more complex the text and also the emotional world of Gilgamesh could be.

The literary cosmology of this oeuvre spans an extremely rich arc of different topics and motives such as the meaning of life, the realm of the underworld, war, friendship, immortality, death, floods, darkness, splendour, sleeping, dreaming, awakening, chaos and order, the divine, the human vs. the animal, savagery, power, aggression, human weakness, love and cruelty, returning home, etc. In a word, Gilgamesh, as a hero, provides a whole encyclopedia of great literary themes and dramas by embodying the qualities that make up humanity. This is why Gilgamesh can be considered a hero archetype of Indo-European poetics; the grace of humanity finds a place in the drama of his epic journeys and return adventures.

Gilgamesh's identification with the Deep goes beyond the literary interpretation. It was no accident that the verse 'He who saw the Deep' served as the Babylonian and Assyrian title for *The Epic* for centuries. This Deep, before and after Gilgamesh's adventures, stands for wonder and mystery of life itself. Solving this mystery, an impossible task *sui generis*, becomes an honour belonging to Gilgamesh. Even nowadays, his great name refers to this mastery, gaining the admiration of many readers and writers over the last few decades.

Indeed, unlike most other figures from myth, literature, and history, Gilgamesh has established himself as an autonomous entity or simply a name, often independent of the epic context in which he originally became known (Ziolkowski xii-xiii);

this literary phenomenon is not very common today.

Consequently, Gilgamesh remains a classical hero, à la Campbell (1949), but is also a non-classical hero: he continues to appear on academic curriculums but also holds significance in literary narratives, animations, cinema, paintings, and illustrative texts.¹² This real global renaissance of Gilgamesh raises the following question:

By what process did this hero of a Mesopotamian epic from the third millennium B.C.E. become a twenty-first-century cultural icon? (Ziolkowski 2)

Certainly, this is not a rhetorical question, but neither is it a question requiring an answer. Nonetheless, a 'mystical' assumption is obvious. *The Epic* is considered a great book, and not only because it is one of the oldest surviving works of literature. Gilgamesh's time-transcending yearnings, his adventures, and his endeavour to return home largely contribute to its greatness. Such thrilling experiences, permeated by emotions including wonder, fear, and grief, might always be dazzling for human beings. Gilgamesh, a tyrant at the beginning of *The Epic*, is a different, humane creature by the end, by having become an iconic hero of humanity. In fact, Gilgamesh turns into a figure who represents the quintessence of life.

The fictional-historical figure of Gilgamesh becomes 'our hero', not because he protects us physically but more because he provides us with meaning, dilemmas, and a wide range of feelings, always delivering a good substratum for the poetics of emotions. He makes us question everything. He teaches us how to make friends and how to cultivate patience, and to find enjoyment in what we already have. He instils wonder and wander in us. And above all, he provides access to the crossroads of heroes' paths, from the old Indo-European epic paradigm to Asian 'non-heroic' facets, as two crucial ways of making sense of human life. He becomes an amalgam of hero and warrior, wanderer and sage, by opening up a path that crosses different geographies and cultures.

As a remarkable terrestrial yet fantastic figure, Gilgamesh establishes cornerstones of human texture and scripture, both secular and religious, mythical and fictional. If humanity ceased to need a hero like Gilgamesh, it would be in a lamentable state.

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Rrahmani's research focuses on the intersections between poetics and emotions, intertextuality and orality, anthropoetics and life, and *polis* and *poiesis*. He has published widely on these topics. He is currently investigating the different faces of the hero and poetic/fictional forms of wonder.

1 I would like to express my thanks to the Open Society Foundation for the fellowship during which I completed this article.

2 Throughout this article, I refer to George's edition of the Standard Babylonian Epic. Other sources that were consulted are: Dalley, Harris, Ungnad/Gressmann, and Azrié.

3 The literature discussing the cultural and fictional dimension is fairly vast but for a general overview and major arguments, see Sallaberger, also Evans. As for the links of Gilgamesh with the 'Ur-Sprung' stories, see Gerhards, and with regards to the culture of iconography, see Steymans.

4 Most scholars consider Gilgamesh an 'epic hero'. See, for instance, one of the most prominent classical authorities on heroic poetry, Bowra.

5 In fact, in his book, the neuroscientist Damasio overshadows the earlier theories on emotions by negating the emotion-reason bipartition, by affirming emotion as the first human characteristic and by considering reason strongly attached to emotion.

6 See Zocco on this topic. H. H. Jahnn seems to be a great example.

7 There are different stances on the role of Sin-leqi-unninni (about 1300–1000 BC) as a possible author, compiler, translator and editor of the various extant poems, songs and other text fragments featuring Gilgamesh. It seems that he had a peculiar role in unifying these into a single version but certainly there was not one single composer of *The Epic*, which had already existed at least 1000 years before him in oral culture and written tradition, although in different versions. Sin-leqi-unninni's authorship is contested more than Homer's authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (see also Sallaberger 2013, ch.5).

8 See Kirk on this topic.

9 Gilgamesh, as a hero, seems not to fit in perfectly with Freud's conceptuality of mourning, melancholia, and self-destructive savagery.

10 On internalizing fascination and danger and delivering 'animating force of astonishment', see Müller followed by Couquiaud.

11 Alongside Damasio's bio-perspective on feeling and culture, the concepts of 'paleopoetics' and 'neopoetics' are put forward by Brône, Vandaele, and Collins.

12 Today, the storyline of social media, TV and tabloid advertising generally departs from the 'old lines' of Gilgamesh as a 'primitive' king hero, and ranges from caricatures to commercial genres, from national to personal identifications with the hero, from ironic to ludic and affirmative modes of expression. On these issues and on the literary reception of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in the twentieth century, see Zocco.

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