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PRESENCE
AT THE CREATION

> The classics console. But not enough.
>
> Derek Walcott

THE INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS from ancient Mesopotamia is dominated by a strongly anti-theoretical philological tradition that often looks with derision and suspicion at attempts to discuss hermeneutic issues.[1] The immense difficulties involved with basic matters of establishing reliable text editions, reference grammars and dictionaries have provided a seemingly impenetrable barrier of arguments against critical reflection, and have conspired to postpone interpretive issues to a mythical time when the groundwork will have been laid, and a happy generation of grateful scholars will have the leisure to indulge in such undignified and unscholarly labors. One may, of course, note that it is not possible to provide these "foundations" without critical thought, and that matters of interpretation are involved from the very first moment that one approaches a text; this is often viewed as mere quibbling, however. The matter is primarily sociological: certain disciplines of culture study, among them primarily various branches of Near Eastern and Classical studies, have been traditionally hostile to other disciplines, often looking at them with scarcely veiled contempt. At the same, however, opinions on the civilizations are offered, compendia on the culture and literatures are published, and "literal" translations are produced. The situation is identical to the one described by Paul Zumthor in medieval studies. Writing of the "fathers" of that field he observed that "The greatest of them possessed an immense amount of knowledge on which we still draw today. But they never questioned the ideological and philosophical implications of their manner of working, of collecting information, and of transmitting it to their students and readers."[2] His comments could be constituted as a veritable definition of "philology," as expressed already in

[2]P. Zumthor, "Comments on H. R. Jauss's Article," *New Literary History* 10 (1979) 371.

1900 by Wilhelm Dilthey: "... the art of understanding centers on the exegesis or *interpretation of those residues of human reality preserved in written form.* The exegesis of such residues, along with the critical procedures inseparable from it, constituted a point of departure for *philology.* Philology is in its essence a *personal skill and virtuosity in the scrutiny of written memorials.*"[3] This form of philology, nevertheless, had a strong grounding in philosophy as well as in the technical aspects of the trade, and was thus very much a child of its own time. Over the decades, however, the techniques became more and more developed while the philosophical underpinnings of the art became obsolete and were eventually lost; *Verstehen* was replaced by intuition.

In traditional philology meaning is simply there. And if one is clever and hard working enough, one will, with good luck, eventually find it, like a treasure hidden by the gods. Upon reflection, however, this becomes a difficult aim to achieve. As Susan Stewart has put it in another context:

> Interpretation is not a process whereby some meaning "underlying" or "behind" the text/event is made evident, but a process in which meaning is manufactured and accomplished in light of the constraints of tradition, the stock of knowledge at hand. "Meaning" itself is not prior to social interaction, but is achieved in the course of social interaction.[4]

Such a position has much to recommend it; it is necessary, however, to ask how one can reconstruct a tradition, presumably a tradition of readings, from the past. Would this not be a circular enterprise, building up a tradition from our own readings, only to appropriate it as the privileged basis for new readings? This is precisely what is normally done and the dilemma remains: how does one get out of the circle and, if no such escape is possible, how does one stay within its confines with dignity? One solution to such a problem has been the notion of alterity, defined as:

> the particular double structure of a discourse which not only appears to us as evidence of a distant, historically absent past in all its surprising "otherness," but also is an aesthetic object which, thanks to its linguistic form, is directed toward an *other*, understanding consciousness—and which therefore also allows for communication with a later, no longer contemporary addressee.[5]

The past is dead, however, it cannot "speak," as introductory textbooks would often have us believe, and if it could, we would not understand it. The concept of alterity will not satisfactorily solve our problem unless we can specify what it is about linguistic form that would allow a much later audience to interpret a text. In a naive

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[3]W. Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," translated by F. Jameson, *New Literary History* 3 (1972) 233.

[4]S. Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore, 1979) 14, commenting on the work of Alfred Schutz.

[5]H. R. Jauss, "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature," *New Literary History* 10 (1979) 187.

fashion, we must once again inquire of the qualities of *language* that make it independent of particular languages and situations: traits which allow one to deduce immediate context and semantic usage from a frozen, isolated text.

Part of our problem must then relate to the question of lexical meaning. Does the lexicon, or lexicons, have structures and if so can usage be predicted? In a sense this is closely related to the concept of the dictionary or rather, as Gragg has asked, what does one do after a traditional dictionary has been written?[6] Perhaps it may be best to state that, ultimately, the limited kind of interpretation which I am discussing here concerns the recovery and understanding of the process of troping in another language and another text. When a tradition of troping is not continuous, when successive readings do not accumulate and build a tradition, or when such a tradition has been lost, then the matter of such a recovery becomes crucial to hermeneutics. This is true of much of European medieval literature, sealed off from us, in Zumthor's words, by the invention of the printing press, and it is even more dramatically true of the literature of ancient Mesopotamia, recovered now after more than three thousand years of silence.[7]

In order to investigate some of these problems I would like to concentrate my attention here on one specific text, a long poem often referred to in modern discussions as the Babylonian Genesis—but more properly, as the ancients did in their literary language—*Enūma Eliš*, "When on High." The modern designation of the text is misleading, for it has been recognized by scholars that the creation is not the focus of this story. Nevertheless, because our culture greatly favors beginnings, origins and the like, it has been assumed that such matters were of equal interest to the Babylonians. Indeed, this text does begin at the beginning and includes an account of the creation of the universe, but the role of this motif in the narrative cannot be compared with the similar stories in Genesis. First, there are other contemporary Mesopotamian poems that begin with the creation of the world, and some of them are quite different from the one found in *Enūma Eliš*. Second, with one exception, none of these texts contains only the creation; rather, this type of narration is confined to introductions of texts which are primarily concerned with other matters.[8] And third, the metaphysical importance of creation in Western traditions is inescapably bound to the other end of

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[6]G. B. Gragg, "Redundancy and Polysemy: Reflections on a Point of Departure for Lexicography," in D. Farkas *et al.*, eds., *Papers from the Parasession on the Lexicon* (Chicago, 1978) 174.

[7]P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris, 1972) 42.

[8]The one text that contains only a creation story is the Middle Assyrian tablet *KAR* 4. It is obvious, however, that the extant manuscript does not contain the whole composition, whatever it may have been. An Old Babylonian version has been recently found at Isin (see D. O. Edzard and Cl. Wilcke in B. Hrouda, *Isin—Išān Baḥrīyāt* I [Munich, 1977] 87), but it is fragmentary and does not provide any clues as to the continuation of the narrative. I am grateful to Cl. Wilcke for placing his unpublished copy at my disposal.

time and thus must be seen in a different light, for in ancient Mesopotamia there is absolutely no trace of any apocalyptic vision and thus the linear axis of time is not so strongly determinant.

Part of our problem then must relate to the question of lexical meaning in this narrative, which if it is "about" anything at all, is about the exaltation of Marduk, the city god of Babylon, to the head of the pantheon. For this reason, it has been suggested by Wilfred Lambert, one must date this text no earlier than the eleventh century B. C., since the exalted position of Marduk can hardly be documented before this time.[9] The function of the text was seen most clearly by F. M. Cornford, not a Near Eastern scholar but a classicist, who wrote that:

> This is not an epic, but a hymn. Epics do not reflect ritual action; nor were they recited as incantations to reinforce the efficacy of a rite every time it was performed. This document is a hymn to Marduk, recounting his exploits in creating and ordering the world of gods and men.[10]

Let us forgive Cornford his generic imperialism, for one must admit that he has seen something here. So much, thus, for the title, "The Epic of Creation." The text is primarily about Marduk, of that there can be little doubt. But why it is about that god and why it is couched in this particular form is a matter that must still be explored. Here I shall devote myself to two sets of problems: the place of the text in the Mesopotamian literary tradition and the political significance of *Enūma Eliš*. At the end I hope to demonstrate that these two issues are in fact inseparable but for the sake of the discussion they must be investigated in turn.

Let us then begin at the beginning and read the opening lines of the poem:

enūma eliš lā nabû šamāmu	When on high the heavens had not been named
šapliš ammatum šuma lā zakrat	Below the earth had not been given a name,
apsûmma rēštû zārûšun	Primeval Apsu, their begetter,
mummu tiʾāmat muallidat gimrīšun	(And) *mummu* Tiʾamat, who bore them all,
mêšunu ištēniš iḫḫīqūma	Mingled their waters together;
gipāra lā kiṣṣuru ṣuṣâ lā šēʾu	No grassland had been formed, no reed-thicket had been laid out.
enūma ilū lā šūpû manāma	When no gods had been brought into being,
šuma lā zukkurū šīmāta lā šīmu	Had been given a name, had their destinies determined,
ibbanûma ilū qerebšun	(At that time) the gods were created within them.[11]

[9]The classic argument for this position is found in W. G. Lambert, "The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion," W. S. McCullough, ed., *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of T. J. Meek* (Toronto, 1964) 3–13. See now also W. Sommerfeld, *Der Aufstieg Marduks* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982) 174–81 and the important review article by W. G. Lambert, "Studies in Marduk," *BSOAS* 47 (1984) 1–9.

[10]F. M. Cornford, *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1967) 110. This particular essay, entitled "A Ritual Basis for Hesiod's *Theogony*," was actually written in 1941 but was not published until 1950.

[11]Unless otherwise specified, *Enūma Eliš* is cited here as normalized from the composite cuneiform edition of W. G. Lambert and S. B. Parker, *Enūma Eliš: The Babylonian Epic of Creation. The*

The text begins with a series of nominal sentences containing predicates that are agentless and neutral as to time or aspect. Chaos is envisioned as an absence and presence is linked to naming. Two primordial deities are there, the ocean—feminine Ti²amat—as well as the sweet waters—the male principle Apsu. Their spatial relationship mimics the order given in lines one and two, she is above and he is below. But as well known as this text is, there is a philological crux at the very outset, in line four. Ti²amat, the primeval ocean, is described by the epithet *mummu*, which for the time being must be left untranslated. Further in the text a character by that same name will become the "vizier" (*sukkallu*) of Apsu, but at this point in the story he is only there *in potentia*.[12] Traditionally, *mummu* has been described by recourse to the dictionary and thus we find a *mummu* house, where statues are repaired, a translation "craftsman," as well as, more interestingly, "school for scribes, workshop."[13] Unfortunately, none of these meanings fits our line, and to find the answer to the problem we must look ahead to two occurrences of one and the same line. When the battle of the gods can no longer be put off and Ti²amat is ready to spring into action we read:[14]

ummu ḫubur pātiqat kalama   Mother *ḫubur*, who fashions all things.

The philologist here encounters another lexical problem for the dictionaries provide an explanation of *ḫubur* as an obscure name for an underground river. "Mother underground river" makes little sense, however, and other interpretations must be sought. A solution comes quickly when one realizes that throughout the text, and in other Mesopotamian literary compositions, noise and silence are symbols of action and inaction.[15]

The two Babylonian words for "noise" that are used in this tradition are *rigmu* and *ḫubūru*.[16] One can posit that *ḫubur* is in fact an archaizing name formation, in

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Cuneiform Text (Oxford, 1966). For discussions of these lines see, most recently, M. Held, "Two Philological Notes on Enūma Eliš," *AOAT* 25 231–37 and Cl. Wilcke, "Die Anfänge der Akkadischen Epen," *ZA* 67 (1977) 163–77.

[12]I 30 and I 48; see note below.

[13]See A. Heidel, "The Meaning of *Mummu* in Akkadian Literature," *JNES* 7 (1948) 98–105; *CAD* M/2 197.

[14]Line 133 of tablet I, repeated verbatim in line 19 of tablet II.

[15]Peter Machinist, "Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra," *JAOS* 103 (1983) 221–26 has noted this phenomenon and has provided examples form the Erra Poem. Similar use of these metaphors could be cited from a variety of Mesopotamia literary texts.

[16]For previous attempts at analyzing the function of these terms in Babylonian mythology see G. Pettinato, "Die Bestrafung des Menschengeschlechts durch die Sinflut," *Or. NS* 37 (1968) 165–200; W. L. Moran, "Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood," *Biblica* 52 (1971) 51–61; A. D. Kilmer, "The Mesopotamian Concept of Overpopulation and Its Solution as Reflected in the Mythology," *Or. NS* 41 (1972) 160–77; E. Carter, "The Babylonian Story of the Flood: An Archaeological Interpretation, " in L. D. Levine and T. C. Young, Jr., eds., *Mountains and Lowlands:*

the absolute state, from *ḫubūru*, just as Tiʾamat is the absolute state of *tâmtu*, the word for "ocean, large body of water." Hence, when Tiʾamat springs into action she is "mother noise, who fashions all things." What we have here is not simply an interesting solution to a minor textual problem; it can actually tell us much more. Let us return to line 4 where Tiʾamat was described as *mummu*, "the one who bore them all."[17] This line is semantically parallel with line 133,[18] and the assonance of *ummu* and *mummu* can hardly escape our attention. But *mummu* is simply another word for noise—it is a synonym of *ḫubūru* and *rigmu* as well as an anagram, and thus in a sense a homonym, for *ummu*. There are two pieces of evidence that support this line of reasoning: first, an ancient commentary has provided us with the equation *mummu* = *rigmu*—an equation that no modern scholar has integrated into the analysis of the line;[19] second, in bilingual texts the Sumerian word for noise is mu_7-mu_7.[20] Even if that is a late equation, it is still important to our discussion, for in line 4 the extension of homonymic and synonymic balances goes further. Recall the wording of the line: *mummu tiʾāmat muallidat gimrīšun*. *mummu* is related to *ummu*, "mother," a fact further underscored by the assonance with the participle *muallidat*.[21] Look at the last word—*gimrīšun*, which means "all of them." *gimru*, "all," is an anagram of *rigmu*, "noise"; it is thus a homonym for the synonym of *mummu* and must confirm the hypothesis![22] It should come as no surprise that in the late second and early first millennia Mesopotamian scribes were playing with language in such a manner. After all, this is the same period that produced such lexical texts as *Nabnītu*, *Erimḫuš*, and *Antagal*, that are organized not according to the left-hand Sumerian column but

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[17] *mummu tiʾāmat muallidat gimrīšun.*

[18] *ummu ḫubur pātiqat kalama* "Mother *ḫubur*, who fashions all things."

[19] *CT* 13 32 rev.10: *mu-um-mu / rig-mu*. This comments on tablet VII line 121 of *Enūma Eliš* where *mummu* is the roar of the thunderstorm. There is no reason to enter this as a separate word in a dictionary, as was done in *CAD* M/2 198; see already F. Delitzsch, *Das babylonische Weltschöpfungsepos* (Leipzig, 1896) 119.

[20] It has been argued that the Akkadian word is a loan from Sumerian; thus, most recently, W. G. Lambert, *JSS* 14 250. The Sumerian word is not attested in this meaning in OB texts and one suspects that the loan came the other way around, that is mu_7-mu_7 is a learned pseudo-Sumerian lexeme, reconstructed on the basis of the esoteric meanings of *mummu*. The other *mummu*, related to Standard Sumerian umun_2, is likewise problematical. As M. Civil has noted, it is probably not of Sumerian origin ("Bilingualism in Logographically Written Languages: Sumerian in Ebla," in L. Cagni, ed., *Il bilinguismo a Ebla* [Naples, 1984] 95).

[21] Note the spelling *mu-um-ma-al-li-da-a[t]* in *CT* 13 1 (BM 93,015).

[22] A similar device is found further in the same tablet (I 48: *sukkallum la māgiru milik mummīšu*). This line contains the same type of anagram that was posited above for line I 4. Although Mummu is now personified as a vizier of Apsu, the same kind of homonymity is invoked: similar to *gimru*, *māgiru* is an anagram for *rigmu*.

according to the roots of the Akkadian translations and move from one section to another according to metonymic principles.[23]

This play on the homonymic and synonymic axes of language is no mere formal device, however. It is where *Enūma Eliš* immediately establishes its relationship with the rest of the contemporary Mesopotamian literary tradition. Even more, through an intertextuality which I have already hinted at, it participates in the establishment of an ethos and a world view. Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that Mesopotamian civilization was devoid of reflexive analysis, something that had to await the Greek world of Plato and his contemporaries. The difference lies somewhere else, however: not in the presence or absence of reflexivity but in the narrative techniques which were used to express it. In Mesopotamia there was no metalanguage; reflexivity was part of the construction of the text itself.[24] The way in which texts imparted meaning was thus of prime importance and part of that mechanism was to be found in the way in which texts spoke to each other. Here I would like to quote Harold Bloom, who phrased the question thus:

> An empirical thinker, confronted by a text, seeks a meaning. Something in him says: 'If this is a complete and independent text, then it has a meaning.' It saddens me to say that this apparently commonsensical assumption is not true. Texts don't have meanings, except in their relations to other texts, so that there is something uneasily dialectical about literary meaning. A single text has only a part of a meaning; it is itself a synecdoche for a larger whole including other texts. A text is a relational event, and not a substance to be analyzed.[25]

Let us look at the metaphor of noise as activity, as creation. Several passages have already been quoted where this occurs, but the most important aspects of the matter are found in poems that include stories of the flood. To be sure, the flood was not as central a narrative element in the historical cosmology of Mesopotamia as one would imagine.[26] It did, however, surface as a useful symbol in the tropic trail that we are following here. The Babylonian account of the flood, "plagiarized" by one of the authors of Genesis, is recounted twice, in almost identical form in two texts, the Story of Atra-ḫasīs and in the eleventh tablet of the so-called Epic of Gilgamesh. The narration is used for different rhetorical purposes in each poem but in regard to the

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[23]See M. T. Roth, *MSL* 17 135–42.

[24]I intend to discuss this matter in more detail elsewhere; for an interesting example of analysis of meaning and composition in Greek literature along these lines, see F. Létublon, "Le miroir et le boucle," *Poétique* 53 (1983) 19–36.

[25]H. Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York, 1975) 106.

[26]This is particularly true of earlier Mesopotamian traditions, see M. Civil, in W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, 1969) 139. The earliest attested use of the phrase e g i r a-m a-ru ba-ùr-ra-ta, "after the deluge had swept..." is, as Civil points out, first attested in a hymn Išme-Dagan of Isin (*Enlildiriše*). I would suggest, however, that this refers not to the mythical flood but to the same events that are described in highly metaphorical fashion in the Nippur Lament.

elements which interest us here it is identical. The god Enlil sends down the flood because the noise—*rigmu, ḫubūru*—of mankind is excessive, and Enlil cannot sleep.[27] Why should this be? Can this noise here also be linked to action, creation, creativity? Let us go one step further on the trail. The second and first millennium Mesopotamian accounts of the creation of man all agree on one thing: mankind was created to do labor for the gods. In the Atra-ḫasis poem a god is slaughtered and all the remaining deities bathe in the blood. Next, the birth goddess Nintu mixed his blood with clay and fashioned the primeval human being and the goddess Mami addressed the divine assembly:[28]

You commanded me a task and I completed it.
You have slaughtered a god together with his *personality*,
I have removed your heavy work,
I have imposed your toil upon mankind.

The English word "personality," drawn here from the translation of W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, is in this line a rendition of the Babylonian noun *ṭēmu*; note how this word is used in another context:

ḫubūrša iktabas ṭēmša ispuḫ   (the x of Adad) suppressed the din (of) its (inhabitants), it confused its *mind*.[29]

In order to create mankind the gods must sacrifice one of their own. The rite of passage that is depicted here, with a scapegoat motif that would surely gratify R. Girard, provides a reciprocal bond between gods and men.[30] Such a bond means that although mankind must serve the gods, the gods also needed them. The flood was a disaster for the mortals and the divine ones in equal measure and indeed this sacrificial bonding, which was established at the beginning, resurfaces in the aftermath of the great deluge. When the waters began to recede and the rains stop, the Babylonian survivor of the cataclysm, Uta-napištim, set up a censer on top of Mt. Nimuš. This is what he then saw:[31]

I poured out a libation on the top of the mountain, I set up seven and seven vessels,
Upon their pot-stands I heaped cane, cedar and myrtle,

[27]Note that in addition to its function in the "flood stories," the noise of mankind, disturbing to Enlil, also occurs in the "Myth of Labbu," *CT* 13, 33–34.

[28]The following are the words of the goddess Mami in W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasis* 59, lines 237–241, see also W. L. Moran, "The Creation of Man in Atrahasis I," *BASOR* 200 (1970) 48–56.

[29]J. J. Finkelstein, "The So-Called 'Old Babylonian Kutha Legend,'" *JCS* 11 (1957) 86 iv 5. For the difficult word *ṭēmu* see J. Bottéro, "Le pouvoir royal et ses limitations d'après les textes divinatoires," in A. Finet, ed., *La voix d'opposition en Mésopotamie* (Brussels, 1973) 146–48.

[30]René Girard has developed an extensive theory of culture based on sacrificial bonding and scapegoating. He has written widely on the subject; the classic statement of his case is to be found in *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris, 1972).

[31]Gilgameš XI 156–161; see already OB Atra-ḫasis IV 34–35.

The gods smelled the savor,
The gods smelled the sweet savor,
The gods crowded like flies about the sacrificer.

Not a very noble scene this! The hungry gods, who had not been fed throughout the flood, are buzzing around their food like flies! They need man just as man needs them and the flood thus proves to have been a terrible mistake.

The metaphors outlined above make little sense when seen separately. But when we trace these tropes within the tradition there begins to appear a common set of values which are encoded, so to speak, in the spaces between the texts. The metaphor of noise, which is there, although poetically *in absentia*, at the beginning of the world, establishes a privileged position for the concept of creation, activity, independence. This concept is then fostered upon man and in a series of narratives it is shaped to establish a world view. And indeed this is one that asserts the place of humanity in the universe, not as a blind slave of the gods, but as an independent, creative being. The harmony and hierarchical arrangement of the world does not require that mankind be passive. The creation of these creatures, as well as the clash which resulted in the flood, serves as an etiological charter which affirms the independent status of mankind. Those who would interpret noise literally in the flood narratives, claiming that it is a mark of overpopulation, have completely missed the point, for they would see human beings as mere puppets of the gods.

Let us postpone further analysis of this issue for a moment, and turn to the political aspects of *Enūma Eliš*. One will recall that the text has been described as the exaltation of the god Marduk. The center of the story contains the establishment of the sky and earth, the two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, as well as the foundation of Babylon at the center of the universe as the eternal dwelling of the new master of the world, Marduk. From the point of view of the Babylonians this was indeed a compelling picture of the world, but historical reality was fast against them, for, from the thirteenth century onwards, political and military dominance had passed for the most part into the hands of their northern cousins, the Assyrians. The Assyrians did not yet control Babylonia, but the political primacy of the southern state was not to remain unchallenged. By the eleventh century, the most probable date, as we have seen, of the composition of *Enūma Eliš*, certain changes were taking place in Assyria that were, most probably, reflected in this text. Here I must stress that although much less is known of the native religion of Assyria than that of Babylonia, a major difference that can be detected concerns the relative status of the city gods of Assur and Babylon. Marduk is simply the head god of his city but this does not necessarily mean that he is the head of a national pantheon. By contrast, the Assyrian god Assur is inseparable from his city, called Assur, as well as from the state itself which is named "The Land of Assur." In Assyria the main god is truly at the top of the hierarchy and the ruler is only his viceroy on earth. Indeed there is a peculiarly Assyrian

type of text, never found in Babylonia, of historical annals in the form of a letter from the king to Assur.[32]

The difference in religious hierarchy briefly described above became important during the late second and early first millennia when Babylon, for most of this period quite weak and often under the direct rule of Assyria, depended for its survival not on military means, but primarily on a form of ideological blackmail. For Babylon was perhaps not the powerful military and economic force in the world, but it was the center of knowledge, learning, and of the old Sumerian tradition. Indeed, there is hardly any strictly Assyrian literature to speak of and while there are exceptions, the Assyrian scribes usually copied and wrote texts not in Assyrian but in the Standard Babylonian literary dialect of their southern cultural mentors. For the most part the kings of Assyria were respectful of the ancient traditions of Babylonia, but there were moments when brute reality took over. Indeed, I would like to suggest that the main impetus for the exaltation of Marduk in *Enūma Eliš* is linked to the cultural tension between Babylonia and Assyria. There can be no comparison between incommensurate hierarchies; and so in order to assert the primacy of Marduk, the Babylonians had to make their pantheon homologous to that of Assyria. The central act in this reform was the exaltation of the city god of Babylon to the status of a national deity, an exaltation that provided a direct counterpart to Assur. The complex cosmology of *Enūma Eliš* put Marduk in the equivalent role that Assur had in Assyria, while at the same time it connected the Babylonian deity with older Sumero-Babylonian cosmological traditions. One should, therefore, note that the composite structure of *Enūma Eliš* and the reuse of older cosmological and religious materials in the text, are not simply compositional features, but carry a complex ideological message.[33]

The ideological battle between Assur and Babylon was not restricted to *Enūma Eliš*. Consider the following facts. Only two Assyrian kings attacked and destroyed Babylon and both events were unusual enough to warrant our attention. Ca. 1210 BC

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[32]On these texts see A. L. Oppenheim, "The City of Assur in 714 B.C.," *JNES* 19 (1960) 133–47. Letter-prayers from rulers to deities are known from early in the second millennium but these are not reports of the *status quo* as are the Assyrian letters to gods. A "forerunner" of sorts is the Mari letter *ARM* 1 3, from Yasmah-Addu to Nergal (most recently translated into English by A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* vol. I [Wiesbaden, 1972] 27–28, collations and new readings are now available in D. Charpin and J.-M. Durand, "La prise du pouvoir par Zimri-Lim," *M.A.R.I.* 4 [1985] 339–40), but the genre as such appears to be characteristic of first millennium Assyria and has to be analyzed within the context of Sargonid royal ideology. [The Mari letters to deities have now been newly edited by Jean-Marie Durand, *Archives épistolaires de Mari* I/1 (Paris, 1988) 413–19, with new texts, including letters from deities to the king. These materials necessitate a re-examination of this literary tradition.]

[33]On the composite nature of the composition, as well as the borrowing of older motifs see, most recently, W. G. Lambert, "Ninurta Mythology in the Babylonian Epic of Creation," in K. Hecker and W. Sommerfeld, eds., *Keilschriftliche Literaturen. Ausgewählte Vorträge der XXXII. Rencontre assyriologique internationale. Münster, 8–12.7.1985* (Berlin, 1986) 55–60.

the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I conquered the city and claimed, in a biased composition that is our main evidence for these events, to have destroyed the city and taken much booty. The list of goods which he claimed to have taken from Babylon includes a unique set of items—cuneiform tablets of literary and religious works. The Assyrian cultural inferiority feeling was never so well demonstrated as in the textual material devoted to these actions. Tukulti-Ninurta lived long enough to commission an apologia for these events but did not enjoy his spoils for long as he was eventually assassinated under circumstances that are not yet clear to us.[34]

Six centuries later, in 689 BC, another Assyrian king, Sennacherib, attacked and plundered Babylon. In one of his historical annals he describes his deeds in the following words:[35]

> I carried Šuzubu, king of Babylon, off alive into my land, together with his family and [officials]. I distributed the wealth of that city (Babylon)—silver, gold, precious gems, property and goods—to my people; and they took it as their own. My people took hold of the (statues of) gods who were dwelling there and smashed them; they took their property and goods.... The city and its houses, from foundation to parapet, I destroyed, devastated (and) burned down. I removed the brick and earthenware of the outer and inner wall (of the city), of the temples, and of the ziggurat, and dumped (them) into the Araḫtu canal. I dug canals though the midst of the city, I overran it with water, I made its foundations disappear; I brought on a destruction that was more devastating than (that of the) flood. So that it might be impossible in future days to recognize the site of the city and (its) temples, I disintegrated it with water (so that it) resembled inundated land.

But this was not all, for in a second passage describing the same event Sennacherib reveals another aspect of his destruction of the holy city:[36]

> I removed the debris of Babylon and piled it up in heaps in that *akītu*-temple as a sight for future generations.

This commemorative act betrays the cultural tension behind these deeds, and serves to support the hypothesis offered here, for the *akītu*-temple, which was made to house the dust of Babylon, was built for one ceremony—the New Year ritual, and it was during this rite that *Enūma Eliš* was recited. Moreover, as a direct expression of what was at stake, the Assyrian ruler constructed a gate for the building on which the battle between Tiʾamat and Assur was graphically depicted.[37] It is also interesting that Sennacherib performs this symbolic act in the old religious capital Assur and not in Nineveh, which at this time was the new political capital of the state. One cannot avoid the supposition that this gesture was a direct answer to the challenge of *Enūma*

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[34]See P. Machinist, "The Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I: A Study in Middle Assyrian Literature" (PhD. diss., Yale University, 1978).

[35]The "Bavian Inscription," 3R14: 46–54, D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Chicago, 1924) 83–84.

[36]*KAH* II 122, a foundation stone from Assur, D. D. Luckenbill, *Sennacherib* 138: 46–47.

[37]D. D. Luckenbill, *Sennacherib* 139: 6–16.

Eliš. It is also worth mentioning that only in copies from Assur did the Assyrian scribes attempt to neutralize the text—they substituted the name of their god for that of Marduk and amalgamated Assur with Anšar.[38] A recently published Kouyunjik copy of a text from the reign of Sennacherib provides further evidence of these complex ideological maneuvers.[39] In this unique document, written in literary Babylonian, the king of Assyria endows Assur with the epithets and titles that had been associated with Marduk. The Assyrian god, moreover, takes into possession the Tablet of Destinies, a symbol of supreme rule that in *Enūma Eliš* is strongly identified with Marduk and his supremacy over the universe.[40]

Sennacherib, like Tukulti-Ninurta before him, was assassinated soon after his Babylonian adventure and his son and successor, Esarhaddon, hastened to undo the damage by putting his energies to the rebuilding of Babylon. In his inscriptions the embarrassing admission of cultural war is suppressed and a different motivation is established, in the standard tradition based on divine abandonment, just as Tukulti-Ninurta had done in the 13th century.[41]

> The Enlil of the gods, Marduk, was angry... The gods and goddesses who dwell
> in it (*i.e.* Babylon) fled like birds and went to heaven.

A similar motif is taken up in a different inscription of the successor of Sennacherib.[42]

> (Esarhaddon), the king during whose reign the great lord Marduk was reconciled
> towards Babylon and (once again) took up residence in the Esagila, his palace.

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[38]Similar conclusions were reached independently by P. Machinist, "The Assyrians and Their Babylonian Problem: Some Reflections," *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Jahrbuch* 1984/85 353–64, with a more elaborate discussion of these matters.

[39]A. R. George, "Sennacherib and the Tablet of Destinies," *Iraq* 48 (1986) 133–46.

[40]See also the observation by W. G. Lambert, "The God Assur," *Iraq* 45 (1983) 86: "(Sennacherib) developed a hatred for Marduk, city god of Babylon, who had replaced Enlil as the head of the pantheon some 500 years earlier. This hatred expressed itself in the attempt to put an end to the cult of Marduk and to set up Assur in his place. Ironically this often meant making Assur more like Marduk than he had been previously." One should note here that the Middle Assyrian ritual for the *akītu*-festival in Assur still has Marduk as the main protagonist (F. Köcher, "Ein mittelassyrisches Ritualfragment zum Neujahrfest," *ZA* 50 [1952] 192–202).

[41]R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* (Graz, 1956) 13 Ep. 5a:34–35 – 8a:43–46. On the earlier king and his cultural war with Babylon see P. Machinist, "Literature as Politics: The Tukulti-Ninurta Epic and the Bible," *CBQ* 38 (1976) 455–82. The complex ideological and historical context of the thematic structure of *divine alienation—devastation: divine reconciliation—reconstruction* in the narratives concerning the destruction and rebuilding of Babylon have now been studied in detail by J. A. Brinkman, "Through a Glass Darkly: Esarhaddon's Retrospects on the Downfall of Babylon," *JAOS* 103 (1983) 35–42. The complex consequences of this event continued after the death of Esarhaddon, for it was his successor, Assurbanipal, who finally restored the statue of Marduk to Babylon; see the remarks by H. Tadmor, "Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature," H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld, eds., *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures* (Jerusalem, 1983) 47–48.

[42]A. Goetze, "Esarhaddon's Inscription from Nippur," *JCS* 17 (1963) 129:9

These are ancient clichés, and it is interesting that an Assyrian king hides the crimes of his father behind this old rhetoric which was the heritage of Babylonia. But this was only a temporary suppression of the cultural tension between Assyria and Babylonia. *Enūma Eliš*, one will recall, was recited at the New Year festival celebrations in Babylon. Granted, the ritual describing these events that has come down to us exists only in a Seleucid copy, but this should not stop our speculations since the composition itself is undoubtedly much older.[43] According to this text, on the fourth day of the first month the *urigallu* priest of the temple Ekua recites *Enūma Eliš* to Marduk. During the recitation "the front of the tiara of the god Anu and the resting place of the god Enlil shall be covered."[44] The next day the same priest takes away the scepter, the ring, and the sword—that is, all the symbols of royal power—from the king. After leading the king before the statue of Marduk he strikes the royal cheek, drags him by the ears, and makes him bow down. The king then recites the following prayer:[45]

[*ul aḫ*]-*ṭu* EN KUR.KUR *ul e-gi ana* DINGIR-*ti-ku*	I did not sin, oh lord of the lands, I was not neglectful of your divinity,
[*ul u-ḫa-a*]*l-liq* E.KI *ul aq-ta-bi* BIR-*šú*	I did not destroy Babylon, I did not command its dispersal,
[*ul u-r*]*ib-bi e-sag-gil ul u-ma-aš* ME-*šú*	I did not [desecrate?] Esagila, I did not forget its rites.
...	...
[*u-pa-a*]*q ana* E.KI *ul a-bu-ut sal-ḫu-šú*	[I watched] out for Babylon, I did not smash its walls.

In the context of our discussion this is indeed a stunning prayer. For here the king—whether native or Assyrian, is not important—in the midst of the liminal, suspended moment of a rite of passage, recites a text which can be paraphrased as "I am not Tukulti-Ninurta, I am not Sennacherib."[46] The cumulative evidence appears thus incontrovertible: we are forced to admit the strong political role of *Enūma Eliš* and of the exaltation of Marduk.

I have discussed two seemingly different aspects of *Enūma Eliš*—the intertextual role of the poem within the literary tradition and the political dimensions of its theology. It is important to stress, however, that these two aspects of the text are closely related. The poem begins with the question of naming as a function of creation and

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[43]F. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels accadiens* (Paris, 1921) 129–49. For a general description of the New Year festival see, most recently, J. A. Black, "The New Year Ceremonies in Ancient Babylon: 'Taking Bel by the Hand' and a Cultic Picnic," *Religion* 11 (1981) 39–59.

[44]*RAcc* 136:283–284.

[45]*RAcc* 144:423–425; 428.

[46]The connection between this passage and the two destructions of Babylonia was made independently, in a very different context, by J. Z. Smith, "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams: A Study in Situational Incongruity," *History of Religions* 16 (1976) 1–19 (a revised version is now available in J. Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* [Chicago, 1982]). One should note that Smith suggests that this version of the Akītu festivities was reinterpreted to serve new ideological purposes in Seleucid times.

testifies to the oral, self-present background of much of early Mesopotamian writing. But in fact the text is highly scriptural; it is an affirmation of the scribal craft and of writing. The complex homonymic and synonymic dimensions of *mummu* in line four cannot be separated from the fact that in one of its meanings the word refers to the scribal art. The interrelationships with other poems are textual and refer to a closed body of written texts. Moreover, *Enūma Eliš* contains puns and exegeses that play specifically on the learned written tradition and on the very nature of the cuneiform script. Consider, for example, the well-known word games that accompany the birth of Marduk in tablet I:[47]

ma-ri-ú-tu ma-ri-ú-tu
ma-ri ᵈ*šamši*ˢⁱ ᵈ*šamši*ˢⁱ *ša ilī*

The passage is virtually untranslatable as it is filled with puns and allusions. What is particularly striking in the present context is that at least two puns work on the graphemic level: the Sumerian name of the sun god is Utu and thus the sign which is here read as *šamši* (written ᵈUTUˢⁱ) also has the phonetic value u t u, moreover, ᵈ*šamši*ˢⁱ means not simply "my sun," but more specifically "his majesty," and is a frozen form used in addressing royalty in the second as well as in the third person.[48]

Enūma Eliš is also a text that parades its traditional knowledge. The final part of the narrative includes a recitation of the fifty names of Marduk and this section is undoubtedly, as Lambert has shown, an elaboration of an older god list.[49] The names are all in Sumerian and the poetic epithets that follow every name are complex, often to us inexplicable commentaries on various spurious etymologies that have been milked from the Sumerian.[50] But the conclusion of the poem is the most dramatic witness of the written nature of the text.[51]

ina zik-ri ḫa-an-ša-a DINGIR.DINGIR GAL.GAL	With the name "Fifty" the great gods
ḫa-an-ša-a šu-mé-e-šu im-bu-ú ú-ša-ti-ru al-kàt-su	Proclaimed him whose names are fifty and made his way supreme,
li-iṣ-ṣab-tú-ma maḫ-ru-u li-kal-lim	Let them be kept in mind and let the elder (scholar) explain them.
en-qu mu-du-u mit-ḫa-riš lim-tal-ku	Let the wise and the intelligent discuss them together,

[47]Lines 101–102. The variants are of little interest here.

[48]On the latter usage see, most recently, Stephanie Dalley, "The god Ṣalmu and the winged disk," *Iraq* 48 (1986) 99.

[49]W. G. Lambert, *BSOAS* 47 (1984) 4.

[50]For a fascinating attempt at an analysis of the way in which the original god list was transformed into an elaborate commentary, see J. Bottéro, "Les Noms de Marduk, l'écriture et la 'logique' en Mésopotamie ancienne," in M. de Jong Ellis, ed., *Essays in the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein* (Hamden, 1977) 5–28.

[51]Tablet VII 143–148; 157–158; 161–162.

li-šá-an-ni-ma a-bu ma-ri li-šá-ḫi-iz	Let the father repeat them and thus instruct his son,
šá LÚ.SIPA *u na-qí-di li-pat-ta-a uz-na-šú-un*	Let them be known by the shepherd and the herdsman,
...	...
tak-lim-ti maḫ-ru-ú id-bu-bu pa-nu-uš-šu	He wrote down the words of enlightenment which An eminent (scholar) had spoken before him
iš-ṭur-ma iš-ta-kan ana ši-mé-e ar-ku-ti	And deposited them for future generations to learn.
...	...
[l]i⁷-šas-s[u⁷-m]a za-ma-ru šá ᵈAMAR.UTU	Let them *read aloud* the song of Marduk,[52]
[ša] ti-a[mat i]k-mu-ma il-qu-u šar-ru-ti	Who vanquished Ti'amat and took the kingship.

There is only one comparable epilogue that comes anywhere close to this type of a statement about the written nature of poem, and that is in the so-called *Epic of Erra*, which is also a composition of the first millennium B.C. But this should not surprise us for the intellectual ethos of first millennium Mesopotamia was filled with rampant textuality. The old traditions were preserved mainly through writing by a very small class of literate scholars, priests, and diviners. Their ever increasing separation from society and from oral literature accelerated with the aramaization of the country, for now the scribes had to learn not only one dead language—Sumerian—but two, since Akkadian was rapidly becoming extinct, and the literary version of Akkadian, Standard Babylonian, was quite likely very difficult to understand by the population at large. Thus, this literate class came to view the whole world through the metaphor of writing. All phenomena, in other words, were signs. Whereas in Old Babylonian times the diviners read messages from the gods in sheep's innards and in smoke and oil patterns, by the first millennium everything had become significant—the stars, the earth, unusual births, the pattern of foxholes in the city wall and even the behavior and speech of men and women.[53] What other period would produce omens from the sexual activities of human beings? The sky, which was now an object of the omen-priests, became the *šiṭir šamê*, "the writing of the sky."[54] And the basis of this written, almost Kabbalistic tradition is, of course, Babylonian. In *Enūma Eliš* the political

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[52]I have restored the line according to the remains as copied in the composite text. The translation of *šasû* as "read aloud" was suggested to me by J. Cooper.

[53]This is not to say that these types of omens did not exist in the Old Babylonian period, and even earlier. It is the relative frequency of texts in the literary corpus that is important. For OB birth divination, see E. Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu* (Locust Valley, 1970) 23; terrestrial omens from the period are attested in a tablet from Ur, published by D. B. Weisberg, "An Old Babylonian Forerunner to Šumma ālu," *HUCA* 40/41 (1969/70) 87–104; OB celestial omens are listed by F. Rochberg-Halton, "Canonicity in Cuneiform Literature," *JCS* 36 (1984) 132 n. 21; for earlier evidence for various divinatory practices, see A. Falkenstein, "'Wahrsagung' in der sumerischen Überlieferung," in J. Nougayrol *et al.*, eds., *La divination en Mésopotamie ancienne et dans les régions voisines* (Paris, 1966) 45–68.

[54]See Jean Bottéro, "Signes, symptômes, écritures," in J. P. Vernant *et al.*, eds., *Divination et rationalité* (Paris, 1974) 160.

and the cultural motivations come together and the claim of the Babylonian priests and scholars is expressed by the exaltation of Marduk, as well as by the creation of a central text within the tradition. The sly anticipation of the Assyrian answer is already in the text; and so while the old scribes of the city of Assur fell into the trap, substituting Assur's name for that of Marduk, the wiser scribes of Nineveh and Nimrud, who accepted the Babylonian claim to cultural superiority also accepted *Enūma Eliš* for what it was, and made no such changes in their copies. The reason for that is not hard to find, for the puns and exegeses described above work on a phonetic basis and thus no substitution for the name of Marduk will work.[55] In this written world the spoken word—and presence—may have been there at the creation, but the universe had become a library and a Babylonian one at that. Many centuries later the Kabbalistic commentator on Genesis was to see this clearly when he wrote in the Zohar, commenting, as it were, on the wrong text:

> "In the beginning"—when the will of the King began to take effect, he engraved signs into the heavenly sphere [that surrounded him].[56]

<p style="text-align:center">*
* *</p>

This article was finished in the early months of 1987. Since that date new interpretations have been published that anticipate some of my conclusions. It is particularly felicitous that William Moran, to whom this volume is dedicated, figures here most prominently. First, I should mention that H. L. J. Vanstiphout, *NABU* 1 (1987) pp. 52-53, has presented an analysis of the opening lines of *Enūma Eliš* and has prompted a response from W. L. Moran in *NABU* 2 (1988) pp. 15-16, a response that focuses on some of the issues that were discussed above. Moran has also published an analysis of *rigmu* and *ḫubūru* that is very close to mine, although his argument proceeds along different lines.[57]

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[55]The substitution of Assur, written AN.ŠÁR, again contains graphic allusions. AN.ŠÁR, originally a Babylonian deity attested in God lists, personified the heavenly horizon, in conjunction with KI.ŠÁR, the earthly horizon. The appropriation of this *writing* for the name of the Assyrian high deity brings new meaning to the logogram, which is now interpreted as DINGIR.ŠÁR, that is "god of the universe."

[56]G. Scholem, *Zohar: The Book of Splendor* (New York, 1963) 27.

[57]"Some Considerations of Form and Function in *Atra-ḫasis*," in F. Rochberg-Halton, ed., *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* (New Haven, 1987) 245–55.

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