HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederick Will, Ph.D.

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography and Selfhood in the Ancient Near East

Contents

Unit I: MANNERS AND LAW

Hammurabi Law Code 1772 B.C.

Unit II: MAN-GOD RELATIONSHIPS

Torah 9th-6th Cent. B.C.
Enuma Elish 1894-1595

Unit III: FROM THE IMAGINATION

Gilgamesh 18th-7th Centuries B.C.

Unit IV: FROM OUR TIME

Ancient Near Eastern Life Writing Today 20th Century A.D. 2

Introduction

'The two great hindrances to any proper appreciation of the literature and civilization of ancient Egypt are the Bible and the glory that was Greece.' This fascinating statement, on p. xi of John Foster's anthology of *Ancient Egyptian Literature*—cf. bibliography at end of this syllabus--is a startling twist to the expected praise of the cornerstones of our cultural heritage.

We are used to seeing a banner, flying over our Biblical/Greco-Roman inheritance, which proclaims: *Western culture starts here*. That proclamation retains its strength even in our *current* Western culture in which we live and behave as though we viewed ourselves as *post*-everything, *post* Greco- Roman as well as *post*-Biblical. (*Western* is the keyword, when it comes to the gloomy assessment just expressed, for not all of the contemporary world views itself as on the far side of great traditions, and without clear mandate for the future. In China, to pick a single counter example, the continuity of the present with the most archaic strata of the culture, with origins as ancient to the Chinese as those of Egyptian literature are to us, is nearly unbroken. The man on the street in Beijing can relate intelligently to *The Book of Songs, 5th Century B.C.*, while he or she will at least know about *The Hundred Schools of Thought*, which began to be collected during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty in the early 8th century B.C.) Yes, *Western* is the keyword, when it comes to the above assessment of the continuity (or lack of it) of the cultural tradition, for we Westerners are in an age when it is in fashion to claim, even though with a sigh of resignation, that we have long and far surpassed even our nearer cultural forefathers. That is to speak of the Greco-Roman and Hebraic, which flourished no more than two and a half millennia before us. Even as it is, and despite that ahistorical weakness so evident in the West today, our relation to our Greco-Roman/Biblical forefathers is strong enough to block our access to the vast

civilizations on which our cultural forefathers *themselves* built; I mean Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Is it time then to widen and deepen our cultural horizons? Is it not possible to relate directly back to that ancient Near East from which we are truly spiritual descendants? If the Greco-Roman and Biblical persist in us, even though we think ourselves *post*, can we not still hope for a living contact with an Ancient Near East, on which the Greco-Roman and Hebraic worlds were *themselves* dependent? Before launching on such a culture-project, we need to know a little more exactly what the obstacles facing us are.

The Roman Empire became the powerful catch-all basin for the collected experience of the Greco-Roman world, and it is the Roman Empire that slipped formatively into the Middle Ages and Renaissance, bearing with it the texts, written and visual, which became modern Western man's grammar of the past. The Roman Empire is a huge force, the understanding of which is a powerful challenge to our historical self-awareness, and which pools ancient knowledge in a format to which historical chance and the accidents of scholarship have conspired to limit us. This is the catch-all basin where our historical self-awareness, such as it is, is likely to stop. Nothing redirects us from the Roman to the Egyptian Empire, which was little known by the Romans, was waning by the time of Christ, and for which there was no geopolitical afterlife like that awaiting the unraveling of the Roman imperial structure. An historical transition position is even more evidently *not* the role of the civilizations of Babylonia and Assyria, which had their own tributaries but little world historical influence—as distinct from historical presence, as generations of powerful myth and societal know-how. As for the power of the Semitic component of our own cultural heritage, we will attribute that in part to the same Roman influence which enabled Christianity—that revised Judaism—to break from the confines of a small Near Eastern city state into what turned out to be one of the mainstreams of world culture. We will also, in part, attribute the Semitic element in our Christian culture to legal and religious texts from the Sumerian-Babylonian world, Mesopotamia.

It is not simply political history that marks out the path of cultural influence, and determines our special relation to the Hellenic and Hebraic, as united in the Roman. It is also a question of what kind of *world experience* the Ancient Near East puts at our disposal, either through Roman culture or directly through Hebrew religious tradition. That archaic cultural world brought to our formative West thematics alien to the sensibility of the Late Roman world. (Here we deal with vast issues, and in a nutshell: the following syllabus is meant as a guide to understanding at least *something* of the present point.) The Ancient Near East put at our disposal world views which jarred against the increasingly 'modern civil society' which was shaping Rome, especially during the Later Empire. Events in Ancient Near Eastern Literature are characteristically (but not always) embedded in the codes of myth or religious language—and though the Semitic code in *Genesis* and the Hebrew Old Testament is an historical power, saved for us by the Biblical tradition, the religious codes of Babylon and Egypt strike us as themselves inaccessibly stiff and proclamational. We will find, in the readings which comprise our syllabus, many difficulties of style, structure, and world-view. We will also find, as becomes evident in Week 14, evidence of a fertile contemporary revaluation of those difficulties.*

The following course voices the case for cultural widening, for reclaiming our whole human heritage, while directing its attention to some of the rich Ancient Near Eastern literary material which forms at least the backstory to our Classical/Hebraic

experience. But we are not simply presenting selections, or the framework for an 'anthology.' We are going to pursue a single multi-faceted thematic through our choice and discussion of texts. We will concentrate here on *the sense of self, personhood, self-awareness, in Ancient Near Eastern literature*, and we will take as our study method the way language is used to promote self-search or self-realization in this archaic literature. We will in doing this be dividing our material in terms of three fundamental registers of language—*behavior-descriptive, religious, imaginative*— which play out here; in that way, I believe, we will be getting to the heart of the archaic culture of the self. In that sense we will be concerned with the way archaic author-selves contributed a human signature to what they wrote. How better can we contribute to the recovery of the full range of *our own human capacities,* or even of our presence as selves, than by performing this personal archeology? Are we then sidestepping the presence of actual 'autobiographies' in this inquiry into the archaic autobiography? No not at all. This is not to say that there were not 'orthodox' a*utobiographies* in archaic literatures, for there were: but these accounts are for the most part carved into the walls of tombs, are stylized, cut from a single template, and unable to represent the person him/herself. They are brief stylized footnotes on a life. (Cf. Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* {Chapter IX} for sample autobiographies, chiefly from officials and military personnel concerned to document their achievements.) We will have little reason to include these testimonials to self-praise in our account of the living self-writing of the archaic Near East.

To be human is by definition both to be a self and to be aware of being a self; and these conditions reflect themselves in different postures within language. Not all of god's creatures can boast an awareness of that definition. Would we attribute a sense of selfhood to the higher apes, with their capacities for problem solving and 'reading,' or to dolphins, with their capacity to communicate by sonar, and at great distances, with their kind, or to elephants, with, for instance, their well-known cults of mourning? No we believe that selfhood is a level of organic-loop wholeness, peculiar and useful to the human being, and we christen as personality or personhood the presence crowning the development of such selfhood. Being and being self-aware enable us to engage with ever higher-order tasks of society-building, community shaping, artistic projection, and communal protection. We are looking for the signatures of such self-awareness.

The syllabus examples of Ancient Near Eastern search for selfhood, personhood and personality are various, both in time and place. Our texts range from 2350 B.C. to 30 B.C., and stem from a variety of regions of ancient Egypt, Babylonia, Sumeria, and Israel—thus from North East Africa to the north of the present Middle East. We will, as said, divide our weekly assignments into three thematic sections. Two of our texts are related to matters of *law and behavior*: the conception of personality as it emerges from a society's laws, as in Hammurabi's *Law Code* (1772 B.C.) or from instructions for gentlemanly behavior and social/military success, as in the *Instructions for Merikare* (21st Century B.C.). These two texts provide us with glimpses of everyday social value. We start with these texts, which immerse us in the realities of Ancient Near Eastern society. A number of our texts are *theological/liturgical.* (The fact is that all of our texts intersect with religious assumptions, but only some of them are exclusively related to the nature and worship of God and Gods.) *The Egyptian Pyramid Texts (*2350 B.C.), the *Babylonian Creation Text*, *Enuma Elish* (1894 B.C.) and the Hebrew *Torah* (ca. 600 B.C.), and the Egyptian *Hymn to the Sun* (1380 B.C.): all address the fundamental nature of human personhood through tales and reflections on God's creation and the nature of the soul. Three of our texts --*The Tale of Sinuhe*, (l995 B.C.) , *Gilgamesh* (18th cent.-7th cent.), a selection of Egyptian love poems (13

th. Cent. B.C.)—spring from imagination, interweave with religious issues, and query the essential character of the human experience.

Reading: Frankfurt, Henri, *Before Philosophy*: *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago, l947).

Discussion issues and points of reflection for (if they catch your attention) the three paper writing assignments of the course. Each week we will offer two or three discussion questions, which can be used for paper ideas, or, as you see useful, as springboards for a diary you create to accompany your readings in this course.

1 Does the Greco Roman/Hebraic cultural axis still serve as a foundation for Western thinking? Is it significant that the knowledge of Greek and Latin is fading in the schools, not to mention Hebrew—except in the case of a few specific religious institutions? Does the tacit persistence of the Roman Empire still pervade our cultural values? Does the Roman experience in some sense encapsulate the Greek within it?

2 Does the development of the sense of selfhood, which will provide our thematic, seem to you to be an essential human quest? Is finding your own self part of what living your life is about? Is coming to know and be self-aware as important as coming to know the presence of other people? How are the two developmental achievements related?

3 Do you think the barriers to understanding the Ancient Near East may derive from problems like perishable texts, limited information storage facilities, and breaks in the affiliations of language histories? In other words, is the literary culture of the Ancient Near East inaccessible largely because of the limited tools it had, for propagating itself?

MANNERS AND LAW

Hammurabi Law Code 1772 B.C. (Babylonia)

The *Instruction for Merikare* involved prescriptions for appropriate behavior and worldly good sense within gentlemanly society, while Hammurabi , the sixth king of Babylon, provided his people with a god-given law code which purported to regulate the rules for behavior among different actors from different classes in society. We might say that the language of Hammurabi is proscriptive, confirming the state of affairs as is and as must be, while that of the *Instruction* is prescriptive, recommending a course of behavior. We have in making this point switched kingdoms and cultures, moved from Middle Kingdom Egypt to Babylon several hundred years later, but can persist cogently with our inquiry, into the concept and pursuit of selfhood long before the periods of imaginative creativity made familiar to us by the Greeks, and especially Roman. We are still concerned with normative behavioral rules for behavior within society.

As a divinely descended ruler Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.) believed his law code to have been handed down to him by a succession of divine order givers. His laws, inscribed in cuneiform letters on human sized basalt stelae, were found in Persia and consisted of 282 proscriptions—regulations and legislations--which if thought out to their implications could form the basis of a Constitution, but which as presented to their reader were take it or leave it statements about offences 'in connection with property, marriage, divorce, adoption, purchase and sale, loans, dismissal, calmumny, corrupt jurisdiction, theft, receiving stolen goods, robbery and kidnapping, plundering, burglary, murder, prices and wages, and much more, each with its respective punishment.' (H.-Dieter Viel, I, p. 9). The tenor of the laws is

harsh and firm: punishments by death are frequent, and cautionary examples like injudicious rulings from the bench, or false accusations of witchcraft, are punished as severely as murder itself—in each of these cases by death.

196. If a man destroy the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye.

127. If a man point the finger at a priestess or the wife of another and cannot justify it, they shall drag that man before the judges and they shall brand his forehead.

6. If a man steal the property of a god (Temple) or palace, that man shall be put to death; and he who receives from his hand the stolen (property) shall also be put to death.

Hammurabi's laws are in the if/then or casuistic mode, except for the beginning and concluding laws, which are apodeictic, and simply state that 'you must do this or you must not do that.' None of these laws include their own legal foundations; so that, although Hammurabi's laws show potential as the basis of a Babylonian Constitution, they skip the nicety of explaining on what foundations they rest. In that, these laws resemble not only a number of Mesopotamian law-codes more or less contemporary with that of Hammurabi, but resemble in great detail the admonitions of the Mosaic Law Code (*Exodus* 21-23), which is incorporated in Judaeo-Christian theology.

What kind of view of selfhood is implicit in the Law Code of Hammurabi? We have spoken of the language as proscriptive. The individual is the target of each law, exemptions and favors null and void. The self of the individual, who is covered by Hammurabi's Law Code, is subordinate to the laws themselves, is an actor living out the principles encoded in the Laws—and not much else. (Once again, we are not sure what the *authority* of the Laws is: is it a *Diktat* of the ruler, or a distillate of practice, come to the formulation point by the maturing of a society?) Does the individual have a formative role in the making of these laws? The *Instructios for Merikare* is full of advice for the formative self; the Laws of Hammurabi are regulators of behavior, established to define and protect selfhood.

Readings: http://www.commonlaw.com/Hammurabi.html
The above website provides an easy access to Hammurabi's text. Gordon, Cyrus, *Hammurabi's Code: Quaint or Forward Looking?*
Maine, Henry Sumner, *Ancient Law; its connection to the History of Early Society*.
Meek, Theophile, 'The Code of Hammurabi,' pp. 155-178 in Pritchard/Fleming, *The Ancient Near East*..

Discussion Questions:

1 In the introduction we discussed the relatively sharp cultural breaks that separate us today from our Ancient Near Eastern ancestors. Did we exaggerate? After all the Mosaic Code, which pervades the liturgies of the Christian community, is in some respects closely kin to Hammurabi's code, which is itself widely interrelated to other Near Eastern Law Codes: the Code of {Ur-Nammu} (ca. 2050 BC); the Laws of Eshnunna {ca. 1930 BC}; and the codex of Lipit-Ishtar of Isin {ca. 1870 BC}. Later Codes include the Hittite and Assyrian Laws, and the Mosaic Law, to which we have referred above. Are *we* inheritors of the Code of Hammurabi?

2 We have discussed the kind of descriptive and apodeictic languages that Hammurabi uses. Does the author of this law code find his/its way toward a view of

the self? Is the quest of this language to find and thus establish the right-thinking self, who is the implicit understander of the propositions being enunciated here? Is there an implied self, of the reader of this law code?

3 Erudite studies (cf. David Wright, bibliography) have proposed a close historical co codes are subtly intertwined with religious precepts, and imply a concept of the distinctive value of the person?

MAN-GOD RELATIONSHIPS

Enuma Elish 1894-
1595 B.C.
(Babylonia)

This epic creation story is preserved on seven clay tablets and runs to a little over a thousand lines. The first discovery of the tablets was made in the Library of King Ashurbanipal (668-630 B.C.) between 1848-1876, and subsequent finds, throughout ancient Babylonia and from dealers in antiquities, have enabled scholars to restore what they take to be a nearly complete (but often hard to interpret) version of the original. The date of the original is hard to determine, because the complete version we have constructed is based on many earlier tablet examples. It is probable, in any case, that the original dates back to at least l500 B.C.

We want to consider the sense of selfhood and the nature of the person as it emerges through the cuneiform lines of this text, and at first our challenge seems insurmountable. We have here a text which is at many points unclear and partially pieced together again. (See the effort of Doria and Lenowitz, in *Origins*, pp. 182-236, bibliography, to make poetry of this text, and to honor it with a translation into English which 'counteracts' the difficulties of the poem by incorporating them). We also have a text which challenges our sensibilities as sharply as any text before us in this course—and thus to the finest point underscores the points made in the Introduction, about our cultural distance from Ancient Near Eastern writings. We need to make a cursory survey of the plot, which, though narrative in its way, a bumptious story for the modern Western ear. (It is because of this bizarre discordance, to the modern western ear, that we slow down for this mundane plot retelling. After plotting the line of the tale, we can venture to place the view of selfhood, which we find here, inside the larger thrust of the course.

The epic opens onto a time when nothing existed except the sweet water ocean and the salt water ocean and the mist rising up between them. These natural forces are personified as Ur- gods. Apsu and Tiamat are the names of the first two gods. This god pair begat a lively brood of Baby Boomer gods—including Enki, the god of magic and the master brain of the Mesopotamian divinities. The lesser gods made such a racket that Apsu decided to kill them, but instead—*he* was the master brain—Enki intervened to kill Apsu—he spared Tiamat—and to set himself and his wife up in a grand mansion. There they gave birth to Marduk, the supreme god to be, and the single hero of this entire epic, the figure whose radiance and splendor will dominate the remainder of the epic. (It will interest those familiar with early Greek cosmogony, as we find it in Hesiod, to compare the Kronos-Rhea, Ouranos-Gaia, Zeus-Hera sequence with the Babylonian: natural forces meld raucously into a humane personscape in the mythy generation of the cosmos. A conduit opens from the Ancient Near East to the Hellenic.)

On subsequent tablets we learn that Tiamat, seething at the destruction of her spouse, and spurred on by restless agitators, determines to avenge Apsu's death. Enki is informed of this threat, and goes to war against Tiamat, but in vain, and then,

equally vainly, sends his son Anu to try peaceful reconciliation with Tiamat. Again no luck. At this point Marduk appears willing to destroy Tiamat, is acclaimed by the gods in a rowdy festival, and assumes supreme power over heaven. In bloody battle, egged on by his cohorts, Marduk wipes out the forces of Tiamat—the primal order of things—and goes even farther, creating man out of the blood of the most fractious rebel against his authority. At this point the modern reader, eager to see the birth of a kind of *Genesis*/humanism, is startled to see the emphasis of the epic turn back onto Marduk, praising his astounding power. No attempt is made to conceptualize Marduk himself; the tale turns back into the mythical divine.

The intent of this summary is to chop away details, to avoid retelling. In so doing we leave out labyrinthine details of the bumptious and muscular behaviors of the gods, who are, we might say, stages of the cosmos' path to creating the greater disciplinary form that is mankind. But there is here no dwelling on that point, no self-discovery, by man, of supernal origins; rather a fierce return from man into the cosmic.

The disconnect between political/economic history and a text like the above, which is itself the consequence of a long history of scholarly retracking, and which refuses its own historical base while commenting on the whole human adventure, drives the interpreter back to the theme which dominates this course: the quest for and discovery of, the self, personhood. Who are the creators of a text like the present, and what do they want to say? Finally, what kind of language are they using to develop their point? And is it the language of the search for selfhood?

The origin of the text of the *Enuma Elish* is probably at least a millennium older than the date of the tablets we possess, and thus goes back into the founding efforts of the Babylonian State; in this case the effort to consolidate the supremacy of Marduk, as supreme god and ruler—and, conjecturally, as a model for the stability of the ruler of Babylon himself. The text was of course anonymous, but seems to have had a clear social function. The text—which was poetry, and rhythmic—was recited by the high priest before the central statue of Marduk, on the fourth day of the festival of the supreme god, and then again during that festival, for the express purpose of releasing the god from captivity. 'The chanting of the epic is here apparently intended as a magical aid in Marduk's deliverance from imprisonment,' (Heidel, bibliography, p. 16). Though we don't know exactly what this means, we can guess that the purpose was to protect Babylon against its enemies—as Tiamat was subdued by Marduk—and perhaps to ward off the threat of the annual flooding of the Tigris/Euphrates rivers. (Cf. Heidel's account—pp. 1-17--of these theories, and of the parallels between the origin accounts in *Enuma Elish* and *Genesis* in the Hebrew *Torah.* It appears that *Genesis* may have drawn its concern with the originating sky/water/mist thematic from a widespread Near Eastern cosmological perspective.

The language of this text deals in awe with events in the heavens, as did the Egyptian pyramid texts. Belief and hypothesis seem to blend in such language, where human destiny is sketching itself out across a long arc of suppositions. What do you feel eventually about the role of the human, Marduk's offering to his culture?

Is the language of this text a quest to isolate or refine the notion of the self? How we answer will depend on whether we are tempted to 'psychoanalyze' a text of such great antiquity and ritual rooting. From one perspective, at least, the *Enuma Elish* can be seen as an inquiry into the bloody throes of our human origins, and a reaffirmation of the power and violence of the elemental setting from which we set forth on life.

Readings:

Heidel, Alexander, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation.*
Origins: Creation Texts from the Ancient Mediterranean, edited and translated by Doria and Lenowitz, pp. 182-236.

Discussion Questions:

1 What is the role of the human in this epic by which the human labors to portray its own origins? (After all, one purpose of the creation of the epic seems to have been to protect the human community.) Does the human, as portrayed in this creative text, have the interests of the human at heart?

2 What do you think of the portrayal of the assembly of the gods, in the present text? You will notice that on two occasions the gods are rowdy and noisy. Do they seem to behave like incorrigible teen-agers? If so, how do you explain this? Are they forces of nature, turbulent and needing control? What relation do you see here between nature and culture? Is this universe ruled by values or only by forces?

3 What do you see as the 'motivation' behind a creation story like *Enuma Elish*? Has that motivation to do with what we are calling the language peculiar to the Man/God relationship? Does that language rise from increasingly sharp self-definition of the individual, who—as part of a growingly self-aware society—thereby longs to address the progenitors he finds inside himself, as well as longing to define his ultimate sense of dependence? If these seem to you plausible accounts of creation-tale establishment, how do you explain the rough god-level conflicts that surge brutally through the *Enuma Elish*? Is conflict in heaven the path to characterizing the struggles within the self, to give a compelling account of its path into social consciousness?

Torah 9th- 6th Cent. B.C. (Hebrew)

We opened our course with an introductory week, in which we negotiated with the provocative statement, that Greco-Roman and Hebrew cultures are the main reasons why we have trouble getting back to the world-view of the Ancient Near East. Our readings *in Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* probably reinforced our initial perspective, probing into what Frankfurt viewed as the pre-rational thinking of early Mesopotamia and Egypt. We are not now going to retrace the perspective of the first week, or reshape our broad inquiry into the expression and pursuit of selfhood in Ancient Near Eastern literature, but we are ready to add something in: that there is a corridor of intellectual 'traditions' working through the Ancient Near East, by way of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and flowing through obscure but unmistakable conduits into the earliest Jewish thought. The archaic posture of transcendence-worship, that move in language which generates the oriental credent posture of the Ancient Near Eastern religions, will in passing into the Hebraic cultural orbit emerge with a fresh humanism of perspective, one that we contemporary westerners can breathe with the sense of homecoming.

The Hebrew Book of *Genesis*, like much of the religious and legal material we have been reading, is a pastiche of text elements. Although the ancient tradition was that Moses was the author of the *Torah*—the *Pentateuch* or first five books of the Christian Old Testament, the 'law' to the Jews—that view has been disputed since the sixteenth century A.D. Textual critics have long pointed out discrepancies among different accounts within the *Torah*—discrepancies among different ways of describing certain events; Beersheba and Bethel are given their names twice, at different points both Abraham and Isaac try to pass off their wives as their sisters, at one point man is created before the other animals while elsewhere he is created

after them, and most importantly there are two different names for God (*Yahweh* and *Elohim*) and under those different names God behaves differently. Passed under the lens of German scholarship, in the nineteenth century—Graf and Wellhausen were decisive analysts here—the text of the *Pentateuch* is broken down into four finely interwoven strands deriving from differing traditions of different ages: the J (*Jahweh)* source, which stresses the constant involvement of God with his people, and which was written in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 9th century B.C.; the E (*Elohim*) source, which was written in the northern kingdom, in the 8th century, and which, stressing God's concern with his chosen people, and the good that can come out of evil, is tightly woven into the J source; the D source, from which come the laws of the book of *Deuteronomy*, and in general the prescriptive legalistic conception of Jewish responsibility; the P (priestly) source, deriving from the Jews' period of exile in the 6th century, and the origin of the poetic account of the creation of the world.

The *Torah* (*Pentateuch*) is thus a brilliantly composed pastiche of the Jewish people's records of survival in Canaan, the hotbed of competing Middle Eastern tribes under whose pressure and rivalry the Jews were fighting for their lives. The God of Israel, jealous, highly critical, partisan to his people when their obedience was firm, becomes a survival weapon on whom the Israelites rely for support. What has to amaze is that the resultant *Torah* text, the first text of this course which penetrates into our own culture-space today, survives with a single tone. Is that because we live the text of the *Torah*/*Pentateuch* as part of our own cultural practice—whether or not we are 'Judeo-Christian believers'—or is it because the text of these ancient Hebrew documents, which were composed at different dates themselves, have passed through a brilliant translation history that includes some of the finest literary achievements of (say) the English language? (The King James version of the 'Bible' was created under red hot creative circumstances as rare as those which earlier created the *Septuagint* {3rd century B.C.}--which brought the Hebrew scriptures over into Greek, and thus into the wider international climate in which they could create their audience.)

Whatever the answer, to the inner carrying power of these earlier Hebrew texts, the quest for realized selfhood is here formative and inspirational in a way we will hardly want to claim for the earlier (and much older) Ancient Near Eastern texts we have encountered. The language of the *Torah* is preoccupied with 'God,' of whom the very name is a Holy topic of treatment, and adorational in the highest degree. (What can we say of the language of the *Enuma Elish* or *The Book of the Dead*, in comparison with that of the Hebrew *Torah*?) The implicit 'self' of the Biblical narrator—for it is as though we can hear a single voice under the blended themes—is one of supplication, of laying the self on the line, or begging forgiveness for inevitable straying. That this is religious language proves itself by the fact; we are still living that language today, and even though we may not be credent, the language in which we pronounce our non-credence is inflected by the faith of its makers.

Readings:

Cohn-Sherbok*, Judaism: A Short History* Assman*, Of God and Gods.*
Wrigh*t, Inventing God's Law.*

1 With the Hebrew Creation myth—one among many Near Eastern Creation Myths—we cross the boundary dividing the archaic Near East from the Hebrew-Hellenic sweetness and light of which Matthew Arnold wrote, in *Culture and Anarchy (1868)*,

that they are the two bulwarks of our sanity and salvation. (Matthew Arnold is a key figure in defining off the Greco-Roman/Hebraic as our cultural signature in the West; his ideology perfected the assumptions of Victorian England about the splendor of the Classical Tradition, and the propriety of a class society which sustained that tradition.) Does it seem culturally logical, to you, that this text was the one to spearhead a religious movement which would 'find its way' into two (or perhaps three?) world religions in our time?

2 We have seen that the *Torah* (*Pentateuch*) is the product of blending, several different thematic strands from several
historical periods interwoven. One result of that construction process is that individual authorship is muted or invisible. Does that muting of the individual author seem to you predominant in the Ancient Near Eastern works we have been reading? Are there exceptions? The *Instruction for Merikare*? *Sinuh*e--ahead in Week Eleven? Do we know anything about the authors of those two texts? Does the by and large anonymous character, of the texts we have been reading, support the 'new view' of autobiography we have been developing? (The view that types of basic expression in language are already stages in the expression of self?)

3 What kind of autobiography is a creation story? In principle the creation story is the writing down, by a creator (a society, a gifted representative of the society), of the creation which brought a society into being. Thus the creation story is a kind of group meditation on how the group was created. Does the self-reflexive quality of the creation story mean that creation stories are basically efforts to come to grips with what a society is at a particular time? Do you see the traces of that kind of societal self-interest in *Enuma Elish* or the *Torah*?

FROM THE IMAGINATION

Gilgamesh 18th-7th Centuries, B.C.
(Babylonia)

If any text of Ancient Near Eastern *imagination* has crossed into the cultural mainstream of the Hebraic/Greco-Roman tradition, it is *Gilgamesh*, an Akkadian/Babylonian epic of 2900 lines, found on eleven clay tablets, dating in its most complete form to the seventh century B.C., and in that form best preserved in the Palace and Temple libraries of the ruler of Assyria, King Ashurbanipal (685-627 B.C.). (The oldest fragments of the text probably go back to the l8th century B.C., and a variety of versions stud the intervening centuries.) Six or seven other versions of the 'text' have been found in Iraq, but the epic itself been known to the world only for the last century and a half. This last reason could go far to explaining the partial *but only partial* incorporation of this epic into our literary canon, though a degree of cultural otherness, to which we referred in our Introduction, and which marks *Gilgamesh* as distant from the Greco-Roman/Hebraic, also plays a part in the difficulty of our access to this work. Famed though *Gilgamesh* is for its universal human values, and now internationally known and studied, the looming figures, the potent epic forces at work here remind us of another epic created nearer to our time, but equally 'strange,' *Beowulf.* The chief manuscript of *Beowulf* was destroyed in a fire in the early l8th century, and only introduced into our cultural awareness in 1815, thanks to the work of editors and scholars.

The epic of *Gilgamesh* 'concerns' certain exploits of an Assyrian king who flourished around 2700 B.C.*;* in other words we deal here with an historical figure of the—already at the time of the writing of the epic--distant past, a figure whose exploits are cast onto the screen of mythical thinking, and through whose destiny we rehearse

many of the profound rites of the human condition. (This text is more than a quest for selfhood; it is an exploration of the depths of the human condition: the meanings of friendship, the love of adventure, the fear of death and longing for immortality, the exhausting delights of lust.) These rites will make themselves clear to the reader as he/she passes through the reading of this small epic.

The notion of the self is already developed here, Gilgamesh being open to his world. The creator of this work—we are reading the most complete version available, dating from the first millennium B.C.-- is embedded in the progressive redaction and circulation of this poem, first put together in Old Babylonian, read throughout Mesopotamia for 1500 years, and, though probably restricted to the literate elite, nonetheless for a millennium serviceable as a vehicle of the cult of the hero, Gilgamesh.

Through many versions of the text Gilgamesh remains the perceiving center. From the start 'the hero' speaks to us from under a cloud—he is guilty of having mistreated the citizens of Uruk, oppressing the men, invoking the *droit du seigneur* with the women. To tame him the mother goddess creates Enkidu, a force of nature, mankind in the primitive state of oneness with nature 'before the fall.' This formulation of the nature-culture divide—which reminds us of the imagination of Jean Jacques Rousseau—enriches itself throughout the epic, as Gilgamesh ultimately joins Enkidu in close friendship, in searing adventures, and ultimately in the terrifying experience of his friend's death. Gilgamesh's consequent dread of death leads him to seek immortality, in classic encounter with the Ur-Noah, Utanapishtim, who has survived death, but who in the end cannot rescue Gilgamesh from the common fate.

From clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform, and broken repeatedly through the centuries, we inherit a text full of lacunae, which must be reconstructed in places or left for lost, depending on the judgment of the editor. The text with which we are left—cf. photo on p. xviii of Kovacs, below in Readings—acquires (modern taste speaking here) a certain additional power and archaic depth from the stark brokenness of the tale. (Accidents of preservation become, on this view, part of the narrative itself; we will see, in the work of Week 14, that powerful modern poetry has been created capitalizing on the tormented state of the *Gilgamesh* narrative.) The search for selfhood, which drives Gilgamesh, replicates itself in the tenacity with which 'scholars' have struggled, for over a century, to reconstruct these eleven tablets, on which some of the boldest human self-analyses are worked through.

Reading:

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Translated, with an introduction, by Maureen
Kovacs Ziolkowsi, *Gilgamesh Among Us*.

Discussion Questions:

1 The German/Swiss philosopher/psychologist, Carl Jung, established an influential theory of archetypes, pervasive and repetitive patterns of human psychology, which dominate the deeper strata of our mental life; one of his followers, Maud Bodkin, transferred his basic concept into the study of literature, and of the archetypes to which great works of literature give expression. It is plausible to view the major themes of *Gilgamesh*—the love/friendship relationship, the quest for immortality, the heroic defeat of the monster-giant, the vulnerability to the sexual passion—as examples of such archetypal patterns, by which masterpieces from world literature can reveal certain interrelationships. What do you think of this idea of Bodkin's, and how explanatory do you find it, for a text like *Gilgamesh?*

2 Human themes are deeply plumbed—as we imply in the first question, above—in *Gilgamesh*, and in that searching, universal sense we require of the great world classics of epic—the works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton in the West. Do you *feel* that *Gilgamesh* is a work embedded in an historical situation, and expressing group memory and attitude, or do you *feel* you are dealing with an individual creator's work? Whichever *feeling* you have, can you support it with some hard evidence? If not, why not?

3 Utanapishtim, Humbaba, Innana, Enkidu: in these 'minor characters' *Gilgamesh* displays what at first sight seems almost a novelist's skill at perception and depiction. Have these 'characters' that concrete universal richness which brings, say, a Shakespearean character (Falstaff? Hamlet?) to unanalyzable life? Or are these figures in archaic epic more nearly abstractions, representing distinctive *roles* in the human condition?

FROM OUR TIME

Ancient Near Eastern Life Writing Today 20th Century A.D.

Charles Olson (1910-1970), American poet, critic, and rethinker of culture, shared the sense we aired in our introduction, that The Archaic Near East—he thought chiefly in terms of Sumeria—was alive with energies that were essentially end stopped with the advent of the Indo-European, the cultural explosion the West dates from the middle of the second millennium, the coming-in which brings with it the early Helladic cultures, the period of the first Hebrew self-definition, in short the Greco-Roman/ Hebraic world we have been discussing. He puts it thus, saying that the story of this Indo-European coming

is an incredibly accurate myth of what happens to the best of men when they lose touch with the primordial & phallic energies & methodologies which, said this predecessor people of ours, make it possible for man, that participant thing, to take up, straight, nature, live nature's force.

Olson builds out, in a series of small books and 'letters'—The *Mayan Letters, A Special View of History,* the *Letter to Elaine Feinstein* (1959)—and in a great many poems with 'Sumerian' myth-content, an aesthetic and a body of poetry which privilege what he calls the 'post-modern.' Olson's take on that much played with term, is essentially the 'anti-Renaissance,' that in our cultural heritage which rebuts the Greco-Roman (and less the Christian-Hebraic), and its assumptions of humanism, rationalism, and symmetry. For Olson, the true source of our power is the Ancient Near Eastern, especially the Sumerian tradition, with its mythical thinking—remember the discussion in Frankfurt, in Week One?—and its freshness:

I am talking from a new 'double axis': the replacement of the Classical-representational by the primitive-abstract …I mean of course not at all primitive in that stupid use of it as opposed to civilized. One means it now as 'primary,' as how one finds anything, pick it up as one does new--fresh/first.

What Olson finds, as he makes his way back to the Pleistocene, is Sumer, arguably the oldest creative culture in Mesopotamia, and what he wants to make of that new fresh/first, is the building block of a new view of Humanity, for which the Mayans, with their astronomical based religion, their massive worship of the object in architecture, their planting of man directly in nature and going with the gut, when it comes to myths of the human, for which the Mayans, and then the Sumerians vie as sources. The

underlying drive in Olson is toward what he sees as the ritual/mythical space of archaic consciousness.

Olson is one of a number of American thinkers who plough this archaic ground in our time. Predictably the authors in question, fiction writers as well as poets, are not on the whole 'mainstream' writers; with the possible exception of John Gardner, whose *Sunlight Dialogues* (1972) transpose the conflict between post-modern and modern to local fictional struggles in Batavia, New York. (For more details on the 'fictional' side of this effort, cf. the article by Maier and Ghassemi, in bibliography.) Two more efforts in poetry, to prioritize the Archaic, will enrich our brief remarks on Charles Olson.

Armand Schwerner, in *The Tablets (I-XV)* (1971), springs mythical-poetic language loose from a supposed 'translation' of clay tablets such as *Gilgamesh* or the *Enuma Elish* were inscribed into. The ruse/joke/proclamation battens on the breakage-power of a simulated script recovery; one feels the brittle clay under the lacunae. A few lines from Tablet II—note that + signs mean *missing* while …. sequences mean *untranslatable:*

4. they are dry scales +++++++?)
5. on the inside their scales are wet (moist?)
6. they are empty holes; why do they walk and walk?
7. the +++++++++++++children eat+++++++++strings and pieces 8.
the empty children run in {their} patterns (shoes)
9. the pig
(god?)waits………………fish-death.
10. the children……………

See how this fits the Olson theme? What we want –says this post-modern aesethetic—is to force ourselves to experience the fresh/new once again in the sterterous remaking of a mythical world. The Archaic Near East is a living museum of such fractured harmonies.

The third text to mention is *Origins,* a collection of creation texts from the Ancient Near East. This volume is edited by scholar poets—Charles Doria and Harris Lenowitz—who like
Olson and Schwerner work by transposing rough pre-translated versions of Ancient Near Eastern—Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hebrew—creation myths into a free field contemporary English which (they believed) replicated something of the lacuna-studded, syntactically alien, and relatively 'pictographic' quality of both hieroglyphs and cuneiform. *The Book of the Dead* translation starts out this way:

I am (bowl lord all fluid owl) ATUM completing-rising of
all The only one
In Nun/chaos-fluid/

I am RA
(sitting hawk-head resting cobra-cock circling Sun Disk)
in first (lotus papyrus acres starting up Horushawk
handgiving) I ruled this
He did

The hacking out of a new American poetic is at work in this language, which was taking part in the efforts of American English, in a Sixties full of revaluation, to freshen and strengthen itself. The influence of Ezra Pound was stark in here, as were the vehicle journals—Robert Bly's *The Sixties*, Frederic Will's *Micromegas*, Jerome

Rothenburg's *Alcheringa*—which fostered and moved forward this daring adventure in scholarly creativity.

The post-modern, as understood by the American writers we reference, here, is only loosely the post-modern under construction in the work of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, a post-modern which superimposes a simultaneous self-scrutiny onto the expressions of the human, which calls into question, in act, the way mankind constructs its universe of values. In common to the two uses of postmodern— Olsonian and Derridean—would be the calling into question of the Humanist/Capitalist/Exploitative of which we see the very origins in the Renaissance.

Ancient and archaic! How sharply those terms wrestle each other to the ground, how sweetly fresh and new rings the word *archaic*, in which are connoted the angularities of a Sumerian epic, a Pharaonic temple, or a Babylonian code of laws. The self we find awaiting us, in the forests of that new archaic storage house of myths, is the pre-technical, pre-rational *mythopoeticus* Frankfurt hints at, and that we create out of our need for a way out into the new *heilig*.

Readings:

Article by Maier/Ghassemi in bibliography.
Charles Olson: *A Special View of History*; *Letter to Elaine Feinstein*; *The Mayan Letters*; the poems 'La Chute' and 'La Chute (II) in *Selected Poems*.
Armand Schwerner, *The Tablets I-XV.*
Doria and Lenowitz*, Origins: Creation Texts from the Ancient Mediterranean.*

Discussion Questions:

1 In so far as you grasp Olson's archaic aesthetic, to what Archaic Near Eastern texts that we read do you consider it most applicable? (That question has been before us, actually, since reading Frankfurt, in Week One, for there, too, it was a question of working our ways back to the pre-causal, mythopoetic mind.) Would *Gilgamesh* and the *Enuma Elish* and the *Torah* all be examples of this archaic turn of mind that seems so liberating to Olson? Or—because none of these texts is Sumerian—would we need to look elsewhere, especially into Sumerian mythology, for examples of the sensibility Olson admires?

2 What view of the self do Olson, Schwerner, the creators of *Origins* value, in the archaic poetry they relish? Remember, in thinking this through, that for Olson there are a number of turning points into Humanism—early Greek culture, the Renaissance—from which the energy of the archaic leaches. It is at such points that we see the humane-sentimental replacing the geometrical-cosmic-mythical-mind-frame, the archaic perspective of the pre-classicals and the Mayans. Does this view of the self express itself in the poetry the Olsonians both write and value? Do you think that technology, which a century ago was saluted as the advent of a new non-Humanism, has any affiliations with the Archaic that Olson and company admire?

Paper

1 What conception of historical knowledge do you bring into this class, and how do you feel about the topic as you proceed into fairly remote waters, like those of the Ancient Near East? Can we 'know' what life and culture were like from the inside, in a period of humanity which precedes ours by five thousand years? Is it a myopic illusion to suppose that with the optic of our own time we can see into that distant form of life? Can you pick some examples of the feasibility of knowing the past from your own experience? Some instances where you found out that what you thought

to have been true in the past was either untrue or true? Could you extrapolate from that close-up personal instance, to the issue of knowing the writings of the Ancient Near East?

2 The law code of Hammurabi is one of several codes established in Mesopotamian culture. (Hittite, Assyrian, and the Mosaic code are outstanding examples; each of these bears striking detailed resemblances to Hammurabi's Old Babylonian code.) By nature law codes are composed with an impersonal narrator—either because they are collective products or because their creator (this may have been the case with Hammurabi's code) prefers to leave the impression that the laws are inscribed by God into the nature of things. (Do the laws current in your own country come with the stamp of a particular creator on them?) Does the code of Hammurabi seem to you to embody a search for the nature and expression of selfhood? Does the hypothetical individual, for whom the code is constructed, seem to you a representative of mankind in general, a citizen of Babylon, or the creator of the code itself, trying to work through in mind the possibilities of outcomes for different states of affairs in his society?

3 We are tracking the conception and presentation of selfhood, through the texts of our course. We have entitled the course 'Autobiography,' but with a shaping of that term which has *diverged* from the classical conception of the autobiography--the account, by an integrated ego, of major events in his/her life, plus appropriate 'interpretations' of what all this means. (Gandhi's *Autobiography*, that of Nelson Mandela, that of Goethe.) *Divergence* is an understatement, here, and yet there is a case to be made for the extension of the term 'autobiography,' which means a life-writing by the 'self' (the *autos*, or third person pronoun, in Greek.) Writing can be of many sorts—and as we have seen in this course even hieroglyphic and cuneiform forms of writing have been influential media for communicating humans' feelings and hopes—as in the *Pyramid Texts* or the *Code of Hammurabi.* Do you feel comfortable with including the self-expressions of Ancient Near Eastern literature with the traditional western concept of autobiography?

4. Are you comfortable with the notion of selfhood as the leading theme of the group of texts we have read? Does the quest for the discovery and expression of selfhood dominate the texts that we have been reading? Conceive the human adventure of the Ancient Near East as a powerful dynamic in the lengthy process that leads from the Neolithic Age, with its tools and inscriptions and rudimentary social formations, through to the classical Greek world that derived from Near Eastern culture in the Mycenaean Period! Can you in that historical optic begin to see freshly the role of the Ancient Near East in leaving room for the development of a sense of self?

5. Do you appreciate the historical thinking that moves by vast typological leaps, embracing a handful of key documents, as we have done, and inviting you to see a whole in which they 'fit.?' Is it appropriate to *select out* so much 'historical packing,' and to believe that you can catch the essence of several millennia? Is this a rational process of thought, or a kind of academic/poetic mind-mapping? What is the goal of the study of 'history'? Is it, as Nietzsche said, to provide value for mankind in the present, or is it to make aesthetic wholes out of the fragments of human history?

6. The material conditions of writing, in the period considered in this course, exercised a great influence on the signatures left there by the self. Both hieroglyphic carving and cuneiform inscribing in clay were cumbersome and time consuming practices, but there was no alternate in the West until the wide use of papyrus in Egypt began to dominate the art of the scribe. What effect do you suppose these ancient writing practices had, on the expression of selfhood? Beyond that, what was the effect of writing in hieroglyphs of either the Old Kingdom pictorial form or in the later cursive forms of the New Kingdom? What kind of *writing* got produced in this way?

7. In the last two weeks of class we turned to self-reflective issues, emerging in our own time, concerning the archaic human past and its uses. We looked at a new poetics concerned with tracking the archaic sensibility as reconstructed in language. We looked at efforts to reconstruct a cultural past far more archaic than what we had been calling 'archaic.' We played with the idea

of plunging into the historical depths of the human, and ausculting the *autos* even there. What do you think of such an extension of the notion of 'autobiography,' and indeed of the slippery slope adopted throughout this course, in which we chew away at the (to us) quite traditional conception of the autobiography?