

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*Autobiography and Selfhood in the Ancient Near East*

## Course Description

Ancient Near Eastern Autobiography explores first-person narratives in the Near East, with a focus on ancient narratives that include Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

## About the Professor

This course was developed by Frederick Will, Ph.D., professor emeritus from the University of Iowa.

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*Autobiography and Selfhood in the Ancient Near East; Self-presentation in writing, signatures of the self (the autos), the techniques of personal identity*

*The course will be sixteen weeks. There will be three written assignments: 1000 word papers Weeks 5 and 10, a 3,000 word paper in Week 16. Any of the discussion questions, which follow each week's introductory material, can serve as material for the papers to be written; or the discussion questions may simply be there to promote thinking about the week's assignment. Weeks 5, 10, and 16 offer detailed suggestions for written topics. It is recommended that you start early in the course plotting out the topics you will use for your three papers. You will note that three weeks of the course are devoted to paper writing; thus there is a stress on written work. That written work will be the place where you display your research concerns, your originality, and your personal thoughts. You might want to consider keeping a diary of your reflections on the course.*

*Texts: There is no single text which includes all the readings for this course. However there are four texts, listed in the bibliography, which would guide you through most of the course; they are the Egyptian literature anthology by John Foster, the selection of Near Eastern texts in Pritchard and Fleming, and the two histories by van de Mieroop. A number of works—like Hammurabi's Code or Maine's Ancient Law—are available online. Otherwise a visit to a research Library should easily and quickly fill the gaps.*

### Week One **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*, 5<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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 reevaluation of those difficulties.

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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' *autobiographies* 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* (21<sup>st</sup> 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*, (1995 B.C.) , *Gilgamesh* (18<sup>th</sup> cent.-7<sup>th</sup> 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, 1947).

*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**

Week Two ***The Instruction for Merikare*** 21<sup>st</sup> cent. B.C.  
(Egypt)

We turn to a small example of poetry from the Early Middle Kingdom in Egypt, instructions of a war-and-experience-tested King of Herakleopolis-- to his son, Merikare. We are in the twenty-first century B.C. The papyrus from which we work has many lacunae, especially at the crucial beginning. We have to guess at the identity of the writer, the precise events to which he is directing the younger man (his son), and the larger geopolitical situation in question here; we grasp little except that there was incessant border fighting to the east of the Kingdom of Egypt, and tension amounting to Civil War between the North and South of Egypt. We know too that the neighboring kingdom of Thebes was to defeat and swallow up Herakleopolis not long after the writing of the present text. The vague broader outlines of this entire situation are that the Monarchies of the Old Kingdom (2664-2155 B.C.) were at the time of *Merikare* giving way to a decentralization which was diminishing their power, and that they were coping with a serious separation between the Kingdom of the North and that of the South. Many small scale conflicts were breaking out throughout Egypt, and both war and peace had become necessary survival skills. The

elites, rulers and writers and scribes, were under pressure to take charge of their lives.

The set of instructions before us could in some sense be from any age—the age of Pliny, of Lord Chesterfield. Merikare’s father urges him, in the beginning, to crack down on dissenters and rabble rousers—‘a quarrelsome man, one that createth two factions among the youth’; and to wipe out their names, but at the same time, a few characters later, the son is told that ‘a good disposition is a man’s heaven.’ ‘A man should do that which profiteth his soul.’ In essence, these two essential points—be on your guard against the enemy, but keep your soul as pure as you can—are the core of the entire set of instructions. Were our assignment to summarize the contents of early Egyptian literature, we would have moved on rapidly to the next week’s assignment. Our assignment, however, is to penetrate the sense and pursuit of selfhood in this first text of our course. It will be appropriate, while doing this, to look into the nature of literary production and inscription that brought the present fragmentary piece to our attention, after millennia of hazards.

Observations on life, anecdotes from the narrator’s past, universal wisdoms about the importance of goodness and the damage done by cruelty to neighbors and the weak: all these moves in language establish here a kind of Kingly paternal atmosphere. Father offers advice of various kinds: watch for traitors, be merciful, hone your skills with the word, for therein lies your strength, keep your mind on the eternal realm in which you will one day be a participant, treat high officials with respect but don’t underestimate the value of the ordinary man in sustaining the state. The selves of the king and of his son are blended together in this hortatory discourse, which comes ‘from on high’ except for cunningly hidden mention—p. 202, Foster—of the ‘monumental evil’ the father had caused. His destruction of the nome of Thinis serves the narrator as a reminder of how dreadful it is to destroy what has been laboriously built up. This reference gives the whole exhortation a sizzling dimension, and (we have to imagine) builds the narrator into the thrilled attention of his son. The self of the father is unfolded into a dramatic self-presentation, to which his son is urged to direct his attention.

This exhortation to discipline and game plan makes much of the *word*, and the importance of using the *word* well. The readings in Erman’s introduction, below, will help you appreciate the nature of writing at this time in Egyptian history, the importance of the scribe, and the kinds of documents of the word remaining to us on papyrus, stelae, and monuments. At the very beginning of writing, the *word* is being distinguished as a source of power and precision, while in our age, as we near the ‘end of writing,’ we begin to lose our faith in the word.

Readings: (For this week, and the remainder of the course, text references will be to works cited in the bibliography, where you will be able to retrieve the full data on each work).

Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. xxiii-lxi.

*The Instruction for King Merikare*, pp. 75-84

*The Instruction for Merikare* in Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 191-203.

Parkinson, R.B., *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt*, pp. 248-57.

Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*. pp. 1-26, Introductory Concerns. (This text by van de Mieroop, and his *History of the Ancient Near East*, are easily available and essential background resources for this whole course.)

Discussion and Reflection Questions:

- 1 Does the father-son relationship assume an intimate familiar tone in the *Instruction for Merikare*? May I guess that the answer is something like: yes, though the tone is military behavioral and not intimate, still it seems to be paternal. May I think back then to the point of our introduction, which was that there is a major cleavage in meaning and cultural assumptions between the literatures of the Ancient Near East and those that melt into the Greco-Roman Tradition.? If that point is valid—is it?—are you suspicious of the seeming closeness we feel toward the voice speaker of the *Instructions*?
- 2 There is debate about whether the Egyptians, as early as the Middle Kingdom, had a sense of historical self-awareness. They seem not to have had 'historians' in any sense of erudite and informed students of their national past. It was not until the time of Manetho ( 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. B.C.) that a 'History of Egypt' was written. Do you note the historical references made by the narrator from within *The Instruction for Merikare*? Do you think that historical self-consciousness is related to the personal self-awareness we are tracking through archaic literatures? What do you think of the idea that what we have in this week's reading is wisdom literature rather than an historical perspective?
- 3 Does the language in which the present text works strike you as behavior-descriptive, to continue with the tripartite language distinction we started with? Is it evident that we are not dealing with religious or imaginal language? Is it, by the way, acceptable to you that we use the hermeneutical principle of three different self-presenting languages as our working principle in this course?

Week Three ***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, calumny, 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 connection between Hammurabi's law code and the Mosaic law. Does this seem to you a plausible connection? Do the Ten Commandments have their roots in a broad tradition of Ancient Near Eastern law codes? If so, would you say that law codes are subtly intertwined with religious precepts, and imply a concept of the distinctive value of the person?

## MAN-GOD RELATIONSHIPS

Week Four ***Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin Texts*** 2350-2150 B.C. (Egypt)

We have made a distinction between proscriptive (Hammurabi) and prescriptive (*Merikare*) language, in the preceding week's work. This week we turn to the kinds of text which dominated Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, texts intended to describe, propitiate, and track the movements of the Gods. We will be looking at a variety of texts, ranging from ancient Sumerian and Babylonian to Egyptian literature both of the Old and the New Kingdoms, and including the Hebrew text of the creation (*Genesis*). Can we say that, in these religious texts designed to deepen and control the man-god relationship, there is a predominant sense of awe, and thus a prevailing language of adoration, wonder and fascination, as the creature attempts to assure himself/herself in the immensity of his/her created setting?

The oldest religious texts from Egypt, and arguably the oldest recorded texts, were the Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin texts, the former from the end of the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 B.C.), the latter from the early Middle Kingdom (2055-1650). The former of these texts, the oldest, were inscribed as hieroglyphs on the walls of the tombs of Old Kingdom Pharaohs, to provide encouragement and instructions for the journey into the next world. The latter, in many ways maintaining the texts and attitudes of the prayer makers of the Old Kingdom texts, differ primarily in their use by the 'general educated public,' those who wanted to inscribe *their* spells too on their permanent resting place. The coffin spells were painted in vertical columns—thus were much less costly and time consuming to set down than the carved inscriptions of the Old Kingdom.

From a Pyramid text addressed to Nut, the sky-goddess:

Make this Pepi a spirit-soul in thee, let him not die.  
 O Great Lady, who didst come into being in the sky, who are mighty,  
 Who dost make happy, and dost fill every place (or being), with thy beauty,  
 The whole earth is under thee, thou hast taken possession of it.  
 Thou hast encompassed the earth, everything is in thy two hands,  
 Grant thou that this Pepi may be in thee like an imperishable star... (Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, p. 19).

There are several thousand of these Pyramid texts and coffin spells, and you are asked to read a representative sampling. (The examples in Foster, *Ancient Egyptian*

*Literature*, pp. 70-93, will give you a 'modernized' reading, some of it very moving, some fierce, like the text for King Unis of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in the Old Kingdom—a text celebrating the King's power to cannibalize his lesser rivals, during his passage into the next world; some, like the Coffin Text from the Middle Kingdom on p. 91, in which the departed is given power to rise by the Four Winds, 'deceptively translatable into the 'poetry of the afterlife,' as in

These winds have been offered me by the Maidens:  
 The East Wind is she who raises the lashes of seeing;  
     Discloses dawn,  
         Makes glittering way for the footstep of God  
 When he strides over eastern horizon.  
     Oh, let Re hold fast to my arm,  
     Place me there in his field,  
         At peace among rushes  
 There leave me eating and drinking forever,  
     Blessed by Osiris and Seth.  
 She is the breath of life, the East Wind,  
     Offered to me  
         And through her I live.

You only need to look at the two translations offered above—by Budge and Foster respectively—to see that translation is a key factor in the kind of access we have to these archaic spells, and that the kind of language on which we are carried here is as genre-specific when it comes to religious texts as it is in texts conveying 'the law,' like those with which we started. The texts concerning law and manners led us to terms like 'prescriptive' or 'proscriptive,' but what kind of language will we call that of the Pyramid and Coffin texts? An effective answer to this question could help us organize the readings that lie ahead for us in this course--the language of 'religion,' and finally that of the 'creative imagination.'

The 'language' of the Pyramid texts is 'adorational' or 'imprecatory,' drawing attention to the awesomeness of the human condition and to the aligning of the self to that condition. (In this latter function, obviously, there will be a fine line between religious and some poetic language—though not the kind of poetic language we find below in Week Thirteen, under 'love poetry.')

The character of the search for selfhood, in diverse forms of language, will accordingly differ. In the languages of law and manners, with which we began, the self is treated as embedded in the realized settings of social protocol, and as requiring direct address in that setting. In the languages of religion—to make a massive general step—the self is sought in the arc of its aspirations, the trajectories it performs in prayer, spell, or royal itinerary. The self sought in this performative language exists as a permanent condition of discovery.

Readings:

Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 64-91.  
 Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 9-24.  
 Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 1-18.  
 Van de Mierop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 81-83.

Discussion Questions:

1 We opened with an introduction to the distance of Ancient Near Eastern Literature from the sensibility of the literatures of the Greco-Roman and Hebraic traditions. Yet in the discussion of the different kinds of language, with which the archaic texts address their subject matters, are we not assuming some similarity between that archaic language process and that of our own time; some continuity of relation between subject and the kind of language we address to it? Are we thereby undermining the thesis of the gap between archaic and Greco-Roman Hebraic traditions?

2 What kind of view of the self is implicit in the notion of establishing a coffin text or spell to guide you in the next world? Does such a practice bespeak confidence in the rightness and harmony of the universe? We have mentioned the affiliation of religious Man/God language with adorational posture, which relies on God's benign intentions and aid. Is there some contradiction between the precautious attitude of the spell maker and the trusting attitude of the believer with his/her faith? Or is the notion of 'faith' not appropriate, so far as you can tell, to the texts you are reading?

3 What is the importance of the difference between hieroglyphs carved into stone pyramid walls, and texts written onto papyrus and intended for inclusion in the deceased's coffin? (The physical difference itself is evident; though skilled scribes are required for both kinds of memorial—and the scribe occupied a high and respected role in Egyptian society—one act was almost sculptural, while the other was scriptural.) Is the importance of the difference that in one case the scribe promotes a lasting eternity of soul-mapping, while in the other the script writer/painter creates a move in an ongoing narrative?

#### Week Five First 1000 word 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 Does the *Instruction for Merikare* resonate with you as appropriate father/son advice for our day? What part of this instruction seems to you most clearly to be applicable 'today'? A propos of that response, are you on board with the idea that there are distinctive kinds of language along which we can divide up the products of a culture? Do the languages used by 'Hammurabi' and the 'father of Merikare' seem to you related to each other, at least when counterposed against the spell language of a coffin text? Does the distinction among these 'different kinds of language' come down to distinctive types of intention? That is, is there a profound difference between what the author of a coffin text aims to accomplish, and that which Merikare's father wants to accomplish?

Week Six ***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 1500 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 mythic 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?

Week Seven ***Egyptian Book of the Dead*** 1550 B.C.-30 B.C. (Egypt)

We are already familiar with some of the magic and heaven-mappings of Pyramid spells, Week Four, but with the Book of the Dead we come to a far vaster assemblage, a long text dating back to the first dynasties (thus including the Pyramid texts and the Coffin texts) but enlarged and enriched right through to the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty (664-525 B.C.), and in fact ultimately to the end of the Ptolemaic period (30 B.C.). In its most recent versions, this long text of 192 spells was a prized tomb or coffin ornament for the upper classes as well as the rulers, and in the later period—Middle Kingdom through to the Ptolemaic period--many well to do citizens attended to hiring professional papyrus scribes who could paint them their own copies and even their own versions of this guide to the next world. (With the 18th dynasty--1550-1295--it became the custom to write the *Book of the Dead* on rolls of papyrus, which were included in private tombs, with the corpse, and not inscribed either on

temple walls or on sacrophagi. Thus the portability of these texts was enhanced, and their use made easier. We move into an era of what has been called the 'democratization of the holy.') We will see that the text of the Book itself, of which there are four extant versions, is built up from textual accretions of two millennia, going back at least to the 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty (2345-2181 B.C.), and perhaps to pre-dynastic Egypt, a mysterious world about which we have limited (and no written) testimony. But throughout, whether in hieroglyphic or papyrus form, whether relevant only to the Pharaoh, who was surrounded by the Book inscribed onto his tomb walls, or democratized into a text the prominent could have tailor-copied for themselves, and laid on their corpses, the text was a community-constructive textbook of life on the edge, a guide book to passing through the Underworld, and over the edge into the geographies, hazards, and judgments of the next world.

The spells collected in the *Book of the Dead* are word itineraries to be repeated (like the Catholic rosary, the komboloia of Greek Orthodox tradition, the Islamic *misbaha*) in a particular physical setting—frequently in the process of 'telling the beads' of some mantra-promoting prayer object. A typical papyrus written prayer, for instance, segues into the command that the prayer should be 'said over a green stone scarab set in a band of *tchamu* metal (i.e. silver-gold) which is to be hung from the neck of the deceased.' (Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, p. 50). Instructions for an early word-itinerary can be most specific. Here, for example, is the instruction for activating spell 134:

*To be spoken over a falcon standing with the White Crown on his head; [Atum](#), [Shu](#) and [Tefnut](#), [Geb](#) and [Nut](#), [Osiris](#) and [Isis](#), [Seth](#) and [Nephthys](#) being drawn in ochre on a new bowl placed in the sacred barque, together with an image of this spirit (*ba*) whom you wish to be made worthy, it being anointed with oil. Offer to them incense on the fire and roasted ducks, and worship Ra. It means that he for whom this is done will voyage and be with Ra every day in every place he desires to travel, and it means that the enemies of Ra will be driven off in very deed. A matter a million times true.*

*Book of the Dead, spell 134*

Two of the actual spell itineraries may give the flavor of this distinctive language of going-beyond:

*Words spoken by Ani: 'O you Soul [*ba*], greatly majestic, behold, I have come that I may see you; I open the Netherworld that I may see my father Osiris and drive away darkness, for I am beloved of him. I have come that I may see my father Osiris and that I may cut out the heart of Seth who has harmed my father Osiris. I have opened up every path which is in the sky and on earth, for I am the well-beloved son of my father Osiris. I am noble, I am a spirit [*akh*], I am equipped; O all you gods and all you spirits [*akhu*], prepare a path for me.*

*Book of the Dead, spell 9.*

The spell will be repeated regularly throughout the individual's life on earth, as a static insurance policy against the unknown, specifically against the much dreaded dissolution of the body, which all efforts—different versions of mummification—are devoted to preventing.

*May I have power in my heart, may I have power in my arms, may I have power in my legs, may I have power in my mouth, may I have power in all my members may I have power over invocation-offerings, may I have power over water ... air ... the waters ... streams ... riparian lands ... men who would harm me ... women who would harm me in the realm of the dead ... those who would give orders to harm me upon earth.*

*Book of the Dead, spell 68.*

The itinerary of the soul (*ba*—free ranging spirit of the dead person; *ka*—life-force of the individual) through the *Duat* (Underworld) is fraught with obstacles, monsters, evil demons, deadly toxins, and leads eventually to a meeting with the supreme judge (Osiris, Ra). No care can be too great in view of the judgments studding the way, and particularly the ultimate *Weighing of the Heart*, by which the Supreme Judge evaluates the moral purity of the candidate for immortality.

The word 'spell' suggests the ritual language which drives the Egyptian texts for survival. A central premise of ancient Egyptian practice is that language is identical with what it names, and thus can affect, even change, what it names. (This is an assumption deep in verbal prayer, despite the admonitions, of the modern monotheisms, to consider prayer a *vehicle*.) Noting this, we note the special turn we are now able to give, to our perspective onto the language of the Man-God relationship in the Ancient Near East. The spells of the *Book of the Dead* are practices in mind-mapping, and, like the data generated by a good GPS device, are only as good as the spatial diagrams they represent. For the ancient Egyptian the 'next world' is in no sense a metaphor, but is a 'realm' in which no apologies are made for the physicality of the décor. Telling it like it is is the only way to make 'it' perform for you as you wish.

Readings:

Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 37-66.

Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Read enough—30 pages?-- to see the syntactical patterns, and to appreciate the kind of narrative flow that reigns here.)  
Frankfort, Henri, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*.

Discussion Questions:

1 Is the kind of future-realm mapping language of *The Book of the Dead* like the prayer languages of 'modern' monotheisms? *The Book of the Dead* exists as language of which we might want to say, today, that it enables the self to discover the itinerary set out for it. Do Christian or Muslim orthodoxy, for example, propose prayer systems which create or which discover reality? Are their prayer systems parts of ways to discover ultimate reality, or are they creators of that reality?

2 Please reflect on our considerations of language in this syllabus. We have proceeded on the assumption that the ways we use language are the ways we *are*; a useful but certainly arguable description of what being human in the world involves. (Would you yourself argue with that conception?) Are you comfortable with the distinction between the language of manners/social rules and the language of 'religion.' Can you look ahead in thought, and consider the plausibility of a language peculiar to creations of the imagination?

3 We opened with an introduction indicating a more or less sharp break between the cultural traditions of the Ancient Near East and those of the Biblical/Greco-Roman cultures. Does that indication hold up, in the case of Ancient Egyptian religious practice? Do you see that practice as continuous, in important ways, with the subsequent monotheistic religions of the Near East?

Week Eight ***Hymn to the Sun*** 1380 B.C. (Egypt)

The most intriguing and culture-influential of the Pharaohs, Akhnaten (1352-1336), is associated before all with the introduction into Egyptian religious thought of monotheism. Virtually overnight he intruded into the dense polytheism, indeed the native polymorphism (animal-god fusions), which had defined Egyptian religious experience. How remote we are from the inner narratives of Egyptian social/political development is proven by how unprepared we are for Akhnaten's reversal of national theology. Whatever the well-springs of Akhnaten's monotheism, what he imposed on his people, especially in the new royal city of Amarna, a vast complex he had built in haste as an administrative capital and a site for his huge Amen temple, the power of his vision was compelling, his courage was unstoppable, and the narrative of Egyptian faith forever enriched. That he created for the ages will be evident in the persistent fascination he exercises over modern scholars, readers, and musicians—cf. Philip Glass's minimalist opera, *Akhnaton*—and by the creative place he continues to occupy in cultural history. Sigmund Freud's last work, *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), turned on the assumption that Moses was an associate of Akhnaten in Amarna, and that Moses drew his monotheistic vision for the Jews from the milieu of Akhnaten's court.

It was the lasting assumption of Egyptian theology that the Pharaoh is an embodiment of God—or of the God of the region where the Pharaoh ruled; Atem, or later Ra, at Heliopolis; Ptah for the citizens of Memphis; Amen for the Thebans and their ruler. Thus when the Pharaoh Akhnaten creates his *Hymn to the Sun*, which we have reason to think he himself wrote, he adores the sky-passage of a holy sun, his God, which is also himself. Perhaps he needed so high a self-concept to create at the level he achieves here; and at the same to create for his awe-inspired citizenry, worshipping with him, probably in festal recitations of this hymn, the force that makes the world. It will have been for the whole people that Akhnaten created this musical poem which celebrates 'going forth into the light,' the phrase-thought that sprang from the real name of *The Book of the Dead*. We seem to have, here, a piece of religious literature which can be read like a piece of imaginative literature. Can we believe that is true, when we look back on the stubborn otherness, in style, viewpoint, and world frame, which marks the Ancient Near Eastern material we have been reading, and which Frankfurt, in the *Before Philosophy* we read in Week One, thought the first thing to understand about the archaic world?

We need to go back to our translations, to our discussions of kinds of language, and to the problem posed by language for recovering the past. Let's start by juxtaposing three samples of translation into English of the *Hymn to the Sun*. (Our translation dates are 1923, 2001, and 2011. ) The selection is from the description of the world as the sun is setting.

*When thou goest down in the western horizon, then earth is in darkness, as if it were dead. They sleep in the chamber, their heads wrapped up, and no eye seeth the other. Though all their things were taken, while they were under their heads, yet*

*would they know it not. Every lion cometh forth from his den, and all worms that bite. Darkness is....the earth is silent for he who created it resteth in his horizon.*

(Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 289.)

When you sink to rest below western horizon  
 Earth lies in darkness like death,  
 Sleepers are still in bedchambers, heads veiled,  
 Eye cannot spy a companion,  
 All their goods could be stolen away,  
 Heads heavy there, and they never knowing!  
 Lions come out from the deeps of their caves,  
 Snakes bite and sting;  
 Darkness muffles, and earth is silent;  
 He who created all things lies low in his tomb.

(John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 2).

When you set in the western horizon,  
 Earth is in darkness as if in death;  
 One sleeps in chambers, heads covered,  
 One eye does not see another.  
 Were they robbed of their goods  
 That were under their heads,  
 People would not notice it.  
 Every lion comes out from its den.  
 All the snakes bite:  
 Darkness hovers, and earth is silent;  
 As the one who created all things rests in the horizon.

(Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 204).

A translation, a carrying-over, is there to make clear to us what was written in a language unfamiliar to us. Is that what these three texts do? (Hard to say, unless we can 'read' the original, in which case we don't 'need' the translation?) Does each of the above versions give you a sense of what the original means—the first version employing Biblical diction and a concrete thingliness; the second version a 'feliculously anglicized smoothness,' and a poem-like layout that cozens the modern ear; the third version contemporary but blunt, and, for example, sticking to what is probably 'original' --'horizon' in the final line, rather than 'lies low in his tomb?' Now try this. Take a copy of Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, and turn to pp. xxxviii-xxxix. You will find there both a hieratic and a hieroglyphic facsimile of a passage from the 'Dispute with his Soul of one who is tired of Life,' a wisdom tale like *Sinuhe*, from 2500 B.C. Now think: vast spaces seemingly separate the script-things visible from Egypt from the script-thing 'in English' at the bottom of Erman, xxxix. Do we think those spaces are easy to cross. Let's try another experiment. Order a copy of Budge, *Egyptian Language*, Dover reprint from the New York, 1910 version. That's an approach. Are you getting my tedious point? It will be a long train ride from the hieratic manuscript on xxxviii to the English on the bottom of xxxix. Do you feel sure that we can cross the border separating these different language acts? Or do we drift back toward Frankfurt's (and our own, in the Introductory week) view that Ancient means Archaic, when it comes to the Ancient Near East? (I drift that way.) Oh yes, and by the way, what about the physical moment of directing your eyes (mind) from

Erman xxxviii to xxxix? What kind of distance is involved there? How many millimeters?

What, finally do you make of our effort to divide Ancient Near Eastern texts in terms of their distinctive language address, and, within that division, into the further issue of kind of quest for selfhood? Do the three kinds of language in question here—so far as we can reach back into them—comfortably unpackage into the addresses of behavioral description, ascension and praise, and imaginative expression? I hope you will say yes, and expect you will, thanks to the broad sense in which each of our text translations above is an address to the transcendent—and sharply different from a proclamation of behaviors or an expression of creative imagination, even though this wonderful Hymn, probably the composition of Akhnaten himself, expresses awe in a language of poetry. But what of the issue of selfhood, and its presentation, which is the title giving action of our course? Is that quest implicit in the language practices tracked in this week's work?

Language—whether in the *Instruction for Merikare*, in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, which we will read in Week 11, or in the *Hymn* of Akhnaten—is the human self actualizing, trying out its contours, and—so to speak—carving its own map of the world in the face of time. High writing, disciplined by time and life, testifies to the self that is it, and is the quest we are.

Readings:

Freud, Sigmund, *Moses and Monotheism*.

Lichtheim, Miriam, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. II, p. 90.

Pritchard and Fleming, *The Ancient Near East*, Vol. I, pp.227-230.

Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 202-207.

Waltari, Mika, *The Egyptian*.

Discussion Questions:

1 What do you think of the power of language to bridge the temporal gap of three and a half millennia which separates us from the creator of the *Hymn to the Sun*? Is it not true that in a sense the gap is immediately closed by, say, the act of a translation of that *Hymn*, which is thus vaulted into our mind's midst? Is it not equally true that that 'vaulting' is a dangerous sleight of hand, misleading us to bypass the reality of the temporal?

2 What is the source of the remarkable interest our time has paid to Akhnaten? Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*? Philiip Glass' *Akhnaten* opera? Mika Waltari's *The Egyptian*? Plays? Operas? Films? Is it the Sun-King's monotheism, which may in fact have influenced theological developments in Hebrew culture? Is it his mysteriously beautiful wife, Nefertiti, whom Akhnaten came increasingly to resemble in visual depictions? Is it his sense of individuality, distinctive selfhood, which has led thinkers to consider him the first modern man, the first individual?

3 In our introduction we stressed the break between the archaic world of the Ancient Near East, and the Greco-Roman Hebraic cultural world we inherit. But we have been admitting the exaggeration of that view, even by our language practice, our confidence that we can penetrate the archaic world whose unreachability we are asserting. Does the case of Akhnaten seem to you an example of the point where a connection, with the Hebrews through Moses, breaks a channel right through the

wall dividing us from the archaic? What do you think of the thesis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*?

Week Nine **Torah** 9<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.; the E (*Elohim*) source, which was written in the northern kingdom, in the 8<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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* {3<sup>rd</sup> 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 adoration 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*.  
 Wright, *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*? *Sinuhe*--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*?

#### Week Ten Second 1000 word **paper**

1 You will have observed that vast time spans separate the texts we have been considering to this point: from the 21<sup>st</sup> century B.C., the conservative date for the Egyptian *Pyramid Texts* (whose origins may in fact be buried in pre-writing cultures millennia older than what we have), to the third decade before Christ, when the active use of the *Book of the Dead* had stopped. We have looked at two texts from the third millennium, four from the second millennium, and to this point one (the *Torah*) from the first millennium B.C. We have looked into four texts from Egypt, two from Babylonia, and one from Palestine. (If you read into van de Mieroop's *History of the Ancient Near East* you will see how diverse were the cultures swarming in that region during the time period indicated in this course.) Now, the question: *what kind of unity do you begin to see—if any—in the cultural creations we have been addressing so far in this course?*

2 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?

3 There were 'autobiographies,' in the conventional sense of the word, in ancient Egyptian writing. (Cf. for example, the excerpts in Budge, *Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 126-154). For the most part they are self-praise by military officers or high government officials, and were inscribed on the walls of pyramids. These self-accounts, in the view of this syllabus maker, are not where the life of Ancient Near Eastern self-presentation lies. Please evaluate this syllabus-maker claim. Do you agree with the tweak this syllabus is giving to the notion of the autobiography? Does it awaken in you any appetite to regress even farther, 'behind' the Ancient Near East, into the Indo-European self-presentational stage which generates the autobiographical at a level farther inside our conscious present than the work of the Ancient Near East? Does any part of you want to go forward into the Pleistocene, in search of your family tree?

#### **FROM THE IMAGINATION**

Week Eleven ***The Tale of Sinuhe*** 1995-1965 B.C. (Egypt)

The *Tale of Sinuhe* is a brief fiction, set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century B.C., in the reign of Amenemhatep III, at a time of High Renaissance for Egyptian culture; the so called Golden Age of the Middle Kingdom. (*The Instruction for Merikare* is only slightly older than *The Tale of Sinuhe*.) The reigning Pharaoh Amenemhatep's grandeur of position is reflected in his name, which meant 'Belonging to the Justice of Re,' the Father God, and the cult of monarchical divinity is here at its apex. Like all Egyptian Pharaohs Amenemhatep's attention turned early not only to the exercise of administrative control over his rapidly growing domains, but to the construction of a pyramid worthy of his divine kingship; his first pyramid, the 'Black Pyramid,' was built at Dashur, but was later superseded by a new pyramid at Hawara. The intricate architectural work embodied there reflects engineering skills befitting the monarch of Egypt at a high point in its culture, and the themes of divinity, monarchy, and tomb-building will clearly be seen to penetrate the following tale.

The *Tale of Sinuhe* was composed at just this renaissance moment, and yet the always difficult explanatory bridge, between background and text to be explained, is difficult in a case like that presented by the story before us. The story is thin on local details, and though that very thinness is part of the mystery and fascination of the tale, it compounds the problems of lodging our text historically. Who wrote it? Who was the Sinuhe he wrote about? What is he trying to say about the nature of the human person?

As it is, we confront a simple but subtle plot. Sinuhe, a government official, presents a tale which opens with the announcement from his tombstone of the tale of his life, which is what follows. Sinuhe accompanies a certain Prince on assignment to Libya. Then Sinuhe becomes aware (by the miracle of fiction), through an overheard conversation, that there was a problem (*a coup d'état*) in the Royal Palace; and 'then was mine heart distraught, mine arms sank, and trembling fell on all my limbs.' Consequently Sinuhe flees to Canaan. (Within the simple narration, that leads Sinuhe's way, there are moments of sharply felt anxiety: 'I bowed me down in the thicket lest the watcher for the day on the wall should espy me.' His flight is punctuated by his and the narrator's comments on his flight and on himself as the flier. 'I set out southward yet did I not purpose to reach the Residence (his home city), for I thought that strife would arise, and I was not minded to live after him (the ruler under attack).' With these few words Sinuhe affirmed his fear, his timidity, and his 'love for his master.' And at the same time we hear his muttering self-presence, which these directional plans emerge from. We are jolted by the selfhood presence of Sinuhe, here in his text, more living than any access to self we get in earlier Egyptian or Babylonian literature—and on a par with the depth of *Gilgamesh*, next week's reading.

The ongoing progress of Sinuhe's journey is furthered by the flier's report to the Prince of Upper Retenu, to whose lands he eventually comes, explaining who he is and where he came from. We hear Sinuhe's account from his own voice, enclosed of course in the narration of the whole text, and are left wondering whether we are to take the report at face value—'I know not what brought me to this land; it was like the dispensation of God'; 'and I said again, dissembling'—Sinuhe has traversed so many events, without really seeming to belong to them, that he comes across as a shadow figure, when he gives an account of himself to another person. (The

construction of selfhood is being ingeniously insinuated here, where it leaves its carbon footprint in the minima of Sinuhe's expressive life.)

Frightened, carefully managing his image lest he fall into dangerous hands, Sinuhe addresses the Prince of Upper Retenu with effusive praise of the new king at the Residence, successor to Amenemhatep, whose power and mercy are already legendary. (It is hard—from the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western readerpoint--not to take Sinuhe, addressing the Prince of Upper Retenu, as a blend of con man, keeping everybody happy while keeping himself safe, with a genuine admirer of his new king/savior.) At this point Sinuhe accepts the invitation of Nenshi, son of Amu, the Prince of Upper Retenu, who has been sheltering him, and settles down with the Prince, to pass an idyllic life as pampered guest, husband of the Prince's daughter, and darling of the Prince's court. The self-reflexive dimension of the character construction seduces us into seeing the world from 'his' standpoint.

Sinuhe becomes a powerful and merciful king in his own right, though telling us about it—first person narration—with a modesty, almost uncertainty, which marks his whole tale. Finally Sinuhe appeals to the royal court from which he first fled, and begs for the right to 'return home.' (His view of himself, as he lodges this petition, is self-critical, confessional:

'Once a fugitive, fled in his season—now the report of me is in the Residence. Once a laggard lagged because of hunger—now give I bread to my neighbor.')

The decree permitting him to return to Egypt arrives, and Sinuhe is invited, as an old man now, to return to his roots, where the gods are preparing a funeral in high honors for him. (Please note that what we recount here, for you the student, is in the text recounted by Sinuhe about himself, and thus participates in his narration of a fiction which will settle and enoble his life. The artfulness of the narrator of this tale, who embeds so much self-reflection in his own narration, embodies the kind of move toward the sense of selfhood which this course concerns.)

Sinuhe is overjoyed by the new king's invitation, for which he feels a gratitude indicative of a sense of guilt, or at least of unworthiness. (The way he expresses his joy indicates his insecurity.) Having taken careful leave of his life home with Nenshi, Sinuhe travels back to the home city from which he set out, whence he came, and where the new monarch welcomes him—in a ceremony indicating (but all half-said) how deeply traumatic Sinuhe's absence from home has been, and how deep a fault/error/mistake divides him in old age from the mind that filled him when first he heard bad news from his post in the bull rushes. (Like the narrating king in the *Instruction for Merikare*, Sinuhe lives over the depths of a shameful secret, his impulsive flight.) The rest is history. Back with the royal family Sinuhe is given his own sumptuous quarters, golden raiment, four meals a day, and has nothing left but to live out his life in patronal splendor, awaiting the blessedness of his own beautifully appointed pyramid. He has told us himself into just the overall point the narrator of him wished.

We have said it already; we could assemble pictures of the great temples and sculptures and paintings of the Middle Kingdom Renaissance, and make this week's work an entry on culture at large in Egypt at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. But that would be too much to undertake, our approach too shallow, and our focus diffuse. We are interested in the development of self-awareness or personal presence in Ancient Near Eastern Literature. We are not going to find a subtler or more irresolvable case of the search for personal identity than in the tale of Sinuhe.

The way he presents life situations to himself, while himself being a life situation presented by a narrator, is the key to 'his' three dimensionality.

Reading:

Parkinson, R.B., *The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 B.C.*

Discussion Questions:

1 In the introductory material, above, we referred to *The Tale of Sinuhe* as a 'brief fiction.' No one knows whether the word 'fiction' applies here. It is possible, but hard to verify, that Sinuhe was a real historical figure. Does the text before us seem to you to bear the marks of a fiction. Is fiction an appropriate vehicle for self-discovery?

2 If anyone is trying to track and define self-identity, in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, it must be the author or narrator of the tale. Does that narrator seem to you to be identical with Sinuhe himself? At what points does the narrator separate from Sinuhe and talk about 'him' as another person, or perhaps as a 'fiction?' Do these layers of personal address and reference qualify this ancient text as what we would call postmodern today?

3 What kind of narrative is the *Tale of Sinuhe*? Do you flow from one stage to another, or is the flow interrupted by major hieratic passages and by jumps in narrative strategy? Do you see any parallel between the formal presentation technique here and that in hieratic Egyptian sculpture, in which the frontally depicted human figure is to us anti-naturalistically juxtaposed to the other images in its painted panel.

Week Twelve *Gilgamesh* 18<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> 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 18th 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 18th 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 Ziolkowski, *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?

#### Week Thirteen ***Egyptian Love Poems*** 13<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. (Egypt)

Egyptian love poems, from the thirteenth century B.C., open our way to what seems a direct expression of emotion, and a verbal field on which we can read without endless footnotes, cautions, and uncertainties. (And without that awesome sense of strangeness that the *Pyramid Texts* or *Book of the Dead* enforce in style and narrative technique.) We should no doubt keep some guard up, for where ready feeling offers itself there is always room for delusion and even deception. The comparison of alternate translations is one way to remind ourselves that the original is never of a single meaning, but in literary work flays out into multiple meanings. And that reflection will remind us that the quest for selfhood, and for ways for formulate it, is (in literary art) a byproduct of language. The language of poetry is inherently ambiguous, and thrives on a margin of half clarity, and is in that different from the languages of, say, the *Code of Hammurabi*, which *proscribes* and lays down, or the language of *The Instruction for Merikare*, which *prescribes*. We will start with a juxtaposition of two translations of a single text, whose language neither proscribes nor prescribes, but *suggests*.

The distinguished pioneer Egyptologist, Adolf Erman, published his *Ancient Egyptian Literature* in 1923, and in it we read (itself a translation from German into English) the following:

\_\_\_\_my god. My brother, it is pleasant to go to the (pond) in order to bathe me in thy presence, that I may let thee see my beauty in my tunic of finest royal linen, when it is wet \_\_\_\_I go down with thee into the water, and come forth again to thee with a red fish, which (lieth?) beautiful on my fingers \_\_\_\_Come and look at me.

(Erman, p. 248; trans. Blackman, 1927).

The language is an archaized English—itself a kind of translation, of seventeenth century English/ King James Bible translation language—and simulates a difficulty of

disengaging meaning from material (papyrus) not easily read, and syntax not easily converted into the languages of English poetry. This is the kind of anti-English English translation which we will find generative in Week 14, when we turn to lived verbal creations of our time, in which Ancient Near Eastern Literature becomes part of English language newspeak. Erman's translation work contrasts sharply with our second example (in a volume translated 2001), also by a talented Egyptologist:

Love, how I'd love to slip down to the pond,  
           Bathe with you close by on the bank.  
 Just for you I'd wear my new Memphis swimsuit,  
           Made of sheer linen, fit for a queen—  
 Come see how it looks in the water!

Couldn't I coax you to wade in with me?  
           Let the cool creep slowly around us?  
 Then I'd dive deep down  
           And come up for you dripping,  
 Let you fill your eyes  
           With the little red fish that I'd catch.

(John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2001; p. 23.)

Foster's translation not only smoothes and charms, where Erman/Blackman scrape rough meanings straight off the papyrus, but Foster also attempts to simulate the meter and rhythm of Egyptian poetry, an effort Erman (p. xxxi in his Introduction) speculates on, but makes no effort at.

Translation is the hidden issue below that 'distance' of Ancient Near Eastern literature, which we discussed in our first paragraph this week. (As a student of literatures not native to you, you may want to reflect on the enormous importance of translation as a whole, is establishing our senses of the creative traditions of our world. ) That being said, however, it remains true that Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry, of the Ramasside Period (13<sup>th</sup> century. B.C.), does what it can to touch broadly human registers, and thus to overcome its birth passage to us through language and artifact barriers—papyrus quickly dries and cracks, and is rarely intact; stelae are often hard to read--not to mention the pure hazards of location and discovery. In this week's readings you will find poems by women as well as men, sensuous as well as longing poems, and lustful poems.

It is from this small collection that we now pay our weekly homage to the issue of selfhood and the person. The language before us, in whatever translation, is clearly one of suggestion and implication, as distinct from the languages of law, manners, or religious adulation. (We can see that suggestive trait of this language, even through the mist of translation.) The expression of longing, passion, nostalgia, which drives Egyptian love lyrics, is at bottom just a distinctive kind of language, the language of feeling yes but in a deeper sense the language of implication and suggestion. Is this language of poetry different from the language of prose, say from that of *The Tale of Sinuhe*? It is difficult to answer, given our distance in time and language from the texts in question. *The Tale of Sinuhe*, we might want to say, is as allusive/suggestive as the love-poems we are reading, but the language of the tale is more causatively sequential, and narrative. In either case, *Sinuhe* or the love-poem, it is the self-identity of the narrator that provides the driving *eros* of the piece, and that keeps us under a spell that at the same time involves ourselves.

## Readings:

John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* pp. 17-31.

Adolf Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 254-310.

Frederic Will: *Translation Theory and Practice: Reassembling the Tower*.

## Discussion Questions:

1 Is there any norm for good translation? Should it be as literal as possible, and try to replicate (in the case of poetry) the meter and even sound of the original? Or should the translation of poetry strive for a new version entirely in the new language? This is a classic conundrum in translation theory, and there have been as many responses as translators. Do you have a position on this issue? Do you prefer Foster or Erman, from our own brief survey above? What is your impression of the translations we have been reading in this course? Is there any text that seemed to you to fare especially badly in its English version, and if so what do you surmise was the problem?

2 Do *The Tale of Sinuhe*, *Gilgamesh*, and the love poems we have read seem to you have in common that they all spring from the imagination? We have implied that point repeatedly here, in an effort to consider the width of the range of the texts that go into this class. But are we to think there is not imagination in the *Enuma Elish* or that there is nothing but imagination in the kinds of love poetry we are reading? If imagination means what is created from within special wholeness-establishing powers of the person, might we not say that the pond-poem we sampled above is rather a literal descriptive statement of an emotional condition, while, say, the *Enuma Elish* employs the imagination of huge cosmic conflicts—rather like Milton?—even while purporting to account for the actuality of events in heavenly time? What, finally, do you think of our tripartite division of three kinds of language? Is it proving a useful guide for you as you move through these archaic texts?

3 As you peruse the love lyrics in Erman or Foster, do you accept Foster's view, that when it comes to 'love lyrics' the universal kicks in; we all understand what is going on here, in a way we do not with, say, a creation hymn or a hymn to the sun. Erman's translation segment, above, seems to suggest that at least the flowing syntax of Foster's translation must have cost something in the course of 'smoothing out' the original. Nevertheless, though, do you buy into the idea that the way the 'romantic' is expressed in widely different cultures will be fairly consistent and similar—as distinct, say, from the way the languages of high theology are expressed?

**FROM OUR TIME****Week Fourteen Ancient Near Eastern Life Writing Today**

20<sup>th</sup> 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 ended 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 aesthetic—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

Who is he?  
 Is RA...

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 reevaluation, 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?

Week Fifteen **Forward to the Pleistocene** 2013 A.D.

Is it not possible to view the whole of human self-expression in writing as a single body, with a temporal dynamic in it? If you will try out that perspective, will you agree that the usual reading of the temporal, in cultural histories like writing as well as in natural history, cosmology, social evolution, is from past to present.? After all we grow from youth to age—despite Wordsworth's hints that the child may be father of the man—and it defines us that we regard the development of our world in those terms. But is there another way of looking at the various histories intersected by each of us in the course of a lifetime? Can we review our own history, including the history of our self-expression, in a reverse direction, from present 'back'—or is it 'forward'?-- to the past?

Our encounter with the post-modern poetics of the previous week will have indicated a step toward flexing up the time sense. Olson, Schwerner, Rothenburg are all reflecting with close attention on the archaic or deeply pre-modern in human culture; a move in which they direct the cognitive force of poetry on what anthropologists, archeologists, and paleontologists—all the *ologists*—are turning to study. The forces assembled in this action are, in fact, simply doing what humanistic scholars do professionally, striving to find out what the past was like, and to name it in the terms of the scholar's own world. This huge self-recovery mode is carried out in the interest of self-recovery, not of self-modification. The scholar of past recovery is not buying Nietzsche's perception that history is about making life better in the present; rather

this scholar person, who is in the West a byproduct essentially of Renaissance curiosity, and who barely existed prior to pre-modern Europe, is part of a huge self-recovery effort; yet only rarely does he/she venture beyond the closure of recovery into the open field of discovery, the 'forward to the Pleistocene' mode latent in the recovery action.

And what is that open field? Are we simply closing this course on the fantasy of a place prior to written records which merges mysteriously, and vapidly, into an undefined temporal flatland that stretches back to....the origins of organic life?

Once the notion of autobiography has been enlarged, as it has been in the current course work, we have acquired extensive new realms in which to explore the farthest ranges of the human intervention into culture—and the earliest available signatures of the human in written language. We can 'retreat' or 'advance' beyond the limits of the Archaic Near East to the world of Indo-European and proto-Indo European languages, and can thus recover more and more distant signatures of the human in language. Whether the perceptions suggested here seem to you fruitful will depend on whether you are interested in pressing the human self-recovery project, as it works itself out in language, beyond the point where verifiability dominates over suggestion and speculation; and whether you are willing to squeeze the last cry of 'autobiographical' humanity out of the shrinking evidence grounds?

Is there something 'practical' (Nietzschean) to say about this quest to recover ever new territory for our sense of being here? Is cognitive regression into the proto Indo-European simply one more use of the faculty of historical learning, and therefore just good exercise? Or does this kind of movement, this 'forward into the Pleistocene,' qualify as a fragment of global psychoanalysis, and thus as a bracing effort to become one with ourselves, as the psychoanalyst Ferenczi thought we can do as part of freeing ourselves from acquired neuroses? Are there intelligible signatures of human selfhood even in the earliest vestiges of human presence?

This final week is devoted to reflection on the implications of the search for the origins of the human self in history, and to the first 'autobiographies.' In our Readings for this week you will find both fiction and linguistic scholarship, and you are urged to pick and choose, and to find other texts of interest to you. The field of inquiry here is huge: in our readings you find a superb novel, by Golding, about Neanderthal age culture and its passing, as well as two accessible works of historical linguistics, devoted to Indo-European culture. If the field is open, it is yours as well as mine. Let's play there!

Reading:

Golding, William, *The Inheritors*.  
 Watkins, Calvert, *How to Kill a Dragon*.  
 West, M.L., *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*.  
 Will, Frederic, 'Shamans in Turtlencks'

Discussion Questions:

1 What do you see as the 'purpose' of studying the 'signatures of the human,' the fundamental autobiography of man, in remotely past ages? When we regress to Indo-European linguistics, and reconstruct archaic language, are we doing more than satisfying our curiosity--which is a lot? Are we in some sense coming to fruitful terms

with ourselves? (Or, alternatively, do you consider this whole 'regression trip' a poetic delusion?)

2 The expression of human selfhood in writing grows increasingly attenuated as we go 'farther back' into human history. Do we begin, at a certain point—say when mere scribbled indicators of human presence are all we have—to make a mockery of our enlarged view of 'autobiography'? Where would the absurdity point be reached, as we retreated through stages of increasing attenuation, when we refused to believe we were dealing with a human self-account?

#### Week Sixteen: Final 3000 word **paper**

1 Starting with our introduction, we have argued for a strong break between Ancient Near Eastern literature and that of the Greco-Roman Christian-Judaic traditions. As we have proceeded, though, you will have noticed some modifications of that initial imagery. The Hebrew *Torah*, for instance, is planted in the Ancient Near East, but we know that it is still a living part of, say, the Christian and Muslim faiths. We have alluded to the literary energy of *Gilgamesh*, which makes it a living text in the creative world of our time. In our last two weeks of class we worked with creative writers of our time for whom the Ancient Near Eastern world was a model of *Weltanschauungen*, fresh air not yet contaminated by the aestheticism and 'sentimentality' of the classical or Christian. How do you feel now about the alleged impermeability of the wall dividing the Ancient Near East from the Classical/Hebraic? Were we on the right track in the argument we initiated in Week One?

2 We have read a number of texts—Hammurabi's *Code*, *The Pyramid Texts*, the *Enuma Elish*—of which we would not say that they are autobiographical in any familiar sense; that they have a personal narrator or are in search of the meaning of that author's selfhood. We have, however, been working toward a theory of autobiography that can accommodate the study of such texts as these: that borrows much from the notion of life-writing, thus that meshes the created text into the life of its creator; but that reaches farther even than the life-writing notion in its account of the autobiographical, that goes to the mimima of the 'writing of the *autos*, *self* as personal pronoun.' We have been reaching for a level of writing that includes the *palette of expressive ranges by which the creator signs his/her expressions*—a palette so broad that the traditional Western notion of autobiography would fit into its pocket. Of course we are not implying single authorship in many cases, and in fact are reaching for a notion of autobiography which can accommodate a variety of kinds of collective authorship. You might say that we are trying to extend the Western notion of autobiography in a direction which would make it comfortable to discuss *War and Peace* or a *Pyramid Spell* as kinds of autobiography. We would thus be loosening the hold of the western notion of the individualized author/creator. But WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS IDEA? WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS ENLARGEMENT OF THE IDEA OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5 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?

6 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?

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