THE TWO JOURNEYS OF GILGAMESH

The destiny was fulfilled which the father of the gods, Enlil of the mountain, had decreed for Gilgamesh: 'In nether-earth the darkness will show him a light; of mankind, all that are known, none will leave a monument for generations to come to compare with his.

The Epic of Gilgamesh¹

On his figure thus gravitated the first literary interest of mankind.

---

Seeing the impermanence of life, he discovers the eternity of life, the constant changing process of death and birth taking place all the time.

---

Many attain liberation just by realizing how impossible it is.
The story of Gilgamesh comes to us from the earliest of civilizations: that of the Sumerians, who were also the inventors of writing. The earliest cuneiform inscriptions concerning Gilgamesh are from a time only a little after the invention of writing itself, and it is interesting to note that Gilgamesh of Uruk was a priest of Innana -- for it was the priests of Innana in Uruk that are credited with the invention.

Gilgamesh himself is believed to have lived around 2800 BC, and his name is found in the list of the ancient kings, in a dynasty "who descended from the sky." After his death he was divinized and statues of him abound in the ancient remains of Mesopotamia.

---

4. In The Lazy Man's Guide to Death and Dying
It is likely that the writing of the earliest Gilgamesh stories followed a period of transmission through oral poetry, and it is most remarkable that this earliest of literary traditions was still alive in the near East until recent times -- for Gurjieff tells in his autobiography⁵ that his father could recite the epic of Gilgamesh before the cuneiform inscriptions were deciphered.

When the Sumerians were conquered by the Akkadians -- semitic invaders -- who created the first old empire, the Gilgamesh poem was translated, and it was also translated later to the language of the Assyrian conquerors and to that of the Hitites. It is clear that the deeds of Gilgamesh were well known in ancient times through all these people and even by the mycenians. It may be assumed that it was also known to the aramean invaders -- the Chaldeans -- who established themselves in Babylonia and out of which migrated -- according to Genesis -- Abraham with his people.

---

⁵ Meetings with Remarkable Men by George I.Gurdjieff
Just as the Odyssey, written in the 8th Century BC constitutes an elaboration and a piecing together of poetic creations of earlier centuries (anything between Homer's time and that of the war in Troy in 13th Century BC) the tale of Gilgamesh that we know ⁶ constitutes the Babylonian written crystallization of a much earlier Sumerian tale that was probably as old in the days of the Bronze Age pre-Homeric bards as Homer is old to us. Though five Sumerian poems have Gilgamesh as their hero, what today is usually called the Gilgamesh epic is a later composite creation which brings together the material in two of them as well as an early story of the deluge. As Federico Lara writes in the introduction to his Spanish translation of the Babylonian text, the poem was "a creation of the Sumerian culture that has passed through the wise and eclectic screen of semitic sensibility," and this "first great work of universal literature would take two millenia before it found its definitive structure." It may be approximately said that Gilgamesh is the first "tale of the hero" that we know.

⁶The poem of Gilgamesh became known to us through the discovery of the Assyrian library of Assurbanipal (669 to 626 BC) in Ninive. This king -- who was particularly interested in learning -- embodied a more widespread interest of the Assyrian people in collecting and giving permanence to the knowledge of earlier peoples, and thus he gathered in this library many texts of all kinds and in different languages, as well as new translations.

Throughout this commentary I sometimes quote from Sandar's prose translation (in Penguin Books) and more often from the little known of Gardner and Maier of the "standard" version of Gilgamesh, composed sometime between 1600 and 1000 BC, by the priest Sin-Lequi-unninni (in the middle Babylonian period).
I say "approximately" since other works such as Innana's descent into hell can be also understood as expressions of the timeless journey of the soul. The story of Gilgamesh, however, is a more complete expression of the soul's journey than others and also is characteristically a tale about a human hero rather than a god -- and a literary composition rather than a "myth": it stands at a beginning of literature proper as the oldest account of self-divinization. The epic of Gilgamesh begins with an implicit prologue that constitutes the first column of the first of twelve tablets. The essence of this prologue is condensed in its opening statement:

"The one who saw the abyss I will make the land know;

of him who knew all let me tell the whole story"

......

"[as] the lord of wisdom, he who knew everything,

Gilgamesh,

who saw things secret, opened the place hidden,

and carried back word of the time before the Flood --

he travelled the road, exhausted, in pain,

and cut his works into a stone tablet."
Of course, we should take "to whom all things is well known" as a symbolic reference to the inner experiential knowledge of one who has completed the "soul's journey": the wisdom of one who has lived through a laborious process of transformation.

As in other "tales of the hero" it is suggested by the poem that Gilgamesh was fated to succeed in the quest of turning from an ordinary human into an awakened and fully matured member of the species -- i.e. one of "super-human" stature. The Babylonian epic tells us that Gilgamesh was well-endowed: when the gods created Gilgamesh they gave him a perfect body. Shamash the glorious sun endowed him with beauty; Adad, the god of the storm, endowed him with courage. Though the poem begins with praise of Gilgamesh's final achievement and condition, it soon turns to the time when he was only an unripe hero, at the beginning of his life's journey. We are told that he was a powerful king, yet one that comes across to us as power-driven. His people complained to the gods. Though there is some doubt as to the exact nature of that about which his people complain, the picture we form is certainly that of a powerful but abusive king "In the raising of his weapon has no equal;" And yet "he does not allow the son to go to his father; day and night he opresses the weak -- Gilgamesh, who is shepherd, strong, shining, Gilgamesh does not let the
young woman go to her mother, the girl to the warrior, the bride to the young groom."

"Uruk of the Sheepfold" is the designation of the city in the late Babylonian text in reference to the identification of the king-priest with a shepherd. It is not strange, however, that in view of the abuses of Gilgamesh, the people ask "Is this the shepherd of Uruk of the Sheepfold?" Apparently he exercises too much power in taking the young men into war and exaggerates his kingly rights over the women. Since in the story Gilgamesh appears to have been one of the first military conquerors -- who gave Uruk a triumph over the rival city of Kish, it is likely that his abuses were those of the exaggerated patriarchal reaction that assured the victory of the new socio-political system over the earlier matriarchal times in the Middle East.

After hearing the lamentation of the people of Uruk, the gods of the above, in turn, called on Aruru, the goddess of creation.

"When [Anu the sky god] heard their lamentation ¶ he called to Aruru the Mother, Great Lady: 'You, Aruru, who created humanity, ¶ create now a second image of Gilgamesh: may the image be ¶ equal to the time of his heart. ¶ Let them square off one against the other, that Uruk may have peace."
The following lines of the poem are reminiscent of the creation of Adam in Genesis: she "conceived an image in her mind, and it was a stuff of Anu of the firmament."
The biblical parallelism continues: "She dipped her hands in water and pinched off clay, she let it fall in the wilderness, and noble Enkidu was created." His hair is long like a woman's, and Gilgamesh is to love him like a woman. Ninsun, Gilgamesh's mother, will tell him that he will find a companion whom he could "hug like a wife."
If Gilgamesh is the hero that sets out, the egoic self that embarks on the path that will entail his own undoing, -- what is this creation of a double for Gilgamesh? If Gilgamesh is the king within the mind, the controlling self, the little and yet grandiose "I," -- who is this innocent man who eats grass in the hills with gazelles. We are told of him that he was "like an immortal from heaven."
If we approach the symbolic system of the myth as we would approach a dream, we can say that both Gilgamesh and Enkidu are parts of the individual, and that the hero -- who starts out as a single monolithic mind -- now has become the field of two sub-selves in struggle; a controlling and a natural, spontaneous and animal self. While Gilgamesh may be seen as an extreme embodiment of the patriarchal mind, it is the mother qualities that are more apparent in Enkidu. So, we may say that Gilgamesh's search is on the way to becoming more balanced. The
story proceeds to tell us how when Enkidu came to the water-holes with the wild animals, he was seen by a stalker who was greatly terrified, and who next lamented for his father concerning this wild giant who helped the animals undoing his traps. The old man advised the stalker that he should obtain from Gilgamesh a temple-harlot to come and seduce and civilize Enkidu. Of course, the word "civilize" is not used and we can also say hominize, for now Enkidu will be transformed from a human-animal into the companion of Gilgamesh through the intervention of a woman. The stalker's father asserts that once he has lain with her the animals will reject him -- which reflects a good knowledge in antiquity of something that scientists have only recently ascertained: a lamb that has been touched by human hands is indeed rejected by the herd. At the level of inner meaning we may see this transformation of Enkidu, a transformation of "animality" or natural instinct. The process through which the harlot entices Enkidu with her presence, interests him coming to the great city and finally brings him to Gilgamesh might be viewed as a birth of new life within the psyche which will undergo a refinement but not to the point of cancelling that antagonism towards Gilgamesh's attitude that the gods desired as a remedy to the country's predicament. Gilgamesh, stronger even than Enkidu and favored by Shamash and Anu of the heavens is one in whom dominance has become a perversion, yet
after meeting Enkidu his energy will find a less destructive course. "I have come to change the old order for I am the strongest here," he seems to say to the harlot when, after hearing of Gilgamesh's abuses, he sets out to meet him.

A marriage is about to take place when Enkidu comes to meet Gilgamesh and it seems that Gilgamesh is coming to claim his royal rights before the husband. "The bride waited for the bridegroom but in the night Gilgamesh got up and came to the house." ¶ "Then Enkidu stepped out, he stood in the street and blocked the way." A power struggle takes place, where both the door posts and walls shook, and they snorted like bulls locked together. Gilgamesh was stronger, Enkidu surrendered and this was the beginning of their friendship. This friendship will progress into brotherhood when Gilgamesh takes his friend to his mother Ninsun who adopts him as her own son, blesses him and charges him with the protection of Gilgamesh. We may say, thus far, as an allegory of a healing integration within the psyche.

I am proposing that we view the creation of Enkidu as an inner birth that occurs at the beginning of the quest. The way in which this inner birth is portrayed, however, seems so different from that "second birth" acknowledged by the Hindu and Christian traditions that I want to pause to assert my conviction that they refer to the same
event in the process of human unfolding. The parallel will seem more completed later through the fact that, just as the inner Christ is not only born but dies, so too, it is with Enkidu -- before the time of Gilgamesh's "resurrection." We may say that the birth of the savage was, in the Gilgamesh story, the pre-condition for the calling -- for it is immediately following the encounter between Gilgamesh and Enkidu that Gilgamesh feels the desire to set out on an adventure. It will turn out to be the first of several adventures, yet, in a sense, it is the adventure, for it is the one that he originally seeks, and we imagine that it is one from which he thinks that he will return.

The gods were right in responding to the distress of the people with the creation of a match for Gilgamesh, and now his overwhelming and overpowering energy is about to fall upon them in its restlessness. The pugnacity of Gilgamesh will from now on have something superhuman as a target. Since he has seen that "whoever is tallest among men cannot reach the heavens and the greatest cannot encompass the earth," he wants to enter what the text calls rather enigmatically the "country of the living." It is clear that the "country of the living" is not meant to be for humans, for when he implores the help of the sun, "glorious Shamash" answers: "Gilgamesh, you are strong, but what is the country of the living to you?"

The words of Gilgamesh leave no doubt that his longing is
the same of every human that sets out on life's inner adventure. He will not be contained by the city, he wants something more. We may say that he dimly seeks something eternal, for he had a dream that Enkidu interpreted for him to mean that he should understand that his destiny is kingship and not everlasting life. In his wakeful life, however, the longing of Gilgamesh is for something less than eternity. He explains to his companion, "I have not established my name on brick, as my destiny decreed, therefore I will go to the country where the cedar is felled, I will set up my name in the place where the name of famous men are written, and where no man's name is written I will raise a monument to the gods." His wish to conquer Humbaba, "the keeper of the cedar forest," is not all that different from the will to fight Enkidu and the kind of greatness that according to history immortalized him as a great conqueror in the days of the first dynasties. It is remarkable that this very early telling of the "hero's tale" is so profoundly psychological in the caricature it presents before us of a childish quality of Gilgamesh's "heroic" seeking. Chögyam Trungpa would have spoken of his "spiritual materialism." The narcissistic element in his search for something beyond the ordinary reminds us of a much later caricature: that which Cervantes gave us of Don Quixote — for Don Quixote's craziness is precisely this yuxtaposition of the sublime ideal and the ridiculous of
his thirst for recognition.
The poem tells us that, on hearing Gilgamesh's intention, Enkidu's heart was sick. He answered Gilgamesh: "the cry of sorrow sticks in my throat, why must you set your heart on this enterprise?"
Gilgamesh also resembles Don Quixote in his rationalization: "Because of the evil that is in the land we will go to the forest and destroy the evil, for in the forest lives Humbaba, whose name is dangerous, the prodigious giant." It seems that Gilgamesh needs to make Humbaba bad so as to make himself good, just as Don Quixote's insistence on seeing giants instead of windmills served his construction of a heroic image for himself through the struggle against evil. Yet viewing Humbaba as evil is most questionable. We are told that Anu appointed him "keeper of the cedar forest," and we may see in him the figure of the "master of animals" that is still alive in the minds of shamanistic cultures. Humbaba, whom -- we are told -- has the mouth of embodiment of nature itself, that nature of which Enkidu was fully a part, before being "tamed." Perhaps, with a logic similar to that degree of dreams, we are given here a continuation of the fight of Gilgamesh against Enkidu -- the inner struggle between a civilized aspect of the mind and the animal level within it. If so, we shouldn't be surprised that the slaying of Humbaba
that will crown this episode brings about the death of Enkidu.

If Humbaba is not evil, however, it is unavoidable to feel that Gilgamesh is at fault in slaying him. The situation creates a certain suspense in the reader, who may wonder what will be coming to Gilgamesh in consequence of his action. When we see that complications arise, we feel justified, even though Gilgamesh is not directly punished for his deed. But let us not skip ahead of the story. Before setting out on the Humbaba adventure Gilgamesh, following Enkidu's advice, seeks the protection of the sun god, "Whoever is tallest among men cannot reach the heavens," Gilgamesh explains; "the greatest cannot encompass the earth, therefore I would enter that country, because I have not established my name stamped in brick has my destiny decreed," he pleads before Shamash. "If this enterprise is not to be accomplished why did you move me Shamash, with a restless desire to perform it?" Shamash was merciful, and accepted the sacrifice of his tears. Only because of the allies he gave to Gilgamesh (the eight great winds) Gilgamesh would be able to win. The two giants had craftsmen forge heavy armour and weapons for them. A literal interpretation is out of the question and it seems that the poet has wanted to indicate this through the very exaggeration: the swords of the heroes weighed six score pounds each one; and after setting out it is
only after twenty leagues that they broke their fast. The reference is undoubtedly to the super-human exaltation of their capacities -- and of the individual's capacities in general at this point in the inner journey. It is the mission of Enkidu to go first, to protect Gilgamesh and to urge him on "... step up to him, do not let him go, climb to the woods, do not be afraid. Humbaba has clothed himself with seven cloaks, he has put on one, six are not yet on him." Yet after a point their roles reverse. Enkidu "shapes his mouth" and speaks to Gilgamesh saying, "Friend, let us not go up into the heart of the forest. Opening the gate my hand went weak." It is Gilgamesh's turn to encourage him. "Touch my heart, you will not fear death. Let your heart grow light in battle, forget death, fear nothing." The beginning of the Humbaba adventure proper is clearly demarcated in the poem. There was a gate that the hero must cross to enter the forest. The corresponding column is rather incomplete in the tablet, yet it appears to address a door as if it were human.

It is Enkidu who insists that Humbaba be killed after he has been defeated and is asking for mercy. This is how the Hitite text paints the scene: "Heavenly Shamash listened to the prayer of Gilgamesh, and against Huwawa mighty winds rise up; eight winds rose up against him and beat against the eyes of Huwawa, and he was unable to move forward nor was able to move back. Then Huwawa said
to Gilgamesh: 'Let me go, Gilgamesh. You will be my master and I your servant. But Enkidu said to Gilgamesh, 'The words Huwawa has spoken do not hear, do not listen...'"

Hearing Enkidu encourage Gilgamesh, Humbaba said:
"Enkidu, what you have spoken is evil...in envy and for fear of a rival have you spoken evil words." But Enkidu seem to have been convinced by Gilgamesh to the effect that Humbaba is evil, and fears that he is not to be trusted. He prevails on Gilgamesh, and this aspect of the story seems to suggest that just as his brute force makes the adventure possible, his excessive brutishness end by making it less than felicitous: "When he saw the head of the forest guardian, the god Enlil of the mountain raged at them. 'Why did you do this thing? From henceforth may the fire sit where you sit, may it eat the bread that you eat, may it drink where you drink.'"

About four milenia later we will find this very situation -- though in different garb -- in various romances of chivalry in the Grail cycle. It will be quite clear in them that according to the code of honour a knight is to be satisfied with his triumph when his victim, having accepted his defeat, offers satisfaction. Turning from the literal to the inner meaning, we may say that the issue is not a slaying of the inner animal, but a domestication, or more generally, a transformation of energies. As in the case of medieval knights that are reproached or punished for their lack of charity, it
seems that Gilgamesh here has been guilty in not being satisfied with Humbaba's surrender and his offer to serve him. The emotional logic of the story thus leads us to expect some form of retribution.

This comes only indirectly, however, after the battle with the Bull of Heaven, that we may regard as an echo of the battle against Humbaba. Let us consider now this second adventure of the Gilgamesh epic, which begins when our shining hero, glowing from his victory, meets the great Goddess whom the Sumerians called Innana and the Babylonians Ishtar. In view of the central position of the heros-gamos in the tale of the hero this might well be called the tale of the hero and the Goddess, yet Gilgamesh is not ready for a union that he well knows is not only of love but of death. For Innana, goddess of love and war, is known precisely for the death she brings to her lovers -- particularly to the first of these: Tamuz, the Babylonian antecedent to Osiris. In this, too, we may see this ancient epic as "true to life" and extremely sophisticated in its implicit humour. Just as it has depicted the unripeness of Gilgamesh when he set out to conquer Humbaba, it now depicts his unripeness as he approaches the second stage of his journey -- which will be under the aegis of the great mother, rather than that of glorious Shamash. The encounter with Ishtar might well be taken as the crowning episode of the hero's ambition, if Gilgamesh had sought glory, for what greater
glory could there be for a mortal than that of being sought as a husband by the great Goddess?

"To Gilgamesh's beauty great Ishtar lifted her eyes.

'Come, Gilgamesh, be my lover!
Give me the taste of your body.
Would that you were my husband, and I your wife!"

We might say that with Ishtar there starts for Gilgamesh a journey within the journey: he is not ready to surrender to the goddess, yet we are left with the impression that his refusal -- compounded into an insult -- reveals itself as something akin to that movement against destiny. Thus only contributes to its fulfillment in the Greek tragedies. If we read the poem in an impressionistic manner, as we read a dream, we indeed see Innana as a bringer of death to him -- and thus the gateway for the journey of Gilgamesh into death and in search for immortal life. But let us return to the story: Rejected, Innana appeals to Anu of the firmament demanding that the gods create the Bull of Heaven and turn him against our heroes. She threatens to open the gates of hell so that the dead compete with the living, and so the gods are forced to oblige her, and only ask Innana whether she has made herself ready for the seven years of famine that are to follow his creation. Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat the Bull of Heaven, and this defeat is like a repetition of their titanic battle with
Humbaba, yet in the end Enkidu's excessive aggression in face of the goddess brings about his own end. After he defiantly throws one of the bull's thighs onto the face of the goddess, she insulted, demands of the gods the death of one or the other of the companions. I have already intimated that if Enkidu is a literary expression for the birth of a new life within the individual, we may correspondingly see in his death a reference to an internal death; the disappearance from the life of Gilgamesh of his beloved and supportive "other." We now come to that part of the story that describes Enkidu's sickness. When Enkidu knew himself a dying man, he first cursed the woman that domesticated him, but then, urged by Shamash, blessed her. Then he dreamed that the heavens groaned and the earth resounded, and that the talons of an eagle grabbed him by the hair, overpowering him, and bore him down -- to the house of darkness, the house of Irkalla.
"The house where one goes in never comes out of it again, the road that, if one takes it, one never comes back, the house that, if one lives there, one never sees light..."
The fourth column of tablet VII brakes off with Ereshkigal lifting her head and looking directly at the newcomer: "Who has brought this one here?"
The precise moment of Enkidu's death is not described in what has survived of the poem, which continues in tablet VII with Gilgamesh's lament. In the interpretation of the
story that I am offering this lament correspond to a time of mourning in the individual who has undergone an inner dying process, and is analogous to the mourning of Isis for Osiris. The mourning proper ends when Gilgamesh issues a call through the land to his artisans to fashion a life size gold image of his friend with a breast of lapis lazuli. Though it is Enkidu that has died instead of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh not only mourns him deeply but is afraid for his own fate. Seeing the inevitability of his own death, he now truly embarks on his second journey. This is not contaminated by the pursuit of fame and of glory, yet we see that it is contaminated by fear and by a confusion between the eternal and the everlasting. He decides that he will go to the house of Utnapishtim, the only one to whom the gods had given eternal life, and seek his help.

"Me! Will I too not die like Enkidu?

Sorrow has come into my belly. I fear death;
I roam over the hills. I will seize the road;
quickly I will go to the house of Utnapishtim,
offspring of Ubaratutu."

Upon embarking to his quest to reach Utnapishtim the Faraway, it is not to the sun god -- Shamash -- that Gilgamesh prays, but to the moon god -- Sin. Yet he acts like a "solar hero" when, axe in hand, he falls upon the lions that block his path, smashing them. Perhaps the best known representation of Gilgamesh is that in which
he stands holding one lion in each hand by the tail, in reference to this episode. Perhaps more deadly than the lions are the Scorpion man and the Scorpion woman, whom he finds at the gate that marks the entrance of the night journey proper. That will take him through the darkness inside the mountains -- the tops of which reach the vault of heaven, while below their feet touch the underworld.

When the Scorpion man called to his woman saying "this one who has come to us, his body is the flesh of gods, the woman retorted: "Two thirds of him is god, and one third human," an expression which we may read as applicable to every human being, consubstantial with the divine at both ends, so to say, a son or daughter of heaven and earth, coextensive with both matter and mind. When Gilgamesh tells the Scorpion man that he has come in account of Utnapishtim -- "who stands in the assembly of gods, and has found life" the Scorpion man assures Gilgamesh that no mortal man has accomplished this journey, but only Shamash. Still, Gilgamesh insists and he is allowed to go on. Like the Egyptian Osiris, he is to follow the sun's road to its rising through the mountain.\footnote{8. I quote from The Epic of Gilgamesh - N.K.Sandars' translation - Penguin edition.}

And now comes my favorite part in the whole poem:
"When he had gone one league the darkness became thick around him, for there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. After two leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. After three leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. After four leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. At the end of five leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. At the end of six leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. When he had gone seven leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. When he had gone eight leagues Gilgamesh gave a great cry, for the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. After nine leagues he felt the north wind on his face, but the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. After ten leagues the end was near. After eleven leagues the dawn light appeared. At the end of twelve leagues the sun streamed out."
Next, Gilgamesh finds himself in "the garden of the gods," that is filled with jewel-like plants, and, significantly, covered with vines. The presence of wine in the paradise that Gilgamesh reaches after crossing the mountains may be taken as a symbol of transformation through rebirth -- for we know well how wine has conveyed this significance in both near Eastern and Greek religions.

We may conjecture that this paradise was the end of some early version of the Gilgamesh story, but just as the early stage of Gilgamesh's career has come to be formed of two rather similar adventures -- the slaying of Humbaba and that of the Bull of Heaven, also in the Babylonian version of the epic we find the second adventure on the hero's path (which occurs, not under the aegis of the moon and will make him into priest of Innana) is constituted of two very similarly impossible journeys -- the first through the mountains, the second through the waters of death.

9. Or perhaps beer.
At the edge of this "Garden of the Sun" Gilgamesh meets the guardian of another gate along his path. Siduri, as she is called, constitute another embodiment of the great mother. She offers him a golden bowl of wine. She is covered with a veil and sees Gilgamesh walking toward her "his face like that of a man who has gone on a long journey." She bars the door on Gilgamesh and interrogates him: "Why is your strength wasted, your face sunken? ... There is sorrow in your belly ... Your face is weathered by cold and heat because you roam the wilderness in search of a wind-puff." Gilgamesh explains to her that his strength is wasted and that cold and heat have weathered his features because Enkidu, his friend, has died. "In fear of death I roam the wilderness. The case of my friend lies heavy in me. On a remote path I roam the wilderness. The case of my friend Enkidu lies heavy in me. On a long journey I wander the steppe. How can I keep still? How can I be silent?... Now, Barmaid, which is the way to Utnapishtim? What are his landmarks? Give it to me. Give its signs to me. If it is possible, let me cross the sea; If it is possible, let me traverse the wilderness."

She retorts that there never has been a crossing, except for Shamash, and even if he were able to cross the sea, what would he do, on arriving at the waters of death?

10. Through this expression (a foreshadowing of the Greek and Arabic image of "cup-bearer") is Siduri called in Gardner's translation.
Her behavior is paradoxical, for, while she tells Gilgamesh that the journey is impossible, she directs him to Urshanabi -- boatman to Utnapishtim. "Show him your face. If it is possible, cross with him. If it is not possible, come back."

There follows a scene in which Gilgamesh destroys certain stone objects which apparently made it possible for Urshanabi's boat to cross the waters of death. It seems to convey a situation along the path when the individual, in utter despair, explodes in impatience and irritation -- and yet, mercifully, his self-destructive impetuousness turns out not to be fatal.

When Gilgamesh addresses Urshanabi, we find less fear in him than when he explained his situation to the Scorpion man and to Siduri. As he tells Urshanabi his predicament, it is his pain and his love for his friend that stands out rather than his fear. Now Urshanabi tells Gilgamesh that his own hands have hindered the crossing, when he destroyed the "stone things," yet (again paradoxically) instructs him to take an axe, to go down into the forest and to cut poles -- a hundred and twenty poles of sixty cubits. It is by heaving these poles that Gilgamesh pushes their boat, as they crossed the waters of death. When all of them are gone, he strips himself, he holds up his arms for a mast and his covering for a sail.
The image evokes a nearly perfect coincidence of a running out of resources and the crossing to the other shore -- a synchronization comparable to that of a rocket that has an exact amount of fuel to leap into a different orbit.

Gilgamesh, at last, comes to Utnapishtim, the Faraway, and explains his "dark night of the soul": "I said: I will go to Utnapishtim, the remote one, about whom they tell tales. I turned, wandering, over all the lands. I crossed uncrossable mountains. I travelled all the seas. No real sleep has calmed my face. I have worn myself out in sleeplessness; my flesh is filled with grief. I had not yet arrived at the house of the Barmaid when my clothing was used up... I slept in dirt and bitumen."

Utnapishtim's reply is incompletely preserved, but it seems to say that when Gilgamesh's divine parents conceived him in the assembly of the gods, he was fated to be mortal, and not immortal: "From the beginning there is no permanence."

Gilgamesh's reaction on meeting Utnapishtim is that of a surprise at finding one not essentially different from himself. He who has pursued the extraordinary, the super-warrior that some identify with the biblical Nimrod, cannot believe that Utnapishtim is not himself heroic. Yet Utnapishtim is precisely the answer to Gilgamesh's unbalanced "solar" nature. We may say that in the
land of Utnapishtim Gilgamesh will have to learn to leave behind his heroic approach, to learn, instead, the way of the prophets, the way of receptivity. This is clearly the poet's message though Utnapishtim's answer to Gilgamesh's question: how had Utnapishtim came to be in the assembly of the gods? Utnapishtim's answer to this question (that we may regard equivalent to an asking for the secret of immortality) is appropriately prefaced with his telling Gilgamesh that he will uncover for him a "secret of the gods."

There was an uproar in the city of Shuruppak -- set on the bank of the Euphrates -- and he, Utnapishtim had been silent, so his ear had been open enough to hear the voice of Ea, the friendly god of wind to the wall of his reed hut. "Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubaratutu," Ea had then said to him: "Tear down the house. Build an ark. Abandon riches. Seek life." He would build a boat, according to precise measures, and like the abyss itself, it would be covered with a roof. Into his ark he commanded him to load the seed of every living thing. It had been trickery on the part of Ea to divulge -- without divulging it -- the secret of the gods (he only whispered to the wall, or so pretended). Now he advises our primordial Noah to be a trickster himself. In response to the concern of Utnapishtim that he will need to answer the city, the people and the elders, lord Ea responds: "You may say this to them: Enlil hates me!... I
will go down to the Abyss, to live with Ea, my lord."
"He will make richness rain down on you —
the choicest birds, the rarest fish.
The land will have its fill of harvest riches.
At dawn bread
he will pour down on you -- showers of wheat."
When the deluge came Ishtar cried out like a woman giving
birth. "How could I speak evil in the Assembly of the
Gods?"
"How could I cry out for battle for the
destruction of my people?
I myself gave birth to my people!"
Six
days and seven nights the wind shrieked, the stormflood
rolled through the land, and at last the ark stood
grounded on the mountain Nisir. Utnapishtim first
sent out a dove, then a swallow, and both returned. Then
he sent out a crow and it did not come back. Now he
sacrificed -- and the lady of the gods came down and said
"Gods, let me not forget this, by the power of the lapis
lazuli on my neck," and he invited the gods to approach
the offering, except Enlil, for without discussion in the
Assembly of the Gods he had brought on the Flood.
Enlil was furious that life-breath had escaped the
devastation. Then Ea rebuked the warrior god Enlil for
sending the flood. In a frame of mind comparable to that
of Abraham when he interceded for the just that might
live in Sodom and Gomorrah, he said to him: "Punish the
one who commits the crime; punish the evildoer alone."
"I, I did not unhide the secret of the great gods," Ea
explained to Enlil: "Utnapishtim the over-wise, a vision
was shown to him; he heard the secret of the gods." And
we may assume that it is in Utnapishtim's silent and
obedient ear that there lies the greatest of divine
secrets.

"Think about Ea's words, now, Gilgamesh,"
Utnapishtim advices to our hero as he is about to finish
answering his question as to how he came to be in the
Assembly of the Gods; and he proceeds:

"Enlil came up to the ark.

He seized my hand and picked me up,

and he raised my wife up, making her kneel at my
side.

He touched our foreheads and, standing between us,

blessed us."

Thus, not because of a super-heroic effort, but because he had been
silent, calm and receptive, Utnapishtim and his wife had been transformed, becoming godlike. Not the active way of
Shamash, but the passive one of the moon had brought him
to the condition of living far off, at the source of all
rivers, i.e. in a different dimension, transcendent to
that of our earthly experience.

Now the story proceeds to suggest that it is not courage that Gilgamesh
is lacking, but subtle attention; not the power of arms
but a power such as is necessary to not fall asleep for
six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh, of course, fails this test, and he even ignores or denies that he has fallen asleep. Gilgamesh cannot understand the secret of the gods, and has failed the test of wakefullness -- yet we are left with the impression that his failure is only a stage along the way, for when Urshanabi, enjoined by Utnapishtim, puts on him "the robe of life" so that he may go back to his city, we have the sense that Gilgamesh's journey to death has come to an end. "Let him put on an elder's robe" says Utnapishtim, "and let it be always new. Urshanabi took charge of him ¶ and brought him to the washing place. ¶ He cleaned his filthy body hair in the water, made him pure. ¶ He cast off the skins and carried them to the sea; ¶ the goodness of his body shone out." We will find echoes of this scene in Dante's Garden of Eden and at the beginning of second Faust where comparable imagery is deliberately intended to convey a rebirth. It definitely conveys renewal, purification, rejuvenation and reentry into a world that had been abandoned at the beginning of the long pilgrimage. One more adventure will Gilgamesh still have on his way of return to his city, the world and kingship. It is an adventure in which we may see a reiterated summing of his adventure
thus far. For, another secret of the gods Utnapishtim reveals to Gilgamesh, (upon his wife's prompting) as he embarks on his return journey. There is a plant in the bottom of the sea, the spike of which pricks our hand like a bramble. "If you get your hands on that plant," he tells him "you'll have everlasting life." Binding heavy stones to his feet Gilgamesh was "dragged down into the abyss" where he saw the plant. He seized it, it cut into his hand and he cast it up onto the shore. This plant of rejuvenation, he would eat and give to the elders to eat, yet a snake smelling the plant's fragrance, came up through the waters and carried it away. The plant was certainly transformative and rejuvenating, for the snake threw off its skin -- yet did Gilgamesh need to eat it? In the dream-like language of the poem it would seem that his involvement with plant and snake, after receiving an elder's robe was all that needed to be -- a sign -- and perhaps he only wept out of a residual identification of longevity with spiritual permanence. The mention of his weeping is appropriate at this point of the story, however, for it is the time of what may be called a tragic victory in the hero's journey. We may say that the end of Gilgamesh epic is paradoxical, in that it depicts our hero's triumph through the imagery of failure. We cannot deny that the story is about a successful journey -- for the end result is wisdom, and Gilgamesh was to be remembered as a man
who became a god. But the story of the journey's end would not be accurately told if it did not appear to be that of a failure -- for the triumph is not "of this world," and the spiritual birth as something only visible to the earthly level of the mind as a death. When I first knew the epic (some forty years ago) -- and for a long time after that -- I did not really understand it, and did not understand why the earliest "tale of the hero" that we have would be the story of a failure in the quest.

I did not understand, of course, that Gilgamesh is not the story of a failure except from the perspective of an immature view of what the quest is about -- or what it is that may be found at its end. Ego failure as the crowning event in a path that is inherently one of ego-annihilation is, of course, spiritual success.

It seems fitting that the ultimate victory of a super-hero be a seeming defeat. We may see in Gilgamesh a precedent, in this, of Christ's "Lord why have you abandoned me?" at Golgotha. In the end Gilgamesh was most humble, for he told us that he had only realized the truth of impermanence. There was wisdom in his willingness to present himself like a loser. He leaves us with the impression that his coming to the land of Utnapishtim was only a passing experience, something left behind like the plant that was snatched away by the snake before his return. From what he tells us it seems to us
that he has returned empty handed, yet, I think, there is something that he is not saying, and which the author of the poem also is silent about: that his visit to the transcendent land of Utnapishtim made him a different person. Yet the poet is not altogether silent, for he speaks to us poetically; not through his words, but as in a whisper, through the message of his medium: stone. Just as it was "stone things" that allowed Urshanabi's boat to cross the waters of death, and stone that, tied to his feet, carried Gilgamesh down into the abyss, to the plant of life, in the end "he engraved in stone the whole story." Why stone and not clay tablets as have come to us? Not so much for its practical advantages, I believe, but for its meaning. We may be sure that for Gilgamesh, as for our megalithic ancestors and for the Egyptian pyramid builders, stone meant permanence. Just as fire, in its evanescence, evokes life, the seeming changelessness of stone suggested death: death as the deathless, a permanence that is not of this world. For all is, truly, impermanent -- yet there is a knowledge of impermanence: a wisdom or consciousness beyond its objects, that is like a deathlessness, and which, I think, Gilgamesh knew as well as every spiritual man at the end of his path. At the end of the poem Gilgamesh celebrates the city to which he has returned -- and to the building of which, we
may surmise, he contributed: "Inspect the base, view the brickwork. ¶
Is not the very core made of oven-fired brick? ¶
Did not the seven sages lay down its foundation?
In Uruk, house of Ishtar, one part is city, one part orchards, and one part claypits. ¶
Three including the claypits make up Uruk.'"

Long live the memory of Gilgamesh who made the great crossing, who knew the abyss, who became a servant of life, and who, in accepting his humanity, became complete! So ends the epic of Gilgamesh, I think we may say -- in spite of the fact that Sin-Lequi-Unninni's version contains still a 12th tablet, in which is described the journey of Enkidu to the underworld. Surely the compiler must have respected an established tradition in including this fragment in the work, though it constitutes a non-sequitor at the end of the poem (for Enkidu has been dead long ago). In a different position, this text could fit quite well -- specially after the passage when Enkidu dreamt about being carried by a vulture-like being to the house of ashes. Inserted before tablet eight, the "descent of Enkidu into hell" would precede Gilgamesh's lament and complete the account of his passing away.
Something that perhaps has contributed to its being left to the end, however, is the reinforcement that it provides, at this point, to a meaning that is only
implicit in the epic: the affirmation of life. Whether you read it at the end or before the setting out of Gilgamesh in search of Utnapishtim, the essential content of the descent of Enkidu into hell", is news to the effect that the realm of shadows is not so good as of the living. Father Ea had a hole be made to the underworld so the ghost of Enkidu might rise from the darkness and tell the ways of the underworld to his brother. During his fleeting return Enkidu was able to tell Gilgamesh: "I will not tell you, friend. I will not tell you. If I must tell you the ways of the underworld that I've seen, sit down and weep."

I think that after his return Gilgamesh followed the advice that Siduri (according to the Sumerian version) had given him in the garden of the sun.

"As for you Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,¶

Make merry day and night.¶

Of each day make a feast of rejoicing,¶

Day and night dance and play!¶

Let your garments be sparkling fresh,¶

Your head be washed; bathe in water.¶

Pay heed to a little one that holds on to your hand.¶

Let a spouse delight in your bosom,¶

11

11. In search of Gilgamesh's pukku and mikku.
For this is the task of woman."

Gilgamesh had rejected this advice as he had rejected his old garment in the savage pilgrimage to the beyond. So I think we can give him credit for having found that the other shore is no different from the one he had set out from in the first place.

In a veiled manner the Gilgamesh poem addresses the paradoxical fact that the journey does not need to be made, and yet nobody can know this without making it.

*************************