Gilgamesh (outline)

Tablet one

The story introduces Gilgamesh, king of Uruk. Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third man, is oppressing his people, who cry out to the gods for help. For the young women of Uruk this oppression takes the form of a droit du seigneur, or "lord's right", to sleep with brides on their wedding night. For the young men (the tablet is damaged at this point) it is conjectured that Gilgamesh exhausts them through games, tests of strength, or perhaps forced labour on building projects. The gods respond to the people's pleas by creating an equal to Gilgamesh who will be able to stop his oppression. This is Enkidu, who is covered in hair and lives in the wild. He is spotted by a trapper, whose livelihood is being ruined because Enkidu is uprooting his traps. The trapper tells the sun-god Shamash about the man, and it is arranged for Enkidu to be seduced by Shamhat, a temple prostitute, his first step towards being tamed. After six days and seven nights (or two weeks, according to more recent scholarship) of lovemaking and teaching Enkidu about the ways of civilization, she takes Enkidu to a shepherd's camp to learn how to be civilized. Gilgamesh, meanwhile, has been having dreams about the imminent arrival of a beloved new companion and asks his mother, the goddess Ninsun, to help interpret these dreams.

Tablet two

Shamhat brings Enkidu to the shepherds' camp, where he is introduced to a human diet and becomes the night watchman. Learning from a passing stranger about Gilgamesh's treatment of new brides, Enkidu is incensed and travels to Uruk to intervene at a wedding. When Gilgamesh attempts to visit the wedding chamber, Enkidu blocks his way, and they fight. After a fierce battle, Enkidu acknowledges Gilgamesh's superior strength and they become friends. Gilgamesh proposes a journey to the Cedar Forest to slay the monstrous demi-god Humbaba in order to gain fame and renown. Despite warnings from Enkidu and the council of elders, Gilgamesh is not deterred.

Tablet three

The elders give Gilgamesh advice for his journey. Gilgamesh visits his mother, Ninsun, who

seeks the support and protection of the sun-god Shamash for their adventure. Ninsun adopts Enkidu as her son, and Gilgamesh leaves instructions for the governance of Uruk in his absence.

Tablet four

Gilgamesh and Enkidu journey to the Cedar Forest. Every few days they camp on a mountain, and perform a dream ritual. Gilgamesh has five terrifying dreams about falling mountains, thunderstorms, wild bulls, and a thunderbird that breathes fire. Despite similarities between his dream figures and earlier descriptions of Humbaba, Enkidu interprets these dreams as good omens, and denies that the frightening images represent the forest guardian. As they approach the cedar mountain, they hear Humbaba bellowing, and have to encourage each other not to be afraid.

Tablet five

The heroes enter the cedar forest. Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest, insults and threatens them. He accuses Enkidu of betrayal, and vows to disembowel Gilgamesh and feed his flesh to the birds. Gilgamesh is afraid, but with some encouraging words from Enkidu the battle commences. The mountains quake with the tumult and the sky turns black. The god Shamash sends 13 winds to bind Humbaba, and he is captured. Humbaba pleads for his life, and Gilgamesh pities him. He offers to make Gilgamesh king of the forest, to cut the trees for him, and to be his slave. Enkidu, however, argues that Gilgamesh should kill Humbaba to establish his reputation forever. Humbaba curses them both and Gilgamesh dispatches him with a blow to the neck, as well as killing his seven sons. The two heroes cut down many cedars, including a gigantic tree that Enkidu plans to fashion into a gate for the temple of Enlil. They build a raft and return home along the Euphrates with the giant tree and (possibly) the head of Humbaba.

Tablet six

Gilgamesh rejects the advances of the goddess Ishtar because of her mistreatment of previous lovers like Dumuzi. Ishtar asks her father Anu to send the Bull of Heaven to avenge her. When Anu rejects her complaints, Ishtar threatens to raise the dead who will "outnumber the

living" and "devour them". Anu states that if he gives her the Bull of Heaven, Uruk will face 7 years of famine. Ishtar provides him with provisions for 7 years in exchange for the bull. Ishtar leads the Bull of Heaven to Uruk, and he causes widespread devastation. He lowers the level of the Euphrates river, and dries up the marshes. He opens up huge pits that swallow 300 men. Without any divine assistance, Enkidu and Gilgamesh murder him and offer up his heart to Shamash. When Ishtar cries out, Enkidu hurls one of the hindquarters of the bull at her. The city of Uruk celebrates, but Enkidu has an ominous dream about his future failure.

Tablet seven

In Enkidu's dream, the gods decide that one of the heroes must die because they killed Humbaba and Gugalanna. Despite the protestations of Shamash, Enkidu is marked for death. Enkidu curses the great door he has fashioned for Enlil's temple. He also curses the trapper and Shamhat for removing him from the wild. Shamash reminds Enkidu of how Shamhat fed and clothed him, and introduced him to Gilgamesh. Shamash tells him that Gilgamesh will bestow great honors upon him at his funeral, and will wander into the wild consumed with grief. Enkidu regrets his curses and blesses Shamhat instead. In a second dream, however, he sees himself being taken captive to the Netherworld by a terrifying Angel of Death. The underworld is a "house of dust" and darkness whose inhabitants eat clay, and are clothed in bird feathers, supervised by terrifying beings. For 12 days, Enkidu's condition worsens. Finally, after a lament that he could not meet a heroic death in battle, he dies. In a famous line from the epic, Gilgamesh clings to Enkidu's body and denies that he has died until a maggot drops from the corpse's nose.

Tablet eight

Gilgamesh delivers a lament for Enkidu, in which he calls upon mountains, forests, fields, rivers, wild animals, and all of Uruk to mourn for his friend. Recalling their adventures together, Gilgamesh tears at his hair and clothes in grief. He commissions a funerary statue, and provides grave gifts from his treasury to ensure that Enkidu has a favourable reception in the realm of the dead. A great banquet is held where the treasures are offered to the gods of the Netherworld. Just before a break in the text there is a suggestion that a river is being dammed, indicating a burial in a river bed, as in the corresponding Sumerian poem, The

Death of Gilgamesh.

Tablet nine

Tablet nine opens with Gilgamesh roaming the wild wearing skins, grieving for Enkidu. Having now become fearful of his own death, he decides to seek Utnapishtim ("the Faraway"), and learn the secret of eternal life. Among the few survivors of the Great Flood, Utnapishtim and his wife are the only humans to have been granted immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh crosses a mountain pass at night and encounters a pride of lions. Before sleeping he prays for protection to the moon god Sin. Then, waking from an encouraging dream, he murders the lions and uses their skins for clothing. After a long and perilous journey, Gilgamesh arrives at the twin peaks of Mount Mashu at the end of the earth. He comes across a tunnel, which no man has ever entered, guarded by two scorpion monsters, who appear to be a married couple. The husband tries to dissuade Gilgamesh from passing, but the wife intervenes, expresses sympathy for Gilgamesh, and (according to the poem's editor Benjamin Foster) allows his passage. He passes under the mountains along the Road of the Sun. In complete darkness he follows the road for 12 "double hours", managing to complete the trip before the Sun catches up with him. He arrives at the Garden of the gods, a paradise full of jewel-laden trees.

Tablet ten

Gilgamesh meets alewife Siduri, who assumes that he is a murderer or thief because of his disheveled appearance. Gilgamesh tells her about the purpose of his journey. She attempts to dissuade him from his quest, but sends him to Urshanabi the ferryman, who will help him cross the sea to Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh, out of spontaneous rage, destroys the stone charms that Urshanabi keeps with him. Gilgamesh tells his story, but when he asks for help, Urshanabi informs him that he has just destroyed the objects that can help them cross the Waters of Death, which are deadly to the touch. Urshanabi instructs Gilgamesh to cut down 120 trees and fashion them into punting poles. When they reach the island where Utnapishtim lives, Gilgamesh recounts his story, asking him for his help. Utnapishtim reprimands him, declaring that fighting the common fate of humans is futile and diminishes life's joys.

Tablet eleven

Gilgamesh observes that Utnapishtim seems no different from himself, and asks him how he obtained his immortality. Utnapishtim explains that the gods decided to send a great flood. To save Utnapishtim the god Enki told him to build a boat. He gave him precise dimensions, and it was sealed with pitch and bitumen. His entire family went aboard together with his craftsmen and "all the animals of the field". A violent storm then arose which caused the terrified gods to retreat to the heavens. Ishtar lamented the wholesale destruction of humanity, and the other gods wept beside her. The storm lasted six days and nights, after which "all the human beings turned to clay". Utnapishtim weeps when he sees the destruction. His boat lodges on a mountain, and he releases a dove, a swallow, and a raven. When the raven fails to return, he opens the ark and frees its inhabitants. Utnapishtim offers a sacrifice to the gods, who smell the sweet savour and gather around. Ishtar vows that just as she will never forget the brilliant necklace that hangs around her neck, she will always remember this time. When Enlil arrives, angry that there are survivors, she condemns him for instigating the flood. Enki also castigates him for sending a disproportionate punishment. Enlil blesses Utnapishtim and his wife, and rewards them with eternal life. This account largely matches the flood story that concludes the Epic of Atra-Hasis.

The main point seems to be that when Enlil granted eternal life it was a unique gift. As if to demonstrate this point, Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh falls asleep, and Utnapishtim instructs his wife to bake a loaf of bread on each of the days he is asleep, so that he cannot deny his failure to keep awake. Gilgamesh, who is seeking to overcome death, cannot even conquer sleep. After instructing Urshanabi, the ferryman, to wash Gilgamesh and clothe him in royal robes, they depart for Uruk. As they are leaving, Utnapishtim's wife asks her husband to offer a parting gift. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that at the bottom of the sea there lives a boxthorn-like plant that will make him young again. Gilgamesh, by binding stones to his feet so he can walk on the bottom, manages to obtain the plant. Gilgamesh proposes to investigate if the plant has the hypothesized rejuvenation ability by testing it on an old man once he returns to Uruk.When Gilgamesh stops to bathe, it is stolen by a serpent, who sheds their skin as they depart. Gilgamesh weeps at the futility of his efforts, because he has now lost all chance of

immortality. He returns to Uruk, where the sight of its massive walls prompts him to praise this enduring work to Urshanabi.

Tablet twelve

This tablet is mainly an Akkadian translation of an earlier Sumerian poem, "Gilgamesh and the Netherworld" (also known as "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld" and variants), although it has been suggested that it is derived from an unknown version of that story. The contents of this last tablet are inconsistent with previous ones: Enkidu is still alive, despite having died earlier in the epic. Because of this, its lack of integration with the other tablets, and the fact that it is almost a copy of an earlier version, it has been referred to as an 'inorganic appendage' to the epic. Alternatively, it has been suggested that "its purpose, though crudely handled, is to explain to Gilgamesh (and the reader) the various fates of the dead in the Afterlife" and in "an awkward attempt to bring closure", it both connects the Gilgamesh of the epic with the Gilgamesh who is the King of the Netherworld, and is "a dramatic capstone whereby the twelve-tablet epic ends on one and the same theme, that of "seeing" (= understanding, discovery, etc.), with which it began."

Gilgamesh complains to Enkidu that various of his possessions (the tablet is unclear exactly what – different translations include a drum and a ball) have fallen into the underworld. Enkidu offers to bring them back. Delighted, Gilgamesh tells Enkidu what he must and must not do in the underworld if he is to return. Enkidu does everything which he was told not to do. The underworld keeps him. Gilgamesh prays to the gods to give him back his friend. Enlil and Suen do not reply, but Enki and Shamash decide to help. Shamash makes a crack in the earth, and Enkidu's ghost jumps out of it. The tablet ends with Gilgamesh questioning Enkidu about what he has seen in the underworld.

'"[Let him who] goes first be on guard for himself and bring his comrade to safety!"
It is they made a name [for days] long in the future!'
[At the] *distant* . . . the two of them arrived,
[they ceased] their talking and came to a halt. IV 260

Tablet V. The Combat with Humbaba

After admiring the mountain dense-grown with cedar, the heroes draw their weapons and creep into the forest. Humbaba confronts them, and accuses Enkidu of treachery. Enkidu urges swift action. Gilgamesh and Humbaba fight, and Shamash sends the thirteen winds to blind Humbaba and win victory for his protégé. Humbaba pleads for his life. Enkidu again urges haste, telling Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba before the gods find out. Humbaba curses the heroes, who promptly kill him and begin felling cedar in the sacred groves. From one especially magnificent cedar Enkidu vows to make a great door to adorn the temple of the god Enlil.

They stood there marvelling at the forest,
gazing at the lofty cedars,
gazing at forest's entrance –
where Humbaba came and went there was a track.

The path was straight and the way well trodden. V 5
They saw the Mountain of Cedar, seat of gods and goddesses' throne.
[On the] face of the mountain the cedar proffered its abundance,
its shade was sweet and full of delight.

[Thick] tangled was the thorn, the forest a shrouding canopy,
. . . cedar, *ballukku*-trees . . . . . . V 10

* * *

After a lacuna intervenes, the text continues, though it is not completely recovered:

At once the dirks . . . . . . , V 53
and from the scabbards . . . . . .
The axes were smeared . . . . . . , V 55

hatchet [and] dirk in . . . . . .
One . . . . ,
they stole into . . . .
Humbaba . . . . V 59

* * *

Gilgamesh [opened his mouth to speak,] V 65
[saying to Enkidu:]

'What, [my friend,] . . . . . .

* * *

'[For] Enlil . . . . '

Enkidu [opened] his mouth [to speak,] V 70
[saying to Gilgamesh:]
'My [friend], Humbaba . . . . ,
one-to-one . . . .

'[Two] garments, however, ... ,
even a glacis-slope two [*climbing can conquer.*]
Two . . . . V 75
a three-ply rope [*is not easily broken.*]

'[Even] a mighty lion two cubs [*can overcome.*]'

A fragment of this conversation is also preserved on a second Old Babylonian tablet from Tell Harmal (Ha_2):

'We have come to a place where a man shouldn't go . . . ,
let us set our weapons in the gate of *Humbaba!'
. . . [Enkidu] declared to his friend:
'A tempest's onslaught is [ferocious *Humbaba!]
[Like] the god of the storm he will trample us down.'

When the text of Tablet V resumes, the heroes are face to face with the forest's guardian:

Humbaba opened his mouth to speak, V 85
saying to Gilgamesh:
'Let fools take counsel, Gilgamesh, with the rude and brutish!
Why have you come here into my presence?

'Come, Enkidu, you spawn of a fish, who knew no father,
hatchling of terrapin and turtle, who sucked no mother's milk!
In your youth I watched you, but near you I went not,
would your . . . *have filled* my belly? V 90

'[Now] in treachery you bring before me Gilgamesh,
and stand there, Enkidu, like a warlike stranger!
I will slit the throat and gullet of Gilgamesh,
I will feed his flesh to the locust bird, ravening eagle and vulture!'

Gilgamesh opened his mouth to speak, saying to Enkidu: V 95
'My friend, Humbaba's features have changed!
Though boldly we came up to his lair to defeat him,
yet my heart will not quickly . . . '

Enkidu opened his mouth to speak,
saying to Gilgamesh:
'Why, my friend, [do you] speak like a weakling? V 100
With your spineless words you [make] me despondent.

'Now, my friend, but one is [*our task*,]
the copper is already pouring into the mould!
To stoke the furnace for an hour? To . . . the coals for an hour?
To send the Deluge is to crack the whip! V 105

'[Don't] draw back, don't make a retreat!
. . . . . . make your blow mighty!' V 107

* * *

He smote the ground and . . . faced him head on. V 132

At the heels of their feet the earth burst asunder,
they shattered, as they whirled, Mounts Sirion and Lebanon.
Black became the clouds of white, V 135
raining down on them death like a mist.

Shamash roused against Humbaba the mighty gale-winds:
South Wind, North Wind, East Wind and West Wind,
Blast, Counterblast, Typhoon, Hurricane and Tempest,
Devil-Wind, Frost-Wind, Gale and Tornado: V 140

there rose thirteen winds and the face of Humbaba darkened –
he could not charge forwards, he could not kick backwards –
the weapons of Gilgamesh then reached Humbaba.
In a plea for his life said Humbaba to Gilgamesh:

'You are so young, Gilgamesh, your mother just bore you, V 145
but indeed you are the offspring of [Wild-Cow Ninsun!]
By Shamash's command the mountains *you flattened*,
O offshoot sprung from Uruk's midst, Gilgamesh the king!

'. . . , Gilgamesh, a dead man cannot . . . ,
. . . alive for his lord . . . . . . V 150
Spare my life, O Gilgamesh, ... ,
let me dwell here for you in [the Forest of Cedar!]

'Trees as many as you command . . . . . . ,
I will guard you myrtle, ...
timber to be the pride of [your] palace!' V 155

Enkidu opened his mouth to speak,
[saying to Gilgamesh:]
'Do not listen, my [friend,] to Humbaba's words,
[*ignore*] his supplications . . . . . . ' V 158

* * *

[Humbaba opened his mouth to speak,] V 174
[saying to Enkidu:]

'You are experienced in the ways of my forest, the ways . . . , V 175
also you know all the arts of speech.
I should have picked you up and hanged you from a sapling at the way into the forest,
I should have fed your flesh to the locust bird, ravening eagle and vulture.

'Now, Enkidu, [my] release lies with you:
tell Gilgamesh to spare me my life!' V 180
Enkidu opened his mouth to speak,
saying to Gilgamesh:

'My friend, Humbaba who guards the Forest of [Cedar:]
finish him, slay him, do away with his power!
Humbaba who guards the Forest [of Cedar:] V 185
finish him, slay him, do away with his power,
before Enlil the foremost hears what we do!

The [great] gods will take against us in anger,
Enlil in Nippur, Shamash in [Larsa] . . . ,
Establish for ever [*a fame*] that endures,
how Gilgamesh [*slew ferocious*] Humbaba!'

Humbaba heard [*what Enkidu was saying*,] V 190
he [lifted] his head and . . .

* * *

[Humbaba opened his mouth to speak,]
[saying to Enkidu:]

' . . . You sit before [him] like a shepherd, V 236
like his hireling [*doing his bidding*.]
Now, Enkidu, [my release] lies with you . . . ,
tell Gilgamesh to [spare] me my life!'

Enkidu opened his mouth to speak, V 240
saying [to Gilgamesh:]
'My friend, Humbaba who guards the Forest [of Cedar –]
[finish him,] slay him, [do away with his power,]
before [Enlil] the foremost hears what we do!

The [great] gods will take against us in anger,
Enlil in Nippur, Shamash in [Larsa] . . .
Establish for ever [*a fame*] that endures,
how Gilgamesh *slew* [*ferocious*] Humbaba!' V 245

Humbaba heard . . . and . . . [*bitterly cursed them*:]

* * *

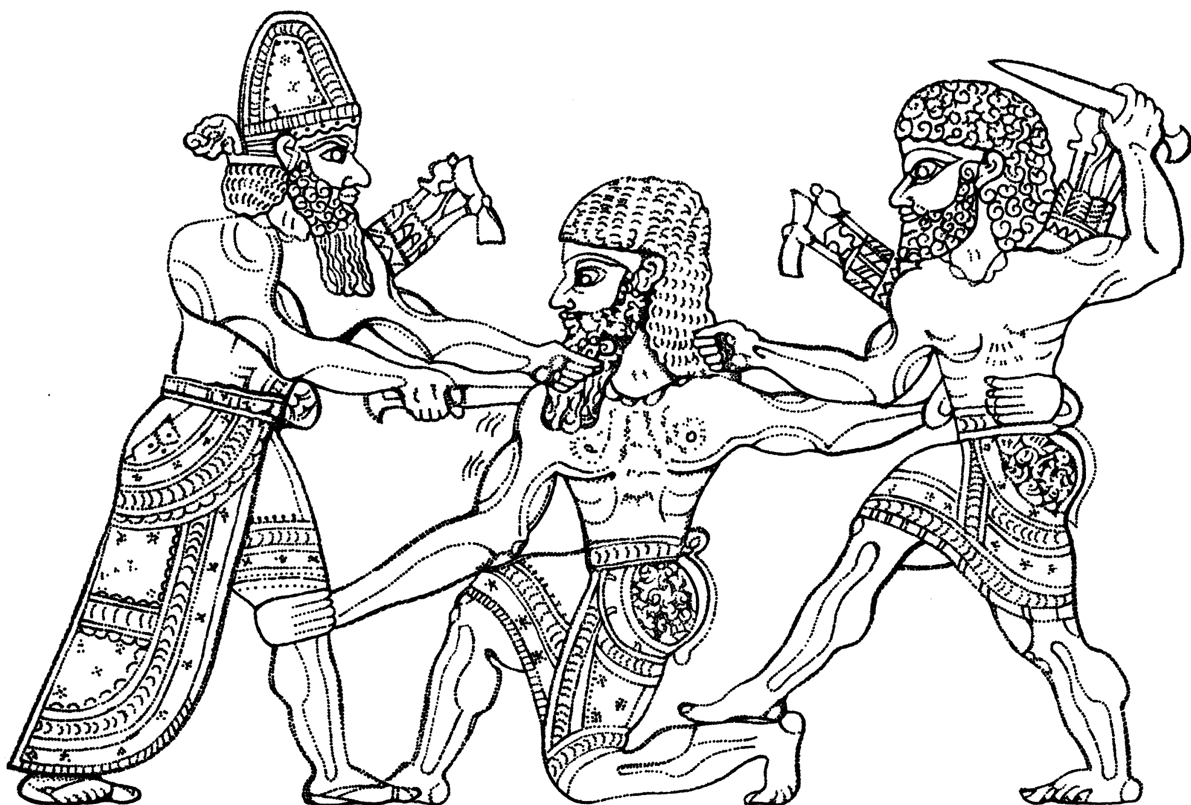
'May the pair of them not grow old, V 256
besides Gilgamesh his friend, none shall bury Enkidu!'

Enkidu opened his mouth to speak,
saying to Gilgamesh:
'My friend, I speak to you but you do not hear me!
While the curses . . . . , V 260
[*let those curses return*] to his mouth.'

[Gilgamesh heard the words] of his friend,
he drew forth [the dirk at] his side.
Gilgamesh [smote him] in the neck,
Enkidu . . . while he pulled out the lungs. V 265

[. . .] . . . springing up,
[from] the head he took the tusks as booty.
[*Rain*] in plenty fell on the mountain,
. . . in plenty fell on the mountain. V 269

A different version of the slaying of Humbaba and his minions, but better preserved, is given in an Old Babylonian tablet from Ishchali:



6 'Gilgamesh smote him in the neck'.

[Said] Gilgamesh to [him,] to Enkidu: Ish 10′
'Now, my friend, we must impose our victory.
The auras slip away in the thicket,
the auras slip away, their radiance *grows dim*.'

Said Enkidu to him, to Gilgamesh:
'My friend, catch a bird and where go its chicks? Ish 15′
Let us look for the auras later,
as the chicks run here and there in the thicket!

'Smite him again, slay his servant *alongside him*!'
Gilgamesh heard the word of his companion.
He took up his axe in his hand, Ish 20′
he drew forth the dirk from his belt.

Gilgamesh smote him in the neck,
his friend Enkidu *gave encouragement.*
He . . . . he fell,
the ravines did run with his blood. Ish 25′

*Humbaba the guardian he smote to the ground,
for two leagues afar . . .
With him he slew . . . . . . ,
the woods he . . . . . .

He slew the ogre, the forest's guardian, Ish 30′
at whose yell *were sundered* the peaks of Sirion and Lebanon,
. . . the mountains did *quake*,
. . . all the hillsides did tremble.

He slew the ogre, the cedar's guardian,
the broken . . . . . . Ish 35′
As soon as he had slain all seven (of the auras),
the war-net of *two talents' weight*, and the dirk of eight,

a load of ten talents he took up,
he went down to trample the forest.
He discovered the secret abode of the gods,
Gilgamesh felling the trees, Enkidu choosing the *timber.* Ish 39′

After a gap the text of Tablet V resumes:

Enkidu opened his mouth to speak, V 292
saying to Gilgamesh:
'My friend, we have felled a lofty cedar,
whose top thrust up to the sky.

'I will make a door, six rods in height, two rods in breadth, one cubit in thickness, V 295
whose pole and pivots, top and bottom, will be all of a piece.'

At this point Tablet V is badly damaged. A better-preserved version of the episode is known from an Old Babylonian tablet of unknown provenance, now in Baghdad:

. . . he went trampling through the Forest of Cedar, IM 17
he discovered the secret abode of the gods.
The Wild-Born knew how to give counsel,
he said to his friend:

'By your strength alone you slew the guardian, IM 20
what can bring you dishonour? Lay low the Forest of [Cedar!]
Seek out for me a lofty cedar,
whose crown is high as the heavens!

'I will make a door of a reed-length's breadth,
let it not have a pivot, let it travel in the door-jamb.
Its side will be a cubit, a reed-length its breadth, IM 25
let no stranger draw near it, let a god have love for [it.]

'To the house of Enlil the Euphrates shall bear it,
let the folk of Nippur rejoice over it!
Let the god Enlil delight in it!' IM 29

The text of Tablet V resumes for the final three lines:

They bound together a raft, they laid [*the cedar on it.*] V 300
Enkidu was helmsman . . . . ,
and Gilgamesh [*carried*] the head of Humbaba.

Tablet VI. Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven

Back in Uruk Gilgamesh's beauty provokes the desire of the goddess Ishtar and she proposes to him. Gilgamesh scorns her, reminding her of the fates suffered by her many former conquests. Ishtar is enraged and rushes up to heaven. She persuades Anu, her father, to give her the fiery Bull of Heaven (the constellation Taurus) so that she can punish Gilgamesh with death. The Bull of Heaven causes havoc in Uruk, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu discover its weak spot and kill it. They insult Ishtar further and return to the palace in triumph to celebrate their victory.

He washed his matted hair, he cleaned his equipment,
he shook his hair down over his back.
Casting aside his dirty gear he clad himself in clean,
wrapped cloaks round him, tied with a sash.
Then did Gilgamesh put on his crown. VI 5

On the beauty of Gilgamesh Lady Ishtar looked with longing:
'Come, Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom!
Grant me your fruits, O grant me!
Be you my husband and I your wife!

'Let me harness you a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold, VI 10
its wheels shall be gold and its horns shall be amber.
Driving lions in a team and mules of great size,
enter our house amid the sweet scent of cedar!

'As you enter our house
doorway and footstool shall kiss your feet! VI 15
Kings, courtiers and nobles shall kneel before you,
produce of mountain and lowland they shall bring you as tribute!

'Your goats shall bear triplets, your ewes shall bear twins,
your donkey when laden shall outpace any mule!
Your horse shall gallop at the chariot in glory, VI 20
no ox shall match yours at the yoke!'

[Gilgamesh] opened his mouth to speak,
[saying] to the Lady Ishtar:
'[And if indeed I] take you in marriage,

' . . . . . . body and clothing, VI 25
[*whence would come*] my food and my sustenance?
[*Would you feed me*] bread that is fit for a god,
[*and pour me ale*] that is fit for a king?' VI 28

* * *

'[*Who is there*] would take you in marriage? VI 32
[You, *a frost* that congeals no] ice,
a louvre-door [that] stays [not] breeze nor draught,
a palace that massacres . . . warriors, VI 35

'an elephant which . . . its *hoods*,
bitumen that [*stains the hands*] of its bearer,
a waterskin that [*cuts the hands*] of its bearer,
limestone that [*weakens*] a wall of ashlar,

'a battering ram that destroys [*the walls of*] the enemy, VI 40
a shoe that bites the foot of its owner!
What bridegroom of yours did endure for ever?
What brave warrior of yours went up [*to the heavens*?]

'Come, let me tell [you the tale] of your lovers:
of . . . . his arm. VI 45
Dumuzi, the lover of your youth,
year upon year, to lamenting you doomed him.

'You loved the speckled *allallu*-bird,
but struck him down and broke his wing:
now he stands in the woods crying "My wing!" VI 50
You loved the lion, perfect in strength,
but for him you dug seven pits and seven.

'You loved the horse, so famed in battle,
but you made his destiny whip, spur and lash.
You made his destiny a seven-league gallop, VI 55
you made his destiny to drink muddy water,
and doomed Silili his mother to perpetual weeping.

'You loved the shepherd, the grazier, the herdsman,
who gave you piles of loaves baked in embers,
and slaughtered kids for you day after day. VI 60

'You struck him and turned him into a wolf,
now his very own shepherd boys chase him away,
and his dogs take bites at his haunches.

'You loved Ishullanu, your father's gardener,
  who used to bring you dates in a basket, VI 65
daily making your table gleam.
  You eyed him up and went to meet him:

'"O my Ishullanu, let us taste your vigour:
  Put out your 'hand' and stroke my quim!"
But Ishullanu said to you: VI 70

'"Me! What do you want of me?
  Did my mother not bake? Have I not eaten,
that now I should eat the bread of slander and insults?
  Should I let only rushes cover me in winter?"

'When you heard what [he'd] said, VI 75
  you struck him and turned him into a *dwarf*.
You sat him down in the midst of his labours,
  he cannot go up . . . , he cannot go down . . .
Must you love me also and [deal with me] likewise?'

The goddess Ishtar [heard] these words, VI 80
  she [went up] to heaven in a furious rage.
[Weeping] she went to Anu, her father,
  before Antu, her mother, her tears did flow:

'O father, again and again does Gilgamesh scorn me,
  telling a tale of foulest slander, VI 85
slander about me and insults too.'

Anu opened his mouth to speak,
  saying to the Lady Ishtar:
'*Ah*, but was it not you who provoked King Gilgamesh,
  so he told a tale of foulest slander, VI 90
slander about you and insults too?'

Ishtar opened her mouth to speak,
  saying to her father, Anu:
'Father, give me, please, the Bull of Heaven,
  so in his dwelling I may slay Gilgamesh! VI 95

'If you do not give me the Bull of Heaven,
I shall *smash* [*the gates of the Netherworld, right down*] to its dwelling,
to the world below I shall *grant* [*manumission*,]
I shall bring up the dead to consume the living,
I shall make the dead outnumber the living.' VI 100

Anu opened his mouth to speak,
saying to the Lady Ishtar:
'If you want from me the Bull of Heaven,
let the widow of Uruk gather seven years' chaff,
[and the farmer *of Uruk*] grow seven years' hay.' VI 105

[Ishtar opened her mouth] to speak,
[saying to] her father, Anu:
'......... already I stored,
.... already I grew.

'The widow [of Uruk has] gathered [seven] years' chaff, VI 110
the farmer [*of Uruk* has grown seven years'] hay.
With the wrath of the Bull I shall [*have vengeance*.]'
Anu heard this speech of Ishtar,
the Bull of Heaven's nose-rope he placed in her hands.

[Down came] Ishtar, leading it onward: VI 115
when it reached the land of Uruk,
it dried up the woods, the reed-beds and marshes,
down it went to the river, lowered the level by seven full cubits.

As the Bull of Heaven snorted a pit opened up,
one hundred men of Uruk fell down it. VI 120
The second time it snorted a pit opened up,
two hundred men of Uruk fell down it.

The third time it snorted a pit opened up,
and Enkidu fell in as far as his waist.
Enkidu sprang up and seized the Bull by the horns. VI 125
In his face the Bull spat slaver,
with the tuft of its tail ......

Enkidu opened his mouth [to speak,]
saying to Gilgamesh, [his friend:]
'My friend, we vaunted ourselves [*in our*] *city*: VI 130
how shall we answer the thronging people?

'My friend, I have tested the might of the Bull . . . ,
so learning [its] strength, [*and knowing its*] *purpose.*
Let me [test] again the might of the Bull,
I [*shall get myself*] behind [the Bull of Heaven,] VI 135
I will seize [it by the tuft of the tail.]

'I will set [my foot on the *back of*] its [*leg*,]
in . . . . [it.]
Then [you] like a [butcher, brave and] skilful,
between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot thrust in your knife!' VI 140

Enkidu rushed round to the rear of the Bull,
he seized it by the [tuft] of the tail.
[He set] his foot on [*the back of*] its [*leg*,]
[in] . . . . it.

Then Gilgamesh like a butcher, brave and skilful, VI 145
between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot [he thrust in] his knife.

After they had slain the Bull of Heaven,
they bore its heart aloft and set it before Shamash.
Stepping back they fell prostrate in the presence of the Sun God,
then both of them together sat down. VI 150

Ishtar went up on the wall of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
hopping and stamping, she wailed in woe:
'Alas! Gilgamesh, who mocked me, has killed the Bull of Heaven.'

Enkidu heard these words of Ishtar,
and tearing a haunch off the Bull he hurled it towards her. VI 155
'Had I caught you too, I'd have treated you likewise,
I'd have draped your arms in its guts!'

7 *'Between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot he thrust in his knife'.*

Ishtar assembled the courtesans, prostitutes and harlots,
over the Bull of Heaven's haunch she began rites of mourning.
Gilgamesh summoned all the smiths and the craftsmen, VI 160
the size of the horns the craftsmen admired.

Thirty minas of lapis lazuli in a solid block,
two minas each their *rims*,
six kor of oil, the capacity of both.
He gave them to his god Lugalbanda, to hold oil for anointment, VI 165
he took them in to hang in his chamber.

They washed their hands in the river Euphrates,
  took each other by the hand and in they came.
As they drove along the streets of Uruk,
  the people were gathered to gaze [on them.] VI 170

Gilgamesh spoke a word to the serving girls of [*his palace*:]
  'Who is the finest among men?
Who the most glorious of fellows?'
  'Gilgamesh is the finest among men!
[Gilgamesh the most] glorious of fellows!' VI 175

* * *

  Gilgamesh made merry in his palace. VI 179

At night the men lay asleep on their beds, VI 180
  and Enkidu as he slept was having a dream.
Enkidu rose to relate the dream,
  saying to his friend:

Tablet VII. The Death of Enkidu

In a dream Enkidu sees the gods in assembly decree his doom. In anguished delirium he pictures before him the great door of cedar he made for Enlil's temple, and he curses it because it has failed to secure for him the god's favour. He then turns his thoughts to the trapper and the prostitute, the instruments of his introduction to civilization, whom he also blames for his plight. Shamash persuades him to relent, and he returns to bless the prostitute. He has a second dream, in which he is dragged down to the Netherworld by the Angel of Death and granted a vision of hell. After describing the dream to Gilgamesh he falls sick. Languishing on his deathbed he complains to Gilgamesh of the ignominy of his fate, compared with death in battle. He dies.

'My friend, why were the great gods in counsel?' VII 1

What followed the opening line of Tablet VII is still not recovered. The missing episode is known from a fragmentary prose paraphrase, written in Hittite, which was based on an older version of the epic:

. . . and dawn broke. III(?) col. i

Enkidu began to speak to Gilgamesh: 'My brother, this night what a dream [I dreamed!] The gods Anu, Enlil, Ea and celestial Shamash [held assembly], and Anu spoke unto Enlil: "These, because they slew the Bull of Heaven, and slew *Humbaba that [guarded] the mountains dense-[wooded] with cedar," so said Anu, "between these two [let one of them die!]"

'And Enlil said: "Let Enkidu die, but let not Gilgamesh die!"

'Celestial Shamash began to reply to the hero Enlil: "Was it not at your word that they slew him, the Bull of Heaven – and also *Humbaba? Now shall innocent Enkidu die?"

'Enlil was wroth at celestial Shamash: "How like a comrade you marched with them daily!" '

Enkidu lay down before Gilgamesh, his tears [flowed] down like streams: 'O my brother, dear to me is my brother! They will [never] raise me up again for my brother. [Among] the dead I shall sit, the threshold of the dead [I shall cross,] never again [shall I set] eyes on my dear brother.'

The text of Tablet VII resumes with Enkidu's delirium:

Enkidu lifted [his eyes *as though to the door*,] VII 37
he talked with the door as if [*with a man*:]

'O door of the woodland, that has no [sense,]
I have understanding that [you] have not. VII 40
For twenty leagues I sought for you the [*finest*] timber,
until [*in the forest*] I found a tall cedar.

'Your tree had no rival [*in the Forest of Cedar*:]
six rods is your height, two rods your breadth, one [cubit] your thickness,
your pole and your pivots, top and bottom, are all of a piece. VII 45
I fashioned you, I lifted you, I hung you in Nippur.

'Had I but known, O door, that so you would [*repay* me,]
had I but known, O door, that so you would reward me,
I would have lifted my axe, I would have cut you down,
I would have floated you down as a raft to Ebabbara. VII 50

'[To] Ebabbara, the temple of Shamash, I would have brought [you,]
I would have set [up] the cedar [*in the gate*] of Ebabbara.
[In] its doorway I would have stood thunderbird [and *bull colossus*,]
. . . . . . your entrance I would have [*placed*.]

'I would have . . . the city . . . Shamash, VII 55
and in Uruk . . . . :
because Shamash heard what I said,
and in time of [*peril*] . . . *he* [*gave*] *me* a weapon.

'Now, O door, it was I who fashioned you, who lifted you up:
can I now [*break you up*, can I] now tear you down? VII 60
May a king who comes after me bear for you hatred,
or . . . . . . hang you [*where you cannot be seen*,]
may he remove my name and write upon you his own!'

He tore out . . . , he cast it . . . ,
as he listened to his words, all of a sudden his [tears were flowing –] VII 65
as Gilgamesh listened to the words of Enkidu, his friend,
[all of a sudden his] tears were [flowing.]

Gilgamesh opened his mouth to speak,
saying to Enkidu:
['My friend,] . . . in . . . . . . pre-eminent,
[*do you*, who] had *understanding* and reason, [*now speak*] *profanity*? VII 70

'Why, my friend, does your heart talk *profanity* . . . ?
[the dream] was special, great the anxiety.
[*Your feverish lips*] were buzzing like flies,
[the misgivings were] great, the dream was rare.

'To the one who survives [*the gods*] leave grieving: VII 75
the dream leaves sorrow to the one who survives.
The great gods [I'll] beseech in supplication,
let me seek out [*Shamash*,] I'll appeal to your god.

'*In* [*your presence*] *I will pray* [*to* Anu,] father of the gods,
[may] *great* counsellor Enlil [hear] my prayer in your presence, VII 80
may [*my entreaty find favour with Ea*!]
I will fashion your statue in gold without limit,
. . . .'

['My friend,] give no silver, *give* no gold, *give* no . . . !
The word [*Enlil*] spoke is not like the . . . gods', VII 85
[what he] commands, he doesn't erase,
[what] he sets down . . . , he doesn't erase.

'My friend, fixed [*is my destiny*,]
people go to their doom before their time.'
At the very first glimmer of brightening dawn, VII 90
Enkidu lifted his head, lamenting to Shamash.

Under the rays of the sun his tears were flowing:
'I appeal to you, Shamash, for my life so precious:
[as for] the hunter, the trapper-man,
who let me be not as great as my friend: VII 95

'may the hunter be not as great as his friend!
Destroy his profit, diminish his income!
May his share be cut in your presence!
[*The house*] where he enters, may [*its god*] leave by the window!'

[After] he had cursed the hunter to his heart's content, VII 100
he decided [also] to curse Shamhat [the harlot:]
'Come, Shamhat, I will fix your destiny,
a doom to endure for all eternity:

'[I will] curse you with a mighty curse,
my curse shall afflict you now and forthwith! VII 105
A household to delight in [you shall not] acquire,
[never to] reside *in the* [*midst*] of a family!

'In the young women's [*chamber* you shall not] sit!
Your finest [garment] the ground shall defile!
Your festive gown [the drunkard] shall stain [in the dirt!] VII 110
Things of beauty [you shall never acquire!]

' . . . . of the potter.
No . . . shall you have . . . . . . !
No table [for a banquet,] the people's abundance, shall be laid in your house!
[The bed you] delight in shall be a miserable *bench*! VII 115

'[The junction] of highways shall be where you sit!
[A field of ruins shall be] where you sleep!
The shadow of the rampart shall be where you stand!
[Thorn and] briar shall skin your feet!

'[Drunk and] sober shall strike your cheek!
. . . *shall* be plaintiff, and claim against you! VII 120
[*The roof of your house*] no builder shall plaster!
[*In your bedroom*] the owl shall roost!

'[*At your table* never shall] banquet take place! VII 123

* * *

'Because [you made] me [weak, who was undefiled!] VII 130
Yes, in the wild [you weakened] me, who was undefiled!'
Shamash heard what he had spoken,
straight away from the sky there cried out a voice:

'O Enkidu, why curse Shamhat the harlot,
who fed you bread that was fit for a god, VII 135
and poured you ale that was fit for a king,
who clothed you in a splendid garment,
and gave you as companion the handsome Gilgamesh?

'And now Gilgamesh, your friend and your brother,
[will] lay you out on a magnificent bed. VII 140
[On] a bed of honour he will lay you out,
[he will] place you on his left, on a seat of repose;
[the rulers] of the underworld will all kiss your feet.

'The people of Uruk [he will have] mourn and lament you,
the [thriving] people he will fill full of woe for you. VII 145
After you are gone his hair will be matted in mourning,
[clad] in the skin of a lion, he will wander the [wild.]'

Enkidu [heard] the words of Shamash the hero,
. . . his heart so angry grew calm,
. . . [his heart] so furious grew calm: VII 150
'Come, [Shamhat, I will fix your destiny!]

'[My] mouth [that] cursed you shall bless [you] as well!
[Governors] shall love you and noblemen too!
[At one league off] men shall slap their thighs,
[at two leagues off] they shall shake out their hair! VII 155

'No soldier shall [be slow] to drop his belt for you,
obsidian he shall [give you], lapis lazuli and gold!
Ear[rings] and *jewellery* shall be what he gives you!

'Ishtar, [the ablest] of gods, shall gain you entrance
to the man whose home [*is established*] and wealth heaped high! VII 160
[For you] his wife shall be deserted, though mother of seven!'

[As for Enkidu], his mind was troubled,
he lay on his own and [began to ponder.]
What was on his mind he told to his friend:
'My friend, in the course of the night I had such a dream! VII 165

8 *'Ishtar, the ablest of gods'.*

'The heavens thundered, the earth gave echo,
  and there was I, standing between them.
A man there was, grim his expression,
  just like a Thunderbird his features were frightening.

'His hands were a lion's paws, his claws an eagle's talons, VII 170
  he seized me by the hair, he overpowered me.
I struck him, but back he sprang like a skipping rope,
  he struck me, and like a raft capsized me.

'Underfoot [he] crushed me, like a mighty wild bull,
  [*drenching*] my body with poisonous slaver. VII 175
"Save me, my friend! . . . . . . "
  You were afraid of him, but you . . . . . . VII 177

* * *

'[*He struck me and*] turned me into a dove. VII 182

'[He bound] my arms like the wings of a bird,
to lead me captive to the house of darkness, seat of Irkalla:
to the house which none who enters ever leaves, VII 185
on the path that allows no journey back,

'to the house whose residents are deprived of light,
where soil is their sustenance and clay their food,
where they are clad like birds in coats of feathers,
and see no light, but dwell in darkness. VII 190

'On door [and bolt the dust lay thick,]
on the House [of Dust was poured a deathly quiet.]
In the House of Dust that I entered,

'I looked around me, saw the "crowns" in a throng,
there were the crowned [heads] who'd ruled the land since days
of yore, VII 195
who'd served the roast [at the] tables of Anu and Enlil,
who'd proffered baked bread, and poured them cool water from
skins.

'In the House of Dust that I entered,
there were the *en*-priests and *lagar*-priests,
there were lustration-priests and *lumahhu*-priests, VII 200
there were the great gods' *gudapsû*-priests,

'there was Etana, there was Shakkan,
[there was] the queen of the Netherworld, the goddess
Ereshkigal.
Before her sat [Belet]-ṣeri, the scribe of the Netherworld,
holding [a tablet], reading aloud in her presence. VII 205

'[She raised] her head and she saw me:
"[Who was] it fetched this man here?
[Who was it] brought here [*this fellow*?]"' VII 208

The remainder of Enkidu's vision of hell is lost. At the end of his speech he commends himself to Gilgamesh:

'I who [endured] all hardships [with you,] VII 251
remember [me, my friend,] don't [forget] all I went through!'

Gilgamesh:

'My friend saw a vision which will never [*be equalled*!]'

The day he had the dream [his strength] was exhausted,
Enkidu was cast down, he lay one day sick [and then a second.] VII 255
Enkidu [lay] on his bed, [his sickness *worsened*,]
a third day and a fourth day, [the sickness of Enkidu *worsened*.]

A fifth day, a sixth and a seventh, an eighth, a ninth [and a tenth,]
the sickness of Enkidu *worsened* . . .
An eleventh day and a twelfth, ... VII 260
Enkidu [lay] on the bed, ...
He called for Gilgamesh [*and spoke to his friend*:]

'[*My god*] has taken against me, my friend, . . . ,
[*I do not die*] like one who [falls] in the midst of battle.
I was afraid of combat, and . . . . . . VII 265
My friend, one who [falls] in combat [*makes his name*,]
but I, [*I do not fall*] in [*combat, and shall make not my name*.]'

The description of Enkidu's final death throes, which no doubt filled the remaining thirty or so lines of Tablet VII, is still to be recovered.

Tablet VIII. The Funeral of Enkidu

Gilgamesh offers up a great lament for Enkidu. He summons his craftsmen and makes a funerary statue of his friend, and from his treasury he selects the grave goods that Enkidu will take to the Netherworld to win the goodwill of the deities who dwell there. As part of the wake a great banquet is held, and then treasures are offered to the gods of the Netherworld and ritually displayed in public.

CHAPTER FOUR

Human Character as a Vital Lie

Take stock of those around you and you will . . . hear them talk in precise terms about themselves and their surroundings, which would seem to point to them having ideas on the matter. But start to analyse those ideas and you will find that they hardly reflect in any way the reality to which they appear to refer, and if you go deeper you will discover that there is not even an attempt to adjust the ideas to this reality. Quite the contrary: through these notions the individual is trying to cut off any personal vision of reality, of his own very life. For life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost. The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his "ideas" are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defense of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality.

—JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET[1]

The problem of anality and the castration complex already takes us a long way toward answering the question that intrigues us all: if the basic quality of heroism is genuine courage, why are so few people truly courageous? Why is it so rare to see a man who can stand on his own feet? Even the great Carlyle, who frightened many people, proclaimed that he stood on his father as on a stone pillar

buried in the ground under him. The unspoken implication is that if he stood on his own feet alone, the ground would cave in under him. This question goes right to the heart of the human condition, and we shall be attacking it from many sides all through this book. I once wrote[2] that I thought the reason man was so naturally cowardly was that he felt he had no authority; and the reason he had no authority was in the very nature of the way the human animal is shaped: all our meanings are built into us from the outside, from our dealings with others. This is what gives us a "self" and a superego. Our whole world of right and wrong, good and bad, our name, precisely who we are, is grafted into us; and we never feel we have authority to offer things on our own. How could we?—I argued—since we feel ourselves in many ways guilty and beholden to others, a lesser creation of theirs, indebted to them for our very birth.

But this is only part of the story—the most superficial and obvious part. There are deeper reasons for our lack of courage, and if we are going to understand man we have to dig for them. The psychologist Abraham Maslow had the keenest sense for significant ideas, and shortly before his recent untimely death he began to attack the problem of the fear of standing alone.[3] Maslow used a broad humanistic perspective in his work, and he liked to talk about concepts like "actualizing one's potential" and one's "full humanness." He saw these as natural developmental urges and wondered what holds them up, what blocks them. He answered the question in existential language, using terms like the "fear of one's own greatness" and the "evasion of one's destiny." This approach throws a new light on the problem of courage. In his words:

> We fear our highest possibility (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments. . . . We enjoy and even thrill to the godlike possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak moments. And yet we simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe and fear before these very same possibilities.[4]

Maslow used an apt term for this evasion of growth, this fear of realizing one's own fullest powers. He called it the "Jonah Syndrome." He understood the syndrome as the evasion of the full intensity of life:

> *We are just not strong enough to endure more!* It is just too shaking and wearing. So often people in . . . ecstatic moments say, "It's too much," or "I can't stand it," or "I could die". . . . Delirious happiness cannot be borne for long. Our organisms are just too weak for any large doses of greatness. . . .

The Jonah Syndrome, then, seen from this basic point of view, is "partly a justified fear of being torn apart, of losing control, of being shattered and disintegrated, even of being killed by the experience." And the result of this syndrome is what we would expect a weak organism to do: to cut back the full intensity of life:

> For some people this evasion of one's own growth, setting low levels of aspiration, the fear of doing what one is capable of doing, voluntary self-crippling, pseudo-stupidity, mock-humility are in fact defenses against grandiosity . . .[5]*

It all boils down to a simple lack of strength to bear the superlative, to open oneself to the totality of experience—an idea that was well appreciated by William James and more recently was developed in phenomenological terms in the classic work of Rudolf Otto. Otto talked about the terror of the world, the feeling of overwhelming awe, wonder, and fear in the face of creation—the miracle of it, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum* of each single thing, of the fact that there are things at all.[6] What Otto did was to get descriptively at man's natural feeling of inferiority in the face of the massive transcendence of creation; his real *creature feeling* before the crushing and negating miracle of Being. We now

* As we shall see in the pages that follow, other thinkers had their version of the "Jonah Syndrome" long before Maslow; I am thinking especially of Rank, who gave the idea no special name, and of Freud, who probably began our scientific approach to it with his famous discovery of the "Wrecked by Success" syndrome. He saw that certain people couldn't stand success after they had achieved it; as it was too much for them, they quickly gave it up or went to pieces. I am leaving Freud out here because Maslow so well represents the existential approach that I believe is a considerable expansion of the Freudian horizon—even though Freud himself developed far toward an existential framework, as we shall see in Chapter Six where we discuss this problem again.

understand how a phenomenology of religious experience ties into psychology: right at the point of the problem of courage.

We might say that the child is a "natural" coward: he cannot have the strength to support the terror of creation. The world as it *is*, creation out of the void, things as they are, things as they are not, are too much for us to be able to stand. Or, better: they *would be* too much for us to bear without crumbling in a faint, trembling like a leaf, standing in a trance *in response* to the movement, colors, and odors of the world. I say "would be" because most of us—by the time we leave childhood—have repressed our vision of the primary miraculousness of creation. We have closed it off, changed it, and no longer perceive the world as it is to raw experience. Sometimes we may recapture this world by remembering some striking childhood perceptions, how suffused they were in emotion and wonder—how a favorite grandfather looked, or one's first love in his early teens. We change these heavily emotional perceptions precisely because we need to move about in the world with some kind of equanimity, some kind of strength and directness; we can't keep gaping with our heart in our mouth, greedily sucking up with our eyes everything great and powerful that strikes us. The great boon of repression is that it makes it possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty, and terror that if animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed to act.

But nature has protected the lower animal by endowing them with instincts. An instinct is a programmed perception that calls into play a programmed reaction. It is very simple. Animals are not moved by what they cannot react to. They live in a tiny world, a sliver of reality, one neuro-chemical program that keeps them walking behind their nose and shuts out everything else. But look at man, the impossible creature! Here nature seems to have thrown caution to the winds along with the programmed instincts. She created an animal who has no defense against full perception of the external world, an animal completely open to experience. Not only in front of his nose, in his *umwelt*, but in many other *umwelten*. He can relate not only to animals in his own species, but in some ways to all other species. He can contemplate not only what is edible for him, but everything that grows. He not only lives in this moment, but expands his inner self to yesterday, his curiosity to centuries

ago, his fears to five billion years from now when the sun will cool, his hopes to an eternity from now. He lives not only on a tiny territory, nor even on an entire planet, but in a galaxy, in a universe, and in dimensions beyond visible universes. It is appalling, the burden that man bears, the *experiential* burden. As we saw in the last chapter, man can't even take his own body for granted as can other animals. It is not just hind feet, a tail that he drags, that are just "there," limbs to be used and taken for granted or chewed off when caught in a trap and when they give pain and prevent movement. Man's body is a *problem* to him that has to be explained. Not only his body is strange, but also its inner landscape, the memories and dreams. Man's very insides—his self—are foreign to him. He doesn't know who he is, why he was born, what he is doing on the planet, what he is supposed to do, what he can expect. His own existence is incomprehensible to him, a miracle just like the rest of creation, closer to him, right near his pounding heart, but for that reason all the more strange. Each thing is a problem, and man can shut out nothing. As Maslow has well said, "It is precisely the god-like in ourselves that we are ambivalent about, fascinated by and fearful of, motivated to and defensive against. This is one aspect of the basic human predicament, that we are simultaneously worms and gods."[7] There it is again: gods with anuses.

The historic value of Freud's work is that it came to grips with the peculiar animal that man was, the animal that was not programmed by instincts to close off perception and assure automatic equanimity and forceful action. Man had to invent and create out of himself the limitations of perception and the equanimity to live on this planet. And so the core of psychodynamics, the formation of the human character, is a study in human self-limitation and in the terrifying costs of that limitation. The hostility to psychoanalysis in the past, today, and in the future, will always be a hostility against admitting that man lives by lying to himself about himself and about his world, and that character, to follow Ferenczi and Brown, is a vital lie. I particularly like the way Maslow has summed up this contribution of Freudian thought:

Freud's greatest discovery, the one which lies at the root of psychodynamics, is that *the* great cause of much psychological illness is the fear of knowledge of oneself—of one's emotions, impulses, memories, ca-

pacities, potentialities, of one's destiny. We have discovered that fear of knowledge of oneself is very often isomorphic with, and parallel with, fear of the outside world.

And what is this fear, but a fear of the reality of creation in relation to our powers and possibilities:

> In general this kind of fear is defensive, in the sense that it is a protection of our self-esteem, of our love and respect for ourselves. We tend to be afraid of any knowledge that could cause us to despise ourselves or to make us feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful. We protect ourselves and our ideal image of ourselves by repression and similar defenses, which are essentially techniques by which we avoid becoming conscious of unpleasant or dangerous truths.[8]

The individual has to repress *globally*, from the entire spectrum of his experience, if he wants to feel a warm sense of inner value and basic security. This sense of value and support is something that nature gives to each animal by the automatic instinctive programming and in the pulsating of the vital processes. But man, poor denuded creature, has to build and earn inner value and security. He must repress his smallness in the adult world, his failures to live up to adult commands and codes. He must repress his own feelings of physical and moral inadequacy, not only the inadequacy of his good intentions but also his guilt and his evil intensions: the death wishes and hatreds that result from being frustrated and blocked by the adults. He must repress his parents' inadequacy, their anxieties and terrors, because these make it difficult for him to feel secure and strong. He must repress his own anality, his compromising bodily functions that spell his mortality, his fundamental expendability in nature. And with all this, and more that we leave unsaid, he must repress the primary awesomeness of the external world.

In his later years Freud evidently came to realize, as Adler had earlier, that the thing that really bothers the child is the nature of his world, not so much his own inner drives. He talked less about the power of the Oedipus complex and more about "human perplexity and helplessness in the face of nature's dreaded forces," "the terrors of nature," "the painful riddle of death," "our anxiety in the

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MORTAL TERROR AND THE INVENTION OF THE SUPERNATURAL

Symbolization, self-consciousness, and the capacity to contemplate the future were extremely helpful to our ancestors. But these highly adaptive cognitive abilities also gave rise to an ever-present potential for mortal terror. What happened when a life-form, crafted by billions of years of evolution to strive to survive at almost any cost, recognized that it was destined to lose that war?

"As a naked fact, that realization is unacceptable," proposed philosopher Susanne Langer, adding, "Nothing, perhaps, is more comprehensible than that people…would rather reject than accept the idea of death as an inevitable close of their brief earthly careers." Our ancestors consequently used their imagination and ingenuity to stifle their existential dread. They were already employing their sophisticated intellectual abilities to ask and answer questions about how the world worked. But solving the practical problems of living was of little use or solace to them in the face of death. While mountains and stars apparently persisted indefinitely, our ancestors clearly saw that animate entities, subject to forces beyond their control, all came to an end.

Overwhelming fear of death, argues biologist Ajit Varki (working in collaboration with the late geneticist Danny Brower), would "be a deadend evolutionary barrier, curbing activities and cognitive functions necessary for survival and reproductive fitness." People terrified by the prospect of their own demise would be less likely to take risks in hunting to increase the odds of landing big game, to compete effectively for mates, or to provide good care for their offspring. So our ancestors made a supremely adaptive, ingenious, and imaginative leap: they created a supernatural world, one in which death was not inevitable or irrevocable. The groups of early humans who fabricated the most compelling tales could best manage mortal terror. As a result, they would have been the most capable of functioning effectively in their environment and thereby most likely to perpetuate their genes into future generations.

Some supernatural beliefs may have developed prior to the knowledge of mortality. Evolutionary theorists such as Pascal Boyer and Paul Bloom propose that supernatural beliefs originated because humans are predisposed to attribute mind and intention to living things. According to this view, our ancestors projected their own subjective experiences of feeling, wanting, and willing onto their surroundings; trees and rocks spoke to them with power and purpose, and rain and lightning were both the language and the playthings of invisible gods. This proposition is quite plausible. But even if it is correct, as our ancestors subsequently faced the dawning awareness of mortality, these rudimentary supernatural ideas clearly

formed the basis of more sophisticated belief systems designed to help quell the fear of death by providing a sense of continuance beyond it.

Consider the well-preserved Sungir archaeological site outside Vladimir, Russia, inhabited twenty-eight thousand years ago, consisting of houses, hearths, storage pits, and tool production areas. The remnants of multiple elaborate burials were also found there, including those of two young people and a sixty-year-old man. Each body was decorated with pendants, bracelets, and shell necklaces, and dressed in clothing embellished with more than four thousand ivory beads; it would have taken an artisan an hour to make a single bead. The youths were buried head to head and flanked by two mammoth tusks. By devoting such inordinate amounts of time and effort to generate these elaborate burial constructions, the inhabitants of Sungir seemed to show that the symbolic supernatural world they created took priority over more mundane, here-and-now practicalities. Moreover, the grave sites indicate a belief in an afterlife; after all, why bother getting dressed up for a journey to the void?

Such conceptions of the supernatural world were probably in place around forty thousand years ago, with the advent of what anthropologists call the Upper Paleolithic Revolution, or the Creative Explosion. This era was marked by the simultaneous appearance of art, body adornments, burials, and elaborate grave goods in many different societies. Sophisticated technology appeared at the same time. Campsites and shelters became more complex. Specialized stone blades and bone tools became common. The concurrent emergence of material manifestations of supernatural beliefs and extraordinary technological advances is consistent with the notion that the sophisticated cognitive capacities associated with consciousness could serve our ancestors well only when buttressed by confidence in a supernatural universe in which death could be forestalled and ultimately transcended.

RITUAL: WISHFUL THINKING IN ACTION

Our ancestors received support for their beliefs from one another, but they also needed some tangible signs that the invisible world really existed. Rituals, art, myth, and religion—features of every known culture—together made it possible for people to construct, maintain, and concretize their supernatural conceptions of reality. By making the incredible credible, Becker explained, humans "imagined that they took firm control of the material world," which "raised them over and above material decay and death."

Some scholars propose that rituals came first, and ultimately spawned the development of art, myth, and religion. How did ritual evolve? The Greek word for rite or ritual is dromenon, "a thing done." Rituals were unnecessary when a resource was readily available. Thirsty people on the bank of a flowing river do not need to dance for rain; they need only lean over

and drink. And where food is plentiful, one need only pluck nourishment from a tree or a bush. But nature is not always accommodating. There was not always water nearby when our ancestors were parched, or food when they were famished. Predators might strike at any time. In the wake of such helplessness in the face of nature's indifference, our ancestors had to do something to enhance their chances for survival.

In tenuous circumstances, classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison argued, human beings must act to ease their worry or grief, even if it means thrashing around and howling like an animal. Such spontaneous, idiosyncratic emotional reactions were probably the basis for the earliest rituals. But to become a ritual, an individual's demonstrative outburst had to be formalized and copied by others. A woman whose mate had been killed by a male from a competing tribe might have haphazardly outstretched her arm and thrust it upright with a clenched fist. Her friend might have copied that motion, refining and elaborating it with a sweeping arc. The two angry women would have moved together, echoing each other's movements. What began as a nervous need to express a deep feeling in one woman morphed into a dance between two; others, catching their contagious emotions, would have joined in emulation with their own danced outbursts. A few catchy or comforting snippets of a mournful moan, repeated and extended with a high or low note at the end for emphasis, turned the whimpering wail into a vengeance-seeking song.

Some combination of dance and song in turn likely formed the earliest rituals. Mithen notes that utterances that monkeys employ to defuse conflict and express emotion have rhythm and melody, and he proposed that early humans may have refined this propensity to strengthen bonds between helplessly immature infants and their mothers. Like modern humans all over the world, our ancestors found rhythmic movement and music and the social unity forged by coordinated activity soothing, even if the movements or sounds had no direct or logical connection to the precipitating event and could do nothing to change it.

And rituals were more than balms. They were also directed toward altering dire circumstances, because the essence of ritual is wishful thinking in action. We act out what we want to happen. Everyone does this quite naturally, as when we stamp on an imaginary brake pedal while riding in a car driven by a teenager accelerating toward a stop sign, or lean toward the center of a bowling alley lane to coax the gutter-bound ball to follow suit.

Magical dancing was common in Europe into the twentieth century. Farmers in Transylvania jumped high in their fields to make the hemp grow tall. German and Austrian peasants danced or jumped backward from a table to increase the length of the flax. Macedonian farmers threw their spades in the air after planting the fields, and after catching them, they exclaimed, "May the crop grow as high as the spade has gone."

Rituals almost certainly grew out of past successes. After a productive hunt or victorious battle, proud and happy hunters or warriors would reenact their experiences to an appreciative crowd around the campfire. But since not every hunt or battle ends well, why not start such ventures with the same wishful thinking in action? Instead of waiting for a great bear hunt and celebrating afterward by dancing like a bear, people danced like bears before the hunt to ensure they would not return empty-handed.

SACRIFICE AND DEATH RITES

Song, dance, and symbolic preenactments seemed helpful in making wishes come true, but more difficult circumstances sometimes called for more extreme actions. Archaeologists suggest that sacrificial rituals involving objects of symbolic or practical value, such as holy water, wine, succulent food, sacred animals, and even humans, were probably central to most, if not all, early cultures. If a terrible storm or flood destroyed their village, our ancestors felt that the gods—anthropomorphized entities who presumably oversaw and controlled the supernatural and natural worlds—had been angry with them and that they had done wrong. If the gods were angry, then blood was called for if more death was to be prevented. Given that the ancient peoples believed that their many gods had wishes and feelings much like their own, surrendering something of value to the gods was a sign of both apology and humility.

Sacrifices were fundamentally a trade: if the gods were kind in delivering a successful hunt or a healthy child, then it was only fitting to repay their kindness and increase the chances of future assistance. Lavish sacrifices of valuable resources were also symbols of potency and authority; by holding up their end of the deal with the gods through ritual sacrifices, humans gained a sense of control over life and death, a sense that the spirits would protect them in this life and welcome them to the next one. "The sacrifice of living things," Becker explained, "adds visible life power to the stream of life…. The sacrifice was a means for establishing a communion with the invisible world, making a circle on the flow of power, a bridge over which it could pass." Sacrifice brought death to the few to facilitate survival of the many.

Early humans were aware that plants and animals appeared and disappeared at different times of the year, so people adopted seasonal rituals, some to welcome new life, others to discourage death. For example, May Day celebrations in pre-Christian Europe coincided with planting crops for the coming year. A young boy or girl would carry a heavily budded tree branch into a village to infuse it with greenery and the spirit of life. In Thüringen, in central Germany, a ceremony called "Driving Out the Death" was traditionally performed on March 1. A figure of straw made by youngsters was dressed in old clothes and tossed in the river. Afterward, the children returned to the village and were rewarded with eggs and other treats.

In Bohemia, children carried a similar straw puppet away from the village and burned it. While the puppet burned, the children sang: “We have carried away Death, and brought back Life.” These rituals were not recreational; they were a matter of survival.

And death rituals are particularly important. The Fante of Ghana provide an elaborate example. The death of an adult male is formally announced by the abusuapanyin (the oldest living male on the mother’s side of the deceased’s family), who then presents a “notification drink” to the supi (head of the deceased’s family on the father’s side). The supi accepts the drink and summons the kyerema (master drummer) to broadcast a message to the entire community. All the men on the father’s side of the family then gather to recount the deceased’s achievements and work out the specifics of the funeral. Meanwhile, the abusuapanyin oversees the bathing and dressing of the corpse, which is laid in state at the family house. Then the kyerema leads a procession of men to the family house. A eulogy is given for the deceased, and the coffin is draped with flags. On the day of the burial, there is singing, dancing, drumming, and libations. Eight days after interment, dates are announced for additional rites in the future, to ensure that the deceased will become an ancestor who thereafter serves as a benevolent intermediary between cosmic primal forces and the living relatives.

Throughout history, and to this day, such rituals have enabled people to endure the loss of loved ones, dampening the dread associated with their own eventual demise to the point where they can continue their daily routines.

RITUALS ARE THE BEHAVIORAL bedrock of human culture. As wishful thinking in action, rituals empower us to sustain life, forestall death, and manage the universe. They assure our success in love and war. They determine who we are. You’re not an adult until ritually fashioned into one. Ritual determines when you’re married. You are not even considered fully dead until the official ritualizers—doctor, coroner, preacher—declare you to be. And if something goes wrong in our lives, we have an out: The problem is due to a wish or prayer somehow misdirected or gone awry. We must have performed the ritual improperly, or we need to add another step to an existing ritual, or create an entirely new one instead. Rituals, then, help manage existential terror by superseding natural processes and fostering the illusion that we control them.