

Cultural Daily

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On Gilgamesh

Robert Wood · Wednesday, May 30th, 2018

I used to think that the dialectic that mattered was art and politics, mapping those common sense understandings onto superstructure and base, soft and hard power, resistance and hegemony. Now, I think that maybe the one that matters is dream and reality, or death and language, or worms and bees. Those are organisational binaries, a double consciousness, which one negotiates and elevates through thought and action in the world. But there is, of course, a sort of drugs and logic one too. Ernest Hemingway said 'write drunk, edit sober' which I read as a gesture towards irrationality and the sensible rather than something literal. It is like saying 'get into a different state by whatever means possible to create but reflect on it with another mind'.

I do not think that literature has a higher proportion of drugs and alcohol than any other field, though there may well be a romance that would suggest it does. There is also a time in youth devoted to the pose of being an artist based more on the exploits of getting drunk rather than doing the work itself. That drug logic is most well known from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to the Beats to Hunter S Thompson. This goes towards a type of surreal and fantastical quality, a way to open up imagination that the reader can share in too. And yet, if that is its guiding principle we must ask: does this enable a type of unreality that allows us to turn all the way back to the oldest written texts to answer the simple question 'what is the origin of our world?' The epics speak back with stories that seem impossible; stories that have been written by shamans on peyote missions who have come back from the depths like divers with pearls. How deep those waters are we do not know, but it is water that connects us all.

Water is what matters when you prawn in the Swan River, when you float boats in Singaporean monsoon, when you are dry in the dust riding a dirtbike through the Sahara. Being out of one's depth, either by being too dry or too wet, often brings with it the threat of monsters. And monsters are part of that drug logic. They are there in JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis, Ursula K Le Guin, Anne Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Stan Lee. Monsters are those boundary crossing inhuman beings that come to us in the shadow lands, at twilight, at midnight, at dawn. They are the ones who are indeterminate, the sum of all the ugly parts, the unknown that confuse our categories. They come too when the water is high, when the floods have come and washed away what is normal life.

The flood is there in Indigenous stories, the Bible, hieroglyphics. It is there too in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* where Utnapishtim is a type of Noah. He learns there will be rising waters when one of the gods whispers it into the walls of his house and the bricks tell him afterwards. He builds an ark and then the black clouds arrive bringing rain and destroying the earth. His ark comes to rest on Mount Nimush and after seven days and seven nights he releases the animals and makes a sacrifice

to the gods. The gods come to Utnapishtim and make him immortal. And there are monsters there in *Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh's sidekick Enkidu starts out as a monstrous sort of man, a man that is created with the strength of dozens of wild animals in the forests where he is from. He is, of course, subdued through the caresses of a courtesan, before becoming civilised by a group of shepherds. When he first meets Gilgamesh he fights him but they are soon reconciled as friends. Enkidu becomes a kind of therapist to Gilgamesh, interpreting dreams and spurring him on to great deeds.

There are ominous dreams in *Gilgamesh*, which are often reinterpreted to become positive. Through the act of literary criticism, or of reading the text like a psychoanalyst, the characters tell themselves a different story. Enkidu's stories about dreams calm Gilgamesh's worry and in this way they are not so different from all of us. He is a kind of sweat-lodge spirit guide, the sober companion who reminds you that this too shall pass when your trip gets rough.

There may yet be another flood on another horizon, or another tsunami, drought or infestation. This may be sometime soon or sometime later, but whatever happens in the future, the predictive scientific dreams of our global warming present make it hard to sleep at night. It is better to be like Humbaba, the protector of the Cedar Forest, fighting Gilgamesh and Enkidu for the rights of the trees to remain as a living ecosystem rather than become the ornamental great doors to wall in a city on the Euphrates. That natural exploitation is the legacy of Gilgamesh and when reality feels like it has been drugged, seeing clearly is a task enough.

That is why the dialectic that matters is worms and bees. Worms are the workers of the soil and bees are the workers of the air. Without them both we can have no Cedar Forest let alone a whole world. We need them to compost and to pollinate. We need them to give us the freedom to dream of a different fate, rather than resign ourselves to destructiveness and searching, to the kingly hubris that would have us seek out immortality like Gilgamesh who cut to pieces the Bull of Heaven even as that was a kind of offering. In the worms and the bees we see a deeper reality that is not monstrous or drugged but true and hopeful precisely because it is grounded in the soil and the clouds that make the classics part of our very selves.

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