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Conclusion

A central thesis of this study is that the most ancient poetry cannot be read without the same aesthetic and theoretical presuppositions as we bring to the poetry of the modern Western tradition; and that it can be read by us only in that modern world, with all the multifarious associations and distractions that clutter our minds.

At the same time I have argued that there are special considerations relevant to this literature's special circumstances which cannot be fully apprehended using many of the usual critical approaches derived from a range of current literary theories. I have held this to justify a frankly eclectic approach to the study of imagery in a Sumerian poem, and the resulting assessment is part technical investigation and part personal response. The responsibilities of critic and reader are not necessarily vested in the same person, although no critic can escape being also a reader; in the present treatment they have been allowed to fuse together.

It must be clear that it is impossible to read Sumerian literature exclusively as a set of mere 'cultural documents' – as referential, cultural-historical sources for the reconstruction of the society that produced them. Any attempt at such a reading, so far from being authoritative, would choose to ignore a whole range of codes of indirect signals present in poetic language which are constitutive for its character as literature. To underprivilege such channels of communication is to diminish the reading experience to a jejune academic exercise. The trope of metaphor, or imagery, in which the object of the reader's attention is enriched satisfyingly in meaning by being juxtaposed surprisingly with other elements of the known world – Shelley's 'before unapprehended relationships'⁴²⁷ – is perhaps the most fundamental and most powerful of these signals. Indeed the functioning of metaphor is itself a metaphor for the act of reading.

I have identified various special problems attending on the 'reading' of Sumerian poetry, several of them characteristic of encounters with any ancient or alien forms of art. Amongst these, the unfamiliarity to most readers of the style of diction of this literature is a primary stumbling

⁴²⁷ His expression is still felicitous: 'Their [the poets'] language is vitally metaphorical, that is, it marks the before unapprehended relationships of things', P.B. Shelley, *A defence of poetry* (written in 1821).

block. It inhibits the immediate and sophisticated response which it is possible to make to poetry in whose linguistic codes the reader is already more or less fluent. Insurmountable barriers are created by (possibly temporary) technical limitations of linguistic knowledge of Sumerian, both in terms of vocabulary, where the meaning of words may not yet have been elucidated, and of phonology (which has a bearing on studies of euphony, metre, and so on). But both these problems exist, in a less acute form, for the study of medieval or Renaissance literatures also, and increasingly perhaps for any pre-twentieth-century writings as modern vernaculars move away from traditional written styles.

The lack of a detailed and extended chronological framework in which to site manuscripts and, ultimately, the poems themselves, is caused partly by a still imprecise control of cuneiform palaeography and partly by the absence of archaeological contexts, which in many cases are now all but irrecoverable. This shortage of technical information inhibits a proper siting of the poems within their genres, and severely restricts the ability to relate them to one another.

The almost complete absence of ancient literary theory, which would act as a further guide to the generic and other implications which combine to lend meaning to literature, is in some ways a serious difficulty. Nevertheless it can serve to promote instead a welcome focussing of attention on the twentieth-century reception of the literature, in the form in which it is preserved. For instance, the nature of the 'corpus' is to a large extent defined by extant ancient catalogues which list the incipits of poems but whose precise original functions are far from clear, and the corpus is therefore, at least partially, a modern construct.

Complex problems exist with the text, and even with the term 'text'. Manuscripts from which the text is reconstructed frequently do not overlap and do not issue from a single context; this bears on the very identity of a 'poem'. As the text available has changed – as it has been improved by the recovery of more sources – so interpretations have of necessity changed, and will change further. The fragmentary condition of manuscripts necessitates the reconstruction of a text with gaps, sometimes of many lines; the reading experience of fragmentary works is an ineluctable element of their modern reception.

Among the special difficulties created by certain critical approaches, the Mesopotamian lack of interest in 'authorship' imposes severe limitations on the usefulness of what I earlier referred to as 'author-centred' views of critical practice. This has a considerable bearing on 'willed intention': the question of whether the reader, in the activity of reading, wishes to be aware of, or is trained to think of, an encounter with a single human mind at work. From another point of view, the lack of an elaborate historical context in which to site the poems may seem insignificant or even

desirable for those theoretical approaches which profess to downgrade the value of everything but 'the work itself', while tacitly counting on the reader's familiarity with the cultural milieu. But in practical terms the importance of historical context for meaningful interpretation cannot be underestimated, since nothing can be taken for granted in criticising the literature of a distant and incompletely accessible culture.

While the potential subjectivity of such criticism may be sensed as a danger by many, the obvious impossibility of escaping from it functions as a positive encouragement to take cognizance of modern readers' responses to ancient literature as a significant part of the attempt to create meaning for it. The modern critical canon will be subtly altered as this 'new', most ancient, literature gradually becomes more readily available and is added to the corpus of what can be read with understanding. In evaluating Sumerian poetry it is positively illuminating to reflect on the earlier low valuation placed on it, for example by Samuel Noah Kramer himself ('The compositions involved are not overly imaginative and profound'), since that was based on a less complete, less accessible state of text; the observation contributes to the modern 'reception history' of ancient literature. In the same lecture he wrote:

It is my feeling that when, in the course of time, the Sumerian *belles lettres* come to be better understood, and lose some of the strangeness that veils them from the mind and heart of the modern reader, they will compare not too unfavorably with the literatures of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks.⁴²⁸

All the theoretical questions revisited above bear directly upon the study of imagery in *Lugalbanda*. In particular they confront some assumptions the reader may be tempted to make about the genesis of the poem, based on the strikingness of the images and their apparent originality. Ever since Aristotle, Western views of imagery have been closely bound up with its ascription to individual creativity:

But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the only thing which cannot be learnt from others, and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ See *JAOS* 89 (1969), pp. 1f. His mention of 'Hebrews and Greeks' issues, of course, from his personal educational and cultural experience and concerns. Bendt Alster also makes comparisons with ancient Hebrew and Greek literature (in 'Lugalbanda and the early epic tradition in Mesopotamia', in Tz. Abusch, J. Huehnergard and P. Steinkeller, eds, *Lingering over words: studies in Ancient Near Eastern literature in honor of William L. Moran*, p. 61); but I cannot help feeling that his failure to find profound 'human conflicts' in Sumerian narrative poetry and his disappointment at the absence of any 'sign of development in the personality' of its characters (p. 69) may betray some characteristic modern Western valuations.

⁴²⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Bywater's translation, p. 78.

I have proposed that it may be justifiable to assume for the imagery of *Lugalbanda* the 'calculated, willed intention of its user to create an emotive effect',⁴³⁰ even if this is not appropriate for all Mesopotamian literature. This has implications for the question of authorship; it implies that, despite the hermeneutic problems arising from the form in which the poem is accessible, we may legitimately sketch the outline of a single, original poet after all. This position in no way precludes the existence of earlier traditional versions of the narrative or even of the poem. Certainly the striking similarity of imagery and style between *Lugalbanda* and *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave* – in my view greater than can be accounted for merely by designating the two poems as products of the same cultural tradition – might well support a single-author hypothesis for the two works.

While a global approach to a specific (group of) metaphor(s) overcomes the difficulties of incomplete or imperfectly understood contexts, one result of the approach of studying all images in one work⁴³¹ is that it deals in whole works rather than fragments,⁴³² and so gives a possible point of comparison *between* individual creative works which can, eventually, be used to contrast them within their broad cultural horizon. In the process of making these comparisons, it has been necessary to discuss the literary effects in terms which assume some degree of intention(alism). However, the spectres which this raises can hardly be pursued further without reference to recent discussions of other traditional (and oral) literatures, and that lies outside the scope of this work.⁴³³ At any rate it is doubtful that we shall ever recover sufficient historical information necessary to identify the individual poets who contributed to the classical Sumerian tradition, as has been possible to a limited extent for the later Standard Babylonian tradition.

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