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TRANSLATING ARCHAIC LITERATURE

The Sumerians, who may have been the inventors of true writing, knew a story about the beginning of the written word. Two leaders of city-states, one in what is now Iraq, the other in modern Iran, are engaged in a mighty struggle. The form of the struggle is a context of magic. Back and forth from one city to the other travels a certain "word-wise herald," carrying with him the exactly-worded messages from Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta. The journey is a difficult one, and the messages become ever more complex and tricky. Finally, Enmerkar gives the herald a cryptic message that is simply too difficult to carry. The messenger becomes "heavy of mouth," and fails to memorize the speech. The clever leader, Enmerkar, sees the difficulty and relieves the messenger's dilemma in a simple way. He pats a piece of clay and writes a message on it. If that were not simple enough, when the messenger takes the clay tablet to Enmerkar's opponent, the Lord of Aratta takes the clay tablet and calmly sits by his brazier and sets about reading it![1]

Of course, these men were ancient heroes–ancient by the time the story was written. One cannot expect such grand personages to worry over the complex and demanding cuneiform writing system–as we must, alas, struggle. Although the events narrated are not, strictly speaking, in "mythic" time of origins–the main characters are humans in human history, not gods–the poet is quick to point out that, before these events took place, there was no writing. We (poet and audience) do not belong to the time of the invention of writing, though we do retain the instruments that go back to the event.

Nothing is, perhaps, as familiar to the student of literature as the significant archaism. Heroes and events are in the past; the form of song and poem is traditional; even the choice of words is dominated by the old word-hoard. In the Western traditional, the epic provides the most obvious example. Homer is already ancient when the *Illial* and *Odyssey* appear, and

[1] The story is now called "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta", edited by Samuel Noah Kramer (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1952). See now Soll Cohen, *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (Diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1973), and on the Enmerkar cycle, Adele Berlin, *Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna, A. Sumerian Narrative Poem* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1979).

the line of transmitters, translators, and transpositioners–Virgil, Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser, Milton and the like–preserve the archaic. Romances and myths proper also are heavily marked by a deep nostalgia for the remote and the original. That other great repository of works, the Bible, is similarly dominated by nostalgia even when, as in the late *Gospel of John* and the *Book of Revelation*, "present" events and the thrusting-forward into future events are the major concerns of the works.

This is a paper on "Translating Archaic Literature," and it contains two parts, one on translation, the other on "archaic" literature. It pursues two simple ideas: (1) that a concept of "archaic" literature is useful; and (2) that the process of translating "archaic" literature has its own peculiar problems and solutions to those problems. I have hinted at the meaning I give to "archaic", and I will attempt a definition of the term; and, finally, I will mention a few examples from my attempts at translating Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite poetry.

First, I think it useful to tell you why I have thought to consider "archaic" literature. Although my early work was in Western literature, I have become increasingly involved with Middle Eastern literature, especially Ancient Near Eastern literature. From the comparatist's point of view, the earliest literature is of great importance. We know, for example, that no long after the invention of true writing (ca. 3000 B. C.) translation became important; and some feel that it was the presence of Akkadian-speaking people that turned the Sumerian writing system into a true writing system,[2] that is, phoneticized. Robert Biggs discovered Akkadian scribes (i.e., speakers of a Semitic language, Akkadian) in the Sumerian scribal school at Abu Salabikh, where the earliest (ca. 2650 B.C.) translatable texts have been excavated.[3] The Abu Salakikh texts are contemporary with the finds at Ebla, in northern Syria. Among the 20,000 tablets at Ebla were the earliest bilingual dictionaries (Eblaite-

[2] Jean Nougayrol, in Marcel Cohen, *et al., L'écriture et la psychologie des peuples* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1963), p. 90.

[3] See Robert Biggs, *Inscriptions from Tell Abu Salabikh* (Chicago: University Press, 1974).

Sumerian) ever recovered.[4] Akadian-Sumerian bilingual dictionaries and bilingual texts have been known for some time, but they are mainly from the 2nd and 1st milennia. The scribal schools lasted until the early Christian era, long after Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite (and Hurrian) had ceased to be spoken languages;[5] the mastery of cuneiform script demanded the learning of different languages and texts that represented the languages at earlier stages of development, roughly like the preservation of Latin in the Western Church on the one hand, and the ability to write Middle English for a modern student of English today.

Much of Ancient Near Eastern literature is anonymous, or attributed to a god or to a scribal tradition rather than an individual.[6] But a conspicuous exception for ca. 2150 B. C. reveals the name of the earliest poet we know about: Enheduanna. Enheduanna was a politically important high priestess, daughter of the emperor Sargon the Great; she was the first to construct something like a systematic theology. What is significant is that this Akkadian-speaking 3rd Millennium poet wrote in the Sumerian language.[7]

The literary tradition is extensive enough to show a curious tendency that sheds light on its strong conservatism. Much of the Sumerian literature that has been preserved dates from a period when Sumerian was in decline (Old Babylonian period); and Sumerian literature was still being written a thousand years after it had been lost to speech. Akkadian literature (i.e., of the Babylonians and Assyrians) in its turn developed with Sumerian models

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[4] Giovanni Pettinato, *Old Canaanite Cuneiform Texts of the Third Millenium*, into. Matthew L. Jaffe (Malibu: Undena, 1979), pp. 10-11.

[5] Consider the long literary evolution of the masterwork of Mesopotamian literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, in Jeffrey H. Tigay, *TheEvolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

[6] On the concept of "authorship" in the Mesopotamian literary tradition, see W. G. Lambert, "A Catalogue of Texts and Authors", *Journal of cuneiform Studies*, 16 (1962), 59-77, and William W. Hallo, "Toward a Hisotry of Sumerian Literature", in *Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen*, ed. Stephen Lieberman (Chicago: Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 181-203), and also Hallo's "New Viewpoints on Cuneiform Literature", *Israel Exploration Journal*, 12 (1962), 13-26.

[7] See the introduction to William W. Hallo and J. J. A. Van Dijk, eds. *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968).

in mind; but the literary tradition preserved it, too, when Akkadian was supplanted by Aramaic in the 1st Millenium. Hittite literature, which flourished for a few centuries in the 2nd Millenium, was, in a sense, trebly removed from its "source". Sumerian is unrelated to any known language (though it has some features that remind one of other agglutinative languages); Akkadian is a Semitic language; and Hittite is Indo-European. But Hittite poetry shows the strong influence of Sumerian and Akkadian literature, and was mediated by yet another language, Hurrian.

The poetry I have been working with, ninety-five short poems which represent the speech of one of the major gods (Enki/Ea) in the Sumerain pantheon, were written from the late 3rd Millennium through all the major periods of Sumerian and Akkadian literature into Late Babylonian times (400-100 B. C.). There is some evidence that the theme is present in even earlier Sumerian literature. As it is, the poems represent the work of two thousand years and three languages (in three language families); a number are bilingual texts.

I have been referring to this activity as a literary tradition. Of course, the vast majority of the people who spoke the languages could not read and write. It is certainly plausible that oral tradition was at least as productive of songs, hymns, and stories as a literary tradition. The scribal schools (é-dub-ba, "house of tablets") appear to maintain the continuity.[8] Contacts would seem to be strong to the temple and to the palace. One may expect connections with oral composers, but such connections are difficult to establish from the documents. My own feeling is that a number of conspicuous features of the poetry–brevity, terse expression, repetition and variation, ironic twists, and quick turns–in the collection are features that reflect the difficulties in learning a large a complex sign lists and "school texts". These are not the features, typically, of "oral tradition". It is just this problem, how to place the poetry between "oral tradition" and the literary traditions we are familiar with in the West, that has led me to "archaic" literature.

We have been told by Albert Lord and, more recently, Berkley Peabody that "oral

[8] On the schools, see Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), on "Schools Days".

literature" is deeply traditional, in style of composition.[9] (Peabody in *The Winged Word* proposes five "tests" of orality, each test relating to linguistic codes, from the phoneme through discourse or "song"; failure to pass any one of the tests indicates that the work is not from a genuine oral tradition.) Some features of Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite poetry suggest its roots in oral tradition. There is, in Sumerian poetry especially, a high degree of repetition. Phrases, lines and even groups of lines are repeated exactly. (A striking example is a myth, *Inanna and Enki*, in which a list of over one hundred divine *me*, or principles, is repeated in four different places.)[10] Some epithets and a good number of formal similes are repeated in a single work and in related works. Jerrold Cooper has suggested the term, "oral aesthetic", for this repertory of conventional elements.[11]

Still, the basic point of the Parry-Lord notion of oral tradition seems to lead us away from the kind of works the Sumerian, Akkadian and Hittite poems present. For Lord, it is not the repetition of elements that marks the oral tradition. Quite the contrary, "Oral tradition" is oral composition, techniques by which the singer produces in performance, not the same lines of poetry or the same song, but the opposite. Without a fixed text to follow, the singer improvises, given the audience's interest and the time available to expand or contract the song. Every performance is different–though, of course, metrical regularity and very similar "themes" are to be expected. The death of "oral tradition", in its most basic meaning, oral composition, is the fixed text.

And the fixed text is just what the cuneiform literary tradition produces. Over hundreds of years, of course, changes will occur; the reasons for the changes can sometimes be explained. But the most striking feature of the literary tradition is its strongly conservative

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[9] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960); Berkley Peabody, *The Winged Word: A Study in the Techniques of Ancient Greek Oral Composition* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1975).

[10] The poem has been edited by Gertrud Farber-Flügge, *Der Mythos "Inanna und Enki" Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Liste der ME* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973).

[11] See Jerrold S. Cooper's introduction to *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1978).

tendency. It is not unusual to find a duplicate separated by a thousand and more years.

I want to urge the notion of "archaic literature" to describe this proximity to–but separation from, in a decisive way–the tradition of oral composition.

Archaic means, of course, "marked by the characteristics of an earlier period; old-fashioned, primitive, and antiquated". We think of it especially in regard to language, for there the archaic belongs to an earlier period and its no longer in common use, though retained for special poetical and magical and liturgical purposes. The archaic is also the chief or principal, the pre-eminent; the first in time, the original.[12] If the formal features of Ancient Near Eastern poetry mark it as archaic in the sense of retaining the characteristics of an earlier period and mimicking oral tradition, the themes that run through the literature suggest a deeper, more profound archaism.

Here I must confess my indebtedness to that most complex and stimulating work of philosophical anthropology, the *Anti-Oedipus* of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972).[13] Deleuze and Guattari trace the Freudian Oedipus complex and with it the anthropologists' discovery of the very widespread incest taboo in human societies. They attempt in *Anti-Oedipus* an explanation of the mechanism of social repression and psychic repression symbolized by "Oedipus". In the process, they describe society in terms of three social machines, which they call the savage (nomadic, territorial), the barbarian (imperial, deterritorial), and the civilized (capitalist). Further, they claim that:

each type of social machine produces a particular kind of representation whose elements are organized at the surface of the socius: the system of connotation-connection in the savage territorial machine, corresponding to the coding of the flows; the system of subordination-disjunction in the barbarian despotic machine, corresponding to over-coding; the system of co-ordination-conjunction in the civilized capitalist machine, corresponding to the decoding of the flows. (p. 262).

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[12] Consider the range of meanings in the O. E. D., under "Archaic".

[13] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Robert Hurley, et al., (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

Archaic literature is that produced in what Deleuze and Guattari call the barabian or imperial social machine. It is a kind of literature marked by a style and thematics related to what Deleuze and Guattari call the kind of representation peculiar to the barbarian despotic machine, that is, "the system of subordination-disjunction... corresponding to overcoding". Their analysis of "Barbarian or Imperial Representation" is found in the seventh section of the Third Part of *Anti-Oedipus*.

The father (in terms that are derived from Jacques Lacan) is the "simulacrum of the despotic Law" (p. 269). And the despot "establishes the practice of writing" (p. 202). The turn from the primitive to the barbarian or imperial despot is related in this way to the turn from oral to written tradition:

primitive societies are oral not because they lack a graphic system but because, on the contrary, the graphic system in theses societies is independent of the voice; it marks signs on the body that respond to the voice, react to the voice, but that are autonomous and do not align themselves on it. In return, barbarian civilizations are written, not because the voice has been lost, but because the graphic system has lost its independence and its particular dimensions, has aligned itself on the voice and has become subordinated to the voice, enabling it to extract from the voice a deterritorialized abstract flux that it retains and makes reverberate in the linear code of writing. In short, graphism in one and the same movement begins to depend on the voice, and induces a mute voice from on high or from the beyond, a voice that begins to depend on graphism. It is by subordinating itself to the voice that writing supplants it. (p. 202)

Consider for a moment these many, little poems–nearly one hundred have been discovered so far–in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite in which the god Enki/Ea speaks. All of the speeches take place within a narrative frame, although in some instances the frame has been reduced to a very meagre shell. Typically, a problem has arisen and efforts to solve it have failed. The god Enki is approached, and in a powerful few lines (often clever, ironic), Enki provides a solution. Either the words are enough, and the poet does not bother "finishing" the story by showing that Enki's plan worked; or another character in the story takes Enki's words and acts upon them–successfully. In the overwhelming number of texts,

all the characters are gods, though they may act for humans; the conspicuous exception can be found in the many Flood Story texts, in which Enki speaks to a human, a Noah-like character.

The Mesopotamian tradition did not produce a monotheism. Gods may be powerful and knowing, but they are not all-powerful and all-knowing. From the Third Millenium on (at least), Enki was one of the four most important and most powerful of the gods; and his "character" was the power of the word. More than any other Mesopotamian god, his essence, as it were, was speech; his complexity is the complexity of language itself, with its capacity for double-meaning, for lying, for naming the real (and causing it to be), and for fashioning the "fate" of things and persons.[14] Enki is also one of the old gods, one of the fathers. His "place" was the watery depths, the *abzu*; and near the *abzu* was his sanctuary, the ancient temple (the earliest brick building so far excavated) at Eridu, near the Persian Gulf at the southern-most tip of Iraq. He was also considered an "author": a late list of works and authors places Enki at the head of the list, the author of magical texts especially.

It is a magical text that I have brought along as an example. It is a most traditional piece, of a type called the "Marduk-Ea" ritual (a type that goes back at least to the time of the Abu Salakikh texts);[15] it was set into a series called *Šurpu*, or "Burning", a group of magical texts, in its present form in the 1st Millenium. The text is bilingual, Sumerian and Akkadian; for convenience I have placed de Sumerian and Akkadian apart from one another; but on the tablet the Akkadian is really an interlinear translation of the Sumerian original.[16]

Enki is approached by his son, the city-god of Babylon, Marduk (or ^{d}asal-lú-hi). Marduk has taken note of a person afflicted with "an evil curse like a *gal$_s$-la*-demon".

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[14] See, e.g., Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 110-21; and Margaret Whitney Green, *Eridu in Sumerian Literature* (Diss., Univ. of Chicago, 1975).

[15] Adam Falkenstein, *Die Haupttypen der Sumerischen Beschwörung; Literarische Untersuchtung* (Leipzig: August Pries, 1931), examined the "Marduk-Ea" and related ritual texts.

[16] Erica Reiner, *Šurpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1970), pp. 30-31.

Marduk (as is typical in the genre) has been unable to help the accursed individual. The "curse" is likened to a disease-demon. The effects are described in vivid fashion. An "unwholesome dumbness" and "daze" have come upon the person. The evil curse "has slaughtered this man like a sheep". His god has left him. His mother has left him (actually his "goddess-mother"). The condition covers him "like a cloak" and overwhelms him incessantly.

What you have is Enki's response. The first part is a formula, in which Enki passes his knowledge to his son, Marduk. The usual "ritual" part of the instruction is reduced to a minimum: take the person to the purification-house, and pronounce the healing-speech. The words follow, carefully mentioning the sources of the curse, so that nothing is overlooked: whether it was the person's father, mother, older brother–or even an unknown, one with blood on his hands. By uttering the spell of Enki, the damaging "oath" will be peeled off like an onion, stripped off like a date, and unraveled like matting. (We know from another part of *Surpu* that the priest was to have used an onion, date, and matting and to have tossed them into fire.) The final lines are formulaic, cursing by heaven and by earth, a feature found elsewhere in the "Marduk-Ea" rituals.

Apart from the obvious problems facing the translator of a no-longer-living language, this example from the collection provides problems typical of what I call Archaic Literature. Many of the terms employed are primary terms–father, son, mother, elder borther, evil, heaven and earth–and the larger shape of the piece is clear enough. Yet one is never sure even if when the primary terms are fully understood, their resonances caught. "Evil", "oath", "spell", and "curse" seem indispensable, yet they are too sterile, outworn, and empty for us. Still, the pull of these works operates at a different depth. The son is helpless and must turn to the old father. The one unalterable feature of these rituals is the command, "Go, my son". The narrative is curiously subverted by the words composing it. A mark of Archaic Literature is that stories are dominated (as in Homer) by representation of speech. Straightforward third-person narrative continuously breaks down before dialogue. In this instance, the "spell of Enki", is mentioned as part of the instructions to Marduk. but the "spell" is itself part of the magical saying. In fact, the narrative is swallowed up in the speech. It is, as it were, a

living center of spoken urgency, the voice from behind or above. The way we are used to thinking of narratives, with clearly defined events and stable characters more or less described in their settings, tells us little about this poem. With all inessentials stripped away, the old father's voice remains. It is captured on a recording surface, that very material medium, clay, which allows it to be read over and over again, exactly. Traditions fixes the text, carries it along, holds it steady for the next one to vocalize or translate it.

We sometimes hear that all literature is archaic, in the sense that even the simplest literary from fixes original and increasingly withdrawing early features. Archaic literature stands at that curious turn from "savage" to "barbarian" representation, when with the invention of true writing, the voice is captured one clay–only to retreat to the voice "on high", the repressing despot, the signifier around whom is organized the imperial socius. In the poem, all elements are subordinated to Enki's command, "Go, my son". Deleuze and Guattari describe the leap to barbarian representation:

... with the despotic machine and imperial representation... graphism aligns itself on the voice, falls back on the voice, and becomes writing. At the same time it induces the voice no longer as the voice of alliance, but that of the new alliance, a fictitious voice from beyond that expresses itself in the flow of writing as direct filiation. These two fundamental despotic categories are also the movement of graphism that, at one and the same time, subordinates itself to the voice in order to subordinate the voice and supplant it. Then there occurs a crushing of the magic triangle: the voice no longer sings but dictates, decrees; the graphy no longer dances, it ceases to animate bodies, but is set into writing on tablets, stones, and books; the eye sets itself to reading. (p. 205)

Is there a translation style appropriate to this Archaic Literature? Since we are perforce caught up in what Deleuze and Guattari call the "civilized" (or capitalist) representation, the question is not all a simple one. We usually satisfy ourselves with talking about what "primitive" people *believe*, their mythic consciousness and the like. I must say that because the collection of Enki speeches included texts in three very different languages and different periods, I opted (for reasons that I will not get into here) for the following: 1 *Sumerian texts* were translated into the most ordinary, colloquial English; 2 *Akkadian texts*

were translated into what the Romantics came to know as a special poetic vocabulary; and 3 *Hittite texts*, thrice removed from the early texts, were translated in a colorless, abstract language. To an extent, this scheme could be defended by close examination of Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite styles. But it is important to confess that the threefold scheme was adopted because English history has made available to us these translation styles.

The text is Sumerian with an interlinear Akkadian translation, from the collection, *Šurpu* (after Erica Reiner, *Šurpu, A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* [Osnabruck: Biblio Verlag, 1970], pp. 30-31). Sumerian and Akkadian texts are separated here for convenience. In Reiner, the text is given as Tablet V-VI, lines 27-59.

Sumeria text	***Akkadian text***
^{d}en-ki dumu-ni ^{d}asal-lú-ḫi mu-un-na-ni-íb-gi$_4$-gi$_4$	^{d}é-a DUMU-šú ^{d}AMAR-UD ip-pal
dumu-mu a-na nu-i-zu a-na ra-ab-daḫ-e	*ma-ri mi-na-a la ti-di mi-na-a lu-ṣib-ka*
^{d}asal-lú-ḫi a-na nu-i-zu a-na ra-ab-daḫ-e	^{d}AMAR-UD mi-na-a la ti-di mi-na-a lu-rad-di-ka
[níg]-mà-e i-zu-a-mu ù za-e in-gá-e-zu	šá a-na-ku i-du-ú at-ta ti-i-di
gin-na dumu-mu ^{d}asal-lú-ḫi	a-lik ma-ri ^{d}*AMAR-UD*
mu é-tu$_5$-a kù-ga šu-u-me-ti	[a-na É] rim-ki el-li li-qí-šu-ma
nam-erím u-me-ni-búr nam-erím u-me-ni-du$_8$	ma-mit-su pu-šur-ma ma-mit-su pu-ṭur-ma
su-bi-a-ke$_4$ ḫul-lu-bi lù-lù-a	lum-nu daḫ-ḫu šá zu-um-ri-šú
áš-a-ni ḫé-me-a	*lu-u ár-rat a-bi-šu*
áš-ama-a-ni ḫé-me-a	lu-u ár-rat um-mi-šu
áš-šeš-gu-la-a-ni ḫé-me-a	lu-u ár-rat ŠEŠ-šú GAL-i
áš-ki-lul lú-ra nu-un-zu-a	*lu-u ár-rat šag-gaš-te šá LÚ NU ZU-ú*
tu$_6$-dug$_4$-ga nam-erím ^{d}en-ki-ga-ke$_4$	ma-mit ina MIN-e šá ^{d}É-a
sum^{sar}-gin$_8$ ḫé-en-zil	GIM šu-mi liq-qa-líp
zú-lum-gin$_8$ ḫé-en-du$_8$	*GIM su-lu-up-pi liš-ša-ḫi-iṭ*
šu-SAR-gin$_8$ ḫé-en-búr-ri	GIM pi-til-ti lip-pa-šir
nam-erím zi-an-na ḫé-pàd zi-ki-a ḫé-pàd	ma-mit niš AN-e lu-u ta-ma-ti niš KI-tim lu-u ta-ma-ti

English Translation

Enki replied to his son, Asalluhi (Marduk):
“Son, what you don’t know–what could I add to it?
Asalluhi, what you don’t know–what could I add to it?
Whatever I know, you know as well.
Go, my son, Asalluhi.
Take him to the pure house of bathing.
The oath–undo it.
The oath–release it:
so the vexing evil of his body–
be it the curse of his father
be it the curse of his mother
be it the curse of his older brother
or the curse of a bloodshed unknown to him–
by the saying of the spell of Enki,
the oath
like the onion, it is peeled off
like the date, it is stripped off
like matting, it is unraveled.
Oath: by heaven cursed!
by earth cursed!

Source : *Babel*, vol. 29, no 2, 1983, pp. 76-82.