

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Even in the most distinguished of publishing houses, publishers occasionally come across a manuscript which intrigues them but which is problematic for a number of reasons. This manuscript, inspired by the Epic of Gilgamesh, presents such difficulties. Not only is the manuscript itself unusual, but never before have we had to deal with one in which the stringent and unrestrained comments of its first editor have been included by the author, comments which are clearly designed to discourage readers from reading the book. In what must have been an act of sheer desperation, the author sent us the document, complete with the editor's notations, along with a letter saying that he wished to have nothing more to do with it.

Our first move, obviously, was to find out if the author existed and was not the invention of some sophisticated prankster. Discreet enquiries led us to a man, still alive, who, some forty years ago, was so terror-stricken at the thought of dying that he had left his cottage on the Nova Scotia shore in search of a way to defeat death. It seems that he had long been influenced by the Epic of Gilgamesh with which he was familiar.

While this Sumerian epic, written five thousand years ago,

touches upon every significant issue that mankind has had to face from the beginning of time and is considered the first great masterpiece of world literature, it was clear that our man was interested solely in that part of the legend in which Gilgamesh sets out to find his own way around death. Indeed, their shared obsession had so captivated him that he apparently changed his first name to Gilmour, it being as close a pseudonym as he could find to that of his hero.

He eventually expressed a readiness to let us publish what was in fact a series of letters on the firm understanding that, although he was now well over ninety, his real name should remain unrevealed. The letters are undated but the internal evidence suggests that they were written sometime in the 1970s — before dawn was breaking over the internet. The acid comments of his obstructive editor are of more recent vintage.

It is reasonable to ask why, with the steady flow of less complicated manuscripts, we should have considered this eccentric submission. We have received (and rejected) many manuscripts written in epistolary form. It is often a device designed to divert attention from an author's inability to write straight and engaging narrative. In this case a number of reasons led us to decide on publication. The letters present an arresting and articulate, if bizarre, version of the mid-life crisis that Everyman is said to endure. They offer a unique contribution to that popular genre of self-help literature the author himself pretends to despise. And, the inclusion of extended and pretentious comments by the nameless first editor left us with a manuscript that is, in its way, outrageously funny. We decided to respect the author's wish to be represented by a *nom de plume*.



The letters frequently touch upon Sumerian life and beliefs, but Gilmour was clearly no scholar of the ancient world. It may be helpful, therefore, to summarize that part of the original story with which he was most concerned.

Gilgamesh, the son of the goddess Ninsun and a high priest of Kullab, is king of the city state of Uruk, and a man of beauty, strength and learning. His demands on his subjects are so heavy, however, that they call upon the gods to produce a match for him, a man who would challenge his will, subdue his ardour and redirect his restlessness. Enkidu, a man reared among wild animals, is brought to Uruk from his state of nature by a decision of the gods and with the help of a temple prostitute. She and Enkidu lie together for six days and seven nights until he “had forgotten his home in the hills.” He becomes Gilgamesh’s physical match and, together, they engage in adventures and battles of heroic dimensions, in all of which they are both successful and inseparable, but also a cause of wrath to those of the gods they disobey. For this last sin, retribution is visited upon Enkidu, who dies.

Gilgamesh’s mourning for his friend, together with a sudden, painful awareness of his own mortal nature, combine to persuade Gilgamesh to set out on a pilgrimage in search of a way around death. Recalling that Uta-Napishti, the Noah of the Sumerian version of the Flood, was granted eternal life by the god who dwells “in that holy land where the sun rises,” Gilgamesh resolves to visit him and seek his counsel. On his journey he encounters mountain lions and man-scorpions, travelling league upon league in total darkness before being thrust into the blinding heat of the

rising sun. More mundanely, Gilgamesh meets Shiduri, a goddess of brewing and the barmaid of an alehouse, who tries to persuade him to relax and enjoy life while he can, and to let tomorrow look after itself. It is not the kind of advice he is looking for.

Finally, Gilgamesh finds a boatman who, after an unexplained and destructive rash of temper on the part of Gilgamesh, agrees to ferry him across the deadly waters to the holy city in the land of Dilmun where Uta-Napishti resides. When they meet, Uta-Napishti recounts his version of the Flood, and then tells Gilgamesh that everlasting life is a gift of the gods and not within the power of mortal man to achieve by himself. Overcome with disappointment and fatigue, Gilgamesh falls asleep. To show him how ill-equipped he is to face the rigours of an unending life, Uta-Napishti instructs his wife to place a loaf of bread beside him each day for as long as he sleeps. When Gilgamesh finally wakes he finds seven stale loaves beside him. By way of consolation for this discouraging advice, Uta-Napishti tells Gilgamesh how to acquire the plant of “youth-regained” which grows on the ocean floor. Gilgamesh successfully retrieves a specimen but carelessly leaves the plant lying on the ground. A serpent appears, swallows the plant, sloughs its skin and disappears.

Upon this turn of events, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, resigned to the fact that he will remain as mortal as the rest of mankind. He admires the great walls of his city. The epic ends.



The one remaining mystery in the manuscript we received is why Gilmour should have chosen to address his letters to Ninsun, the mother of Gilgamesh. Was this perhaps the whim of an unsettled

mind or the device of an inventive raconteur? It seems to us to have deeper roots. In the legend, Ninsun plays an unwelcome and interfering role in the evolution of her son's character. It therefore seems reasonable (in so far as anything in this saga is "reasonable") that Gilmour should be led by his sense of kinship with Gilgamesh and his own quirky nature to become paranoid about this mother figure and see her as the cause of his own obsession as well as that of her son. There are, of course, other possible interpretations and, as will soon be apparent, his pompous editor offers one of his own.

— August

Dear Ninsun,

You are an old meddler. You interfered in Gilgamesh's life. Now you are tampering with mine.

Imagine, if you can, a Nova Scotia cove on a late summer evening, a short sagging wharf, the bent arm of grey rocks, casual and protective, the white Cape Islander at anchor, a rusty can on its upright exhaust pipe, the red buoy, the lone gull, all still in the pellucid air. Only the sun setting and the tide in an imperceptible ebb. In front of my cottage, indolent, sipping my dry martini, I had my demon under control.¹ It was a moment of peace.

And only a question of time. Soon I saw the cat's paw, the ripple on the water that foretells the breeze that heralds the storm. Movement, upheaval, creative discomfort, that upsetting of order which I cannot do without. I began to think, as I often do, about dying, or rather, not dying: the Gilgamesh obsession, and of your part in it.

¹ This is the first of what, I fear, are a number of occasions where the meaning is unclear. The author is presumably referring to his horror at the thought of dying. It might also be read as the first, albeit oblique, hint at an alcohol problem, an allusion which, alas, would not have been erroneous. Ed.

I don't know why I am so anxious to have your attention, your approbation even. It is only (in middle age) that I have come to acknowledge our relationship, mainly because it took me a long time to come to terms with your highly questionable procreative record. On the shortlist of your liaisons: a god-shepherd, a high priest and a male vampire, if you please. I have now come to accept that I am the recipient of that recessive gene or Andromedan kink or foetal lag that brings us — you and me — directly into touch. But there is no doubt about it: you are a prize meddler.²

Take the incident of the axe. As you well know, Gilgamesh's high spirits and buck-like vigour were the talk of nocturnal Uruk, but you disliked the way he exercised with unfailing zest the *droit de seigneur*, his right to a bride's bed on her wedding night. You therefore declared that his dream of finding an axe in the streets of Uruk meant that he was, in fact, sexually frustrated but that he would soon find a brave companion he would love like a woman. This was malicious innuendo. It is true that he and Enkidu both liked body contact, dressing up, and rather unmanly farewells, but it was a deeply committed comradeship and straight.

And now you have been playing fast and loose with the portraits on *my* watch. Not with my libido, I grant you, more with my obsession. I don't know much about psychoanalysis but I should have thought that the incident of the axe would, if anything, suggest a fear on Gilgamesh's part that the time might be

² It is my editorial opinion that Gilmour's *soi-disant* relationship with the mythical mother figure was no more than an affectation, the indulgence of an unworldly personality. A psychologist may see in it a more fundamental failing. Ed.

coming in his manhood when he could no longer enjoy his *droit de seigneur* with the same degree of zest, that he could not, in a word, cut the mustard.³

I know that few Sumerians could be relaxed about the hereafter and that they could look forward to a rough eternity, especially if they had defied the gods in their lifetime. Moreover, Neti, the gatekeeper of the underworld, stripped everyone naked as they entered the hereafter (a role made for Henry Miller).⁴ I also know that anyone entering this land of no return would find, at its dead heart, a grotesque palace from which Ereshkigal, the goddess of doom, was to be seen (also in the buff) ruling over this dust-deep desolation, flanked by Nergal, her consort, and Namtar, her chief minister and demon of the underworld, the dispenser of pitiless fate. The Anunnaki, the seven dreaded judges (the Supreme Court from hell), lolled in their chambers while the gallas, those attentive and heartless slave devils, were waiting to

³ There is a prevailing opinion among professional students of the Gilgamesh epic, particularly those reading it from an analytical perspective, that it was, *au fond*, a homosexual relationship. Given Gilgamesh's relentless assertion of his *droit de seigneur* and Enkidu's dramatic engagement with the accommodating, if holy, prostitute, it is clear that both men were bisexual by nature and inclination. This was obviously too complex a notion for Gilmour to handle. And the Oedipal aspect of his whole enterprise has escaped him entirely. Ed.

⁴ A gratuitous reference to Henry Miller led to a lengthy dissertation on Miller as an influential writer of social criticism. More significantly, Gilmour cites him as a notable pioneer in sexually explicit practices and refers to his habit of playing table tennis in the nude. Neither the subject nor Gilmour's occupation with it needs further publicity and both have been edited out. A cumbersome attempt to compare the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu with that of D. H. Lawrence and Middleton Murry seemed equally extravagant and was also excised. Ed.

carry out their rulers' ruthless commands. It occurred to me, as I poured a second martini,⁵ that, if I found this anteroom to the hereafter, this limbo, where fickle gods stripped you of your possessions, played tricks and called it justice, I could then plot my path *around* it and be on course to where my dread of dying would be cured. I was ready to go to the ends of the earth to seek out — and circumvent — this sinister scene.

It would mean a long journey. *Not a problem.*

There would be hardship. *Of course.*

My mind might not stand it. *No great misfortune.*

But how and where would I find it? *I was at a loss to know.*

And it was at that precise moment that you, my dear Ninsun, meddled again, taking advantage of my unrest, to plant the answer in my mind to where I would find the land of “total darkness before being thrust into the blinding heat of the rising sun,” where my tribulation will end, if it ever does.

But I ask you!

Las Vegas! *Really!*

Yours ever, so to speak,

Gilmour

⁵ (!) Ed.