Literary Onomastics Studies

Volume 4 Article 5

1977

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The greatest rookie pitcher ever to play the game of professional baseball was, Philip Roth claimed, a nineteen year old lad with the Ruppert Mundys team. His name was Gil Gamesh, the only member of the Ruppert Mundys--or any other team for that matter--to come from Babylonia. Those who have followed the career of the famous Babylonian hero, Gilgamesh, from king of Uruk and world wanderer, to Philip Roth's avatar of the very worst in American competitiveness, are apt to peg Gil's age at somewhat older than his nineteen years. We could add about four thousand years to the total given in Roth's The Great American Novel (1973). More than that, the claim that Gil Gamesh is the only Babylonian around these days is stretching it. There may be another. He may indeed be more Babylonian than Gil Gamesh, a man who body and soul breathes in the spirit of ancien Mesopotamia and challenges our modern world with that spirit. Perhaps with good reason his creator, John Gardner, describes him as a "lunatic magician."

His name is Taggert Hodge, the central character in the 1972 novel by John Gardner called The Sunlight Dialogues. The novel is, as I hope will come clear as it is discussed, a work of the 1970's, very much so.

It is perhaps surprising to find in it a wealth of ancient Mesopotamian names that to my knowledge is unsurpassed in contemporary fiction. The Sunlight Dialogues is not a historical novel. It is set in the contemporary world; most of the action takes place in 1966 and in, af all places, Upstate New York. More specifically, the setting is for the greater part of the long (746 pp.) work none other than Batavia, New York and its environs.

The Sunlight Dialogues is a realistic novel in the usual sense that it preserves and describes the ordinary circumstances of the lives of ordinary individuals in and around Batavia, New York, a Police Chief, the Mayor of the city, assorted farmers and petty criminals, people with names like Fred Clumly, Mildred Hodge (née Jewel), Walter Boyle and Nick Slater. There are occasional references in the book to figures of the remote past, but none so often and importantly as figures from ancient Mesopotamia. Mildred, or Millie,Jewel Hodge,for example, is called Mama, not only because she is indeed a mama, with husband, children, and other assorted relatives, but also because she related in some way to Mama, one of the names of the Great Goddess of ancient Akkadian religion, otherwise known as Aruru, Great Goddess, Ninhursag, Ninti, Ishtar and the like. Gardner introduces Mama through a quotation from A. Leo Oppenheim's fine study called Ancient Mesopotamia, Portrait of a Dead Civilization (1964), a remark that is rather cryptic as it appears in the novel (p.195), that "The story seems to begin with the creation of mankind by the

goddess Mama." What "the story" is as far as The Sunlight Dialogues is concerned, is not immediately clear. Oppenheim (p. 266) was describing an Old Babylonia poem in which the goddess Mama creates mankind but in which the center of interest is the great Flood, one of the precursors of the Biblical Flood narratives.

There are other references, like Will Hodge Jr.'s driving from Batavia to Buffalo and entering that city. "He drove with authority and grace, head back, jaw thrown forward: an Assyrian king." (p. 363). Of the twenty-four sections of the novel, easily a third refers to Mesopotamian art works, like the magnificent friezes, "Lion Emerging from Cage" (p. 135), "Hunting Wild Asses" (p. 227), "Workmen in a Quarry" (p. 637) and "Winged Figure Carrying Sacrificial Animal" (p. 675); or they refer to Babylonian divination tablets, like the section titled, "When the Exorcist Shall Go to the House of the Patient..." (p. 63), or the section called, "Like a robber, I shall proceed according to my will" (p. 393). One also sees in the novel references to Mesopotamian gods, Anu, the "son of Samas" (Shamash) and Enlil (p. 347). There is even a section of the novel entitled, Nah ist--und schwer zu fassen der Gott (p. 497), a title obviously not Akkadian, but a line from the German poet Hölderlin that was used by A. Leo Oppenheim as the title of his chapter in Ancient Mesopotamia on the religion of Mesopotamia!

Why all these references to the ancient world? Section titles of literary works are notoriously enigmatic and sometimes throwaways. But

I think the many allusions to Mesopotamian names in The Sunlight Dialogues are tightly functional. Most striking of all is that the title of the novel leads directly to the intellectual core of the work; ancient Babylonian wisdom. The "Sunlight" of the title is the central character, Taggert Hodge, who operated under the name, the "Sunlight Man"--and whose identity is kept secret for a good part of the novel. The "Dialogues" of the title refer to four specific exchanges between the "Sunlight Man" and Police Chief Fred Clumly. The dialogues are mainly monologues, if the truth be known but they are almost purely Babylonian wisdom updated to apply to the crisis of contemporary American civilization.

Before looking in detail at the four "Sunlight dialogues", though, I should say something about the narrative lines in the novel. It is a large and sometimes complicated story. Gardner briefly sketches some seventy of the characters who will appear in the novel; although the action occurs in 1966, the narrative flashes back at least a generation and sometimes ahead; and whole story lines that are only incidentally connected with the main lines. An example--the most conspicuous--is the story of Walter Benson, a "good citizen living in a suburb of Buffalo," who is also Walter Boyle, a professional thief. His double life is carefully sketched, and he even goes so far as to murder his wife's lover. The story functions something like the subplot of a Renaissance English play, reduplicating in a different "key" the "themes" and "movements"

of the main plot.

And true to the form of the open realistic novel, Gardner does not force all characters and all narrative lines to converge in a grand climax--perhaps because Gardner tries hard to indicate that the amazing story actually took place in Batavia in much the way he is recounting it. Given the length and complexity, four characters stand out. Millie, or Mama, describes herself as a "bitch", an extraordinarily strong-willed person who creates problems for just about everyone. She uses cunning and sex to marry into an important, prestigious and wealthy family--and then sells the family estate. She sleeps around--with, horrors, college professors (most of whom, one gathers, teach at SUNY Buffalo)--and ridicules her long-suffering husband by flinging at him books currently on the reading lists of the professors and challenging the poor farmer to understand and, more, appreciate them. At least one of the Sunlight Man's goals in Batavia is surely to "break" Mama. In a rather strange episode, the Sunlight Man, who has taken her prisoner--he is her brother-in-law--takes a gun from her that she had hoped to use on him:

> He began a wild patter of lunatic talk, patting her cheek, tousling her hair, hissing, howling, whining. She did not realize until too late that she was naked to the waist. A lightning flash filled the room and revealed his face. She screamed, though an instant before, crazily, she had been willing; almost willing. The Sunlight Man lifted his arm to hid his ugliness and backed away. She shook with anger and believed for a moment in the fire breaking out at his feet. (p. 275).

With such are the conflicts revealed. I'm not sure, but I don't think Mama is broken in the novel.

Mama's son, Luke, is the closest thing to a saint in the novel. As the one who understands the conflicts not only in his immediate family, but has a terrible awareness of the tensions everywhere, Luke takes on the enormous guilt of all and in a gesture that is supposed to rid Upstate New York of the problems created by the Sunlight Man, he crashes the truck he is driving, killing himself in the "sacrifice." Ironically, the Sunlight Man had had an inkling that something was amiss, and he escaped before the suicidal crash occured. Still, Luke's Mama, one of the survivors in the novel, remains, even in the knowledge of her son's death, indestructible:

> Her arms were white, her elbows like daggars. Her eyes were like emerald, her lips like amethyst, and in her mourning she was beautiful again; she was calm as stone. (p. 715).

Mama is, I think, a wondrous fictional creation, a wild and lawless energy at the heart of the novel. But the contours of the novel are seen in the curious exchanges between two men, Fred Clumly, the sixty-four year-old Chief of Police, and Taggert Hodge, a generation younger, the Sunlight Man. Clumly, who is used to giving speeches before Batavia's citizenry on Law and Order, likes to refer to the police as the Watch-dogs of Society, a metaphor gleaned out of the prophet Isaiah. Suddenly into his precinct arrives the mysterious stranger, the Sunlight Man, who is arrested by Batavia police for writing <u>love</u> across the entrance of

the New York State Thruway. Not long after that, the Sunlight Man is responsible, directly or indirectly, for breaking jail, three murders, a suicide, the burning of much of the old family estate and sundry other incidents too numerous to mention. Clumly is basically a decent fellow, and he rather easily becomes the novel's representative of what is best--and most paradoxical--about the need of man to develop and maintain civilization, the need for law and order. It is, of course, his job to track down the Sunlight Man. The most interesting movement in the novel traces his gradual change from the rhetoric of "law and order" to the rhetoric of "justice". In the process he has at least four occasions in which he could apprehend the Sunlight Man. In the first few he is merely foiled and unable to catch the magician. But in his last, he is forced to let the man go free. The Sunlight Man is subsequently shot by one of Clumly's men, but through no help by Clumly, and the Police Chief stands before the citizens of Batavia one final time. Departing from the text of his speech, the Watchdog laments the death of the magician and delivers a moving "justice" speech. The audience is deeply touched, but Clumly will lose his job for his handling of the case.

Fred Clumly is the most "humanitarian" of the characters, it turns out, perhaps because he is the most "rounded" of Gardner's characters. He arrives at an intelligent and sensitive awareness of injustice, but the novel is carried by a much more frenzied character, one who had long passed the stage of warm human regard and awareness of the

modern world's injustice, the Sunlight Man. This ironic figure is the novel's triumph; upon this very complicated character the novel stands or falls. He is a magician, though it is magic of the most modern sort: sleight-of-hand, tricks with wired chairs and explosives, clever escapes. The interesting point to me is that there is nothing at all mysterious about the magic; some amusing tricks, perhaps, with a tendency to cruelty in them at times; but no depth; a glittering surface, that leaves reader and fellow characters in the novel in a state where it is impossible to predict what will happen next.

But the Sunlight Man himself, Taggert Hodge, returned to Batavia for reasons that are difficult to grasp at best, is complex, ambiguous, ironic, enigmatic. The details that we grasp of Taggert Hodge's life are not all that consistent--mainly because he has a tendency to talk about himself. and he lies about his past! He is also "mad," mad in a way that would delight an R.D. Laing. Who is to say that his bizarre attitudes and behavior are "insane," when the Sunlight Man never fails to point out (as Laing does) that the modern world is insane?

What concerns us is Taggert Hodge's motives? Why return to Batavia? Why write <u>love</u> on the New York State Thruway? Imprison his sister-in-law? Burn the family estate (mostly)? There are almost too many reasons, and none of them quite work. His wife, Kathleen, had gone insane. He has a great many animosities toward police, his family, and society in general. He tells of having participated in the Civil Rights

movement and other reformist movements of the 60s. He used to teach. Now he is an anarchist. He prophesies the terrible collapse of contemporary American society even as he burns the silo and barn of his father's estate.

Enter the Sunlight dialogues. It is impossible to tell from the book where John Gardner stands on the ideas raised in the dialogues. The speaker is, of course, an ironic, unstable anarchist. What he preaches is John Gardner's understanding of the great principles of ancient Mesopotamian thought.

There are four dialogues in all, "The Dialogue on Wood and Stone," pp. 341-361; "The Dialogue of Houses," pp. 460-472; "The Dialogue of the Dead," pp. 586-592; and "The Dialogue of Towers," pp. 694-701. In each case the Sunlight Man directs Fred Clumly to appear at a bizarre location: a church at midnight, a tent suspended from a railroad trestle, a cemetary crypt, and a silo. In each case Clumly records the Sunlight Man's comments on tape. (The tapes will then become the document against Clumly for not apprehending the man.) In each "dialogue", the modern world is shown to be dominated by Biblical thinking; to be breaking apart; and to be in need of the corrective offered by the very people the Biblical prophets objected to most stridently, the Babylonians.

What is this Babylonian wisdom Taggert Hodge (if not Gardner) is impatient to relate?

The first dialogue, "The Dialogue on Wood and Stone," begins as a

challenge to Hebrew attacks on idolatry, the Babylonian's worship of "sticks and stones" rather than "spirit." Taggert tells two stories of himself. The first concerns his involvement with CORE in San Francisco, in which all white participants, terribly ridden with guilt, allowed and desirect all kinds of emotional punishment meted out by the "big boss." The second is a more fantastic tale, one which comes just after Sunlight claimed he had lied about the first story. In the second, Sunlight tells of running down a young thief he was chasing while Sunlight was driving a diaper truck. In grotesque fashion, the man imprisons the boy for years in a cellar; when finally allowed to leave the prison, the boy crawls out, sees sunlight--and then returns to his dark cellar. This grim allegory, reminiscent in a way of Plato's cave, is prefaced by Sunlight's discussion of Babylonian gods. Because the gods operated within the limits of the idol, because they were not gigantic buy man-sized, and especially because the chief gods--Anu, Enlil and the like--were misanthropic or indifferent to man, the Sunlight Man sees in them a possibility for relating matter and spirit, the practical and the spiritual, body and spirit in a way we have lost; we who are heirs of the Biblical split between body and spirit. The Babylonians loved substance--yet spirit as well. Taggert is fascinated with what he sees is the total indifference of the Babylonians in the institution of marriage to love--a matter to which the Sunlight Man will return in other dialogues. Because love and marriage have no relation-

ship to one another, the Babylonians were sexually free; there was no guilt. Further, because the Babylonians placed no value on the individual human life, death could be accepted. Most important, the crushing oppression of Law and its indifference to the single, unique individual--paradoxically such oppression is ours, not the Babylonians. As the Sunlight Man becomes more agitated, as he reflects more on the destructive nature of Law and the agony of guild, he reveals his anarchistic conclusion:

> Ha! Madness! I care about every single case. You care about nothing but the average. I love justice, you love law. I'm Babylonian, and you, you're one of the Jews. I can't cover every single case, I have no concern about covering cases, so I cover by whim whatever cases fall into my lap--the Indian boy, the Negro thief, for instance--and I leave the rest to process. But you, you cover all the cases--by blanketing them, by blurring all human distinctions (p. 360).

Fred Clumly fell asleep during the dialogue--and that may have been the Sunlight Man's cue to cut them down in the future. In dully summarizing the dialogue, I have certainly cut the life out of them. cut out the outrage, and cut out what I think are rather intense mements in the novel--though like choral songs in Greek tragedy they do little to advance the action and offer rather a kind of vertical strip of meaning against which one can view the marrative line. But I fear that in summarizing the dialogue, I have also lost the nervous leaps, the failure of the Sunlight Man to connect one part of the dialogue explicitly with another. All four dialogues are elliptical, twisted, ironic--with the Sunlight Man appearing anything but the philosopher stringing together

a patently systematic argument.

Still, Taggert presses the Babylonian ideas in the dialogues. In "The Dialogue of Houses," given just before a train runs along the tracks and threatens to kill both Clumly and Taggert, the Sunlight Man turns to astrology. Again he demands that Clumly understand the Babylonian idea of astrology, and with it "personal responsibility." "Luck," which is raised to a major theme in the novel, is seen in the Babylonian way, accepting "personal responsibility" in the recognition of what binds you. As there is no escaping one's simtu (for shimtu), or "one's personal fate," and the blueprint, istaru (for ishtaru), there is only the possibility and responsibility to act with the gods. "You discover which way things are flowing, and you swim in the same direction" (p. 462). One needs to be "in shape to act with the universe" (p. 463)--this rather than following Law, performing duties.

The Sunlight Man gives a famous and interesting example from the Ancient Near East. King Naram-Sin (p. 464) waited and waited to hear what the gods had to say to him, and received only silence.

> "Very well," said the king. "Has a lion ever performed extispicy? Has a wolf ever asked advice from any interpreter of dreams? Like a robber, I shall proceed according to my will!" (p. 464).

Then the gods spoke. "They smashed that poor devil like an ant!" (p. 464).

The second dialogue, like the first, turns round to the Sunlight Man's own experiences and the hang-ups of the modern world. The examples are still grim, but often they are funny, as when he claims to have shot all

the sales force of Muntz TV after he discovered that the whole company was a rip-off and he, who had been one of their salesmen, had been taken in by it. Although I can see no connection with the Muntz TV story, the Sunlight Man again seems to hold out the promise--or at least emphasize the need for--sexual freedom.

Dialogue number three is called "The Dialogue of the Dead", and it takes place, fittingly enough, in a cemetary. Taggert's chief example here is the ancient story of Gilgamesh's search for immortality. Although Gilgamesh pushed everywhere for a positive answer, the answer was always no. Using this as a way of blasting away at the American cult of youth above all, the Sunlight Man links the freedom to act with the meaninglessness of death. With this he exposes the choice, with which he will confront Fred Clumly in a very specific way:

> Once one's said it, that one must act, one must ask oneself, shall I act within the cultural order I do not believe in but with which I am engaged by ties of love or anyway ties of fellowfeeling, or shall I act within the cosmic order I do believe in, at least in principle, an order indifferent to man? And then again, shall I act by standing indecisive between the two orders--not striking out for the cosmic order because of my human commitment, not striking out for the cultural order because of my divine commitment? Which shall I renounce, my body--of which ethical intellect is a function--or my soul? (pp. 588-589).

The Sunlight Man will deal with this question in a theoretical way and will pose some examples which supposedly are from his own life. But the choice will press upon Fred Clumly: to seize the man according to law,

and thus remove a dangerous anti-social force; or to "act on the side of the universe" (p. 591), turn away, and let the Sunlight Man go.

The moment of decision arrives for Fred Clumly at the end of fourth and last dialogue, "The Dialogue of Towers." The Sunlight Man reflects upon the most famous feature of Mesopotamian archiecture, the ziggurat, or great towers. Herodotus had written that the very top of the tower was the place where the divine and human made contact: the god descending and sleeping with a human priestess. The Sunlight Man--and with him John Gardner?--emphasizes the bottommost part of the tower:

> Fact is, the god is in the base, a kind of inner mystery from which the towers ascend. Could it mean this: (a little wildly) from man's own inner mystery,the destructive principle in his blood --his knowledge that he's born for death--his achievements ascend--his godly will, his desire to become at one with the universe, total reality, either by merging with it or by controlling it? (p. 697)

Fred Clumly--and with him most Assyriologists, probably--is dubious about the interpretation of the towers. The Mesopotamian ideas end there, though, as the Sunlight Man turns more and more into the king of prophet of doom we know from the Bible. The last age of man is upon us; he can only see destruction.

> The people of the city are blinded and they speak in a babble of tongues, and around the towers there are luminous clouds full of dazzling colors, and the air stinks of brimstone. There is no Zoar to run to, and if there are five good men living they have no more chance than a Jew's fat wife. Hell's jaws will yawn and the cities will sink, and there not to be a trace (p. 698).

This sounds so much like the great prophets that one wonders where the Babylonian went. I suppose one should not expect too much consistency from a prophet--especially a mad one. In the tower symbolism, though, the Sunlight Man seems pretty consistent. He and Clumly are in a silo, and soon it begins to burn. Clumly is faced with an impossible choice, it would seem to me. The Sunlight Man has prepared not only the silo and the barn of his father's estate to go up in flame; the house, too, will go--and with it, possible the new family living in it--if Clumly does not relent. The Police Chief, fighting a life of instinct, finally accepts. Just before leaving, the Sunlight Man makes the point even more clearly: Clumly is giving the man his freedom.

"Luck"--the Babylonian luck, that is--is intimately a part of the Sunlight Man, as it is a theme in the novel as a whole. The magician narrowly excapes the suicidal truck run, as we have seen; he had a "hunch" he should leave the truck. His death, though, reveals the paradoxes of luck. After having escaped freely, he nevertheless returns. He comes to no other place than the police station. One last trick. Yet it is not Clumly who is on duty. When the Sunlight Man suddenly appears before the only man still in the station, "Shorty" Figlow, Figlow moves without thinking. A shot is fired, and the Sunlight Man drops.

Are the four dialogues all that intimately related to the action of the narrative? How seriously are we to take the "Babylonian" way rather than the "Jewish" way of Law and Guilt? At this point in a paper

written in the Anglo-American critical tradition, it is customary to say, it doesn't much matter. After all, the dialogues are not John Gardner's ideas. The speaker is a fictional construct, an ironic persona. And the persona is a madman, a "lunatic magician," a liar, and anarchist. The Sunlight Man reveals what he need to--the problems of the world today. That there might be solutions, a new orientation along the lines of Babylonian wisdom--should we even consider it? Is there any commitment?

My guess is that Gardner is trying to have it both ways. Ending the novel as he does, with Clumly's speech on "justice," is ironic enough--we know he will lose his job in disgrace anyway. Are we to discount the statements presented there, as truths?

Let me hazard a final guess. A novelist, especially I think a novelist in the United States today, has some difficulty making ideas relate to something like "pure action," especially if his characters are not all university professors (or French children). How are the great concerns, the noble causes of the 1960s,related to a Batavia, New York Chief of Police? My guess is that most people reading The Sunlight Dialogues will read it for the action; will read it for the characterization; my guess is they will ignore the dialogues themselves. But by appealing to ancient Babylon, Gardner, I think, has found a way to deal with important philosophical and ethical issues without turning his work into a mere forum.

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