Negation as Description: The Metaphor of Everyday Life in Early Mesopotamian Literature

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The topic of "everyday life" brings to mind the mundane, normal activities of mankind, or so it would seem from books published a generation ago under titles that began with the phrase "Everyday Life in ..."[1]. These titles imply that there is something artificial in the literature and the mythology, something elitist that must be offset by an inquiry into the vernacular, the everyday life of humanity. This very same dichotomy between elitist literature and the life of common men and women, which can be studied from archaeology and from economic documents, is implicit in certain varieties of materialist theory and in the concurrent western distinction between "Tammuz and Onionology". Nonetheless, this distinction, one that grew out of modern critical concerns, depends primarily on our interpretation of ancient societal conditions that is, on the theoretical stance of the observer. In order to interpret the relationships between texts and reality – for this is what one is really talking about – one has to take into account the social role of literacy in ancient societies. In conditions of restricted literacy – and I am not using the expression in a technical sense – there are social as well as semiotic constraints on written communication; writing is associated with prestige and power that is often divorced from, or even unrelated to, the literal content of the message. One example of this is the category of monumental legal "codes" that were meant to be more visible than read, to use Detienne's felicitous phrase[2]. In such a society, written literature may be purposely "different" from oral tales. This is a device that establishes the social status of the scribal class and of those who use, as well as those who control, communication. It follows that in such a situation one must use utmost caution when one associates writing with the everyday world. Thus, myth may reflect life in peculiar ways and it is not possible to view imaginative texts as direct reflexes of the mundane. Or, to put it in another way, can we make a distinction between myth and reality, between the word and the

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1. Assyriologists will immediately think of Georges Contenau's *Vie quotidienne à Babylone et en Assyrie* (Paris, 1950), a fascinating book that has been translated into many languages. The original version of this paper was presented at the 4th international Assyriological meeting *Shulmu* in Poznan, Poland, in September, 1989, which was dedicated to the topic of "everyday life" in the ancient Near East.
2. Marcel Detienne, *The Creation of Mythology* (Chicago, 1986) 32.

world, between ideology and individual texts? Perhaps the answer to this question depends on how seriously one takes the words of Paul Valery that "whatever perishes from a little more clarity is a myth"[3]. The observations that follow are happily dedicated to Miguel Civil, who, more than any other scholar, has provided us with so much light on the details of the everyday world of ancient Mesopotamia, and on the textual traces of the imaginations of its inhabitants.

Descriptions of "everyday life" are indeed found in Mesopotamian literary texts, but it would be a mistake to take them out of context and milk them for practical detail[4]. This can be done, but one may find that unless caution is applied, one could easily be misled, for the level of verisimilitude would differ from genre to genre and from text to text. Thus, one may ask, for example, whether it is possible to utilize mythological tales to establish kinship terminology. This is very tempting as the economic texts rarely provide us with sufficient genealogical information for this task. Nevertheless, there remains the distinct possibility that the myths preserve a different, "sacred" terminological set or utilize obsolete labels that were no longer in use in the population at large[5]. This is not only a matter of the mythological or ritual texts. Descriptions of peoples or landscapes in royal inscriptions, particularly in Assyrian accounts of military campaigns, are hardly realistic or naturalistic; they are the stuff of political and cultural ideology, as Fales, Zaccagnini, and others have made us aware[6]. These compositions utilize language play as much as any other text and are rife with metaphor. To cite one recent author on the subject:

> If there is no such thing as an artless language, it follows that descriptions of environments are never merely empirical. They are strategies which encode the interests and concerns of the writer as well as the physical nature of the terrain, the climate, and so on[7].

It is important to keep this in mind as we read royal annals, or attempt to trace the path of Sargon's Eighth Campaign.

Idyllic descriptions of the everyday world are rare in Mesopotamian literature. Consider, for example, the introduction to a first millennium "Fire Incantation":

> At dawn, before the birds twitter
> Before a bird has picked up water in its beak,
> Before a strong young man has satisfied his hunger,
> Take tamarisk and soapwort,
> Rub the shoulders, chest, hips, buttocks and back of the neck of that man,
> Cast your spell,
> That, like an extinguished brush fire, it may itself be extinguished.
> etc[8].

3. Paul Valery, "A Fond Note on Myth", in *The Outlook for Intelligence* (Princeton, 1962) 41 (originally published in 1919).

4. One must refer here to the important comments by Miguel Civil, "Les limites de l'information textuelle", in *L'archéologie de l'Iraq du début de l'époque néolithique à 333 avant notre ère: perspectives et limites de l'interprétation anthropologique des documents* (Paris, 1980) 225-232.

5. This problem is well demonstrated in Å. W. Sjöberg, "Zu einigen Verwandtschaftsbezeichnungen im Sumerischen", *HSAO* 1 (1967) 201-231. Written almost a quarter of century ago, this remains, to this day, the only major attempt to analyze Sumerian kinship terminology. It remains extremely useful, but the results are a good indication of the limits of traditional philological lexicography.

6. F. M. Fales, "The Enemy in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: 'The Moral Judgment'", pp. 425-435 in Hans-Jörg Nissen and Johannes Renger, eds., *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn* (Berlin, 1982) and C. Zaccagnini, "The Enemy in in the Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: "The 'Ethnographic' Description", pp. 409-424 of the same volume.

7. Robert Lawson-Peebles, *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America: The World Turned Upside Down* (Cambridge, 1988) 6.

8. W. G. Lambert, "Fire Incantations", *AfO* 23 (1970) 43-44.

The beginning of this incantation contains a pleasant little scene that is, of course, but a setup for what is to follow: a ritual to extinguish "fire", in this case some form of fever. Note, however, that it is all expressed in the negative: the idyllic first part contains negative particles or prefixes (for the text is bilingual Sumerian and Akkadian), followed by imperatives, and finally, in the last section of the text, desideratives. But the semantics is the semantics of negation. This is an unusual form but it serves our purpose well, for it brings us to the main topic of this paper: descriptive inversion and symbolic reversal[9].

Consider the well known passage in the great OB Sumerian Enlil hymn, *Enlilsurashe*[10]:

> Without Great-Mountain Enlil
> Cities would not be built, humanity not established,
> Stalls would not be constructed, sheepfolds not set up,
> Kings would not be elevated, leaders not born,
> Priests and priestesses would not be chosen by omen,
> Troops would not have generals nor sergeants,
> The cresting spring flood would not sweep clean the waterways,
> ...
> The sluice of the canal would not be set straight,
> The fish of the deep would not spawn in the canebrake,
> Birds of the sky would not spread out their nests on the teeming earth,
> In the heavens the rain clouds would not open their mouths,
> Field and meadow would not be filled with grain,
> Plants would not grow in splendor in the steppe,
> Mountain trees would bear fruit in the orchards.
> Without Great-Mountain Enlil,
> Nintu would put (people) to death, would not slay,
> Cows would not lose their young in the stalls,
> Ewes would not bring forth sick baby lambs.

This is perhaps the longest and most detailed passage of this sort, but similar devices are used in other Sumerian literary texts. Some are simple one liners, others are more developed. The Sumerian negative verb used in this type of formulation is nu-me-a, a nominalization of the negative form of the verb "to be"[11]. A clever version of this is found in the long late-OB ritual text known as the "Incantation to Utu"[12]. Here a litany of attributes of the sun god are listed; they are in his power, za-a-kam ("yours", lines 29-38). Then follow thirty-seven lines (39-66) of negative description, using za-da nu-me-a, "without you"[13]. A sample from this passage reads, in translation[14]:

9. For an excellent overview of the problem, see Barbara A. Babcock, "Introduction", pp. 13-36 in Barbara A. Babcock, ed., *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, 1978).

10. Lines 109-114; 117-130; see Daniel D. Riesman, *Two Neo-Sumerian Royal Hymns* (University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation, 1969) 53-54; new translation by Thorkild Jacobsen *The Harps that Once ...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, 1987) 108-109.

11. See, in general, Gene B. Gragg, "The Syntax of the Copula in Sumerian", pp. 86-109 in J. W. M. Verhaar, ed., *The Verb 'Be' and its Synonyms* 3 (Dordrecht, 1968). Akkadian uses *balu* in such contexts.

12. G. R. Castellino, "Incantation to Utu", *OA* 8 (1969) 1-57. A new edition has just been published by Bendt Alster, "Incantation to Utu", *ASJ* 13 (1991) 27-96.

13. A duplicate has za-da nu-è, "when you do not rise".

14. Lines 40-47, *ASJ* 13, 44-45, 72.

Oh Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the river ordeal does not give judgment,
Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the throne of kingship is not set up,
Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the scepter of Kingship is not established,
Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the regulations of Kingship are not set up,
Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the King does not give instructions to his troops,
Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the trap of the gods is not set up,
Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the priest and priestess are not chosen by omen,
Utu, without you/when you do not rise, the wolf does not snatch the lamb, the lion does not hide (in waiting) in the field.

The obvious relationship between these two passages from the Enlil and Utu texts, points to the fact that we are dealing here with the clever manipulation of a relatively set literary topos.

A second type of negation is found in mythological introductions that describe the non-time prior to the creation of the world. In such texts, non-presence can only be described as absence, and hence we find the type of discourse that is exemplified by the well-known opening lines of *Enūma Elish*. Negative descriptions are most common in a different type of text, the Sumerian city laments, the related *Curse of Agade* and the cultic laments, that is the *balag*'s. Finally, one must mention the unique use of a similar device in the well-known "Incantation of Nudimmud" that is embedded in the story of *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*[15].

Negation is thus a rhetorical and stylistic device. It is one of the few rhetorically limited formal contexts in which descriptions of realia appear in Sumerian literature. We are only beginning to define such contexts and to date we have only one study of such a device, "enumeration", which has been treated by Miguel Civil[16]. As Civil has demonstrated, the enumeration of "realia" in some literary texts was based as much on literary traditions as it was on the culturally mediated observations of the outside world. Literary traditions are understood here to encompass not only poems and narratives that look like Western belles-lettres, but also such texts as lexical lists, which are the fullest repositories of a world viewed through the gauze of writing. The subject is a large one, and the scope of this essay is limited to a small portion of the problem.

Why, one may ask, are realia so often found in negated contexts and what is the value of this consistent symbolic inversion? First of all, negation is processual. This is to say, it is an activity, an actualization of reality. As a result, negative devices in creation stories accentuate that the world is not static, that it is capable of change. Reed huts, cities, all the accouterments of civilization did not exist but now they do. This cannot be separated from other use of the trope of negation: the interchange of positive and negated images in the laments and related texts. Here negation again suggests not only reversal, but the future possibility of change. In this lies a specific distinction between one composition, the *Curse of Agade* and the canonical city laments.

The beginning of the *Curse of Agade* is couched in positive terms: the city ruled the known universe and was filled with the splendors of empire. Then, after Inanna spontaneously turned her favor away from the city, all was reversed. The end is well known – the city was destroyed, never to be occupied again. The city laments, however, are structured in a different manner. I have elsewhere described certain aspects of the complex relationship between the *Curse* and the laments and I shall not repeat that here[17]. Suffice it to say that the latter texts all begin in a different way: with negated images. The exact narrative is different in

15. See, most recently, Bendt Alster, "An Aspect of 'Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta'", *RA* 67 (1973) 103.

16. Miguel Civil, "Feeding Dumuzi's Sheep: The Lexicon as Source of Literary Inspiration", pp. 37-55 in Francesca Rochberg-Halton ed., *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* (New Haven, 1987).

17. Piotr Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (Winona Lake, 1989) 8-9.

all cases, but the pattern holds true. Consider, as an example, the opening lines of the *Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*, when the great gods An, Enlil, Enki, and Nimah had decided:

> To overthrow the appointed time, to forsake the preordained plans
> The storms gather to strike like a flood.
> To overthrow the decrees of Sumer
> To lock the favorable reign in its abode
> To destroy the city, to destroy the temple,
> To destroy the cattle pen, to level the sheepfold, ...

Similar to the Ur and Nippur laments, this narration opens with negation, filled with the potential of its own reversal[18]. This does lead, indeed, to a reversal, for the genre requires that the final outcome be positive: reconstruction and the triumph of the victorious ruler or his dynasty. The *Curse of Agade*, in many ways an antecedent to the lament texts, has the reverse structure; here the positive leads to the negative, as the result is the opposite to that of the lamentations. Nippur, Ur, Uruk and Ur are rebuilt but Agade had to be destroyed forever.

We can now turn our attention to another aspect of the matter. One of the aspects of the negated literary description of realia concerns the depiction of landscape in Mesopotamian literature. Consider the following introduction to a magical incantation[19]:

> A sacred temple of the gods had not been built in a pure place,
> Reed had not come forth, wood had not been created,
> Brick had not been laid, brick mold not fashioned,
> Temple had not been created, city had not been made,
> City had not been created, settlements not founded,
> Nippur had not been made, the Ekur not erected ...

Later in the text there is a non-negated description of the world created by Marduk; this is an almost verbatim reversal of this image, couched in positive terms. But there is a contrast between absence and presence. Nature is represented in the negative description only by reed and wood, components necessary for the next stage, the brick and the brickmold, cities, and the temples of the gods. When creation takes place, however, we find humans, the two great rivers, grass, rushes, reeds and woods, animals, orchards and forests, dry land, and only then do we get to the reed and wood, the brick and the brickmold, the city and the temple.

In an important essay which was to be his final comment on problems he had wrestled with all his life, the late Jacob Finkelstein argued that there was a fundamental difference between the Biblical and Mesopotamian views of the order of things in the universe[20]. He located this difference in the attitude of these civilizations towards the place of humankind in the world. Briefly stated, he argued that the Biblical "world view" was predicated on the dominant role of mankind in the universe, a view fundamentally at odds with the ancient Mesopotamian way of seeing the matter. In the latter, humanity was simply part of nature, not its lord and master. Consider now the incantation, cited above, as well as the similar "creation" stories. They all mention an interrelated set of natural and cultural entities, reeds, houses, cities, etc.

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18. For the former, see S. N. Kramer, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (Chicago, 1940). A new edition by H. L. J. Vanstiphout is in preparation. The latter is now edited by Stephen J. Tinney, *The Nippur Lament: Ancient Sumerian Literature and Politics in the Reign of Ishme-Dagan of Isin (1953-1935 B.C.)* (University of Michigan doctoral dissertation, 1991).

19. *CT* 12 35:1-6; latest translation by M. J. Seux, *La création du monde et de l'homme* (Paris, 1982) 28-30.

20. J. J. Finkelstein, "The West, the Bible and the Ancient Near East: Apperceptions and Categorizations", *Man* 9 (1974) 591-608.

They are linked by tropes such as metaphor and metonymy and are, moreover, all within the sphere of human activity. Humans are then created to serve the gods, either through a sacrificial art – the offering of a divine being – or through spontaneous growth, mimicking nature. The sacrificial birth of the first human, symbolized by the slaughter of a god and the mixing of his blood with clay, is a form of ritual reversal. Here the sacrificial cult of animals, intended to feed the gods, is grotesquely reversed so that the divine ones offer up one of their own. Then follows another ritual reversal, the mixing of blood with clay to produce primeval man. Humanity is here definitely subjugated to the gods, although the ritual bond established at its creation provides the symbol of the dialectical relationship between humans and their masters. Nevertheless, I would claim that Finkelstein was correct when he insisted on the integrated view of nature and human affairs in Mesopotamian literature. The pregnant negation of nature and culture in the creation texts is followed by ritual reversal in the formation of the first human being, and thus they are linked in a dialectical relationship.

The visions of the world upside down, that is the descriptions of "realia" in many literary texts, are not in any way realistic – they are the stuff of anti-structure. This is a common device for taming difference in many cultures, a form of self-definition as well as a form of demonization of the Other. A good example of this is found among the Lugbara people of the Philippines, who conceived of Europeans as literally inverted: people who walked upside down and embodied social values that were the opposite of their own – including cannibalism and incest[21]. In the present context one must compare this with the often cited negative descriptions of Shimashkians, Elamites, Gutians, or Amorites encountered in a variety of Sumerian literary sources[22]. There are those who take these descriptions at face value and believe that Amorites dug up truffles; I, for one, have my doubts. The heart of the matter lies not in the details – these may have complex, often playful origins – but in the manner in which symbolic inversion is used to mark social and semantic boundaries[23].

I have related a select number of different usages of descriptive reversals in Mesopotamian literature, from hymns, incantations, laments, and other types of texts. The narrative usages vary, but the mechanism remains fairly constant. Let me now attempt to put these examples in a common perspective. Reversals and negation carry with them the potential for change, hence they are dynamic devices, full of promise, movement, and implied action. Moreover, by dealing with matters of the "real" world, they allow for the play between two concepts: hierarchy and order.

It has been often observed that symbolic reversals – whether in ritual play or in literature – act not only as a safety valve for social tensions, but as a form of *play* that releases focused energies within a restrictive environment in which threat can be expressed, and in which one can take chances with new roles and ideas. Anyone who has grown up within the realm of the Western theater knows this instinctively, but the Mesopotamians had to make do with specific cultural expressive forms. Language play provided the impetus for movement and interpretation: negation and reversal thus made their appearance in literature as a form of comment on the outside world, a semantic world that was interpreted rather than described by means of the written word.

If one were to take seriously such a point of view, then the way in which we analyze literature would have to be revised in the extreme. What we call history cannot be exempted from the critique that this view requires, and such a move would force us to rethink many of the comprehensive essays about the ancient world. One could argue, however, that it opens up many new interpretive vistas and this may more than make up for the difficulties that it brings in its wake.

21. Renato I. Rosaldo, Jr., "The Rhetoric of Control: Ilongots Viewed as Natural Bandits and Wild Animals", p. 241 in Barbara A. Babcock, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, 1978), citing and commenting on John Middleton, *Lugbara Religion* (London, 1960) 236.
22. J. S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore, 1986) 30-33.
23. Babcock p. 27.