

We Need to Talk About “Sumerian Literature”

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Abstract:

The scope and purpose of the world’s earliest extant literature remain a matter of debate. Why bother to debate, however, since Sumerologists can study Sumerian literature despite their disagreement on the very definition of their topic, or even on the need thereof? Simply because this disagreement risks to hinder the understanding that the study seeks, is my contention. My research hypothesis is that a definition of Sumerian literature can be reached that is explanatory, involving a proximal *genus* and a specific *differentia*. In order to test this hypothesis, informed by Sherma’s (2011; 2022) “hermeneutics of intersubjectivity”, I argue that Sumerian literary compositions should be defined by the specific difference of being framed as distant in space, time, manner, or any combination thereof (that is, may I say, of their being of yonder, of yore, and/or of wonder) in contrast with other Sumerian compositions. A brief discussion of this definition against the backdrop of ancient Near Eastern literature helps to situate this paper beyond Sumerology and in the theory and history of literature. Indeed, Sumerian literature has a “performative” dimension in terms of the self-transformation of its literary audience. The definition of Sumerian literature is a topic whose time has come.

Keywords: Akkadian literature; definition of literature; Egyptian literature; *organisme discursif*; performative; self-transformation; Sumerian literature; wonder; yonder; yore

‘Stalking deer without a woodsman’ (*Zhouyi*, 3:3).¹

1. The need to define

Thus wrote Plato:

If you wish to reach a good decision on any topic, my boy, there is only one way to begin: You must know what the decision is about, or else you are bound to miss your target altogether. Ordinary people cannot see that they do not know the true nature of a particular subject, so they proceed as if they did; and because they do not work out an agreement at the start of the inquiry, they wind up as you would expect – in conflict with themselves and each other (*Phaedrus*, 237 b7-c4).²

The concept of “literature” is famously elusive. This sobering fact has even found its way into dictionaries³. And yet, this fact is first and foremost famous with literary theorists. The rest of us must fight instead a deep and distinct feeling of familiarity upon reading world literature that ranges from the age-old *Epic of Gilgamesh* up to the latest Nobel laureate. Literature’s form and content may, and do, so vastly vary across time and space all while its fundamental function stays the same. Or does it? Nye (1990, 177) quipped: “power, like love, is easier to experience than to define or measure”⁴. Likewise, do we experience literature spontaneously, without much thought of measurement or definition; in case we like it (or dislike) it with a touch of emotion, and yet, constantly, with firm and false familiarity. But, ever since we witnessed several years ago Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize and thereby the redefinition of the boundaries of world-class literature – are we still confident that we all properly know our *Gilgamesh*? The past is sometimes changing faster than the future. And that is, every time we take the time to deeply think about the past. And every time we understand how little we can understand the past. Especially through the use of “young notions”⁵.

Veldhuis observes: “in the practice of Sumerology the question ‘what is it that makes a literary text literary?’ has not been appreciated as a particularly pressing matter” (2003, 32). Although understandable⁶, this is a kind understatement. Swinging to the other “extremity” of the so-called Fertile Crescent (in Hallo’s reworking⁷ of Breasted’s reworking⁸ of Goodspeed’s concept⁹), Assmann notes: “There has scarcely ever been a doubt among Egyptologists whether a text should be classified among literary or non-literary texts. In practice, this distinction works extremely well”¹⁰. If such is the situation in Egyptology, then Egyptology is better placed than her younger sister Sumerology¹¹. Not only this distinction does not work so well (and never did) in Sumerology, but also Sumerologists of note are having serious doubts about it. Indeed, Veldhuis’s question is anything but trivial, and false familiarity is a false answer, both anachronistic and culturally insensitive. The definition of Sumerian literature is therefore a topic whose time has come (cf. Pongratz-Leisten 2020, 21).

Foster aptly notes that “in ancient Mesopotamia, there was no concept of literature as a special subgroup of writing esteemed for beauty or emotional effect”¹². This can never be repeated often enough¹³. “One may say that we see Sumerian through an Akkadian glass darkly,”¹⁴ quips Edzard. Likewise, we see Sumerian, and Akkadian, literary texts *darkly* as literary texts. They are not literary texts. Not in the sense that we expect. I dare say, not in *any* sense that we expect.

Not every eminent scholar would necessarily agree with that. “The scholarly work of H. L. J. Vanstiphout, known as Stip to his friends, reads as a persistent, stubborn meditation on one central theme: the importance of Mesopotamian literature as *literature*, that is as verbal art” (Michalowski and Veldhuis 2006, 1). “It soon became obvious that some of these were truly literary in the sense of *belles lettres*” (Biggs 2007, xxiii).

For all that, it is not too early to assay a history of Sumerian literature on strictly literary grounds, not only for the sake of a better appreciation of Sumerian literature, but also in the service of the history of literature.¹⁵

And yet, this is exactly what Sumerian literature was *not*: “literature as *literature*, that is, as verbal art”, as “*belles lettres*”, fit to be studied on “strictly literary grounds”. In Veldhuis’s (2004, 39) words: “as a category, therefore, Mesopotamian literature is a creation of modern scholarship and it therefore needs careful and explicit definition”. However, as Hollis aptly noted (2009, 89-90) in an Egyptian literary context: “we need to exercise much care in the use of modern terminology for these materials, keeping ourselves ever aware that our designations and terms are just that, ours”. It is notable in this respect that Parkinson, in an early attempt at systematisation, starts from a technical definition of Egyptian literature in terms of purpose “other than the merely necessary communication of practical information” but still ends with a “popular modern” usage determined by aesthetic considerations¹⁶.

What then is literature in a Sumerian context? If Black in 1998 dispenses with the need for definition¹⁷ – two years later, Black and Zólyomi’s definition can serve as a useful starting point: “for present purposes, literary can be defined as referring to any composition which survives in multiple exemplars”¹⁸. This definition, while obviously operational, and fit for most literary cases, is not without its limitations. In order to do a thought experiment, please imagine for an instant that all but one of the exemplars of the *Keš Temple Hymn* (or of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*) had never been discovered. Would those compositions cease to be literary by the simple accident of their surviving in one exemplar only rather than in many exemplars? (Please also note that this discussion is not merely academic; indeed, Rubio (2009, 26) reminds us that “a number of compositions are preserved in single copies”). A further and stronger objection, however, is that Black and Zólyomi’s definition is descriptive, *not* explanatory. Rather than a descriptive or imitative definition, this research needs an essentially exploratory and explanatory one. Veldhuis’s influential “curricular”¹⁹, or “contextual”²⁰, approach, which is a corollary of Black and Zólyomi’s definition, *is* explanatory indeed – but it presents the same type of limitations, being fit for most cases but not for all; moreover, for many cases, it is not even fully explanatory²¹. We clearly need a more precise definition. In 2003, Veldhuis (2003, 36) also discusses in a Sumerian context, and ultimately dismisses, the definition that Loprieno (1996) had given of the Egyptian literary discourse:

Finally, we may discuss the concept fiction as a potential positive characteristic of Sumerian literature. A. Loprieno has defined Egyptian literature with the concepts of fictionality, intertextuality, and reception. Fictionality, according to Loprieno, “is the textual category whereby an implicit mutual understanding is established between author and reader to the effect that the world represented in the text need not coincide with actual reality, and that no sanctions apply in the case of a discrepancy”. Loprieno uses the concept of fiction in particular to distinguish between literature and theology.

Loprieno’s concept of *fiction* is criticized by Veldhuis, who notes: “Margalit Finkelberg has argued that literary fiction is an invention of the Greeks of the classical period. This invention constituted a revolution in poetics. Archaic poetry, represented by Hesiod, was evaluated as divinely inspired truth”²². Such triangulation involving Sumerian, Egyptian, and Greek poetry cannot obfuscate

the fundamental fact that neither Sumerians, nor Egyptians can boast of anything comparable to Aristotle's *Poetics*. They seem to know poetics in the guise of practice only, not of theory also. Conversely, it is a convenient logical shortcut to collapse Sumerian poetry, Egyptian poetry, and Hesiod under the same "archaic" label, but actually, this approach is inconclusive. Literary traditions that span millennia, like the Sumerian and the Egyptian, are hardly without major differences within; between, such differences become exponentially greater; and moreover so in a triangular relation to Hesiod. However, Veldhuis presents not only circumstantial Greek, but also direct Sumerian evidence to the effect that the concept of fiction is largely irrelevant in a Sumerian context (as for its original, Egyptian, context, notwithstanding intimations based on Greek evidence, it should perhaps be better left to Egyptologists to assess). Fiction is in the eye of the beholder, one could almost say. Thus, indeed, and quite anachronistically, Black *et al.* (2004, xxv) note:

In other instances, Sumerian literary works are more obviously fictive: their main protagonists are gods, or talking animals, or even supposedly inanimate objects. But in each case the composition works hard to convince you of its plausibility, whether through setting, circumstantial detail, dialogue, or plot.

Sumerian gods are supposed to be fictive to whom: to ancient Sumerians, or to modern Sumerologists? Then, literature should be defined as fiction according to whose criteria: theirs or ours? But, if it is our criteria that really matter rather than theirs, then how explanatory can be fiction of the production and reception of Sumerian literature? Conversely, if gods are "obviously fictive" to ancient Sumerians, as the excerpt given above suggests – then where does the demarcation line run between "religion" and "literature"? "*La filosofía y la teología son, lo sospecho, dos especies de la literatura fantástica. Dos especies espléndidas*", writes Borges (2011, 577). *Reductio ad absurdum*, one might think. But this is not presumably so for Borges. And this is not necessarily so for anachronistic approaches.

However, it is noteworthy that Loprieno had stated (2000a, 41-42), three years before Veldhuis's critique:

The combination of these three criteria defined in my previous work Egyptian literary discourse. I would like to lay the emphasis on the *combination* of factors, because – if taken individually – fictional, intertextual, or receptional features can indeed be encountered in a variety of non-literary genres.

The operative word is here not "combination" (if fiction does not apply aptly to the Sumerian literary case, neither would apply to it, logically, a combination of several criteria including fiction) – but "previous". It is indeed noteworthy that Loprieno (2000a, 41) was already changing of definition:

One of the ways to define "literature" in Ancient Egypt is to identify texts that problematize personal concerns: not the concerns of the gods, or of the king, or of the deceased – to choose the three most frequent groups of referents –, but rather the problems of the individual human being in his dialogue

with these groups: with god (or the gods), with society (or with the king, who in Egypt represents its symbolic personification), with death.²³

Veldhuis is obviously free to choose to criticize whichever definition he prefers. Then, it remains for us to examine in turn Loprieno's later definition in a Sumerian context. I contend that this definition can work remarkably well in some Akkadian contexts, for instance with the world-famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which combines Loprieno's three "dialogues". It works less well however in other Akkadian contexts, such as the world-famous *Enûma Eliš*, where the focus is indeed on "the concerns of the gods" rather than on Loprieno's "problems of the individual human being". And it works less well, too, in a Sumerian context, where the concerns of the gods often similarly outclass the problems of the individual human being. Therefore, I contend that Loprieno's later definition is largely inadequate in a Mesopotamian context. On the other hand, Rubio's beautiful definition ("literariness can be defined by the predominance of connotation over denotation, by the abundance of tropes, and by intertextual kinships"²⁴) is *not* explanatory. An application to the Sumerian case of Schenkel's (2001, 54) definition – "Nonliterary texts such as correspondence diverge from inscriptions and literary texts principally in diction, not in grammar. Nonliterary texts are primarily illocutive, addressing the reader himself, and literary texts are predominantly delocutive, simply describing states of affairs" – makes it hard to distinguish Sumerian literary texts from lexical, administrative, or legal texts, or indeed from royal inscriptions (brushing aside the thorny issue of the "literary letter"²⁵). Like Loprieno, Assmann contributes two definitions of Egyptian literature: the earlier one suggests that literary texts are non-functional while functional texts are non-literary (Assmann 1999; as he will later summarize his argument, "literature is born from literature and not from life and its functional necessities", Assmann 1999, 4); whereas the later one suggests that literary texts had an "identity function"²⁶. The first definition is not explanatory. The second definition fails to distinguish between the "literary" and the other "cultural" texts, in Assmann's choice of terms. Finally, Parkinson (1998, 3) marshals a multiplicity of criteria in order to articulate his later definition of Egyptian literature:

Egyptian literary texts exhibit various distinctive features: they mingle the general and the particular; they are self-conscious and concerned with self-definition and expression; they are not bound to any context or situation; aesthetic considerations are of central value; the speaker-hearer relationship is dramatized with framing devices. Perhaps most importantly, they are fictional. This last feature distinguishes them from commemorative texts, which were intended to be accurate – if idealized – accounts, and from religious texts, which were intended to be authentic reflections of the universe. Fiction, however, allows its audience a vision of a different reality and an experience of alternative possibilities. Egyptian literature was also a predominantly secular mode of discourse, being concerned with the 'here and now', but it was one which spanned various spheres, and crossed the secular-sacred and royal-private divides; it was not limited to a particular single function.

However, I contend that it is simplicity rather than multiplicity that can make for an apt

definition of literature. The more criteria Parkinson marshals, the less explanatory his definition becomes. Having thus briefly discussed ten definitions of literature, among many more extant, three suggested by four Sumerologists (Black and Zólyomi, Veldhuis, and Rubio), and seven suggested by four Egyptologists (earlier Parkinson, earlier Loprieno, later Loprieno, Schenkel, earlier Assmann, later Assmann, and later Parkinson), the time has come perhaps to suggest myself a tentative definition of literature in a Sumerian context.

2. First essay

In order to do this, I contend that an *explanatory* definition is best built on Aristotle's articulation in his *Topics* of what was later called *genus-differentia* definitions, involving a proximal *genus* and a specific *differentia*. Thus, for instance, religion is a species of "religion" (*cf.* Assmann 2008, 10, Eliade 1969, v); *i. e.*, [monotheistic] religion is a species of the "religion" genus (a genus defined by the experience of Otto's 2014 *das ganz Andere*), a species defined by the specific difference of monotheism. Similarly, I contend that literature is a species of "literature"; *i. e.*, [artistically valued] literature is a species of the "literature" genus (a genus defined by the medium of writing), a species defined by the specific difference of artistic value. More in detail, a leading English dictionary lists these two meanings of the word literature:

1 pieces of writing that are valued as works of art, especially novels, plays and poems (in contrast to technical books and newspapers, magazines, etc.): *French literature* ◇ *great works of literature* 2 ~ (on sth) pieces of writing or printed information on a particular subject: *I've read all the available literature on keeping rabbits.* ◇ *sales literature* (Hornby 2015, 883; slightly edited for fluency).

Thus, I contend that meaning 1 is a species of the meaning 2 genus of literature (as given in its above definition). Hence, logically, it would seem that Sumerian literature would be a species of Sumerian "literature"; *i. e.*, [artistically valued] Sumerian literature would be a species of the Sumerian "literature" genus (a genus defined by the medium of writing in Sumerian), a species defined by the specific difference of artistic value. However, it would seem that what works logically does not necessarily work chronologically. Specifically, what works with a 21st century dictionary definition does not always work with a 21st century BC literary corpus in (Third Dynasty of Uruk) Uruk, or with an 18th century BC literary corpus in (Old Babylonian) Nibru, or with a 26th century BC literary corpus in (Early Dynastic) Abū Ṣalābiḥ. Indeed, this is the very type of definition, in the vein of Biggs, Hallo, or Vanstiphout, that I intend to criticize. Instead, and in order to keep in line with logic (because history as a science builds up at the crossroad of logical *and* chronological criteria), I contend that the above definition should be kept in part and in part altered to the following effect: Sumerian literature is a species of Sumerian "literature"; *i. e.*, [*criterion of demarcation to be determined*] Sumerian literature is a species of the Sumerian "literature" genus (a genus defined by the medium of writing in Sumerian), a species defined by the specific difference of [*criterion of demarcation to be determined*]. One consequence of the preceding sentence is indeed that Sumerian literature is *not*

logically a species of literature, *i. e.*, of (artistically valued) literature. Its artistic value, if any at all (full disclosure: I personally find Sumerian literature to be of often very high artistic value), pertains to *accident*, not to *essence*, to keep in line with Aristotle's terminology.

In order to determine this *criterion of demarcation*, I have pondered over the primary data from a pragmatic perspective. I have started from the discourse analysis of some more legible Early Dynastic literary texts from 'Abū Ṣalābīḥ ("literary", following Biggs's standard 1974 edition). I was struck by the wide divergence therein between what I will call *utter meaning* and *utterer's meaning* (thus revisiting the seminal conceptual distinction drawn by Grice²⁷): *i. e.*, between what an utterance means in general, free of context, on the one hand, and on the other hand what that utterance means in a specific context. For instance, these three lines from the *Early Dynastic Proverb Collection One*, "A malicious ox does not build a house./ 'Let the day pass:/ Let me build a house!'" (Alster 1991-1992, 21), have little to do with building, oxen, or even houses; they refer instead to the negative consequences of being malicious. The next line, "The eye is a deep place" (*ibid.*), is obviously literally incorrect, although quite suggestive. A further line, "A liar has no name" (*ibid.*), is similarly suggestive and literally incorrect. Based on many similar examples (and on many others more complex), I sought to suggest that Sumerian literature might be defined by the high frequency of the divergence between *utter meaning* and *utterer's meaning*. Or between literal and figurative meaning, to take an approximate but convenient short cut. Thus, my definition would run: Sumerian literature is a species of Sumerian "literature"; *i. e.*, [figurative] Sumerian literature is a species of the Sumerian "literature" genus (a genus defined by the medium of writing in Sumerian), a species defined by the specific difference of a high frequency of figurative meaning. This definition would have much in common with Rubio's definition, but it would shed further light on the workings of form. However, I refrained from proposing this first definition because I have found that it had too little explanatory power.

3. Second essay

Continuing with discourse analysis of later, Old Babylonian, Nibru versions of the Early Dynastic literary texts from 'Abū Ṣalābīḥ ("literary", again, following Biggs's standard 1974 edition), that form the vast majority of the Sumerian literary corpus (*i. e.*, those compositions that are commonly considered "literary"), I was struck by the widely acknowledged fact that both masters and pupils usually were Akkadian native speakers, while the language they wrote in usually was Sumerian:

Like Latin in the European Middle Ages, written Sumerian carried a religious and often political cachet that was from time to time challenged by Akkadian but was never completely extinguished. By the eighteenth century BCE it appears that in schools like House F, Akkadian was actually the language of instruction although the vast majority of the curriculum was still in Sumerian; and in some places Sumerian remained the language of legal documentation until late in the eighteenth century (Black *et al.* 2004, 1).

From that time and place, *A Supervisor's Advice to a Young Scribe* reads (in Sumerian, naturally): "You opened my eyes like a puppy's and you made me into a human being" (*ibid.*, 278). Is it Vanstiphout's question, "*How Did They Learn Sumerian?*", or Veldhuis's question, "*How Did They Learn Cuneiform?*", that the young scribe has in mind? Presumably both, since he rejoins: "through you who offered prayers and so blessed me, who instilled instruction in my body as if I were consuming milk and butter, who showed his service to have been unceasing, I have experienced success and suffered no evil" (*ibid.*, 280). Hence, I sought to suggest that Sumerian literature might be defined by the construction of a Sumerian *possible self*⁸ in non-native Sumerians. Similarly, Sumerian "literature" would at that time serve for the construction of a Sumerian reality. Thus, my definition would run: Sumerian literature is a species of Sumerian "literature"; *i. e.*, [formative] Sumerian literature is a species of the Sumerian "literature" genus (a genus defined by the medium of writing in Sumerian), a species defined by the specific difference of modeling the self. This definition would have much in common with the later Assmann's definition, but it would shed further light on the workings of content. However, again I refrained from proposing this second definition because I have found that it had too little explanatory power.

4. Third essay

It was only upon considering Sumerian "literary texts" as a whole that I ended up with my third definition. Classicists will certainly recall, for Greek, with Smyth that: "the chief demonstrative pronouns are ὅδε *this (here)*, οὗτος *this, that*, ἐκεῖνος, *that (there, yonder)*"²⁹. For Latin, with Allen and Greenough, that: "*Hic* is used of what is *near the speaker* (in time, place, or thought). It is hence called the *demonstrative of the first person*"; "*ille* is used of what is *remote* (in time, etc.); and is hence called the *demonstrative of the third person*"; "*iste* is used of what is *between the two others* in remoteness: often in allusion to the person addressed, – hence called the *demonstrative of the second person*"³⁰. This ancient delicacy of nuance was often lost in modern vernacular. Hence, German *hier/da/dort* often means something similar, but much more imprecisely. English has *here/there/yonder*, but the last one is archaic or dialectal. However, it is indeed Japanese that captures best this threefold nuance, or tripartition of space:

When referring to location, English distinguishes between the two categories of the area near the speaker ('this', 'here'), and any area not near the speaker ('that', 'there'). In Japanese there are three categories: words beginning with *ko~* indicate the area near the speaker, *so~* words indicate the area near the listener, and *a~* words refer to the area which is distant from both the speaker and the listener. As English does not distinguish the three ways, translations into English of words in the *so~* and *a~* groups are often the same (Bunt 2003, 186).

Koko, here. *Soko*, there. *Asoko*, over there (or, yonder). Then, I contend that Sumerian literature is defined by the construction of an "*asoko*" referential space; or by its equivalent in time; or by its equivalent in manner. Thus, my definition runs: Sumerian literature is a species of Sumerian

“literature”; *i. e.*, [of yonder, of yore, and of wonder] Sumerian literature is a species of the Sumerian “literature” genus (a genus defined by the medium of writing in Sumerian), a species defined by the specific difference of being framed as distant in space, time, manner, or any combination thereof.

Here, there, over there (yonder). Now, some time ago, a long time ago (yore). Thus, otherwise, completely differently (wonder). Thus begins the *Keš Temple Hymn* in its Early Dynastic version from Ābū Ṣalābīḥ (slightly edited for fluency):

The prince, the prince came out of the temple;/ Enlil, the prince, came out of the temple./ He wore Keš like a crown on his head./ A pleasant, much admired place,/ The Keš temple lifted its head over all others in the land.³¹

Of yonder and especially of wonder: the setting is clearly distant in space and especially in manner from us, and from they who wrote this in Ābū Ṣalābīḥ. Thus begin the *Instructions of Šuruppak* in their Early Dynastic version from Ābū Ṣalābīḥ: “The intelligent one, the wise one, who lived in the country,/ the Man from Šuruppak, to “Father-in-Law” – the intelligent one, the wise one, who lived in the country,/ the Man from Šuruppak gave instructions to his son”³². Of yonder and of wonder: the setting is clearly distant in space and in manner from us, and from they who wrote this in Ābū Ṣalābīḥ. The beginning of the *Keš Temple Hymn* changes eight centuries later, in its Old Babylonian version from Nibru, to that effect (slightly edited for consistency):

The prince, the prince came forth from the temple./ Enlil, the prince, came forth from the temple./ The prince came forth royally from the temple/. Enlil lifted his glance over all the lands,/ and the lands raised themselves to Enlil./ The four corners of heaven became green for Enlil like a garden./ Keš was positioned there for him with head uplifted,/ and as Keš lifted its head among all the lands,/ Enlil spoke the praises of Keš (Black *et al.* 2004, 326).

Of yonder and especially of wonder. – The beginning of the *Instructions of Šuruppak* changes eight centuries later, in its Old Babylonian version from Nibru, to that effect:

In those days, in those far remote days;/ in those nights, in those faraway nights;/ in those years, in those far remote years;/ in those days, the intelligent one, the one of elaborate words, the wise one, who lived in the country;/ the man from Šuruppak, the intelligent one, the one of elaborate words, the wise one, who lived in the country,/ the man from Šuruppak gave instructions to his son/ – the man from Šuruppak, the son of Ubartutu –/ gave instructions to his son Ziusudra.³³

Of yonder, of wonder, and especially of yore. – More elaborate yet is the beginning of *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Underworld*:

In those days, in those distant days, in those nights, in those remote nights, in those years, in those distant years; in days of yore, when the necessary things had been brought into manifest existence, in

days of yore, when the necessary things had been for the first time properly cared for, when bread had been tasted for the first time in the shrines of the Land, when the ovens of the Land had been made to work, when the heavens had been separated from the earth, when the earth had been delimited from the heavens, when the fame of mankind had been established, when An had taken the heavens for himself, when Enlil had taken the earth for himself, when the Underworld had been given to Ereškigala as a gift; when he set sail, when he set sail, when the Father set sail for the Underworld, when Enki set sail for the Underworld – against the king a storm of small hailstones arose, against Enki a storm a large hailstones arose (Black *et al.* 2004, 32-33).

Of wonder and especially of yore (even the very phrase “in days of yore” is present in translation). Incidentally, this certainly is an elaborate way to say “once upon a time” (and, incidentally, the Romanian counterpart of this English introductory set phrase, “*a fost odată ca niciodată*”, is much more suggestive than the English, which means “once upon a time like no other time”). Moving from fairy tales to myths, Eliade’s account of their setting “*in illo tempore*” (*vd.*, *e. g.*, Eliade 1963) is further significant. This setting is anything but accidental. Indeed, this setting is essential. For fairy tales, *a fortiori* for myths, the distance is both temporal and modal. For Sumerian literature, as we have seen above, the distance can be either spatial, or temporal, or modal, or any combination thereof. But what about Akkadian literature? I contend that the same simple, single criterion of demarcation (*i. e.*, distance, be it in space, in time, in manner, or in any combination thereof) works in an Akkadian context too. Thus begins the *Šamaš Hymn* in its Early Dynastic version from ‘Abū Ṣalābīḥ (slightly edited for fluency and consistency):

The bolt of heaven,/ the exalted one of the gods,/ in whom heaven trusts,/ Šamaš,/ who holds the life of the land,/ the “arm” of the king of (the) TLURU.DA,/ (which is) the ŠU.ÁG of “prince” Ea,/ the god of rejoicing,/ the burning light,/ the fiery radiance,/ the splendour of the Apsû,/ the leader among the Anunna-gods:/ to the young men, he gave great strength/ and fierce GIŠ.GANÁ (Krebern timer 1992, 81-82).

Of wonder. Thus begins the *Enūma Eliš* in its late version from Nineveh:

When on high the heaven had not been named,/ Firm ground below had not been called by name,/ Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,/ (And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,/ Their waters commingling as a single body;/ No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,/ When no gods whatever had been brought into being,/ Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined –/ Then it was that the gods were formed within them (Speiser 1969, 60-61).

Of wonder, and especially of yore. Thus begins the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for fifty lines, in its late version from Nineveh:

He who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,/ [who knew the proper ways], was wise in all matters!/ [Gilgamesh, who] saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,/ [who] knew the [proper ways,

was] wise in all matters!// [He]explored everywhere the seats of [power]/ [he knew] of everything the sum of wisdom./ He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,/ he brought back a tale of before the Deluge.// He came a far road, was weary, found peace,/ all his labours were [set] on a tablet of stone./ He built the rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,/ of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse.// See its wall like a strand of *wool*,/ view its parapet that none could copy!/ Take the stairway of a bygone era,/ draw near to Eanna, seat of Ishtar the goddess,/ that no later king could ever copy!// Climb Uruk's wall and walk back and forth!/ Survey the foundations, examine the brickwork!/ Were its bricks not fired in an oven?/ Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?// [A square mile is] city, [a square mile] date-grove, a square mile is clay-pit, half a square mile the/ temple of Ishtar: [three square miles] and a half is Uruk's expanse.// [Find] the tablet-box of cedar,/ [release] its clasps of bronze!/ [Lift] the lid of its secret,/ [pick] up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read out/ the travails of Gilgamesh, all that he went through.// Surpassing all other kings, heroic of stature,/ brave scion of Uruk, wild bull on the rampage!/ Going at the fore he was the vanguard,/ going at the rear, one his comrades could trust!// A mighty bank, protecting his warriors,/ a violent flood-wave, smashing a stone wall!/ Wild bull of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh, the perfect in strength,/ suckling of the august Wild Cow, the goddess Ninsun!// Gilgamesh so tall, magnificent and terrible,/ who opened passes in the mountains,/ dug wells on the slopes of the uplands,/ and crossed the ocean, the wide sea to the sunrise;// who scoured the world ever searching for life,/ and reached through sheer force Uta-napishti the Distant;/ who restored the cult-centres destroyed by the Deluge,/ and set in place for the people the rites of the cosmos.// Who is there can rival his kingly standing,/ and say like Gilgamesh, "It is I am the king"?/ Gilgamesh was his name from the day he was born,/ two-thirds of him god but one third human.// It was the Lady of the Gods drew the form of his figure,/ while his build was perfected by divine Nudimmud.³⁴

Especially of yonder, of yore, and of wonder. – I leave it to Egyptologists to decide whether, when, and to what extent this single, simple criterion of demarcation – *i. e.*, distance, be it in space, in time, in manner, or in any combination thereof – might be of any use whatsoever for the study of Egyptian literature (it would seem to work, for instance, with Middle Kingdom compositions³⁵ such as *The Tale of Sinuhe*³⁶, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*³⁷, *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*³⁸, *The Tale of King Cheops' Court*³⁹, *The Words of Neferti*⁴⁰, *The Words of Khakheperreseneb*⁴¹, *The Dialogue of a Man and His Soul*⁴², *The Dialogue of Ipuur and the Lord of All*⁴³, *The Teaching of King Amenemhat*⁴⁴, *The Teaching for King Merikare*⁴⁵, *The "Loyalist" Teaching*⁴⁶, *The Teaching of the Vizier Ptahhotep*⁴⁷, and *The Teaching of Khety*⁴⁸). I leave it to Hittitologists to decide whether, when, and to what extent this criterion might be of any use for the study of Hittite literature (it would seem to work, for instance, with compositions⁴⁹ such as *The Moon that Fell from Heaven*⁵⁰, *Kingship in Heaven*⁵¹, *The Song of Ullikummi*⁵², *The Myth of Illuyankas*⁵³, *The Telepinus Myth*⁵⁴, and *El, Ashertu and the Storm-God*⁵⁵). I leave it to Semitologists to decide whether, when, and to what extent this criterion might be of any use for the study of Ugaritic literature (it would seem to work, for instance, with compositions⁵⁶ such as *Kirta*⁵⁷, *Aqhat*⁵⁸, *The Baal Cycle*⁵⁹, *Baal Fathers a Bull*⁶⁰, *The Wilderness*⁶¹, *El's Divine Feast*⁶², *The Rapiuma*⁶³, *The Birth of the Gracious Gods*⁶⁴, *The*

*Betrothal of Yarikh and Nikkal-Ib*⁶⁵, *The Mare and Horon*⁶⁶, and *CAT 1.96*⁶⁷). I leave it to Classicists to decide whether, when, and to what extent this criterion might be of any use for the study of Greek or Roman literature (it would seem to work, for instance, with Homer⁶⁸, Hesiod⁶⁹, or Virgil⁷⁰). I leave it to literary theorists to decide whether, when, and to what extent this criterion might be of any use for the general study of literature. Gerrig and Rapp (2004, 267) note that “readers often describe literary experiences by invoking some version of the metaphor of *being transported*”. They then discuss “the analogy between literal and metaphorical experiences of being transported”:

These experiences share several features:

- Someone (“the traveler”) is transported by some means of transportation as a result of performing certain actions.
- The traveler goes some distance from his or her world of origin, which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible.
- The traveler returns to the world of origin somewhat changed by the journey.

With respect to this conceptualization, we suggest that the extent to which the traveler will be changed by the journey will depend in part on the types of activities in which the traveler engages while on the journey. In this case, we mean cognitive psychological activities: How much effort does the traveler devote to keeping the impact of the experiences of the journey isolated from his or her everyday life?

To address this issue, we have defined a position that we call *the willing construction of disbelief*. Our central claim is that people must engage in effortful processing to disbelieve the information they encounter in literary narratives (as well as other types of narratives); otherwise, that information will have an impact in the real world. We intended our position to make a clear contrast to the notion, derived from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, of a “willing suspension of disbelief”. The phrase, as typically interpreted, suggests that readers ordinarily would disbelieve a work of literature (because it is a work of fiction), but they suspend that ordinary impulse so as not to undermine their narrative experiences. However, as Noël Carroll observes, “we cannot will our beliefs”. Instead, “belief is something that happens to us”.

One can, by contrast, engage one’s cognitive resources to retrieve evidence from memory that undermines belief in particular propositions. Our core claim is that, to forestall belief change from the content of literary narratives, readers must invest exactly such effort...⁷¹

I contend that literature (starting with its oldest precursor, Sumerian literature) also has a function of world-building-by-word. That world built by word is distinct, and distant, from this day-to-day world. The distance between them is distance in space, in time, in manner, or in any combination thereof. In purpose, it is actually mental distance, which can hence be modulated in scope as distance in space, in time, in manner, or in any combination thereof. The building by word of a distinct world is not an activity specific to literature; indeed, it is the same activity that supports science. Gonseth (1958, 294) noted that: “*En se développant dans le climat de cohérence qui lui est propre, un discours va toujours au-delà de la simple fonction d’énoncer. Il est d’abord un organisme discursif pour lequel l’accord qu’il recherche avec une activité investigatrice ne fournit guère qu’un certain ensemble de points de repère*”. In more detail (*ibid.*, 293-294):

Nous avons fait observer que l'activité énonciatrice reprenant le matériau expérimental avec la spécificité qui lui est propre, confère une certaine généralité au matériau discursif avec lequel elle opère. Le discursif revêt, de ce fait, une certaine qualité d'existence autonome qu'on peut supposer appartenir à un certain horizon de réalité. L'horizon géométrique en est un exemple frappant. Il est irréductible à l'horizon de réalité des choses sur lesquelles opère la géométrie expérimentale. Ces deux horizons sont à distinguer l'un de l'autre et à opposer l'un à l'autre comme doivent l'être le front de l'énonciation et le front de l'investigation.

Or (et c'est là la constatation sur laquelle il nous paraît utile d'insister) l'activité discursive a la faculté d'organiser un discours dans lequel le matériau discursif entre et figure avec les modalités de son existence discursive. Un discours a quelque analogie avec un organisme : il est comme animé d'une intention de cohérence. Il tente ainsi à imposer certaines normes d'usage aux éléments discursifs qui y participent. Il devient alors assez malaisé d'indiquer ce que devient le sens d'un mot, d'une expression ou même d'un passage appartenant à un discours déterminé. La fonction "d'avoir une signification" se trouve en quelque sorte transférée au tout du discours. Même visant à constituer des énoncés idoines aux mêmes faits expérimentaux, les mêmes éléments discursifs peuvent ne plus être chargés du même pouvoir de signification s'ils participent à des discours différents. Pour les éléments discursifs pris séparément, ce n'est plus seulement d'un sens inachevé qu'il faudrait parler, mais d'un sens plus ou moins indéterminé.

The major difference between literature and science in this respect is that science strives to build up a distinct world that comes as close as possible to our day-to-day world, while literature strives to build up a distinct *and* distant world. But, why? Why strive indeed for mental distance? Oatley, Mar, and Djikic (2012, 237) argue that:

Pieces of fiction are simulations of selves in the social world. Fiction is the earliest kind of simulation, one that runs not on computers but on minds. One of the virtues of taking up this idea from cognitive science is that we can think that just as if we were to learn to pilot an airplane we could benefit from spending time in a flight simulator, so if we were to seek to understand ourselves and others better in the social world we could benefit from spending time with the simulations of fiction in which we can enter many kinds of social worlds, and be affected by the characters we meet there.⁷²

I contend that the concept of "simulations of selves in the social world" that Oatley, Mar, and Djikic relate to literature can also relate to Sumerian literature, which is *not* necessarily best described as "fiction". My contention warrants qualification. Indeed, Sumerian literature deals with issues relevant to Sumerians⁷³. Therefore, a large number of Sumerian literary compositions focus not only on the social environment, but also *infra*, on the natural environment, and *supra*, on the divine environment (thus recalling Black *et al.*'s concept of Sumerian fiction quoted above: "In other instances, Sumerian literary works are more obviously fictive: their main protagonists are gods, or talking animals, or even supposedly inanimate objects"). One should then more appropriately speak of "simulations of Sumerian selves in the social environment, or in relation to the natural environment, or in relation to the divine environment". Indeed, Mar and Oatley (2008, 182) take a modern perspective:

The content of literary fiction is largely about people and the problems that arise when their desires, emotions, and goals come into conflict. We are attracted to literature because we are social creatures who are interested in one another. It is important to note that social information is not only fascinating – it also possesses survival value. To survive the harsh environments of our history, early humans needed to form and maintain groups so that protection from external threats, hunting, gathering, and other necessary pursuits were more likely to be successful. Such conditions required consummate skill in social navigation. The social environment probably ensured that fictional stories have played an important role in the communication of information relevant to social skill throughout history, a role that seems more important than the need for amusement.

However, in a Sumerian “mutual cognitive environment” (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 41-42), relevant information was not only social, but also natural and divine. Therefore, I contend that Sumerian literature relates to the communication of these three classes of relevant information, in addition to “simulations of selves” in relation to this information. I further contend that the fundamental function of Sumerian literature is the facilitation of self-transformation. As Mar and Oatley (2008, 182) add:

Thus, understanding characters in a story is a means through which we can come to better understand ourselves and others. The impact of character in a novel or short story is that a reader essentially enters another mind as they enter, Alice-like, through the looking glass of the narrative. This mind is like his or her own in some ways and unlike his or her own in other ways. The impact of this experience illuminates the nature of selfhood by means of the literary idea of character. Because this experience of being within another mind is also accompanied by other perspectives, such as impressions of the protagonist formed by other characters in the novel, it offers the reader not just the possibility of clarifying his or her mental models of self, but also a sense of polysemy and self-transformation; such a potential is unique to fictional narratives.⁷⁴

Again, theirs is a modern perspective. Then, rather than an “experience of being within another mind”, I will contend indeed that the experience of being with another being (who belongs to the natural, social, or divine environment) is apt to facilitate self-transformation in the sense of self-diversification, self-development, and self-adaptation. Hence, (Sumerian) literature’s function of world-building-by-word facilitates self-building-by-word. Whereas that world built by word is distinct, and distant, from this day-to-day world – the self built by word is neither distant, nor distinct: it is the self of her or him who hears or reads (Sumerian) literature. Then, the function of (Sumerian) literature is double: world-building-by-word beside this day-to-day world, and self-building-by-world inside this day-to-day world. One should not conclude, however, that world-building-by-word is an activity specific to literature, or science, or any other world distinct from this day-to-day world⁷⁵. Indeed, this day-to-day world is also largely built by word (and this day-to-day world includes not only the social, but also the natural and divine environments). Yet, this day-to-day world is built by word not as a function of a specific discourse, literary or scientific for instance,

but through the hugely complex network of human communication and cognition. The theory of the construction of reality does not claim otherwise (*cf.*, for instance, Schütz 1945; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Watzlawick 1984; Searle 1995; and *id.* 1999). Thus, the reality of literature (that distinct, distant world), or the reality of science (that distinct, close world), for instance, are built by word just as this day-to-day reality is built by word. And indeed, just as the self that participates in this variety of worlds is to a large extent built by word. Therefore, Sumerian literature has a "performative" rather than a "constative" dimension (*vd.* Austin 1975): rather than *mimesis*, imitation, or description – it serves to change the world by changing the self of her or him who hears or reads it in a Sumerian context. Indeed, here as elsewhere, not only the "locutionary" level (what is written) and the "illocutionary" level (what is meant) are decisive, but also the "perlocutionary" level (what is achieved; *ibid.*). What is achieved is the building by word of a Sumerian literary world distinct and distant from the day-to-day world that has in turn significant effects on the day-to-day world in terms of self-transformation of its literary audience.

It has often been noted that the question of the author is problematic in ancient Mesopotamia⁷⁶. It would be unwarranted to consider in turn that the question of the audience is *not*. Three circumstances are noteworthy in this connection. First, the native language of the audience of Sumerian literature presumably ceases to be Sumerian, after a lapse of time. Second, the native language of the audience of both Sumerian and Akkadian literature presumably ceases to be Akkadian either, after another lapse of time. Third, the native language of the audience of Mesopotamian literature is now a modern language, after yet another lapse of time. Thus, the self-transformation of a Sumerian, Akkadian, later Mesopotamian, or modern audience is *not* necessarily an effect achieved with the same breadth, depth, and adaptive value. I need hardly say that this effect widely varies not only across, but also within audiences: there are likely not two persons who take precisely the same meaning from a given literary text. One could almost say that everyone takes from a literary text what she or he brings to it in the first place. In ancient Mesopotamia, the issue is made even more complex by the fundamental fact that the distinction between author and audience was not so dramatically drawn as in our modern world. As Foster (1991, 31-32) aptly notes:

The real significance of the absence of an author's name may lie yet deeper in recognition that performer, traditer, or auditor of the text play roles no less important than that of the author himself. As was stressed, the author's inspiration and composition of the texts were events circumscribed in time. Nearly all examples urge the importance of dissemination and understanding the product. Without this the text is lost, and the author's achievement nullified. Just as the text is impossible without its initiating inspiration and its mediating author, so too it is impossible without its traditer and appreciative auditor. Authors in Mesopotamian civilization well knew and were wont to recall in their texts that composition was an ongoing, contributive enterprise, in which the author, or "first one", was present only at the beginning.

Gonseth's concept of the "*organisme discursif*" thus acquires a social dimension in a Mesopotamian context. I contend that Sumerian literature is an *organisme discursif* which is socially

conditioned in both its purpose and scope: in scope, Sumerian literature is punctually transformed through multiple interactions in social settings – while in purpose, Sumerian literature punctually transforms the selves of them who take part in those interactions. Thus, my third definition of Sumerian literature (as a species of the Sumerian “literature” genus which is defined by the specific difference of being framed as distant in space, time, manner, or any combination thereof) does not relate either to form (as did my first definition of Sumerian literature) or to content (as did my second definition of Sumerian literature) – but to the *organisme discursif* of which form and content are but aspects. It would be wrong however to conclude that I was completely mistaken in my first two definitions of Sumerian literature – or, *a fortiori*, that I consider the distinguished scholars that I briefly discussed mistaken in their respective definitions of Sumerian, or Egyptian, literature. There is truth in my previous definitions, I think, and certainly there is truth in their respective definitions. Indeed, Sumerian literature often obeys “aesthetic considerations” (earlier Parkinson); often “survives in multiple exemplars” (Black and Zólyomi); is often best described by a “contextual” approach (Veldhuis); can often be also described by a combination of the “fictionality, intertextuality, and reception” criteria (earlier Loprieno; however, to what extent is fictionality a heuristic concept in a Sumerian context? this question warrants qualification); it often “problematizes personal concerns” (later Loprieno); it is often characterised “by the predominance of connotation over denotation, by the abundance of tropes, and by intertextual kinships” (Rubio); it is often “delocutive” (Schenkel); it is often “non-functional” (earlier Assmann; however, to what extent is functionality a heuristic concept in a Sumerian context? this question warrants qualification); it has an “identity function” and also “serves the purpose of an initiation into the art of writing” (later Assmann; but arguably, so do lexical texts); it often “exhibits various distinctive features” (later Parkinson). Moreover, Sumerian literature has a high frequency of figurative meaning (my first definition). And Sumerian literature models the self (my second definition). But I contend that there is one condition that, making a difference from the other definitions recapitulated above, is both necessary and sufficient for an adequate definition of Sumerian literature, and this is the condition of being framed as distant in space, time, manner, or any combination thereof. This frame is implicit rather than explicit. However, this frame is both necessary and sufficient. Loprieno and Rubio came perhaps closest to giving an account of this frame as they discussed the concept of *distance* in two insightful contributions (*Toward a Geography of Egyptian Literature* and, respectively, *Time before Time: Primeval Narratives in Early Mesopotamian Literature*). However, they did not discuss distance as a distinct descriptor of Egyptian, or Sumerian, or Akkadian, or any other, literature; they did not discuss but one type of distance each; and, most importantly, they did not discuss distance in relation to a definition of Egyptian, or Mesopotamian, literature.

As seen above, distance in space (and in time, but not in manner, again) is best framed in Japanese, for instance, with *a~* words. The Japanese grammatical distinction between *ko~* words, *so~* words, and *a~* words relates to a tripartition of space whose perpetual mobility is mental rather than physical. These three realms of reality recall Charaudeau’s (1992, 574-575) distinction between three

types of speech-acts, “*élocutif*”, “*allocutif*”, and “*délocutif*”, and, more generally, the grammatical distinction between first person, second person, and third person with pronouns (and verbs). However, I contend that, more specifically, the Japanese grammatical distinction between *ko*~ words, *so*~ words, and *a*~ words can serve to suggest a distinction between three fundamental functions of writing in a Sumerian context. As Assmann notes:

Concerning the primary functions of writing I would like to start with a very general reflexion. There seem to be two fundamentally different functions of writing, namely storage and communication. They may be understood as extensions of two different bodily capacities. As the medium of storage, writing extends the range of human memory and as the medium of communication it extends the range of the human voice. In the first case, writing is employed in order to preserve data that would otherwise be forgotten, and in the second case to reach addressees who are distant in space or time. Any look at the early history of writing can teach us that it is not communication but storage that was responsible for the invention of systems of notation that preceded real scripts and that might therefore be referred to as prewriting.⁷⁷

Therefore, I contend that *ko*~ words relate to storage, *so*~ words relate to communication, and *a*~ words relate to literature. “As the medium of storage, writing extends the range of human memory and as the medium of communication it extends the range of the human voice”: as the medium of literature, it extends the range of human imagination. Significantly enough, in Sumer, written storage comes first (*c.* 3200 BC), written literature second (probably *c.* 2600 BC), and written communication third (*c.* 2350 BC)⁷⁸. Hence, I conclude my excursus *ex abrupto*, in Mar and Oatley’s words:

It is worth recalling the ideas of Booth, who likened books to close friends. There is no doubt that friends influence us, and so do books of fiction. Just as we are careful in choosing the friends who surround us, so should we be careful in choosing the books with which we spend our time (2008, 185).

5. The need to refine

The ideas that I have suggested above should be related, on the one hand, to Michalowski’s description of Sumerian as “the poetic language (“one may propose that beginning perhaps as early as the late third millennium, Sumerian was, simply speaking, the poetic language”, 1996, 147) – and on the other hand, to Pongratz-Leisten’s interpretation of myth:

I myself suggested that we conceive of myth not as text *per se* but as a “charter myth” (Malinowski), “hypotext” (Genette), or “conceptual metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson), i.e. a narrative that can translate into the discourse of the various media of text, image, and ritual (2020, 32-33).⁷⁹

Their rich heuristic insights should inform further research needed in order to refine my explanatory model. “Finally, to specialists it will need not stressing that what is advanced here is

entirely provisional and put up for discussion”, writes Lambert (1989, 1, n. 3). As Edzard writes, “there is no end of addenda – and corrigenda” (2003, 179). And, as Hornung writes: “Modesty is appropriate to these age-old problems of mankind. Every ‘final’ insight is only a signpost on a road that leads farther and may be trodden in the company of others who think differently” (1982, 11).

Endnotes:

1. ‘Entering deep in a forest, a prince considers giving up the chase. Going on is distressing’ (Rutt 2002, 226). In the original Chinese: “即鹿无虞，惟入于林中，君子幾不如舍，往吝”，“Book of Changes.” *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/zhun>, 8 February 2025.
2. In the original Greek: “Περὶ παντός, ὃ παῖ, μία ἀρχὴ τοῖς μέλλουσι καλῶς βουλευέσθαι: εἰδέναι δεῖ περὶ οὗ ἂν ᾗ ἡ βουλὴ, ἣ παντός ἀμαρτάνειν ἀνάγκη. Τοὺς δὲ πολλοὺς λέληθεν ὅτι οὐκ ἴσασι τὴν οὐσίαν ἐκάστου. Ὡς οὖν εἰδότες οὐ διομολογοῦνται ἐν ἀρχῇ τῆς σκέψεως, προελθόντες δὲ τὸ εἰκὸς ἀποδιδόασιν: οὔτε γὰρ ἑαυτοῖς οὔτε ἀλλήλοις ὁμολογοῦσιν”. ‘And a definition is a formula which is one not by being connected together, like the *Iliad*, but by dealing with one object’, notes Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* (1045a12-13; in the original Greek: “ὁ δ’ ὁρισμὸς λόγος ἐστὶν εἰς οὐ συνδέσμων καθάπερ ἡ Ἰλιάς ἀλλὰ τῷ ἐνὸς εἶναι”). And again, in his *Topics*: ‘a definition is a phrase signifying a thing’s essence’ (101b38; in the original Greek: “ἔστι δ’ ὅρος μὴν λόγος ὁ τὸ τί ᾗν εἶναι σημαίνον”).
3. Thus, Hornby’s (2015, 485) best-selling *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* gives three examples of use for the word *elusive*: the second one being “the elusive concept of ‘literature’”.
4. Cf. Martin’s (1971: 241) similar, somewhat less poetic, stance: “power, like love, is a word used continually in everyday speech, understood intuitively, and defined rarely”.
5. “There is no need to recall that literature, as we know it today, is a young notion” (Korthals Altes 2007, 183). Cf. Michalowski’s critique of the generic label “epic”: “I believe that the term ‘epic’, when applied to the Enmerkar, Lugalbanda or Gilgamesh material, is prejudicial, for generic labels, among their multifold functions, are primarily providers of clues to modes of reading and thus when we speak of ancient epics we subconsciously bring to bear upon these texts very specific anachronistic expectations and interpretive strategies” (1992, 228-229).
6. “In part, the primary focus on textual elucidation and the lack of literary-critical approaches stem from the fact that the cuneiform literary tradition has been disclosed to us in stages or segments largely dependent upon the fortunes of archaeological or archival discovery and retrieval. Because of this, we have not confronted all at once a truly ‘full’ and received tradition, rather, we have had to work in fits and starts, and consequently we have been forced to adjust and readjust our research and thinking to the vagaries of discovery. Given this state of affairs, literary-critical studies and related formulations of a theory of cuneiform literature could only be frustrated instead of growing apace with other developments in the discipline” (Ferrara 1995, 86). On the decidedly fragmentary nature of Sumerian evidence, cf. Michalowski’s quip: “Our ignorance of these matters is so large that scholars are still debating whether the balaḡ was a harp or a drum; but this matters little, since they will stay silent for eternity” (1996, 144).
7. “The ever growing abundance of textual materials and their increasingly sophisticated analysis and integration, makes it possible to claim that large portions of the Near East moved in a common rhythm from the beginning of history, some five thousand years ago. Repeatedly, the two extremities of the ‘Fertile Crescent’, Egypt and Mesopotamia, have been the natural foci of imperial concentrations of power, destined to aspire to rule the entire Near East. These imperialistic triumphs repeatedly gave way before the onslaughts of crasser and more bellicose elements from the less hospitable environments bordering on the Fertile Crescent. This collapse of these Empires at either

- extremity, provided the recurrent opportunity for the middle – Israel or Syria – to assert itself” (Hallo 2010, 44).
8. “This fertile crescent is approximately a semicircle, with the open side toward the south, having the west end at the south-east corner of the Mediterranean, the center directly north of Arabia, and the east end at the north end of the Persian Gulf. It lies like an army facing south, with one wing stretching along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and the other reaching out to the Persian Gulf, while the center has its back against the northern mountains. The end of the western wing is Palestine; Assyria makes up a large part of the center; while the end of the eastern wing is Babylonia. This great semicircle, for lack of a name, may be called the Fertile Crescent” (Breasted 1916, 101).
 9. “Looking at the whole region thus bound together, we observe that it has somewhat the character of a crescent. The two extremities are the lands at the mouths of the two river-systems – Egypt and Babylonia. The upper central portion is called Mesopotamia. The outer border consists of mountain ranges which pass from the Persian Gulf northward and westward until they touch the northeast corner of the Mediterranean, from which point the boundary is continued by the sea itself. The inner side is made by the desert of Arabia. The crescent-shaped stretch of country thus formed is the field of the history of the ancient Eastern World. It consisted of two primitive centres of historic life connected by a strip of habitable land of varying width” (Goodspeed 1904, 6).
 10. “Better perhaps than in our postmodern days when we don’t know whether to read Jacques Derrida as literature or as philosophy, or Carlos Castaneda as fiction or ethnography. There are very few Egyptian borderline cases of this kind” (Assmann 1999, 1).
 11. “Sumerology had come of age in the early twentieth century, with the start of the French publications of documents and inscriptions from Lagas” (Black, *et al.* 2004, lvii). By that time, Egyptology already had a tradition. “A threshold in the development of the discipline was 1881, which saw the beginning of controlled site excavation in Egypt and, fueled by pivotal discoveries such as the oldest religious text corpus of humankind, the Pyramid Texts, a series of scholarly milestones, among them the first cultural history of ancient Egypt. So when Amelia Edwards came to give a series of lectures at the Peabody Institute in the winter of 1889/1890 – probably the first Egyptological lectures offered at what is now a part of Johns Hopkins University – she was able to look back at the transformation of Egyptology into an independent academic discipline. A reflection of this state of affairs was the 1891 publication of the first monograph-length presentation of Egyptology, as was its further institutional acknowledgment with the creation of new chair positions in several European countries” (Schneider 2012, 57).
 12. “Likewise, comprehensive studies of cuneiform literature through the 1960s treated all writing in cuneiform as literature, including scientific and scholarly works and letters” (Foster 2009, 137).
 13. The modern solution to this ancient problem, which consists in ignoring it, and in ignoring the taste of the ancients, in considering our own taste instead, making our own guided shopping tour on the Mesopotamian “literary” market, assessing it by our own standards of “beauty or emotional effect” (beauty to us, effect on us) – this dubious solution does offer us indeed millennia more of history of literature and masterpieces to enjoy, but not to understand. Since understanding them eludes us greatly even when, and if, we constantly strive to consider them on their own terms. If we consider them on our terms only, then understanding them remains little more than a beautiful, a touching dream.
 14. “Because the values (*‘Lautwerte’*) of nearly all signs used in the Sumerian syllabaries of different places and periods have been identified by way of Akkadian syllabic spellings or – additionally – from the so-called tu-ta-ti syllabaries” (Edzard, 2003, 7).
 15. “For Sumerian literature meets the criterion of basic linguistic unity which has now been reinstated as a principle of literary history. But beyond that it can claim distinction on the basis of three remarkable superlatives: it leads all the world’s written literature in terms of antiquity, longevity, and continuity.

Its beginnings can be now traced firmly to the middle of the third millennium B. C., and native traditions would have it that it originated even earlier, with the antediluvian sages at the end of the fourth millennium. Its latest floruit occurred at the end of the pre-Christian era, and at least one canonical text is dated as late as 227 of the Seleucid Era and 163 of the Arsacid (Parthian) Era (or 85 B. C.). And in the long interval between these extreme terminals, much of it was copied and preserved with a remarkable degree of textual fidelity” (Halla 1976, 182).

16. “Egyptian literature can be defined as a body of written high culture with purposes other than the merely necessary communication of practical information. Within this literature there was a significant body of texts which were more concerned with aesthetically structured form and were consistently composed in verse: religious, funerary and monumental texts. There was also a smaller group of texts in which aesthetic considerations were primary. This latter group corresponds to the popular modern idea of things ‘literary’, and I will use the term to describe this group alone” (Parkinson 1991, 22-23).
17. “Despite the many questions which arise, it actually does not seem necessary for present purposes to devote much space to an appropriate definition of literature. By contrast, that has been a rather crucial question for Egyptologists to answer” (Black 1998, 5). Not only is Egyptian literature identified rather than Sumerian literature as being in the need of definition, but also is Akkadian literature, see *ibid.*, n. 8.
18. Black and Zólyomi 2000, 3.
19. Classics of the “curricular” approach are Vanstiphout 1979; Veldhuis 2000; and *id.* 2006.
20. “The contextual approach of Sumerian literature will concentrate on the consequences of studying this literature as a main element in the curriculum of the scribal school. This approach may not replace the historical, poetic, or intertextual approaches discussed above. However, it may put them in a different light. Regarding literary history we may ask: what is the difference between a new composition and an old one? What is the significance of copying texts with a long transmission history? There can be little doubt that Babylonian scribes were aware of the historical dimension of writing. Some of the lexical texts included spellings that had gone out of use long ago, and testified to the consciousness that scribal habits had changed. There are few texts that were considered so prestigious that they were copied verbatim sign by sign. Most ancient texts were adapted – at least in orthography. Is there a curricular or educational significance to the age of a composition? The poetic problem, ‘what is a literary text?’ may receive a straightforward answer: everything that was studied in school is by that token a literary text. There is no indication that literature as such was a separate realm or institution in Old Babylonian society. The option to equate the literary with the curricular has the advantage that it emphasises the anachronistic element in the concept ‘literary’. We will end up, then, with a corpus of literature that does not correspond in all respects to our idea of what literature is, including lexical lists, mathematical tables, letters, and even administrative documents. This problem is a minor one, though. First, we can make a distinction between earlier and later phases of the curriculum. The earlier phase contains most of the text types that strike us as non-literary (mathematical tables, lexical lists, model documents). This will allow the definition of a group of texts that corresponds more closely to our idea of literature. Second, however, we may actually take advantage of this unusual definition of the literary by appreciating links and cross connections between literary and lexical texts which would otherwise not be apparent. The contextual approach does not invalidate the poetic discussion about the concepts ‘literary’, ‘religious’, ‘scholarly’, and ‘fiction’. We will have to investigate what (institutional) contexts we may identify for religion and knowledge. The phenomenon of cultic texts entering the literary corpus may then be described as a type of interaction between institutions or rather fields. Finally, intertextuality receives a very specific meaning once we realise that the texts studied by us were all studied in a well defined context: the scribal school. The intertextual is not an aspect of the texts themselves; these texts actually encountered each

other in the hands and heads of teachers and pupils. There are good indications that the assumption that *all* Sumerian literature derives from exercises in the school has to be abandoned. Quite a few Sumerian texts are known in a single copy only – or in very few copies. Steve Tinney, in a forthcoming article, argues that several such unique pieces may belong together as a ‘cultic archive’. The tablets in question are similar in format and paleography. A problem is that we have very little archaeological information on the most important find-spots of literary tablets in Nippur. The excavations happened late in the nineteenth century and very little was recorded about the provenance of the objects found. There is no way to know, therefore, whether Tinney’s cultic archive was actually found as a single lot, and if so, what else was related to it. It is probable that in addition to Tinney’s cultic archive we may identify other groups of texts that may have had their own characteristic context. This will make a contextual approach more differentiated and therefore even more attractive” (Veldhuis 2003, 41-42).

21. “Many Sumerian literary compositions are thoroughly scholastic and appear detached from performative goals of any kind. They are in fact scribal artifacts from conception to transmission. This understanding of the scribal setting of Sumerian literature is embodied in the modern curricular approach to its corpus. However, the curricular approach does not imply that all Sumerian literary texts are scribal exercises or merely the result of scribal activities. A number of compositions are preserved in single copies and some groups of tablets seem to constitute homogeneous cultic archives, sharing similar format and paleographic features. Moreover, many hymnic compositions were most likely performed. Many royal hymns devoted to the kings of the Ur III and Isin dynasties were probably performed at those courts – but it is also quite likely that many other royal hymns were produced at the school, by the school, and for the school. In a few instances, both the performance and extracurricular nature of some compositions were inherent to their genres, as is the case of many cultic compositions, especially canonical lamentations, dirges, and songs (e.g., *balags* and *eršemmas*)” (Rubio 2009, 26). Cf. Alster and Oshima 2006.
22. “This concept of poetry and truth is later on rivaled by new prose genres, which develop after the spread of writing. Inspiration is kept as a literary *topos*, but the corollary, that poetry has an exclusive claim on truth, is abandoned. For Aristotle, the truth-value of a literary work is entirely irrelevant. The poet has become an artist, and he is supposed to make good verses, not to tell the truth. Poetry, in particular fiction, becomes an autonomous phenomenon that is gradually separated from non-fiction such as medicine or philosophy. Part of Finkelberg’s argument is related to the concepts of responsibility and knowledge. The archaic poet is not responsible for his verses. The muses inspire him, and tell him about events he did not know. For the classical poet, however, traditional stories are not knowledge that he is supposed to transmit, but rather the raw material from which he creates something new. He is an artist, and being inspired does not free him from the responsibility for what he has made. He will be judged not for his truthfulness of his creation, but for its aesthetic value” (Veldhuis 2003, 36-37).
23. Cf. his similar label in another article published in the same journal issue: “*les textes littéraires, ceux qui appartiennent donc à la sphère humaine*” (Loprieno 2000b, 137).
24. “Moreover, the specifically poetic nature of Sumerian literary texts can be established on the basis of the frequency of specific tropes (parallelisms, repetitions), a common repertoire of imagery (similes, metaphors, metonymies), and a shared body of lexical items. The presence of a literary lexicon and the accumulation of tropes establish a tapestry of intertextual connections and genealogies. These intertextual bridges configure a referential system within which works are written and read. In the case of Sumerian literature, such interconnections stretch beyond literature itself, as in the case of literary texts that are shaped on the template of lexical lists. Ultimately, one should not ignore the fact that prose tends to be a later development and that poetry normally predates prose in most literary traditions. In fact, as Godzich and Kittay noted, prose literacy is not simply a matter of style but rather a radically different signifying practice” (Rubio 2009, 21-22). Cf. Veldhuis 2003, 38: “A

literary corpus may be defined by the intertextual links between its parts. A significant intertextual aspect of Sumerian literature is the personal name. Personal names in great majority refer to existing beings: kings, legendary kings, or gods. Only very rarely do we encounter names of other people. Some of the disputations are between named protagonists, but this is quite exceptional and its significance is as yet unclear. Most names are well-known to us and must have been well-known to an ancient audience”.

For a broader perspective on the issue of intertextuality, critical for theory and typology, cf. Genette 1982.

25. “The archival letters were used in everyday transactions. Since the scribes had to learn how to compose such texts, practice letters quickly gave birth to the literary epistle. This was to happen time and again in literary history; indeed, it is impossible to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ letters. This is true for Sumerian ‘literary’ letters as well as for classical Greek or Renaissance epistles. As early as the Old Babylonian period, letters of Ur III scribes and officials from Nippur and Ur were copied and recopied by students as writing and rhetorical exercises. In addition, revised versions of almost thirty letters between Ur III kings and their high military officers were studied in the schools, as were a few letters from the early rulers of Isin. Not a single Ur III original of this correspondence has survived, and if these texts are copies of authentic texts, then one has to assume that the orthography of the letters had been revised to conform with later standards, as there are no surviving traces of earlier writing habits. Although it is possible that all of these texts were fictitious, it is more probable that the core of this royal correspondence was based on actual archival letters, but revised, and that other texts of the same type were written long after the death of the kings of Ur. We have no ways of unraveling the levels of authenticity, and one could argue that any attempt to do so would be technically impossible, as well as theoretically futile” (Michalowski 1993, 4).
26. “Cultural texts in general initiate the novice into culture in general. There are, however, specialized fields of culture which require special initiation. With regard to ancient Egypt, one would think in the very first place of the art of writing, which, in this society, is tantamount to the art of administration and all the other branches of political, legal, ritual, economical, mathematical, and technical knowledge. Writing and reading form the entrance to the ruling class, the class of ‘literatocracy’ which, in Egypt, is not recruited by birth but by education. It is evident that this subsystem developed its own institutions of recruitment, socialization, and structural reproduction which we became accustomed to subsume under the somewhat anachronistic term of ‘school’. By using this term, we must not think of special buildings, large classes, and professional teachers. Classes existed only for the first four years of elementary education; they were small and were taught by priests or officials who held positions in the temple or in the civil administration. After these four years, education was continued on the basis of individual apprenticeship. With these necessary changes, we may employ the term ‘school’ in order to denote the whole system of socialization, education, training, cultural formation, and promotion. The Egyptian school in this broad sense is designed to impart not only special skills but above all fundamentals of cultural and moral formation in the sense of *musar*, *paideia*, or *Bildung*. My thesis is that this is the functional frame for most of those texts which we are used to classify as ‘literature’. These texts, as well as the orally transmitted cultural texts, were meant to be learned by heart and to be stored in memory. This is what constitutes their identity function. But at the same time they served the purpose of an initiation into the art of writing. For that purpose they had to be written down from memory after having been learnt by heart. They imparted literate and cultural competence, the knowledge how to write in order to become a scribe and how to live in order to become a gentleman. We must not forget that the scribes did not just belong to a specialized guild of craft but that they represented the Egyptian aristocracy and the ruling class. Things changed somewhat during the New Kingdom and so did literature, but this description may apply fairly well to the Middle Kingdom and, therefore, to the classical age of Egyptian literature. Scribal culture was held representative of culture in general. Unlike India, where every caste developed its own system of values and code of honor, Egypt did not develop a stratified

system of different cultural codes. The scribal class embodied in a representative way all the culturally relevant values and moral codes. The scribe was the exemplary Egyptian. It seems as if this educational system did not yet exist during the Old Kingdom and that it only developed in the 12th dynasty and its efforts to create a new class of priests and state officials. I think it was in the functional frame of this cultural and political project that most of the great texts of the Middle Kingdom had been composed. They were meant as cultural texts to function in the specific frame of textual or scribal culture and to form the cultural memory of the new ruling elite" (*ibid.*, 8-9).

27. "Utter meaning" is my tentative formulation; "utterer's meaning" is Grice's original term. Grice's original terms, "timeless meaning of an utterance type" versus "utterer's meaning", have been more commonly rendered in pragmatics as "sentence meaning" versus "speaker's meaning". They might almost be called "semantic meaning" versus "pragmatic meaning". In his *Meaning Revisited*, Grice puts it this way: "the main theme will be matters connected with the relation between speaker's meaning and meaning in a language, or word meaning, sentence meaning, expression meaning, and so on" (Grice 1982, 283). In the present paper, I keep Grice's "utterer's meaning" and tentatively use "utter meaning" as a term that: 1. can be applied at the level of *speech act*, anywhere between word meaning and sentence meaning; and 2. suggests that its meaning is *by default*. For Grice's theory of meaning, *cf.* Grice 1957; 1989a; 1989b; and 1982. For a thought-provoking development of Grice's ideas into relevance theory, *vd.* Sperber and Wilson 1995. For speech act theory, *cf.*, *e.g.*, Austin 1975; *id.* 1979; Searle 1969; and *id.* 1979. For Skinner's application of speech act theory to the history of political thought, *vd.*, *e.g.*, Tully 1988.
28. For the social psychological concept of "possible self", *vd.* Markus and Nurius 1986. *Cf.* Markus and Wurf 1987.
29. Smyth 1956, 94 (§ 333). *Cf. ibid.*, 307-309 (§ 1240-§ 1261).
30. Allen and Greenough 2006, 177-178 (§ 297).
31. Biggs 1971, 200 (A i-ii).
32. Alster 2005, 176 (lines 1-3).
33. Alster, 2005, 56-57 (lines 1-8).
34. George 2020, 1-3. This is the standard translation. The standard edition is George 2003. The standard account of the various versions is Tigay 2002.
35. For translations, *vd.*, for instance, Parkinson 1998.
36. Especially of yonder and of wonder.
37. Of yonder, of yore, and of wonder.
38. Especially of yonder and of wonder.
39. Especially of yore and of wonder.
40. Of yore and of wonder.
41. Of wonder.
42. Of wonder.
43. Of wonder.
44. Of yore and of wonder.
45. Of wonder.
46. Of wonder.
47. Of yore and of wonder.
48. Of yonder, of yore, and of wonder.
49. For translations, *vd.*, for instance, Goetze 1969.
50. Of wonder.
51. Of yore and of wonder.
52. Of wonder.
53. Of yonder, of yore, and of wonder.

54. Of wonder.
55. Of wonder.
56. For translations, *vd.*, for instance, Parker 1997.
57. Of wonder.
58. Of wonder.
59. Of wonder.
60. Of wonder.
61. Of yonder and of wonder.
62. Of yonder and of wonder.
63. Of yonder and of wonder.
64. Of wonder.
65. Of wonder.
66. Of wonder.
67. Of wonder.
68. Especially of yonder, of yore, and of wonder (for both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*).
69. Of yonder, of yore, and especially of wonder (*Theogony*); of wonder (*Works and Days*).
70. Especially of yonder, of yore, and of wonder (*Aeneid*); especially of yonder and of wonder (*Bucolics*); of wonder (*Georgics*).
71. *Ibid.*, 267-268. *Cf.* Prentice and Gerrig 1999. *Cf.* also Mar and Oatley 2008, 174.
72. "This simulation facilitates the communication and understanding of social information and makes it more compelling, achieving a form of learning through experience. Engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference" (Mar and Oatley 2008, 173). "It trains us to extend our understanding toward other people, to embody (to some extent) and understand their beliefs and emotions, and ultimately to understand ourselves. Fictional literature brings close attention to distant worlds that would otherwise remain unknown. Fictional stories not only allow us access to environments and situations that are difficult to experience firsthand, such as faraway countries and cultures, but it also takes us to places that are impossible to reach, such as past societies. Moreover, literary narrative allows us to experience rare situations many times over. In much of literature, the author challenges readers to empathize with individuals who differ drastically from the self" (*ibid.*, 181).
73. On the fundamental concept of relevance in communication and cognition, *vd.* Sperber and Wilson 1995.
74. "Literary fiction allows us to experience social situations vicariously, thus allowing for personal consideration of response and action. The simulation of interacting ideas and emotions evoked by a story simultaneously permits the exploration of our own ideas, feelings, and desires, and of our own potential reactions to the story's plot. Constructing a complex simulation of concepts, ideals, or emotions allows for an arena within which we can test out our own affective reactions. Fiction is a laboratory that allows us to experiment in a controlled and safe manner with intentions, emotions, and emotion-evoking situations that would be impossible and often highly undesirable in the real world" (*ibid.*, 183). "Projecting ourselves into these difficult circumstances also provides us with an opportunity to grow emotionally. Fictional literature not only allows us to simulate ideas and situations, it can enter our emotional system and prompt it toward the experience of emotions that we might otherwise rarely acknowledge. By engaging in these emotional experiences, we may not only gain a greater understanding of emotions and of their breadth and quality, we may also pick up emotional cues implicitly communicated by the author" (*ibid.*).
75. *Cf.* Schütz's (1945) theory of "finite provinces of meaning". *Cf.* also Couliano 1991.
76. *Cf.* Foster 2010-2011, 61: "Since Sumerian works were normally referred to by their opening words,

no indication of their authorship remains. One group of poetic compositions, however, represented here by tablet YBC 7169, is a striking exception to this pattern. These are works ascribed in antiquity and today to a woman, Enheduanna. An identifiable historical personality of the twenty-third century BCE, she actually named herself in the text, and by this evidence may be deemed the first author in history to whom specific, surviving works can be ascribed" – and *id.* 1991, 17: "That the names of the authors of major works of Akkadian literature are unknown seems strange to us, to whom authorship implies a named author. Only a few works of Akkadian literature can be identified with a specific author".

77. "Systems of prewriting such as knotted cords, or calculi, or picture writing served as memory supports. The most typical functional context for the development of such databases was economy. This has a very simple explanation. Economical data have no intrinsic mnemophilic quality. Because of their contingency they demand exterior notation. This is the origin of the archive" (Assmann 1999, 5-6).
78. "This is the oldest Mesopotamian letter that can be dated with any degree of accuracy" (Michalowski 1993, 11).
79. "The full meaning of any literary text, image, or ritual then can only be fully grasped when analyzed not only as a narrative in itself but in its intertextual and intermedial relationships with other cultural forms of expression and with 'myth' as the underlying 'hypotext'" (Pongratz-Leisten 2020, 33).

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