WISDOM AND NOT:
THE CASE OF MESOPOTAMIA

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I. INTRODUCTION.

LET US CONSIDER A METAPHOR FOR HISTORICAL PROCESS AND DIFFERENTIATION — that of a threshold. Against the background of experiences already identified and assimilated, new ones emerge which take shape and identity in relationship to, and perhaps in contrast with, those on the other side of the threshold. This applies to progress along the vertical scale of time, and it applies, horizontally, to synchronic distribution. On the one hand, bringing a new experience to the realm of consciousness entails the conquest of a novel human dimension — and this marks a threshold from one phase of cultural growth to another. On the other hand, within the overall configuration of a given culture, one can identify patterns of expression and institutional implementation which are like differentiated components within the same continuum, joined and divided at the same time by common thresholds. A threshold is in fact a point of contact and of separation, the symbol of both an end and a beginning. It is static in that it marks a boundary; yet it is dynamic in that it is meant for crossing.

The purpose of the metaphor is to help focus the attention on a given dimension of Mesopotamian, and ancient Near Eastern, wisdom. Viewed primarily as a literary phenomenon wisdom has been abundantly discussed as a specific genre. Secondarily, it has been analyzed as an institutional phenomenon, emanating from a given social group with certain intellectual goals. Building on these considerations, I would like here to strive for a sharper definition of the phenomenon in its conceptual boundaries. Is there, first of all, a phenomenon which may be identified as wisdom? And if so, what is wisdom and what isn't? Where is the temporal threshold when the phenomenon acquires its own self-identity? What are the configurational thresholds which signal a crossing over from a given cultural phenomenon to another?

We will analyze the question from four different points of view, and consider (II) certain conceptual components, or themes, which presuppose a common perspective in the understanding of reality and of ultimate values; this commonality is brought out in a contrastive manner along a line of binary oppositions. On the other hand, there are (III) concrete, historical channels which provide specific embodiments (in literature, religion, folklore, etc.) for the Mesopotamian experience of these themes. Together, themes and embodiments appear to stem (IV) from given settings within the institutional framework of Mesopotamia, from the school and from the activity of certain individuals to the anonymity of the popular tradition. Seen along the temporal axis, we can recognize (V) important moments within the unfolding of Mesopotamian cultural history and beyond. In conclusion, I will try to assess (VI) the phenomenon of what I call the wisdom tradition as distinct from other ways of understanding the pertinent data.

II. THE THEMES.

The current understanding of "wisdom" may be summed up along two lines of reasoning. On the one hand, wisdom is viewed as a literary genre, characterized by certain formal traits, such as the type of composition or certain linguistic peculiarities. On the other hand, wisdom is viewed as an intellectual trend— an ideology which colors man's appreciation of reality and embodies a certain philosophy of life, pertaining especially to ethical issues. Where the two aspects, formal and intellectual, come together, we come as

close as possible to an accepted "canon" of wisdom literature, whether sanctioned by a long tradition (notably the "Writings" of the Bible) or by a short one (such as the corpus of Babylonian Wisdom Literature reflected in the work of that title by W. G. Lambert [1960a]). We could, for our present task, accept this "canon" at face value and restrict our analysis to the accepted texts: we would then proceed with a method which is essentially exegetical and as such presupposes the corpus as a fixed datum, much as we would do when studying the work of a single author. Instead, I will follow a line which may be called epistemological, in that I will not presuppose a corpus, but will rather ask a question which lies farther upstream. If "Wisdom" is to be a specific and useful concept, can it, in fact, be defined by means of traits resulting from oppositions? And if so, do these traits cluster in such a way as to yield distributional patterns corresponding to meaningful textual wholes, or corpora? The analysis allowed by the limits of the present article can be neither exhaustive nor documentary, but only indicative and discursive. We will begin by considering in this section two central concerns: religion and knowledge.

A. **RELIGION.** Religion is an institution which may be said, briefly, to regulate the relationship between man and the absolute. One pivotal point in this relationship is the very concept of the absolute. In this respect there is in Mesopotamian thought an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, we have an open system which we call the pantheon, a kaleidoscopic repertoire of divinities who personify various aspects of reality. This system is "open" in the specific sense that any variation is possible: as new aspects are perceived, new divinities may be added and the necessary adjustments made (e.g. the curtailment or abolition of the prerogatives of other deities). But even if open, it remains a system, and it is its overall integrity as a sytem which reflects an acceptable statement about the absolute. Acceptable — and not. The corollary intrinsic in a polytheistic system is that the components of the system, the gods, place limits on each other; and hence underscore by their very existence a dimension of relativity within a system which tends to proclaim the absolute. Accordingly, we find in Mesopotamia, as a counterpart of the polytheistic system, a closed system which views the absolute as being above internal variation.

This alternative perception of the absolute is first of all apparent in the case of a specific concept, that of fate. It had not yet come to be fully elaborated in the Mesopotamian context; yet it appears to be well defined, and may be juxtaposed in several ways to the polytheistic system. Fate is not a god because it is not the personification of any single aspect of reality, and as such it does not enter into a one-to-one relationship with either the gods (he is not a protagonist in any myth) or man (there is no prayer or hymn to fate). And yet fate belongs to the divine sphere because it conditions divine action as an ultimate referent — more divine than the gods in its degree of absoluteness, and yet lacking the personal dimension the gods exhibit. (It may be argued that Israelite monotheism is the locus where this antinomy is resolved — but this must be left for another occasion.) Of the two systems, the polytheistic one is clearly in major evidence throughout Mesopotamian culture, and it is often seen to subsume within itself the closed system revolving around fate — hence, for instance, in those myths where fate is presented as an object, the tablets of destiny.

There are other cases, besides those which make specific reference to fate, where the closed system is dominant at the exclusion of the polytheistic system. This is true especially in two areas. The first is divination; the second, the type of reflective literature represented, for example, by the Theodicy. Divination proclaims in an operational mode the supreme reality of the absolute as perceived through its own immutable laws. Rather than an attempt to bend reality, divination may be viewed as the ability to perceive laws which *de facto* link the various aspects of reality. Since the gods are themselves subjected to these laws, they have no direct participation in the phenomenon of divination, but appear only as outsiders (e.g., Šamaš as the guardian of justice); and even though fate is not explicitly introduced, it may be said (perhaps metaphorically) that divination may be considered as the ritual pertaining to fate's causality in human affairs. Similarly, we may say that some of the reflective literature, such as the Theodicy, may be viewed as the correlative of a mythological statement about fate. While not narrative in content, like the myths, these texts nevertheless present a descriptive reflection about the pervasiveness of laws which in their absolute value transcend both the individual gods and the unresolved questions of human life. Thus the Theodicy is not the vindication of a given god or of the open polytheistic system, but rather a statement about the ultimate validity of the absolute, both in the divine (or supernatural) and in the human (or political) sphere (see Buccellati, 1972: 163-5).

This finer sensibility for the proper dimensions of the absolute finds a correlative in the particular attitudes which lead man to question and assimilate it

more deeply. The texts which deal with the open polytheistic system propound an axiomatic view of the divine world. It can be compared to an immanent revelation, **i.e.** an obvious reality which makes itself known simply by being there. Transcendent revelation is not unknown. but is limited to the communication of specific messages, rather than being the self-revelation of the divine sphere — examples being the Mari oracles and, from the myths, the messages of Ea to Adapa (in the homonymous myth), of Ea to Utnapishtim **(Gilga-**mesh), of **Nergal** to **Kurrā** (Vision of the Netherworld), of Irra to **Kabti-ilāni-Marduk** (Poem of Irra). Nor-mally, therefore, knowledge of the divine world is simply assumed as obvious, without transcend reve-lation and without theological reasoning: the metaphor is the main device to convey, present and describe what is already apparent. In contrast with this, we have texts exhibiting a more inquisitive attitude — and these are the same texts which presuppose a closed system of the absolute. Divination is built on an age-long inquiry into data and their associations (Botttro, 1974): it may be considered true theological speculation, inasmuch as it develops a system of relationships resting on a theory of causality which was clearly perceived, even if not articulated, in a systematic fashion (see especially Starr, 1974; 1980). The Theodicy includes a specific call to reject established religion (the open system),' and delves at length into the question of the accept-ability of the divine sphere. The Dialog of Pessimism also accepts a refusal of religion, at least on an alternative basis (53-61). Gilgamesh is presented as rejecting given embodiments of the established system (Ishtar, Humbaba) and as setting out on a personal quest in defiance of established norms.

The case of Gilgamesh is also paradigmatic in another respect: the process through which his goal is acquired, the experience this represents, is itself the measure of his personal enrichment. This is an impor-tant dimension which serves well to differentiate among various types of texts. On the one hand we have a stress on the growth of inner experience as a major goal in life (Gilgamesh, Theodicy, Pessimism), while on the other the stress is on the attainment of externals (Ludlul, hymns, etc.). The latter is the easier scale: the gods are considered as procurers, they are interme-diaries to something else which is in reality the main reason for the relationship. The former attitude is more difficult to sustain and to express: the emphasis is placed on experience as experience for its own sake and at the expense of comforts if necessary; but, in religious terms, it does not build on a specific or personal object of experience other than the most abstract and generic values. Such an attitude is, on the side of the interacting subject, the natural correlative of the concept of the absolute as perceived in the closed system described above: since the object of the rela-tionship (whether fate or abstract values) is itself impersonal, the experience which underlies the rela-tionship cannot itself take place at an impersonal level. In this respect, a most interesting text comes from the scientific literature, formulated, as is normally the case in this genre, in omen form — the so-called **physi-**ognomatic omina (Kraus, 1936; 1939): it gives a long series of psychological observations about human psychological behavior, its roots and its manifesta-tions: in terms of religious experience, the text formu-lates a series of paradigms which will find their echo in the Beatitudes of the Gospels **(Buccellati,** 1972).

B. **KNOWLEDGE.** These remarks about the value of experience may serve as the starting point for another set of considerations. We have looked so far at two different perceptions of religion as presented in the Mesopotamian texts. Along similar lines, we may now turn to a brief analysis of various perceptions of the phenomenon of knowledge. An important trend in this respect is precisely the one just noted in connection with religion: the stress on experience. Personal aware-ness of the world is viewed in alternation with, though not at the exclusion of, intellectual cognition. It is not only the acquisition of information that matters, but the shaping of an inner attitude. The physiognomatic omina are important in this respect, with their empha-sis on psychological responses to information and other stimuli. The counterpart is equally revealing: not only the aquisition, but also the communication of knowledge is a channel for the development of self-consciousness. In several texts we have a direct partic-ipation of the author in the message, expressed emphatically in the first person. This "lyric I" identifies personally with the message; it represents a believer defending his belief, and is not just the carrier of a message as, for instance, with the hymns. There is the need on the part of the author to assert his own self, from the use of the author's own name within the text itself (Theodicy, Vision of the Nether World, Irra) to the expression in first person, underscored by the repeated use of the appropriate pronoun (Theodicy, Ludlul), to the declaration of feelings for their own sake (Gilgamesh, Theodicy, Pessimist, physiognomatic omina).

This introspection leads to the realization of two seemingly opposing dispositions towards the acquisi-tion of knowledge. On the one hand, the emphasis

placed on self-understanding highlights the role of personal effort and of hard-won individual skill. Precisely because experience itself is a goal, it can only come from a strong personal commitment which is made even stronger by adversities: hence the classical figure of the suffering just (Liverani, 1973: 184-6; 1974). The strength necessary to overcome the obstacles can only come from within the self: it is a personal toil, a personal effort and a personal skill. Introspection is not a narcissistic and self-complacent exercise; it stems rather from a competence in psychological evaluation, an ability to measure one's own inner strength and limits. This points in turn to the second major disposition with regard to the acquisition of knowledge: humility. This inner attitude would seem at first opposed to the one just described of reliance on personal skills. In point of fact, one flows from the other. To the extent that introspection is sincere, it yields a picture of human weakness and frailty: it is its acceptance that results in strength. Gilgamesh (in its latest version) is the great paradigm of this type of inner adventure, a fact which has largely gone unnoticed because of the outer **"epical"** garb of the poem; the dominant themes in this respect are his recognition of weakness, his admission of fear, his emphasis on physical **unkempt**-ness and, above all, his newly discovered readiness to ask questions (Buccellati, 1977: 1-36). But we also find the same polarity between introspective self-reliance and humility in the Theodicy, in Ludlul, in the proverbs, in the precepts, in the physiognomatic omina. The Dialog of Pessimism has the same message as well, though in a different tone: the ability to rationalize either side of the polarity which is intrinsic in reality results in a final, humble acceptance of death as a leveling factor of that polarity (Buccellati 1972: **98**-100). A counterpart to the texts which stress skill and humility can be seen in the texts which base the acquisition of knowledge on extrinsic factors and self-assertion (**e.g.** epics and myths). Divination falls partly in this category, except that in the background, the recognition of regularities rests on hard won insights into causality patterns.

Next to the acquisition of knowledge, the nature of its object is also an important discriminant among texts. In most cases we meet with particular events, centered around given individuals — thus, again, with myths and epics. True, there may well be a symbolic value which transcends the specific events, which will then assume a broader meaning — the Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld, for instance, may be a metaphor for seasonal cycles of life. But the level of perception

and formulation remains anchored to the particular, the individual, the specific. Conversely, we find in other texts an insistence on the universal. The **physi**-ognomatic omina or the precepts, for instance, envisage very generic situations which have a broad validity, even though they are based on empirical observations. Rather than events we have here principles. What is more, we find here, more perhaps than anywhere else, a formulation of principles for the sake of principles, not as correlative of narration, as is true instead of the so-called scientific literature (from the dreambooks to the laws). In other texts a narrative thread is present, but merely as a frame within which to embed the assertion of the universal — thus with the Theodicy, the Dialog of Pessimism, Ludlul: certainly there is no emphasis here on the unfolding of a plot, and at most we have a tenuous setting with a hint of character development. The proverbs are also universal statements with a contracted frame — except that their interrelationship within the broader context of a "collection" expands proportionately their range of value. Finally, in Gilgamesh we find a message which is propounded through narrative, and a most dynamic narrative at that, but one which gives at the same time ample room to articulate a reflection about the universal value of the message itself, much like a chorus in a Greek tragedy.

C. **REVIEW.** The themes reviewed so far exhibit a reciprocal unity on two levels. First there is a certain conceptual cohesiveness which holds them together. Even though they are never presented in any of the ancient texts as a single articulated system, they are more than unrelated statements. Their pervasiveness within certain individual texts implies that these themes were operative as a whole and that they molded thought and expression correspondingly. The second indication of internal unity among these themes is that they tend to be found in certain texts and not others. We will not give here a complete tabulation because it would go beyond the scope of the present essay, but even the remarks made in the course of the presentation given above provide a sufficient indication of what is meant.

We will refer to these as wisdom themes, without intending to prejudge thereby the definition of what wisdom may **ultimately** be considered to be. They are themes, and as such what is emphasized is their autonomy as self-standing components. But they are at the same time tied together by a certain relatedness,

conceptual and distributional, hence the appropriateness of a common qualification—for which the traditional term "wisdom" seems indeed the most apposite.

The following chart summarizes in tabular form these themes, in the order presented above.

Chart 1. **WISDOM** THEMES

Fields of analysis		Contrastive pairs	
		Wisdom	Other
religion	concept of the absolute	closed system (fate)	open system (pantheon)
	attitude toward the absolute	critical evaluation	(immanent) revelation
	measure of personal enrichment	experience	success
Knowledge	communication of knowledge	lyric introspection	narrative
	disposition of subject	skill/humility	receptivity/self-assertion
	nature of object	principles/universal	events/particular

III. THE EMBODIMENTS.

We have singled out the themes which are found to recur in certain groups of texts and which are held together by a certain conceptual cohesiveness. We should now turn to an analysis of the texts as compositional units in order to see whether any distributional patterns exist at other levels.

The only specific correlation appears to be the one between wisdom themes and a dramatic or dialogic form of expression (although such correlation is not exclusive; see, for instance, the Dialog of a Faithful Lover). By this I mean a dialog outside a narrative frame of the type we find in the Theodicy, the Dialog of Pessimism, the Disputations or some Proverbs in contradistinction with, say, the dialogs in the Eniima Elish, the Descent of Ishtar or the Poor Man of Nippur. In the latter we have very lively and sharp exchanges which, embedded in the unfolding of a story, provide the real connective texture for the intended message. In the former compositions, on the other hand, the dialog starts out *in medias res,* and it folds at the end upon itself, without "extra-dialogic statements. In this respect, the dialog is like a play, even though there is no reason to assume that these particular compositions were enacted as performances. The dramatic dimension of these texts, then, derives not from the physical setting in which they came to life, but rather from the formal channel chosen for expression. The alternation of different personalities is projected unto a plane all by itself, and its impact is thereby strengthened. There is a tensional factor in any dialog, presupposing as it does commonality and confrontation at one and the same time: and when a dialog is presented in and of itself, without an extrinsic setting, it lends a special resonance to the concept of a dialectical juxtaposition of points of view. It appears, then, that the correlations between wisdom themes and dialogic form is a very meaningful one: the dialog, pure and simple, emphasizes the unfolding of a thought process viewed dynamically in its becoming.

Beyond dialogic form, there seems to be no other unique correlation between wisdom themes and the compositional structure of the individual texts. The outward dimension of the text may in some respects be considered a distinctive trait. The Proverbs are characteristically short, a point which is not irrelevant: the poignancy of the message derives precisely from the narrow outer boundaries of the text, which provoke the need of a compact expression, often heightened in

its tension by the presence of word play. It may be said, then, that compositional brevity is a necessary requirement of the Proverbs as literary units, and to this extent it may be considered an important correlative of the Wisdom themes which are also found in the Proverbs. But a similar compositional constraint is also found with other texts, such as the omina, the laws (i.e. the scientific literature) or, to a different degree, with such political inscriptions as those found in foundation deposits.

It is clear, then, that wisdom themes appear abundantly in most other categories of texts, where however they are not exclusively, or even primarily, characteristic of that category: thus, for instance, with hymns (e.g. the **Shamash** Hymn), or epic (e.g. Gilgamesh), or prose narrative (e.g. the Poor Man of Nippur). A thorough distributional analysis along these lines would presuppose a type of literary categorization which, for Mesopotamian literature, has generally been based on *ad hoc* observations or unreflected schemes. To provide a general overview of the correlation between compositional types and wisdom themes, a preliminary classification is given below in Chart 2. The first distinction, between poetry and prose, is based on formal criteria derived from discourse analysis, i.e. basically the presence or absence of a metrically chan-

neled type of expression. **A** second sorting criterion is based on the type of relationship between the text and its audience: this relationship may be direct when there is (at least primarily) a specific individual or group addressed in the second person, i.e. a one-to-one type of communication, or it may be indirect when the message is a "voice" which communicates to a general audience. The first type may be labeled as "I-you," the second as "I-him" or "he-him." The final sorting criterion is based on the type of composition. Here we may distinguish depending on whether or not there is a "story" (either a factual account or imaginary plot). The absence of a story entails greater emphasis on an explicit and articulate formulation of intellectual concerns or of emotional feelings: the former leads to a philosophical type of statement (which in Mesopotamia remains generally on this side of a thorough systematization), while the latter results in a type of lyric statement which focuses on self-expression. If on the other hand a story is present, it may be described in its modality, its participants, its setting, and so on; or else it may be enacted, whereby the confrontation of the participants is the only clue to the other aspects. In tabular form, these observations may be rendered as follows:

Chart 2.   CLASSIFICATION OF MESOPOTAMIAN LITERARY GENRES
AND CORRELATION WITH WISDOM THEMES

type of discourse	type of communication	Literary classification		genre	Correlations	
		type of composition			wisdom themes	other
metric (poetry)	direct (I/you)	address		hymns	+	+
	indirect (I/him, he/him)	story	none : statement	lyric poems	+	+
			described : narrative	myths, epics	+	+
			enacted : dramatic	lyric dialogs	+	—

non-metric (prose)	direct (I/you)	address			precepts and admonitions	+	—
					letters, prayers	+	+
	indirect (I/him, he/him)	story	none : statement	systematic	—	—	—
					proverbs	+	—
				sentential	laws, omina	+	+
			described : narrative	event oriented	royal inscriptions, chronicles, novels	—	+
				principle oriented	fables	+	+
			enacted : dramatic	cult oriented	rituals	—	+
				secular	disputations	+	—

IV. THE SETTINGS.

The wisdom themes noted above are rooted in folk tradition, and yet they are also steeped in learned sophistication. The latter dimension is easier to document, and we shall turn to it in a moment. Folklore, on the other hand, is a much more elusive dimension of Mesopotamian literature, because it is restricted within the confines of an oral tradition which has gone largely unrecorded. There are, however, two directions which may be pursued in this respect.

On the one hand, there are, in the literary traditions, numerous insights which would appear to stem from a common-sense approach — because of the type of phenomena observed which belong to a simple, everyday setting in life, or because of the primary level of the observational powers displayed. This is not to imply superficiality or irrelevance. Quite on the contrary, there is often a poignant depth of conception and expression, which seems all the more powerful on account of its freshness and even naiveté. This comes through especially in the Proverbs, the Sayings, the Precepts and the Admonitions, which may in part be the literary codification of observations which were otherwise in common circulation.

A second type of evidence for a folk tradition is much more direct — and yet it has largely been ignored. I am referring to the vast lore embedded in the personal names. No major interpretive work has been undertaken in this respect since the masterly publication of Stamm (1939), in spite of the vast increase of documentary material. The names are especially important because the sample is excellent: not only are they numerous in their sum and highly differentiated in their typology, but they also come from all walks of life and all periods of time. The information they provide is very rich with regard to beliefs and experiential concerns: besides referring to specific gods (whose popularity may thus to some extent be measured) they allow us to monitor at surprisingly close range the attitudes exhibited by the people toward the divine world and toward reality in general. The wisdom

themes loom large in the onomastic repertory, thus proving that their roots, and their uses, were spread far and wide in **Mesopotamian** consciousness.

These remarks refer to the popular milieu—an anonymous and amorphous quantity. There are almost by definition no individuals who could have been the "authors" of a folk tradition. There are, however, individuals who may be considered as the folk heroes of the wisdom tradition: they are the sages or wise men par excellence, those who mirror in themselves the ideals of wisdom and can externalize better than anyone its inner substance. We may include in this roster a god, Ea (and secondarily his son, **Marduk),** and the so-called seven sages (apkallu). We are in a mythical sphere, and if I include Ea, a god, with the wise "men," it is because they all share in some respects a common typology and because in any case the sages belong to a superhuman sphere. They keep their distance from the gods of the Pantheon at the very moment that they deal with them: Ea gives advice against the interest and the will of the gods (Buccellati, **1973),** the sages "anger" one god or another and intervene in the affairs of the gods (Reiner, 1961: **4f.).** On the positive side, they seem to hold a special link with the universal laws of reality as appointed and regulated by fate: the sages are the ones "who insure the correct functioning of the plans of heaven and earth" (*muštēširū uṣurāt šamē u erṣetim,* Reiner 1961: pp. 2 and 4, l. 9), a lofty qualification indeed for anyone who is below the divine sphere; and the logogram by which they are designated (NUN.ME. TAG) may be taken to mean literally "the great one(s) endowed with the universal laws" (Van **Dijk,** 1953: **18-** 20). Finally, **Marduk,** the son of Ea, is specifically addressed as the "lord of Wisdom" (*bēl nēmeqi*). Ea, Marduk, and the sages are, then, in different ways, personifications of the popular idea of wisdom.

But next to the folk tradition, there is the school. It is here that learning has its proper locus, not only in the sense of the transmission of information and culture, but also in the sense of an intellectual posture toward reality. The high degree of self-awareness borne out by the wisdom texts is largely due to the sustained effort at introspection typical of the scribes, or at least of portions of the scribal tradition. Characteristically, several of the compositions which contain wisdom themes are linked with the concept of "authorship" ˙ ˙ the Theodicy, the later version of Gilgamesh, and to some extent the Poem of Irra. As literature becomes an investigation of the self, declaration of authorship becomes an outward sign of the identification between an author and his work. The work is in fact the author, in this view of things, because the work externalizes and projects to the outside his own inner reflections. As a paradigm of human experience, the work acquires a general value which goes beyond the individual; but it is a paradigm extrapolated from an individual statement, and felt all the more general, precisely because it is so uniquely individual. If there is fastidiousness in the scribal schooling (borne out of the need of exactness in recording economic data, religious canons, scholarly compendia), there is also pathos—an intellectual pathos, perhaps, but one which nevertheless crystallizes more consciously than ever before the confrontation of man with his own inner self.

V. THE MOMENTS.

Viewed in terms of long term cultural development, the elements which we reviewed so far acquire a special place. We may say that here is the first chapter in a documented history of human introspection, one which leads eventually to systematic philosophy on the one hand, and to lyrical poetry on the other.

The recorded beginning goes back to very early moments in **Mesopotamian** history, to the middle of the third millennium: both Abu Salabikh (Biggs, 1974; Alster, 1975) and Ebla (Pettinato, 1977: 232; 1979: XXX) have collections of proverbs in their tablets, and the folk tradition underlying this literary embodiment must naturally reach back much farther in time. The sentential type of literature represented especially by the proverbs continues practically unchanged over the centuries to the end of the cuneiform tradition: it represents the most direct embodiment of a perduring popular reflection about simple truths. The successive growth within **Mesopotamia** has been outlined by Lambert **(1960a)** with regard to literary forms, and especially by Jacobsen in terms of the overall religious, spiritual, literary and artistic development of **Mesopo-** tamia (1949; 1961; 1963; 1976). Jacobsen in particular has shown very insightfully how the progressive internalization of basic human values took place against the background of socio-political evolution on the one hand, and the accompanying **moral/intellectual** crises on the other.

Within the process envisaged here, we can point to major changes with respect to the dialog form and the personal involvement of the author. The disputations are an earlier antecedent of such dialogs as the Theodicy and the Dialog of Pessimism; but the latter ones constitute a real threshold in utilizing the dialogic alternation as a dialectic mean to articulate a line of thinking—and feeling. The novelty consists (apart

from the high formal achievement of the Theodicy in the field of metrics) in the presentation of a true contrastive growth. The confrontation of the two participants is not static, as is the case with the disputations: these are in effect juxtaposed lists of attributes, a kind of personalized binary system which elicits the appropriate logical components by means of a binary search under the guise of a personal contrast; the participants are vying for excellence, they are presupposing as a given fact that one of the two is better than the other, and that the only tension is in the uncertainty as to how the argument in favor of one is going to be countered by the other. The dialogs, on the other hand, are dynamic, the central question has no predetermined answer, and the process of heuristic recovery has its ups and downs. This system is especially apparent in the Theodicy, where the unfolding of the search is all the more beautiful and effective because the formal constraints are so rigid and explicit.

Such a utilization of the dialogic form is then especially apt to reflect the spirit of critical inquisitiveness which represents, as we have just seen, a major wisdom theme. Since the search itself is a value, and its very experience an achievement, it stands to reason that the correlative literary embodiment should acquire an autonomous preeminence. The dialog is the outward form of a conceptual clarification obtained through a dialectical alternation; and it is remarkable to note how much this dimension will be present at the roots of the Greek philosophical tradition. I have already had occasion to discuss in some detail the intellectual kinship between the Dialog of Pessimism on the one hand and, on the other, the agonistic efforts of the sophists as well as the Heraclitean doctrine of contrasts (Buccellati, 1972: 94-96). We may also see a parallel with the great philosophical and literary achievement reached in Plato's dialogs. These are of course the supreme examples of the genre, but a comparison with the Mesopotamian — and, in general, ancient Near Eastern — dialogs is not out of line. The intended effect is to bring about, through a dynamic rendering of a process of mental acquisition, the natural birth of an idea: the reader, or listener, identifies so fully with the process that the resulting conclusion is already internalized in its premises. The "maieutic" method of Socrates, so artfully reproduced by Plato, is not only addressed to his adversaries but also, by association or implication, to any outside observer, listener, or reader. The Mesopotamian dialog can be seen as an early moment in this development, even though we may not be able to establish a documentable historical connection between the two. The central effort in this respect is to provide a frame for an accessible abstract characterization of reality: the focus is already on abstract values, as they can be perceived through the concrete dimension.

Just as the wisdom themes and the dialogic form may be viewed as a moment in the growth of what later came to be called philosophy, so we can also see in the Mesopotamian experience a fundamental stepstone in the development of another major cultural dimension, lyric poetry. The introspection which we have noted as a key wisdom theme is more than perceptive self-awareness, however important this may be in itself; it is also accompanied by an intense pathos, and it is couched in powerful poetic language. The discovery of the lyric "I" is suffered, but it is also celebrated. Here too we can see a link with the later blossoming of lyric poetry in Greece. In Mesopotamia, and the Near East, a place had already been won for this aspect of human culture — the desire, and the usefulness, to bare one's inner feelings. For it not to be narcissistic, it had to presuppose the need to share experience as a common good; and for it not to be ephemeral, it had to capture the imagination through a compelling expressive register. The Mesopotamian poets rose to the occasion and succeeded in making the individual universal. It is not without justification that the most fitting compendium of what is shown here (the urge for a divine absolute, the personal discovery of the self, the relationship between wisdom and consciousness) is to be found in an impressive poetic (if not lyric in a technical sense) passage in Aeschylus' Agamemnon (160-7, **176-83**).

> "Zeus" —whoever may he be:
> if this be a dear sound
> to him when called upon,
> thus I will call him.
>
> When all is put in balance,
> I have nothing to compare with Zeus:
> for the sake of truth I know I must
> cast off what's vain
> from my burdened thought.
>
> He has pointed man
> on his way to wisdom
> by having consciousness
> emerge through suffering:
> memory of pain, instead of sleep,
> he will distill into the heart,
> until it yields the gift of wisdom,
> even unwanted.

VI. **THE PHENOMENON.**

We have come full circle from the attempt to identify meaningful clusters of conceptual and formal traits, to the suggestion of a continuity between a given reality in Mesopotamia on the one hand and classical Greece on the other. What then is our conclusion with respect to our initial question as to the possibility of the very existence of a phenomenon labeled "wisdom"?

I would exclude the identification with a literary genre. Wisdom themes are too diffused throughout a variety of literary forms to evidence any type of unique correlation with a single formal set of characteristics. The significance of the dialogic form is considerable and specific, but it is not exclusive, because it shares a great deal with a variety of other literary forms (see especially above, section 2).

I would also exclude the identification with a specific intellectual or spiritual movement. Wisdom themes are dispersed through a wide range of environments, from the most popular to the most learned level, and there is no trace of a unified doctrine, system or intellectual program. We are obviously far from any type of philosophical school, nor can we recognize the impact of any single individual as a key representative, founder or innovator who would have blended the various strands into a unified whole.

It is also questionable whether we may speak of wisdom "literature." There is no coherent textual corpus which might be viewed as the basis for such a literature: in fact, part of the documentation is explicitly non-literary, such as the personal names or the omina. (We have not even considered in this presentation the figurative evidence, which may appear a **priori** not to be pertinent, given the emphasis on the abstract in the wisdom themes mentioned above; it is not inconceivable, however, that if we were to expand our analysis of the wisdom elements, we might be able to establish some links with the iconography especially of such items as figurines and cylinder seals). Of texts which are explicitly literary, we have too wide a range, and, within each genre represented, too diffused a situation: hymns, myths or epics do not normally embody wisdom themes, and when they do (as in Gilgamesh or the **Shamash** hymn) the wisdom dimension is only a component, and often not even a prevalent one at that. The use of the concept "wisdom literature" is too restricted on the one hand—if we take into consideration the entire documentation, which includes an important non-literary portion—, and it is on the other hand too broad—·if we take it to subsume a repertory of wisdom themes and diverse literary realizations. We find a comparable inadequacy in the use of the concepts "religious" or "political" literature: they may be taken to refer to literary embodiments of the religious beliefs or political ideology, but they remain by necessity vague since there is no consistent matching of literary expression with a spiritual or intellectual message.

However that may be, it is clear that we must separate wisdom from literature. The correlation between the two is important, but not exclusive. Rather, wisdom should be viewed as an intellectual phenomenon in itself. It is the second degree reflective function as it begins to emerge in human culture; in Mesopotamia, it takes shape in a variety of realizations and institutions, from onomastics to literature, from religion to the school. It provides the mental categories for a conscious, abstract confrontation with reality, from common sense correlations to higher level theory. It did not lead to a deductive systematization of the reasoning process—a major innovation which was left for classical Greece; but it went beyond empirical observation and primary classification. On the arc of progressive differentiation which characterizes the evolution of human culture, wisdom marks the first explicit attempt to gain some distance from one's own inner self, and to cast the particular in a universal mold which can be described rationally and critically. It is at once epistemology, ethics, ontology and lyrical introspection. Thus it can be said that wisdom has an internal coherence of its own, but as a dimension or attitude, not as an institution; it is not amorphous, but also it is not organized along systematic lines. It is, we might say, a cultural tradition.

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