The Planetary Turn
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Can we understand the turn to “world literature”—as David Damrosch defines it—as a turn not to a designated canon but to a circulatory effect, “the effective life” of any text “whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture”? If so, then what are the consequences of thinking of literature in this way, that is, as a far-flung network of redistribution, recombination, and recontextualization? And is it possible to add another analytic layer, putting the emphasis less on the networks projected to come into being than on the ones already enjoined, feeding a stream of reusable material from earliest antiquity into an ever-growing body of work, sustaining a planetary ecology and bringing newness into the world through the turns of decomposition and recomposition?

In what follows, I experiment with this approach, looking at the epic not in isolation but as part of a recycling process unfolding on three continents, across a variety of genres and media, and over a period of several thousand years. The text being recycled is *Gilgamesh*, an epic originating from Mesopotamia and developing multiple variants even in 1700 B.C.E. The novel *Gilgamesh* (2001), by the Australian author Joan London, is the one of the most recent spin-offs from it. There are many others, including many from the United States, and in thinking about the “planetary ecology” of *Gilgamesh*, it is worth looking outside a strictly text-based medium to engage a distributive process that not only reuses the old but also spills over in all conceivable directions, into all conceivable venues.

**Staging**

I begin with a collaboration between dramaturge Chad Gracia and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa. In 2006, these two teamed up for a stage adaptation of *Gilgamesh*. The text was published by Wesleyan University Press, and the play was performed in New York, Chicago, Boston, and New Orleans, Komunyakaa’s home for many years.

These were lean productions, with a small crew, no set to speak of, and about six actors doing double or triple duty, playing more than one role, and
often serving as handy stage props. Making ingenious use of simple objects, actors produced a wealth of visual effects to make up for the bareness of the stage. In the Chicago performances by the Silk Road Theatre Project, the Goddess Ishtar, for instance, was shown only as a silhouette, a face in the moon, an effect accomplished with a flashlight and stretched cotton over a hula hoop. Humbaba, the guardian of the cedar forest and Gilgamesh’s main adversary, was meanwhile represented by a bamboo frame covered with green and brown fabric and moved around by three actors. The Silk Road Theatre Project called this kind of theater “stylized and actor-driven.” Another name for it would be poor man’s theater: low-tech and low-cost, using nothing more than the primitive resources of the dramatic medium. However, this did not mean low-quality. The Silk Road Theatre Project is a respected company, receiving grants from Google, IBM, the MacArthur Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Their low-budget production is rather a point of pride, the signature style of a theater with a particular vision of itself. Founded in 2002 by Malik Gillani and Jamil Khoury as a response to the anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiments sweeping across the United States after the 9/11 attacks, it set out to be a grassroots theater for the multi-faith and multiethnic communities that once flourished on the trade routes linking Asia to Africa and Europe. The Komunyakaa-Gracia adaptation of Gilgamesh is very much in that spirit.

I go into these details because these empirical circumstances are almost never mentioned in theories of the epic. While Mikhail Bakhtin draws on the language of theater to create an analytical vocabulary for the novel—for the “carnival” in Rabelais—the politics and pragmatics of stage adaptation are subjects that never come up when he discusses the epic, which he dismisses as a dead-end genre, ossified and moribund, with a past but no present or future. What difference does it make to see the epic through an empirical lens, through specific instances of translation, citation, and stage adaptation, instances of recycling that bring it back, break it up, and redistribute it across a variety of locations and platforms? How do these activities, often happening at irregular intervals and at locations hard to predict, complicate our understanding of this particular genre and of “genre” as a planetary phenomenon, an evolving field spread across temporal as well as geographical coordinates?

The Komunyakaa-Gracia adaptation reaches back to the oldest known epic, a non-Western one, predating the Iliad and the Odyssey by a thousand years. It reminds us of the local and largely ungeneralizable contexts for recycling, some having to do with the quirks of on-site production and some much broader in scope, fueled by large-scale events such as global terrorism and the 9/11 attacks. How do these input networks—macro, micro, and any number of intermediaries—bear on the form of the epic, its morphological spectrum over the course of five thousand years, as well as the permutative possibilities of any particular moment? What is the typical scale of operation
for the genre, and how much variation might we expect as we navigate within one work and among several works?

Mash-up

The case of *Gilgamesh* is especially instructive. Unlike the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Mesopotamian epic originated in written form, etched into clay tablets. It was not improvisationally composed by rhapsodes, who selectively rearranged the oral epics as they traveled. And yet, in its enormous range of variations—far more diverse than the Homeric epics—this epic stands as the earliest (and still most stunning) example of a text that was never integral to begin with, a text that upon its transcription was immediately translated and continued to flourish only through various turns of translation, combination, and recombination.

Gilgamesh was a historical king who ruled in the Mesopotamian city of Uruk around 2750 B.C.E. Legends about him probably arose shortly after his death; they were first written in Sumerian, a non-Semitic language with no relation to Akkadian, the Semitic language in which *Gilgamesh* would eventually be circulated across Mesopotamia. This earliest Sumerian material seems to have existed as five separate poems for about a thousand years, long after the Sumerian people were overrun by their Semitic neighbors; around 1700 B.C.E. the poems began to be collated and translated into the cuneiform script of the Babylonian language, a dialect of Akkadian. The best preserved were twelve tablets pieced together a bit later, probably around 1200 B.C.E. by the scholar-priest Sin-liqe-unninni, and eventually brought to the library of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria (668–627 B.C.E.).

As is clear from this brief account, the making of *Gilgamesh* was long drawn out even in ancient Mesopotamia; the shape of the text and its basic features varied tremendously from one collator to another and one translator to another. These early efforts at collation, however, were nothing like the monumental labor performed in the nineteenth century by European scholars faced with hundreds and thousands of broken fragments of such clay tablets. How to restore these to some legible order? Since the epic existed in so many different versions, put together by so many different scribes over such a long period of time, and since none of these had survived intact—even the most complete set, Sin-liqe-unninni’s, is missing approximately one-third of its lines—guesswork was unavoidable in the nineteenth century, and it remains unavoidable in every modern translation. Stephen Mitchell’s, one of the most readable, uses Sin-liqe-unninni’s twelve-tablet “Standard Version” as the primary source, filling in the gaps with words or lines from some other tablets and from the Sumerian poems. Andrew George’s 1999 Penguin edition and Benjamin Foster’s 2001 Norton Critical Edition go even further. In the Penguin edition, Sin-liqe-unninni’s “Standard Version” is presented along with four
other versions: Babylonian texts from the early second millennium B.C.E.; Babylonian texts from the late second millennium B.C.E.; texts from the late second millennium B.C.E. but from outside Babylonia; and, finally, the Sumerian poems. In the Norton Critical Edition, four texts are offered: the “Standard Version”; the Sumerian poems; a late second-millennium B.C.E. translation of *Gilgamesh* into the Hittite language; and, finally, a parody called *The Gilgamesh Letter*. Both the Penguin and the Norton editions use square brackets and ellipses to indicate either conjectural inserts or unfilled gaps in the text.

What counts as the “text” of *Gilgamesh*—what is included and what is left out, how the gaps are filled and with what additional material—reflects an editor’s preferences more than anything else. These preferences can go quite far in remaking the text, giving it an up-to-date purpose, an up-to-date agenda. Stephen Mitchell, for instance, translating *Gilgamesh* in the twenty-first century, cannot help seeing in the Mesopotamian epic an “eerie counterpoint to the recent American invasion of Iraq.” In the poem, Gilgamesh’s sudden announcement of epic purpose sounds in this context like the immemorial words of “the original preemptive strike”: “where the fierce monster Humbaba lives. / We must kill him and drive out evil from the world.” Is this really a battle of good against evil, as Gilgamesh claims? “Everything in the poem argues against it,” Mitchell says. “As a matter of fact, the only evil we are informed of is the suffering Gilgamesh has inflicted on his own people; the only monster is Gilgamesh himself.” Humbaba, the targeted villain, “hasn’t harmed a single living being”: Mitchell explains that it is “impossible to see Humbaba as a threat to the security of Uruk or as part of any ‘axis of evil.’ ” On the contrary, as the guardian of the Cedar Forest, he “is a figure of balance and a defender of the ecosystem. (Having a monster or two around to guard our national forests from corporate and other predators wouldn’t be such a bad thing.)”

Komunyakaa and Gracia do not claim for *Gilgamesh* quite this degree of contemporary relevance, although, as we will see, their play is not without topical accents of its own. Since theirs is not a translation but a stage adaptation venturing into an entirely different medium, the allowable deviations are also much greater. Komunyakaa took full advantage of these, not only inventing entirely new characters but also in some instances using the outline of the epic only as a loose-fitting shell to develop themes he had already been exploring elsewhere. The initial idea for the play had come not from him but from Gracia. Unlike Komunyakaa, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, and unlike Stephen Mitchell, celebrated translator of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and the *Book of Job*, among other works, Gracia is a dramaturge operating on a considerably lower level. (On his own website he is now listed as working in international trade and development, specializing in the Middle East.) It is fair to say that he is less the top dog in the theater world than a persevering fan of the Mesopotamian epic, determined to give it a contemporary staging.
Corruptible Body

Gracia was first introduced to *Gilgamesh* as a young reader of Will Durant’s *Our Oriental Heritage*. It was the beginning of a lifelong attachment. For weeks after reading it, he could not get this line out of his head: “I too shall die, for am I not like Enkidu?” The line is Gilgamesh’s. He and Enkidu have been inseparable up to this point, their partnering not an issue. After the slaying of Humbaba, however, this inseparability suddenly becomes vexed. Gilgamesh does not want to be exactly like his friend at just this moment for Enkidu has been singled out for punishment by the gods: of the two, he is the one who must die. This differential outcome is in some sense the logical extension of the initial difference between the two friends: from the first we know that Gilgamesh is part God (through his mother, Ninsun, he is supposed to be “two-thirds divine, one-third human”), whereas Enkidu seems to be part animal: he is the “man-beast of the Steppe.” Both, it seems, are only fractionally human but fractional in opposite ways, pointing to two antithetical forms of identity. How do these get resolved? If humans are always going to be part-animal and part-god, which of these two gene pools will rise to the top, or, realistically, which will turn out to be the non-negotiable baseline, the most fundamental fact about us?

The death of Enkidu raises the question to a fever pitch. No longer fully human, is there enough humanity left for the corpse to resist being banished to the other side? How long can it put off that eventuality? How long can it hold on to its fractional species membership before being relegated once and for all to a much lower rung of the taxonomic hierarchy? Hanging in the balance seems to be the very nature of “humanness”—our place in the animate and inanimate world, our relations to other living things and to non-sentient organic matter. Who are our kin, our kind? Especially troubling here are the physicality of the body and its seemingly inexorable outcome. Does a body like that not doom us to being more animal-like rather than godlike? What exactly does it mean to be attached to, and coextensive with, a body that is perishable and corruptible?

*Gilgamesh* is unsparing on this point. Rather than giving Enkidu a dignified and ceremonious end, the Gilgamesh author(s) show him at the last as a corpse, a mound of dead flesh. Enkidu’s deadness is accented by a small visual detail that has maximum shock effect, a revolting close-up from which we are not allowed to look away. It is this small detail that is stuck in Gracia’s mind. We can think of it as a moment of “microcization”: Gilgamesh hanging onto the corpse, not letting go, until

\[
\text{a maggot dropped from Enkidu’s nose.}^{9}\]
Gracia was reading Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* at the same time as he was reading *Gilgamesh*, and it seemed to him that what Becker was saying about human beings—that we are “gods with anuses”—could have served as well as a motto for the Sumerian epic. Gross physicality is, of course, a common sight in the epic; there are numerous instances in Homer’s work, especially in the *Iliad*. But *Gilgamesh* is unique in putting the maggot at center stage, magnifying it far beyond its objective puniness. This is the less-than-human emblem of the less-than-human baseline of our species: it unites all of us, and it unites our species to all the others. As common denominators go, this one is exceptionally low, setting the bar for species membership at a level where there is in fact no sharp distinction between humans and nonhumans, nor between the so-called civilized and the so-called barbaric. Death seen up close, fear of dying oneself, the instant degradability of the physical body: these are the basic ingredients that make up the epic landscape shared by humans and animals. The genre is “primitive” in this sense: not only is *Gilgamesh* the oldest literature known to humans, but also the emotions provoked by it are raw, visceral, and primal. From the standpoint of evolution, they represent the most elemental brain processes, evolved in and robustly shared by a large number of animal species, having been there from the first and likely to be there till the bitter end.

Yet rather than being permanently stuck in the past and cut off from the living world, as Bakhtin contends, the epic is the genre of the living world. It is the genre that carries forward the most physically grounded, basic emotions known to humankind. The epic is a prehistoric continuum surviving into the twenty-first century, enunciating fears and hurts undiminished in strength and sway over the species. It is able to serve as this carrier mostly by remaining a “low” genre both in terms of its simple, death-driven narratives and in terms of the deflationary view of humanity that such narratives call up. This is a genre that constructs a spectrum of life forms—gods on the one end, worms on the other—and leaves little doubt about where we humans stand. “Mortals”: this is the label that the epic reserves for our species. It sums us up. And, when the end arrives, as it is guaranteed to do, the epic quite often marks that occurrence with a formal spasm: simultaneously magnifying, contracting, and disorienting, it gives the end of life a hallucinatory intensity that fills every inch of space yet shrinks to a smaller and smaller point.

**Macro and Micro**

All of which is to say that the epic is doing active work on more than one scale, going back and forth between the large and the small and bringing these two into dialogue, bringing one to bear on the other, if not as an inverted prism, then as a persistent counterpoint. Aristotle is wrong, then, to
associate the epic only with the vexingly large. The vexingly small is equally within its province.\textsuperscript{11}

In fact, it probably does not make a lot of sense to maintain a strict separation between the epic and other genres simply on the basis of a text’s own size or of the size of that which it examines, for the epic’s operating coordinates are far from uniform, with a broad spectrum of variation linked to an alternating rhythm, often crossing over into the territory that is traditionally assigned to other genres.

In what follows, I would like to argue against a strict separation between epic and lyric. Rather than aligning the former only with the macro and the latter only with the micro, I would like to see these dimensional planes as up-and-down scalar variations that can be switched into and switched out of quite routinely, without too much fuss. Epic and lyric, in this view, are complementary registers, a functional duality allowing representational space to expand or contract as the need arises, to alternate when necessary between the technically neutral bird’s-eye view and the deliberately charged close-up. While it still makes sense to think of lyric and epic as distinct genres, the “lyricization” of the epic is by no means oxymoronic but rather an important operational dimension of the genre, making it scale-rich, scale-variable.

For this reason, the otherwise localized phenomenon of death, happening inside just one body, can be both hidebound and world-destroying, both center and circumference. In \textit{Gilgamesh} death is figured in both the concentrated repulsiveness of the maggot and the reproducible story of grief and fear, occasioned by the corruptibility of the body and expanding to include many spin-offs from the death event. It is a story populated by a host of gods and a host of unclassifiable creatures (such as Humbaba and the Scorpion People). All have some relation to humans, to the mortals that we are. The epic is a multi-scale, multi-species environment that stretches the bounds of representation far beyond the customary borders of the “real,” turning unthinkably alien life forms into companionable creatures and interlocutors on life’s journey.

It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the names the epic would adopt in the twentieth century is “science fiction.” A modern mutation of the ancient genre, science fiction adds extraterrestrial species and interplanetary travel to the epic plot but otherwise sticks with the same death-driven and life-seeking narratives and the emotions they reproduce and reactivate. Intimation of mortality, the physical nature of the body, and the up-for-grabs definition of “humanness” itself: these basic ingredients of the Mesopotamian epic are also the basic ingredients of science fiction. One telling example illustrates this. Nearly five thousand years after \textit{Gilgamesh}’s inception, the 102nd episode of the 1990s television series \textit{Star Trek: The Next Generation} reaches back in self-conscious tribute to the ancient epic. The “Darmok” episode, well known among literary scholars, reinscribes the “epic DNA” of \textit{Gilgamesh}—what made it so powerful and widely translated in ancient
Mesopotamia and also what makes it so eminently recyclable now. And yet, while this *Star Trek* episode does reenact the iconic scene of one companion dying and the other grieving, its overwhelming focus is not on the biological necessity of death but rather on the human determination to survive.¹²

This example, and numerous others like it, suggests that the epic is best explored as a cascading form, with a downstream textual field exploding in volume, energized by various projective arcs and increasingly scattered across a variety of genres and media. The *Star Trek* episode is indeed a striking example, a transcoding and redirecting of those cuneiform tablets onto a non-text-based (or at least not strictly text-based) platform that is mass-circulated and low in literary prestige but high in popular appeal, as measured in number of viewers. The ease with which the epic can make it onto the TV screen points to at least three possibilities. First, the genre seems to have an easily mobilized set of optics and a predisposition towards images, perhaps because humans have always been more visual than linguistic or because human emotions before the advent of language were triggered by visual cues.¹³ Second, popular culture is not a problem for the epic. It is entirely at home there, its primitive griefs and fears and its easily visualizable plots comprehensible even to the unschooled and needing no exegesis. And finally, the frequency of recycling in the epic speaks to “lyricization” as one of the most important self-propagating mechanisms of the genre, since a very small group of words, and certainly not the entire epic, is selectively highlighted, extracted, and circulated anew, gaining new meanings and entering into new associations in entirely different environments. It is not the large size of the epic but the portability of a tiny fraction of it that allows it to spread far and wide, to be cited and embedded over and over again, in countless new updates and remakes.

But if this is true, portability would seem to rest on something like the *non-integrity* of the original text—the ease with which the latter can be broken up, pieces of it dislodged and taken elsewhere, and the ease with which it can be mixed in with new material, not only in contexts increasing far away in time and geography but also in registers often operating at a lower cultural elevation. As we have seen with *Gilgamesh*, the general tendency for the epic, in the thousands of years of its recycling, is to drift steadily downward, assimilating itself to more popular tastes, moving to more popular venues, speaking the street vernacular of the locals. The epic is eminently “corruptible” in this sense: random composting is natural to it, while fragmenting, fermenting, and disintegrating are its life-processes. Not only does the genre have a thematic interest in the degradability of matter, but it also is itself a part of that process, degrading with gusto and feeding the unsparing but microbially vital downward percolations that carry the process forward. From this perspective, the maggot is not only a repulsive detail; it is a counterintuitively *lyrical* detail, a close-up too gross for comfort but also life-giving in that grossness. It keeps the epic going, just as it keeps the planet’s ecosystem turning.
The Maggot and the DNA of Epic

What would a play look like that gives pride of place to the maggot, a play dedicated to the twin concepts of corruptibility and renewability? Gracia started casting about for a playwright already thinking along those lines. Komunyakaa caught his attention right away, since the poet already has under his belt a poem entitled “Ode to the Maggot”:

Brother of the blowfly
& godhead, you work magic
Over battlefields,
In slabs of bad pork
& flophouses. Yes, you
Go to the root of all things.
You are sound & mathematical.
Jesus Christ, you’re merciless
With the truth. Ontological & lustrous,
You cast spells on beggars & kings
Behind the stone door of Caesar’s tomb
Or split trench in a field of ragweed.
No decree or creed can outlaw you
As you take every living thing apart. Little
Master of earth, no one gets to heaven
Without going through you first.14

“Ode to the Maggot” was published in 2000 in Talking Dirty to the Gods. Komunyakaa was probably not thinking of Gilgamesh when he wrote this poem, and in fact its emotional orientation is significantly different. In Gilgamesh, the maggot is harsh, unstoppable, the voice of necessity from the biosphere. “Ode to the Maggot,” on the other hand, is almost a fond tribute to the “little / Master of earth,” finding something “ontological & lustrous” where most people would feel disgust. The poem employs a shift in perspective and in scale of attention that marks a shift from epic to lyric, recognizable even within a strict definition of those two genres. The shift is not too difficult, for the maggot in fact has the scalar flexibility that allows it to be at home in the alternating rhythm that links the two genres. On a lyrical note, Komunyakaa’s poem reminds us that decomposing texts, like decomposing bodies, are the lifeblood of any generative process, a thought twined around the disintegration of matter that it executes on the epic stage. This modern-day maggot, in short, has enough in common with the ancient one in Mesopotamia to convince Gracia that Komunyakaa “had a Gilgamesh waiting inside him all along.”15

It is an interesting idea, a theory of literature based on the virtual guarantee of cross-time reproduction. Even as the epic carries forward the evolutionary
psychology of the human species on a large scale, it would seem itself to be enacting a micro-evolution on its own, long drawn out but apparently fairly dependable. What Gracia is proposing, in fact, is a special kind of textual genetics, based not on the replication of a DNA script but rather on the mutation and fragmentation of textual motifs, linguistic clusters, into smaller and smaller recombinable units. This would be a “lyricization” uniquely able to propagate, to produce new and altered assemblages at greater and greater distances. How do we otherwise account for the proven track record of Gilgamesh, for its history of being recycled over and over again, not always predictably, but not without some degree of regularity?

The environmental reason for this continuity is both simpler and more inexorable than we might think. For, to the extent that the death of physical organisms has remained a hard fact across time—in effect, one of the key constants of the biosphere—and to the extent that most of us have remained unreconciled to it, unconsolled in the face of its necessity, mortality might turn out to be the single most consequential human event on the planet, experienced to the full from one generation to another. The primitive devastations of Gilgamesh are no less devastating now than they were five thousand years ago. The potency and transmissibility of this particular bit of genetic material make the epic robust, durable, and adaptable.

As Komunyakaa’s poem illustrates, however, the epic DNA reproduced throughout his corpus might not be mortality as a general condition but rather the smaller, grosser pressure point that is the maggot. This particular fascination no doubt has something to do with the author’s background and the entwined coarseness and delicacy surrounding death in that particular environment. Son of a carpenter, Komunyakaa grew up in Bogalusa, Louisiana, forty miles north of New Orleans. He was given the name James William Brown, but later reclaimed the African name Komunyakaa, the name of his grandfather, a stowaway from the West Indies:

My grandfather came from Trinidad
Smuggled in like a sack of papaya
The name Brown fitted him like trouble.16

The family was poor. One of the effects of that poverty was a kind of companionship with death, an accommodation to the act of killing and with what happens after the killing. In the “Meat” section of the long poem “A Good Memory,” Komunyakaa writes:

Folk magic hoodooed us
Till the varmints didn’t taste bitter
Or wild. We boys & girls
Knew how to cut away musk glands  
Behind their legs. Good  
With knives, we believed  
We weren’t poor.  

. . . . . . . . . . . . . .  
Sometimes  
We weighed the bullet  
In our hands, tossing it left  
To right, wondering if it was  
Worth more than the kill. 17

Someone who kills to eat every day is going to have a very different attitude than would well-to-do urbanites about meat consumption and about the edible nature of bodies. Hunger, a perennial problem in Bogalusa, would have been much worse if individual animal bodies were not so easily degradable, so easily absorbed back into the vital processes of the biosphere. This recycling-based aesthetics gives the maggot an honored place in Komunyakaa’s poetry, assigning it the same ontological centrality (if a somewhat different emotional charge) that it carried in Gilgamesh. And, of course, it was this small, diligent, and easily portable bit of epic DNA that would also accompany the poet as he went to war.

For, in fact, Komunyakaa went to Vietnam. He was there from 1969 to 1970, working for the Army’s newspaper, The Southern Cross, covering the military action and writing articles on Vietnamese history that won him a Bronze Star. He also published a volume of poems, Dien Cai Dau, perhaps the most memorable poetry to come out of the Vietnam War. In this volume, there is another poem, “We Never Know,” also seemingly descended from Gilgamesh, that reenacts the same divided tableau of dying and surviving and once again puts flies and maggots at the center:

He danced with tall grass  
for a moment, like he was swaying  
with a woman. Our gun barrels  
glowed white-hot.  
When I got to him,  
a blue halo  
of flies had already claimed him.  
I pulled the crumbled photograph  
from his fingers.  
There’s no other way  
to say this: I fell in love.  
The morning cleared again,  
extcept for a distant mortar
& somewhere choppers taking off.  
I slid the wallet into his pocket  
& turned him over, so he wouldn’t be  
  kissing the ground.18

The dead man in the poem is a complete stranger, most likely an enemy combatant, someone the poet has just killed, someone he is supposed to kill. Yet this death is anything but routine. On the contrary, it is self-consciously lyrical: a spot of time special unto itself, luminous and overflowing with meaning, its smallness amplified into something much larger. It is fitting that this subjectively magnified event should be coupled with and offered in counterpoint to the larger narrative of war, here miniaturized in its turn. For death in combat is indeed a classic moment of scalar instability, oscillating between two or more phenomenal planes, between epic expanse and lyric compression, between the impersonal necessity of killing and the convulsiveness of death as bodily event.

The poem begins on a lyrical note, with a slightly blurred, almost hallucinatory image of the enemy combatant swaying and dancing. But it pulls back from that lyricization as it moves swiftly to the other end of the emotional spectrum, its descriptive lens zeroing in on the now-fallen body, with a “halo / of flies” already gathered. It is unsightly, grossly reductive and deflating, turning the dead soldier instantly into an abject corpse: edible flesh, food for worms. We could call this a moment of ecological realism; an impersonal, across-the-board recycling downward. Yet this particular form of recycling is one that acknowledges the subjectivity of each organism rather than erasing it completely. In fact, in a double-stranded structure almost like a double helix, the ecological realism is coupled here with an organism-based lyricism that counters it, a lyricism that grants the fallen soldier a degree of individuality. Startlingly, completely out of the blue, the poet announces that he has fallen in love. We do not know with whom he has fallen in love, whether it is the dead man or the person in the crumbled photograph pulled out of his wallet by the speaker just before the man dies. But that almost does not matter. The identity of the love recipient is less important than the fact that the sentiment is there, amplified, attended to, and given poetic life. Both epic and lyric are honored by this alternating rhythm, a scalar flexibility that unmakes and remakes, as tender as it is hard-nosed.

And the alternation persists. The poem’s speaker now makes another gesture in the direction of lyric as he does two last things: he puts the wallet back into the dead man’s pocket and turns him over, to face up. These gestures, each deliberate, each unexplained, and all non-trivial, do not change the fact that the dead man is organic matter. They do not have the power to fend off the “blue halo / of flies” that are most certainly there. On the contrary, it is the visceral proximity of those flies that makes the cross-stitched rhythm of epic and lyric so powerful, with two force fields intertwined and yet pulling
in opposing directions, energized by that paradox, carrying forward both the non-negotiability of our physical end and the infinitely negotiable turns of textual reproduction.

**Variation and Mutation**

Since this alternating rhythm is so close to the expanding and contracting phenomenal planes of death in combat, we should not be surprised that, in his more recent collection, *Warhorses* (2008), as Komunyakaa turns from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, the same genetic material from *Gilgamesh* and the same double-stranded structure would be brought along, put to work in these new environments. The cross-stitching of the large and the small is reflected this time in the very form of the poetry. In a long, fourteen-section poem called “Love in the Time of War,” Komunyakaa devotes an entire section to the Sumerian epic, taking in the gods and the cosmos but also lyricizing the death of one particular individual, turning it into an arresting micro-phenomenon:

Gilgamesh’s Humbaba was a distant drum
pulsing among the trees, a slave to the gods,
a foreign tongue guarding the sacred cedars
down to a pale grubworm in the tower
before Babel. Invisible & otherworldly,
he was naked in the king’s heart,
& his cry turned flies into maggots
& blood reddened the singing leaves.

The death of Humbaba is here given a context, a dense psychology, and a visceral immediacy. Once again, the maggots are impossible to miss, although this key signifier has now been transferred from Enkidu to Humbaba. This unexpected shift suggests that the epic is perhaps distinguished above all by its “mutating genes.” Periodic shifts in its centers of gravity might turn out to be a crucial self-propagating mechanism, as important to the ongoing life of the epic form as anything that was written on the original clay tablets. This is another way of saying that, for the planet-wide continuum that is the epic, variation is the rule rather than the exception. Its ontology is the ontology of local input and local inflection: ever-multiplying, often randomly generated.

Humbaba is a case in point. As he appeared in the Mesopotamian texts, Humbaba was the guardian of the sacred Cedar Forest, restricted more or less to that sole function. He embodied a divine prohibition, and yet, strangely, he was also supposed to be evil. Stephen Mitchell, as we have seen, has seized upon this apparent contradiction and turned it into a fable for our own
time. According to him, the supposed evil of Humbaba is largely projected by Gilgamesh, a preemptive name-calling to justify a preemptive first strike. Komunyakaa and Gracia do not go quite so far, but, like Mitchell, they are also struck by Humbaba less as a substantive entity than as a hollow sound. With no demonstrable physical might, he is merely a rumbling sound. The stage directions say, “The marching-rolling sound of Humbaba’s approach is heard—circular. He is not seen. ’Humbaba’ grows into a resounding echo.” A creature of hearsay, Humbaba falls apart almost instantly in this stage adaptation. Enkidu says:

Humbaba is no god.
He is a small beast
in a big forest.
He is only a roar
among the night trees.²¹

Humbaba as a small beast in a big forest is not strictly an invention by Komunyakaa and Gracia; the character is not an absolute departure from the Mesopotamian epic. This ambiguously unclassified creature has always been an agent, a proxy; he executes the will of the gods and serves at their pleasure. And the Mesopotamian gods are nothing if not treacherous. It is Shamash, after all, who unleashes the thirteen winds that blind Humbaba and pin him down, turning his imminent victory over Gilgamesh into a defeat. Still, it takes the stage adaptation and “Love in the Time of War” to turn the fate of Humbaba into a fully imagined story about a low-level functionary, quite far down on the totem pole, done in by the higher power he serves. He is not only “a slave to the gods” (which is more or less what we might expect) but, surprisingly, always “a foreign tongue” to them, meaningless as far as they are concerned, a tongue they never bother to learn.

But in what sense is Humbaba “a foreign tongue”? This is a manner of speaking, of course, since there is no evidence anywhere that Humbaba’s actual language requires translation. His foreignness to the gods and his status as an alien come rather from the fact that, existentially and taxonomically, he belongs to a different level, a lower order: they are immortal, but he is not. Unlike the gods, and very much like Enkidu, Humbaba is perishable and corruptible, and the flies and maggots are there to prove it. These creatures are certainly nothing new: they have been with humans “before Babel.” What is new, though, is that what is a given for humans is now a given for Humbaba as well. Not even remotely godlike, he is no better and no different from his supposed adversaries. The label “mortal” applies to him just as it does to them, making him an eternal underling, “invisible and otherworldly” to the gods. If there had been any previous ambiguity about how to classify Humbaba and where he stood on the spectrum between gods and humans, the nature of his servitude and the nature of his death put that beyond doubt.
The “humanization” of Humbaba—here, effectively a demotion—is indeed a significant departure from the Sumerian epic, a recycling so radical that I would like to call it a base modification. In “Love in the Time of War,” it is not through Gilgamesh, and not even through Enkidu, but rather through Humbaba, that “humanness” is being defined. And it is being defined in terms of its lowest common denominator, its physical degradation and psychological abjection. If the vitality of the epic comes in part from a downdrift, a channeling of its emotional charge toward the lower rungs of the hierarchy, in the hands of Komunyakaa that downward momentum reinvents the genre even as it redraws the boundaries between what is human and what is not. That impetus gives us a repopulated baseline that is increasingly the center of gravity, and it puts corresponding pressures on the shape of history told from that standpoint. Moreover, though “slave to the gods” could have been just a catchphrase, the word “slave,” coming from Komunyakaa, is neither casual nor trivial. Nor is it casual or trivial that this particular layer of American history is being called up by the Iraq war, a military operation manned by those with no say in the process, “slaves” to higher powers who act as if they were gods. What results from this base modification is a radical redrawing of the epic map, a redefinition that loosens the criteria for species membership even as it turns over the most vital part of the story to the lower ranks.

Another Continent

This outcome, so striking in “Love in the Time of War,” is not the only one possible, however. How would the epic map and its emotional baseline be modified again, when it is recycled on yet another continent and woven into the lives of other below-the-threshold groups? In her novel Gilgamesh (2001), the Australian author Joan London brings Gilgamesh to Nunderup, in south-western Australia. However, remaining true to this epic’s peregrinations over the course of the past five thousand years, she does not limit her action to one geographic or temporal location. Instead, her narrative is looped through major historical events of the twentieth century: World War I, the Armenian genocide, the Soviet invasion of Armenia, and the outbreak of World War II. It brings Edith Clark, a young Australian woman, and her young son, Jim, first to London and then to Yerevan, Armenia, and finally through Persia and Syria before returning to Nunderup.

What sets this planetary travel in motion is the arrival in Nunderup of two young men: Edith’s cousin Leopold, who had been working on an archaeological dig not far from Baghdad, and Aram, his Armenian driver. The two companions had driven all across Mesopotamia, visiting ancient sites such as Ur, Nineveh, and Uruk. And now, in Australia’s southwest, what they miss the most is the site of the royal libraries of Nineveh, where the clay tablets of Gilgamesh were first found. Leopold is never without this text: he “and
Aram spoke of Gilgamesh as if they knew him.” They tell Edith about what great friends Gilgamesh and Enkidu were, and how “the two of them became so arrogant together that the gods decreed Enkidu must die and go to the Underworld.”

Once again, the stage is set for two companions and the death that awaits one of them. Who will it be? Edith’s fate is intertwined with that of both men: it is Aram, the father of her child, whom she has set out to look for, but it is Leopold who shows up and escorts her on her return trip. It is also Leopold’s jeep that hits a land mine not far from Aleppo. He has just left Edith and Jim there, in the safety of an orphanage; the explosion can be heard where they are. Yet he turns out to be alive and well at the end of the novel, sending a letter in his still-recognizable handwriting to let Edith know that he is in Baghdad once again, drinking coffee every day in a café, learning Arabic. There will be no reunion between him and Edith, but Jim is taking “the first ship out” to see for himself.

In this recycling, Gilgamesh dies and is resurrected. It seems that nobody has thought of this permutation before, just as nobody has thought of a young Australian woman as an epic protagonist or her lover as an Armenian who is able to survive several wars. The baseline population has shifted yet another way, and not in a way that anyone could have predicted. But we should not be too surprised, after all. Something new always happens when the old decomposes, as the epic is bound to do. Reaching back to several non-Western ancient languages, and mutating to incorporate countless local circumstances in a five-thousand-year-old recycling, these macro and micro networks of variants, at once finite and yet endlessly extendable, show that literature is above all a series of planetary turns.

Notes

2. See Yusef Komunyakaa and Chad Gracia, Gilgamesh: A Verse Play (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).
9. Ibid., 56.
11. While in Poetics the epic’s bulk and breaking of dramatic unity are a challenge for Aristotle, the hexameter is able to turn the epic’s extra mass into acceptable size, letting in all sorts of elements that would not have been admitted into a form such as tragedy. Here again we have a productive interchange between macro and micro at the level of form. In addition, Aristotle points to the presence of foreign words and metaphors in the epic, but the influx of foreignness—material coming from the outside, not there from the first and not there by invitation—would seem far more endemic than his isolated examples would suggest, its effects not incidental but fundamental to the genre. See Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), sec. 22. For a longer discussion of this section of Poetics, see my Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 81–82.
22. Joan London, Gilgamesh: A Novel (New York: Grove, 2001), 41–42. All references hereafter are to this edition and are noted parenthetically.