

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP: AUGUST SEMINAR

Date: Wednesday 29 August 2018

Time: 6-8 pm

Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade

Reading: The Epic of Gilgamesh, Lacan Seminar II

The Play of the Double in The Epic of Gilgamesh

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By opening *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Sumerian epic of 3,500 BC, we find ourselves at once in the middle of a mythical repertoire of a story and action. The eponymous hero, the legendary king of Mesopotamian city of Uruk intermingling with anthropomorphic gods and goddesses easily than he contacts his subjects and members of his royal court. His mother is wise goddess, Ninsun who lives in Uruk. He is two-third divine and one-third human. When gods created him, Shamash [Shams means in Arabic sun], the sun-god gave him a matchless divine beauty; Adad, the god of storm, bestowed upon him courage and bravery. When his subjects in their prayer ask gods to create his equal to tame him, Anu (in Sumerian mythology father of gods) orders Goddess Aruru (the mother of all goddesses) to mould Enkidu from clay and water, “let it be as like him as his own reflection, his stormy heart for stormy heart,” (G. 62). Enkidu is a grass-eating savage with long hair and hairy body. A trapper discovers this savage who is advised by his father to go to Uruk and find Gilgamesh and report to him what he had seen, and Gilgamesh advises the trapper to take a temple prostitute, Shamhat, ‘a child of pleasure’ to seduce and house-train Enkidu. After spending six nights and seven days with him, Shamhat tells the wild man, “you are wise, Enkidu, and now you have become like a god. Why do you want to run wild with the beast in the hills? Come with me. I will take you to strong-walled Uruk, to the blessed temple of Ishtar and of Anu, of love and of heaven: there Gilgamesh lives, who is very strong, and like a wild bull he lords it over men,” (G. 65). Everything we know about Gilgamesh insofar as his presence and endeavours in Uruk is concerned, we receive them from what the narrator says: “His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior’s daughter nor the wife of the noble; yet this is the shepherd of the city, wise, comely, and resolute,” (G. 62). According to Lévi-Strauss, there is always ‘crazy’ similarities between myths in terms of their themes and structure, the Sumerian epic too is one mythical epic among others in literature with striking similarities with Greek epics. The Epic of Gilgamesh could be classified as an epic poem outlined by Aristotle *Poetics*. One ubiquitous paradigm of mythical fantasies for example is a desire for immortality and power, which stands against the destruction of the ego—a tragic fall of the apparently invincible hero. In what follows, I will first try to build a theoretical context in relation to the notion of double by exploring the key ideas of Otto Rank, Freud, and Lacan and then I will delve into the depth of the epic and try to bring out a number of striking facts that back up and validate that theoretical premise. Finally, I shall be obliged to underscore the problematics in relation to the interpretation of the epic.

Let us start off with the Austrian psychoanalyst, Otto Rank. He is the first thinker who has made an original and in-depth investigation into the notion of the double in literature,

anthropology, mythology, and culture in his works, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study and Beyond Psychology*. By illustrating his theory in the works of Dostoyevsky, Maupassant, Moliere and others, he outplays the notion of the double, before Freud and Lacan. There are three major ideas in his theory that may well help us here in our investigation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. First, all pertinent literary references bear evidence to the fact that there exists a close relationship between the inner narcissistic impulses of the self and the outward endeavour and actions that one undertakes. Second, the rationale behind this relationship leads Rank to hypothesise that the self has an immortal desire for doubling itself. This is a strategy through which the ego preserves immortality and by extension a victory over death. In other words, by doubling, the self tends to survive and extend its past in the future. In order to achieve this ideal, the self will strive to find or project a psychological equal, friend, brother, rival, and even mortal enemy. It is not accidental that in myths god and demons always interchange their roles. As hinted earlier, Rank draws on works of Dostoyevsky (*The Double, The Brothers Karamazov, The Possessed, Raw Youth, etc.*) and presents them as exemplary references to the idea of the double in literature.

Originally, the double was an identical self (shadow, reflection), promising personal survival in the *future*, later, the double retains together with the individual's life his personal *past*; ultimately, he became an opposing self, appearing in the form of evil which represents the perishable and mortal part of the personality repudiated by the social self. (Rank, 1941, 61)

Third, at the heart of the doubling is an overriding guilt that the self would avoid responsibility for it by projecting the dark side on his double, friend or enemy. This paradigm is always repeated in Homeric epics and in literature as a whole as Rank writes there is "a powerful consciousness of guilt which forces the hero no longer to accept the responsibility for certain actions of his ego, but to place it upon another ego." (Rank, 1971, 99-100)

The self would project Freud on the other hand acknowledges Rank's major contribution and integrates the double in his own theory of the Uncanny. In Freud, the split of personality shows itself in the recurrence of the old familiar things as horribly unfamiliar. He sees the origin of the split and alienation of the self in primary narcissism and their manifestations in dreams. The doubling stands as a defence against the destruction of the ego as Freud emphasises, "For the 'double' was originally insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death,'" (Freud, 1985, 356). The tendency originates with the early stage of life and continues to repeat itself in many ways in later life.

The idea of the 'double' does not necessarily disappear with the passing of primary narcissism, for it can receive fresh meaning from the later stages of the ego's development. A special agency is slowly formed there, which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego. (Ibid, 357)

The ego in Lacanian theory constitutes man's leading symptom that frequently creates and recreates itself on the ground of outside image. By permanently seeking its double, the ego ensures its elusive integrity and absoluteness. This effort, in fact, reveals the ego's irrecoverable alienation, multiplicity, envy, paranoia, narcissistic aggression, and so on. This theoretical contour allows us to deconstruct and interpret mythical fantasies in classical tragedies and epics.

The notion of the double evolves into a modern antidote to the Cartesian cogito in Lacan's thinking where the ego turns into an object. The subject of the unconscious sees the

proliferation and splits of the ego as a great source of enjoyment. Without admitting Rank's contribution, Lacan in *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis (1954-1955)*, provides a detailed account of the notion by examining a comic literary reference in Moliere play *Amphitryon*, which was essentially adopted from classical Greek mythology. He develops the notion of the double further in his theory of the Mirror Stage, Graphs of Desire, the Schema-L, and his theory of the imaginary interplay between the ego and ideal ego. In brief, the key points in Lacan's arguments is the formation of the ego, which takes place in the imaginary. This imaginary identification is subject to perpetual alienation. In other words, the ego duplicates itself from an image from the outside. Such vague identification objectifies the ego. Lacan often reiterates that as an agency, the ego has a passion for misrecognition and misrecognizing.

If there is something which gives us a demonstration of the mirage-like quality of the ego, in the most problematic manners, it must be reality of the double, and what is more, the possibility of the illusion of the double. In short, the imaginary identity of two real objects puts the function of the ego to the test. (Lacan, 1988, 258)

By examining the comic doubles in the said seminar, Lacan concludes that the legend of *Amphitryon* introduces Amphitryon and Sosie as comic doubles. Following his wedding night with Alcmena, the mythical hero Amphitryon leaves to participate in the war. Fallen in love with Alcmena, Jupiter and Mercury came down to earth, the first changes his appearance as Amphitryon and the second as Sosie. At the same time, the real Amphitryon sends the real Sosie home to bring the news of his success in war. When the real Sosie sees his look-alike Mercury, he begins a fight with him. But the Alcmena spends the amorous night with the look-alike of Amphitryon. Finally, Jupiter tells the truth to Amphitryon and his faithful wife who is now bearing his child. Shakespeare also shows us doubling of characters in his *The Comedy of Error*. The two sets of twin brothers provide multipole doubling in the comedy. At the heart of these models, the ego stages its comedy of illusions.

Lacan returns to the notion of the double in his *Seminar X: Anxiety*, where he suggests that the image which is doubled functions as a specular image or Ideal-I (ego). The ideal-ego is the idealized self-image, a secondary identification of the ego—an imaginary projection with an elusive unity and autonomy. In the seminar on Anxiety, Lacan explores the idea of the double in two short fictions by Hoffmann, "The Sandman" and "The Devil's Elixir." The specular image becomes uncanny, which once was intimately unfamiliar.

The specular image becomes the uncanny and invasive image of the double. This is what happens little by little at the end of Maupassant's life, when he starts failing to see himself in the mirror, or when he glimpses something in a room, a phantom that turns its back on him, whereupon he knows it to be something that bears a certain relation to himself, and when the phantom turns around, he sees that it is he. (Lacan2014, 97-99)

To return to the epic, this persistent doubling between Gilgamesh and Enkidu has been set up in the epic as a strategy. Such mixed-up identity is no way limited to this pair. Everywhere in the epic one can see a mirror-game in Lacanian sense. Enkidu is replaced by Utnapishtim and his ferryman shows us, as Rank's theory suggested, Gilgamesh's aspiration for immortality signified by Utnapishtim and his abnegation of mortality which was symbolized by Enkidu. We may draw this conclusion by looking at the epic if we analyse it through the prism of Lévi-Strauss' structuralist anthropology. He argued that the meaning in a myth should be sought from the relationship and the place of each structural constituent of the myth that he called 'mytheme', like signs in language. The episodes of Gilgamesh killing of

Humbaba, his losing of Enkidu, and then his quest for meeting Utnapishtim embody an underlying structure that signifies Gilgamesh and his odyssey for gaining everlasting life.

Weary of everyday life, Gilgamesh and his friend set off his cedar forest journey in order to show their power and ambition to destroy the dangerous demon, Humbaba who is guarding a faraway forest. Enkidu also reminds Gilgamesh of the perils of fighting a monster that “his roars it is like fire, and his jaws are death itself,” (G.71). With the help of Shamash, Gilgamesh entraps Humbaba by howling winds around him and then cut off his head. This is the first adventure of Gilgamesh after finding his double, Enkidu. His position is morally strengthened when his goddess mother places an amulet round his neck and prays for his success and safe return. After killing Humbaba, Ishter, the goddess of love and the queen of heaven sees the beauty of Gilgamesh and asks him, “Come to me Gilgamesh, and be my bridegroom, grant me seed of your body, let me be your bride and you shall be my husband....” (G. 85).

That being so, it is noteworthy that dreams have a significant role in the epic. Beside a means of communication between gods and mortals, dreams are prophesying the future acts of the hero. Moreover, every event is foretold in dreams. Gilgamesh finds about the coming of Enkidu and his death in his dreams. This discloses Gilgamesh’s unconscious fantasy to see Enkidu dead.

The ancients recognized all kinds of things in dreams, including, on occasion, messages from the gods—and why not? The ancients made something of these messages from the gods. And, anyway—perhaps you will glimpse this in what I shall say later—who knows, the gods may still speak through dreams...*The gods belong to the field of the real.* (Lacan, 1994, 44-45)

What is of interest here is Gilgamesh’s disclosure of this fantasy when he speaks about his dream, “O my brother, such a dream I had last night. Anu, Enlil, Ea and heavenly Shamash took counsel together” (G. 89) And in the meeting, the sun-god proposes that Enkidu has to die. The sun-god is Gilgamesh’s supporter and well-wisher. Such contradiction between conscious desire of love and the unconscious desire to kill, according to Lacan always takes place in myths. “Myths too have meaning only inasmuch as they render manifest and veil at the same time, a contradiction that is their truth,” (Lacan cited in Dunand, 1996, 106). Gilgamesh bitterly mourned Enkidu’s death for seven days and seven nights. His tears dry up only when he makes a statue of his friends out of gold, lapis lazuli and offered to the sun-god.

*Hear me, great ones of Uruk,
I weep for Enkidu, my friend,
Bitterly moaning like a woman mourning
I weep for my brother.
O Enkidu, my brother,
You were the axe at my side,
My hand’s strength, the sword in my belt
... ..
And the young men your brothers
As though they were women
Go long-haired in mourning.
What is the sleep which holds you now?
You are lost in the dark and cannot hear me. (G. 94-95)*

In *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan postulates that in a myth “truth reveals itself in an alternation of strictly opposite things, which have to be made to revolve around one another. This holds for whatever has been constructed ever since the world, including the higher, very elaborate, myths like Yin and Yang,” (Lacan, 2007, 110-111). This argument was mentioned in relation to the interpretation of myths by structuralist anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss in his *Seminar: VIII: Transference*, where he stresses that like the ancient Chinese philosophy, ‘Yin and Yang’ indicates that world functions as an interaction and coherence of opposing forces, the meaning has to be driven as from the whole rather than the composite elements.

Even though like Achilles in Iliad, he is partly divine, but after the death of his double, Gilgamesh sees his own death for which he shows as much anxiety as he feels pride in his power and bravery. Enkidu’s absence brings the lack upon which Gilgamesh is roving with his desire. The signifying system of myths places the naked truth and its veiled form side by side, as Lacan says, “myth is always a signifying system or scheme, if you like, which is articulated so as to support the antimonies of certain relation,” (Lacan, 1999, 143).

The second adventure of Gilgamesh is seeking immortality by seeing the end of the world and seeks Utnapishtim, his spiritual double who enjoys eternal life. Enkidu was immortal therefore he has to be replaced by a spiritual double who will guarantee Gilgamesh’s self-perpetuation. Therefore, like Moses who searches in the Koranic legend for the wise and immortal man, Khidr, Gilgamesh seeks his immortal man, Utnapishtim. “I will go as best I can to find Utnapishtim whom they call the Faraway, for he has entered the assembly of the gods,” (G. 97). After journeying for so long in the thick darkness, he finally reaches the sun light. Shamash warns him: “You will never find the life for which you are searching,” (G. 100). The same advice is offered by the young Siduri, the wine-maker goddess in the garden of sun: “Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find the life for which you are looking,” (G. 102). But Gilgamesh will not stop. On the way he met up with Urshanabi the ferryman of Utnapishtim. When he finally sees Utnapishtim, he declares, “Gods decree the fate of man. Life and death, they allot but the day of death they do not disclose,” (G. 107). Utnapishtim spells out the secret of being immortal. The flood that gods intended to eliminate mankind. Enlil (God of earth) saved Utnapishtim and his wife and placed them to live at the mouth of rivers. When Gilgamesh fails the test of sleep for six days and seven night, Utnapishtim’s wife ask her husband to give a rose-like flower as a gift to Gilgamesh. Utnapishtim says to Gilgamesh, “I shall reveal a secret thing, it is a mystery of the gods that I am telling you. There is a plant that grows under the water, it has a prickle like a thorn, like a rose; it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores his lost youth to man,” (G. 116). But the magic flower is then stolen by a serpent and then Gilgamesh has no option but to return home empty handed.

It is important to note that one of the major stains of the epic is its *disjecta membra*. The missing parts of the epic leave gaps in the narrative, which may have played a part in the imperfect interpretation of the work. The epic for example doesn’t answer two crucial questions. First, we know little about Gilgamesh and his interaction with the people of Uruk especially when the failed hero returns home. The only thing we are aware of Gilgamesh after his homecoming is his words to Urshanabi—his last double in the epic.

Urshanabi, climb up on the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations? One third of the whole is city, one third is garden, and one third is field, with the precinct of the goddess Ishtar. These parts and the precinct are all Uruk. (G, 117)

Second, we don't know what exactly did cause Gilgamesh. We know from the narrator that the hero's family members and his subjects are united in lamenting his demise and giving offerings to gods on this occasion. The last thing we know is Enlil's words who "has given," to the hero the "power to bind and loose, to be the darkness and the light of mankind." (G. 118)

*The king has laid himself down and will not rise again,
The Lord of Kullab [part of Uruk] will not rise again;
He overcame evil, he will not come again;
Though he was strong of arm he will not rise again;
He had wisdom and a comely face, he will not come again;
He is gone into the mountain, he will not come again;
On the bed of fate he lies, he will not rise again,
From the couch of many colours he will not come again. (Ibid)*

It was reported in a section of media that 20 new lines of the Sumerian epic were discovered as archaeologist found new clays inscriptions in 2015 of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The news lines identify Humbaba as a foreign ruler, "The Chatter of monkeys chorus of cicada and squawking of many kinds of birds formed a symphony (or cacophony) that daily entertained the forest guardian, Humbaba," (Tharoor, 2015, 8). The future further discoveries might give us more information about the ancient epic.

In conclusion, the epic of Gilgamesh is a prototype of the split-self or to be more precise the duplication of the ego. It is an exemplum of the doubling in literature where almost every major character in the epic serves as an alter ego or duplicated self of Gilgamesh. This is the identification of the ego in the mirror stage, where the ego indulges in an endless, "instances of sameness, resemblance and self-replication, it is the birthplace of the narcissistic 'ideal ego' [*idealich, moi idéal*]," (Bowie, 1991, 93). This ideal ego or specular image is what we explored here as the double through which the internal biddings and external images works together in the self. The doubles are sometimes idealized egos and sometimes polar opposite. The first double of the hero is Enkidu who sprang from wilderness but ironically had been assigned to tame the wild side of Gilgamesh. Humbaba, the monster is equally his identical as is Shamash the sun-god—his fantastic protector. The wise and immortal Utnapishtim is his other fantasised mate in the sequence who by gives him a thorny rose of rejuvenation. Urshanabi, is another buddy who assists him return to Uruk. He also helps him cross the Waters of Death to see the surviving model of humanity—Utnapishtim. At the heart of this endless game is rivalry, enmity, aggression, narcissistic passion, erotic passion. As a literary masterpiece of the oldest civilizations, Gilgamesh shows all this in a straightforward and unblemished mythical configuration. Gilgamesh prizes immortality and recounts the tale of an impossible desire that brings the possibility of duplication of the ego. In the process of doubling, the subject sees the ideal ego and, as Lacan says in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the subject "desires to gratify himself in himself," (Lacan, 1994, 257). In other words, the subject now sees the ego as an object and enjoys its performance as object. The uniqueness of the epic lies in bringing together in this objectification humans and deities. This is the hardest lesson to be drawn from the world's oldest known epic.

Notes:

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