

***MEMORY AND TIME IN LITERATURE***  
***NOTES ON THE EARLY LITERATURE:***  
***MYTHS, EPIC POEMS, BARDS, GODS AND HEROES***

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Giorgio de Chirico, The Disquieting Muses, 1947, University of Iowa Museum of Art

The world begins with a dream, a dream we call **MYTH**. Myth is not mere fiction; its origins lie in the efforts of early peoples to make sense of nature and explain the world about them. Myth can be thought as an early form of history. Five and six thousand years ago, people did not write, they just *spoke* and *listened*. In lack of written records, they relied on the **oral tradition** to tell their dreams, sing their joys, remember stories, recite poems, express fears, praise their gods, form an understanding of civilization and what it means to be human, and finally seek knowledge and draw an imaginary line between the tangibility (and inevitability) of mortality and the illusion of immortality.

The oral tradition gave birth to literature. During the formative age of antiquity that preceded the Sumerian civilization no literature was being written down, but oral literature was on the tongues of all men. Tales of gods and human heroes passed from generation to generation in poems that often were inconclusive and kept being added to. By the time of Homer (circa 800 B.C.) poetry incorporated more complete memories of the heroic past. The early literature was not only delivered orally, but also composed strictly in verse (poetic, or lyrical form). It was usually composed and delivered in public in singing by a bard, sometimes accompanied by a stringed musical instrument called lyre. A **bard** was a poet reciting epic poems in singing, a highly reputable and well paid vocation in the ancient world and Homer was allegedly one of the most celebrated bards.

Epic poetry, which is the earliest literary genre, is an **amalgamation** of tales and memories that in its total lengthy form provides with insights to ancient civilizations, tells the coherent story of imperfect heroes in the path to **redemption** and begins with the poet's invocation to the muse. These are the opening lines of the *Odyssey*:

*Tell me about a complicated man.  
Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost...*

The Muse is a divine spirit that is always called upon by every skillful bard in the beginning of his tale to bless and inspire the poet so he can tell the story. The interaction between a poet and his muse is indicative between the relationship between mortals and deities: unless a mortal has the blessing of divinity nothing moves forward. The bless of a goddess generates creativity and art. Her fury brings upon stagnation and sterility of ideas. In other words, the divine kiss sets in motion the wondrous gathering of words and memories springing out of a mortal mind.

Literature, one may say, is the offspring of this union between flesh and spirit; history and imagination; memory and the present. In its early days, literature arose as the founding pillar of communication, which in turn is the cornerstone of progress. In the dawn of civilization, long before the scientific culture that produced the ways we experience the world today was even imagined, people told stories to inform and entertain each other, but also to remember what came before them. Life (what we call the 'present') is inconceivable without the energy and knowledge of the past. Memory is the mother of storytelling; imagination is the father –and

that's how our story begins in verse (poetic language), through the intercourse of those two antithetical forces that gave birth to literature and art.

## *Memory and Time in Literature*

### *Time Periods*

Memory is the ark of lost time. Literature is the art of reviving and articulating the hidden world of memory and imagination. Memory contains both fantasy and history, and literature is driven by both the real and the imaginative. Our dreams entail fictional visions stimulated by our exposition to reality, which is mandated by the overall passage of time. Everything in history and literature, privately or collectively, subjectively or objectively, happens *in time* whose irreversibility we all recognize as the defining essence of existence.

The early people did not have the same concept of time as we do. The passing of seasons and years occurred in an inexplicable order. Who *made* time? Why winter followed summer? How come even the mightiest kings, like Gilgamesh, at the end they all, as a popular song put it, bite the dust? Where did people go after they died, in the underworld or in heaven –or just *nowhere*? What would it take for a human to overcome his limitations and live like a god –forever? These were puzzling questions and challenges for people back in the day of Gilgamesh or Homer. And even though the scientific logic, of course, has answered some of them through time, we still have not been able to come up with one unanimous explanation of the original riddle: who *made* time?

Perhaps, one may start by pondering over the nature of time: what is time? On one hand, there is the philosophical understanding of time and the belief that our consciousness of time is one of our most central features that separates us from the lower animals. But is time linear or cyclical, endless or finite, subjective or objective? And is time really what we perceive it to be? Do we shape it, or does it define us? These questions, which remain largely unresolved, have been around since philosophers in ancient India and Greece posed them long ago. Today, even if we agree that time is linear and infinite, or the opposite, we still could not all agree upon who or what exactly set time in motion? As stated in the **incipit** --the opening words of a text, manuscript, early printed book, or chanted liturgical text-- of the early versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, king Gilgamesh is "the one who saw the Abyss." That is the way ancient wisdom best labelled the mystery of time: an *abyss*, a deep that contained all past knowledge and wisdom and remained dark, unreachable and fearsome.

On the other hand, there is the structured sense of time as set and determined by progressed civilizations, what we often call historical time. We divide historical time into:

**-BCE ("Before Common Era") or BC ("Before Christ")** –the former a secular abbreviation for the ancient centuries, the latter a religious one indicating an ancient period used in dating years prior to the estimated birth of Jesus in the Julian and Gregorian calendars,

and

**-CE (“Common Era”)**, the secular abbreviation for the post-classical era, or **AD, (*Anno Domini*)**, medieval Latin for “the year of the Lord” that is commonly used to denote the years elapsed since year 1 in the Gregorian calendar.

The BCE/BC centuries are counted backwards from 5 to 0, whereas the CE/AD onwards from 0 to the present year.

Historical time, in more practical terms, we know from textual sources. According to this common understanding of the term, historical time refers to the period which we know through texts, making it possible to investigate the life, thinking, philosophy, culture and social reality of the time periods concerned. Earlier periods, for which we have no direct textual evidence, are much more difficult to investigate in terms of the human dimensions of society and culture. Below there is a chronological list of the general BC and AD periods:

#### ANCIENT PERIODS BCE/BC

NEOLITHIC	6000-2900 BCE (Timeline of events taking place in <i>Gilgamesh</i> )
EARLY BRONZE	2900-2000 BCE (Time of composition of <i>Gilgamesh</i> )
MINOAN	2000-1400 BCE
MYCENAEAN	1600-1100 BCE (Timeline of events taking place in Homer’s epics)
DARK AGES	1100-750 BCE
ARCHAIC	750-500 BCE (Time of composition of the Homeric Epics)
CLASSICAL	500-336 BCE (Time of Herodotus)
HELLENISTIC	336-146 BCE

#### POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD CE/AD

Period that immediately followed ancient history

POST-CLASSICAL                      200-600 CE

MIDDLE AGES (Also known as Dark Ages) 400s-1400s CE (Dante, *Divine Comedy*)

## MODERN HISTORY

### EARLY MODERN PERIOD

THE RENAISSANCE      LATE 1400s – 1600s (Milton, *Paradise Lost*)

### LATE MODERN PERIOD

THE ENLIGHTENMENT      LATE 1600s – 1700s (Age of Revolutions, Early Romanticism, Immanuel Kant)

THE COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT      LATE 1700s – EARLY 1800s (The Romantics, *Frankenstein*)

THE VICTORIAN AGE      1800-1901 (Darwin, Whitman, Baudelaire, Zola)

## CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

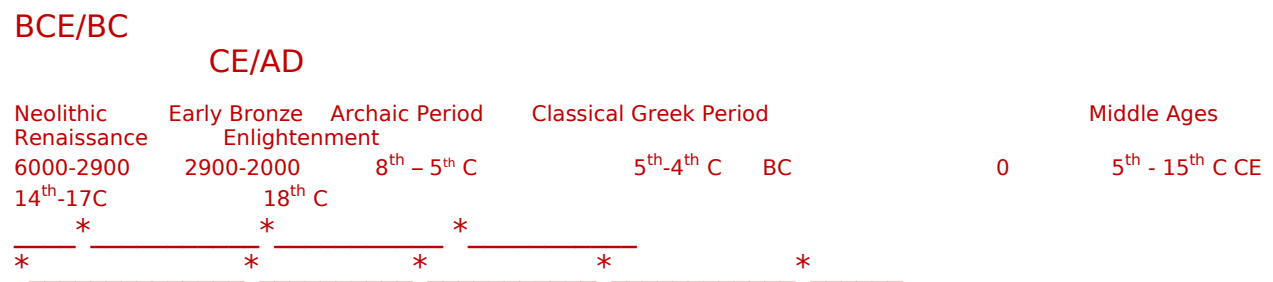
History within living memory

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY

POST-MODERNITY      1996-NOW

Often people confuse the ancient Dark Ages (1100-750 BCE) with the Middle Ages (also called Dark Ages). These are two entirely different periods. The former is ancient and immediately follows the decline of the Mycenaean Age. It is called “Dark” because from its beginning till about the start of the Archaic Age, the time of Homer, there are no traits or records about this period, thus it remains literally dark because we don’t know much about it. The latter, the Middle Ages, we call dark metaphorically, because it was a long period covering the timespan of a millennium, marked by religious persecution and indoctrination, famines, disease and limited access to knowledge.

In my in-person classes I usually draw on the board the following chart that will help you visualize the above-mentioned time periods in a linear pattern from the time of *Gilgamesh* to modernity:



### *Physical/Psychological Time*

One of the most defining themes of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the inability of the early man to come to terms with his own mortality and thus to recognize and accept his own imperfect human nature. It takes a journey to discover that humanity equals mortality and that is the journey of king Gilgamesh. Immortality is one of one of the underlying concerns of the epic heroes. Gilgamesh, the earliest epic hero, is obsessed with the idea of immortality. Odysseus, 1200 years later, understands that there is no such thing as immortality, nor would he wish for it even if it was made possible, but he is preoccupied with the idea of fame, which substitutes for immortality in the mind of a more experienced civilization. We may all die, but a few of us become legends and our name, reputation, and actions survive in the minds of the people thousands of years after our flesh perished. That's the closest one may come to immortality and for the epic hero this is worth fighting for. After all, Gilgamesh's and Odysseus' legends have survived the longest test of time so far.

### *Faith and Fate*

The ancient world of Gilgamesh and Homer was polytheistic. **Polytheism**, the belief in or worship of multiple gods, is a result of the early civilization's need for order and authority in an unruly environment whose natural laws were hard to understand and define. Gods are creations of the human imagination, invented immortal leads of ancient life that reflected the strengths and weaknesses, desires and biases of the early humans who invented them. Above all, ancient deities mirrored the imperfections and whimsical nature of humanity.

For most of ancient societies, and especially for the Sumerians and the Greeks that you are studying, the supernatural deities represented two things:

- The forces of nature (wind, land, water, air)
- The nature of man, his desire, ambition, anger and jealousy -in other words, his imperfections.

The gods not only reflected the world, but also shaped its destiny.

**Destiny and fate** are two synchronous terms that emerge from the ancient anxiety of origin: who authors human destiny? The individual or the deities invented by the ancient mind? It is a very

simple and at the same time unresolved question! One thing is certain, fate and destiny, albeit synchronous terms, are not to be confused as synonyms.

Let's pause for a moment and look at a dictionary:

*"Fate" comes from the Latin word Fatum meaning "that which has been spoken." Therefore, through the ages, fate has come to be associated with that which has been predetermined for our lives. **Fate is based on the notion that there is a natural order in the Universe which cannot be changed, no matter how hard we try.** The ancient Greeks and Romans even believed that three goddesses called Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos (or the "Three Fates") had the role of determining a person's ultimate life path.*

*Destiny has much more positive connotations than fate. Deriving from the Latin word Destinare, destiny means "that which has been firmly established." While this definition also refers to the idea of predetermined events, destiny is something we can actively shape and alter. Unlike fate, **there is an element of choice in destiny.** Qualities such as courage, compassion, willpower, and patience can all help to change your destiny.*

In other words, Fate is that which you cannot change. Destiny is that which you're meant to do. While fate is what happens when you *don't* take responsibility for your life, destiny is what happens when you commit to growing, learning, and taking chances. Being "destined for greatness" only comes through active and conscious decisions. But fate is what happens when you let other people and external circumstance dictate your life.

The ideas of destiny and fate emerged from an early world whose understanding of life was formed in a void of knowledge and primarily ruled by magical thinking and superstition. Magical thinking is one of the greatest manifestations of **metaphysical** (beyond the physical) interpretation of reality that allows spirits, ghosts, deities and shadows to take charge of the world. In the epics you are reading, the journeys of characters like Gilgamesh and Odysseus are determined, and often modified, derailed or assisted by the ruling gods whose thoughts, actions and passions affect but not necessarily entirely determine a character's destiny. At least in the epic poems, heroes are allowed to discover and mold their destinies themselves.

In *Gilgamesh*, for example, the great king of the story discovers the meaning of mortality after a long series of misfortunes initiated by the vindictiveness of Goddess Ishtar set him on the road to self-knowledge. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' path is drawn between two oppositional divine willpowers, Poseidon's anger and Athena's compassion. By chapter 24 of the *Odyssey* it becomes clear that Odysseus's conclusive resolution in the epic is both owed to the help of goddess Athena, but also to his own devices. As people still say in modern Greece, "along with Athena lend a hand too," (an idiomatic way to imply that the gods help those who help themselves) and this is something to be said about the legacy of ancient myth and its continuous impact on modern society.



