

# The Chronotope of the Threshold in *Gilgamesh*

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The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a story full of thresholds, liminal spaces, and times of transition. This essay investigates the representation of time and space in *Gilgamesh*, employing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope." The chronotope is a methodological tool that Bakhtin developed to compare changing depictions of time and space across the history of literature, and I argue that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* employs what Bakhtin terms "the chronotope of the threshold." I examine four aspects of this chronotope: the depiction of space, the depiction of time, the human characteristics associated with the chronotope, and its relation to the textuality of the epic. I argue that space in *Gilgamesh* is structured as a mosaic sequence of externally different but internally homogenous spaces, separated by highly symbolic thresholds. Likewise, the passage of time is repeatedly depicted as transformative, through such temporal markers as the "six days and seven nights," or "the very first glimmer of dawn." Further, it is shown that this particular arrangement of space and time, both in *Gilgamesh* and in *Ishtar's Descent*, is associated with characters who are driven by powerful but obscure forces within themselves, crossing thresholds that lead to their undoing. The essay closes with a consideration of how the epic's depiction of thresholds is related to the threshold of textuality itself, that is, the line that separates reality from representation.

The depiction of space in the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is dominated by one particular figure: the threshold. Boundaries between different kinds of space are time and again essential turning points in the narrative. The city walls of Uruk mark the threshold between nature and culture, Gilgamesh meets Enkidu at the door of a wedding house, and the roof on which Ninsumun prays to Shamash links the earth with the heavens. Gilgamesh's quest to find Uta-napishti likewise leads him through a series of strange thresholds: the gates of Mount Mashu, the Tunnel of Darkness, and the Waters of Death that "lie across the passage forward" (*ša pānāssa parkū*, X 84). Likewise thresholds in time, such as the phrase "at the very first light of dawn" (*mimmū šēri ina namāri*), mark key moments in the story: this phrase introduces Enkidu's curses, Gilgamesh's eulogy, and the coming of the Flood (VII 90, VIII 1, XI 97).

The epic's emphasis on thresholds has been noted repeatedly in the scholarly literature. Laura Feldt and Ulla Koch (2011), Annette Zgoll (2010), and George Mobley (2014) have analyzed spatial thresholds in the epic, while William Moran (1995: 2328–29) and Bernd Janowski (1989: 68–84) have dealt with its temporal thresholds. In this essay, I approach the subject of thresholds in *Gilgamesh* from a new perspective, by employing the concept of the "chronotope" as developed by Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. I will argue that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a key instance of what Bakhtin calls the "chronotope of the threshold," and since Bakhtin proposed the existence of this chronotope but never

*Author's note:* Unless otherwise noted, all citations and translations of *Gilgamesh* follow the text edition by Andrew George (2003).

described it in any detail, my argument will also serve to elucidate an undeveloped aspect of his theory.

#### THE CHRONOTOPE OF THE THRESHOLD

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) was one of the most noted literary theorists of the twentieth century (see Holquist 2011 for an introduction to his work), and it is striking that his theories have not more often been employed in the study of Akkadian literature—particularly so because much of his work is historiographical. Bakhtin developed the chronotope as a methodological tool to study how literary representations of time and space changed across the history of European literature. The chronotope is a way of analyzing how descriptions of time and space are related to each other differently in different genres and periods. As Bakhtin (2011: 84) writes: “We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (italics in the original). According to Bakhtin, representations of time and of space are necessarily related to one another but can be related differently, and to these different “sorts” of relations he assigns different chronotopes. For example, there is the chronotope of Hellenistic adventure stories, whose spacetime is abstract and alien, or the chronotope of Apuleius’s everyday adventure, whose spacetime is developmental and personal, and so forth. It is the historical development from one configuration of the spatio-temporal structure to another that Bakhtin sets out to trace, as part of his study of the emergence of the novel in European literature.

In this essay Bakhtin comes finally to the chronotope of the threshold, and this final category occupies a rather strange place in his work, a somewhat belated space. He completed the essay in 1938 but added a series of concluding remarks in 1973, two years before his death, and it is in this tardy afterthought that one finds the chronotope of the threshold. Even there, its presentation is abrupt. Not much more than half a page is spent on the chronotope of the threshold, compared to the twenty-five pages Bakhtin devotes to time in Hellenistic adventure.

Further evidence that this remained for Bakhtin an uncompleted project is a collection of posthumously published notes about the reworking of his book on Dostoevsky, among which one reads: “The threshold, the door, and the stairway. Their chronotopic significance. The possibility of transforming hell into paradise in a single instance (that is, passing from one to the other, cf. ‘the mysterious visitor’)” (Bakhtin 1984: 299; “hell,” “paradise,” and the “mysterious visitor” are all references to *The Brothers Karamazov*). The chronotope of the threshold clearly remained a work in progress for Bakhtin up to the time of his death, though he never treated it at any length (for later studies on the chronotope of the threshold, see, e.g., Falconer 2005: 68; Olufunwa 2005; and Krogstad 2016).

What one learns from Bakhtin’s surviving, scattered remarks is first and foremost that the chronotope of the threshold is a profoundly transformative one. As he writes, “its most fundamental instance is as the chronotope of *crisis* and *break* in a life” (2011: 248, italics in the original). The “breaks” or changes that such thresholds in time and space bring about are unpredictable, because the world of this chronotope is saturated with thresholds, and so transformation is a constant possibility. Movement from one kind of space to another is always connected with symbolic movement, unlike for example the world of Hellenistic adventure, where movement is merely a progression through “abstract” space, that is, across places that are exotic but never substantially different from one another. In the chronotope of the threshold the places on either side of its breaks are radically different from each other,

and movement from one to the other inevitably leads to a transformation of the character who carries out the movement.

Further, such transformations are never gradual: “In this chronotope, time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time” (Bakhtin 2011: 248). Narrative progression in this chronotope is not a continuous motion through time and space but a succession of sharp, instantaneous transitions. In the following sections, I will argue that Gilgamesh and Enkidu carry out exactly this kind of movement, and accordingly undergo those kinds of transformations.

#### TREES AND TRAVEL

I begin with the representation of space in *Gilgamesh*, turning in the next section to the representation of time. The first thing to note about space in the epic is that it is nothing if not heterogeneous. The narrative moves through very different kinds of space, from the city of Uruk to the wilderness where Enkidu grows up, from the Cedar Forest of Humbaba to the strange lands traversed by Gilgamesh in his search for Uta-napishti. Unlike the space of Hellenistic adventure mentioned above, where the places encountered by the characters are exotic but not substantially different from one another, the various kinds of space in *Gilgamesh* are fundamentally heterogeneous. The city and the wilderness, for example, form a crucial opposition: They are spaces of culture and nature, respectively, and the heroes’ movement between them structures the first half of the narrative (Feldt and Koch 2011; Foster 1987: 23–33).

At either end of the epic’s world, Gilgamesh is confronted by a strange forest—the Cedar Forest at its western end and the Jeweled Trees at its eastern end. As noted by Dickson (2007b: 193), the story of Gilgamesh “unfolds within the space between two trees.” These two forests are described in detail, highlighting their strangeness and their difference from ordinary landscapes. The newly discovered manuscript of Tablet V extends the description of the Cedar Forest that opens the tablet all the way to l. 26, in “one of the rare passages of Babylonian narrative poetry that is given over to the description of nature” (George and Al-Rawi 2014: 69). It tells of tangled undergrowth, scented cedar, oozing resin, and a chorus of birds, crickets, and monkeys. Though no new manuscript fills its many gaps, the description of the Jeweled Trees (IX 171–94) is likewise detailed and exotic, but its strangeness is also different from that of the Cedar Forest. In contrast to the jungle’s jumble of sensations, the allure of the Jeweled Trees is the cold shine of precious gems, a landscape that is “luminous and brilliant and just as inhospitable” (Dickson 2007b: 198).

The epic thus dwells on the heterogeneity of space. Feldt and Koch (2011) further argue that the different kinds of space in the epic belong to separate registers of being, which they term Nature, Culture, and Supernature. That is, the differences between city, wilderness, and the exotic forests pertain not only to their external appearance, but derive from a difference in ontological status. They are the spaces of animals, humans, and deities, respectively, and there can be no true propinquity between them.

But different as they are from each other, these spaces are also internally homogenous. While movement from city to wilderness entails a transition from one kind of space to another, movement within the wilderness has no such significance. To travel around in the wilderness is to cover a certain distance, but it does not lead one to a new kind of space—unless a threshold is crossed. There is no gradation whereby the steppe slowly gives way to jungle, because these are highly distinct yet internally uniform places. Space, in *Gilgamesh*, is mosaic. Accordingly, the descriptions of both the Cedar Forest and the Jeweled Trees are

placed at the very moments when Gilgamesh steps from one space into another, for, in the chronotope of the threshold, it is only in such moments of transition that difference in space becomes manifest.

Likewise, Feldt and Koch argue that the ontological difference between spaces does not mean that movement from one register to another is impossible—on the contrary, the story of *Gilgamesh* revolves around exactly that sort of movement. They note that the epic is especially concerned with “the liminal spaces in between the three domains” (Feldt and Koch 2011: 111). I would argue that this focus is due to the overall structure of space in the epic, where liminal spaces have an exclusive ability to establish spatial heterogeneity.<sup>1</sup> As the lines of contact between the tiles of this mosaic space, they are the key structural elements that allow difference to be articulated.

This structure becomes particularly clear when looking at how movement is depicted in the epic. Turning again to Bakhtin’s description of space in Hellenistic adventure novels, he writes that space in that chronotope is measured primarily in terms of distance and proximity (Bakhtin 2011: 99). One may at first wonder at such a comment—what else would be space be measured in, if not distance and proximity? Yet I would argue that though measures of distance do appear, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* movement through space is primarily marked by the number of thresholds that are crossed.

Consider, for example, the journey of Gilgamesh and Enkidu from Uruk to the Cedar Forest. All of Tablet III is devoted to their departure from Uruk, including the blessings, farewells, and mutual instructions of Gilgamesh, Ninsumun, and the citizens of Uruk. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu finally leave through the city gates after this extended scene of departure, for each evening of their journey there is a lengthy description of how they set up camp, of how Gilgamesh dreams, wakes up, and has Enkidu interpret his dreams. Their arrival at the Cedar Forest at the beginning of Tablet V is followed by a detailed description of the landscape they encounter, and then by a dialogue between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. When a lacuna occurs in the new manuscript, in l. 45, they have still not actually gone into the forest, but remain standing at its entrance (as made clear by l. 32). Each threshold of their journey—their departure from Uruk, each nightly break, and their arrival at the forest—is thus treated with meticulous care. By contrast, the actual physical distance covered by the two heroes is described as follows:

*ana 20 bēr iksupū kusāpu*  
*ana 30 bēr iškunū nubattu*  
*50 bēr illikū kal ūmu*  
*mālak arḫi u šapatti ina šalšu ūmu*  
*iṭḫū ana šadī labnanu*

At twenty leagues they broke bread,  
 at thirty leagues they pitched camp.  
 Fifty leagues they traveled in the course of a day,  
 a month and a half’s march by the third day,  
 they drew near to Mount Lebanon. (IV 1–4 and *passim*)

1. I use the word “liminal” in its basic, etymological sense: relating to or resembling a threshold. The wider anthropological sense of “liminal,” as derived from the study of ritual, is not directly relevant for my analysis. According to Ackerman (2005), for example, the two heroes move in an extended liminal space throughout their adventures, but this is different from my claim. Whereas Ackerman views both the steppe and the Cedar Forest as liminal places (2005: 108, 110), I take only the entrance that leads from one to the other to be “liminal.”

Distance itself is described in short and formulaic lines, and even those lines place their emphasis on the interruption of travel: stopping to eat and setting up camp. There is no scenery in this journey, only the temporal thresholds of nights and days. As Dickson (2009: 32) notes, “[t]he material landscape of the poem is stark and almost minimalist.” The road from Uruk to the Cedar Forest has no distinctive features or internal variation, for emphasis is placed exclusively on its beginning, end, and interruption, that is, on the thresholds rather than the expanses of space. The epic’s minimalist landscape is thus an effect of how its space is constructed: through external differences only.

This accords well with Bakhtin’s suggestions about the chronotope of the threshold, but his theory further entails that movement across the thresholds of the epic will lead to a transformation of the person carrying out that movement. The breaks that occur in the chronotope of the threshold are most importantly crises in the biographies of its characters which are mapped onto physical space.

This is most clearly the case for Enkidu, who cannot move from the wilderness to the city unchanged but must become human in order to do so. The epic describes step by step his transformation from animal to human. It begins with six days and seven nights of love-making with Shamhat, through which Enkidu becomes weaker but gains intelligence. Then Enkidu follows Shamhat to the shepherds’ camp where he learns to eat bread and drink beer. He is shaved, anointed, and clothed, and only then is he ready to enter the city. Crossing the threshold between nature and culture is accompanied by a transformation in his being from animal to human.

Keith Dickson (2007a: 174–75) likewise observes that in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, movement through space is transformative. When the hunter sees Enkidu at the water hole he is described as follows: “His face was like [one who has traveled] distant [roads]” (*ana [ālik urhī r]ūqūti pānūšu mašlū*, I 121), and the same description is later applied to Gilgamesh (X 9). Dickson argues that this simile reflects not only the “outwardly” exhausting effects of travel, but also the “inwardly” transformative effect of being confronted with alien places—including the “ontological distance” (2007a: 175) between nature and culture traversed by Enkidu. As he writes, “[i]nner changes in *Gilgamesh* mostly take place precisely in the context of confrontation and distant travel, whether literal—from Uruk to wilderness, from Uruk to the ends of the earth—or else figurative, as in the case of Enkidu’s own passage from nature to culture” (2007a: 175). I would specify that these transformative confrontations with an alien place occur precisely when a threshold is crossed, such as the heroes’ extended confrontation with the Cedar Forest.

Another link between transformation and thresholds in *Gilgamesh* is ritual action, specifically the acts of prayer, ominous dreaming, and offerings, all of which take place in liminal spaces. The first is performed by Gilgamesh’s mother Ninsumun, who prays to the sun-god Shamash for the well-being of her son. She washes herself in the bath house, dons a special garment, and finally steps through the staircase and up to the roof, where she sets up a censer and scatters incense before commencing her prayer (III 37–45). The second is the ritual, performed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu each night of their journey to the Cedar Forest, of going to the top of a mountain, offering flour, praying to the mountain, and building a so-called *zāqīqu*-house where Gilgamesh will dream an ominous dream (IV 38–48 and *passim*). The third ritual act is the offering with which Gilgamesh and Enkidu attempt to appease the anger of the gods, which they (rightly) fear will afflict them after killing Humbaba. They decide to cut down a mighty cedar tree “whose top abutted the heavens” (*ša muḥḥašu šamē nakpu*, V 315; George and Al-Rawi 2014: 82–83) and hew it into a huge door that they will offer to the sanctuary of Enlil in Nippur.

Each of these ritual actions is performed at a liminal space between the earth and the heavens, and each of them further emphasizes a concrete threshold. In Ninsumun's case, the liminal space is the roof on which she stands, raising her arms to the heavens, and the concrete threshold is the staircase that leads her there.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the dream-house, it is the mountain peak on which the house is built that forms the "upwards threshold" of ritual space, while the concrete threshold is the "storm door" (*dalat šarbilli*) that Enkidu installs each night in the dream-house, as well as the door where he himself sleeps. In the case of the cedar door, the cosmological threshold is represented by the top of the cedar that reaches into the heavens, and the concrete threshold is the door itself. In each case, the ritual activities of prayer, divination, and offering mark these thresholds as spaces of transformation, where destinies are revealed and reversed.

But not only are thresholds in *Gilgamesh* places of personal and ritual transformation, they are also places of meeting. Again this accords well with Bakhtin's notes, for as he writes, the chronotope of the threshold "can be combined with the motif of the encounter" (Bakhtin 2011: 248). The most important instance of this motif in the epic is the meeting between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, which takes place at the threshold of the wedding house where Enkidu bars Gilgamesh from exercising his *droit de seigneur* with a newlywed bride:

*Enkīdu ina bāb bīt emūti ipterik šēpī[šu]  
 Gilgāmeš ana šūrubī ul inamdīn  
 iššabtū-ma ina bāb bīt emūti  
 ina sūqi ittegrū rebīt mātu  
 sippū ir''ubū (?) igāra inūš*

Enkidu with [his] feet blocked the doorway of the  
 wedding house,  
 not allowing Gilgamesh to enter.  
 They took hold of each other in the doorway of the  
 wedding house,  
 they joined combat in the street, the  
 Main-Street-of-the-Land.  
 The door jambs quaked, the wall shook. (II 111–15)

Not only do Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet at a threshold, but the language employed to describe their encounter emphasizes its liminality: note especially the insistence on words like 'doorway' (*bītu*), 'door jambs' (*sippū*), and 'wall' (*igāru*). The threshold is further a highly symbolic one, separating the highly public space of the "Main-Street-of-the-Land" from the highly private space of the wedding house (see also Glassner 2002: 162 for the significance of this threshold as a division in sexual space).

2. It may well be argued that a staircase is not an obvious instance of a threshold, and that it would not, at any rate, necessarily be viewed as such by a Babylonian reader. In attempting to gauge which spatial designations can be read as liminal and which cannot, I have paid special attention to lines that juxtapose two descriptions of space, at least one of which is obviously liminal. In doing so, I have come across "chains" of juxtapositions between spaces, which include door jambs and fences but also roofs and staircases. One such chain is the following (each line juxtaposes the two words on either side of it): *kikkišu*, 'fence' / XI 21 / *igāru*, 'wall' / II 115 / *sippu*, 'door jamb' / II 111–13 / *bābu*, 'door' / X 16 / *ūru*, 'roof' / III 43 / *simmiltu*, 'staircase' / I 11–12 / *dūru*, 'wall' / I 33–34 / *kibru*, 'shore' / XI 140 / *pātu*, 'edge'. Another sequence runs: *nērebu*, 'entrance' / VII 53–54 / *bābu*, 'door' / IV 89–91 / *daltu*, 'door' / VII 191 / *sikkūru*, 'door bolt'. If these chains can be taken as an indication that the juxtaposed words have a similar status, then the staircase is indeed to be viewed as a liminal zone.



Gilgamesh's encounter with the scorpion people likewise takes place at a threshold, namely the gates that they guard. When describing Gilgamesh's encounter with Shiduri the text also emphasizes thresholds, as Shiduri locks her door and goes up to the roof, the two words for 'door' (*bābu* and *daltu*) being repeated no less than seven times in the scene. Further, a particularly strong association is that between encounters and the thresholds of land and water: Enkidu meets the hunter and Shamhat at the edge of the waterhole (I 111–15, 175–79), and Gilgamesh meets Shiduri, Ur-shanabi, and Uta-napishti at the seashore (X 1, 108, and 204, respectively).<sup>3</sup>

#### THE VERY MOMENT OF DAWN

Given the text's numerous mentions of doors and walls, it is perhaps unsurprising that its depiction of space should be structured by thresholds. But what then of time? Bakhtin's theory implies that not only the representation of space, but even more importantly that of time will be shaped by a given chronotopic pattern. In the literary-artistic chronotope, "[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" (Bakhtin 2011: 84). With the analytical tool of the chronotope it becomes possible to describe time in literature not only as an axis along which the narrative is laid out, but as an object of representation itself. What then can be said about the representation of time in *Gilgamesh*? Most importantly, that time is transformative. In the chronotope of threshold, descriptions of time consistently appear as indications of change, and more precisely, as indications of sudden and radical changes. Time is represented by its ruptures; it is made visible through those moments that break it up. In this section I will focus on three kinds of temporal thresholds in the epic: the "six days and seven nights," the motif of dawn, and the cosmic thresholds of death and the Flood.

In his essay "A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," William Moran (1995: 2328) writes that the epic "seems to pivot on three seven-day periods, each of which is associated with a profound transformation." The first of these occurs when Enkidu and Shamhat make love for "six days and seven nights" (6 *urrī u 7 mušāti*, I 194), whereby Enkidu moves from the animal sphere into the human one. The second occurs when Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu's death for "six days and seven nights" (X [58] = 135 = [235]), thereby, according to Moran (1995: 2329), abandoning his humanity and his heroic disdain for death, embarking instead on a superhuman quest for immortality. The final transformative week is the one for which Uta-napishti asks Gilgamesh to go without sleep so as to prove his resolve in seeking immortality, a test that Gilgamesh fails by instead sleeping for "six days and seven nights" (XI 209). He is then forced to give up his quest and return to his human state, closing the circle: from non-human to human, back, and back again.

In addition to the three noted by Moran, there is a fourth week of transformation, namely the mythical Flood recounted by Uta-napishti that also lasts "six days and nights" (XI 128). Like the other three, the Flood is a time of profound transformation. Sex, grief, sleep, and disaster are all times that, each in their own way, tear us out of ourselves. They are moments in which one loses one's self-possession, so it is no surprise to find that they are associated with a change in the characters. Yet while these four weeks are times of transformation they are also, strangely, times of stasis. The weeks are, as a whole, temporal thresholds, but they are not themselves described as expanses of time with internal progressions. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are indeed changed in the course of the "six days and seven nights," but this is never a gradual change. The first week, for example, is filled with sex, but there is no description of the expected sequence of events within it—foreplay, climax, relaxation. This absence makes

3. On taking Shiduri's roof and the seashore as 'thresholds', see n. 1 above.

the “six days and seven nights” oddly empty; their time is a completely uniform period of transformation that might as well have taken place in a single instant.

I noted above that according to Bakhtin (2011: 248), time in the chronotope of the threshold “is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time.” This is readily apparent in the case of the four weeks. They are times without duration, even as their duration is specified in detail. They interrupt the course of the characters’ lives. Take, for example, the week in which Gilgamesh sleeps for “six days and seven nights.” Here it would seem that something happens, that there is an internal narrative: Uta-napishti’s wife bakes seven loaves of bread so as to prove to the waking Gilgamesh that he has indeed slept for a whole week. But in the chronotope of the threshold, the only thing that can happen within the breaks of time is the measurement of that time as proof of transformation. Tellingly, for each night Gilgamesh sleeps, Uta-napishti’s wife draws a mark on the wall of her house, plotting liminal time onto liminal space. Instantaneous moments of change rupture the time of the narrative, but have no actual duration themselves, regardless of how long they may actually last. Time itself becomes strangely timeless, having no internal content but serving instead to mark out the pace of transformation.

The transformative potential of time in *Gilgamesh* is also made clear by the threshold between night and day, and the motif of dawn appears time and again in the epic. The first time is in Enkidu’s interpretation of Gilgamesh’s dreams, where he predicts: “At dawn we will see a favorable message from Shamash!” (*ina šēri amāt Šamaš damiqta ni[m]mar*, IV 33 = [78] = 162). The theme of divine favor appearing at dawn, particularly when coming from the sun-god, is well known in ancient Near Eastern literature and has been treated at length by Bernd Janowski (1989: 68–84, “Der Morgen als Zeit des rettenden Handelns Gottes in der akkadischen Gebetsliteratur”). In Enkidu’s optimistic interpretations of Gilgamesh’s nightmares, dawn figures as the moment when the deceptively grim omens of the night are replaced by the favorable light of the sun.

This motif, however, receives an ironic twist later in the epic, as Uta-napishti prepares for the coming of the Flood. One line is here repeated three times: “At dawn he will rain down on you bread-cakes and at nightfall a shower of wheat” (*ina šēr kukkī / ina līlāti ušaznanakkunūši šamūt kibāti*, XI 46–47). This passage has been much discussed because of its ambiguity and possible word plays (see the summary in Worthington 2019), but one way or the other, it would seem that these lines appear to promise abundance but in fact foreshadow the destruction brought by the Flood. What is important in this context, however, is that the foreshadowing of change, whether good or bad, is again expressed through reference to temporal thresholds, in this case the matching pair of sunrise and nightfall. The fact that these thresholds do in fact lead to destruction gives the motif of dawn a darker side with respect to Enkidu’s optimistic promises.

The clearest instance of the transformative effect of sunrise is the phrase “at the very first light of dawn” (*mimmū šēri ina namāri*), which as noted in the introduction marks the beginning of a number of key passages in the narrative. It is repeated seven times in all, introducing Enkidu’s curses as he lies dying and Gilgamesh’s eulogy for his friend (VII 90 and VIII 1), appearing three times in connection with the fashioning of Enkidu’s statue (VIII 65 = 92 = 213), and again to introduce the building of Uta-napishti’s ark (XI 48). Its last appearance is also the most momentous. As predicted by Uta-napishti, the Flood begins at dawn, introduced by a final repetition of the line: “At the very first light of dawn, a black cloud rose on the horizon ...” (XI 97).

In the case of this line, time is instantaneous in the most literal sense. While I have taken dawn in general to be a liminal time, this line specifies that we are dealing with the very



first glimmer of sunrise, the exact second that night turns to day. This emphatically liminal moment is associated with grief, destruction, and death. George (2003: 846) calls the line “a hallmark of the second half of the SB epic,” and in this second half the epic turns from the theme of love and heroism to that of loss and grief. Time plays a crucial role in the thematic shift, and temporal thresholds in general become far more common in the second half of the epic.<sup>4</sup> Temporal thresholds are inevitably bound up with the fatal change of Enkidu from beloved friend to mourned corpse, and the hopeful dawn he had prophesied when alive becomes a time of grief.

Dawn continues to mark new beginnings, but in each case it is the beginning of a change that revolves around death. It is the beginning of Enkidu’s and Gilgamesh’s speeches, and both of these speeches enact a transformation, but both transformations are tragic. Enkidu curses the door, the hunter, and Shamhat for bringing him to ruin, while Gilgamesh “fills full of grief” the people of Uruk (VIII 88–89). It is the beginning of two acts of creation, but both are occasioned by death and destruction. Gilgamesh constructs the mortuary statue of Enkidu, and Uta-napishti builds a boat to escape the catastrophe of the Flood.

While retaining the association between time and change, the thematic shift toward loss introduces another kind of temporal threshold, what one may call the cosmic or “external” threshold of time. Death is one such threshold. While the biographies of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are interrupted by temporal thresholds such as the “six days and seven nights,” death is the ultimate temporal boundary that circumscribes those biographies. Another such threshold is the Flood. Just as death is the outer limit of human lives, the Flood is the outer limit of human history: Because all was turned to clay and broken to pieces by the destruction of the Flood (XI 119), it is the limit beyond which history cannot be known. The only person who can bridge this cosmic divide in time is the one man who has lived through it, who remembers the time before it and can relate its story to the present: Uta-napishti. Gilgamesh’s quest to find him and learn the secret of immortality thus turns out to revolve around the external, cosmic thresholds of time. While he fails in crossing the threshold of Death, he succeeds in crossing that of the Flood, and the epic’s prologue reminds us of the momentous scale of that achievement: Gilgamesh “saw the secret and uncovered the hidden, he brought back a story from before the Flood” (*[ni]širta imur-ma katimti iptu / [ā]bla ʔēma ša lām abūbi*, I 7–8, translation modified). That is, in the end, our hero’s grandest achievement—that he transgressed the thresholds of time.

#### THE HUMAN IMAGE

The chronotope of a given literary work does not affect only its representations of time and space, but also influences a number of other aspects of the work by determining what kind of developments can unfold within its frame. Most importantly for Bakhtin, the chronotope shapes the literary representation of the human character. “The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” (Bakhtin 2011: 85). Some chronotopes, for example, allow for a gradual and irreversible development in the personalities of the characters, since their time is a sequence of cumulative changes. Such is the chronotope

4. The word *šēru*, ‘morning’, is found twice in the first half of the epic, namely in ll. IV 33 and 162. By contrast, that same word is found ten times in the second half of the epic, namely in ll. VII 90, VIII 1, 65, 92, 213, XI 46, 48, 88, 91, and 97. Other designations of temporal thresholds are found only in the second half: *līlātu*, ‘evening’ (XI 46, 88, and 91), *ašē Šamši*, ‘sunrise’ (IX 45, 84, and perhaps XI 76), *ereb Šamši*, ‘sunset’ (IX 45 and 85), and *Šamši rabē*, ‘sunset’ (XI 77). For the division of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* into two acts, see Vanstiphout (1990: 48–53).

of Apuleius's stories. Other chronotopes, like that of the Hellenistic adventures, allow only for a sequence of self-contained episodes which form no larger whole and from which the characters emerge essentially unchanged. In the first case, the human image will be one of a maturing and evolving personality; in the second, it will be that of a self-consistent and passive individual. What kind of human image is then determined by the chronotope of the threshold? I have already noted the transformative effects that are essential to understanding the chronotope, but how exactly are the heroes of the epic affected by these changes? What kind of a person is a person who crosses a transformative threshold?

First of all, it must be noted that the epic explicitly identifies its main characters with thresholds, lending credence to Bakhtin's claim that there is an intrinsic connection between the representation of a human character and the spacetime within which that character is presented. For his part, Enkidu is identified as a threshold in his vision of the Underworld. Describing his nightmare to Gilgamesh, he relates that "the heavens cried out, the earth answered, and I, I stood between them" (*ilsū šamē qaqqaru īpul / ina birīšunu azzazi anāku*, VII 166–67, translation modified), imagining himself as the meeting point of a cosmic dialogue between heaven and earth. Likewise, in the epic's introductory hymn, Gilgamesh is identified with liminal spaces, being called "a mighty bank, the protection of his troops, a violent flood-wave that smashes a stone wall" (*kibru dannu šulūl ummānīšu / agū ezzu mu"abbit dūr abni*, I 33–34). Gilgamesh is here envisioned as both a wall and the destruction of a wall, both a boundary and its undoing, in a chiasmic contrast between the first and last words of the couplet (*kibru*, 'bank' > < *dūr abni*, 'stone wall').

However, to fully understand the chronotope's implications for the "human image" of the epic, I turn to a comparison with another Mesopotamian story that also belongs to the chronotope of the threshold, namely *Ishtar's Descent*. As in *Gilgamesh*, thresholds play a crucial role in *Ishtar's Descent*. Ishtar's attempt at a coup in the Underworld is thwarted by its "ancient ordinances" (*paršū labīrūtu*, l. 38), according to which she is stripped of one item of clothing at each of the Underworld's seven gates. Arriving finally at the court of her sister Ereshkigal, she is nude and defenseless against the diseases Ereshkigal sends against her. When Ishtar is eventually resuscitated and ascends back from the Underworld, at each gate the item she had left there is returned to her. In *Ishtar's Descent* crossing a threshold very literally represents Bakhtin's "possibility of transforming hell into paradise in a single instance," as Ishtar is first undone and then returned to life by passing through the gates of the Underworld. Unlike Bakhtin's "single instance" of transformation, however, Ishtar has to step over no fewer than seven thresholds—thereby emphasizing through repetition the significance of that action.

But why, if it is to be her undoing, does Ishtar cross these thresholds in the first place? Why this ill-informed foray against her sister? The story is insistently mute on the matter. *Ishtar's Descent* begins with the couplet: "To the Underworld, land [of no return], Ishtar, daughter of Sin, [set] her mind" (*ana Kurnugia qaqqari [lā tāri] / Ištar mārat Sīn uzunša [iškun]*, ll. 1–2). In the opening couplet one witnesses Ishtar resolving to take over the Underworld, or literally "setting her ear" toward it, the ear being the site of intellect and intention in the Akkadian idiom. But as to the motivation for this resolve, the reader is left in the dark. Ishtar's decision is given in l. 1, but the reason for that decision is hidden in l. 0: The story opens with her overpowering will, and any question as to rationale behind it lies beyond the confines of the story.<sup>5</sup> Yet this obscure intention, the "setting of the ear" toward the deep,

5. Though note Verderame 2016: 21: "La ragione per cui si reca negli Inferi non è data e forse è un aspetto che preoccupa solo il lettore moderno." This is certainly a possibility to be kept in mind.

is the driving force of the narrative, it is what motivates and sustains the action of the story, and, fundamentally, it is a will aimed at the transgression of boundaries. Ishtar wants to invade the Underworld and plans to return from it in case she fails—an impossibility, according to the story’s very first line, which defines the Underworld as the land of no return. But Ishtar’s overpowering if obscure resolve nonetheless leads her to attempt exactly that.

In *Ishtar’s Descent* one finds a main character undone by her crossing of thresholds, but also driven toward that crossing by an opaque and powerful will. I would argue that the same “human image” emerges in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh is beset throughout the story by a driving force that neither he nor the characters around him can understand. When Ninsumun prays to Shamash for his survival before he sets off on the quest against Humbaba, she begins her prayer with the words, “Why did you assign a restless heart to [my] son Gilgamesh? You burdened him, now you have touched him and so he will walk the far road to Humbaba’s place” (*ammēni taškun ana ma[rīya Gil]gāmeš libbi lā šālila tēmissu / eninnā-ma talpussū-ma illak / urħa rūqata ašar Ĥumbaba*, III 46–48, translation modified).

In Ninsumun’s words, Gilgamesh is afflicted by a restless heart (literally “a heart that does not sleep”), which leads him ever onward to danger. Like Ishtar he is driven by a powerful will to transgress thresholds; he yearns to go beyond the boundaries of normality, mortality, even history. But powerful as this driving force is, it is also a profoundly obscure one. Shamash gives no answer to Ninsumun’s question, and the origin of Gilgamesh’s restless heart is left unexplained.

Indeed, what exactly motivates Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba and cut down trees in the Forest of Cedar? The question is less clear than it may at first appear. In the OB version, Gilgamesh states that he seeks to establish an eternal name for himself (Yale Tablet I. 160), but he is contradicted both by his mother, who attributes the rationale behind the quest not to ambition but to sheer restlessness, and by the elders of Uruk, who assert that Gilgamesh is simply “carried away by enthusiasm” (*libbaka nāšīka*, II 289). Both Ninsumun and the elders divert the explanation for Gilgamesh’s plan from a conscious decision, rational if risky, to an unclear emotional force within him. Gilgamesh resists their objections and carries on with his plan, but in the end, he too must face up to the irrational drive that led him to his quest. As the deed is done and Humbaba lies dead, Enkidu asks him:

[ibrī ana] tūšar ništakan qišta  
 [mīn]ā ina Nippuri nippal Ellil  
 [ina du]nnīkunū-ma maššara tanārā  
 [m]īnū uzzakunū-ma tarahhišā qišta

[My friend], we have reduced the forest [to] a wasteland,  
 [how] shall we answer Enlil in Nippur  
 (when he asks us:) “[In] your might you slew the guardian,  
 what was this wrath of yours that you went trampling  
 the forest?” (V 303–6; George and Al-Rawi 2014: 82–83, translation modified)

Enkidu asks Gilgamesh how they are to account for their actions when questioned by the gods. He imagines himself and Gilgamesh being interrogated by Enlil, who demands to know: “Why have you done this? What driving force led you to this action?” Yet neither Gilgamesh nor Enkidu can answer; instead, they resort to building a door as an offering to appease Enlil’s anger. This silence is striking: Enkidu and Gilgamesh cannot themselves say what it was that led them to their quest. Further, as this passage intimates, that unknown but overpowering drive will be their undoing. Enlil is indeed angered by their action, and when

they add insult to injury by also killing the Bull of Heaven, the gods decide that Enkidu must die.

A similar example of an obscure resolve is Enkidu's motivation for seeking out Gilgamesh in Uruk. I noted above that Enkidu cannot move from the wilderness to the city unchanged, but is transformed from an animal to a human state by doing so. But what motivates this transition, what drives him across the threshold of culture? Again, this is not so clear as one might think. Shamhat tells Enkidu of Uruk and its king, and when her words find favor with Enkidu, "his heart (now) wise was seeking a friend" (*mūdū libbašu iše" a ibra*, I 214). He then speaks, asking Shamhat to lead him to Gilgamesh, saying, "I, myself, will challenge him!" (*anāku luḡrīšum-ma*, I 220). He contradicts the motivation given by the narrator, and a wish for friendship is replaced by a more aggressive desire for combat.

And again, this unclear motive ultimately leads to Enkidu's undoing (see Feldt and Koch 2011: 115). As he lies dying he will curse the hunter and Shamhat for leading him away from his life in the wild, and thereby ultimately to his death, but his own reason for stepping across the threshold of culture remains ambiguous. Likewise, he first curses the door he made from the felled cedar trees, recalling his earlier soul-searching where he failed to establish the reason why he ravaged the forest in the first place. What is clear is that those whom Enkidu identifies as somehow responsible for his illness are all connected to a transition across space, either literally in the case of the door, or figuratively in the case of the hunter and Shamhat, who led him from the wilderness to the city.

Much like in *Ishtar's Descent*, the main characters of *Gilgamesh* are driven by an opaque but overpowering will to transgress boundaries, but are also undone by that transgression. This seems to be a central characteristic of the "human image" associated with the chronotope of the threshold, but why should this be the case? Why should a mosaic arrangement of time and space entail that the characters be driven to their undoing by forces within them that escape comprehension?

Let us return for a moment to the two examples presented at the beginning of this section: the developmental chronotope of Apuleius and the fixed but passive individual in the chronotope of Hellenistic adventure. As against the human image of Hellenistic adventure, in the chronotope of the threshold the characters are not simply flung from one episode to the next by forces beyond themselves; they are not passive counters in the game of the plot. Because movement from one state to another is connected with such profound transformations, in the chronotope of the threshold, movement itself comes to require a certain driving force that will necessitate the changes it brings about. While the heroes of Hellenistic adventure can remain passive precisely because they remain unchanged by their movement through an alien world, conversely Gilgamesh and Ishtar must actively yearn for their threshold-crossing exploits if they are to be so profoundly transformed by them. Otherwise, those changes would appear to be random, unmotivated effects of accidentally liminal movement, and not necessitated by the nature of the heroes themselves.

As against the gradual developments that affect the characters in Apuleius, however, changes in the chronotope of the threshold are radical, and potentially devastating. The transformations that Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Ishtar undergo are not the gradual and clearly intelligible developments that lead Lucius from youth to maturity in *The Golden Ass*. Change, in the chronotope of the threshold, is principally unforeseeable in often destructive ways. Ishtar is stripped bare by her crossing of the Underworld gates, while Enkidu ultimately dies as a result of his transition from nature to culture, and Gilgamesh is driven to his undoing by his otherworldly travels. For that reason, the reader may come to wonder what kind of driving forces can lead the heroes to their journeys, given such persistently disastrous outcomes.

It becomes necessary to show the heroes acting either against their better knowledge of the perils involved (Gilgamesh, for example, is repeatedly warned about the danger of fighting Humbaba) or without having fully considered the consequences of their actions (Ishtar is said to act “without thinking” as she attacks Ereshkigal, l. 65). Nonetheless, they do cross the thresholds that structure their worlds, and are then undone. Ishtar is trapped in the Underworld and Gilgamesh is deprived of his friend. The obscurity of the drives that beset the heroes is thus best understood as the result of the fatefully transformative effects of crossing a threshold in the chronotope, which make that kind of movement just as irrational as it is necessary for the unfolding of the plot.

#### LIMINAL TEXTUALITY

I would like to conclude by turning to the chronotope of the narrative itself, that is, the time and space in which the reading of the epic actually takes place. As Bakhtin (2011: 252) stresses, the act of reading has its own chronotopic aspect: “We are presented with a text occupying a certain specific place in space; that is, it is localized; our creation of it, our acquaintance with it occurs through time.” The reading of the literary work has a characteristic spatial and temporal dimension that enters into dialogue with the chronotope encountered in the text one is reading. The readers “who recreate and in so doing renew the text” (Bakhtin 2011: 253) allow one chronotope to unfold within another, by lending a spatial and temporal reality to the world represented in the text.

This is not to say that the chronotope *of* the text and that *in* the text are of the same kind. As Bakhtin makes clear, “there is a sharp and categorical boundary line between the actual world as source of representation and the world represented in the work” (Bakhtin 2011: 253). The two sorts of chronotopes are separated by an unmistakable ontological boundary, but this does not mean that there can be no interaction between them. “However forcefully the real and the represented world resist fusion, however immutable the presence of that categorical boundary line between them, they are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction” (Bakhtin 2011: 254). According to Bakhtin, the world of the text and that of the reader are thus separated by a categorical but permeable boundary line.

It is this textual threshold that I would like to consider here. In *Gilgamesh* one finds a rather striking depiction of the outer limits of the epic itself, and it is therefore interesting to see how the chronotope of the threshold, with its emphasis on disjunctions in space and time, constructs the confines between the real and the represented world.

In the prologue to the epic (I 13–28) the text describes itself as a lapis lazuli tablet to be found on the walls of Uruk. The reader is invited to climb the stairway of these walls and walk around on them, to inspect their brickwork and their foundation, and finally, to find the epic’s tablet box, open it, and read it out. The same description of the walls of Uruk is found again at the end of the epic, where Gilgamesh, speaking now in the voice of the narrator, instructs his traveling companion Ur-shanabi to climb the staircase and walk around the walls of Uruk.

The text of the epic associates itself with the walls of Uruk in both a temporal and a spatial sense. First, the walls mark the temporal beginning and end of the text itself. The boundary of the city walls functions as a metaphorical representation of the boundaries that separate the epic from the real world, enveloping it in a circle which the readers are invited to trace out with their steps. Secondly, the walls are the spatial location of the text, the place where the reading of the epic is to take place, according to its prologue. If the encounter with the



text is always “localized,” in Bakhtin’s sense, then this is where the epic itself proposes that that encounter be localized, at least in an imaginary sense, thereby associating the act of reading with the symbolically liminal space of the city walls that stand between city and wilderness, between culture and nature.

The walls of Uruk thus represent both the boundaries of the text, and the text itself, imbuing it with a liminal status. The walls of Uruk can therefore be taken as a metaphorical representation of what Bakhtin calls the “boundary line” between the world of the epic and that of its readers.

Annette Zgoll (2010) has likewise argued that the epic is identified with the walls of Uruk, and accordingly that the instructions to the reader of how to walk about and inspect the walls serve as a cipher for how the reader is to approach the text. The two passages in the prologue where the reader is first invited to inspect the walls and then to read the epic share a number of semantic and structural similarities. Zgoll (2010: 459) shows that the description of the two objects, walls and text, is chiasmic. First a) the writing of the epic is described in I 10, then b) the building of the walls is described in I 11–12, in a parallel act of creation. Then b’) the reader is invited to inspect the walls in I 13–23, and finally a’) to read the text of the epic in I 24–28. Thus identified with and folded into one another, text and wall serve as symbols of each other, and both constitute the extended presence of their creator, Gilgamesh (see also Dickson 2009). As argued by Zgoll, the invitation to inspect and admire the walls is also an invitation to inspect and admire the epic: they are both enduring, unique, and huge.

And they are also, I would stress, both liminal. The walls are of course liminal in a concrete sense, they are the *limen* of the city, the boundaries that separate it from the surrounding wilderness. But how can the text be said to be liminal? In fact, the epic itself stages the act of telling stories as a crossing of thresholds. When Uta-napishti tells the story of the Flood, he begins with an account of how he was warned by Ea of the coming catastrophe. Ea is bound by oath not to reveal the gods’ plan, and so tells Uta-napishti indirectly by speaking to him through his wall:

*kikkiš kikkiš igār igār*  
*kikkišu šimē-ma igāru hišsas*  
*šuruppakū mār Ubār-Tutu*  
*uqur bīta bini eleppa*

Fence, fence! Wall, wall!

Fence, listen! Wall, attention!

Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu!

Destroy house, build boat! (XI 21–24, translation modified)

This episode is a key moment in the story. It is through this crucial communication between Ea and Uta-napishti that the latter is warned of the Flood and that humanity survives annihilation. This moment of speaking, paradigmatic as it is for what the Babylonians perceived as their possibility of communing with the gods, takes place through a wall. As with the epic itself being found on the walls of Uruk, textuality in this episode is more than incidentally connected with liminal space; liminality and textuality are intimately bound up with one another. Note that the parallel between the two scenes may not be coincidental, for, as argued by Piotr Michalowski (1999: 80) among others, the epic can be read as Gilgamesh’s autobiography told in the third person, “an autobiography that mimics the one told to Gilgamesh by Utnapishtim.”



Bakhtin's notion of the "boundary line" must therefore be refined as it pertains to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: Not only is there a "threshold of the text" between reality and representation, but textuality itself is represented as somehow threshold-like. Note also that, when the reader is invited to find the tablet box containing the epic, the text stresses the thresholds that must be crossed to do so. To walk around on the walls of Uruk one must climb the staircase, and to read the text one must open a door (for yet another parallel between the two scenes, see Zgoll 2010: 450). "[Open] the lid of its secret!" (*[pitē-m]a bāba ša niširtīšu*, I 26), the epic exhorts us, with the word for lid (*bābu*) meaning literally "door" in Akkadian.

In the chronotope of the threshold, the telling of stories is something that takes place across and around walls, fences, doors, and thresholds. Further, as noted above, Gilgamesh returns home to Uruk without having achieved immortality, but instead brings back "a story from before the Flood." The story itself crosses the cosmic temporal threshold of the Flood, the great outer boundary of history itself. As we read the text of the epic, we are, like the characters of whom we read, moving across all sorts of fateful boundaries. We cross the boundary line between the real and the represented world, we walk around the walls of Uruk and inspect the story of its king, we move beyond history and learn a secret from before the Flood.

But if the crossing of thresholds in the world of the epic is a transformative event—a time of crisis and rupture—one wonders if the act of reading it is likewise to be transformative. As Gilgamesh and Enkidu are changed by their movement across the boundaries of their world, will we also be changed by the movement from our world into theirs?

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