The Heroic Epic, a Case of Literary Inheritance. (Inter)cultural Intermediation and Eurasian Continuity

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1. The epos at the "heroic age"

There are certain "invariants" (Étiemble 1958, Étiemble 1963, Marino 1998, Popa Blanariu 2015) of heroic poetry, elements that define it essentially: the theme – a narrative about "extraordinary deeds", famous, adventurous topics, in the style of the "traditional heroic mythology" (Marino 1973: 567) – and idealized typology, so that the central character appears like a sum of heroic virtues[1]. *Personarum illustrium*, *illustres actiones* – as Scaliger synthesized in his *Poetics* (1561) – represents the main particularity of heroic poetry that the European Renaissance regarded as the exemplary form of the epic. The presence of these transcultural invariants, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Homeric, Indian, Latin, Germanic heroic epic and its late Renaissance echoes are due either to phenomena of intercultural contact and anthropo-literary transfer – the "influences" of positivist comparatists –, or of some "homologies", independent evolutions, nevertheless convergent of the epic in different cultures. Very likely influenced by the Mesopotamian one from the beginning of the 2nd century B.C., the Homeric epic exerts its influence further into time and cultural geography, over the Latin one from the end of the 1st century B.C. and, via *The Aeneid* (Curtius 1970: 199), over the Germanic medieval one. Homer's self-confessed competitor, Virgil would be, according to Heusler and Curtius (1970: 199), the very missing link between the epic tradition of the Mediterranean Antiquity and the Germanic epic of the Middle Ages. (The latter, the product of a culture that, by its "barbarian" roots, had the inspiration and the ability to assimilate, from defeated Rome, the classic heritage of Greek-Latin humanism). Thus, there could be clarified the transition from the heroic poetry of the Germanic tribes – probably created by the Ostrogoths, but lost, as long as it was not recorded in writing (Curtius 1970) – to the Anglo-Saxon heroic

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[1] In his *Ethics*, Max Scheler inscribes the hero into a typology of exemplary humanity. Scheler associates the five fundamental values – the sacred, spirituality, nobility of soul, the useful, the pleasant – with five types of human "values" or "models": the saint, the hero, the civilizing spirit, the artist. To the hero, there corresponds the "vital" value of nobility of soul (*apud* Curtius 1970: 198).

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epic or the Medieval German one (*mittelhochdeutsch*) of the 12th–13th centuries (Curtius 1970, Martini 1972: 70–75). The literary heredity that unites Homer, Virgil and the Germanic epic in the context of the (likely) assimilation (Kramer 1962, Beye 2006, West 1997, Damrosch 2007, Curtius 1970: 199) of the Mesopotamian prototype, provides yet another very interesting example of (inter)cultural intermediation and continuity in the Eurasian space, within a historical interval of almost four millennia – from Gilgamesh's legendary rule in Uruk and its literary echoes to the Germanic heroic epic from the Middle Ages.

The epic is a symptom of the "heroic ages". Hector Munro Chadwick (1912) had developed the concept in relation with the Germanic, ancient Greek, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Slavic epic tradition. Four decades later, Samuel Noah Kramer (1956) identified a series of similarities between the epics that belonged to three heroic Indo-European ages – Greek, Indian and Germanic –, and to the outline of the "heroic ages" drawn by Chadwick, Kramer adds that of Sumer (Kramer 1962: 264 – 267). By extending the epic corpus, Kramer confirms the validity of Chadwick's hypothesis: heroic poetry appears at different peoples and different historical periods and, despite the considerable distances separating them in time and space, these poems share numerous traits (Chadwick 1912: VII). It is necessary to clarify the "nature" of the respective similitude (*ibidem*) and its causes. The British scholar considered the spread of the heroic narratives, the relations between versions, the dating of the oldest of these, the circumstances in which they were elaborated, as well as the meaning of the different historical, mythical and fictional elements (Chadwick 1912: VII) that define the heroic epic. Several decades after the issue of Chadwick's work, the German philologist Ernst Robert Curtius notices, nevertheless, that we do not yet have a "comparative phenomenology" of "heroism, heroic poetry and the heroic ideal" (Curtius 1970: 201, see also Borbély 2001).

It is difficult, if not "impossible" (Chadwick 1912: 174), to establish precisely the temporal landmarks of the heroic ages, but there already exists an approximate dating. The first and "oldest" (Kramer 1962: 264) of the heroic Indo-European ages is the Greek one, from the end of the 2nd millennia B.C., somewhere between the 12th and 11th (Kramer 1962: 264–266, Chadwick 1912: 196) or 10th–9th centuries B.C. according to M. I. Finley estimation (Finley 1968: 68). India's "heroic age" begins almost a century after that of Greece, the "heroic age" of the Germanic tribes covers the 4th–6th centuries A.D., whereas that of Sumer is dated by Kramer in the first quarter of the 3rd millennia B.C. (Kramer 1962: 264–266, Chadwick 1912). Kramer's argument, based on the conclusions of his British predecessor, consists of the existence of political-military, social, religious and literary traits shared by all these (Chadwick 1912: 320–431, Kramer 1962: 264–267): essentially barbaric periods, with the cult of anthropomorphic divinities and small kingdoms, with tribal leaders who take and keep power due to their military skills and their groups of loyal warriors. The thesis previously formulated by Chadwick considered the same double series of similarities: the literary ones and those related to the socio-political context. The heroic epic constitutes itself as a poetic archive of the world that produced it and which it represents, supported both by historical reference and the mythical-legendary plot. According to Chadwick, the similarities between poems would be due, first and foremost, to the similarities between the circumstances that generated

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them. Therefore, the comparative study of the heroic poetry would require a comparative study of the "heroic ages", meant to elucidate an essentially anthropologic issue (Chadwick 1912: VII), closely connected to the specific literary one; for example, the migration of the different groups of population in relation to the circulation of themes and literary procedures transmitted and assimilated by them; practices and structures of social, military, religious organization – Semitic and ancient Indo-European, Germanic from the end of Antiquity etc. – all these correlated with certain particularities of literary imaginary.

2. The Homeric epic and the Near East

A series of similarities relates the Sumero-Babylonian epic poetry to that of the Greeks, Indians and Germanic populations (Kramer 1967: 267). They may be identified in the thematic content – at the interference of fiction and historical event –, in the mythological and heroic imagination, in the stylistic form and the progress of the action influenced, even hijacked by supernatural interventions (Kramer 1967: 264–265). There can be easily identified interesting correspondences between situations and characters from the Sumero-Babylonian epic and the Homeric poems, respectively (Beye 2006: 298–300; West 1997: 402–417; 626– 627; Damrosch 2007: 195–220): Gilgamesh and Achilles are both the offspring of goddesses, having a human as well as divine ascendance. Each of them loses a close friend – a traumatic episode that leads them towards making a crucial decision for their destiny. They are both reconciled with their fate after talking to an old wise man (Utnapishtim, Priam). Like Gilgamesh in the last part of the epic, Ulysses is a traveller. On his journey, he meets a female divinity with magical powers (Circe), who offers him the guidance needed to continue the journey, like Siduri in the Oriental epic. Ulysses then rejects the advances and promises of eternal life of another immortal woman (the nymph Calypso), just like Gilgamesh spurns Ishtar's invitation. The daughter of the Sun, Circe, transforms mortals into animals, like Ishtar, whom Gilgamesh scolds (Nasta 1963: XXVII). Ulysses descends into the other world, where he meets an omniscient old man (prophet Tiresias), who advises him, like Utnapishtim does with Gilgamesh. The companions of Ulysses perish after having killed and eaten the bulls of the Sun, thus violating the interdiction, just like the gods decide upon the end of Enkidu following the killing of the Bull of Heaven by the two comrades in arms. The descent into the Inferno is "a unique element of continuity" (Nasta 1963: XXXII, Popa Blanariu 2010) in universal literature, occurring from the Sumerians to the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Comedy*, folk stories and, in modern interpretations and rewritings, at Thomas Mann, Mihail Sadoveanu, Mihail Bulgakov, Doris Lessing etc. Angry that Ulysses's starving companions have put his oxen on the spit, the Sun himself threatens to descent into Hades and change natural order: unless Zeus avenges him properly, "I shall go to Hell and give light to the dead" (Homer 1963: 176) – he warns Zeus, in the *Odyssey*. A number of other similarities constitute, according to Beye, mere "common places" in the imaginary of some populations of farmers (Beye 2006: 300). We shall not discuss these, but others which Beye does not mention.

In all the three epics, the coherence of the epic construction derives from the

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hero's passion (Lukács 1977: 35–36). The story of Gilgamesh may be read like the evocation of an inner transformation. Increasingly aware of the limitations of his immortal nature, the hero renounces egocentrism, gradually redefining his relationship with the others: first of all with Enkidu and, towards the end, with an entire community, the inhabitants of Uruk. Like in *The Iliad*, the hero's inner life directly influences the course of action: the absence of emotional involvement from the beginning, the lack of empathy, the brutal manifestation of force, followed by the discovery of vulnerability and suffering, of a fatally ephemeral condition – that makes Gilgamesh equal to all the others, with no defence or privilege in front of death –, and, eventually, the altruism that urges him to keep the grass of immortality in order to share with the ones at home. The epic unfolds like a *Bildungsroman*, a telling about discovering one's self in relation to alterity. The transformation of the hero implies three easily identifiable stages: before Enkidu's arrival to the city (despotic egocentric), after meeting him (companion-in-arms, heroic) and finally, after his unexpected loss (reflexive, sapiential). The latter is placed in the perspective of a generally human destiny, where man's weakness in front of time could be possibly compensated by the posthumous echo of his deeds. The walls of Uruk, which Gilgamesh admires in the end, are probably, in the meaning from *Epistula Ad Pisones*, the first "monument made of immortal bronze" – the work as prolongation of the author's life – ever mentioned in (what has been kept and reached us) world literature (Antonescu, Cizek 1971). Similarly, the entire action of *The Iliad* – an "Achileid" (Creţia 2009: 25–150) – derives from the hero's inner life, his passionate nature that determines the main episodes and discontinuities in the flow of epic events. Irrespective of the form that it takes, Achilles's passion is an "obsession of which he can get rid only through action" (Bonnard 1967: 63); "passion, suffering, action" (*ibidem*) is the constant diagram of his soul. His affection for Briseis and aversion for Agamemnon, the one who humiliated him by kidnapping her, determines him to withdraw from the battlefield, thus knowingly facilitating the victories of the Trojans for whom, even more mercilessly, empowers Thetis to do *lobby* in front of Zeus. The loss of Patroclus triggers his blind fury against Hector and his city, causing the brave warrior to re-enter the fight, transforming him into a ferocious war machine. The vengeful fury of Achilles is tempered by Priam's coming to ask for the body of his son, Hector, in order to fulfil funeral rites. Touched, Achilles sees in Priam his own father, Peleus, of whom he knows that, by the power of the destiny, will shortly lose his son under the walls of Troy. Equally heavy losses leave equally deep wounds in both camps, turning the deadly enemies Achilles and Priam into ideal confidents for one another. The final reconciliation of the enemies lies under the sign of a generic condition, implacably vulnerable. In the *Odyssey*, love and nostalgia, homesickness form, similarly, the emotional spring of the epic (Lukács 1977: 35–36).

In all the three epics, there is also a common scheme of the psychological evolution of characters; their emotional state covers several essential states and moments: attachment, loss, crisis, cathartic recollectedness. For example, Achilles's attachment to Briseis and Patroclus, Gilgamesh's attachment to Enkidu, Ulysses's feelings for Ithaca and his people. Then, the loss of Enkidu, Briseis and Patroclus, the endangering of the family and wasting of wealth along with the onrush of suitors

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who seize the house of Penelope, encouraged by the master's long absence. The crisis of Gilgamesh manifests through the shock caused by the unexpected and incomprehensible end of Enkidu that eventually turns into a fear of his own death. The crisis of Achilles is a dual one, with two distinct manifestations, caused by a double loss: the outburst of pride[2] and sorrow on parting from Briseis, at Agamemnon's order, whom he sanctions by withdrawing at the back of the front line and, on the other hand, the atrocious suffering caused by Patroclus's death, which leads to Achilles's return to the military operations theatre and the expedition for punishing Hector, assumed by the Peleian as his own. Moreover, the double loss leads Achilles to two completely different decisions, by means of which he passes from one version of his destiny to another one: initially, a long life, but wasted in anonymity at home, in Thessaly, towards which he is drawn, disappointed and still angry with Agamemnon, on the very eve of the loss of Patroclus; then, the premature death, covered in glory, at Troy which he had chosen by changing his decision as soon as Patroclus perishes by the hand of Hector. Also a moment of crisis along the hero's inner path and of tension in the unfolding of the epic is Ulysses's outburst of righteous rebellion who punishes the greed of the suitors, recovering his house and fortune. All these critical moments imply a decisive confrontation: with death and his own anguish in the case of Gilgamesh, with Agamemnon and Hector in the case of Achilles, with the greedy suitors in the case of Ulysses.

The endings of all the three epics include the heroes' stories in a metaphysical, ethical and sapiential horizon that relies on the previously narrated events, but project them onto another level of significations. Each of them – Gilgamesh, Achilles, Ulysses – comes to terms with his own destiny. Healed of the fear of his end, Gilgamesh accepts his mortal condition, busying himself with what he still has to do in the city. Achilles knows what awaits him, but is able to look death in the eyes as long as part of him is already there, in the other world, through Patroclus's death. Along with the perishing of Patroclus and Hector – that set into motion the Peleian's passionate nature –, along with the tranquillity and sober wisdom that have descended upon his soul, the epic comes to an end. The war of Achilles is over, what follows fades compared to what he has already experienced – absurd horridness, if the gods had not been invented it would not have been possible to explain it, like the Peleian explains to the old Priam, in terms of tragic destiny. Achilles has lost his great friend as well as his great foe; he himself would soon join them. *The Iliad* is the epic of Achilles, the trace of war upon his soul – a bloody trail of death, sadness and fatalism that the promise of posthumous glory lightens too little. The epic of war begins and ends with the storm from the Peleian's soul. His "anger" from the beginning, in whose blaze there perished friends and foes, died away on Hector's funeral pyre. The rest is agony, the denouement of the siege is predictable, the poet no longer has reasons to tell it, the listener no longer has reasons to wait for it. Between the invocation from the beginning and the last line, there is born and dies

[2] Tracing the variation of the Greek terms designating, in the epic poems, the gifts with which Agamemnon attempts to comfort Achilles (*apoina*, *poine*, *dora*), Donna Wilson (2002) categorizes the reaction of Achilles as a logic of "compensation and heroic identity". She builds her interpretation from the perspective of the classic "Homeric issue".

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an entire universe of the soul, built from the fragile and fatal essence of passions. The end of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and that of *The Iliad* echo the same idea: a solidarity of condition that renders people similar, equally vulnerable in the face of destiny and death – death as fate, in the Babylonian epic. In its turn, *The Odyssey* ends in a clatter of arms, suddenly interrupted by the voice of Athens who, under the guise of Mentor, makes "peace for ever" between (Homer 1963: 343). As informed by Tiresias, Ulysses will have to leave his home again, with an oar on his shoulder, to wander through cities until reaching, in the heart of the land, people who know nothing of the sea, who neither add salt to their food nor know of any ship, or oar, orthe "ship's wing" (Homer 1963: 1949); as a proof, at one point they will mistake the navigation oar with a shovel for grains and vegetables. It is only then that Ulysses will be allowed to stop, to bring offerings to Poseidon and then return to Ithaca and bring full offerings to all the gods in heaven (*ibidem*). After that, far from the sea – as the prophet reveals to him – "sweet death" will reach him and take him away in his old age, "shepherd of a wealthy people". "Here is the truth" (*ibidem*). After the violent death of the suitors, Ulysses's new journey is – an ancient Greek custom – a redeeming exile meant to erase the traces of blood shedding.

The characters from the Oriental epic, from *The Iliad* and also the Germanic epic poetry, suffer from a certain fatalism. Faced with the implacability of human finiteness, Gilgamesh is probably the first "tragic hero" (Dima 1998: 5) from the world's literature. Like Oedipus many centuries later, he cannot change his predestination and, together with Enkidu, commits – also a first timer – an act of *hybris*: he offends the gods, an insolence cruelly punished through the death of one of them and the mortification of the other. Whereas the tragic of the Greeks means confrontation with a limit that crashes man, the fatality of death against which Gilgamesh fights is the experience of the tragic *avant la lettre.* Subject to a fate with two scenarios – as a proof, he may choose between two alternatives for his life and death – Achilles has, until a certain point, like any tragic hero, the freedom to choose, but not also that of defeating his predestination. Similarly, in the Germanic Medieval epic, "despite the great enthusiasm for heroism, the tragic prevails both in action and atmosphere" (Curtius 1970: 199). Upon the cursed beautiful ones, Helen and Paris, there presses the fateful blessing of Aphrodite (Bonnard 1967: 59). Their beauty and power to inspire love are the cause of Troy's destruction, of their happiness and unhappiness at the same time. Paris receives this ambiguous gift naturally and remorselessly, even aware of his status of "chosen one" (Bonnard 1967: 59). Helen rebels, though uselessly. It is the same fatality of the Eros that will lead Euripides's Phaedra to disaster and, along with her, Hippolytus, a victim of the rivalry between goddesses Artemis and Aphrodite. Hector himself bends to the anticipated will of fate (Homer 1985, Book VI, vv. 390–488), which, nevertheless, does not hinder him to turn his end into a stopover to the endless life that fame would bring him (Homer 1985, Book XXII, vv. 294–295, also vv. 204–209). Patroclus laments in a similar way in the Peleian's dream (Homer 1985, Book XXIII, vv. 78–79). The fatality's implacability subjects even the Olympians' will. Weighing with his golden scales (Homer 1985, Book XXII, vv. 204–209) the odds of the confrontation between Achilles and Hector, Zeus himself is forced to follow the inflexible law of fate (evoked by the instrument with which he skimps on luck

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for everyone) and admit, unwillingly, the Trojan's death and the victory of the other one. The episode reflects an ancient mentality, an archaic meaning of destiny, as long as the universal law – blind necessity – forces the decision of divinity, even that of the supreme god (Frenkian 1969: 17). In *The Odyssey*, the newest of them, there emerges, nevertheless, another view upon man, announcing the humanism of classic Antiquity. The hero no longer expects, terrified, the unstoppable blow of fate, although in Hades he receives the prophecy and warnings of Tiresias like the "certain" "decision of gods" (Homer 1963: 149), thus avoiding, as much as possible, to disobey them. With his intelligence and the help of Athens, Ulysses, the man, succeeds – a symptom of the emancipation of the Greek mentality – in defeating Poseidon, the adverse god, and eventually reaches home.

The tragic dimension of the Homeric epic – manifested as the characters' awareness of the implacable – constitutes the object of an implicit polemic between Ernst Robert Curtius and George Steiner. According to the latter, *The Iliad* is the "alphabet book" of tragic art. Like the tragic hero, the Homeric warrior, especially the one from the *Iliad*, knows that he can neither understand nor subject the act of destiny (Steiner 2008: 18–19). Unlike Steiner, Curtius (1970: 218) believes that the tragic as an "essential aspect of existence" prevailing in the Attic tragedy is "rejected by Homer".

The invocations to the muse from the beginning of the Homeric epics objectify the source of poetic creativity and make the transition from the extraliterary space to the universe of story-telling. It summarizes the epic content, drawing a sketch of the hero's profile: the Peleian's passionate nature, which generates the action of *The Iliad*; the "ingenuity" and curiosity that both help and postpone the arrival of the wandering navigator on the shores of Ithaca. Lacking any direct addressing to some inspiring muse, the beginning of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* fulfils, nevertheless, a function similar to that from the Homeric poems, signalling the quality of initiated and civilizing hero of the eponymous character; he is the "one who has seen it all" to the end of the world (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* 1975: 108).

There are equally relevant differences between all these manifestations of the epic. Some of these, regarding the relation between the Germanic, Homeric and Medieval French texts, are highlighted by Curtius (1970: 199–200); however, we shall not approach these, but we shall further discuss the Eastern epic tradition in relation to the Greek one. In Mesopotamian poems, the characters' psychology is quite "rudimentary", whereas the plot and adventures are rendered in a "conventional" and "rigid" style (Kramer 1962: 267), unlike the richness of the details from the Homeric poems: descriptions of interiors, artefacts, scenes of combat or peaceful occupations, physical or behaviour traits, narrations about actions, discourses or discussions between mortals, Olympians or between the former and the latter, with all the range of humours, heroic nature and human weaknesses of all of them. It is enough to compare Gilgamesh's lament when losing Enkidu – briefly, but movingly evoked, in several swift lines that seize the essential with simplicity (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* 1975: 150–152) –, and the Peleian's lament when losing Patroclus, unfolding, with intermittences, over two Books (XVIII and XXIII), including the preparing and performance of the funerals, the *in memoriam* feast and sporting games.

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The same difference may be found between the Homeric epic and another Semitic creation, *The Old Testament*. Homer narrates showily, with a waste of atmosphere-evoking details, artistically and accurately, presenting the visible face of things; nevertheless, the vetero-testamentary text is internalized, essentialized, flowing in heavy, sibylline fog. There is a relevant comparison (Auerbach 2000: 7–26) between the scene of nymph Calypso welcoming Hermes and that of the dialogue between Abraham and God who orders him, without explanation, to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah. In the latter scene, there prevails tension, anxiety. As Kierkegaard (2005) imagines him, Abraham is possessed by *Angst* – an anxiety generated by his absurd situation. On divine order, he must sacrifice the "child of promise" that the same incomprehensible God had given to him, in exchange for his piety. Itself absurd (Kierkegaard 2005), as long as nothing justifies it, Abraham's very faith is his only support and response to the challenge of the absurd.

Between the Homeric narration and the Jewish one, there is a difference between a poetics of transparency and one of occultation. The Homeric one revolves around human reason, able to render accurately and in details a state of facts, clarify the relations between situations, individuals, mortals and the gods approached with familiarity, like the old neighbours from the upstairs of the universe, from which there echo quick and clear snatches of words, descending to the apartment below. The narration of the *Old Testament* is nevertheless focused on divinity, dominated by the unfathomable, pressing mystery of the Jewish God, irreducible to the ordinary categories of the human mind. The *Old Testament*'s interpretation of the sacred as irrational mystery, "*tremendum et fascinans*" (Otto 2005) is missing from Homer's representation of Olympus[3], but emerges in the Greek archaic meaning of destiny. The focus of the Jewish story fuels a stifled, alarming tension. At Homer, the element of tension" is very weak (Auerbach 2000: 8), which is possible through a series of "digressions" (*ibidem*). For example, in Book XIX, between the discovery of the scar on Ulysses's leg by nurse Eurycleia and his recognition there is intercalated a wide parenthesis – the evocation of the circumstances in which the hero got the respective wound in his youth, while hunting on the land of his grandfather Autolycus. No sooner had the elderly woman poured water into the washing basin than she saw the stranger's scar, but before calling him by his name and letting his foot drop into the basin, out of surprise (Homer 2008, Book XIX, vv. 611–620; also Auerbach 2000: 7–26), her mind has been quickly populated with a series of adventures presented in tens of lines and covering several days of the master's feasting at Autolycus. The retrospective digression carries us, in an instant – changing the epoch and the narrative plans –, from the present, Penelope's house, far away to mount Parnassus, where the hunting once took place. It is the difference between Eurycleia's subjective time (of affective memory) and the objective time of the action that takes place outside, under the reader's or listener's eyes.

The description of Achilles's shield (Homer 1985, Book XVIII, vv. 465–

[3] The real belief of Greece before the 4th century had nothing to do with the "luminous" forms of the Olympus (*cf*. Murray, *apud* Dodds 1998: 14). The Gods from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are a charming and funny "invention" of the poets (Bowra, *apud* Dodds 1998: 14).

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595)[4], made by Hephaestus at the request of Thetis, is yet another sample of Homer's art of details that distinguishes the Greek epic poetry from the epic tradition of the Near East. The episode does not present the finite object essentially but rather the process of its making – an already classic observation of Lessing in *Laocoon*. Homer does not insist on what he sees immediately, on snapshots of situations and characters frozen in the layer of metal from where they arose; he lingers on a flow of actions that the craftsman's and the looker's imagination may associate with these images, replacing the immobility of the decorative motif with the fugitive life that inspired him. The ornamentation composes an *imago mundi* – a representation of the world of mortals, against a cosmic background. From human life, the poet selects circumstances that are relevant for the ternary structure – *oratores*, *bellatores*, *laboratores* – of the Indo-European societies, which Georges Dumézil will theorize. Hence, scenes of judgment, combat and death, celebrations with songs and dancing, working the land, among corn fields and vineyards, pastoral and animal farming. By returning to the initial cosmic perspective, all the richness of life and bustle of life is finally engirt with a "frame" that "symbolizes the river/ Great, fabulous Ocean, a flood that encircles earth". The description of the Peleian's shield is a cosmo- and sociography *in nuce*. It has, at the same time, a component of poietic art and *ekphrasis* – realist visual poetics –, anticipating Aristotle's *mimesis*. The credible imitation enables the concurrence of the representation and its referent. Nothing else but this "great miracle" of the impression of reality – of the environment of expression confiscated by the fictional world that it manifests, of the "gold" replaced by the "earth" that it imagines – as Homer captures.

3. Lineage or homology?

Similarities like the one just mentioned raise the issue of the causes that had generated them: mere coincidences – a phenomenon of convergent evolution, of "homology" – or "influences", in other words "lineage"? The first option validates the theory of invariants (Étiemble 1952, Étiemble 1955, Étiemble 1958, Marino 1998, Popa Blanariu 2015) – of similarities ultimately independent from positively demonstrable cultural contacts. The second requires the identification of a centre and some ways for diffusing the respective elements. Kramer finds it "less likely that such a particular literary genre like the narrative poem may have been created and developed separately – as far as its style and technique are concerned – in different historical contexts, in Greece, India, Northern Europe and Sumer" (Kramer 1962: 267). But how can this explanatory impasse be overcome? Admitting, for example, that being, by far, "the oldest", epic poetry was "born in Mesopotamia" (Kramer 1962: 267), from where – as Kramer suggests – it was handed down through a network of influences, first and foremost, to the Greek tribes.

But, in what way could the two cultures have come into contact? Something like this may have happened between the beginning of the Mycenaean era (approximately the 14th century B.C.) and the archaic period, until the 7th century B.C., by one of the two ways indicated by Beye (2006: 300) as hypothesis. The story of Gilgamesh would thus constitute the subject of an interesting cultural

[4] See another interpretation in Creţia 2009: 149.

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(inter)mediation, being transmitted either by means of the Ugaritic language – written in an alphabet similar to the Phoenician one, the origin of the Greek alphabet –, or of the Hurrian language whose speakers may have transmitted the Sumerian and Akkadian traditions to the Hittites from Anatolia (an area with which the Greeks came into contact through the beach stripe from the Mediterranean sea) towards the end of the Bronze Age (Beye 2006, Damrosch 2007). The Ugarit city-state, a "meeting point of cultures" (Damrosch 2007: 196) made use of two parallel systems of writing: the cuneiform syllabic one, with Mesopotamian origins, Akkadian more specifically, and a local one, cuneiform and alphabetical. The Homeric poets may have found about *The Epic of Gilgamesh* at least in its oral form if not in its written one. The transmission of the oriental model could happen either through Anatolia or, as M.L. West assumes, through some bilingual speakers – traders, migrants, itinerant poets – from Syria and Cyprus (West 1997: 626–627, Damrosch 2007: 198). Concerning the relation between the Homeric poems and the techniques of writing, there have been formulated, in time, several hypotheses. Wolf and his followers argued that the Greeks did not know writing at the time when the two epic poems were created (Beye 2006: 210). But, other researchers argued that quite large sections of them were written down at the moment they were elaborated (Curtius 1970: 199, Beye 2006: 210).

Once accepted, such a hypothesis has yet to show how the Mesopotamian prototype was exploited. Between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Homeric poems, the influence appears to be related more to the borrowing of oriental motifs "echoed" in the Greek stories, than to the "translation and the keeping of the full foreign text" (Damrosch 2007: 199, 202). Despite the striking similarities between the two epic traditions, no scene or episode from Homer can be regarded as a direct translation of any of the scenes or episodes from *Gilgamesh* (Damrosch 2007: 198). Although the motivations may differ, this is, up to a point, the same type of lineage – as David Damrosch finds – as the one between the Babylonian texts and the Jewish tradition of the Bible. In the latter case, the lineage does not appear as a "translation", but as a "retelling" from another "perspective" (Damrosch 2007: 202).

According to Heusler and Curtius, *The Aeneid* may be the missing link between the epic tradition of the Mediterranean Antiquity and the heroic epic of the German Middle Ages (Curtius 1970: 199). An ancient literary heritage thus crosses over from the tradition of the Near East to Homer, Virgil and the Germanic epic, merging with the local myths and legends. It is the object of a phenomenon of (inter)cultural intermediation and continuity in the Eurasian space, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Homeric and Latin epics, to the heroic songs of the Ostrogoths (Curtius 1970: 199), and then to the German heroic epic of the 12th–13th centuries (Martini 1972: 70–76).

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Abstract

There are certain invariants of heroic poetry, elements that define it essentially: the theme – a narrative about "extraordinary deeds", famous, adventurous topics, in the style of "traditional heroic mythology" (Marino) – and the idealized typology so that the epic hero usually occurs like a sum of the virtues appreciated by the community which assumes him. Very likely influenced by the Mesopotamian one from the beginning of the second millennia B.C., the Homeric epic exerts its influence further in time and cultural geography, over the Latin one from the end of the 1st century B.C. and, *via* the *Aeneid*, over the Germanic epic from the Middle Ages. Through Virgil, Homer's self-confessed competitor, there could be clarified an issue of the European literary history: how did the transition from the "heroic song" of the Germanic tribes – "lost, as long as it was not recorded in writing" (Curtius) –, to the Anglo-Saxon heroic epic or the Medieval German one (*mittelhochdeutsch*) occur? *The Aeneid* appears to be, according to Heusler and Curtius, the missing link between the epic tradition of Mediterranean Antiquity and the Germanic Medieval heroic epic. (The latter, the product of a culture that, by its "barbarian" roots, had the inspiration of and ability to assimilate, from the defeated Rome, the classic inheritance of Greek-Latin humanism). The literary heredity that unites Homer, Virgil and the Germanic epic on the background of Mesopotamian loans, provides yet another very interesting example of (inter)cultural intermediation and continuity in the Eurasian space, within a historical interval of almost four millennia – from Gilgamesh's legendary rule in Uruk and its literary echoes to the Germanic heroic epic from the Middle Ages.

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