

PARADOXICAL PROVERBS AND SATIRE IN SUMERIAN LITERATURE

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The Sumerian literary compositions have, in modern times, been presented in serious looking publications which would not, at first glance, seem to leave the impression that they contain a material rich in many aspects of humor. Yet, the frequent play on comic effects, originating from a large variety of paradoxical contradictions, is perhaps the strongest means of expression with which the Sumerian poetic texts operate. This applies not only to the so-called wisdom texts (proverbs, disputations, satires, etc.), but also in no small degree to Sumerian mythological poems.

The present study cannot possibly attempt to bring all instances to light, for much of the relevant material is not yet published, and a large monograph would be needed. Its sole purpose is to draw attention to the phenomenon under discussion by giving some illustrative examples, with the particular view in mind of pointing out the consequences of the methodology used for the interpretation of our sources.

We must assert, first, that humor, irony, sarcasm, satire, etc., are indirect means of communication which only make sense when seen in a tacit opposition to something else. The humorous statement reduces a seemingly serious matter by pointing to its relative importance in a larger perspective; the ironical one does so by saying the opposite of what is intended; the sarcastic one does so in a harsh or bitter manner; and the satirical one describes someone whose behavior is contrary to good manners, in order to ridicule him. In any case the effect of the indirect expression is much stronger than that of the direct one, but of course only if it is understood by the one to whom it is addressed. An even sharper effect will appear if the message is understood by a third person, but not by the one to whom it is addressed, or if it is placed in the mouth of one who does not himself understand it.

Already an important methodological conclusion follows: The comical effect of a given statement appears only if it contains a contradiction in itself, or if an implicit contradiction is present. Therefore, if the Sumerian poetic texts make use of comical effects, we at once end up in the same kind of methodological considerations which I have expounded in my study of Sumerian proverbs (Alster 1975b) and of symbolism in hymns and myths (Alster 1975d), namely that no element in any Sumerian poem can be interpreted with certainty if deprived of relational context. This is due to the multi-level nature of the poetic expressions. In the proverbs, it

is not the literal meaning of the individual saying that counts, but the abstract idea which is actualized each time the saying is placed in a new context—the important point being that the same phrase may be capable of expressing several different ideas depending on its application to ever new circumstances. Similarly, in a hymn or a myth, the possibility of a switch into a metaphorical plane is always present, so that theoretically speaking a whole passage or even a whole poem may function as an allegory operating with multiple meanings at a time. The refinement in operating with metaphors and symbols is again conditioned by their indirect means of communication. In particular the symbol is capable of expressing much more than the literal value of the word would seem to suggest, and constantly postulates an analogy between vaguely known cosmic functions and well known terrestrial ones. The symbol thus makes sense on a literal level and on one, or perhaps even several, metaphorical levels at a time. The meaning of a given symbol can only be clarified by a cautious analysis of the context in which it is placed. A further consequence of the indirect means of communication is the chance of a constant play on ambivalent possibilities, often reinforced by the extreme thrift with regard to the use of grammatical elements, as well as conscious play on the tension which originates from the expected issue of a passage and the preceding expansion of this passage, eventually by means of metaphorical descriptions which pretend to mislead the listener; a tension which may be further emphasized if the issue, when it finally comes, has the character of a comical anticlimax. One will understand that, in a Sumerian text, the problem is not only what each line says, but in no less degree where in the structural organization of the poem each line is placed.

An important conclusion follows: The study of the literal meaning of the Sumerian words does not necessarily lead to the full understanding of any text whatsoever. References, Akkadian equivalents, lexical entries, etc., are useful only insofar as it is pointed out exactly what the words and phrases under discussion refer to in each particular context. Thus, to mention one example, through a structural study of the composition “The Hymn to the Hoe,” one can make out that the “hoe” is in one line a symbol of lightning, then of a constellation, then of thunder, then presumably the Pleiades (the “hunting net” of Gilgames in which he, apparently, catches the spirits of the dead), etc. (cf. Alster 1975d, Sec. VI), all of which does not exclude the possibility that it is simultaneously a concrete hoe. It would not help to provide a long list of references from other texts unless it has been clarified how the word has been used in each particular case. Akkadian equivalents, usually considered the magical means which solves all problems, would not have helped here, but one might have succeeded in dissolving the symbolism, to some extent at least, by a cautious analysis of the context, even without knowing the literal meaning of the word and its Akkadian translation.

It is characteristic of the Sumerian poetic language, that not only a large

number of traditionally coined expressions and complete phrases, but even single words may be of an ambivalent and dialectical nature. In most discussions of the meaning of the most essential of all words with regard to the understanding of Sumerian texts, the term *me*, it has tacitly been taken for granted, both that a single translation could be found (e.g. “göttliche Kräfte”), and that Akkadian translations would help to solve the problem. In reality the meaning can only be established on the basis of a study of the contexts in which it is placed. One would then soon realize its dialectical nature, which implies that under certain circumstances it is something abstract (“plan, measure, archetype,” etc.), and under other circumstances a visible actualization of an abstract plan (Alster 1975c, n. 33). Therefore, several translations of the word are equally possible, but which of them to choose in a given case depends on the analysis of the context in which it is placed.

I repeat, therefore, that no element in any Sumerian text should be treated without taking into account its reciprocal relations to the surrounding context. The poetic language is coined through ages of repeated use so as to enable the same expressions to yield an infinite number of nuances depending on the various manners in which they are used. The following study will seek to demonstrate the use of comic contradictions in Sumerian texts. It will take several possibilities into account, namely that a given statement may be comical by itself if it contains an expressly mentioned contradiction, or if it contains an implicit contradiction to something not directly mentioned, or if a statement which is not comical by itself is placed in an unexpected satirical context. In every case one must keep in mind that any comic statement by itself may receive a further implication depending on its actual application in a given context. Our investigation will move from relatively simple examples of juxtaposition of two incompatible words to complete satirical texts.

I. *Juxtaposition of Incompatible Words*

Paradoxical combinations of two contradictory words, like the English “science fiction,” are known in many languages. An evident Sumerian example is *galam-ma hu.ru* “exalted fool” (*Example 1*), which comes close to the English “prize idiot.” We note that *galam*, approximately meaning “artful,” by itself may be ambivalent. It is usually used in a positive sense, but in “The Instructions of Šuruppak” 255 *galam-ma* “an exalted one” is apparently used in a negative sense of a despot.

Such polarizations are frequent in satirical descriptions. I have elsewhere (Alster 1975b, Chap. VIII n. 5-7) pointed to the fact that the names of the persons described in three Sumerian satires are built on the same model: a *dùg-ga ur-ra* “The good descendant of a dog” (*Example 2*), *engar dùg lù.lil-lá* “The good farmer, the fool” (*Example 3*), and *dím-ma-ni ús-a-ni* “His plan is his track” (i.e., “wise after the event,” or Epimetheus)

(*Example 4*). In all cases the first portion of the name contains a positive evaluation, but the second a negative one which unexpectedly contradicts the positive one without permitting any mediation, thereby turning it into a caricature. In the ancient cultures it makes good sense to call a man “good farmer,” for the precise knowledge of the agricultural terms usually plays a great rôle in proverbial wisdom (Alster 1975b, Chap. I c). By simultaneously calling him “fool” one revokes the positive evaluation in a paradoxical manner which is much stronger than if one had called him “fool” right away. The paradoxical message suggests several possible implications, e.g., that the man himself pretends to be a clever farmer.

Example 2, quoted above, may serve as an illustration of the frequent use of animal similes to describe human beings (cf. Alster 1975b, Chaps. III q and IX b). Further instances are: amar kir₄ šu nu-dím (var. šu nu-zu) “hyena cub without limbs” (lit. “for whom hands have not been created,” var. “are unknown”) (*Example 5 a*), the point being that swift limbs are an indispensable characteristic of hyenas. This expression is followed by an equally paradoxical one, ka₅.a bar kušu₂.ku₆ “a fox with the side of a crab” (*Example 5 b*), where again the second portion contradicts one of the essential attributes of a fox, that of swiftness. A further comic effect starts to appear when we realize that the man to whom these paradoxes are applied in what follows is described as a thief (Satire 1, 10ff.). In other words, he is too clumsy to be able to escape.

While animal descriptions may hint at a person’s bad behavior or bodily appearance, most of them certainly point towards intellectual deficiencies, thus za.e dím-ma-zu dím-ma ugu.ugu₄.bi galga ur.gi₇-ra-gim “you—your plan is the plan of a monkey, the counsel of a dog” (*Example 6*), which contains two paradoxes, both of which are found elsewhere (cf. Sjöberg 1972, 110).

II. Paradoxical Proverbs

Many Sumerian proverbs are structured on oppositions similar to the ones just treated. The basis may be a contradiction between someone’s inner qualities and his outer appearance. This is the case with umbin.ku₅ tóg.mu.dur_x-ra mu₄-mu₄ “a manicurist dressed in dirty clothes” (*Example 7*), which can be understood positively as implying that even a bad looking person may have positive values. It is more likely, however, to have been evaluated negatively, in which case it points towards a person who is less faultless than he is supposed to be, or pretends to be, or in particular one who pretends to be able to help others without being able to help himself.

Numerous similar examples could be adduced from the satirical descriptions in the disputations. As an illustration may serve ur.sag gub-ba šu-bi-šè lá-a “a hero who hesitates, twiddling his thumbs” (lit. “a hero who stands, holding (something) in the hands”) (*Example 8*). It is symptomatic that the description serves to deny that the person in question possesses the positive values claimed at first, by showing that he fails to respond properly to a given challenge.

A very concise form of the same type is found in enumerations of anomalies, such as the extremely difficult proverb $u\check{s}_7(KA \times LI)$ dug_4-ga $g\grave{ir}i$ $nu-kin-a$ $KA.te.en.na$ $sa\check{h}ar$ $nu-gi_4-a$ $eme.ak$ $an.bir_x(NE)$ $an.d\grave{u}l$ $nu-g\acute{a}-g\acute{a}$ $n\acute{ig}.gig$ $^dutu-kam$ “a clot of spittle which is not trampled on, a nose-protector(?) which does not keep back the dust, a sunshade(?) which does not afford shade at noon, are abominations to Utu” (*Example 9*), where it is to be noted that the expression “is an abomination to Utu,” which is a recurrent end-formula (cf. Alster 1975b, Chap. II g), here receives an unexpected climatic implication, for Utu, both being the god of justice and the god of the sun, is logically related to the idea of affording shade in a different manner than he is to trampling on spittle.

Equally frequent in the disputations are sayings which ridicule people who handle valuables in a foolish manner. Thus, in “Dialogue 2” 52, it is said: $za.e$ $n\acute{ig}.tuku-zu$ $t\acute{u}g-ga-\grave{a}m$ $a-ab-[dul]$ “you hide your property under a garment” (*Example 10 a*), which is the Sumerian equivalent to the well known “to hide one’s light under a bushel.” The text leaves no doubt that this is considered a foolish thing to do, for the statement is preceded by one which says that, “in our city,” the rich are easily distinguishable from the poor, and it is followed by an anticlimactic one which denies that the man has any property at all: $tukum.bi$ $n\acute{ig} nu-tuku-zu$ $t\acute{u}g$ $\grave{h}a-[\dots-dul]$ $za.kam$ $za-ra$ $ab-l\acute{a}-e-[en]$ “it is certainly things which you don’t have that you cover under a garment, you are devoid of things that are yours!” (*Example 10 b*).

The contraction between the value of a given thing and the manner in which it is used also underlies such sayings as:

Example 11:

$[u\check{h}-e$ $gada]$ $ba-l\acute{a}$

$[num.sa\check{h}ar-ra]$ $gi.kid.a\check{s}.rin$ $ba-e-si$

$[mu\check{s}-da].gur_4-ra$ $[\check{s}utu]m$ $an(!)-na-an-d\grave{u}$

Linen is stretched out for the flea.

The . . .-basket (= “meat-safe”?) is filled for the blow-fly.

The store house is built for the lizard.

The first two of these sayings are actually quoted in a disputation (“Dialogue 1” 14-15), thus giving them the implicit implication that the man to whom they are addressed is a fool who does not take care to protect his own valuables, so that the idea comes close to the English “to throw pearls before swine.”

A large number of proverbs are structured on contradictions between two incompatible evaluations of the same thing. This idea as such is expressed by the following proverb: $[g]u$ $bala$ gu $ki.ta$ $al-ak-e$ “to make the distant side the nearer side” (*Example 12*), which corresponds to the English “to prove that black is white.”

The following proverb expresses a contradiction between two different evaluations of the same thing in two different moments: $al-g\acute{a}l-la$

túg.níg.dara₂-àm ú.gu ba-an-dé túg.ga-àm “being at hand it is (considered) a (dirty) rag, having disappeared, it is (considered) a (fine) garment.” (*Example 13*).

One of the most interesting examples of this type is the following: en.na ti-la ku.li-ni-im u₄ ug₅-ga-a gal₅.lá-ni-im “as long as he is alive it/he is his friend, when he is dead it/he is his demon” (*Example 14*). It is to be noted that the demon here symbolizes the power which causes someone’s death, as e.g., in the myth “Dumuzi’s Dream.” We can take this proverb as a model of the manner in which a proverb functions. As is seen, we can establish the internal logical relations of the proverb without knowing its external relations (cf. Barley 1972, 744). Such a proverb is a “concrete expression generalised by the erasure of semantic markers. It is interpreted in actual use by the allocation of fresh linguistic markers, drawn from context. This general state of affairs thus becomes available for manipulations” (Barley 1972, 747). Therefore, “we can only adequately understand a proverb by viewing it as operating by a process of substituting in the underlying structural description” (Barley 1972, 740). In our case this means that the structural description of the internal relations would denote that a positive relation between x and a person y is converted into a negative relation between x and y. We are in the fortunate position to be able to pinpoint how this proverb was given concrete sense in two different cases by substitutions of the hidden terms:

1. In Proverb Collection III 16, our proverb is preceded by one which deals with a person who eats too much. Therefore, in this specific case, the proverb means: The man who eats too much will be killed by food. Here it is hardly necessary to stress that the Sumerian proverb collections should not be read as single unrelated sayings, but, on the contrary, the manner in which the individual sayings are grouped together is a highly important matter with regard to all aspects of the interpretation (cf. Alster 1975b, *passim*).

2. In a uniquely interesting fragment of a historical composition, PBS 5 76 (*Example 15*), of which only the final episode is preserved, we find a description of a ruler (whose name is not extant) who addresses the sun god by means of liver omens, water libations, and incense (col. vi 2-8) in order to obtain an oracle, apparently concerning a vassal who has revolted against him. This results in a quotation of a variation of our proverb (col. vi 9-11): u₄ ti-la ku.li-ni-im] en.na ÚŠ-a gal₅.lá gal hé-[a] i-im-gi₄ “‘when he is alive he is his friend, as long as he is dead, let him be his big demon,’ was the answer,” an oracle which in its ambiguity is worthy of those of Delphi, and provides the proof that such oracles were known to the Sumerians. In the following section of the text, the ruler again addresses the sun god (col. vi 12) describing the attack of the antagonist (col. vi 13-30). Most probably our ruler was killed by the antagonist (this section is missing), as is also most likely to be the implication of the oracle. This is suggested by the final episode of the composition (col. vii), according to which a (new) ruler was

crowned (1-26), and the army (of the antagonist?) was scattered (27-33).

The proverb just quoted leaves the possibility open that the person to whom it is addressed considers something or someone friendly without knowing that it or he is hostile. As an example of a reversal of this pattern may serve *lul dug₄-ga-ab zi dug₄-ga-ab lul ba-e-si-ke* “tell a lie, tell the truth, it will be counted as a lie” (*Example 16*), where we have a sarcastic contradiction between the real value of something and the manner in which it is evaluated.

The humorous contradiction that reduces the importance of all troubles by indicating their relative significance in view of the inevitability of death, can be illustrated by the following saying: *ti-la lul-la hul na-an-gu.ul-l[a] gam ha.la-zu mu-un-g[ál]* “life is evil, don’t make it worse (than it is), you have to die (anyway)” (lit. “to die is your lot”) (*Example 17*).

The latter example illustrates one of the essential topics of Sumerian proverbs, the *memento mori* (cf. Alster 1975b, Chap. VI b, VIII and IX a). This idea often goes together with the notion “pride goes before a fall” (cf. e.g. “The Instructions of Šuruppak” 116-19, and Alster 1975b, Chap. VIII). As an exemplification may serve: *é.gal ní-bi-šè gam-e-dam* “the palace is termed to collapse by itself” (*Example 18*), which structurally is closely related to Examples 7 and 8, quoted above. More frequently such sayings are structured in two parallel, but contradictory, sentences, thus:

Example 19:

é.gal u₄ diš ama tu-da-àm
u₄ diš ama a.nir-ra-àm

The palace: One day it is a mother who gives birth,
the next day it is a mourning mother.

Example 20

lugal-mu hul-la-zu an-gu.l[u-e]n
ù ír pà-da-zu an-gu.lu-[e]n

My king: How big was your pleasure!
And how big was your weeping.!

Of these the latter comes close to the Danish “*høt at knejse, dybt at falde*.”

Another type of contradiction is involved in proverbs of impossibility, which are frequent in the Sumerian material. As illustrations may serve *kur-ra kur na-an-na-dub-bé* “do not heap up a mountain in the mountains” (*Example 21*), and *níg gú kud-kud-du gú nam-ba-e-kud-du* “do not cut off the neck of that which has had its neck cut off” (*Example 22*). It is interesting to notice that both of these proverbs are found in contexts which show that their actual application is to warn against trying to oppose death.

Closely related to these proverbs are those which deal with the futile attempt to avoid realizing the consequences of something unavoidable. This is a possible interpretation of the following description of an absurd

situation: gud šár-ra šurum-bi nu-gá[l-la-àm] “from 3600 oxen there is no dung” (*Example 23*), which is similar to the English “where there’s smoke, there’s fire.” A similar absurd situation is also contained in ur.gi₇ ùr-ra-šè mu-un-e₁₁ “the dog has climbed up on the roof!” (*Example 24*), which might have been addressed to a person who boasts to have done something impossible.

A strongly scornful effect may appear when two paradoxes are combined in such a way that a logical analogy between them is suggested (cf. Alster 1975b, Chap. III j). This type can be illustrated by dub.sar šu nu-a nar mili₂ (KA×LI) nu-a “a scribe without a hand (is as impossible as) a singer without a throat!” (*Example 25*).

The futile deed is again hinted at in descriptions of comical situations, such as áb nu-tu-[d]a(?) -gim amar-za nu-me-a mi-ni-ib-kin(?) -kin(?) -e-en “like a cow that has not given birth you are looking for a calf of yours which does not exist!” (*Example 26*), which uses an effect which is very similar to that of *Example 10 b*, quoted above.

A more complicated comic situation underlies the following proverb: u₁ ur.maḥ-e é.tùr-šè ur.gi₇-re éš sig sur-ra(?) ì-mu₄ “when the lion (came) to the pen, the dog was wearing a leash of spun wool” (*Example 27*), which implies that the dog was tied with a leash made from the wool of the very sheep which he was supposed to guard, and so could not protect them against the lion, as already suggested by Gordon 1958, 48.

Since the existence of the proverb is always conditioned by the possibility of manifold application of the same logical relations, and, as is well known, an essential basis of proverbial wisdom is to warn against doing things which may do harm to oneself (cf. Alster 1975b, Chaps. III g and V f), it is always possible to seek for the external relations of a proverb in a repetition of the internal structure, applied to the person to whom it is addressed. Therefore, the following proverb: uzu ur.bar.ra na-an-kú-e-[en] “do not eat the flesh of a wolf!” (*Example 28*), may be understood as implying that, if one eats a wolf, one runs the risk to be eaten by a wolf oneself, a statement which more generally could be viewed as a sarcastic warning against contacts with dangerous persons, but other interpretations are of course also possible.

Another sort of contradiction may be illustrated by ^diskur an dar-dar-re kuš.a.gá.lá nu-dar-re “the storm splits the heavens, but it does not split the water skin” (*Example 29*), where we have an illogical relation between a seemingly irresistible cosmic power being opposed by a seemingly little and insignificant one.

A highly comic effect appears when a conflict which cannot be solved is expounded. If my interpretation is justified, this is the case with ka₅.a BIR(?) -re al-ús-sa BIR(?) -re nu-tur-tur ù e.ne nu-kúš-ù “a fox was pursuing a . . . (unidentified animal, tentatively butterfly): The butterfly(?) was not forced into a corner, and he (the fox) did not become tired” (*Example 30*). As is seen, no conciliation is suggested, so one has to

visualize the two animals pursuing each other eternally.

The ultimate type of comical effect to be considered here consists of the unexpected play on words, where a situation and a name is involved:

Example 31:

ì-gin-gin-na-ke₄-eš
 ì-kaš₄-kaš₄-{na}-ke₄-eš
 ba-an-du ba-an-du
 mu-mu-šè ba-an-dug₄

Because he always went,
 because he always ran,
 “He went! He went!”
 —they called him as a name.

The point here depends on the recognition of the pun between the situation, the name (“He went” = ba-an-du), and the sound of the verb “they called him” (ba-an-dug₄). This type of pun is frequent in Sumerian texts (cf. below, *Example 39*), Alster 1975c with n. 8, and Biggs 1966, 80).

The relatively limited and by no means exhaustive material which has been presented here suffices to demonstrate that the essential patterns of the Sumerian proverbs can be perceived through an ordered and systematic structural analysis. The further possible consequences of such an analysis on a larger scale can only be intimated here.

In a study of Romanian paradoxical proverbs, Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu (1971) has suggested that the study of such proverbs can lead to a deeper insight in certain words (e.g., “money, rich, miser, thrifty, yours, healthy, good, brave, young(ling), old, too, greedy, pits himself, self, God, liar, drunk, pity, unproved, jest, silence”), which linguistically “constitute lexical abbreviations for one or several paradoxes,” and as such are paradoxical words which “appear to have a paradoxical semantic interpretation.” Therefore, “the Lexicon of a language . . . cannot be said to exclude contradictions . . .” Such paradoxical words “are semantically vague” and “their highly subjective predication becomes a symptom for the thinking of the user.” The perception of such words can be correlated with the theories of Cl. Lévi-Strauss, according to whom certain words denote mediatory functions which attempt to solve logical contradictions (e.g., clothes in relation to nature-culture, etc.), the important point being that such words “have a somehow contradictory semantic representation which the linguist is not yet prepared to account for.”

The recognition of such words, which actually are extremely characteristic of the Sumerian language, might lead to great progress in the study of Sumerian lexicography. It has usually been taken for granted that the lexicographical study of Sumerian words could be undertaken independently from the analysis of the literary aspects of the texts, so that when the meaning of the words had been established, e.g., by means of

Akkadian equivalents, then the translation and understanding of the texts would follow automatically.

If the approach suggested here is justified, the “meaning” of such words can never be established permanently, simply because they do not have “one” meaning which exists independent of relational context. This does not mean, of course, that Akkadian equivalents are insignificant, but they constitute nothing more than material of potential value, and each instance must always be evaluated against a given context. Any word may theoretically be ambiguous and ambivalent, and may therefore have several “meanings” at a time, and often these meanings do not coincide with any single Akkadian term. The translation of a given word must therefore always be established on the basis of a perception of the reciprocal interrelations in a given context.

It is easily seen that numerous Sumerian proverbs are based on such “paradoxical” terms as e.g. “money” (i.e., merchant, rich, poor, beggar, miser), death, life, truth, liar, boaster, the palace, war, civilization, barbarism, beer, drunkenness, clothes, diligence, laziness, etc. (cf. e.g., Alster 1975b, *passim*). It follows that under certain circumstances the paradoxical proverb may be viewed as nothing but an explicit illustration of a contradictory semantic representation (cf. e.g., *Example 18*, which is an illustration of the contradictions involved in the term “palace”), and therefore these proverbs might be of great value for deeper insight into the lexical structure of the language.

As is seen, this study has so far moved in a methodological circle which returns to the starting-point, namely that no element of any text can be interpreted with certainty if deprived of relational context. The remainder of this study will move in a similar circle, but instead of concentrating on the logical relations between single words, it will concentrate on the relations between complete statements.

I have suggested elsewhere (Alster 1975b, Chap II h; Alster 1975d, int.) that the proverb, being a traditionally coined statement concerned with fundamental logical relations applicable to manipulations, exemplifies, in the briefest possible manner, the functions of the Sumerian poetic language in its entirety, one that is characterized by an oral-formulaic diction (Alster 1972) where each traditionally coined poetic expression can acquire ever new implications when related to something else.

It is worthy of mention that recent important paremiological studies (e.g., Barley 1972, 749) have recognized the fundamental analogy between poetry on a larger scale, myths, and proverbs, all of them being characterized by transferring generalizations based on past events into timeless and always valid categories. It further deserves mention that the importance of viewing both linguistic and poetic, as well as other cultural phenomena, as a constant interaction of mutual interrelations, is increasingly becoming recognized in many fields of research, and has also resulted in attempts at creating a standardized scientific language with

which to express such relations (Greimas 1966).

In what follows we shall seek to take the consequence of these ideas by proceeding to still longer texts, always viewing them as being based on logical relations between their constituent elements.

III. *Wellerisms*

We shall now consider a highly interesting type of proverb, the one for which Archer Taylor has coined the designation "wellerism" after Samuel Weller of Dickens who uses many proverbs of this sort (Taylor 1962, 221). Hitherto no one has thought of the possibility that the Sumerian material might provide documentation for this type, and all the relevant examples have been classified as "fables" (cf., e.g., Gordon 1958, 3). However, although most instances known to me are concerned with animals, I cannot see why this should prevent us from classifying them as wellerisms, for they certainly fulfill the formal requirements, and, as already mentioned (sec. I), the use of animals as referents in Sumerian proverbs is customary. The presence of this type in Sumerian material is of obvious historical interest, since the problems of its historical origin have been much discussed (cf., e.g., Taylor 1962, 203-207).

The wellerism has two parts, the context description and the discourse. There are two important points to be made here: 1) Many Sumerian proverbs include quotations, but these cannot be considered wellerisms unless a comical contradiction appears as a result of the combination of the two parts (cf. Alster 1975b, Chap. II f with n. 6). 2) In Sumerian poetry the insertion of direct speech without introductory lines (such as "he said" or something similar) is customary (cf. Alster 1975b, Chap. II f). Therefore, we must be prepared to consider sayings which contain both a context description and a discourse, even if no introductory marker to the latter is present. It is to be noted that the Sumerian language possesses a special grammatical element, -e.še, that can be attached to a verb, thereby apparently under certain circumstances replacing an introductory marker (cf. for this particle Falkenstein 1952).

It is of obvious interest for our purpose to notice that either the context or the discourse, or both, may be fixed expressions, e.g., already existing proverbs (cf. Barley 1972, 733; Taylor 1962, 220). The citation of an otherwise "sober" proverb in a ridiculous context may result in a most comical effect. Our material is too limited to enable us to undertake a detailed investigation of the effects that can be used, but, as far as I can see, all the Sumerian examples have their basis in a ridiculous contradiction which consists of letting someone utter a comment on a given situation in such a way that he unmasks himself as being a boaster or fool without contact with realities.

In what follows I shall cite some typical examples of wellerisms. Other more problematic examples, which either would demand a more detailed commentary or are in need of collation, can be found in Gordon's publications, and will not be treated here.

Example 32:

ka₅.a-a a.ab.ba-šè giš-a-ni ù-bí-in-sur
a.ab.ba TÛN-bi kâš-mu-um-e.še

The fox urinated into the sea:

“The sea—(all) its surface(?) is my urine!” (he said).

Example 33:

ka₅.a idigna-šè kâš ì-sur-sur-ra
a.eštub.ku₆ ba-zi-ge-en-e.še

The fox urinated into the Tigris:

“I am causing the high tide to rise!” (he said).

Example 34:

anše.kur lú.u₅-a-ni ù-mu-ni-in-šub
tukum.bi gú.un-mu da-rí-šè
ne.en.nam al-sig-en-e.še

The horse, after he had thrown off his rider:

“Should my burden always be this,
how weak I would become!” (he said).

Example 35:

anše bara₂.lá-a-ni ù-mu-ni-in-šub
du.lum u₄.bi.ta geštu₂-gá ba-an-u_x.lu-u[n]-e.še

The ass, after he had thrown off his packs,

“The burdens of former days are forgotten” (he said).

Example 36:

anše id-da al-diri-diri-ge-ma ur.gi₇-re šu ba-ši-ib-ri-ri
[m]e.na.àm al-e₁₁-dè al-kú-e.še

The ass was swimming in the river, and the dog clung to him:

“When will he climb out and be eaten?” (he said).

Example 37:

gala-e dumu-ni a ḥa-ba-an-da-ra-ra
uru.ki gá-a-gim ḥé-dù kalam gá.e-gim ḥé-en-ti

The *gala*-priest threw his child into the water:

“Let him build a city like mine, let the people live like me!” (he said).

The refinement of the wellerism is based on the indirect manner in which the fool unmask himself, and the effect is much stronger than if the idea had been expressed right away. It is interesting to note that a similar effect is used on a much larger scale in the Sumerian composition “The Father and his Disobedient Son,” now published by Å. Sjöberg (JCS 25, 105-169), if I understand the text correctly (cf. my forthcoming note in RA). It seems to be a satire of the art of the singers, from the viewpoint of the scribes. The text starts in a traditional manner with the father accusing his son of being lazy at school, but suddenly and quite unexpectedly, the

father unmasks himself as being a boasting singer, who finds his son worthy of becoming nothing but a ridiculous clown, the point being that, in the opinion of the scribes, all singers are lazy boasters, and really not better than clowns. If this interpretation is correct, the effect of the entire text is most comical, for all that the father says about his son should in fact be understood as applying to himself.

IV. *Fables*

Having considered a number of both simple and more complicated types of proverbs, we shall now move on to some examples of fables which soon will reveal themselves as being structured on contradictions similar to those underlying many proverbs, only the fables operate with expansions and repetitions which serve to emphasize certain points while at the same time keeping the listener in suspense as long as possible about the outcome, thereby giving room for greater poetic elaboration and tension (cf. Alster 1975b, Chaps. IV f and V b).

The first fable to be mentioned is built on an unsolved contradiction similar to the one underlying *Example 30*, quoted above.

Example 38:

ka₅.a úr giš.ád-šè in-ku₄-ma
 ur.gi₇-re ká-na ba-an-tuš
 è-ma-ab è-dè nu-ub-zu-àm
 gú-e-ta a.na.gin_x(GIM)-nam in-ku₄
 en.na nu-{al}-sar-sar al-tuš-en e.še

A fox entered a burrow
 and a dog sat down at the entrance:
 "Come out to me!" It would not come out.
 "I can easily come in from the other side!" (said the dog).
 "As long as you don't chase me away, I will sit here!" (said the fox).

As is seen, we have a situation with two animals waiting for each other *ad infinitum*, without any solution being suggested.

Another fable, which combines an unexpected anticlimax (cf. *Examples 10b* and *26*) with a pun on a situation and a name (cf. *Example 31*), reads as follows:

Example 39:

ur.maḥ-e ùz ḥu.nu-a ù-mu-ni-in-dab₅
 šu ba-àm u₃ tab-ba-mu gur₄-ra ga-mu-ra-ab-sum
 tukum.bi šu mu-ri-bar-re mu-zu dug₄-ma-ab
 ùz-dè ur.maḥ-e mu-na-ni-ib-gi₄-gi₄ za.e mu-mu nu-e-zu
 umum_x(DIM₆) mu-e-da-ak-e mu-mu-um
 u₄ ur.maḥ-e é.tùr-šè i-im-gen-ne-en-na-a
 mu-e-búr-e-en gù al-dé-dé-e
 e.ne gú.ri-ta mu-un-na-ni-ib-gi₄-gi₄

mu-e-búr-e-en umum_x mu-e-ak bar udu-ḫi-a-ka nu-dúr-ru-na e.še

The lion had caught a helpless she-goat:

“Let me go! I will give you an ewe, a companion of mine,
in the bargain!” (said the she-goat).

“If I am to let you go, tell me your name!” (said the lion).

The she-goat gave the lion the following answer: “You do
not know my name?

‘I cheated you’ is my name.”

When the lion came to the fold,

“I have released you!” he shouted.

She answered from the other side:

“You have released me, ‘You were clever’: As far as sheep
are concerned, there are none of them here!”

The point here rests on the sarcastic conversion of the name “I cheated you” (umum_x mu-e-da-ak-e) into “you were clever” (umum_x mu-e-ak), which sounds almost identical in the Sumerian.

In the next text to be quoted, we have a situation where a woman accuses her husband of being lazy. The answer consists of an indirect message: The husband asserts that the slave girl will know enough to mind her own business. It is ironically implied that the wife should do the same, and also let her husband take care of his own affairs. We thus have a pattern which is turned back against the person who first applied it to somebody else (cf. the comments on *Example 28*). Furthermore, the wife’s own speech is ridiculed, for her obviously exaggerated assertion that the fishing pond has been dried up by a hurricane during the husband’s absence, is rejected by an absurd answer, that the slave girl will take care to fill it by means of a potsherd (cf. *Example 29*).

Example 40:

1. mušen.dù kaš in-tuk-^re¹
2. ku.li-ni-ir gù dé-dè ì-gin
3. ku.li-ni-ir igi nu-mu-ni-du₃-a
4. e.ne lú.bar-ra im-ma-da-an-ri
5. dam mušen.dù-ke₄ dam-a-ni-ir gù mu-un-na-dé-e
6. e.sig.mušen-e sa ù-bí-ná buru₅.mušen-e sa ù-bí-gíd
7. si.si.ig ì-lù-lù
8. ambar tur-zu a mu-da-an-pér
9. má-zu peš_x(Kl.A)-peš_x ab-tag-tag-ge
10. mušen.dù sa-zu ḫé-gíd-i mušen ḫé-zi-zi-i
11. dam-a-ni mu-un-na-ni-ib-gi₄-gi₄
12. [g]eme₂ šika-zu ambar tur-zu a ḫé-en-ta-bal-e
13. [e]me(?)₂-na ḫé-en-zu ní.te-a-ni ḫé-en-zi-zi-i

1. A fowler who had some beer
2. went to talk to his friend,

3. As he did not find his friend,
4. he addressed a foreigner.
5. The wife of the fowler spoke to her husband:
6. An e.sig-bird had fallen into your net, a swallow had come into your
net,
7. (but then) it was confused by a hurricane!
8. The water has dried up from your little fishing pond,
9. your boat has taken the ground!
10. Fowler! You should take care to fix your net, you should let a bird
arise into it!
11. Her husband gave her the following answer:
12. Let the slave girl draw water into your little fishing pond with your
potsherd!
13. Let her understand her own language(?), let her arise by herself!

The last text to be treated here is the fable “The Lazy Slave Girl” (*Example 41*), which expounds an imaginary situation, starting with an ironical invitation to the slave girl to stop working (1). There then follows a sequence of analogies (2-6) which pretend to draw the attention away from the slave girl. This section is followed by a description of the unheard-of consequences of this laziness (7-12), but this time they move sarcastically in the opposite direction by drawing the attention still closer to the slave girl, who finally is addressed directly (11-12). The text ends with a moral which expressly applies the entire story to the slave girl, warning her that these will be the consequences if she does not work (13-15).

Example 41:

1. á.še gi₄.in-e kin na-an-šag₅-ge
 2. dumu gi₄.in-na-ke₄ u na-ab-sal-e
 3. kunga_x(ANŠE.ŠŪ+AN)-da še na-an-kú-e
 4. ù.mu.un-bi ǪŪB.DAR-šè na-an-zé-e
 5. pú a.zé-ba na-an-dé-e
 6. da.pú-ba ú.šim na-an-mú-mú
 7. gùd.uman-na kin ba-sì-ge
 8. túg.níg.dara₂ a.zal-gim ba-ab-nag-gá
 9. lú ma.an.zi.li kuš.suḫub₂ šu ti-a
 10. túg.ám.dara₂ mu₄-mu₄ túg ám.gibil šu ti-a
 11. gi₄.in ù.mu.un gam ga.ša.an gam sila-a úr zé-zé
 12. e.ri na.ám ù.mu.un ir-ra gi₄.in-e na.ám ga.ša.an ir-ra
 13. ám e.me-a mu-ra-ma-ma-al-la
 14. ám u₄.bi.ta nu-mu-da-ab-sá-en
 15. nam.tar egir-ra-ta mu-da-ab-sá-en
1. Hey! Let not the slave girl take pleasure in her work!
 2. Let not the slave girl’s children multiply(?)!
 3. Let not the mule eat barley!
 4. Let not its driver cause it to run(?)!

5. Let not the well flow with sweet water!
6. Let not the herbs grow at the side of the well!
7. —One would have to work for a robber's den!
8. Instead of flowing water one would have to drink from the loin cloth.
9. The one with bare feet(?), having taken on sandals,
10. the one dressed only in a loin cloth, having taken on new clothes,
11. the slave girl, after the husband's death, after the mistress' death, having to roam about the streets,
12. slave, because of the husband's death, slave girl, because of the mistress' death,
13. the present situation, in which you find yourself,
14. the former state of things has never been like this,
15. but the future state of things will be equal to this one!

V *Mythological Satire*

All examples adduced so far are concerned with daily life, describing human beings or animals who act like human beings, thereby expressing human wisdom in a disguised manner. We shall now consider another most interesting phenomenon, namely the comic effect of the travesty which appears when gods who otherwise are taken seriously are described as doing things which only ridiculous people would do. This is the case with a unique Sumerian text, CT 15 28-29 (*Example 42*). It reads as follows:

1. u₄ h_é.gál-la na.nam gi₆ nam.h_é na.nam
2. itu giri_x.zal na.nam mu asila na.nam
3. u₄-ba lú sipa-dè šà h_úl-la aka-dè
4. 'é¹ t_ùr-ra du-dè ur₅-bi zalag-ge-dè
5. [am]aš.kù-ga u₄-gim KÁR-KÁR-re-dè
6. [s]u₆.ba ^ddumu.zi-dè šà kù-ga na-an-tum₄
7. ga.ša.an.an.na ga.ša.an.an.ki.a-ke₄
8. g_ù mu-na-dé-e malga umuš-a-ke₄
9. ^dama.ušumgal.an.na g_ù mu-un-na-ni-ib-bé
10. nita_x.dam-^{*}mu (! text -a-ni) ki.a.ri.a-šè ga-gin
11. é.t_ùr dagal-la-mu èn-bi ga-me-ši-tar
12. amaš.kù-ga-mu a.rá-bi ga-me-ši-zu
13. udu-mu ka ú.kú ga-me-ši-gar
14. a.nag d_ùg-ga èn-bi ga-me-ši-kin
15. nita_x.dam umuš-bi ba-an-na-dug₄
16. malga-a-ni e.ne-ra mu-un-na-an-sum
17. nita_x.dam-ni KU-bi-šè im-ma-an-gi₄
18. kù ga.ša.an.an.na-ke₄ é.t_ùr kalam-ma-ke₄
19. um(!)-mu-ni-in-ku₄ níg.me.'gar¹ ba-an-dab₅
20. mu.gi₁₇(GIG).ib ga.ša.an.an.na 'a¹.gi₆-gim ba-lù
21. ki.ru.gú diš-kam-ma
22. u₄-ba lú sipa-dè edin-šè ba-ra-è

23. me.a ^ddumu.zi-dè é.tùr-ra ga-gin
 24. nin₉-a-ni ga.ša.an dub.sar-ke₄
 25. an-da ki-bi-da-šè ba-ši-su₈
 26. amaš.kù-ga ki udu du.ru.šà-ba
 27. sipa-dè nin₉-a-ni ki-bi ba-an-su-né-éš
 28. ti-le-da-an-ni sipa-dè ti-le-da-an-ni
 29. nin₉-a-ni nar èn.du zu-a KU-ba ti-le-da-an-ni
 30. é.tùr-ra h́é.gál im-mi-in-si
 31. amaš-e nam.h́é.a zal-zal-e
 32. ì-kú-ne ú.sikil ì-kú-ne
 33. ì-sur-sur-ra lál ì.nun-na-ke₄
 34. ì-nag-ne šim ^dKAŠ.KURUN₂
 35. ^ddumu.zi nin₉-a-ni šà h́úl-la zal-e-dè
 36. su₈.^rba¹ ^ddumu.zi-dè šà kù-ga na-an-tùm
 37. u[du(?)] mu-un-ši-lá [é].tùr-ra ba-ši-in-ku₄
 38. [x] mu-un-na-^rni¹-in-du u₈ sila₄-bi-da
 39. sila₄ ama-bi-t[a(?)] ù-mu-un-na-an-kud
 40. ba-ši-in-u₅ [sila₄ ama]-ba(?) gış mi-ni-in-du
 41. sipa-dè nin₉-a-n[i-ra] gù mu-un-na-de-e
 42. nin₉-mu igi bar-^rra¹ sila₄ ama-^rni¹(?) ^ra¹.nam mu-un-ši-u[r₄(?)-ur₄]
 43. nin₉-a-ni mu-un-n[a-ni-i]b-^rgi₄¹-^rgi₄¹
 44. ama-a-ni murgu-na ù-mu-un-ši-^rx¹ i.lu mu-un-di₆-di₆
 45. tukum.bi murgu-na ù-mu-u[n-ši]-^rx¹ i.lu mu-un-di₆-di₆
 46. DU a.na.àm gış a-ni [mu-un-zal(?)-l]e-eš a-ni mi-ni-in-si
 47. máš nin₉-a-ni [ù-m]u-un-ši-gud
 48. ba-ši-in-u₅ [máš nin₉-ba gi]š mi-ni-in-du
 49. sipa-dè nin₉-a-ni [gù] mu-un-na-dé-e
 50. nin₉-mu igi bar-ra máš-e nin₉-[ni] a.na.àm mu-un-ši-ur₄-ur₄
 51. nin₉-a-ni šà nu-dab₅-ba-na [mu]-un-na-ni-ib-gi₄-^rgi₄¹
 52. nin₉-a-ni murgu-na ù-m[u-un-ši-x] i.lu mu-un-di₆-di₆
 53. tukum.bi murgu-na ù.mu-[ši]-^rx¹ i.lu mu-un-di₆-di₆
 54. te-àm a.ri-a-ni gal₄-[l]a mi-ni-in-su-su
 55. gar-ra šeš-mu su(!).lum.ma.ra [x x] ^re.¹.ne BAD ba-u₅
 56. a.ba a.gi₆ ša am mi-ni-in-tuk-e-en-na a.ga-bi-šè
 57. ki.ru.gú 2-kam-ma
 58. sipa-dè su nu-um-[z]i téš {su} la-ba-an-zu(!)
 59. nin₉-a-ni gù mu-un-na-dé-e

1. It was indeed a day of abundance, it was indeed a night of exuberance,
2. It was indeed a month of delight, it was indeed a year of joy:
3. On that day—the shepherd-man—to create happiness,
4. to go to the stall, to make a joyous mood there,
5. to make the holy sheepfold shine like the sun,
6. this is how he, the shepherd Dumuzi, took the solemn decision to do it:

7. The queen of heaven, the queen of heaven and earth,
8. he spoke to her of planning and advice.
9. He, Amašumgalanna, talked to her:
10. My spouse, I will go to the desert,
11. I will take care of my broad stall,
12. I will give an account of my pure fold,
13. I will give my sheep food to eat,
14. I will provide sweet water to drink.
15. To her spouse she spoke about that plan,
16. to him she gave her advice.
17. Her spouse went off to that place.
18. Holy queen of Heaven,
19. after she had entered é.tùr.kalam.ma, it was stricken by terror.
20. The sacred one, Queen of Heaven, was confused like a flood.
21. It is the first kirugu.
22. On that day the shepherd-man went out to the plain.
23. Where, oh Dumuzi (are you going)? — I will go to the stall.
24. His sister, Queen of scribes,
25. was standing(?) there(?) in the open air(?).
26. In the holy sheepfold, where the sheep dwell,
27. there the shepherd met(?) his sister.
28. As he was sitting, as the shepherd was sitting,
29. as his sister, the song-knowing singer, was sitting there,
30. the stall filled with abundance,
31. the sheepfold flowed with exuberance.
32. As they were eating, as they were eating the pure food,
33. as it was dripping—the honey and butter—
34. as they were drinking—the fragrant divine beer—
35. Dumuzi—to make his sister spend the time in a happy mood—
36. this is how he, the shepherd Dumuzi, took the solemn decision
to do it:
37. He bound [four animals(?)] and brought them into the stall.
38. After he had brought them, the ewe and its lamb,
39. he separated the lamb from its mother.
40. He mounted her, [the lamb] copulated with its [mother].
41. The shepherd spoke to his sister:
42. Look, my sister! How lamb plucks(?) his mother!
43. His sister answered him (as follows):
44. After he touched(?) his mother on her back, she screamed!
45. Indeed, after he touched(?) her on her back, she screamed!
46. Hey! What is this? His seed flowed(?), his seed filled her!
47. After he had separated the kid from his sister,
48. he mounted her, [the kid] copulated with [its sister].
49. The shepherd spoke to his sister:
50. Look, my sister! How kid plucks(?) [his] sister!

51. His sister, who (still) did not understand, answered him
(as follows):
52. After he touched(?) his sister on her back, she screamed!
53. Indeed, after he touched(?) her on her back, she screamed!
54. What! His seed is flowing into her vulva!
55. Halt! My brother, a disgrace . . . he mounted.
56. Who (are you) since you have . . . , at the end — ?
57. It is the second kirugu.
58. The shepherd, being fearless, being shameless,
59. spoke to his sister.

Making use of the terminology of VI. Propp in a slightly simplified manner, we can transcribe the composition as follows:

- I. Introduction: Presentation of time and (implicitly) of place: Uruk (1-2).
- II. Violation of interdiction (=transgression of sexual taboo): Dumuzi decides to rape his sister Geštinanna in the sheepfold on the plain (3-6).
- III. “Delegation” of the “hero”: Dumuzi decides to go to the plain in order to take care of the sheep (7-16). He leaves Inanna in an angry mood (=reminiscent of “*méfait*”) (17-20).
- IV. Departure of the hero: Dumuzi goes to the plain (22-23).
- V. The hero is put to the “test”: Dumuzi, having met Geštinanna in the fold, invents a plan when he gets drunk (24-36).
- VI. The “magical object” is placed at the disposal of the hero: Dumuzi finds some animals that can help him to pursue his goal (37).
- VII. “Difficult task”: Dumuzi seeks to let Geštinanna understand his intentions by letting the animals commit incest (37-42), but she fails to understand it at first (=negative response, 43-46). Repetition: 47-50 and 51-56, and perhaps 58ff., the latter presumably with positive result.

Unfortunately the remainder of the composition is missing, but since there would be little point in telling the entire story if Dumuzi did not somehow succeed in raping Geštinanna, we almost certainly have what could be considered an extremely sarcastic use of the function “marriage.” Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that finally Inanna punished Dumuzi in some manner or other for his impudence, which would correspond to “elimination of ‘*méfait*.’”

If this analysis is justified, our text can be viewed as a perverted actualization of a structural pattern which underlies numerous folktales. There is an interesting point to be made here, namely that the fact that a paradigmatic structure can be ridiculed indirectly testifies to the justification of the structural study of these texts. Even if the structure as such is only perceived unconsciously, it is certainly never unimportant, for

any diversion from it will be felt immediately. The well known perverted proverbs, which mock at already existing ones, are perfectly capable of illustrating this (cf. e.g. Barley 1972, 741), but it is most interesting to observe that not only is it possible to ridicule a given concrete proverb, but also the structural formula of a proverb can be ridiculed. As an example may serve the Italian *giòie e dolori, donne e motori* ("pleasures and sorrows, women and motors"), where "motors" replaces the expected "children."

Our poem is thus structured on a well known folktale pattern, the hero who is delegated to depart in order to gain the "princess," obtains a magical instrument by means of which to accomplish a difficult task, and finally is married to the "princess," but a highly comic effect appears when we realize that the "difficult task" here consists of letting the hero's own sister understand that he wants to have sexual intercourse with her, and that the "marriage" consists of the hero committing incest with his sister.

There is a strong point to be made here. Nowhere in the text is it stated expressly what Dumuzi's intention is. This, however, is a conscious result of indirect means of communication, which in fact is characteristic of Sumerian poetry as a whole (Alster 1973, Alster 1975d, Thomsen 1975). The text consciously plays on the possibility of misunderstanding, which in our case may apply to no less than three different persons: 1) The listener. 2) Dumuzi's wife Inanna. 3) Dumuzi's sister Geštinanna. Ironically enough, we are not told what kind of advice Inanna gives Dumuzi in line 16, but we may suspect that she knows more than the text says. The listener will miss the point unless he realizes that the application of the two sequences involving a ewe and its "son" and a she-goat and its "brother" committing incest, is to Dumuzi and Geštinanna, and this insight is likely to occur late, i.e., presumably not until he brings in the she-goat and its "brother" (line 47). A further comic effect appears when, exactly here where the application is evident, Geštinanna herself is expressly stated not to understand it (line 51). This effect is even emphasized by the fact that she actually is sufficiently clever to understand what the animals are doing, namely having sexual intercourse (lines 43-46, 51-56), but Dumuzi, the "hero," is too much of a coward to admit this (lines 42 and 50).

An important conclusion follows: The use of a repeated pattern, here involving a ewe and its "son" and a she-goat and its "brother" (37-46, 47-56), results in a strengthening of the poetic tension. This conclusion is contrary to that held in most Sumerological publications which take it for granted that the repetition is a manifestation of a poetic poverty that diminishes the aesthetic value of the texts, an interpretation which fails to recognize the most essential characteristic of the repetition, namely that the refinement often rests on the point that the same pattern, whether repeated verbatim, or, as in our case, with different wording, is given a new implication each time it is repeated, a phenomenon which also applies to the refrain. A clear example can be found in the myth "Inanna and Enki" where the extremely

long list of cultural norms is recited thrice, but each time with completely different implications (Alster 1975c). It follows that an interpretation which is based on nothing more than the literal translation of the text is scientifically insufficient. The understanding of a text depends on the perception of the logical relations between the hidden and the expressly illustrated conditions. We see again that in a traditional poetic art the implication of a sequence is not brought to light right away by the literal understanding, but only when its logical relationship to the underlying structure has been perceived.

We can make another interesting observation, namely that our text in addition plays on the comic effect of the unexpected use of traditional poetic expressions. From the very beginning there is a ridiculous contradiction between the entire situation and such bombastic expressions as “a day of abundance,” “the queen of heaven, the queen of heaven and earth,” “she of planning and advice,” etc. The effect appears even stronger when we realize that some expressions recur in other texts, in serious context relating to the myths of Dumuzi’s death. Thus, our line 22, which introduces the second portion of the story, “(he) went out to the plain” (edin-šè ba-ra-è), is verbatim identical with a thrice repeated expression in the introduction to the myth “Dumuzi’s Dream” (Alster 1972, 52, lines 1-3), and is thus likely in advance to have been associated with the story of Dumuzi’s death. Also some epithets of Geštinanna, “scribe” in line 24, and “song-knowing singer” in line 29, are paralleled in that myth (lines 21-22), as is the expression i.lu mu-un-di₆-di₆ “she screamed,” in lines 44-45 and 52-53, which recurs in “Dumuzi’s Dream” line 4. We can here start to see an aspect of the oral way of composing that seems often to have been underrated. Not only is such poetry characterized by having created standardized expressions for all frequently recurring ideas, but also by its capability of playing on the unexpected use of a traditional expression. The diction of such poetry would thus tend to become proverbial (cf. Alster 1975b, Chap. I e with n. 6).

VI. Conclusion: *The Existential Paradox*

The mythological satire, a Sumerian example of which has just been treated, is not a rare phenomenon. Famous parallels could be adduced from e.g. Greek and Nordic mythology (Lokasenna). The naive assertion has often been made that such texts have been created at a time when the gods were no longer taken seriously. Our material suggests an entirely different solution. Humor, irony, and sarcasm appear to be logically motivated responses to existential paradoxes with bearings on human life.

In my analysis of the Sumerian myth “Inanna and Enki” (Alster 1975c), I have tried to show that according to Sumerian mythology, human life is conditioned by a logical paradox. If my reconstruction of the plot of that myth is justified, it can be seen that the cultural norms were provided to

mankind when Inanna, the Venus star, descended to the underworld in order to steal them from her “father” Enki by availing herself of her own sexual attractiveness. She succeeded in doing this when Enki got drunk. We note that, in a rather sarcastic manner, Inanna has to receive “everything concerned with the preparation of beer” in addition to the cultural norms, and furthermore that she is “punished” by having to descend eternally to the underworld in order to provide the cultural norms continually to mankind, and also that mankind is “punished” for participating in the divine norms by having to propagate themselves eternally and continually to provide dead men to the underworld.

This myth can be viewed as a key to the understanding of the essential patterns of Sumerian mythology. The important conclusion follows that life, in a paradoxical manner, is conditioned by death. Both gods and mankind have to die in order to create life. The most pregnant expression for this idea is found in “Enlil Hymn” 123-5:

Example 43:

kur.gal ^den.líl-da nu-me-a
^dnin.tu nu-ug₅-ge sag giš nu-ra-ra
 áb-e é.tùr-ra amar-bi nu-šub-bé

Without ‘Great Underworld’ Enlil(’s help),
 Nintu (the mothergoddess) could not kill, could not murder,
 the cow could not have an abortion in the pen.

The implication is beyond doubt when we realize that the text continues by describing the mothergoddess creating life.

The ideas proposed here will account for the ambivalent attitude towards the goddess Inanna, which finds expression in many Sumerian texts (Alster 1975d, Sec. VII-VIII). It is to be seen in the light of the fact that chaos and release from sexual taboos had to be performed every New Year’s day in order to secure the ordered regeneration of time for the following year.

The basis for civilized life is thus a cyclic system which was started by a violation of a sexual taboo by a goddess, which resulted in the continuous propagation of mankind, and the drunkenness of a god, which resulted in the presence of wisdom among human beings. The cycle can only go on if life continually is procured from the realm of the dead.

The mythological satire treated in Sec. V may now be seen to have more serious implications than should be surmised at first glance. As is seen, it concentrates on exactly the two paradoxes which appear to play an important rôle in Sumerian mythology, the excessive use on the part of a god of sexual relations and beer. One could say that, rather than to indicate that the Sumerians did not take their gods seriously, it shows exactly the opposite, that matters of life and death are on display. It is precisely the possibility of ambivalent, i.e., tragic or comic but never indifferent,

evaluation, which constitutes the most essential characteristic of the existential paradox.

We now return to the starting point of this study, the dialectical nature of Sumerian poetry. In order to test the justification of the entire methodological approach, I shall quote a passage which unambiguously shows the positive evaluation of a term which according to our investigation is likely to have a paradoxical and ambivalent nature, the word “beer.” We notice that this word frequently is evaluated negatively, almost becoming a symbol of foolish behavior (Alster 1975b, Chap. III q). According to the myth “Inanna and Enki” it was provided from Enki’s seat, Abzu-Eridu, in the underworld as a complementary aspect of wisdom and culture. This accounts for its positive evaluation in connection with the underworld, in a lamentation for the dead Dumuzi, CT 15 19 (*Example 44*), in which Inanna and Geštinanna, while searching for Dumuzi, receive the following answer from the fly (19-25):

num-me kù ^dinanna-ra gù mu-un-na-dé-e
 num-me ki mu.lu-ni ma-ra-an-pà-dè
 a.na mu-un-ba-e-e
 é.kaš-a-ka é.girin-na-ka
 dumu mu.lu kù.zu-ke₄-ne-ne mu-un-ti-le
 num-me kù ^dgeštin.an.na-ke₄ gù mu-un-na-dé-[e]
 num-me ki šeš ma-ra-an-pà-dè a.na-àm mu-ba AL(sic!)
 é.kaš-a-ka é.girin-na-ka dumu lú kù.zu-ke₄ AMAR sag tuku-a-na

The fly spoke as follows to holy Inanna:

The fly—if it shows you *your (text: her) husband’s place,
 what will you give it?

In the “house of beer,” in the “house of wine,”
 among the sons of the wise men, he dwells!

The fly spoke to pure Geštinanna:

The fly—if it shows you the brother’s place,
 what will you *give it?

In the “house of beer,” in the “house of wine,”
 among the sons of the wise men . . .

As is seen, this text coincides with “Inanna and Enki” by indicating that beer is provided from the realm of the dead, which also is the seat of wisdom and the place from where the cultural and cosmic norms continually are provided.

It can now be seen that Sumerian mythology is founded on a contradiction to which humor is a natural response. It follows that comic effects can be assigned an important function in Sumerian poetry. This study has tried to draw some of the methodological consequences for the interpretation of our sources. The further highly interesting consequences for the comparative study of mythology are outside the scope of this study.

Examples cited:

- Example 1: "Disputation between Bird and Fish" 124, "Dialogue 3" 66, "Dialogue 1" 74. For precise references see Alster 1975a, Chap. VI c, ad line 255 with n. 146-48.
- Example 2: Introductory line to "Satire 1" (Sjöberg 1972, 107).
- Example 3: Introductory line to "Satire 2" (Sjöberg 1972, 107).
- Example 4: Introductory line to "Satire 3." Sources for this text: TuM NF 3 42 "VIII" 24-45, joins ISET 1 123 Ni 9497 "III." Dupl. STVC 96.
- Example 5 a-b: "Satire 1" 2 (Sjöberg 1972, 107).
- Example 6: Emesal disputation, NBC 7805:29f., quoted by M. Civil, JCS 29 (1967) 37.
- Example 7: Proverb Collection VII 14 (=STVC 4 i 8). The concrete application in the context is to a lazy person who wants to feast, but not to work.
- Example 8: "Dialogue 1" 131, "Satire 2" 9, cf. Sjöberg 1972, 114.
- Example 9: Proverb Collection III 9, quoted by Å. Sjöberg, Or NS 39 (1970) 90. My translation differs slightly from that suggested for a part of the proverb by M. Civil, in Cooper 1972, 83, but Civil's translation is undoubtedly basically correct. The translation given here finds indirect support from a parallel in the fragment Ni 3122:2-5.
- Example 10 a-b: "Dialogue 2" 52-53 (=UET 6/2 152:2-3).
- Example 11: Proverb Collection VII 31 (=STVC 3 ii 18-21). The concrete application is here to the miser. Bilingual parallel: Lambert 1960 236 ii 8-13.
- Example 12: Proverb Collection VII 91 (=STVC 3 v 6), Proverb Collection III 181 (cf. Lambert 1960, 275). The interpretation suggested here finds indirect support from the text treated by M. Civil and R. D. Biggs, RA 60 (1966) 5-7. Cf. also Gordon 1960, 136 n. 93.
- Example 13: Proverb Collection VII 99 (=STVC 3 v 25-26), Proverb Collection III 188 (cf. Gordon 1959, 540).
- Example 14: Proverb Collection III 16 (=3N-T 335 ii 9-10 and dupls.), cf. Cl. Wilcke, ZA 25 (1969) 71 n. 24.
- Example 15: PBS 5 76. For an entirely different interpretation of the relevant passage see J. van Dijk, Heidelberg Studien zum alten Orient 237 n. 18.
- Example 16: Proverb Collection II 71 (Gordon 1959, 229). Cf. Alster 1975b, Chap. V an. 6, on the abbreviated proverb in Collection VII 89 (=STVC 3 v 3).
- Example 17: Proverb Collection VII 50 (=STVC 3 iii 15-17), Proverb Collection XI (PBS 1350 i 2-3: ti-la lul-la ħul na-an-gu-la ga.àm ħa-la-zu(!) mu-un-gál), Proverb Collection III 54. Bilingual parallel: Lambert 1960, 237 iv 15. — Note that our proverb is always found in sequences which actualize the pattern: boaster, hubris, memento mori, beggar, etc. It is the recognition of such underlying patterns of contrasting oppositions which may provide a clue to the interpretation of the Sumerian proverb collections, as I have tried to show elsewhere (Alster 1975b, Chaps. V-VIII).
- Example 18: Proverb Collection XI (=PBS 12 29:3). Our proverb is followed by one dealing with Agade which illustrates the matter. Note that, in contrast to what is sometimes assumed, the proverbs should never be interpreted as allusions to concrete historical events. When the Sumerian proverbs contain historical names these are those which have become symbols for always valid abstract notions, completely deprived of concrete information. The same is probably true of the so-called historical omens.
- Example 19: Proverb Collection II 158 (Gordon 1959, 280).
- Example 20: Proverb Collection XII (=Arkeologya Dergisi 8/2 Lev. XXV [Or NS 22 pl. XXXV] Ni 9530+9791 ii 2-3).
- Example 21: "The Instructions of Suruppak" 174 (Alster 1975a).
- Example 22: Proverb Collection I 3 (Gordon 1959, 42). Bilingual parallel: Lambert 1960, 262, obv. 6-7.
- Example 23: Proverb Collection V 26 (Gordon 1958, 15).
- Example 24: Proverb Collection V 109 (Gordon 1958, 68).
- Example 25: Proverb Collection II 43 (Gordon 1959, 204).
- Example 26: Proverb Collection V 34 (Gordon 1959, 17).

Example 27: Proverb Collection V 56 (Gordon 1959, 48).

Example 28: Proverb Collection V 70 (Gordon 1959, 51).

Example 29: UET 6/2 382, Proverb Collection III 76.

Example 30: UET 6/2 215. The verb *tur* here has the connotation “to be in lack of time” (lit. “to be little”). For a similar use see “Dialogue I” 137: *dub ħa-ma-tur ul₁-la-bi ga-ab-til* “I am in a hurry with my tablet, let me finish it quickly” (=UET 6/2 156 r. 7 and dupls.).

Example 31: UET 6/2 278. Play on words is frequent both in Sumerian and in other ancient literatures (such as the Old Testament). The consequences of the failure to recognize such a pun may be illustrated by Th. Jacobsen’s note on the name of the god Dumuzi (Towards the Image of Tammuz, pp. 322-23 n. 6). The term *ki nam.dumu.zi-ka*, in “Nungal Hymn” 71, now published by Å Sjöberg, AfO 24 (1973) 19-46, correctly means “place of child-quickening.” It contains a conscious pun on the name of Dumuzi, as does the term *é nam.dumu.zi-da* “the house where the child is called to life,” in “Ekur Hymn” 56-67 (RSO 32 95-102), both of them being designations of the underworld, a crucial point which is to be viewed in the light of the ideas proposed in Sec. VI of the present study. However, these terms have nothing to do etymologically with the name of Dumuzi, which simply means “The good Child,” so they cannot be adduced in favor of Th. Jacobsen’s translation of that name (cf. Alster 1972, 12).

Example 32: Proverb Collection II 67 (Gordon 1959, 222-23).

Example 33: Proverb Collection II 67 a (Gordon 1959, 531).

Example 34: Proverb Collection V 38 (Gordon 1958, 19).

Example 35: Proverb Collection V 39 (Gordon 1958, 19, restored from UET 6/2 283).

Example 36: Proverb Collection V 42 (Gordon 1958, 20).

Example 37: Proverb Collection II 99 (Gordon 1959, 247).

Example 38: UET 6/2 220.

Example 39: Proverb Collection V 55 (Gordon 1959, 46) — variants not quoted.

Example 40: “The Fowler and his wife.” Sources:

A = N 1237, fig. 1 (published with the kind permission of Prof. Å. Sjöberg), obv. 1-13 = lines 1-13.

B = UM 29-15-667, fig. 2 (published with the kind permission of Prof. Å. Sjöberg), i 7-13 = lines 1-5.

C = Ni 3206 ii 3-15 = lines 1-9.

A, B, and C all belong to Proverb Collection XXI. A variant text of lines 1-10 is found in the Copenhagen National Museum A 10068 r. 7-13 (Proverb Collection XXIV), which I hope to treat elsewhere. The printed text is basically that of A. Variants:

Line 3. B: *ku.li e.ne igi nu-mu-ni-du₈-a*.

Line 4. C: *e.ne lú.kúr-ra im-ma-da-ri*.

Line 6. C: *e.sig-e sa u₅-bí-in-ñ[á] buru₅.mušen-e sa u₅-bí-in-ḡíd¹*.

Example 41: “The Lazy Slave Girl.” Sources:

A = SLTNi 131 ii 3-16 = lines 1-15.

B = TuM NF 3 49:7-18 (Proverb Collection XXI) = lines 1-11.

C = Ni 4360 ii 3-8 (Proverb Collection XXI) = lines 1-16.

D = Ni 4444 frag. b, obv. i = lines 2-6, frag. d, obv. ii = lines 7a-10.

The printed text is basically that of A. Variants:

Line 2: B needs collation. D: *n]a-ab-dù-e*.

Line 3: B: *dusu₂(ANŠE+Û)-da še na-an-kú-e*. C: *dusu₂-da š]e*.

Line 4: B needs collation.

Line 6: B: *da.pú(!)-bi ú.šim na-an-mú-mú*.

Line 7: B: *gùd.uman-na kin(!) ba-e-si(!)-ge*.

Line 7a: B inserts: *ám(!) sag.dili a.ba-a um-ma-x-x-x*. D inserts: *ám x[. . .*

Line 8: B needs collation. D: *túg.ám.dara₂ ‘a’]*.

Line 9: B needs collation.

Line 10: B: *túg.ám.dara₂ mu₄ túg ám(!).gibil šu ti-a*.

Line 11: B: *ù.mu-un [gam] ga.ša.an gam sila-a úr zé(!)-zé(!)*.

The expression *da.pú*, in line 6, occurs in “Inanna and Šukalletuda” 92 = 138, and MSL 10 123, C 11.

gùd.uman-na, in line 7, seems literally to mean “cobweb” or something similar.

For *lú ma.an.zi.li*, in line 9, the context strongly suggests the translation “the one with bare feet.” CAD s.v. *larsinnāti* suggests “club-footed.” My translation also suits the two passages referred to by M. Civil, MSL 12 188: “Dialogue 6” 90 (=Ni 9688 ii 12): *e.sír gir si.ga ma.an.zil.lá-a* “when he walks on the road he is barefooted,” and “Emeš and Enten” (Winter-Summer Debate) 281: *gi.sumun il gi il du₁₀.sa dar-a lú ma.an.zi.lá* “when you carry old reeds, when you carry reeds, the balls of your feet are split (because you are) barefooted.”

For a previous treatment of “The Lazy Slave Girl” see J. van Dijk, *La sagesse suméro-accadienne* (Leiden 1953) 98.

Example 42: CT 15 28-29. Previous treatment: S. N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite* (Bloomington 1969) 102-103, who, most appropriately, states that its “contents have been repeatedly misunderstood and misinterpreted.” Cf. also Alster 1972, 89 n. 10. Notes on the translation:

Line 5: *u₁-gim KÁR-KÁR-re-dè*, lit. “to shine like the day(-light).” *kár-kár* is equated with *nabātu ša ūmi*, cf. AHW s.v. This example may illustrate a methodological error that is frequently made in Assyriological publications. Since the literal translation of *kár* most probably is “to extend, stretch out,” the equation does not imply that *kár* means “to shine,” but only that the Sumerians utilized this verb idiomatically in contexts where the Akkadian language utilized the verb *nabātu*. The methodology underlying the use of Akkadian translations as the basis for the investigation of Sumerian lexicography is in urgent need of reconsideration. — Note that the reading *gur₆-gur₆-re-dè* for our verb might also be considered, cf. e.g. *zi.pa.ág.gá-na u₁-gim KÁR-KÁR-KA* (or *gur₆-gur₆-gù*) “shining upon her throat like the sun,” in UET 1 137 v 4-5 (dedication to Enanedu, cf. C. J. Gadd, Iraq 13 29).

Line 6: Lit. “brought it into his pure heart” (ibid. line 36).

Line 13: Lit. “My sheep—it will let you put food in the mouth.”

Line 17: For the translation of *KU-bi-šè* see Alster 1975a, Chap. VI c, commentary on line 162.

Line 25. A contamination of two different expressions seems to be involved: *an-da ki-bi-šè* “in the open air, at that place,” and *an.ki-bi-da* “heaven and earth.” The translation of *an-da* as “in the open air” is based on “The Instructions of Šuruppak” 124: *an-da níg im-da-lu-lu-un* (cf. Alster 1975a, Chap. VI c on this line; Alster 1975b, Chaps. III n, II i).

Line 26. *du.ru.šà* is emesal for *durun-na*. The sporadic and inconsistent use of emesal in our text is in fact most characteristic of emesal as a phenomenon which actually has nothing to do with a “dialect” in our sense of the word. The so-called emesal dialect is simply a “sweet” pronunciation of the ordinary language.

Line 40. *giš mi-ni-in-du*, phonetically for *giš mi-ni-in-dug₁*.

Line 42. Reconstruction *a.nam . . . ur₁-ur₁* based on line 50.

Line 44. The verb in *ù-mu-un-ši-fx¹* is certainly not *u₅* (against Alster 1972, 84 and 119).

Line 47. *gud* is written phonetically for *kud*, cf. line 39.

Line 55. *su(!).lum.ma.ra* seems to render the well known *su.lum.mar* for which see Cl. Wilcke, *Das Lugalbandaepos* (Wiesbaden 1969) 81 n. 338. I am unable to restore the second portion of the line. The context suggests “it was a disgrace that the kid mounted its sister” or something similar.

Line 56. I am unable to make sense out of *a.gi₆ ša am*. Note, however, that *ša am* might be taken as the verbal prefix *ša-àm-*, and that *a.gi₆* “flood” might hint in an ambiguous manner, both at the same word in line 20, where “flood” metaphorically denotes Inanna’s wrath, and at the sexual activities described in the preceding passage. Our line seems to end with an elliptical exclamation, like “how far (will you proceed)?,” or something similar.

Example 43: "Enlil Hymn" 123-25 (A. Falkenstein, *Sumerische Götterlieder*, I. Teil [Heidelberg 1959] 17).

Example 44: CT 15 19: 19-25.

[The treatment by S. N. Kramer, in *Journal of the Ancient Near East Society*, 5, of CT 15 28-29, treated above as example 42, was not available to me when this study was written.]

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Fig. 1a: N 1237, obv.



Fig. 1b: N 1237, rev.

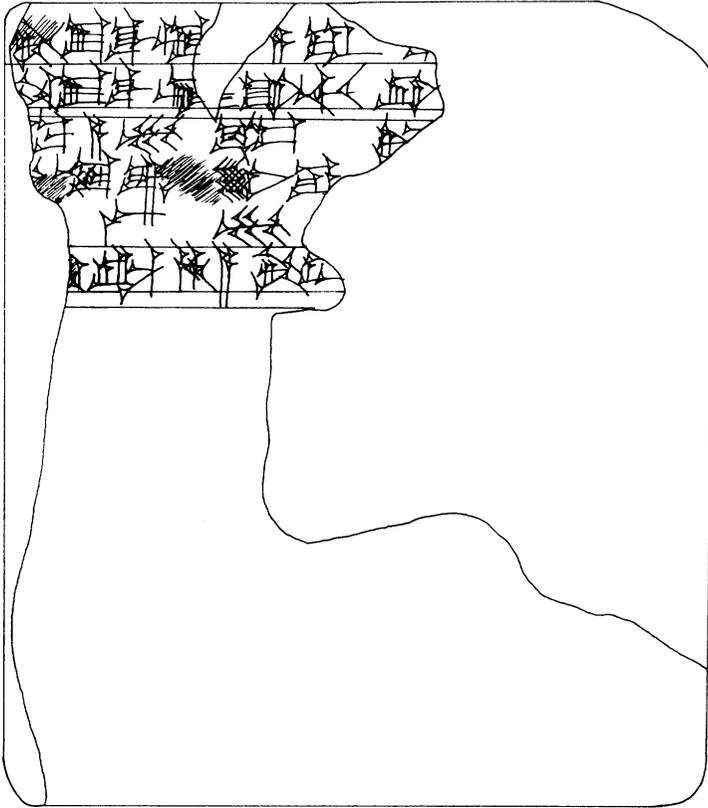


Fig. 2: UM 29-15-667, obv.

