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978-1-107-01076-5 - Greece and Mesopotamia: Dialogues in Literature

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Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The fact is, we are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of.

Edward Said

This book stems from a realization that has steadily transformed perceptions of ancient literature. When ancient texts in Akkadian, Sumerian, Hittite, Ugaritic and other languages started to be deciphered, and were then gradually edited in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were found to bear a number of striking similarities with ancient Greek literature. Greece and Mesopotamia, in particular, seemed to have many genres in common. They also shared narrative techniques such as speeches, dialogue and similes; individual motifs (the quest for eternal life, for example); and even specific scenes such as the three most powerful gods casting lots for the allocation of their realms. Some Greek texts (for example the fable of the bull and the mosquito) looked so similar to newly discovered Mesopotamian ones that they were described as near-translations.<sup>1</sup> Connections between Greek and Mesopotamian texts were there for everyone to see, yet scholars had, and continue to have, great difficulties in accounting for them.

One difficulty concerns the geographical distance between Greece and Mesopotamia, which must have represented a significant obstacle to communication, particularly in the archaic period. The idea of a 'hotline' linking seventh-century Assyrian court literature and archaic Greece has proved controversial,<sup>2</sup> as have the many other scenarios for cultural contact that have been proposed.<sup>3</sup> Another considerable barrier was linguistic: Akkadian and Sumerian, the two main literary languages of Mesopotamia

<sup>1</sup> For the fable of the bull/elephant and mosquito/wren, see below, pp. 26–9. Burkert 1992: 90–1 speaks of 'near-translation' when he discusses the casting of lots among the gods at *Il.* 15.187–93 and *OB Atra-hasis* 1.11–17 (Lambert and Millard).

<sup>2</sup> West's formulation; see M. L. West 1997: 627.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 21–4.

in the first millennium BC, are very different from Greek and, at some point, fell out of daily use. What to make of these linguistic barriers is an open question: there is a danger, here, of projecting current scholarly divides onto the ancient past. Few classicists learn the languages of Mesopotamia; but, at a practical level, they can of course be learnt.<sup>4</sup> There is Hellenistic evidence for people who knew both Greek and Akkadian. For earlier periods we are in the dark, but we can imagine a situation in which some very few individuals managed to overcome both the geographic and linguistic obstacles that separated Greece and Mesopotamia. There are examples of single travellers having huge cultural impact in other historical periods: we may think of Michael Scot, for example, travelling from Scotland to Durham, then Oxford, Paris, Bologna, Palermo and finally learning Arabic in Toledo, thus opening up a whole tradition of knowledge to western readers. Or again we may think of Marco Polo making it to China, or of Ibn Battuta travelling from Morocco to India, China and sub-Saharan Africa. Without written records, the tracks of such extraordinary travellers and linguists would become invisible, and their cultural influence subterranean. For the archaic period, we do not have evidence of actual dialogue between traceable individuals. What we do have are some striking literary similarities or ‘parallels’, as scholars working on the connections between early Greece and Mesopotamia have often called them.

How these ‘parallels’ have been studied and conceived depends, in large measure, on the historical development of Classics and Assyriology as academic disciplines. Mesopotamian literatures emerged piecemeal over the past hundred years or so: to this day, many Mesopotamian texts remain difficult to access, and many more continue to languish unedited in museum collections around the world. Even famous poems have suffered from the exiguity of the Assyriological workforce: the *Epic of Gilgamesh* finally became available in an up-to-date edition in 2003;<sup>5</sup> but the equally important *Enūma eliš* (also known as the *Babylonian Epic of Creation*) is still awaiting a reliable edition.<sup>6</sup> Under these circumstances, classicists devoted themselves to sifting through the emerging materials, establishing

<sup>4</sup> Excellent Akkadian introductions, handbooks, dictionaries and grammars are now readily available, and classicists are better placed than most to make effective use of them; see M. Worthington 2010 and the literature cited there.

<sup>5</sup> George 2003.

<sup>6</sup> The appearance of Talon 2005 has meant that a reading text in Akkadian is now available to the wider public. A critical edition, prepared by the late Wilfred Lambert and to be published by Eisenbrauns, is eagerly awaited.

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broadly what was known about them, and starting a debate about their relationship with ancient Greek literature. The pioneering publications of Burkert and West offered that kind of approach, concentrating on specific parallels as a crude but effective way of bringing non-Greek texts to the attention of classicists.<sup>7</sup> What I hope to offer, as a next step, is a broader methodological framework for comparison, rather than homing in on ‘parallels’ alone. I also move well beyond the archaic period, in order to consider how the similarities between Greek and Mesopotamian literature were received in antiquity, and how they helped to establish a meaningful cultural dialogue, particularly in the Hellenistic age. The example of Berossos, the Babylonian priest who wrote in Greek, concludes this book, but also provides a starting point. Berossos was an acute reader of both Greek and Mesopotamian texts. In modern terms, he might be seen as engaging in the project of comparative literature – and, in that sense, to be setting an example for this book.

Like Berossos’ work, this study also moves between different scholarly traditions. To put it bluntly, neither Assyriology nor Classics have favoured comparative work. For the younger discipline, that of Assyriology, the priority was initially that of establishing its own academic autonomy; and, to this day, the most urgent task remains that of training young scholars to edit, translate and comment on texts that have only recently been discovered and are not yet entirely accessible. Specialized knowledge is required. In Classics, there is already an ample choice of editions, translations and commentaries for all major texts; but there are some intellectual hurdles to the project of comparison. As Walter Burkert points out, ‘European tradition, especially the scholarly tradition, used to see the Greeks ... as unique and isolated, classical.’<sup>8</sup> That is not an auspicious starting point for comparing literatures of any kind. We may contrast Hugo Meltzl’s founding statement of comparative literature: according to him, ‘a people, be it ever so insignificant politically, is and will remain, from the standpoint of comparative literature, as important as the largest nation.’<sup>9</sup> Comparative literature, for Meltzl, requires a level playing field where no culture (or ‘people’, in the terminology of the day) is deemed a priori more important than any other. In practice, Meltzl was broadly Eurocentric in outlook, as were most of his colleagues until well into the twentieth century; but their vision was always inclusive in principle, and that inclusiveness came to the

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Burkert 1992 and 2004, M. L. West 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Burkert 2004: 1.

<sup>9</sup> Meltzl 1877, quoted in Damrosch, Melas and Buthelezi 2009: 45.

fore in the wake of decolonialization and globalization. Summarizing, and responding to, those developments, the influential Bernheimer Report ‘Comparative literature at the turn of the century’ insisted that ‘literature departments should play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualisation of Anglo-American and European perspectives ... questioning and resisting their dominance’.<sup>10</sup> Not everyone agreed, needless to say, but the committee’s recommendations certainly resonated and gained authority through time, at least in the field of comparative literature. As Emily Apter argues, ‘post-colonialism is in many respects truer to the foundational disposition of comparative literature than other more traditional tendencies and approaches’.<sup>11</sup>

It is the comparative approach of Apter and Bernheimer that provides the inspiration for this book. In tracing the dialogues between Greek and Mesopotamian literature this book too aims to ‘further the multicultural recontextualisation of ... European perspectives’. Yet, since it is also a book written by a classicist, and classicists are certainly among its intended audience, its place in the history of classical scholarship needs to be clarified before we can embark on a comparative journey. For Classics has had a different intellectual history from comparative literature. In the same year that the Bernheimer Report recommended ‘questioning and resisting’ the dominance of European literary perspectives, Bernard Knox, founding director of the prestigious Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies (1961–85), wrote about ancient Greek literature:

The primacy of the Greeks in the canon of Western literature is neither an accident nor the result of a decision imposed by higher authority; it is simply a reflection of the intrinsic worth of the material, its sheer originality and brilliance.<sup>12</sup>

Knox saw the privileged position of Greek literature not as a matter of a European perspective that we might wish to challenge. Rather, its supremacy was the straightforward result of its ‘intrinsic’ quality. This view has often been questioned, not least within Classics itself, but it captures something important about the study of ancient Greek literature:

<sup>10</sup> The Bernheimer Report was presented at the MLA convention 1993. It was published in Bernheimer 1995; for the above quote see pp. 44–5. Mary Louise Pratt writes in the same collection (Pratt 1995: 62): ‘The big picture is of comparative literature as a particularly hospitable space for the cultivation of multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding, and genuinely global consciousness. It can develop these things both as scholarly endeavours and as new forms of citizenship in a globalized world.’

<sup>11</sup> Apter 1995: 86.

<sup>12</sup> Knox 1993: 21.

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unlike comparative literature, with its longstanding commitment to equality-in-diversity, Classics as practised since the early nineteenth century has been broadly committed to a single, exemplary tradition. In fact, it is precisely the uniqueness of the Greek experience, its *non*-comparability, which often gave the subject its sense of mission in a changing world.<sup>13</sup>

'Classics', according to one recent definition, 'is a subject that exists in the gap between us and the world of the Greeks and Romans.'<sup>14</sup> The question of who is meant by 'us' has been much discussed in recent years, particularly in the burgeoning field of classical receptions. An ever increasing body of scholarship studies hitherto marginalized responses to ancient literature.<sup>15</sup> One result of that work is that the tail end of the classical tradition can no longer be conceived as exclusively 'European' or 'western', under any definition of those slippery terms. But what about Greece and Rome themselves? Why those two, and why *only* those two? One answer might be, quite simply, that it has long been thus: from the point of view of reception, 'the world of Greeks and Romans' has a well-defined identity. Still, the privileging of 'Greeks and Romans' has come under increasing pressure, both within and without academia.<sup>16</sup> And some of the most considerable pressure comes precisely from the literatures of ancient Mesopotamia. These are not only ancient enough to vie with Greece for seniority, in the wider field of world literature, but also close enough (both culturally and geographically) to threaten a genuine blurring of disciplinary and cultural boundaries. Is ancient Greek literature merely one among other Near Eastern literatures, as Martin West famously stated?<sup>17</sup> In that case, does it still make sense to elevate and isolate it as 'classical' or are 'the days of an exclusively "classical" scholarship ... over', as another critic puts it?<sup>18</sup>

These questions are not simply 'academic', they have broader cultural significance, and sometimes lead to new literary explorations.

<sup>13</sup> For an instructive discussion of what has been at stake in learning Greek, and studying Greece, from antiquity to the present day, see Goldhill 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Beard and Henderson 1995: 6; further remarks in Beard 2012.

<sup>15</sup> For an early conjecture that the study of reception might be energized by comparative perspectives see Most 1997. For Classics and postcolonialism see Davies 1997, Hardwick and Gillespie 2007, Graziosi and Greenwood 2007, Hardwick and Stray 2008, Greenwood 2010, Hall and Vasunia 2010, S. A. Stephens and Vasunia 2010.

<sup>16</sup> For a compelling synthesis, see Settis 2006.

<sup>17</sup> M. L. West 1966: 31.

<sup>18</sup> M. L. West 1997: xi, quoting Petriconi 1964: 338, n. 18. Similar questions have been asked in comparative literature too: after much debate, Susan Bassnett declared, in 1993, that the discipline of comparative literature, in its broadly Eurocentric guise, had 'had its day': Bassnett 1993: 161. The discipline has reinvented itself many times since; e.g. Bhabha 1994, Damrosch 2003, Spivak 2003, Casanova 2004, Apter 2006.

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Chad Gracia and Yusef Komunyakaa's recent adaptation of *Gilgamesh*, for example, casts the Akkadian poem in the form of a Greek tragedy, complete with actors and chorus.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, the Austrian poet Raoul Schrott, who translated both Homer's *Iliad* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, argues (implausibly) that Homer himself came from a Mesopotamian scribal milieu.<sup>20</sup> These examples suggest that Greece and Mesopotamia are currently closer in the popular imagination than in academic research. Indeed, the relationship between research and broader social concerns is far from straightforward when it comes to the interaction between Greece and other ancient civilizations: the controversy over Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* amply demonstrates this. The book has become an important point of reference for the Afrocentrist movement in the United States, but has also come under heavy academic criticism, particularly on the part of classical scholars.<sup>21</sup> More than twenty years after the publication of volume one, *Black Athena* still attracts debate, and is seldom treated in a manner that shows equal understanding of academic and social concerns.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Manfred Osman Korfmann's excavations on the hill of Hisarlık in Turkey, the site where Schliemann thought he had discovered Troy, have inspired popular interest and academic controversy in equal measure. Through several exhibitions, Korfmann aimed to combine the 'dream' of Troy, as propagated by artists and poets from Homer onwards, with the 'reality' of the Hittite principality of Wilusa, which he characterized as a Bronze Age centre of trade at the crossroads between Europe and Anatolia. This vision meets the aspirations of German and Turkish audiences, as well as those of the governments and corporate investors who funded the excavation in the first place. Some of Korfmann's academic colleagues, however, violently objected to the terms used to describe the city of Troy: the controversy is only seemingly about minutiae; in reality it stems from deep-seated assumptions about academic freedom, the new Germany and the new Europe.<sup>23</sup> As with *Black Athena*, the impression is that, today, antiquity matters precisely at the boundaries of the classical.

<sup>19</sup> Gracia and Komunyakaa 2006; cf. Gracia 2005, and for the modern reception of *Gilgamesh* more generally, see Ziolkowski 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Schrott 2001, 2008a and 2008b. Schrott worked with existing translations of *Gilgamesh* rather than the Akkadian text; for responses to his work see Maul 2002, Rollinger and Ulf 2011.

<sup>21</sup> For academic responses to *Black Athena* see e.g. Levine and Peradotto 1989, Levine 1992, Lefkowitz 1996, Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996, Berlinerblau 1999, Bernal 2001.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent discussion, see Orrells, Bhambra and Roynon 2011. For an early and admirably balanced response, see Levine 1992.

<sup>23</sup> For discussion, see Haubold 2002a and 2006, with further literature.

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This book stems from the Stanford Lectures I delivered at Trinity College, Dublin in 2008. I addressed, there, an audience of students and colleagues studying many different aspects of the ancient world; and I imagine that the readership for this book will be similar. This book aims to contribute to academic research, therefore, but is also shaped by broader social and political commitments. And the first commitment is to treat the texts of both ancient Greece and Mesopotamia as literature.<sup>24</sup> Here I take inspiration from Terry Eagleton's invitation to 'think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing ... than as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves to writing*'.<sup>25</sup> It is now well understood just how deeply our view of Greek literature is implicated in processes of reception, selection and canon formation, all of which are in turn influenced by modes of production and dissemination, readerly politics and sheer habit, both ancient and modern.<sup>26</sup> The picture is very different, though hardly any less complicated, on the Mesopotamian side, which lacks an unbroken tradition of reading. To this day, no one has attempted to write a 'history of Mesopotamian literature', because there is a genuine uncertainty about the status and nature of even the most famous Mesopotamian texts.<sup>27</sup> Treating them as literature is, in fact, in itself a gesture of commitment beyond the western canon.

From that gesture, new interpretations ensue: reading them as literature (i.e. with the techniques and commitments of literary study) is likely to generate new insights into Mesopotamian texts, simply because they have often been denied the status of literature and have been approached, instead, as 'mythology', 'wisdom', 'folklore', 'religion' – terms which encourage specific interpretative techniques and fields of comparison. *Relating oneself* to Mesopotamian texts as literature (to use Eagleton's description of the enterprise) has knock-on effects also for our understanding of Greece, which suddenly looks less unique, and more connected to other ancient traditions. It is the nature of that connection that I aim

<sup>24</sup> Contra, e.g., Averintsev 1999a and 1999b, who argues that no ancient Near Eastern texts have the status of 'literature'.

<sup>25</sup> Eagleton 1983: 8.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Whitmarsh 2004a: 1–17.

<sup>27</sup> Though there has been plenty of important preparatory work: e.g. Lambert 1960, Lambert and Millard 1969, Jacobsen 1976 and 1987, Tigay 1982, Vanstiphout 1986, 1999a and b, forthcoming, Edzard and Röllig 1987–90, Longman 1991, Bottéro and Kramer 1993, J. G. Westenholz 1997, Dalley 2000, George 2003, Wassermann 2003, Black, Cunningham, Robson and Zólyomi 2004, Foster 2005 and 2007, Charpin 2010, Frahm 2011, Radner and Robson 2011.

to explore here, by asking how it develops diachronically in relation to Mesopotamia, from the archaic to the Hellenistic period.

### Dialogues through time

Walter Burkert wrote about the ‘orientalizing revolution’ of archaic Greece, but there seem to have been many ‘orientalizing revolutions’ in Greek literature. The archaic period with its manifold literary parallels, the classical era with its invention of literary stereotypes such as the ‘barbarian’, the Hellenistic age with its culturally hybrid practices and literary forms, have all been singled out as periods when contact between Greek and Near Eastern cultures was particularly intense and, at least from a literary point of view, productive. This book argues that the dialogue between Greek and Mesopotamian literature was never confined to a single moment of ‘revolution’, or even to two or three revolutionary periods: although events like the Persian Wars and the conquests of Alexander fundamentally changed the terms of engagement, it is possible to trace connections from the archaic to the Hellenistic period.

This study spans roughly 500 years, from the eighth century BC, when the Assyrians first encountered populations whom they called ‘Greeks’ or rather ‘Ionians’ (Akk. *Yaunāya*), to the third century BC, when we see the rise of a distinct Babylonian-Greek literature under the Seleucid king Antiochus I. This is a vast field, and I make no pretence of covering it in its entirety. My discussion rather focuses on a selection of texts which are of particular interest in a comparative framework: Greek and Mesopotamian mythological poetry (Chapter 1); Greek and Mesopotamian texts that we might loosely call ‘historical’ (Chapter 2); and finally the work of Berossos, who is interested in both mythological and historical narratives (Chapter 3).

Several points need to be borne in mind about this selection. First, it brings together texts from different time periods. Many – though not all – Mesopotamian texts considered in this book are significantly older than their counterparts on the Greek side. Thus, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* dates back to the late second millennium BC in its Standard Babylonian form, which is the relevant text here. (Other versions are even older.)<sup>28</sup> More radically, the literature about Sargon of Akkad and Narām-Sîn discussed in Chapter 2, while certainly popular in the first millennium BC, can be

<sup>28</sup> We can trace a unified epic to the Old Babylonian period (c. 1700 BC). Sumerian literature about Gilgamesh was older still; for discussion see George 2003: 4–17.



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traced all the way back to those kings' own inscriptions in the late third millennium.<sup>29</sup>

Another point concerns my Mesopotamian texts in particular, most of which are written in cuneiform Akkadian. Akkadian is an East Semitic language which was current in Mesopotamia from the third millennium BC to the first.<sup>30</sup> From *c.* 2600 BC onwards, it gave rise to a diverse literature in the cuneiform script, a syllabic and logographic writing system that speakers of Akkadian had taken over from the Sumerians.<sup>31</sup> Literature in cuneiform Akkadian flourished in Mesopotamia in the first millennium BC, but there were also other traditions, in different languages. Some of these are known to us, especially the extensive corpus of Sumerian literature which formed a close symbiotic relationship with cuneiform Akkadian.<sup>32</sup> Others are lost: there must once have been a significant Mesopotamian literature in alphabetic Aramaic which, unlike cuneiform Akkadian, was written on perishable materials and did not survive.<sup>33</sup> What we can still see of Mesopotamian literature is therefore only part of a broader spectrum of literary activity. Much of this literature focused on religion and history, and these aspects of Mesopotamian culture certainly interested the Greeks. Still, we do not possess a representative sample of first-millennium Mesopotamian literature; and the fragmentary state of our evidence affects the nature of our enquiry.

This leads to another, more general point, which concerns the different character and institutional context of Greek and cuneiform Mesopotamian literature. Despite their many similarities, they do not always map neatly onto one another: the boundaries between genres, for example, were drawn in different ways, and some genres do not find obvious parallels at all. There were also important differences in the modes of production and reception. Cuneiform writing was a specialized scribal skill, of which practitioners were justly proud: King Assurbanipal of Assyria boasted about having mastered it, for example.<sup>34</sup> Writing Greek required no very great

<sup>29</sup> Collected in Frayne 1993.

<sup>30</sup> For the history of Akkadian see George 2007a.

<sup>31</sup> C. B. F. Walker 1987 discusses the development of the cuneiform script; for the earliest history of cuneiform writing see Glassner 2007.

<sup>32</sup> For Sumerian language and literature see Jacobsen 1987; Edzard 2003; Black, Cunningham, Robson and Zólyomi 2004; and the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature published by Oxford University ([www.etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/](http://www.etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/)). I discuss some examples of Sumerian literature below, pp. 29–30 and 119.

<sup>33</sup> For the use of Aramaic in ancient Mesopotamia, see Tadmor 1982, Fales 1986, Folmer 1995: 2–6, Parpola 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 310–14, with relevant passages and discussion; for other aspects of cuneiform culture see Radner and Robson 2011.

skill or learning, though various forms of literary *performance* certainly did.<sup>35</sup> Much cuneiform literature was produced for storage in archives and libraries, rather than public singing and dancing.<sup>36</sup>

The Mesopotamian archives must have been particularly inaccessible to outsiders. The question arises, therefore, of what it might mean to trace ‘dialogues in literature’ under these circumstances. The answer, I argue, is complex, and crucially depends on historical context and literary genre. Chapter 1, on early Greek and Mesopotamian epic, addresses the much discussed (but little understood) ‘parallels’ between Mesopotamian texts and the literature of dark age and archaic Greece. I start with reception, and with the observation that the parallels on record are in important ways a product of how we read ancient literature *today*: they are neither self-evident nor self-explanatory (contrary to what Martin West has claimed).<sup>37</sup> As cultural horizons shifted in the course of the twentieth century, readers of ancient epic increasingly challenged conventional views of the western literary canon. Parallels in Near Eastern texts furnished proof that Homer, for example, was not unique and isolated within the ancient world: other authors and literary traditions had treated similar subjects, and in rather similar ways. What was more, they had done so *before* Homer, suggesting a revisionist mythology of European roots.

The central idea that animates Chapter 1 is that we should set aside questions of who ‘came first’, who ‘influenced’ whom, or who ‘stole’ from which neighbouring tradition. My point is not to create an updated version of the western canon. Nor do I plan to visit Mesopotamian epic like a tourist who projects onto the wider world his own local horizons. Sri Aurobindo once pointed out how easy it would be, from an Indian perspective, to misread the *Iliad* as ‘a crude and empty semi-savage and primitive epos’.<sup>38</sup> A lack of readerly commitment can make a mockery of the most canonical of texts. It seems to me that we should try to encounter both ancient Greek and Mesopotamian texts *as readers*, by which I mean that we must approach them with the levels of commitment that they – implicitly or explicitly – demand of us. In so doing, I resist postulating

<sup>35</sup> See variously Bakker 1997 and 2005; Dougherty and Kurke 1993; Goldhill and Osborne 1999; Thomas 2000; I. Worthington 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Differences were perhaps not as stark as my summary suggests: cuneiform texts were also performed, and some circulated in oral form, see Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992 and, for the oral *Gilgamesh*, below, p. 105, n. 100. Conversely, Greek texts too were written down and read: as Whitmarsh 2004a: 106–21 has argued, the formation of an archive of written Greek literature was well under way by the classical period.

<sup>37</sup> M. L. West 1997: viii.

<sup>38</sup> Aurobindo 1972: 257.