

Greece and Mesopotamia: Dialogues in Literature

1. Starting points

'The fact is, we are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of. To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is, I believe, the intellectual and cultural challenge of the moment.' [Said 1993: 331]

'These days I like to advance a concept of comparative literature as a site of powerful intellectual renewal in the study of literature and culture. ... 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.' [Pratt 1995: 62]

2. 'Parallels, similarities and sometimes identities'

'This is the longest book I have written (so far), but by no means the most difficult to read. It contains no complicated arguments. The greater part of it consists simply in the selection and juxtaposition of parallels which will speak for themselves.' [West 1997: viii]

'Van Tieghem, his precursors and followers ... have accumulated an enormous mass of parallels, similarities and sometimes identities, but they have rarely asked what these relationships are supposed to show except possibly the fact of one writer's knowledge and reading of another writer.' [Wellek 1963: 285]

3. Babrius' genealogy of the fable

Babrius, *Mythiambi Aesopei*, Prologue to Part II, 1-5

Μῦθος μὲν, ὦ παῖ βασιλέως Ἀλεξάνδρου,
Σύρων παλαιῶν ἐστὶν εὖρεμ' ἀνθρώπων,
οἱ πρὶν ποτ' ἦσαν ἐπὶ Νίνου τε καὶ Βήλου.
πρῶτος δέ, φασὶν, εἶπε παισὶν Ἑλλήνων
Αἴσωπος ὁ σοφός ...
Fable, son of King Alexander,
is the invention of the Syrians of old,
who lived in the days of Ninus and Belus.
The first to tell fables to the sons of the Hellenes, they say,
was Aesop the wise ...

4. The Greek fable of the bull and the mosquito

Babrius, *Mythiambi Aesopei*, Fable 84 (1st/2nd century AD)

Κώνωψ ἐπιστάς κέρατι καμπύλῳ ταύρου
μικρὸν τ' ἐπισχῶν εἶπε ταῦτα βομβήσας·
'εἴ σου βαρύνω τὸν τέμοντα καὶ κλίνω,
καθεδοῦμ' ἀπελθῶν ποταμῆς ἐπ' αἰγείρου.'
ὁ δ' 'οὐ μέλει μοι' φησιν, 'οὔτ' ἐὰν μείνης,
οὔτ' ἢν ἀπέλθης· οὐδ' ὄτ' ἦλθες ἐγνώκειν.'
A mosquito alighted on a bull's curly horn
and after a short stay whined,
'If I'm a weight and a pain on your neck,
I'll get off and sit on a poplar by the river.'
But he said, 'I don't care whether you stay
or go; I didn't even notice when you came.'

Aesop, Fable 137, ed. Perry (uncertain date)

Κώνωψ ἐπιστάς κέρατι ταύρου καὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἐπικαθίσας, ἐπειδὴ ἀπαλλάττεσθαι ἐμελλεν, ἐπυθάνετο τοῦ ταύρου εἰ ἤδη βούλεται αὐτὸν ἀπελθεῖν. ὁ δὲ ὑποτυχῶν εἶπεν 'ἀλλ' οὔτε ὅτε ἦλθες ἐγνων, οὔτε ἐὰν ἀπέλθης γνώσομαι.
A mosquito alighted on a bull's horn and sat there for a while. When it was ready to leave, it asked the bull whether it now wanted it to go. The bull said: 'I neither knew it when you came, nor will know it if you depart.'

5. The Greek fable of the elephant and the mosquito

Mesomedes 11, ed. Heitsch, trans. West (early 2nd century AD)

Ελέφαντος ἐπ' οὐατι κώνωψ
περὸν οὐ περὸν ἴστατο σείων,
φάτο δ' ἄφρονα μῦθον· ἀφίπταμαι,
βάρος οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸν δύνασαι φέρειν.
ὁ δ' ἔλεξε γέλωτος ὑφ' ἄδοναϊ·
ἄλλ' οὐτ' ἐδάην ὄτ' ἐφιπτάθης [ἐπεστάθης/ἐφεστάθης Wil.]
οὔθ' ἦνικ' ἀφίπτασαι [ἀφίπτασο Wil.] κώνωψ.
On an elephant's ear a mosquito
with wings all aflutter alighted
and foolishly said, 'I will fly away,
for my weight you cannot support.'
But he smiled in amusement and said,
'But I neither knew when you flew down,
nor when you fly off, O mosquito.'

Achilles Tattius 2.20-2 (2nd century AD?)

Ἦν δέ τις αὐτῶν οἰκέτης πολυπράγμων καὶ λάλος καὶ λίχνος καὶ πᾶν ὅ τι ἂν εἴποι τις, ὄνομα Κώνωψ. οὗτός μοι ἐδόκει πόρρωθεν ἐπιτηρεῖν τὰ πραττόμενα ἡμῖν· μάλιστα δέ, ὅπερ ἦν, ὑποπτέυσας μὴ τι νύκτωρ ἡμῖνπραχθῆ, διενυκτέρευε μέχρι πόρρω τῆς ἐσπέρας, ἀναπετάσας τοῦ δωματίου τὰς θύρας, ὥστε ἔργον ἦν αὐτὸν λαθεῖν. ὁ οὖν Σάτυρος, βουλόμενος αὐτὸν εἰς φιλιαν ἀγαγεῖν, προσέπειαιε πολλάκις καὶ κώνωπα ἐκάλει καὶ ἔσκωπτε τοῦνομα σὺν γέλωτι. καὶ οὗτος εἰδὼς τοῦ Σατύρου τὴν τέχνην προσεποιεῖτο μὲν ἀντιπαιζειν καὶ αὐτόν, ἐνετίθει δὲ τῇ παιδιᾷ τῆς γνώμης τὸ ἄσπονδον. λέγει δὴ πρὸς αὐτόν· “Ἐπειδὴ καταμωκᾶ μου καὶ τοῦνομα, φέρε σοι μῦθον ἀπὸ κώνωπος εἶπω.” “Ὁ λέων κατεμέμφετο τὸν Προμηθεῖα πολλάκις, ὅτι μέγαν μὲν αὐτὸν ἐπλασε καὶ καλὸν καὶ τὴν μὲν γένυν ὥπλισε τοῖς ὁδοῦσι, τοὺς δὲ πόδας ἐκράτυνε τοῖς ὄνουσιν ἐποίησέ τε τῶν ἄλλων θηρίων δυνατώτερον. “Ὁ δὲ τοιοῦτος,” ἔφασκε, “τὸν ἀλεκτρυόνα φοβοῦμαι.” καὶ ὁ Προμηθεὺς ἐπιστάς ἔφη· “Τί με μάτην αἰτιά; τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐμὰ πάντα ἔχεις ὅσα πλάττειν ἠδυνάμην, ἡ δὲ σὴ ψυχή πρὸς τοῦτο μόνον μαλακίζεται.” ἔκλαιεν οὖν ἑαυτὸν ὁ λέων καὶ τῆς δευλίας κατεμέμφετο καὶ τέλος ἀποθανεῖν ἠθέλεν. οὕτω δὲ γνώμης ἔχων ἐλέφαντι περιτυγχάνει καὶ προσαγορεύσας εἰστήκει διαλεγόμενος. καὶ ὄρων διὰ παντός τὰ ὦτα κινουντα, “Τί πάσχεις;” ἔφη· “καὶ τί δή ποτε οὐδὲ μικρὸν ἀτρεμῆ μου τὸ οὖς; καὶ ὁ ἐλέφας, κατὰ τὴν παραπάντος αὐτῶ κώνωπος, “Ὁράς,” ἔφη, “τοῦτο τὸ βραχὺ τὸ βομβοῦν; ἦν εἰσδύη μου τῆ τῆς ἀκοῆς ὁδῶ, τέθνηκα.” καὶ ὁ λέων, “Τί οὖν ἔτι ἀποθνήσκεις,” ἔφη, “με δεῖ, τοσοῦτον ὄντα καὶ ἐλέφαντος εὐτυχέστερον, ὅσον κρείττων κώνωπος ἀλεκτρυόν;” ὄρας, ὅσον ἰσχύος ὁ κώνωψ ἔχει, ὡς καὶ ἐλέφαντα φοβεῖν.”

There was one of their servants called Conops – a meddlesome, talkative, greedy rascal, deserving any bad name you liked to call him. I noticed that he seemed to be watching from a distance all that we were about; and being particularly suspicious that we were intending (as was indeed the case) to make some attempt by night, he would constantly sit up until very late, leaving open the doors of his room, so that it was a difficult business to escape him. Satyrus, wishing to conciliate him, used often to joke with him, calling him the Conops or Mosquito, and good-humouredly punned upon his name; he saw through the device, and while he pretended to make jokes in return, he showed in his humour his cross-grained and intractable nature. “Since,” said he, “you even mock at my name, allow me to relate to you a fable derived from the mosquito. The lion often used to complain to Prometheus that he had made him great and handsome, that he had armed his jaw with teeth and made his feet strong with claws, and made him stronger than all the other beasts : ‘And yet’, he would say, ‘powerful as I am, I am terrified of a cock’. ‘Why thus blame me in vain?’, said Prometheus, his attention thus attracted to the matter: you have everything that I could give you at the moment of creation: your spirit is feeble in this one respect’. The lion wept much at his evil case and cursed his cowardice and at last determined to slay himself: but while he was in this frame of mind, he happened to meet the elephant, and after hailing him, stopped gossiping with him. He noticed that his ears kept moving the whole time, and asked him: ‘What is the matter with you? Why is it that your ear never keeps still even for a moment?’ It so chanced that at that instant a mosquito was flying about him, and the elephant replied: ‘Do you see this tiny little buzzing creature? If once it were to get into the channel through which I hear, it would be the death of me.’ ‘Well’, said the lion, ‘there is surely no reason for me to die after all, seeing that I am big enough and as much better off than the elephant, as the cock is a nobler creature than the mosquito’. You see then how powerful is the mosquito, so that even the elephant is afraid of him.”

6. The Mesopotamian fable of the elephant and the wren (‘copied from older original’ in 716 BC)

Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, pp. 216-18 (Popular Sayings, Reverse III, 50-4; modified)

diq-diq-qu ina m[u]hhi pēri ki-i ú-s[i-bu]
um-ma ta-lim id-[k]a an-a-a-ma ina šī-qi mē^{mes} e-ra-[aq-mā]
pe-e-ru a-na diq-diq-qi ip-[pa]
ki-i tu-šī-bu ul i-di-ma ka-la-ka mi-[i-nu]
ki-i ta-at-bu-ú ul i-de-e[-ma]

Als die Mücke sich auf den Elefant setzte,
(sprach sie) also: “Bruder, habe ich dich belästigt? Bei der Wassertränke werde ich mich entfer[nen].”
Der Elefant antwortete der Mücke:

“Dass du dich gesetzt hast, habe ich nicht gewusst. Was bist (du) denn ganz und gar?
Dass du aufgestanden bist, habe ich auch nicht gewusst.”

When the mosquito settled on the elephant
(it spoke) thus: “Brother have I bothered you? I will make [off] at the watering-place.”

The elephant replied to the mosquito:
“That you settled on me I did not know: after all, what do you amount to?
That you have left I did not know either.” [trans. Ebeling 1927: 50]

A *mosquito*, as it settled on an elephant,
 said, "Brother, did I press your side? I will make [off] at the watering-place."
 The elephant replied to the *mosquito*,
 "I do not care whether you get on – what is it to have you? –
 nor do I care whether you get off." [trans. Lambert 1960: 218-19]

*Een diqdiqqu-voegel, toen het was gaan zitten op een olifant,
 zei "Vriend, ben ik vermoeiend? Dan ga ik wel weg naar de irrigatieplaats."
 De olifant antiroordde de diqdiqqu-voegel:
 "Toen je ging zitten merkte ik niets – wat ben je eigenlijk, al met al? –
 en of je nu wegvliegt, merk ik ook niet."
 When a diqdiqqu-bird had settled on an elephant,
 it said: My friend, am I tiresome? Then I will make off to the watering-place."
 The elephant replied to the diqdiqqu-bird:
 "I did not notice when you settled on me – after all, what do you amount to? –
 and whether you fly off now I do not notice either." [trans. Stol 1972: 49]*

A wren, as it settled on an elephant,
 said, "Brother, am I pressing your side? I will remove myself at the watering-place."
 The elephant answered the wren:
 "When you settled, I didn't know it – what do you amount to? –
 and when you arise I shan't know it." [West 2000: 95]

7. *Quellenforschung*

For the first time we can see not only the contents of a Greek fable correspond to those of the Babylonian, but even the wording, down to specific detail. We can almost call this a translation of the Babylonian original into Greek, or at least a paraphrase [...]. In any case, we now have a solid basis for *Quellenforschung* on the Greek fable. It can be hoped that – as new finds accrue – the dependence of the Greek fable on the Babylonian will become even clearer. The wall which ... has been erected between Greek and Babylonian culture is collapsing bit by bit. [Ebeling 1927: 50]

The Assyrian anecdote is preserved with extraordinary fidelity across eight or nine centuries during which attestation of it is lacking. The wren becomes a mosquito; the elephant becomes a bull in two of the versions, but remains an elephant in the third. The place where the wren proposes to depart, *ina šiqi mē*, is reflected in Babrius' poplar by the river. And the big animal's reply, especially in the Aesopic version, is virtually a translation of the Akkadian: I didn't know it when you came, and I shan't know it when you depart. How are we to explain this survival? [West 2000: 95]

8. Elephant vs. bull

Sumerian glossary

am – 'wild-ox'

am-si – 'elephant' < 'wild-ox' (am) + 'horn, ray, antenna' (si)

Sumerian Proverb, Collection 2.65 ed. Alster (early 2nd millennium BC)

ka₅-a gir-súhub am-ma-ke₄ gir-ni bi-in-gub nu-ub-si-e-še

A fox trod on the hoof of a wild-ox. 'It didn't hurt!', it said.

Sumerian Proverb, Collection 8 Sec. B 19 ed. Alster (early 2nd millennium BC)

ka₅-a úr am-si-ka / giri-bi mu-un-gub ab-si ab-diri-e-še

A fox trampled on the feet of an elephant. 'It's enough, it's too much', it said.

9. The Mesopotamian fable of the elephant and the wren, second instalment

Sumerian Proverbs, Collection 5.1, Yale duplicate, ed. Alster, with corrections in Borger 2004: 470 (early 2nd millennium BC)

am-si ni-ta-na máš-anše ^dšakan-ka / níg-gá-gi-na-am al-di-me-en nu-gál na-ab-bé-a / al-ti-ri-gu mu-na-ni-ib-gi₄-gi₄ / ù gá-e i-gi₄-te-mu-uš / za-a-gi-nam al-di-me-en-e-še

An elephant spoke to himself and said, 'Among the wild creatures of Šakan, there is no one equal to me.' The *altirigu*-bird answered him. 'And yet, I, in my own proportion, I am equal to you,' it said.

altirigu-bird = *diqudiqqu*-bird = wren(?); Sumerian-Akkadian glossary, MSL 8/II, p. 172, 14; with corrections in Borger 2004: 466

al-ti-ri-gu₇^{mušen} = *di-iq-di-qu* : *duq-duq-ú*

Akkadian version of Sumerian Proverbs, Collection 5.1, Yale duplicate, ed. Alster, with corrections in Borger 2004: 470

um-ma pi-ru-um i-na ra-ma-ni-ša / i-na bu-ul ša-am-ka-an ša ki-ma ia-ti ma-šú-ú ú-ul i-ba-ši / si-pi-di-qá-ar(?) i-ip-pa-al / ù a-na-ku ki-ma ka-a-ti / a-na ma-na-ti-ia ma-ši-a-ku

An elephant spoke to himself and said, 'Among the wild creatures of Šakan, there is no one equal to me.' The *sipidiqar*-bird(?) answered, 'And yet, I, in my own proportion, I am equal to you.'

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