

AKKADIAN POETRY: METRE AND PERFORMANCE*

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Despite scholarly efforts that now extend over more than a century, the governing principles of Akkadian verse remain elusive.¹ It is obviously not based, like Greek or Latin verse, on the counting and measuring of syllables. The idea that it is based on the counting of accentual peaks has a much greater immediate appeal. There are long stretches of poetic texts that seem amenable to analysis on these lines. Most scholars would be willing to recognize the existence of a “standard” *Vierheber*, a verse with four apparent accentual peaks, giving the sense of a balance of two against two, as in *Enūma eliš* I 47–50:

*īpulma Mummu | Apsū imallik,
sukkallum lā māgīru | milik mummīšu:
“Hulliqamma, abī, | alkata ešīta;
urriš lū šupšuhāt, | mūšiš lū šallāt.”*

This measure may be called “standard” because it occurs at all periods, and in many texts it predominates. But everywhere we find shorter lines interspersed, on no discernible principle, and often longer ones too. The shorter lines generally have three apparent accents, but on occasion only two, while the longer ones may have five or six. According to A. E. Housman,

To think that two and two are four
And neither five nor three
The heart of man has long been sore
And long 'tis like to be.

But what vexes the Akkadian metrician’s heart, if he has one, is

To think that two and two are four
but sometimes five or three.

In general, it seems to be impossible to formulate any rules to which there are not numerous exceptions. In the recent article “Metrik” in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* D. O. Edzard has little guidance to give; he remarks gloomily that “regularities extending over long stretches of text cannot be established”.²

The definition of an accentual unit is, of course, not without its uncertainties. It is natural enough to see *lā māgīru* or *lū šallāt* in the verses just quoted as forming each a single unit, and to assume that other prepositives such as *u*, *ša*, *ina*, *ištu*, etc., are joined with the following word. But then, faced with the line

lū kīamma | mahrū nimbūkun

(*Ee* VI 21), we may be tempted to assign an accent to *lū* in order to find four in all. In most cases it seems that a noun in the construct state before a genitive is not counted as having a separate accent, yet there are some places where it clearly does, as in *milik mummīšu* above. Then there is

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¹ I list here the main discussions of Akkadian metrics known to me: H. Zimmern, *ZA* 8 (1893), pp. 121–4; 10 (1895), pp. 1–24; 11 (1896), pp. 86–8; 12 (1897), pp. 382–92; F. Delitzsch, *Das babylonische Welterschöpfungsepos* (Leipzig, 1896), pp. 60–8; E. Sievers, *ZA* 38 (1929), pp. 1–36; F. M. Th. de Liagre Böhl, *JEOL* 15 (1957–8), pp. 141–53 (in Dutch; shortened French version in P. Garelli (ed.), *Gilgameš et sa légende* (CRR 7, Paris, 1960), pp. 145–52); J. Kurylowicz, *Studies in Semitic*

Grammar and Metrics (Polish Academy, 1972), pp. 177–87; Brigitte Groneberg, *Untersuchungen zum hymnisch-epischen Dialekt der altbabylonischen literarischen Texte* (Münster Diss., 1972), pp. 129–67; Karl Hecker, *Untersuchungen zur akkadischen Epik* (AOATS 8, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1974), pp. 101–60; W. von Soden, *ZA* 71 (1981), pp. 161–204 and 74 (1984), pp. 213–34; D. Fehling in H. L. C. Tristram (ed.), *Metrik und Medienwechsel. Metrics and Media* (Tübingen, 1991), pp. 23–31.

² *RLA* 8 (1993), p. 149 s.v. Metrik: “Irgendwelche über längere Strecken bestehende Regelmäßigkeiten lassen sich nicht nachweisen.”

the question whether we should reckon with secondary accents on long words. When Gilgamesh addresses Ut-napishtim and says (*Gilgamesh* XI 2 f.)

anaṭṭalakkumma, | Ūt(a)-napištim:
minātuka ul-šanā, | kī-yātima attā,

it is hard not to feel that the first line has much the same accentual weight as the second, or at any rate more than the half of it. But at line 196 of the same tablet,

ilqūinnīma ina-rūqi, | ina-pī-nārāti uštēšibūinni,

if this is to be taken as a four-accent line, the last word evidently counts for only one of the four, though it is similar to *anaṭṭalakkumma* in shape and bulk.

The Akkadian poem that exhibits the highest degree of metrical regularity is the *Theodicy*. This highly elaborate composition, whose author Saggil-kinam-ubbib identifies himself in a mighty acrostic that spans all 297 lines of the poem, dates from the reign of Adad-apla-iddina (1068–1047).³ A study of the work will enable us to establish some norms.

The *Vierheber* dominates throughout. Only two or three *Dreiheber* can be found in the entire work.⁴ What is more, the written tradition makes an unusual acknowledgment of the metrical regimen. In three of the four Neo-Babylonian manuscripts each line is divided up not just into two segments, as happens in many poetic manuscripts, but into four. In two of the copies there are not only horizontal ruled lines separating the strophes but also vertical lines dividing the column into four cells, the words of the text being distributed carefully among them.⁵

Are we to suppose that this meticulous layout goes back to the author, to Saggil-kinam-ubbib himself? We might think this more likely than that it was introduced by some impertinent metrician of several centuries later. In this case we shall conclude that the original layout was preserved in (most of) the scholarly Babylonian tradition, while being neglected in the Assyrian copies. However, the question is complicated by the fact that a manuscript of *Enūma eliš* is now known in which the columns were divided into three segments. It is a copy of Tablet VI from Me-Turnat (modern Tell Haddād), dating from about the sixth century.⁶ Can we suppose here too that a layout originally designed in the late second millennium happens to be preserved only in a much later copy? Or is it that in the Neo-Babylonian period a new fashion set in for the segmentation of verses into three or four parts? In any case, these manuscripts hold out the promise of showing us a segmentation that someone thought significant. Inspection confirms that it is not a haphazard dissection made purely for the sake of the tablet's appearance but is related to the rhetorical structure of the verse.

Whoever instituted the four-cell format for the *Theodicy* evidently conceived the verses to be made up of four units. This corresponds very well with our own perception of four accentual peaks. In those portions of the poem for which the manuscripts in question are available, we can see on what principles the words are allocated to the cells, and they do in general correspond to accentual groups. In many of the verses there are precisely four words, so that the distribution is automatic. Longer words such as *īzibūinnīma* or *ikappudūšu* show no sign of a secondary accent. Where there are more than four words in the line, they are grouped almost exactly as we might expect. Prepositives such as *ana, ina, kīma, u, ul, lā, ša*, go with the following word.⁷ Phrases with more than one prepositive are also treated as a unit: 23 *ša lā iqattū*, 24 and 268 *ša lā īšū*, 280 *u lā kīnātu*. The only exception to this treatment of prepositives is line 11,

abī u bāntī: īzibūinnīma: bal: tārūa.
My father and mother: left me: without: a guardian.

³ W. G. Lambert, *JCS* 16 (1962), pp. 66 f., 76.

⁴ Lines 72(?), 235, 238. It is possible that one or two more occurred in the broken passages. In 72 one may find a *Vierheber* by invoking a secondary accent on *il-ligimīyāma*. But 235 and 238 offer no such escape.

⁵ For details see W. G. Lambert's edition in his *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*.

⁶ F. N. H. Al-Rawi and J. A. Black, *JCS* 46 (1994), pp. 131–9. In the case of the Uruk manuscript of Tablet

VII (*LKU* no. 38), to which the authors refer as a parallel, the left side of the tablet is broken away and only one segmentation-line is visible. It is not clear to me whether a second one further left is to be postulated. The distribution of the text to left and right of the segmentation-line seems erratic; sometimes it breaks a word in two. This copy is unusable as evidence.

⁷ Kuryłowicz (as n. 1), pp. 179–81.

We might wonder if there is an error in the distribution of words here, and it should have been

abī: u bāntī: īzibūinnīma: bal tārūa.

On the other hand, “father and mother” make a natural sense-unit, and we may be disposed to let them share a cubicle on that ground; there is, moreover, a tendency to make the central division of the verse following a word with *-ma*. We shall find an apparent parallel for the disjunction of the preposition from its noun in the Tell Ḥaddād manuscript of *Enūma eliš*.

Nouns in the construct state usually share a cell with the following word: 16 *uruh mūtu*, 17 *nāri Hubur*, 20 *bēlu mešrē*, 22 *pālih Ištar*, and so on.⁸ There are, however, some ten exceptions,⁹ in most of which the construct phrase is divided between the third and fourth cells. In l. 64 the phrase *ina ūm lā šīmāti* is accommodated in one cell:

gīriš: ina ūm lā šīmāti: iqammēšu: malku.

And in 240, although we do not have the manuscript evidence, it looks as if *šādīd nīr ili*, “he who bears the god’s yoke”, must have been a single unit. A few lines later, in 247, the term *rabi ahi* “elder brother” must have been treated likewise.

There are two or three other places where more is put in a cell than we might have expected. In 23,

kuppu: ibrī, libbaka: ša lā iqattū: nagab[šū],

the vocative *ibrī*, which elsewhere occupies a cell on its own, is tucked in with the noun that carries the personal suffix relating to it. In 264,

[I]’ id: *mīnā pakki ilimma: nišī: lā lamdā,*

Though one marks what is God’s will, the people are not cognizant of it,

the whole indirect question *mīnā pakki ilimma*, “what is God’s will”, constitutes a single unit. Finally in 285,

sarriš: kala lumnu: šūhuzūšu aššu: lā īšū irītu,
They falsely teach him every evil, because he has no guidance,

I presume the intention was for the whole clause *aššu lā īšū irītu* to represent the fourth unit; pressure of space forced the scribe to take *aššu* back into the third, where it cannot belong.

In the three places where *Dreiheber* occur, unfortunately, none of the Babylonian manuscripts is available, so we cannot see how they were laid out. Presumably the second or third cell was left empty.

In the Tell Ḥaddād manuscript of *Enūma eliš* VI the lines are divided into three segments, not four. The segmentation is simply by spacing, with no ruling of vertical lines. At first sight it might seem that whereas an analysis into four units is easily compatible with the more common division of the line into two cola, as it merely represents a subdivision of the cola, an analysis into three units would be difficult to reconcile with it. In fact no such difficulty arises, because the three units are clearly not equal in weight. The first division corresponds to the usual mid-line caesura, and the second is a subdivision of the second half-verse. When a verse consists of four words, they are normally divided 2: 1: 1. Here, for example, is a transcription of lines 17–22:

Marduk upahhirma: ilāni: rabūti,
tābiš uma’ ara: inamdin: tērti;
epšu pišu: ilāni: upaqqušu,
šarru ana-Anunnakkī: amāta: izzakkar.
“*Lū kīnamma: mahrū: nimbūkun,*
kīnāti atmā: inimma: ittīya.”

There are a fair number of exceptions, some of which may be explained from the constraints of space on the tablet, and others from the desire to keep a construct noun + genitive, or some other closely cohering phrase, as one unit.

⁸ Kuryłowicz, pp. 181–3.

Kuryłowicz, pp. 183 f., who regards these as three-stress

⁹ Lines 8, 57, 70, 252, 254, 256, 266, 277, 291, 294. Cf. lines.

In three places the scribe has left the middle slot empty:

7	<i>lubnīma līlā:</i>	<i>:amēlu.</i>
37	<i>šipru šū lā naṭū:</i>	<i>:hasāsiš.</i>
136	<i>šāšu litta'idāšu ništ:</i>	<i>:ahrātaš.</i>

The first of these is a *Dreiheber*, and the scribe has as usual placed two units before the first break. In 136 the first unit runs well over into the space of the second. Both here and in 37 (which is a short line in terms of syllables) the scribe seems inadvertently to have included too much in his first unit, leaving himself nothing for the second. The final word, of course, had to be aligned with the right margin for aesthetic reasons.

It was mentioned above that this manuscript offers one instance of the separation of a preposition from its noun. This is in 55,

Marduk annītu: ina: šemēšu.

The only possible alternative division would involve the name *Marduk* representing the entire first hemistich, which seems a lot to ask of it (though cf. 29 quoted below). If one is unwilling to regard *ina* as bearing an accent, one may alternatively say that the verse is a *Dreiheber*.

It would take too long, and be ultimately unprofitable, to list all the apparent "irregularities" in the Tell Haddād scribe's segmentation and to try to account for them. He was certainly inconsistent by his own standards; compare, for example,

23 *mannumma ša: ibnū: tuquntu*

with

25 *linnadhamma: ša ibnū: tuquntu*

and

29 *Qingūma: ša ibnū: tuquntu.*

At 125/6 and again at 158/9 and 160/1 he squeezes two verses into a single line, having realized that he must make economies of space if he is to have room for the colophon at the foot of the verso; this is at the expense of segmentation. There are other places where he seems to lose track of it. Clearly we cannot treat this manuscript as an *authoritative* witness to the scheme of analysis that it follows. But overall it indicates that the general principles already inferred from the *Theodicy* enjoyed some wider recognition.

Let us recapitulate these principles. Each line is divisible into two cola. The second colon at least is subdivisible into two elements. In the *Theodicy* a parallel subdivision is applied to the first colon too, though the occasional existence of *Dreiheber* can make this problematic. A unit-element may consist of:

- (a) A single word;
- (b) a group of one or more prepositives + accented word, e.g. *ana Anunnakkī, ša ibnū, ša lā iqattū*;
- (c) a construct phrase, simple or compound, e.g. *mālik ilāni, šādīd nīr ili*;
- (d) a combination of (b) and (c), as in *ina ūm lā šīmāti*;
- (e) a noun + qualifier, as in *kala lumnu, rabi ahi*;
- (f) two words making a linked pair, as in *abī u bāntī, eliš u šapliš*;¹⁰
- (g) a dependent clause, as in *mīnā pakki ilīma, aššu lā tšū irītu*.

Here, then, we obtain some guide-lines which can be applied when we attempt the scansion of Akkadian verse. When they are applied to the *Theodicy*, nearly every verse fits in to a regular pattern. Yet even in this most regular of poems there are a few exceptions; and in other texts there are far more.

It is only in the latter part of the second millennium that the *Vierheber* achieves the dominance that it does. When we go back to the Old Babylonian period, it is already in use, to be sure, but shorter lines of two or three words abound and in some texts, at least, they seem more typical. They normally appear as constituents of larger structures of a strophic nature. They are frequently grouped together in fours (mostly = 2 + 2), less often in twos, to make up a self-contained sense-

¹⁰ Similarly *Enūma eliš* I 10 (cf. III 4, 68, 125) *Lahmu-Lahamu*, 12 *Anšar-Kišar*, 109 *urra u mūša*, 130 *mūša u immu*, III 11 *i'ir alik*, 132 *ahu ahi*; *Adapa* B 49 *Dumuzi Gizzida*.

unit or period. Thus in *Atram-hasis* we can find long stretches of quatrains, interrupted by the occasional distich and by little else. The individual lines tend to be short. For example, I 7–12:

*Anu abušunu ša[rr]u,
mālikšunu qurādu Enlil,
guzzašunu Ninurta,
[u] gallūšunu Ennūgi.
qātam ihuzū qātišša,
isqam iddū, ilū izzūzū.*

The thirty speeches in the poem all consist of an even number of lines, most often two, four, or six.

The Agušaya hymn from the reign of Hammurabi¹¹ presents a similar picture, though the lines are generally still shorter, most often of two words, occasionally of only one. The rulings that divide the text into paragraphs mark off, in the majority of cases, groups of eight lines. Within these octastichs, strong punctuation falls most often after the fourth line, and fairly often after the second and sixth. One might say that these octastichs are really quatrains, with four “standard” verses spread over two lines each — certainly the format of a manuscript is not binding on the metrical analyst— except that the principle of the long penultimate (see below) is operative in each of the short lines, not just in alternate ones. Besides, in some instances the conjunction of two lines would make an awkwardly long verse. Here is a short excerpt (A ii 7–13) set out in a slightly modified lineation:¹²

<i>tamhat rittušša</i>	She grasps in her hand
<i>kalāšunu paršī.</i>	all of the ordinances;
<i>tatnaddanši ašar libbīša.</i>	she disposes them where she will.
<i>Ištar rittušša</i>	Ishtar in her hand
<i>šerrēt niši ukī'al;</i>	holds the peoples' lead-rope;
<i>[iq]ullā ištarātašin [siq]ušša.</i>	her goddesses [at]tend her [command].

We may consider this as a single period in two balancing halves. It is made up of six two- or three-word cola, set apart from each other by pauses of varying degrees of magnitude: a major pause after *libbīša*, lesser ones after *paršī* and *ukī'al*, and still lesser ones, too slight to mark by any punctuation, after each *rittušša* and after *ištarātašin*.

The individual verses in a strophe are not necessarily of equal weight. In the Nanaya hymn for Samsuiluna¹³ there is a clear pattern by which the first line of the strophe is regularly the shortest, or at least as short as any. The number of syllables per line, strophe by strophe, is as follows:

7 10 10 11. 7 11 12 x. 7 9 9 10. 6 11 11 12. 7 11 8 11. 7 10 10 11. 9 12 9 11. 7 11 9 9. 8 14 11
x. 8 11 x x. 8 8 11 10. 8 11 x x.

In the exceptionally long, fourteen-syllable line in the ninth strophe,

34 *šarri tuddi Samsuiluna: zībiki liqūd.*¹⁴

I suspect that *Samsuiluna* is a gloss, added in the written version of the hymn to identify the king for future readers. If so, the variations in line-length remain within moderate limits, between seven and twelve syllables.

Here, then, is a form of versification rather different from the almost stereotyped *Vierheber* of the *Theodicy*, simpler and more archaic in appearance. Yet no revolutionary break separates the one from the other. Both stand in a single line of tradition. In the Kassite period, especially in narrative poems with a hymnic aspect to them, it remains very common for lines to be grouped in twos or fours to make a larger sense-unit, though the stylistic figure by which the second half of a quatrain repeats the first with some small variation becomes less conspicuous. Thus *Enūma eliš* is composed in quatrains almost throughout (a basic fact seldom mentioned in translations and discussions); only now and then is a single distich interposed or subjoined.¹⁵ Much the same is true of *Anzū*.

¹¹ Edited by B. Groneberg (as in n. 1), pp. 29–94, and *RA* 75 (1981), pp. 107–34; cf. Hecker, pp. 88–98.

¹² On the tablet the line-divisions in the second half of the excerpt come after *šerrēt*, *ukī'al*, and *ištarātašin*.

¹³ Edited by W. von Soden, *ZA* 44 (1938), pp. 32 ff.

¹⁴ Following the reading in *CAD* Z 105b.

¹⁵ As in the first two tablets at I 45 f., 67 f., 157 f.; II 1 f., 43 f., 65 f., 71 f., 77 f., 143 f., 153 f. On I 1–8 see the Epimetrum at the end of the present paper.

The contrast between the shorter verses of the *Agušaya* hymn or *Atram-hasis* and the weightier ones of the *Theodicy* reflects a general tendency for the line to become gradually longer after the Old Babylonian period. As von Soden laconically remarks, “jüngere Dichtungen haben meist längere Verse”.¹⁶ In the later second millennium two-word or two-stress lines are rare.¹⁷ Three-word or three-stress lines remain fairly common. In *Enūma eliš*, for example, we soon encounter examples: I 3 *Apsūma rēstū zārūšun*, 5 *mēšunu ištēniš ihīqūma*, 11 *adi* (v.l. *adīma*) *irbū, išihū*, etc. Occasionally they are employed more systematically. In *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* there are several places where short series of up to six consecutive three-stress lines occur, and in the *Counsels of Wisdom* there are longer stretches of them. On the other hand they are lacking in the thirteenth-century Assyrian epics on Adad-nerari and Tukulti-Ninurta, where a more inflated style makes its appearance.¹⁸

The tendency for lines to become longer can also be seen if one compares the Old Babylonian with the Standard Babylonian versions of *Anzū*, *Etana*, or *Gilgamesh*. In a number of places, especially in *Anzū*, a three-stress line in the Old Babylonian becomes a four-stress line in the later version. Here are a few examples:

Anzūm OBV	Anzū SBV
<i>ina-mahar-ilī Ga[šru] lū-šumka.</i>	I 102 <i>šit[rah ina-mahri-ilīma Gašru lū-šumka.</i>
<i>ūtekim ilam enlil[lūsu,</i>	109 <i>ellilūt]a ilteqe, nadū paršī.</i>
<i>ša]diššu ittašī rēšišu.</i>	110 <i>Anzū i]pparišma šadussu igguš.</i>
<i>bītiš Ekur ana-šīr-abīka.</i>	II 19 <i>bītuš Ekur ana-šīr-abīka Ellil.</i>

From F. Sonnek’s study of formulae for introducing speeches¹⁹ it can be observed that they too tend to be padded out more after the Old Babylonian period. Whereas in Old Babylonian we have *pīšu īpušamma izzakkaram ana PN*, later we find an extra verb put in: *pāšu īpušma iqabbi, izzakkara ana PN*, or *pāšu īpušamma iqabbi, ana PN amāta izzakkar*.

The tendency to expansion continued in the first millennium. When we look at late works such as *Erra and Ishum* or Assurbanipal’s coronation hymn, we have the impression of luxuriant growth that keeps spilling over the due measure. To illustrate the point here are the opening lines of *Erra* juxtaposed with those of *Atram-hasis*:

Atram-hasis	Erra
<i>Inūma ilū awīlum,</i>	[Ša]r-gimir-dadmē, bānū-kib[rāti]
<i>ublū dulla, izbilū šupšikka;</i>	<i>Hendursagga, apil-Enlil, rēšt[ū]</i>
<i>šupšik ilī rabūma</i>	<i>nāš-haṭtu širti, nāqid-salmāt-qaqqadi, rē’ū-[tenēšēti],</i>
<i>dullum kabit, mād šapšāqum;</i>	<i>Išum ṭābihu na’du, ša-ana-našē-kakkēšu ezzūti qātāšu asmā,</i>
<i>rabūtum Anunnakkū sibittam</i>	<i>u-ana-šubruq-ulmēšu šērūti Erra qarrād-ilī inūšu ina-šubti,</i>
<i>dullam ušabzalū Igīgī.</i>	<i>īrissuma libbašu epēš tāhāzi.</i>

The extra length in the later texts, especially those of a hymnic nature, is partly accounted for by the proliferation of weighty construct compounds. In other words it is due to an increase in the size of the individual accentual units rather than in their number in the verse.

It is not my aim to provide a systematic descriptive account of the development of Akkadian metre. For that the reader should turn to Karl Hecker’s detailed discussion, which is outstanding for the range of material considered, the sober empirical approach, the methodical analysis, and the appreciation of the interconnection between metrics and stylistics. The purpose of the present paper is rather to offer a hypothesis by which the variabilities of this verse may be made to appear less bewildering. The observations in the preceding pages are intended to bring these variabilities into focus and define the peculiarities to be explained.

I believe that we have to try to explain them with reference to the manner in which verse was recited or sung. But this begs the question: to what extent was a tradition of oral performance sustained beside the written tradition?

¹⁶ ZA 71 (1981), p. 169.

¹⁷ Instances are listed by Hecker, p. 110.

¹⁸ *Ludlul* II 73–9, 84–5, 106–9, III 13–16, etc.; *Counsels of Wisdom* 31–9, 41–6, 135–47; Hecker, pp. 111 f.

¹⁹ “Die Einführung der direkten Rede in den epischen Texten”, ZA 46 (1940), pp. 225–35.

We know the Akkadian poetic texts from written sources. We know that some of the poems were “classics”, preserved in scribal tradition over many centuries. A poem such as the *Theodicy* with its elaborate acrostic must have been designed with at least one eye on the reader; any oral performance of the work was presumably of subordinate importance. But acrostic poems are comparatively rare and comparatively late. In origin, at any rate, metre and poetic form existed in order to please the ear, not the eye. When we read English verse that scans and rhymes, we may take it that its author intended us, if not actually to declaim it, at least to hear it mentally and appreciate it as we would appreciate a recitation. The rhythmic patternings that we discern in Akkadian poetry, such as the balance of words and phrases in the verse, the preference for a long syllable in the penultimate place, the grouping of lines in twos or fours, and the common device by which a couplet is repeated with one or two words varied or added — all this is clearly designed for the benefit of the hearer. Many of the Akkadian hymns and narrative poems contain internal evidence of oral performance. They often begin with an *azammur* “I (will) sing (of) —” or a *luzmur* “let me sing (of) —”, and/or with a call to the people to “hear” the subject-matter of the song. In the epilogue to *Enūma eliš* the written text is represented as having been made on the basis of older oral tradition, and it is to serve in its turn as the basis for future recitations; there is at least a pretence that it will be taught orally by seniors to their juniors.²⁰ Kabti-ilani-Marduk, the poet of *Erra and Ishum*, looks forward to its indefinite preservation both in performance and in literary tradition (V 53–61). One or two passages in poetic texts allude to the accompaniment of a performance on a stringed instrument.²¹ At Aššur in the Neo-Assyrian period there was a college or clan of “chief singers” who copied tablets, signing the colophons as scribes, and whose library contained texts — some of them several centuries old — of *Anzū*, *Etana*, *The Descent of Ishtar*, *Gilgamesh*, and *Enūma eliš*, besides hymns and other poetic and lexical works.²² This is very suggestive of the possibility that these singers might on occasion perform one or other of those classic poems. Many poems exist in divergent recensions: in some cases the variation between texts looks editorial in character, due to someone working on the basis of one or more written sources, but in other cases it looks like the result of a singer retelling the story from memory and changing things round slightly. As a rule, those poems which originated in the Old Babylonian period and were preserved down to the Neo-Assyrian kingdom or later underwent substantial revision or recomposition in the course of that transmission; and we have seen that this might involve a slight but perceptible shift in metrical sensibilities, implying an oral dimension to the process.²³

Well then, how are we to imagine a performer putting across verses in which there were generally four accentual peaks, but sometimes — unpredictably— three, or five? How could this not be as disconcerting to the hearers as it would have been if a Homeric singer had now and then delivered himself of a line with five or seven feet instead of six? Again, how can we make sense of the gross variations that exist in the length of the accentual units, that is to say in the distances separating one accentual peak from the next? They may occur on adjacent syllables, as in *Agušaya* A iv 10 *šī ihšus qurdam*, or there may be six or seven unstressed syllables between them. The variation is too great for the accentual peaks to have been aligned with a “beat” occurring at equal intervals.²⁴ Certain eminent scholars have found this so contrary to common sense that they have been driven to assume some quite different principle of accentuation, with bizarre results.

Thus F. M. Th. de Liagre Böhl starts from the premise that one expects, at least in the narrative poems, a greater regularity than is offered by “la métrique verbale”, the natural rhythm of the

²⁰ VII 145–8, 157 f.; cf. *LKA* 62 rev. 7–9, “Let me ever sing of Aššur’s strong victory ... May the earlier man hear and rep[eat it] to the later.”

²¹ Tukulti-Ninurta epic, vi (B rev.) 30’–2’; Shamash hymn for Assurbanipal, *KAR* 361 obv. 1 ff.

²² O. Pedersén, *Archives and Libraries in the City of Assur* 2 (Uppsala, 1986), pp. 34–41.

²³ The above paragraph is an abridged excerpt from a fuller discussion of oral performance and transmission in Mesopotamia in my book *The East Face of Helicon* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 590–9.

²⁴ We can do this in English verse: when there is a variable

number of unstressed syllables between the stressed ones, we make the stresses equidistant, speeding up the intervening syllables if there are more of them, slowing them down if there are less. But the number of these syllables is limited to between zero and two. If we try to put in more, a secondary accent automatically develops among them and the rhythm is ruined. In Akkadian verse no such constraint applies. We cannot here be dealing with a system of equally spaced stresses as in English. It is inconceivable that the same time-slot could be filled now by one, now by six or seven syllables: either the one would have to be unbearably dragged out, or the six gabbled at a ridiculous speed.

words.²⁵ In his opinion we should look for “la métrique alternante”, that is, for a pattern of alternately stressed and unstressed syllables. In order to find this, he first assumes the loss of short final vowels in pronunciation; he concedes that this would be surprising for the Old and Middle Babylonian periods, but, he maintains, verse calls for a special manner of delivery. Then he postulates a shift of accent, following the loss of the finals, from what had been the penultimate syllable to what now became the penultimate, so that, for instance, *enūma* becomes *énūm*. He also holds that certain words stand outside the metre altogether and are not counted. Here are a few verses scanned as he recommends.

	As transmitted	de Liagre Böhl
<i>Ee I 1–4</i>	<i>Enūma eliš lā nabū šamāmū, šapliš ammatum šuma lā zakrat, Apsūma, rēstū zārūšun, mummu Tiāmat, muallidat gimrīšun, mēšunu ištēniš ihīqūma.</i>	<i>Énūm eliš lā nabū šamām, šapliš iršit šum lā zakrat, apsūm, rēstū zārīūšun, umm T'āmt muallidat gimrīšun mēšun ištēniš ihīqūm.</i>
<i>Gilg. XI 9</i>	<i>Luptēka, Gilgameš, amāt niširti.</i>	<i>Lúptiq^a Gⁱlgameš amāt niširtⁱ.</i>

It is painful to see a man tying himself in such knots in public for the sake of a *métrique alternante* that has no basis whatever in the material evidence but derives entirely from his intuitive preconception.

Wolfram von Soden does not try to squeeze the texts into quite such a rigid straitjacket as Böhl does, and his prosodic methods are less extreme. But he too starts from an intuitive principle, based on analogies from classical and modern European verse, and he constantly makes unverifiable assumptions for the sake of it. His axiom is that in Old Babylonian poetry, at least, the accented syllables may not be separated by more than two unstressed syllables: “zwischen zwei Hebungen kann es wie in den klassischen und unseren Metren nur eine oder zwei Senkungen geben, nicht drei oder mehr.”²⁶ This is indeed a rule that is normally valid for English and German verse. But what ground is there for supposing that it holds for Akkadian? It is certainly not the impression we get from looking at any poetic text. Von Soden reckons with elision or desyllabification of short final vowels, and with secondary accents on long words. But he also postulates various anomalous accentuations as he encounters the need for them. Here is a short specimen of his analysis of one of the Old Babylonian *Gilgamesh* fragments (P i 1–7):²⁷

<i>itbēma Gilgameš šunátam ipáššar,</i>	3 3 3 3
<i>izzákkaram ana ummīšu:</i>	3 3 3
<i>“Ummī, ina šāt mušītīya</i>	2 2 2 3
<i>šámhākūma áttanállak</i>	2 2 2 2
<i>ina birīt eṭlūtīm.</i>	2 3 2
<i>iph[ur]ūnimma kakkábū šamá’v;</i>	2 3 3 3
<i>[á]rrum ša Ánim imqut ana šērīya.”</i>	2 3 2 2 3

The marginal symbols “2” and “3” do not refer to the number of stresses; “2” = “trochee” (a sequence of two syllables of which the first is accented, × ×), “3” = “amphibrach” (three syllables of which the middle one is accented, × × ×). The possibility of analysing the text into these trochees and amphibrachs follows from von Soden’s premises that not more than two unaccented syllables can occur in succession and that there is a “trochaic” ending to every verse. Now, if you are prepared to put accents on prepositions like *ana* and *ina*, and if in long words you assume an automatic secondary accent on the second or third syllable before or after the main accent, of course you are not going to have much difficulty in getting accents on every second or third syllable throughout, thus justifying the initial axiom. And yet the resulting pattern of 2s and 3s has a disappointingly random appearance. Nor does this method of analysis produce any clearer or more predictable accentual framework than we had before, since the number of accents in a verse still fluctuates between three and five. The game hardly seems worth the candle.

²⁵ *CRAA* 7, p. 146: “On s’attend précisément, dans les poèmes épiques, à une régularité plus grande que celle que pourrait offrir la métrique verbale qui est plus simple.”

²⁶ *ZA* 71 (1981), p. 169.

²⁷ The reader curious for longer specimens will find about fifty pages of them in von Soden’s two articles in *ZA*.

I wish to propose a different approach to the problem. Take the following verses of Ogden Nash:

Adorable is an adjective and womankind is a noun,
 And I often wonder why, although adorable womankind elects to talk standing up, it elects to put on
 its coat sitting down. . . .
 Yes, and if you desire *savoir faire* that you could balance a cup on,
 Consider the calmness of a woman trying to get her arm into the sleeve of a coat that she has sat down
 on too far up on.²⁸

These are in fact simply rhymed sentences, with no rhythm or regular beat and no set measure. Yet they are governed by a formal patterning which the hearer, even without seeing the words on the page, may easily grasp: the first line of each couplet is marked off by a syntactic and phonetic pause, and the second line by a stronger break plus the rhyme. Underlying the surface irregularity is a *fixed and unchanging* scheme:

× × R^a;
 × × R^b||

The symbols R^a, R^b, represent the rhyming words or word-groups; the semicolon and period stand for subordinate and dominant punctuation. (The first may in fact be a comma, semicolon, or question mark, and the second either a semicolon or a full stop.)

In Akkadian verse we do not find rhyme (except as an occasional, accidental effect of syntactic parallelism), but there are other features which mark off verses, irrespective of the number of words they contain. Firstly, as Benno Landsberger observed, in the great majority of verses the penultimate syllable is long, that is, it either has a long vowel or is closed by a consonant.²⁹ The first two lines of *Atram-hasis* illustrate the two alternatives:

Inūma ilū awīlum
ublū dulla, īzbilū šupšikkam.

This is, admittedly, a strong tendency rather than an absolute rule.³⁰ What does it mean? Is it merely a reflection of the frequency of long or accented penults in the language? Hecker considers the possibility, but finds that in view of the statistical facts it is “ganz ausgeschlossen”. On the other hand, he observes that there is a distinct preference for long penults at sentence-end even in prose texts. Everything, he concludes, speaks for the assumption “daß der Trochäus am Versschluß mit den prosodischen Gegebenheiten am Ende des akkadischen Prosasatzes in Verbindung zu bringen ist”.

We can take this further. Hebrew prose and verse show a similar liking for a long accented syllable in the penultimate position before a pause, so that some words actually retract the accent from the final syllable to the penultimate in pausal position and/or lengthen what is elsewhere a short vowel (or restore its original length); for example, שָׁמַעַי becomes שָׁמַעִי, and הַפְּיִימָה becomes הַפְּיִימָה־. When a perfect with a personal suffix and waw-consecutive stands before a pause, it retains its normal penultimate accentuation, and the waw fails of its usual effect in throwing the stress back on the suffix.

Thus it seems that the penchant for a long penultimate in Akkadian verse has its basis in an ancient feature of sentence-accent with a wider distribution in the Semitic languages. A verse often *is* a sentence. Strong syntactic breaks are avoided within it, and words that form a strong syntactic unit are not divided between verses. Nearly every Akkadian verse will tolerate at least a comma at the end of it, and even where there is no particular syntactic pause we may assume that there

²⁸ From the poem “Allow Me, Madam, but It Won’t Help” in Ogden Nash, *Good Intentions*.

²⁹ B. Landsberger, *Islamica* 2 (1926/27), p. 371: “jeder akkadische Vers endet auf einen Trochäus”. Von Soden, *ZA* 71 (1981), pp. 170–2, strains to eliminate exceptions.

³⁰ Hecker, pp. 102–8, has collected scores of exceptions and classified them. Some of them may be only apparent, for example proper names of Sumerian origin such as An(n)u, Anunnak(k)ū, Gilgameš (or Gišgimmaš, or however it was read; *CAD* writes Gilgāmeš), Ereškigal (written at Amarna *-ki-i-ga-a-al*), and others. A form such as *šamē*,

found several times at line-end, may conceal the older form *šamāṭī* (cf. *Atram-hasis* (OB) I 101 [*ša*]-*me-e* as against I 19 [*ša*]-*ma-i*, 170 [*ša*]-*ma-i* (v.l. *-m*)-*mi*), III ii 35, iii 7, 48; *Agušaya* A iv 1 *a-gu-ú* as against U 16889 (*UET* VI 395; W. G. Lambert in T. Abusch et al. [eds.], *Lingering over Words. Studies . . . in Honor of William L. Moran*, Harvard Semitic Studies 37, Atlanta 1990, p. 291) obv. 7 *šar-ru-um ša a-ga-i*; B. Groneberg [as n. 1], p. 158). Some of the exceptions are staves of the *paris* type, which at least have the accent on the penultimate syllable.

was a verse-marking pause in the delivery. This was supported by the long penultimate, the natural companion of the pause.

The scribal practice of marking a caesura in mid-verse suggests that that was a point at which some slighter form of pause — or, to be more non-committal, of marker — might be in place. The *Vierheber* often divides here into two balancing phrases:

*Atū mē, petā bābka,
petā bābkama lūruba anāku.
šumma lā tapattā bābu, lā erruba anāku,
amahhaš daltum, sikkūru ašabbir,
amahhaš sippumma ušbalakkat dalāti,
ašabbir gišrinnamma ašahhaṣ karra,
ušellā mītūti, ikkalū balṭūti,
eli balṭūti ima'' idū mītūti.³¹*

In the *Agušaya* hymn, as we saw, units corresponding to these half-verses appear with the status of full verses, with long penultimate, but from a syntactical point of view halves rather than wholes.

There and in many other texts, as has been emphasized, the individual verse often appears as part of a higher-order structure, a distich or quatrain, or in the case of the *Agušaya* hymn an octastich. These structures are themselves marked out by a scheme of pauses on the general pattern $1 + 1 = 2$, $2 + 2 = 4$:

*Nusku pīašu īpušamma
issaqqar ana qurādi Enlil:
"Bēlī, bīnu būnūka;
mārū ramānīka mīnšu tādur?
Enlil, bīnu būnūka;
mārū ramānīka mīnšu tādur?
šupur Anam lišēridū[nimm]a;
Enki libbikūnim ana m[ahrik]a."³²*

This scheme of metrical pauses need not, of course, always be realized by a matching set of syntactic pauses. It represents an underlying matrix which favours a corresponding distribution of syntactic pauses, while allowing the poet some latitude.

It will be instructive at this point to compare the poetry of two other Semitic traditions, the Ugaritic and the Hebrew. Old Babylonian poetry evidently shares with these a common origin, which we may perhaps provisionally think of as Amorite.

As regards Ugaritic, I refer to the analysis by B. Margalit. He finds that what he calls "the verse-line, or stich(os)", which contains between two and four "verse-units" (i.e. accentual units), 'is a component element rather than an independent prosodic structure'. Two or three stichoi make up a "verse".

The verse is the basic structural form which functions as an independent prosodic entity. It is the "molecule" of Ugaritic poetic structure.

Like the sentence, the verse contains (mostly) a complete self-subsistent thought whose punctuation is usually a period, occasionally a semi-colon. The segments of the verse comprise subordinate or (more often) independent clauses to be punctuated with a comma.³³

Hebrew poetry is constructed on similar principles. What are counted as "verses" in our Bibles would be more appropriately called periods. Each of them is divided by one or two major pauses. The two or three segments thus marked out correspond to the stichoi of Ugaritic and the lines of Old Babylonian verse. They are often subdivided by lesser pauses into what may be called *commata*,³⁴ indivisible units of between one and three words.

This principle of structuring by a hierarchy of pauses is made explicit in the elaborate system

³¹ *Descent of Ishtar* 14–20.

³² *Atr.* I 91–8.

³³ B. Margalit, *The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT. Text, Translation, Commentary* (Berlin & New York, 1989), pp. 495–500. Margalit also recognizes a higher-order unit,

the paragraph or strophe, comprising between three and seven stichoi.

³⁴ From *κόμμα*, the smallest subdivision of the sentence (smaller than a colon) recognized by Greek rhetoricians.

of written accents introduced by the Masoretes to regulate the recitation of the biblical text, the prose books as well as the poetic.³⁵ The accents are divided into two categories, the disjunctive and the conjunctive, the latter being complementary and subordinate to the former. A disjunctive accent marks a word as being detached in delivery, to a greater or slighter degree, from what follows it, while a conjunctive one indicates the opposite. The system of accents, then, serves to divide up the period into its cola and commata. The disjunctives are graded in rank. The strongest, *sillûq*, marks the end of the period. The next order of disjunctives, *'atnāḥ* and *'ôlēḥ w^eyôrēd*, divide the period into two or three members. These members in turn, if they are long enough, suffer dichotomy by means of lesser disjunctives such as *ṣinnôr*, *r^ebîa'*, or *d^eḥî*. For example, the first period of the first Psalm is commatized as follows:

'ašrē hā' iš¹ 'āšer lō' hālak² ba'āṣat r^ešā' iṣ³
 Blessed the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
ûb^ederek ḥaṭṭā' iṣ⁴ lō' 'āmād⁵
 and in the way of sinners does not stand,
ûb^emôšab lēšim¹ lō' yāšāb.⁶
 and in the seat of scoffers does not sit.

The disjunctive accents are indicated here by superior numbers (1 = *r^ebîa'*, 2 = *ṣinnôr*, 3 = *'ôlēḥ w^eyôrēd*, 4 = *d^eḥî*, 5 = *'atnāḥ*, 6 = *sillûq*). The words not provided with one of these have conjunctive accents.

If we were to devise a scheme of accents to notate the hierarchical system of pauses in a Babylonian strophe or distich and so define its structure, the Masoretic system would be quite serviceable for the purpose, except that it makes subtler gradations than we can really appreciate and uses names that mean little to us. The period from the *Agušaya* hymn quoted earlier, for example, might be accented like this:

tamhat rittušša²
kalāšumu parsī.³
tatnaddanšî' ašar libbīša.⁵
Ištar rittušša²
serrēt nišī ukī' al.³
[iq]ullā ištarātašin¹ [siqr]ušša.⁶

The marking of two or three caesuras within the *Vierheber* in later manuscripts of *Enūma eliš* and the *Theodicy* points to the recognition of still finer junctures than the medial one. The Tell Ḥaddād tablet subdivides the second hemistich but not the first; a branch of the *Theodicy* tradition subdivides both. This suggests a hierarchy of junctures:

 minima media minor finalis
 × : | | × ||

The first, besides being the least important, appears to have been actually dispensable, seeing that there are three-word lines in which only the two latter junctures can be found.

Now, how were these junctures perceived by the ear? They were evidently marked in some way. They will have been made perceptible by pause (or *rallentando*) and/or by intonation. The hearer registered the series of junctures and in this way he knew when the verse was complete. The same applies to the larger structures, the distich or quatrain, in those compositions which make use of them.

In its principle of progressive subdivision by greater and lesser disjunctions, and its commata of variable length, Babylonian versification appears analogous to the Hebrew. Both systems were probably based on a pattern of intonation with potentially musical implications, whether we think of actual singing or just of some sort of melodic chanting. I draw attention to the interesting

³⁵ The system used for the principal poetic books (Psalms, Proverbs, and Job) differs from that used in the other 21 books, though it has common elements; it is richer and more complicated, though fewer different types of accent are distinguished, and it is presumably older, as the need

to notate the delivery of the Psalms and other poetry would have been felt earlier than the need to regulate prose readings. The actual signs used are related to Byzantine neumes and punctuation-marks.

name borne by one of the major poetical disjunctives in Hebrew: *'ôlēh wəyôrēd*, “going up and going down”. It has a double symbol, a mark above the word followed by one below ($\overset{\cdot}{\underset{\cdot}{\prime}}$), and it must originally have represented a special rising and falling intonation or melodic turn, signalling to the hearer a non-final pause.

The major coordinates in music are rhythm and pitch. We might call pitch the vertical axis and time the horizontal. It is possible to have a musical structure with an identity based on a characteristic melodic profile up and down the vertical axis while being freely adjustable along the horizontal; that is, the sequence of pitches is fixed, but the time-intervals between them can at some points be elastic. The modern churchgoer is familiar with such a structure when a psalm is sung. The Psalms as sung in English are not metrical. They do not have the rhythms of any English verse, they have the rhythms of prose, in which the stresses fall at unpredictable intervals, with possibly six or seven unstressed syllables between them:

O Gód, the heáthen are come into thine inhéritance;
thy holy témples they have defiled.

We seem almost to be back to Ogden Nash, without the rhymes. And yet these verses acquire a perfectly clear profile from the formulaic melodies to which they are sung, the so-called psalm tones. These melodies are elastic in the middle to suit the words of the particular verse, but fixed in outline. In each half verse there is a distinctive opening motif which leads to the Reciting note; that note is repeated for as many syllables as required, and followed by a distinctive cadence.

This is not a system invented for the English. In principle it goes back to the early Church; and the early Church took it over from the Synagogue. Scholars such as Abraham Idelsohn, Peter Wagner, and Eric Werner have established significant affinities between Gregorian chant and the psalmodic traditions of the Jewish diaspora. Idelsohn collected and compared melodies from widely separated Jewish communities in east and west, Persian, Yemenite, Babylonian, Sephardic and Ashkenazic, some of them thought to have separated off before or at the time of the Babylonian exile. The features that they share must, so it is plausibly argued, reach far back into antiquity.³⁶

I suggest the following hypothesis to bring all this together. From sometime before 2000 BC Amorite and Akkadian poetry was chanted in a particular way, or in some cases sung with harp or lyre accompaniment. The performers had a small repertoire of conventional but elastic intonational or melodic matrices to which they could fit their verses. These matrices were structured by means of certain fixed pauses or cadences, major, minor, and minimal. The singer or reciter stretched or shortened the matrix from verse to verse so that the accentual peaks fell at the appropriate points of its profile.

The system did not depend on the number of accents being invariable. For example, if the poet, to express a particular idea, happened to hit on a form of words that contained five accent-bearing syllables, he could easily fit it into a matrix that normally supported four. Whichever of the five was the least important in terms of sentence-accent could be carried in the neutral section of the melody. If, on the other hand, his phrase contained only three accents, one of the nodal points of the melody could be allowed to pass unmarked. The final accent would coincide with the cadence in the usual way.

By way of illustration, here is an invented scheme of the sort I mean:



The reader may like to try the experiment of chanting any passage of Akkadian verse according to this scheme, that is, in a generally level tone with an upward or downward inflection to mark

³⁶ Cf. A. Z. Idelsohn, “Parallelen zwischen gregorianischen und hebräisch-orientalischen Gesangweisen”, *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 4 (1922), pp. 515–24; id., *Jewish Music in its Historical Development* (New York,

1929); P. Wagner, “Der gregorianische Gesang”, in G. Adler, *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1930), i. 77; A. Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York, 1969), pp. 228–33.

the lesser junctures and a more definite falling cadence at the end of each verse or verse-group, plus a *rallentando* on the penultimate note. In this way it should prove possible to understand how verse displaying such alarming surface irregularities could be performed in a uniform manner.

It might be objected that a performance of (say) the Gilgamesh epic according to a stereotyped scheme of the kind proposed would have been extraordinarily monotonous. But there is no reason why it should have been more monotonous than a performance of several thousand Homeric hexameters. For one thing, the singer may have varied his matrices from time to time. For another, it is characteristic of many epic traditions that the same melodic pattern is endlessly repeated, line after line.³⁷ The effect may have been spell-binding rather than tedious.

The hypothesis that I have outlined has the further merit of enabling us to understand the process by which verses became longer over the centuries without their outer form being changed. Poets became more gushing, particularly when they were in the hymnic or eulogistic vein, and this found expression especially in inflated construct phrases, which the verse simply stretched to accommodate.

Epimetrum: the opening lines of Enūma eliš

In the seminar version of this paper I offered a metrical analysis of the first five stanzas of *Enūma eliš*, proposing by the way a transposition of one distich (ll. 7–8) to follow line 2. I take the opportunity here to lay the proposal before a wider public.³⁸

Here is how the passage reads with the transposition:

- 1 *Enūma eliš lā nabū šamāmū,*
- 2 *šapliš ammatum šuma lā zakrat,*
- 7 *enūma ilāni lā šūpū manāma,*
- 8 *šuma lā zukkurū, šimātu lā šīmū,*
- 3 *Apsūma, rēstū zārūšun,*
- 4 *mummu Tiāmat, muallidat gimrīšun,*
- 5 *mēšunu ištēniš ihīqūma,*
- 6 *gipāra lā kišsurū, šuša lā šē' ū.*
- 9 *ibbanūma ilāni qerebšun:*
- 10 *Lahmu, Lahamu uštāpū, šumī izzakrū, etc.*

My grounds for making this suggestion are two. Firstly, the lines in their transmitted order are incoherent: the pronoun suffix in *zārūšun* (3) has no antecedent, and the one in *qerebšun* (9) should refer to Apsu and Tiamat (3–6), a connection broken by the intervention of 7–8. The transposition solves both difficulties at a stroke. Secondly, it restores the pattern of four-line stanzas which prevails almost throughout the poem, and which we might expect to appear at the beginning especially, but which is disturbed in the transmitted version. The parallelism of the two *enūma* clauses in the first stanza may be thought by some an attractive bonus. Others may object that such an anaphora is stylistically abnormal. But are the stray pronoun suffixes not equally abnormal, and a good deal more objectionable?

A mechanical explanation of the assumed corruption is not far to seek. With the two parallel *enūma* clauses before him, a copyist may have initially overlooked the second one and gone straight on to the main clause. The omitted distich could then have been restored from the margin in the wrong place.

The manuscript tradition is unanimous; Professor Lambert tells me that he knows seven copies with the sequence 2–3, and eight with the sequence 6–7. This, of course, does not prove that the text as transmitted must be correct. It only shows that if a mistake has occurred, it occurred at a very early stage of the transmission. In principle that is something that can happen in any written tradition. There is no reason to suppose that the tradition of a Middle Babylonian poem was exempt from those accidents that are an inherent feature of this sublunary world.

³⁷I collected some references on this point in the *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 63 (1986), pp. 43 f.; see also E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (Everyman ed.), p. 398; various writers in A. J. Hatto (ed.), *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* 1 (London, 1980), pp. 107 (Old French), 202 (Serbo-Croat), 225 (Ob-Ugrian), 294 f. (Mongol), 304 f. (Kirghiz), and

vol. 2 (London, 1989), p. 98 (Uzbek); E. Gerson-Kiwi in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ix, p. 638 (Yemen); S. M. Pandey, *The Hindi Oral Epic Canāini* (Allahabad, 1982), p. 58.

³⁸I am grateful to Professor W. G. Lambert for his comments on the idea, which does not persuade him.