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CHAPTER ONE

READING IN A WARMING WORLD

HOW SHOULD WE HUMANS narrate our self-made climate disaster? In a sense, we have been doing it all along. All great works of literature concern themselves with a world reshaped by human hands and are therefore potential sources for understanding the process by which humans have changed their environment. The only challenge is to learn how to read these works with a sustained attention to climate change. They don't always yield to this kind of reading easily because they were not made for this purpose. Sometimes, they hide or sideline the traces of human-made climate change by defending the way of life that caused that change and by being unaware of climate change itself. Yet works of world literature can be made to yield their significance if we ask the right questions, focus on the right details, and embed those details in the larger societal processes that put us on our current, disastrous path.

To exemplify the kind of reading I have in mind, one inspired by ecocriticism, I want to begin with a source text of literature, arguably the first great work of world literature: the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Its earliest form dates back more than four thousand years, but the work took on canonical form seven hundred years later, when it came to dominate an entire region for over a millennium. But then, some time before the Common Era, it disappeared, along with the cuneiform writing system in which it was written. By chance, the text was unearthed again two thousand years later, in the 1840s, by the restless adventurer Austen Henry Layard while he was digging for Nineveh, the biblical city once located on the Euphrates River.¹ Through luck and perseverance—and the reading of the Hebrew Bible—Layard hit upon the burnt-down library of Ashurbanipal, an Assyrian king who had collected the clay tablets that contained this ancient epic. (When Ashurbanipal's library went up in flames, the clay tablets had hardened, inadvertently preserving this masterpiece for millennia underground.)

Finding the epic was one thing; reading it, another. It took another couple of decades to decode the forgotten cuneiform script, a feat that was achieved at the British Library, whither Layard had transported the tablets.² The deciphering of this text was headline news because this oldest surviving masterpiece contained shocking information for Victorian England: a text older than the Old Testament included

an identical story of Noah and the Flood. What were Christian believers to make of this remarkable coincidence? What were the implications for the status of the Old Testament as holy scripture?

Today, the provocative potential of the story of the flood is undiminished, though for different reasons: I regard it as a key text when it comes to climate change.³

Despite the striking similarities, the two flood stories, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and in the Hebrew Bible, are also quite different. In the Hebrew Bible, we read:

And the Lord saw that the evil of the human creature was great on the earth and that every scheme of his heart's devising was only perpetually evil. And the Lord regretted having made the human on earth and was grieved to the heart. And the Lord said, "I will wipe out the human race I created from the face of the earth, from human to cattle to crawling thing to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I have made them."⁴

As translated by Robert Alter, the flood is clearly presented as punishment: humans have been violating God's commands, leading God to regret that he ever made them. He comes to view the creation of humans as a mistake that has to be undone. The mistake encompasses not just humans; all living creatures are apparently guilty by association and must be wiped out

as well. It is only thanks to Noah, the one good man, that humans, along with all the other animals, survive.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the details of survival are similar: the Noah-like Utnapishtim builds a large boat, saves his family as well as the family of animals, sends out birds to see whether the waters are receding, and rejoices when one of them returns with a twig in its beak—these were the details so strikingly similar to the Bible that disturbed Victorian England.

Yet even if the details are similar, the moral of the story is different. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the flood is not part of the main story but merely an interpolated tale told by Utnapishtim to Gilgamesh toward the end of the epic. Instead of framing the story as one of divine retribution, Utnapishtim begins his tale simply by saying that the gods had resolved to send a deluge, giving no reason as to why they had done so. One of the gods reveals the gods' secret plan of destruction and instructs Utnapishtim to build a boat and safeguard samples of the world's fauna. When the ordeal is over, a goddess accuses the great god Enlil of having brought on the deluge "irrationally."⁵ To be sure, she concedes, in a purely hypothetical manner: "punish the wrongdoer for his wrongdoing, / and punish the transgressor for his transgressions / But be lenient."⁶ However, she then suggests less extreme measures that would have been more appropriate: "Let the lion rise up to diminish the human race"; "Let the wolf rise up to diminish the human race"; "let famine rise up

to wreak havoc in the land”; “let pestilence rise up to wreak havoc in the land.”⁷ The point here is not sin and punishment, but something closer to population control. The human race has grown too populous and needs to be culled. There are better ways of doing so than by destroying everything through a flood, the goddess is saying, and the epic confirms her point of view.

Despite the fact that we have now, once again, this second, earlier version of the Flood at our disposal, the biblical version continues to dominate. One reason may be that the debate about climate change tends to be charged morally with ideas of sin and punishment, transgression and retribution; another is, of course, that the Hebrew Bible is more influential than the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Or are these the same reason? Biblical morality is shaping current thinking about the climate more than it should. True, one might argue that seeing climate change through a moral lens makes sense to the extent that human-made climate change is our fault. Perhaps we must even follow Noah and save ourselves by building a new ark (is this what Elon Musk is doing with his mission to Mars?). The question of agency and responsibility is everywhere, and the Old Testament seems to offer a powerful warning in the form of a morality tale as well as a solution.

Today, however, it is becoming clear that the religious fable of righteousness and sin is not effective in pinpointing cause and effect for human-induced

climate change, nor in mitigating it. The righteous recycler who unplugs from the grid and lives a virtuous zero-emissions life will not save humans. If a story of the Flood is useful at all—and it may be better to jettison it entirely—the one from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, less concerned with sin and punishment, and more with population control and the relation between humans and their environment, is probably better.

Mesopotamians, unlike inhabitants of arid Jerusalem, where the idea of a flood must have come as a surprise, experienced floods on a regular basis. Living between two large rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, they had been able to invent intensive agriculture because of the regular flooding that brought new soil and nutrients to their fields (the word *Mesopotamia*, in Greek, means “land between the rivers”). The problem was how to control these periodic floods. For this purpose, Mesopotamians created an elaborate system of canals, something that is also mentioned in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It was the first attempt to control the environment by means of a large engineering project. The canals worked astonishingly well, until they didn’t, leading to inevitable flooding, which reminded humans, or should have reminded humans, that environmental engineering, then as now, had its limits and its risks. As more people settled in the fertile floodplains, more people were exposed to violent floods, beginning a high-stakes cycle that has continued to this

day. Among many other things, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a warning against this form of hubris.

While the flood got all the original headlines, there are other, more trenchant parts of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* that speak to how settled humans construct their relationship to the environment. The epic begins with a crisis: a wild creature has been interfering with the natural order of things. It has destroyed human traps; it has filled in pits that are meant to catch wildlife; it has helped other animals escape from humans. One hunter has spotted the creature: it has fur all over its body, including a long mane on its head; it feeds on grass alongside gazelles and joins other animals at the watering hole.

The epic's account of this wild creature is at least as significant, from an environmental perspective, as the flood. For this creature is actually some sort of a human, named Enkidu. We know this because he has been created by the gods specifically to rein in Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, who doesn't know what to do with his strength. Gilgamesh creates chaos by doing whatever he wants, which is mostly doing battle with men and raping women. Something has to change, so the gods have taken clay and molded Enkidu out of it. But for the time being, Enkidu lives with the animals and shuns human company. He is not quite human yet.

And so, the drama of how Enkidu can be brought into human society begins. He has to shave off his

beard; he has to start wearing clothes; he has to start eating cooked foods; and he has to shun the company of other animals. This is accomplished by sending out a woman who seduces him. After the seduction, the other animals reject Enkidu, and he has no choice but to throw in his lot with humans. Once he is in human society, he befriends Gilgamesh (well, first they fight, then they make up) and learns how to eat bread and drink beer. Only then has Enkidu become fully human, and the epic can turn its attention to other topics, essentially becoming an adventure story of two friends going out into the world. It's possible that they even become lovers.

What the *Epic of Gilgamesh* does here is draw a line between humans and nonhumans. Even if you are biologically a human being, you are not human as long as you live in the wilderness, as long as you graze, as long as you don't reject the wilderness and settle down, as long as you don't eat and drink the products of intensive agriculture, such as bread and beer, that have made settled life possible.

More specifically, what the epic draws between humans and humanlike wildlings isn't a line: it's a wall. Gilgamesh is famous for having rebuilt the wall around Uruk, the city over which he rules. The wall and the physical plant of the city are also what the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is visibly proud of. Before the main action begins, the *Epic* gives its readers a tour of the city:

He [Gilgamesh] built the walls of ramparted Uruk,
The lustrous treasury of hallowed Eanna!
See its upper wall, whose facing gleams like copper,
Gaze at the lower course, which nothing will equal,
Mount the stone stairway, there from days of old,
Approach Eanna, the dwelling of Ishtar,
Which no future king, no human being will equal.
Go up, pace out the walls of Uruk,
Study the foundation terrace and examine the
brickwork.
Is not its masonry of kiln-fired brick?
And did not seven masters lay its foundations?
One square mile of city, one square mile of gardens,
One square mile of clay pits, a half square mile of
Ishtar's dwelling,
Three and a half square miles is the measure of
Uruk!⁸

The passage reads like the script of an excited tour guide telling us where to look, explaining all the sights, praising what we see. It is a miracle, we are to understand, this ramparted city, a miracle made of clay. Clay is the material from which this city wall is made, kiln-fired bricks, and clay bricks are what the houses and temples are made of as well. Clay is such an important building material that the tour guide even mentions the clay pits from which this material is harvested.

This city, ramparted by clay bricks, is the world into which Enkidu has to be brought. It is here where

wheat, harvested by clay sickles or flint, baked in clay pots, and stored in clay containers, is consumed, and where beer, stored in clay vessels, is brewed from barley. The wall that separates humans from animals separates the city from the country. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a text that celebrates urban living and dismisses the wilderness as unfit for human habitation.

There are lots of reasons to celebrate Uruk. The city was one of the first large urban centers in the world, concentrating as many as fifty thousand inhabitants into one small space. But to my ears, the celebration of urbanism undertaken in the epic also has a tinge of defensiveness about it—a tour guide’s exaggeration. One recent scholar has suggested that Gilgamesh’s impressive city wall was built as much to keep the good people of Uruk in as to keep wildlings such as Enkidu out.⁹ It is true that sedentary life reduced the diversity of foods, exposed inhabitants to droughts and floods, and led to the spread of diseases. There is evidence that in the early days of agriculture, humans sometimes returned to hunting and gathering or to following their herds because of the significant drawbacks of agricultural life. Also, cities had to be defended against nomads whose diet was more diverse and who tended to be stronger. So perhaps there is an element of propaganda in the epic’s praise of city living. Enkidu, after all, didn’t come voluntarily. He had to be seduced into the city through cunning.¹⁰

As soon as the seduction of Enkidu, which is really an induction into urban living, is complete, the two friends leave the city again. Their goal is to kill the monstrous Humbaba, who lives far away, in a forest of cedars, which he guards jealously. This is the central episode in the entire epic and one in which the close friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is sealed. Along the way, Gilgamesh is plagued by dreams that seem to foretell disaster, but each time Enkidu puts a more positive spin on them, convincing his friend to go on. Enkidu's past as a wildling is not entirely forgotten. On their trek through the countryside, Gilgamesh remembers that his friend used to live here, that the wilderness is where he originated. Perhaps this is what gives Enkidu the authority to interpret Gilgamesh's dreams.

Finally, after all obstacles, such as Gilgamesh's ominous dreams, have been cleared away, the much-anticipated encounter of the two friends with the monster can take place. Unsurprisingly, the great Gilgamesh vanquishes Humbaba in battle, which is described in some detail. Once more, the wilderness loses against the ruler of urban life. Intriguingly, Humbaba seems to recognize Enkidu as a fellow wildling, which is why he pleads with him for his life. "You know the lore of my forest, / And you understand all I have to say," Humbaba says to him, quite correctly.¹¹ But Humbaba doesn't recognize that Enkidu now denies his past and has fully sided with the city, even more so than

Gilgamesh. He eggs on Gilgamesh and convinces him to kill the monster with the zeal of a recent convert.

Their dirty work complete, the two friends begin what they have actually come to do: to fell trees. “Gilgamesh cut down the trees, / Enkidu chose the timbers,” the narrators says, and Enkidu elaborates the reason.¹² Speaking to Gilgamesh, he says: “You killed the guardian by your strength, / Who else could cut through this forest of trees? / My friend, we have felled the lofty cedar, / Whose crown once pierced the sky. / I will make a door six times twelve cubits high, two times twelve cubits wide, / One cubit shall be its thickness / Its hinge pole, ferrule, and pivot box shall be unique.”¹³ The mythical venture to the forest and the battle with Humbaba are in fact nothing but an elaborate logging expedition, extracting a resource that is crucial for building cities.

While Uruk, the gigantic city, is mostly made from clay, its doors and roofs are made from timber. And also it is not only Uruk. More and more cities have sprung up in Mesopotamia—sedentary life isn’t that bad after all—which means that there have been more and more logging expeditions leading to increased deforestation. Rulers have to bring timber from farther and farther away to feed the first urban construction boom in history. This is why the two friends have to go all the way to Lebanon, which is where Humbaba and his cedar forest are located, some seven hundred miles from Uruk. The sedentary lifestyle is remaking

the landscape and requires more and more resource extraction. It is a bitter irony: the former wildling Enkidu is now working for city dwellers, destroying the environment that once sustained him. Humbaba's is not just a regular forest: it is a sacred grove, which means that it is untouched by human hands. One might translate this into the language of botany and say that it is virgin forest, the most important, environmentally, by far. Humbaba is right: Enkidu knows all about the forest and should know better, but he no longer cares. He likes his clothes, his bread, and his beer, he likes women, and above all he likes Gilgamesh, his best friend and builder of city walls.

The episode confirms the line, or wall, drawn around humanity: those who dwell in the forest are monsters and have to be killed. The forest is not for living. It is for felling trees and bringing them into the city to build houses and to fire kilns in which clay bricks can be hardened.

Interestingly, the epic describes this resource extraction and lets us admire the two heroes who undertake it, but the epic also shows that this deed comes with a steep price attached, which takes the form of the gods deciding to punish the two trespassers. Gilgamesh is spared, but Enkidu must die. He suffers a slow and painful death, leaving Gilgamesh heartbroken and unhinged. He doesn't believe that Enkidu is dead until he sees a worm crawling out of his nose—one of the epic's most affective and touching details.

What, in this epic, does an unhinged person do? He leaves the city and roams in the wild. Gilgamesh runs from one end of the world to the other, his clothes in tatters, living on the steppes, as his best friend once did. It's almost as if he is trying to relive Enkidu's life, though in reverse, leaving the city for the wilderness.

Roaming Gilgamesh encounters Utnapishtim at the end of the world, which is where he hears the story of the flood. It isn't what he had come for. He was looking for eternal life but missed his chance; by the end of the epic, he finally returns to Uruk, having made his peace with death. The epic concludes by giving us another tour of the walls, bricks, temples, and clay pits that make the city so great. This is how an epic that defines the difference between humans and animals, civilization and barbarity, has to end: with the triumph of settled life, secured by a wall.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the first important record of human settlement, the mode of life that set us on a path of destabilizing our ecosystem. For this reason, this text offers important clues about how we got here. It also shows how important it is today to read this text, and specifically to read it against the grain, with attention to how our mode of life first emerged, how it has justified itself, and therefore how it might be altered.

What we need in this situation is a new reading of this foundational story, one that does not believe in the wall and recognizes that what sustains the city inside the wall is the resource-rich environment out-

side of it. It is a reading attuned to what one might term infrastructure, in the broad sense recently suggested by Jedediah Purdy, which includes engineering and agriculture in the context of entire ecosystems.¹⁴ Translated into the terms of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, infrastructure includes not only the city of Uruk but also the forests of Lebanon as well as the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, which sustain the city's agriculture but also threaten the city with devastating floods.

The environmental reading of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* suggested above is but one example of how the deep history of literature can be seen as so many documents that describe and justify resource extraction in its various forms of development. In fact, I believe that the entire canon of world literature would lend itself to such an investigation. Environmental reading of the kind I propose here doesn't need to cherry-pick specific texts or genres, for example those focused on descriptions of nature. Rather, the claim is that all texts and genres can be subject to an environmental reading because of literature's complicity with the lifestyle that has led to climate change. It is striking how consistently (though variously) literature draws a line between civilization and wilderness once one starts looking for the pattern. Let me provide a few more examples, chosen with a view toward variety.

Moving on from *Gilgamesh*, one might turn to another epic from the ancient world, the *Odyssey*. What comes into focus in this epic is the Cyclopes episode, with its attention to alternative forms of commerce and agriculture. The entire episode amounts to a dismissal of people who don't participate in the Greek world of seaborne trade and its particular form of agriculture.

The negative report on the Cyclopes is told, of course, by Odysseus himself, a shipwrecked sailor trying to find favor with his hosts, on whom his fate now depends. Odysseus is therefore likely to exaggerate the bad treatment he had received from previous hosts. The first description of the Cyclopes frames the episode by focusing on the strange form of agriculture these people practice. "They put their trust in gods, / and do not plant their goods from seed, nor plow. / And yet the barley, grain, and clustering wine-grapes / all flourish there, increased by rain from Zeus."¹⁵ At first blush, this sounds very much like a typical agricultural society, similar perhaps to Mesopotamia, where most of the grains mentioned by Odysseus were first cultivated, sustaining a settled life.

But there is one important difference (important to Odysseus, that is): the Cyclopes grow these agricultural products without having to work for them. This difference is immediately joined by a second—namely, that they lack the political organization typical of Greece: "They hold no councils, have no

common laws, / but live in caves on lofty mountain-tops, / and each makes laws for his own wife and children, without concern for what the others think.”¹⁶

Odysseus paints a picture of radical isolation, of individual families living by themselves without a sense of community or polity. Once again, it is city dwelling that is privileged here, the kind available in the city-states prevalent in Greece.

The final oddity, in Odysseus’s mind, is that the Cyclopes do not participate in maritime trade and instead live in (relative) isolation from the rest of the world. Upon seeing this rich island, Odysseus immediately begins to imagine what could be accomplished here by Greek enterprise, what harbors could be created, what fields plowed, what kind of trade set up. Clearly, the Cyclopes do not know what they could do with their natural resources, do not recognize the full potential of their land. Like Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, they are, somehow, “wild.”

With this negative framing concluded, Odysseus proceeds to recount what actually happened here. Once Odysseus and his companions arrive, they find one of the Cyclopes gone but enter the cave anyway. Now begins the riveting drama of the murderous Polyphemus, who disrespects the rules of hospitality (which Odysseus praises his audience for upholding, since his life depends on it), who kills and eats humans (instead of feeding them, like a good host would). This monstrous antihost will have to be brought down through the

cunning of Odysseus, who uses a special wine to make him drunk. Once the guest-eating Polyphemus has passed out, Odysseus sharpens a pole, heats it in a fire, and drives it into the Cyclops's single eye.

At this point, the narrative becomes particularly gory. Odysseus describes his revenge with not one but two extended similes, comparing the movement of turning the pole in the eye to a drill used in shipbuilding (again, the importance of maritime trade and technology) and then the sizzling of the injured eye to that of a blacksmith who puts a red-hot iron in a bucket of water (another technology the Cyclopes do not possess or need). This is what these two similes sound like in Emily Wilson's characteristically direct and powerful rendering:

They took the olive spear, its tip all sharp,
and shoved it in his eye. I leaned on top
and twisted it, as when a man drills wood
for shipbuilding. Below, the workers spin
the drill with straps, stretched out from either end.
So round and round it goes, and so we whirled
the fire-sharp weapon in his eye. His blood
poured out around the stake, and blazing fire
sizzled his lids and brows, and fried the roots.
As when a blacksmith dips an axe or adze
to temper it in ice-cold water; loudly
it shrieks. From this, the iron takes on its power.
So did his eyeball crackle on the spear.¹⁷

Before inviting us to enjoy this much-anticipated revenge, however, Odysseus has inadvertently provided his listeners with details of Cyclopes living that contradict his framing story. While he had originally presented the Cyclopes as lazy recipients of divine plenty, we now learn that they actually work very hard for their sustenance. For one thing, Polyphemus is a neat housekeeper: “We saw his crates weighed down with cheese, and pens / crammed full of lambs divided up by age.”¹⁸ Everywhere is evidence of careful animal husbandry and agricultural activity, like that surrounding the best of Greek cities. Even the claim that the Cyclopes live in isolation from one another is proven wrong by Odysseus’s own words. When the blinded Polyphemus calls for help, help comes immediately. “[He] shouted for the Cyclopes who lived in caves high up on windy cliffs around. / They heard and came from every side, and stood near to the cave, and called out, ‘Polyphemus! / What is the matter? Are you badly hurt? / Why are you screaming through the holy night / and keeping us awake? Is someone stealing your herds, or trying to kill you, by some trick or force?’”¹⁹ Clearly, these are not people who live in isolation from each other but a community that rallies immediately to defend one of its members who appears to be in distress. The Cyclopes help one another out; they form a proper society.

Like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey* draws a line between civilization and barbarity. The line is similar, if not identical, to the Mesopotamian epic in that it

involves agriculture, though here we are dealing not with a grazing wildling but with the odd picture of agriculture and domesticated animal husbandry succeeding allegedly (but not actually) without labor. Equally important is Homer's emphasis on long-distance trade and shipping, the core of the Greek economy, which the Cyclopes lack. This different economic base also explains the diverging attitudes toward the institution of hospitality, which is so central to this episode and the entire epic: hospitality is particularly important for long-distance trade. As subsistence farmers, the Cyclopes do not need hospitality, which is why they are happy to violate its rules.

One could follow the representation of agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade throughout the canon of world literature. The next stop might be Homer's Roman imitator, Virgil. The *Aeneid* is yet another foundational story that revolves around the drama of burning and building urban spaces. Its narrative is like a cord suspended between two cities, beginning with the destruction of Troy and ending with the founding of Rome. To gain a fuller purchase on this epic's attitude toward agriculture, urban living, and other aspects of resource extraction, it should be read side by side with Virgil's other great work, the *Georgics*, which delves deeply into the Roman knowledge-base of agriculture from crop rotation to beekeeping as well as the infrastructure that enabled a city such as Rome to exist in the first place.²⁰ Held side by side, this

pair of texts reveals the relation between city life and agriculture without fully recognizing their interdependence. Emphasizing this interdependence is what an environmental reading would be able to do.

The interplay of an urbanized world with what now appears to be wilderness turns out to be quite important to a number of foundational epics. But there are other genres that could be opened up to this kind of environmental reading, for example the animal fable, which brings select elements of the wilderness into the human world of its readers. As writing increased in the ancient world, more oral stories were written down, especially shorter tales, animal fables among them. These tales were collected and sometimes held together with a framing narrative. Such collections became a widespread genre in the first millennium of the Common Era.

When it comes to animal fables, one the most important collections is the *Panchatantra*, a South Asian text framed as a tool for educating princes. In those fables, speaking animals enact scenes with trenchant morals for the edification of princelings destined to shoulder the burden of kingship. These stories were so successful—less is known about the success of the princelings—that they can be found in many other collections as well. Also from South Asia are the *Jataka Tales*, which are likewise based on animal fables but adapted to a Buddhist worldview with a cunning device: the tales are told by the Buddha, who himself

inhabited these animal bodies in earlier incarnations. Animal fables are also included in the *Arabian Nights*, in Aesop's *Fables* (which borrow from Eastern stories), and in many other collections as well. Reading across these texts, one can track how stories morph from one collection, and culture, to the next. Sometimes the same moral is derived, but the animal changes, according to the local fauna of wherever the tale is being told and collected.

What all these fables have in common is that they bring wild animals into the city by means of literature while also assimilating them to human life, above all by giving them speech. In order to read animal fables, we need to interpret them as so many ways of domesticating wilderness, of bringing it into the domain of human sociability, much like Enkidu. Within these stories, animals converse, debate morals, and behave in most ways like humans. More important, they enact human concerns. These concerns are particularly evident if one relates them to the frame tales by which they are held together and which give them purpose, such as the education of princes in the *Panchatantra* or the survival of the storyteller Scheherazade in the case of the *Arabian Nights*. These frame tales betray the true purpose of the stories collected within them, or rather, they impose their own, human, courtly purposes on them.

Turning from story collections to another major genre, the novel, we find that the challenge of read-

ing novels in light of climate change takes a different form. In the first great novel of world literature, the *Tale of Genji*, written by a lady-in-waiting at the Heian court around the year 1000 CE, most of the action takes place within a few city blocks of the capital, and almost all indoors. Exile is seen as the greatest possible punishment, the forcible ejection of a member into the outside world. Hundreds of years later, something similar happens in the important Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which is confined to the interior of a family compound. All hell breaks loose on the rare occasion when someone leaves this enclosed space for the wilderness, urban or otherwise, that surrounds it.

This emphasis of the novel on human sociability is even more pronounced in the modern era. Recently, the novelist Amitav Ghosh has taken to task the realist canon of the modern novel for being too exclusively focused on the social world while neglecting the resource-extracting lifestyle that made that world possible.²¹ In order to move beyond this narrow focus, he calls for a broadening and deepening of our reading habits.

I agree with this broadening just as I agree with this characterization of realist fiction, but I don't think this argument implies that we should stop reading realist novels. Rather, the very lack of attention to the environment that is often at work in these novels is something we need to understand through close

scrutiny, and that means through a new and different kind of reading (which, after all, is exactly what Gosh does). As with so many other contemporary challenges, what matters is not only *what* we read but also *how* we read. In this sense, environmental reading isn't so different from, say, postcolonial reading that examined realist fiction with attention to the brief moments when colonialism appeared in these works, often in passing. In the case of environmental reading, this includes attention not only to how texts view wilderness, but also to how they assume to have mastered it, not least by dividing the world into conceptual zones of wilderness and settled spaces.

Only very recently has literature sought solace in the wilderness.²² Texts seeking and praising wilderness are historical exceptions, obscuring the role literature has played in creating a sedentary lifestyle that is now devastating the planet, the extent to which literature, beginning with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, has contributed to shoring up our defenses, to defining and defending settled living against all possible alternatives.

The conclusion that should be drawn from this argument is that there is no text of world literature which is not also a document of climate change. If we want to understand where our stories about nature come from, which narratives have occupied our minds and sense of self, we must read the entire history of literature in new ways: as texts that track our evolution into sedentary creatures; as narratives that tend to

justify the values that set us on a path toward agricultural life and resource extraction; as stories that accompany our ingrained habits of thinking and living. We need to recognize these stories in order to understand the collective choices we have made, if we are ever to shake loose from them.

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