

Memory as a Hermeneutic Vehicle in Architectural Design

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It is necessary to pay heed to the basic art of measuring ... To write poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strictest sense of the word, by which man receives the measure for the breadth of his being.

—Martin Heidegger, "... Poetically Man Dwells ..."¹

Etymologists have traced the English word "memory" back to a single Proto-Indo-European root (*s)mer-*, whose meaning was cultivated in an intricate pattern of musical and visual imagery. Its grammatical structure offers three striking images: the first of something folding back upon itself meaning "to mourn;" the second relates to the Old High German *smero*, the inner essence, the flow of the body in breath and blood, the smear of a healing salve; and the third meaning "to receive a share of something," a merit, a portion.² Together they attest to the concrete rather than abstract notion of reflection: the deep waters of time smash against the rocky shores of a crisis, and as the flow folds back over itself, it returns over and over to the smooth jagged edges, calming the crisis with the meditative balm of its rhythm. In its most reduced form, the root of memory is *mr*. Its letter *m*, *mēm*, means "water", as its written form suggests, and forms the bulk of our "watery" words such as moist, mellifluous, mist, immerse, marine, marsh, menstrual, emanate. This sound is related to *mā-*, meaning "good" "mother" and "damp" in a seamless whole. The letter *r*, *rēsh*, means "head" and relates to the roots *er-*, *ar-* and *or-*. *Er-* means "to set in motion" and is at the root of the Latin *oriri*, to be born or "origin;" whereas *ar-* means "to fit together," the Latin *ordo*, the weave, the threads on a loom, harmony, art and architecture; finally *or-* means to speak or pray as in the Latin *orare*. Taken together, *mr* could simply be translated as "head-waters"—evoking the primordial rhythms of music and dance, composing and re-composing, giving birth to poetry, prayer and healing.³

As the house of memory, architecture is an invitation to mourning, to remembering loved ancestors, shattered ideals, lost time. As the house of memory, architecture unveils the healing rituals that mourning awaits: the rhythms, measures, songs and sacrifices imbedded in the material of the world. As the house of memory, architecture gathers community, in-

spiring the ethical imperative to imagine worlds otherwise.

In our culture, personal and communal mourning longs for relief everywhere. From the threat of nuclear annihilation to the ransoming of the third world for corporate profits. Developers, politicians, financial consultants and technicians seem to conspire to reduce the profession of architecture to a mere "stamp" on designs already prescribed by their accountants. A knee-jerk response has often come from architectural theorists by embracing an essentially nihilistic postmodern or deconstructionist philosophy of design. With Roland Barthes, they have posited our Western culture as a "civilization of the image," where images parody or reflect one another, devoid of any fixed reference of origin or meaning in a narcissistic "hall of mirrors."⁴ Architecture becomes dangerously reduced to formal games, facadism or an empty pastiche of colliding lines, dashed, dotted, arched and skewed.

As architects, makers, healers of our cities, how do we initiate our task within this ethical vacuum? How do we call our communities to mourn the loss of its ideals and desires, to revive its primordial orientation, and resituate its ancient utopos? As keepers of communal memory, how do we permit the "trace of the other," as Emmanuel Levinas would say, to inhere in the geography of our bodies and, simultaneously, in the flesh of the world?⁵

Such were the problems set out at the beginning of an upper year theory seminar course I chaired entitled "Memory and Ethics in Architecture." Besides weekly three hour seminar presentations and group discussions based on the students' ongoing reading, they were assigned a built project whose program and approach was designed specifically to investigate the issues discussed in the seminars concerning the coincidence of memory and ethics in architecture. The process and result of this constructed assignment is the focus of this paper.

The Work of Memory

The aim of the built project was to investigate the poetic foundations of architectural making by challenging the students to shoulder the inherently architectural responsibility to embody, interpret, perform and construct a given narrative mythology. By midwiving narrative, the intention was to

focus on the making, on the means of architecture rather than its product, its end as the sum of its parts. The wager being made, following the words of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was that perhaps the parts of our world may be greater than the whole: through the construction act, the architect, the dwelling and the intended community may construct their identity together.⁶

The project had three successive stages which took place over the course of a thirteen-week academic term. The first stage was only three weeks in length, but was essential to the success of the following two parts of the project. Here, a given text, a narrative mythology from the Western tradition, was divided into ten sections and distributed to the ten students.

By assigning each student a portion of the given myth, they were challenged to embody the text through a practice long since assigned to the dust-bins of modern education: memorization. My aim, however, is not to initiate a sentimental journey into the arcana of our pedagogical history. In my opinion, the nineteenth-century practice of rote memory training, that is, the heuristic regurgitation of a given text whose success was measured by its precision, has found its logical and most efficient replacement in the use of computers. The practice of memorization I am speaking about, however, is a tradition more associated with oral cultures, for whom the technology of literacy was unavailable.⁷ Such a tradition was responsible for the transmission of Western culture through the middle or dark ages, and continues to be practiced in many indigenous or otherwise marginalized cultures today. Its aim was less the mindless recitation of given texts but rather the embodiment of the stories of great heroes or gods to form their ethical counterpart in the person doing the memory work: less memorization by ear (such as that popular song we can't get out of our heads), than memorization using all the senses (attempting, one might say, to re-live the text as a life experience). This memorization as hermeneutics, as interpretation, was, until the eighteenth century, the basis of Western education — an education geared to forming ethical character and, by extension, communities of justice.⁸

Perhaps the greatest exponent in the Western Tradition of this memorial pedagogy was Hugh of St. Victor.⁹ In the twelfth century, Hugh undertook to compile all the best methods of the middle ages, whose first lesson, taught on the first day of elementary school, was to remember a given text in its unique context: its exact position on the manuscript page, the color of its initial, the lines above, below and beside it. But one did not stop there; the context had to extend to the specific day, hour, classroom, weather or anything that could jog the mind of the unique occasion when it was first committed to memory.¹⁰ Together with singing the text interiorly as if in choir, and smelling and tasting the imagery it evoked, each verse was received in a total synaesthesia. As a result, the pupils conception of history symbolically merged with that of the text: the Psalms' praises and laments, for instance, become their own, its characters are sitting next to them, and their monastery classroom becomes Jerusalem itself." This

is the main reason why references to ancient authors in medieval manuscripts are often seamlessly knitted into the body of the text, without quotation marks or footnotes: they were paraphrased and adjusted to the argument at hand. The issue isn't precision — let alone the dictates of copyright legislation — but the attempt to merge the examples of the ancient authorities into one's own context. Architecturally, one only has to look at Abbot Suger's St. Denis where the biblical descriptions of Heavenly Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon, the crusader's tales of the Hagia Sophia and St. Peter's, tend to improvise and merge seamlessly with its Romanesque foundations in the language of its local craftsmanship and materiality. In this case, it cannot be doubted that Suger certainly benefitted from Hugh of St. Victor's thinking, since Hugh was not only a close friend, but has been speculated to have designed one of St. Denis' portals himself.¹²

Practically speaking, the students were asked to first read over and become familiar with the narration, characters and metaphors given to them in their portion of the text. While doing so, they were required, in the course of the first week, to gather a number of objects which could represent the parts of the text to them. The objects could either be found in back alleys, or, if they wish to make a personal sacrifice, be a sacred memento or heirloom from their own things. Their poetic intuition was imperative in this step: they were to trust that as they search for their objects, the objects would also find them. As well, I stipulated that the objects should have no visibly printed/written words on them, for the sake of keeping the subsequent act of memorization visually uncomplicated.

Once the objects were gathered, the students then were to follow the steps of a fairly close adaptation I made of Hugh of St. Victor's recommendations, geared to their found objects:

1. Search for a place of solitude. The students needed to find a completely silent place, their laboratory if you will, to do their memory work. No other people, no T.V., no radio, no sound of any kind, all phones unplugged. Finding this place, according to Hugh, is essential.

2. Relax and pace your learning. The students were to do memory work no more than in twenty to forty minute periods with fifteen minute breaks.

3. Divide the text. They were to divide their text up into phrases, if it's not already in verse form, averaging approximately seven words per chunk, or whatever seems comfortable to speak aloud in one breath.

4. Arrange the objects. The objects needed to be arranged in a set series or pattern thematically related to each section of the text. They were to be arranged on, around or near their body in an order whereby the given text can be "read off" the objects, so to speak, as visual or tactile prompts. The objects were not to be marked or altered at this point but worked with just as they were found.

5. Visualize and experience the text. They were then to memorize the text as if it were nested in the objects, in their body and the gestures that would connect the two. Each divided phrase had to be visualized. If the wording didn't lend itself easily to an object or image, an image needed to be nevertheless visualized for that word. For instance, the word "hermeneutics" may be more easily remembered by visualizing a syllable at a time: I imagine a loose woman pointing to her lovers ("her men"), with sparkling new bugs leaping out of their hair ("new tics"). The more outrageous or startling the image the better. Things should not be imagined too small (I would make my sparkling tics quite big), and every image needs to be very clearly and distinctly placed: each seven word chunk had to have its very own 'nest' or resting place in or on the objects.

6. Repeat. The students were to go over and over their journey through the images and objects, always arranged the same in front of them, always saying them out loud. Once a day for ten minutes is much better than cramming. A sure indication that the text was not memorized by rote is that the student should be able to say their text both backwards and forwards, or to pick up any one object at random and ask it for the contents of its "nest." The aim, in the end, is to have the flow and non-hesitation of a story-teller, even if some of the parts are fudged. Precision is less important than the general idea of each phrase negotiating the space between gestures and objects.

Before continuing on with the outcome of this assignment, perhaps a word should be said about the specific text I asked the students to memorize. Out of the desire to select a narrative whose roots were in Western mythology, (since the seminars dealt with memory and ethics in the Western architectural tradition), and whose original use was both oral and ritual, I chose perhaps one of the earliest surviving narratives known to scholars with an explicitly architectural content, that is, the third-millennium BCE Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. This tale is not only a creation history culminating in the foundation of a celestial and a terrestrial temple as a type of *axis mundi*, but it is an extremely poetic theogony, mapping out both the sacred generativity and the ritual destruction of various divinities."

A number of aspects of this myth, if not actual verses, turn up in the Hebraic creation myths in the Book of Genesis, but the *Enuma Elish* is not monotheistic, nor does the creation of humankind account for much. The establishment of the temples however, reveals a powerful example of the destructive yet reconciliatory nature of architectural making (which perhaps emerges in Genesis as the first earthly city attributed to Cain and built upon, one might say, the blood of his brother Abel). It also must be understood that this myth was disseminated not by written texts, silently read, but by an oral culture which had to annually reenact the myth in the nine-day New Years, or Akitu, festival. Here, the Babylonian king becomes

the god Marduk in costume, word and gesture, just as every citizen would act out the primordial chaos in orgies, feasting and ritual combat, as well as fasting, sacrifices and days of corpse-like incubation. The success of the ritual and the re-consecration, re-establishment of the temple as the *axis mundi*, is absolutely crucial for not only the outcome of the harvest or battles with other states, but for the regeneration of life itself for another solar year. Here, one may argue, architecture explicitly radiates its primordial identity as a receptacle for embodied communal memory, if not as a talisman for the determination of life into the next day.

Architecture Performed

At the end of three weeks, the students spread out in a large room, arranged their objects around themselves, and, one by one, told their portion of the *Enuma Elish*. Most of the students chose to become vigorously involved with their objects and created what seemed like a personal ritual or liturgy: standing, sitting, dancing picking up objects to receive one phrase, and then turning it over to "see" the next line. Afterwards the students attested to a new and unique relationship with their objects. The various found objects now oscillated between their first identity as a discarded object (a toaster for example) and their narrative identity (as now the war god Marduk, popping hot, electrically connected to other characters). The same can be said of their conception of themselves as participants and interpreters in the reenactment of the given mythology (fig. 1).

Architectural design using found objects can be a tricky task in both the classroom and in the office. For instance if an old thread spool becomes a turret in an architectural model, it often remains a meaningless if not corny substitute: a simile and not a metaphor. By using narrative experientially embodied, the objects in this assignment were permitted, at the outset, to symbolically reverberate between its own scale and one at cosmogonic proportions, between its given interaction with the human body, and the imagined interaction within a text.

The next stage of the project was to edit the narrative on

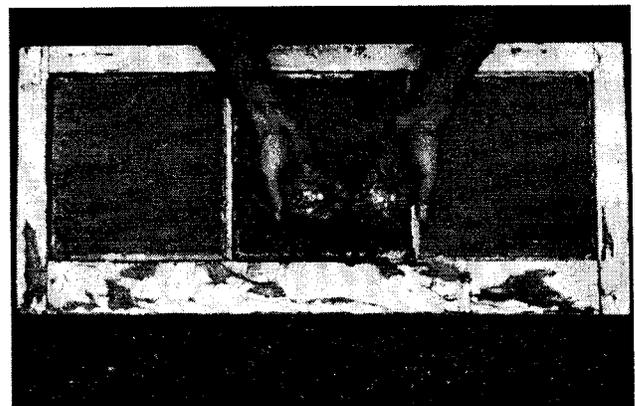


Fig. 1. First Review. "When the skies above were not yet named / Nor earth below pronounced by name / Apsu, the first one, their begetter / And maker Tiamat, who bore them all I had mixed their waters together ..." Photo and performance by Roland Ulfig.

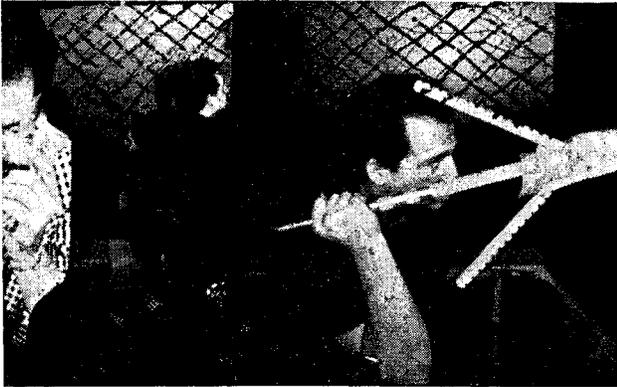


Fig. 2. Second Review. Mammu, threaded with nose-rope, by Enlil with magician coat and flood propeller: the winds are created. Performance and photo-collage by Dionisios Psychas.

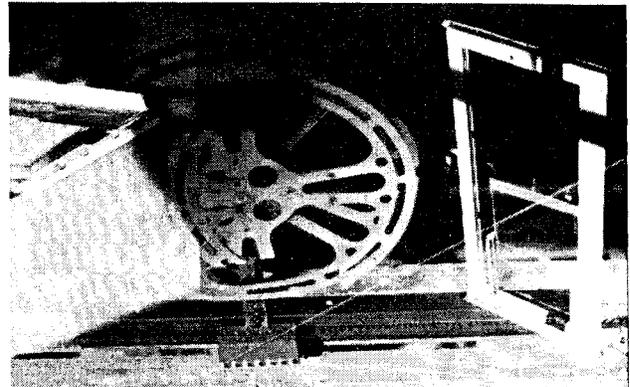


Fig. 4. Final Review. "The foundation of time, spilled out, yet to be headed." Plan and axonometric. Performance and photo-collage by Sonya Jensen.

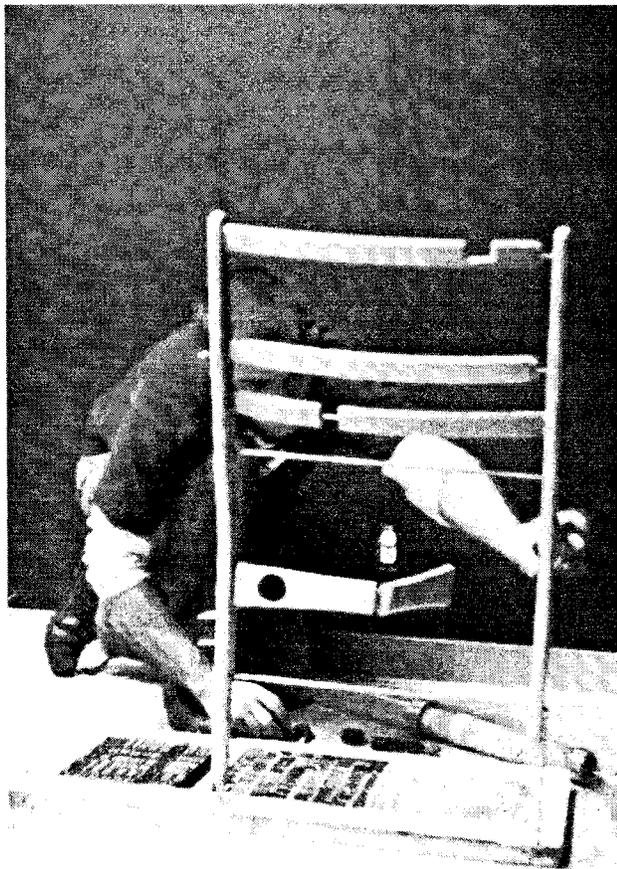


Fig. 3. Second Review. "The throne, gardens, city and main frame of Marduk: the establishment of the chairperson. Performance and photo by Roland Ulfig.

two fronts: in the text and through the objects. The students were to now investigate the text, by researching the translations, etymologies and tropes of certain words that seemed to capture the essence of the story *for them*. Simultaneously, they were to likewise dismantle their objects and investigate their material, structural or symbolic nature. The aim at this

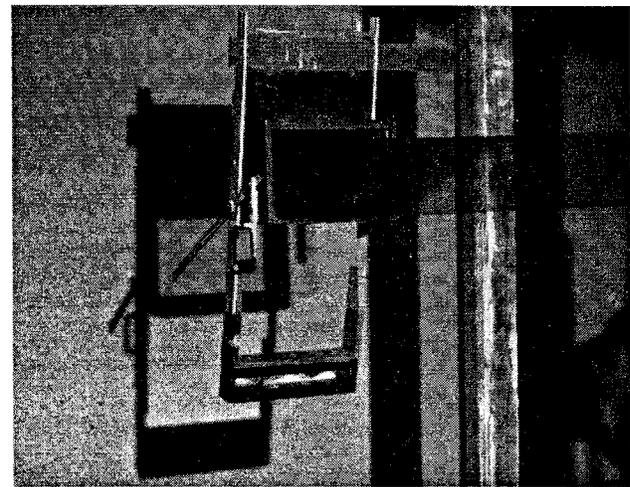


Fig. 5. Final Review. Optical device for the reverse projection of the constellations, the Iggi-gods and site section A-A, rue Saint-Laurent, Montreal. Performance and photo-collage by Tom Yu.

stage was to restate the narrative in an edited version, taking account of one's own interests, memories and relationship to the words and objects to arrive at an interpretation adjusted to our shared world. A narrative still had to be performed in the end, but now it was in their own words and with refashioned, dismantled or fused objects. At this point they were to add no new objects, besides fasteners and glues, but if they needed more materiality, so to speak, they could request pieces of objects from the students performing the parts of the narrative just before and after them. This rule was enforced to place a limit on the scope of this project, to be responsible for the now narrative-infused objects they already have, and to facilitate a story-telling seamlessness with those performing with them (figs. 2, 3).

After five weeks, they performed this new edited narrative. For this performance we brought in guest critics and a local Montreal theatre director to initiate a reflection on the architecture performed. Depending on the part of the story each student had to tell, they choreographed an interaction with collaged, distended or symbolically connected objects

which involved, for instance, saying certain lines in chorus, reflecting light off objects to other objects in the room, tapping out rhythms and their verses on varying surfaces, ritually destroying some objects and building up others in the process. This performance of architecture provoked a lively discussion concerning, from the professors' point of view, whether or not the embodiment of the text and objects would have an impact on its eventual outcome as a silent building. However, the theatre director answered these comments from his experience of performance whereby not just theatres, but communities, buildings and cities would cease to have any meaning, in his opinion, without stories continuously being told about their formation. Many of the buildings of our cities are and will remain silent, he said, because they are dead. No one tells their stories, or engages them meaningfully: their often rich history is eventually reduced to the figure of its price on the real estate market. For him, I suppose, all the world remains a stage, through which both the actors and the stage itself gain meaning through event-making exemplified in this project (figs. 4, 5).

The last five-week stage of the project required the students to do one further edit and interpretation with the intention to find a site for the project through a final performance. The residue of this performance, the parts or pieces that were assembled in this final ritual, was meant to be an architectural presentation, literally understood in the sense of "gifting". The result, in this case, was a carefully edited construction that had a series of positions as a house of memory. For the final presentation, however, the students chose not to present, or formally "gift" their construction to a specific community as asked, since, in their argument, in the objects themselves and in their new narratives, the community was always present. In some of the reviewers minds, the students seemed to have become too attached to their constructions or simply chose to opt out of their responsibility. While the students admitted that may be true in part, they also argued that if there was a failure, it was in their ability to nevertheless evoke the intended community and the site from which all this sprung. Perhaps their hesitancy, in my opinion, was being brought face to face with the danger that any storyteller or poet faces: by reviving the memories of a community, by attempting to build metaphor such that it could poetically reverberate as an ethics, the dark cloud of rejection by those one seeks to serve persistently threatens.

The attempt of this project to infuse its materiality with a narrative, through the act of memorization, challenged the students to wrestle with the possible symbolic depth of the given world. In proposing this project I wanted to ask whether the current practice of post-modern quotation of found objects (such as in the work of Frank Gehry) is not, in fact, a flattening or reduction. Similarly, I wanted to question whether the nihilistic randomness of the juxtaposition of lines and surfaces in deconstruction architecture (such as in the work of Peter Eisenman or Daniel Libeskind) captures our attention precisely in that it does carry a recognizable formal

identity, however obscure. The reconciliation of these issues, in my opinion, may depend on the seriousness of play: the act of playing whereby personal vision and communal narrative reverberate in a directed experiential engagement with a given project, its materiality and its imagined program from the outset.

NOTES

- ¹ Martin Heidegger, "... Poetically Man Dwells ...", in *Poetry Language Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 221-22.
- ² Camn Dunne, "The Roots of Memory", *Spring* (1988): 113-15; Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 273-75; compare memory as mourning with Heidegger's thinking as thanking in *What is Called Thinking?* (New York, 1968), pp. 138-43.
- ³ For the PIE roots of memory see the appendix of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Wm Morris (Boston, 1969).
- ⁴ For an overview of postmodern nihilism and artistic creation see, Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 170-209.
- ⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), pp. 187-240.
- ⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 15.
- ⁷ See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London; New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 5-30.
- ⁸ Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966); Paolo Rossi, *Clavis Universalis: Arti mnemoniche e logica combinatoria a Lullo a Leibniz* (Milan: Riccardi, 1960); Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 8, 11, 156-220. Concerning motor-mnemonics, see Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript; Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1964), pp. 163-67.
- ⁹ On Hugh of St. Victor and memory see Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 61. Grover Zinn, "Hugh of St. Victor and the Art of Memory," *Viator*. 5 (1974), pp. 211-234.
- ¹⁰ Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 94.
- ¹¹ Hugh of St. Victor, *De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum*, 491, lines 3ff, as translated in W. M. Green, "Hugo of St. Victor: *De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum*," *Speculum* 18 (1943): 484-93; and Zinn, "Hugh of Saint Victor and the Art of Memory," p. 227.
- ¹² Otto Georg von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.), 61-141; On Hugh's possible contribution to St. Denis see Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change at St-Denis: Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy Over Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 58.
- ¹³ Pritchard, J. B., ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 42-44; and, for an updated translation see Stephanie Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 228-77.