

# The world 'topsy-turvy' and the ancient Near Eastern cultures: a few examples

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*This paper considers socio-political examples of the universal cultural phenomenon of symbolic inversion (mundus inversus), the earliest instances of which can be traced back to the cultures of the ancient Near East. Symbolic inversion refers to manifestations of expressive behaviour where everything is inverted in relation to the normal state of affairs. Two spheres in the ancient Near Eastern world where this cultural theme is especially prominent are in the conception of the 'other' (other ethnic groups) and in the sphere of social criticism, where a given status quo is attacked and alternative structures are propagated.*

**Keywords:** ancient Near East, symbolic inversion/*mundus inversus*, otherness, social criticism, utopianism

## Introduction

In Umberto Eco's well-known book *Il nome della rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*), one of the characters is the monk, Adelmo, a specialist in the illumination of manuscripts. At one time he worked on a richly illuminated psalter which delineated 'a world reversed with respect to the one to which our senses have accustomed us. As if at the border of a discourse that is by definition the discourse of truth, there proceeded, closely linked to it, through wondrous allusions in aenigmaté, a discourse of falsehood on a topsy-turvy universe, in which dogs flee before the hare, and deer hunt the lion' (Eco 1983:76; also see Stubbe 1988:199).

It is to a similar topsy-turvy world that ancient Egyptian artists drew attention much earlier: a world in which a cat submits to mice and where a fox herds geese (see Kenner 1967:12; Brunner-Traut 1974:12f; Flores 2004). The Egyptian prophet Neferti (c 1950 BC) likewise saw a similar inverted world unfolding before his eyes: 'I show thee the land topsy-turvy. The weak of arm is (now) the possessor of an arm. Men salute (respectfully) him who (formerly) saluted. I show thee the undermost on top ...' (Wilson 1969:445; also see Assmann 2001:260f).

The phenomenon of a 'topsy-turvy world' (*mundus inversus*) is widespread in the literatures and cultures of the world. It refers to a place where everything is re-versed in relation to the normal state of affairs. Babcock (1978:14) presents the following characterisation of this topos: 'Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary<sup>1</sup> or artistic, religious, or social and political'. According to Kenner (1970), the first occurrences of this cultural phenomenon can be traced

back to the ancient Near East (also see Malul 2002:478f). In Sumerian literature a classic example would be the dedication festivities of the Eninnu temple (Gudea Cylinder B), where it is imagined that masters/mistresses are on a par with their slaves for a given time.<sup>2</sup> Similar feasts are attested under the Jews (Purim), the Greeks (Anthesteria) and the Romans (Saturnalia; see Stubbe 1988:199; Graf 2003), and in modern times in carnival-like celebrations, such as the German Fasching (Stolz 1997:94). The 'reversed world' was likewise a popular fancy in art. In the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, for example, image-makers devoted a large share of their energy to depictions of a world turned upside down (Chartier 1988).

One especially important form of symbolic inversion in many cultures in the world is to mark the boundaries between normal life and life after death: life after death is in many instances the direct reverse of ordinary life (Durkheim & Mauss 1963:xxxix). The way in which this 'inverse' world of the dead is generally conceived is illustrated by the anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl (1928:303f) by way of a variety of ethnographic examples:

The world of the dead is the exact reverse of that of the living. Everything there is just the opposite ... There, for instance, the sun and the moon travel from west to east ... when the dead go downstairs, they go head first ... they go to market, but the market takes place at night ... They speak the same language as the living but every word has exactly the opposite meaning: ... sweet means bitter, and bitter sweet. There, to stand up means to lie down, etc (Also see Mühlmann 1961:614; Stubbe 1988:200).

Translated into the life world of a resident of the ancient Near East, the world of the dead would entail the following char-

1. In the literary sphere, the genre of satire could be regarded as a powerful strategy in portraying such an 'inverse world'; see eg Lazarcowicz (1963); Gutwirth (1981). The discipline of philosophy could likewise be added to this list of applications; see eg Keulartz (1995) who regards the 'Metapher der Umkehrung' as the guiding principle in Habermas's philosophy: '... dass wir buchstäblich in einer "verkehrten" Welt leben, und dass es zu den Aufgaben einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie gehört, diesen verhängnisvollen Hergang sichtbar zu machen und anzuprangern, um eine Bekehrung oder Umkehrung herbeizuführen, wodurch die ursprüngliche Ordnung wiederhergestellt wird' (1995:12).

2. The text runs: 'When his king entered into the temple, for seven days (xvii.20) the slave girl did become equal with her mistress; the slave did walk beside the master' (Cyl. B; translation by Averbeck 2003:432).

acteristic inversions: first, it is the realm 'below' over against the normal world, which is conceived as 'above', second, it is a world of 'darkness' over against the normal world, where 'light' is the norm, third, quality of life in the normal world is replaced in the netherworld by all forms of 'abnormality' (the dead have to eat contaminated food, movement is severely curtailed, silence is the norm, and joy has to make room for all forms of joylessness)<sup>3</sup>, fourth, normal beings become 'inverted' beings in that sphere (the dead walk 'upside down')<sup>4</sup> (see Kruger 2005b).

Since the ritual of mourning is so closely associated with the phenomenon of death, it is not unexpected that ancient Near Eastern mourning rites often display a similar 'topsy turvy' world when compared with what was regarded as 'normal' behaviour (see Stubbe 1988). It was a time when first, all forms of pain and suffering were accepted (gashing the body, pulling out beard and hair, beating the breast, staying without food, etc), over against 'normal' life, where these miseries were avoided; second, disregard for personal appearance (putting earth on the head, refraining from wearing a turban, refraining from washing or using ointments, etc.), versus care for personal appearance in 'normal' life; third, all participants in the mourning ceremony were either naked or wear uniform clothing (sackcloth), versus 'normal' life, where there were clear distinctions in clothing; fourth, absence of rank marks the mourning period (all ritual subjects are either 'sitting' or 'lying' on the ground), over against the properties of 'normal' life, where distinctions in status were the order of the day (see Kruger 2005a).

Two other ancient Near Eastern cultural domains where the principle of reversal likewise figures prominently were first, in the construction of the perceived nature of the 'other' (other groups or peoples), and second, in social criticism, where existing structures were attacked or undermined and alternatives are propagated. These two aspects are my main concern in this paper, and I present a selection of examples from the ancient Near Eastern cultures that are expressive of the idea of symbolic inversion regarding these two spheres of life.

### Symbolic inversion and the construction of the 'other'

The experience of social and cultural 'otherness' is as old as humankind itself. In this respect the anthropologist Redfield claims instructively that the world view of each culture, or cultural group, consists mainly of two binary oppositions, viz 'human/not human' and 'we/they' (1962:92). These oppositions most often correlate as follows: 'we' equals 'humans' and 'they' equals 'not-humans'. The 'we' (one's own group)

are accordingly endowed with every aspect that can be deemed as 'cultivated', whilst the 'other' is described in terms of the direct 'inverse' qualities (cf Pongratz-Leisten 2001; Cohen 2001, with literature).

In classical times the historian Herodotus in particular resorted to this strategy a number of times in his *Histories* (see Hartog 1988; Vasunia 2001). The first step in this view of the 'other' was to mention the difference, and the second to 'translate' it by bringing into play the schema of inversion. The following example is familiar: 'The Egyptians have an 'other' (*heteros*) climate, on the banks of a river which is different (*allos*) from all other rivers and so have they made all their customs and laws of a kind which is for the most part the converse of those of all other men' (Hartog 1988:213). The uniqueness of the Egyptian national character entails, for example, the following oppositions when compared with other peoples:

Among them, the women run the market and shops, the men weave at home; and whereas in weaving all others push the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards. Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders. Women urinate standing, men sitting ... Everywhere else, priests of the gods wear their hair long; in Egypt they are shaven. Among all other men, it is the custom, in mourning, ... to have their heads shaven; Egyptians are shaven at other times, but after a death they let their hair and beard grow.<sup>5</sup>

But the application of the phenomenon of inversion in depicting the perceived nature of the 'other' can be traced back even earlier in the history of humankind. For example, if a Mesopotamian city dweller of about 4000 years ago asked for his perception of a nomad, the following 'inverse concept' would most probably have been offered:

He is dressed in sheep skins;  
He lives in tents in wind and rain;  
He doesn't offer sacrifices.  
Armed (vagabond) in the steppe,  
He digs up truffles and is restless.  
He eats raw meat,  
lives his life without a home,  
and, when he dies, he is not buried according to proper rituals (Van de Mieroop 1997:43).

According to this judgment, in every respect the nomads' life style is an 'inverted' form of existence: it is found to be lacking the 'normal' institutions of civilisation, such as fixed shelter, agriculture, cuisine and proper burial practices (Cooper 1983:31).

In the modern world this appreciation of 'culture/not-cul-

3. Cf, for example, the following passage from the myth about the journey of the god Ningishzida to the netherworld: 'The river of the Netherworld flows no water, its water you would not drink ... The field of the Netherworld grows no grain, flour is not milled from it ... The sheep of the netherworld carries no wool, cloth is not woven from it' (Katz 2004:478).
4. Cf, for example, the following characterisation of the nature of the existence of the dead in Egypt: '... the damned have to walk upside down, eat their own excrement, and drink their own urine. Their hands are tied behind their backs, often around stakes; their heads and limbs are severed from their bodies and their flesh is cut off their bones; their hearts are taken out; their ba-souls are separated from their bodies, forever unable to return to them; and even their shadows are wiped out' (Van Dijk 2001:90).
5. Vasunia (2001:94-95); see also the examples gathered by Smith (1978:248), Nippel (1990) and Schlesier (1994). Whilst Book 2 of Herodotus is devoted to the 'Egyptian *logos*', the greater part of Book 4 (1-144) deals with the otherness of the Scythians, who 'represented that Other in its purest, polarized form, being the ideal type of the anti-Greek: non-agricultural, non-urban, uncivilized, nomadic' (Cartledge 1993:56).

ture' most often finds its concrete application in racial categories. The idea of a biologically-determined ethnic inequality was, however, never central to the ancient Near Eastern world-view. Peoples were grouped according to specific characteristics ascribed to them, but such classification was always done in terms of the labels 'culture/not culture': everything associated with the perceiving subject and his group was marked as culture, while all other cultural groups/items were perceived as belonging to the periphery of existence and accordingly classified as 'not culture' (Liverani 1990:33f). Never was the concept of race advanced to sanction the division between groups. The assignment of people to certain ethnic groups on the basis of colour prejudice is a phenomenon of the modern world.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest recorded reference to the existence and objective view of humankind's diversity in terms of language, skin colour and character might well be 'The Great Hymn to the Aten' (approximately 1400 BCE). In this beautiful poem the god Aten is praised as the creator and sustainer of the whole world, which also includes the existence of a diversity of ethnic groups and their languages:

You made the world as you wished, you alone,  
All peoples, herds, and flocks;  
All upon earth that walk on legs,  
All on high that fly on wings ...  
You set every man in his place,  
You supply their needs;  
Everyone has its food,  
His lifetime is counted.  
*Their tongues differ in speech,*  
*Their characters likewise;*  
*Their skins are distinct,*  
*For you distinguished the peoples.*  
(Lichtheim 2003a:46; my emphasis)

The rhetorical discourse of *mundus inversus* also lies at the heart of colonial writing.<sup>7</sup> An idea which from that time onwards, however, began to play a pivotal role in the distinction between different cultural groups is the phenomenon of ethnicity. Needham (1978:5) aptly characterises this initial European prejudice towards the perceived 'inverse world' of the 'other' as follows: 'When European voyages explored the world, they often enough had a clear eye for physique, dress, and habitations, but they more often had a distorted or derogatory view of moral aspects of exotic peoples. Typically, these strange societies had no religion, or no law, or no idea of the family, or not even a true form of language to qualify

them as truly human'. An English traveller of the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century refers, for example, to these 'other' peoples as 'beastly living, without a God, laws, religion, or common wealth; and so scorched and vexed with the heat of the sunne, that in many places they curse it when it riseth' (Snowden 1983:69). A 17<sup>th</sup> century French visitor to the Cape, Francois-Timoléon de Choisy, was also unimpressed by the religious sentiments of the indigenous population: 'They hardly have a religion; only when there is a need for rain they address their plea to a certain divine being without a name' (Van Stekelenburg 2001:9).

However, seen from another perspective, the feature of a dark skin colour could also be regarded as a positive aesthetic asset. In a central African creation myth the Negro regards himself as perfectly cooked, but the white man as underdone because of a defect in the creator's oven where people were fashioned from clay (Snowden 1983:76). In like manner, Van Grevenbroek, secretary of the Political Council at the Cape (1684-1694), had some very fine things to say about the Khoi: 'their souls are more noble than most Europeans'; one of their chiefs is described as 'more human than most Christians'; towards castaways they display 'a human love barely attested among the first Christians' (Van Stekelenburg 2001:11).<sup>8</sup>

### 'Our' geographical world versus 'yours'

Of the primary features to express the inverse nature of the world of the 'other' is that people are led to regard their own territory/world/space as unique and distinct from all other surrounding areas. Some of the earliest examples of such typically ethnocentric pronouncements are encountered in ancient Near Eastern texts. According to the Egyptian world-view, for example, Egypt, as the eye of Horus, was destined by the god not to be a nation among nations, but *the* nation, created for Horus-Pharaoh. In one of the Pyramid texts this ethnocentric stance is expressed in the following words:

The doors that are on you rise in protection.  
They do not open to the westerners,  
they do not open to the easterners,  
they do not open to the southerners,  
they do not open to the northerners.  
They open for Horus! It is he who has made them,  
he who has raised them, he who has saved them  
against all attacks against them by Seth.  
(Bresciani 1990:221f)

Another way of perceiving the opposition between what is

6. See, however, Goldenberg (1999) who argued (with examples) that the idea of race had its origin in classical antiquity from where it was subsequently adopted in Arabic writings (10 century CE onwards). Also see the forthcoming study by Benjamin Isaac (2006), *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton University Press.

7. Cf, for example, a statement by Kramer (1981:7): 'Die Ethnographie des 19. Jahrhundert entwirft im Hinblick auf die "eigene" Kultur die "fremde" als verkehrte Welt'. See also Said's apt characterisation (1994:XI) of this cultural 'colonialisation': 'What are striking in these discourses are the rhetorical figures one keeps encountering in their descriptions of "the mysterious East", as well as the stereotypes about "the African ... mind", the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric people ...'. According to Cohn (1994), a similar perception of depravity underlies the supposedly justifiable grounds behind the Israelite conquest of the perverse Canaanite territory in biblical times. For more recent examples of comparable ideas relating to Europe and the new world, cf Schwartz (1994).

8. Cf also the view of the early American discoverers regarding the native Indians: 'Their language was unintelligible (they did not speak English or Spanish or French or Dutch), they went naked (did not dress like Europeans); they had no government ... they had no religion ... they had no morals ... they were treacherous ... and their customs were barbarous (different from the customs of Europe and therefore not "civilized")' (Calloway 1994:21).

'normal' and what is 'inverse' is by employing different descriptive terms to designate one's own territory over the area of the other. In Sumerian, for example, the inner country is *kalam* (always in the singular), whilst the surrounding lands/mountains are called *kur* (always in the plural) (Kramer 1963:286; Steiner 1982:633; Rollig 1995:88f). In Egypt the flat Nile valley is designated as *ta*, whereas the surrounding mountains are *khasut*; the fertile agricultural land is *kmt*, while the red outer steppe is *dshrt* (Liverani 1990:35).

The characterisation of one's 'own nation' over against that of the 'foreigners' likewise points in this direction. The Egyptians made a distinction between 'men', on the one hand, and Libyans, or Asiatics or Africans, on the other. In other words, Egyptians were 'people'; foreigners were 'non-people'. Non-Egyptians could, however, also acquire the label 'human' if they settled in Egypt, learned the Egyptian language, acquired Egyptian names and clothed themselves as the Egyptians did (Helck 1977:311). In Mesopotamia the same norm applied. In this regard compare the judgment of the 'inverted world' of the mountain-people, the Gutians, in the Sumerian text, 'The Curse of Agade':

Not classed among people, not reckoned as part of  
the land,  
Gutium, people who know no inhibitions.  
With human instinct but canine intelligence  
and monkeys' features -  
Enlil brought them out of the mountains.  
(Cooper 1983:31)

Closely connected with the uniqueness of one's own land, one's own nation, goes the thought that the climatic and geographical conditions of one's own land are considered not only different, but far superior to those of 'other' countries. Such contrasts, however, are nothing new. For an Egyptian, who was dependent on the annual inundation of the Nile, the rain of the Asiatic countries (which from his viewpoint was an 'inverted' form of irrigation: 'the Nile in the sky'; Wilson 1977:38) was a strange phenomenon. In the wisdom instruction of the Egyptian sage, Merikare, the following remarks were made about the Asiatic landscape and climate, which seen through their eyes were indeed 'abnormal': 'It is a land troubled with water, inaccessible because of the many trees, with its roads bad because of the mountains' (Wilson 1977:39). Another text emphasises the unpredictable and unsafe nature of this landscape in the following words: 'The narrow valley is dangerous with Bedouin, hidden under the bushes. Some of them are four or five cubits from their noses to the heel, and fierce of face ... Thy path is filled with boulders and pebbles, without a toe hold for passing by, overgrown with reeds, thorns, brambles and wolf's paw. The ravine is on one side of thee, and the mountain rises on the other' (Liverani 1990:40 ff).

The Asiatic agricultural cycle, as well, was viewed as 'inverted' to what is normal in Egypt. In a Ramesside royal hymn it is said that the Asiatics are 'those who plough in summer and reap in winter' (Liverani 1990:37).

Similarly, to Herodotus, the climate of Scythia is certainly exceptional, compared to the Greek climate. The rainfall pattern is a 'reversal' of what is experienced generally in the Mediterranean regions. Regarding Scythia, Herodotus observes: it never (or virtually never) rains in the winter,

which everywhere else is normally the season of rain (in other words: as is the case in the Greek model). On the other hand, it never stops raining in the summer (Hartog 1988:29).

### 'Our' language versus 'yours'

Language too, can function as a distinguishing mark of what is 'normal' and what is 'abnormal' (Liverani 1990:38; Röllig 1995:93ff). Usually the language of the other is unintelligible, faltering, animal- or child-like speech. One of the oldest references which reminds one of the *barbaros* nature of the language of 'strangers' hails from Old Babylonian times, when the Gutians and two other groups were portrayed as 'those who stay in far away places and whose language is confused' (Machinist 1987:265; also see Röllig 1995:93). On the other hand, a language such as the Egyptian tongue is lauded as 'the language of men' (Liverani 1990:38). Mastery of it, as well as adopting the Egyptian life style, is the ideal *par excellence* and the hallmark of any true education. For foreigners, however, to master the Egyptian language, a type of physical metamorphosis was a prerequisite since the foreign language was 'inverted' when compared with the 'human/Egyptian' language. One text expresses this view as follows: 'Having been brought into Egypt (the Libyans) were settled into fortresses ... They heard, while in the service of the king, the Egyptian language, and the king let them forget their own language, he overturned their tongues' (Liverani 1990:38).

Similar remnants of this ethnographic tradition occur in the Hebrew Bible. According to Ezechiel 3:5, the prophet is not sent to a foreign people, whose 'speech is strange and so difficult that you cannot make out what they say', but to his own people; the Assyrian likewise is qualified as someone 'whose speech is so hard to catch, whose stuttering speech you could not understand' (Isa 33:19; also see Smith 1985:20). The same *topos* can be illustrated from more recent times, the colonising of the Americas, where the 'others' were regarded as 'parrots' with no native language but imitators of European languages (Smith 1985:20).

### 'Our' customs versus 'yours'

The customs of the 'others', likewise, were regarded as completely 'inverted' when compared with a particular national character (Röllig 1995:91f). The Egyptians displayed no understanding of the typical characteristics of an Asiatic. For them 'He does not live in a single place, but his feet wander. He has been fighting since the time of Horus, but he conquers not' (Wilson 1977:39).

Another telling example of the nature of cultural superiority is encountered in the Egyptian story of Sinuhe from the Middle Kingdom (2050-1800 BCE; cf Sparks 1998:77f). It recounts the experiences of an Egyptian high official who, for some inexplicable reason, landed in Syro-Palestine (the foreign country). Although he was apparently well absorbed into this culture, he never forgot his Egyptian roots, and time and again longed back to his home country. For him the Egyptian way of life was the absolute ideal, not to be compared to the unfavourable Syro-Palestinian peasant manner of existence. Understandably Sinuhe was overwhelmed when on one occasion he received the following patriotic message from the Egyptian king: 'You shall not die abroad! Nor shall Asiatics

inter you. You shall not be wrapped in the skin of a ram (as was customary in the nomadic life style – PAK) to serve as your coffin' (Lichtheim 2003b:80).

Back in the Egyptian civilization at last, he felt as if the years of this 'inverted' Syro-Palestinian style of living were literally and figuratively stripped off his body: 'I was shaved; my hair was combed. Thus was my squalor returned to the foreign land, my dress to the Sand-farers. I was clothed in fine linen; I was anointed with fine oil. I slept on a bed. I had returned the sand to those who dwell in it, the tree-oil to those who grease themselves with it' (Lichtheim 2003b:82; also see O'Connor 2003:169f).<sup>9</sup>

### Symbolic inversion and social criticism/utopianism

From a very early stage in the history of humankind the concept of symbolic inversion has served as a powerful strategy (1) to depict negatively a world in which everything is turned upside down in a socio-religious sense, or (2) to propagate in a positive fashion a future messianic or utopian age, where the contraries of life will finally be reconciled (Van Leeuwen 1986:602). In his most informative analysis of the basic social characteristics of 'das Mythologem von der verkehrten Welt', Mühlmann (1961) devotes special attention to these two important socio-historical manifestations of symbolic inversion. The former pessimistic version he associates with the socio-political upper or aristocratic level of society ('Oberschicht'), whilst the latter euphoric stance is found among the plebs or the underdogs on the social ladder ('Untersicht') (Mühlmann 1961:618). One such ancient Near Eastern text, which may be regarded as a classic example of 'inverted social criticism' from an upper-class point of view, is a papyrus of the 19th dynasty in Egypt, 'The Admonitions of Ipuwer'. It laments a world where the entire social order is 'inverted', if compared to what is usually regarded as the norm in that specific sphere. The text runs:

Indeed, poor men have become owners of wealth,  
He who could not make for himself sandals own riches.

(First Poem Lines 2.4-5; see Shupak 2003a:94)

Behold, the possessors of robes are (now) in rags,  
He who never wove for himself is (now) the possessor of fine linen.

Behold, he who never built for himself a boat is (now) the possessor of ships, ...

Behold, he who had no property is (now) a possessor of wealth.

(Second Poem Lines 7.11-8.1; see Shupak 2003a:96)

The New Kingdom 'Prophecies of Neferti', referred to above, paints a similar topsy-turvy world:

I show you the land in turmoil,

The weak of arm is (now) the possessor of an arm,  
One salutes him who (formerly) saluted.

I show you the lowly as superior ...

The poor man will make wealth,

The great one will (pray) to live.

The beggar will eat bread,

The slaves will be exalted.

(Lines 54-56; see Shupak 2003b:109)

In the writings of the Hebrew Bible prophets one comes across the subversive potential of the same principle, but this time from the perspective of those at the 'lower levels' of society. The tone of the sayings is now different: the inversion of the normal state of things is not to be deplored but welcomed, since it holds out the promise of a new social condition in which 'The few shall become thousand, the least a mighty nation' (Isa 60:22); 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. The lame shall leap like a deer' (Isa 35:5-6); 'Men once sated, hire themselves out for bread; those who once hungered, hunger no more. The barren woman bears seven (children), she that had many children is languishing' (1 Sam 2:5). The reversals of this coming age can even reach cosmic proportions: 'In place of the thorn, a cypress shall come up. In place of the briar, a myrtle shall rise' (Isa 55:13; Mühlmann 1961:619).

Instead of pointing to an eschatological future, this utopian or paradisaical order of existence is projected elsewhere to a remote past (Stolz 1997:95ff). It idealises an era of primordial harmony and wholeness that once prevailed where, according to 'Enki's Spell' in the Sumerian epic of Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta, 'there being no snakes, there being no scorpions, there being no hyenas, there being no lions, there being no dogs or wolves, there being no(thing) fearful or hair-raising, mankind had no opponents' (Jacobsen 2003:547). A similar nostalgic picture recurs in the Egyptian Theban cosmogony, which records an age when 'walls did not fall in, a thorn did not prick, no evil existed in the land, no crocodile seized prey and snakes did not bite' (Brunner-Traut 1959:145; my translation from the German). This picture of a mythic blessedness is also echoed in the famous Isaian passage: 'The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf, the young lion, and the fatling together, with a little boy guiding them' (Isa 11:6).

A similar 'Golden Age' existence is portrayed in Hesiod's (8 century BCE) 'Works and Days', when humankind:

... lived like gods, with carefree heart, remote from toil and misery. Wretched old age did not affect them either, but with hands and feet ever unchanged they enjoyed themselves in feasting, beyond all ills, and they died as if overcome by sleep.<sup>10</sup>

9. Cf in the same vein Sargon II's intentions (Dûr-Sharrukîn cylinder) to 'civilise' the conquered people who, according to the Assyrian norm, have no proper language and religion: 'People of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountain and lowland ... I carried off at Assur, my lord's command ... Assyrians, fully competent to teach them how to fear god and the king, I dispatched to them as scribes and sheriffs' (Luckenbill 1927:65f; see also Sparks 1998:35). A similar tradition is still evident in the writings of the Hellenistic-Babylonian priest, Berossus (4th century BC) who recounts how the wise 'fish man', Oannes, appeared long ago to 'a large group of people who lived in Babylonia like wild animals without laws' and that the reason for his appearance was to teach them 'everything that relates to a civilised way of life' (Machinist 1987:286; my translation from the German).

10. The translation is by West (1988:40); see also Müller (1972:60ff); Günther & Müller (1988:109ff; 225f).

## Conclusion

What I hope to have achieved in this contribution is to draw attention anew to aspects of the multidimensionality of the universal cultural theme of symbolic reversal (*mundus inversus/Verkehrte Welt/topsy-turvy world*), especially with respect to the cultures of the ancient Near Eastern world. The aim was to show how this principle operated in some ethnological, socio-political and religious contexts. For that purpose a selection of appropriate examples of applications in these spheres was presented: first, instances representative of the perception of the *mundus inversus* nature of the language, geography and customs of 'other' ethnic groups or peoples, and second, cases demonstrating the subversive power of this very same idea in pronouncements relating to social criticism and religious utopianism. A related aspect regarding the ancient Near Eastern world, which, however, would also be most interesting and worthwhile exploring, but on which little research has been done, is the literary potential of this *topos* in figures of speech such as irony, paradox and satire (see eg Lazarowicz 1963; Gutwirth 1981).

I conclude by referring to the thought-provoking advice of Barbara Babcock, the editor of the book 'The Reversible World': 'Such 'creative negations' remind us of the need to reinvest the clean with the filthy, the rational with the animalistic, the ceremonial with the carnivalesque in order to maintain cultural vitality' (Babcock 1978:32). Or to put it in the words of the seventeenth-century Spanish philosopher and writer, Balthasar Gracian: 'In order to see the things of this world correctly, you have to look at them all upside down' (quoted by Kenworthy 2001:9).

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