

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Riddles	5
Two Roads Diverge	11
Tablet 1	32
Tablet 2	48
Tablet 3	52
Tablet 4	55
Tablet 5	58
Tablet 6	65
Tablet 7	73
Tablet 8	77

INTRODUCTION

GILGAMESH, the oldest long poem in the world, is a relatively *new* classic. Parts of it were rediscovered, inscribed on clay tablets in cuneiform writing, in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq and environs) early in the nineteenth century. Since then it has become a work in progress, a collaboration led by Assyriologists, their discipline born of the poem itself, joined by archaeologists, ruin raiders, jihadis, museum curators, philologists, scholars, and writers who feel entitled to the poem even when they lack the linguistic means to look it directly in the face.

Gilgamesh: is it the first road novel,* the first trip to hell, the first Deluge, the first heterosexual romance in poetry? Does the love that dare not speak its name very nearly speak its name here for the first time? The poet Rod Mengham reflects, 'I love the fact that the earliest literary text we have enshrines friendship as the bedrock of our negotiations with the world and time.' *Gilgamesh* also gives the first account of the uneasy triumph of nurture over nature.

Its composition began more than two millennia BCE and ended around 700 BCE. It prefigures almost every literary tone and trope and suggests all the genres, from dramatic to epic, from lament to lyric and chronicle, that have followed it. It is political, it is religious. Its fractures foreshadow Modernism, which it teased and nourished, teases and nourishes. It is a whole

* Gregory Corso called *Gilgamesh* 'proto-Jack Kerouac' and Enkidu 'proto-Neal Cassady'.

synthesized from fragments. Breakage is part of what and how it now means.

Most poems invite interpretation. *Gilgamesh* invites, indeed requires, construction. Modern readers have to participate, select, invent. It does not let them rest. The more informed readers are, the more similar—we might expect—their readings will be. Yet, though the overarching narratives that scholars trace are broadly similar, their translations, setting out from the same tablets, differ so substantially in interpretation that readers might feel they are approaching quite different poems.

The occasions, subjects and themes of the poem, especially the protagonist's longing to avoid death, are folded into the formal accidents that surround its survival. Because of how it was written down, time and the elements contributed to it as to no other poem. It spent millennia buried. Unearthed, it wears marks of weather, excavation tools, human delinquency and restoration. It shows its age and celebrates its material presence, a partial survival.

But we will never penetrate to the subjectivity of the poem, the 'I' of the narrator. Indeed, as with the authorial persona we call Homer, the 'I' does not exist *in* the poem, and if translators provide a stable narrator, it will be an invention of theirs rather than a presence in the actual text. Much more than the Homeric poems, *Gilgamesh* is provisional, and not—and never—a finished site refined by interpretation.

The growing text of *Gilgamesh* is an increasingly plausible approximation of an original, based on damaged Standard Babylonian tablets. It is re-made with materials drawn from different millennia and languages, a kind of cento—that species of poetic composition assembled from other related works, trying to make a new whole. Because of discoveries and re-interpretations of

older tablets, the words won't settle. They change before our eyes; the poem remains provisional, shifting like dunes.

As non-specialists, we find meaning as we read, or read in, the poem. We help to produce it by acts of selection, emphasis and omission. Given the unstable text, we're always on shaky ground. No other literary adventure demands quite so much risk and care, so great an investment from the reader, as *Gilgamesh* does. Few poems provide such uncertain yet sometimes exhilarating rewards. Reading is a matter of tuning and retuning. Given the damaged state of the tablets and the ambiguities of the languages in which it survives, we can never tune in to the poem precisely; there is static and the volume refuses to be evenly controlled. There are no rests, only gaps: a series of narrative highlights, equally weighted, though the tempo and dynamics change from episode to episode. With the passage of poem time, because *Gilgamesh* traces a history, the action (which begins with the protagonist as an oversexed youth in Uruk and ends with him be-reaved, exhausted, accepting his own mortality, and still king, in the same city) slows in pace, the sky goes dark.

Gilgamesh, like Odysseus and Aeneas, is a protagonist in process, and he achieves repose only at the very end. We have to stay alert at all times. When we look for an author we see that *Gilgamesh* is made by a river, by fire, by generations of scribes, by shepherds, ruin-robbers, archaeologists and scholars. In all the debris there are literally no vestiges of an identifiable poet to be found. (We will come to the question of the redactor Sin-leqi-unninni in due course.)

The early Old Babylonian stories had a *use* of some sort. The most obvious use we can imagine for them is as entertainments, but entertainments in a religious, ceremonial, or a civic context, contributing to other activities and not ends in themselves. All

the same, these episodes are ‘stand-alones’, not chapters in a larger work. Some have a felt religious, though hardly a spiritual, dimension, and as writing, as written, they belong to the scribal and priestly classes. What the speakers of Standard Babylonian made, when they joined up stories that were already ancient in their day, was different, and what remains of that amalgamated whole is the poem this book is about.

When the *Gilgamesh* texts began to be translated into English, their literary impact was slow and decisive. Into a canon based in the Bible and the Greek and Latin classics, a religious and a secular canon with a highly developed culture of reception and interpretation grown up around it, entered a new text that belonged, as it were, in both currents and in neither. It was millennia older than either, with elements in common with each, which unsettled our understanding and gave us a sense of the extending, shadowy backstories of our traditions.

Most literary translators fill in *Gilgamesh*’s blanks and resolve its riddles, trying to free us to be contented literary consumers, untroubled by the distracting questions that it raises: questions of a semantic nature and also of theme, content and the mechanics of transmission. The most popular translations, those of Sandars, already mentioned, and of Stephen Mitchell, neither of whom had direct access to the original languages, stand guilty as charged. The translations that stay closest to the Standard Babylonian text, Benjamin R. Foster’s, Stephanie Dalley’s, and, particularly, Andrew George’s evolving translation, are the best to build our reading on. The creative realisation in their versions devolves in large part on us, non-specialist readers. We are made brave by the editorial generosity of these Assyriologists and of their colleagues working in this busy field.

Index

- Aeneid*, xv, 29
Al-Rawi, F. N. H., 59
Anu, 39, 67, 125
Anunnaki. *See* gods
Aristotle, 127–28
Aruru, 27, 39
Assurbanipal, King, 6–7, 11, 119, 120
Assyriology, 7, 8–9, 16
Augustus, Emperor, xv
- Bamforth, Iain, 104, 105
Batchelor, Paul, 38
Belet-ili, 71
Belet-seri, 75–76
Bilgames. *See* Gilgamesh, King
Bogin, Nina, 107–8
Boyde, Patrick, 104–5
Brackenbury, Alison, 106–7
Brady, Andrea, 101–2
Burckhardt, Georg, 103–4
- Canetti, Elias, 105
Cixous, Hélène, 29
Clegg, John, 117
cuneiform writing, 9, 113, 120–25;
 invention of, 134
- Dalley, Stephanie: *Gilgamesh*
 translation, 4, 35, 42–43, 44,
 50–53, 66, 85, 86, 111–12, 113,
 126, 152–53; on the oral tradition,
 110; on the scribal tradition, 132
Davidson, Peter, 18–19
Davis, Dick, xvi, 16–17
Death of Bilgames, 23, 103
deluge narratives, 6–7, 70–71,
 88–93
Dennis, Nigel, 150–51
- dreams, 42, 44, 56, 73–74, 75–76
Dumuzi, King, 66, 137
- Ea (*also* Enki), 61, 70, 71, 74, 89,
 95–96, 111, 132
Enheduana, 132
Enki. *See* Ea
Enkidu, xiv, 1n, 19–20, 21, 23–24,
 39–40, 41–46, 48–50, 52–53,
 55–57, 60–62, 65, 67–69, 72–79,
 85, 88, 102–3, 106, 108, 140;
 death and afterlife of, 76–78,
 82–83, 95–98; description of,
 39–40, 42–43; poetic portrayals of,
 26–27, 147–56; relationship with
 Gilgamesh, 43–44, 45–46, 49–50,
 74, 96–97
Enlil, 60–62, 70, 71, 74, 89, 92, 95
Enmerkar, King, 134, 135–37
epic, 109–10, 127–28, 130
Ereshkigal, 75–76
Esagil-kin-apli, 118
- Fenton, James, 100–101
Ferry, David, 26, 52
Finkel, Irving, 112, 121, 138
Ford, Ford Madox, 62
Foster, Benjamin R., 29; compared to
 George, 14–16, 33–36; *Gilgamesh*
 translation, 4, 14–16, 32–33,
 34–37, 49, 52–53, 59, 66, 85,
 86–87, 96–97, 113, 126, 143; on
 translation, 8, 29, 30–31
Frost, Robert, 142–43
- Gallas, John, 110
George, Andrew, 26, 126, 158; on
 Death of Bilgames, 23, 103;

- George, Andrew (continued)
 compared to Foster, 14–16, 33–36;
 Gilgamesh translation, 4, 5, 12–16,
 22, 23–24, 30–31, 32–36, 37, 42,
 44–45, 48, 52–53, 59, 66, 69,
 85–86–87, 91, 96, 98, 101, 103,
 111, 112, 113; on scholarship, 8–9,
 23, 24, 107, 117, 128–29, 130–31,
 133, 139, 158; on Shiduri, 84; on
 Sin-leqi-unninni, 117
- Gilgamesh*: author-compiler of, 3,
 116–17, 125; characteristics of,
 37–38, 41, 42, 45, 63, 111, 116,
 118–19, 125–26, 133, 138–40;
 compared with Greek classics,
 xiv–xv, 109; as epic, 109–10,
 127–28, 130–31, 147; history
 of, xiii–xix, 1–3, 6–7, 116–19;
 influence on Rilke, 103–5; length of,
 xiv–xv, 118–19; narrator of, 2;
 numbers in, 9–10; purpose of, 3–4;
 reading of, 2–3, 29–30, 62–64,
 109–10, 126–32, 141–42, 145–46,
 157–58; scholarship, 6–7, 8–9,
 32–33, 109–10, 119–21, 123–24,
 129–131; summary of, 38–42, 44,
 48–50, 52–62, 65–68, 72–86,
 88–98; translations and adaptations
 of, 4, 11–13, 21–37, 52–53, 99–114,
 118–21, 125–26, 133, 142–57
- Gilgamesh*, King (*also* Bilgames),
 38–39, 45, 133–34, 138; descrip-
 tion of: 5–6, 7–8, 11; divinity of,
 68; in Islamic magic, 134; name of,
 38, 93; relationship with Enkidu,
 43–44, 45–46, 49–50, 74, 96–97
- Gilonis, Harry, 17–18, 101
- Globish, 145n
- gods (*also* Anunnaki), 78, 86, 89,
 91–92
- Gracia, Chad, 108
- Greenblatt, Stephen, 117, 130
- Griffiths, Bill, 38, 90–91
- Gulf War, 101–2
- Hacker, Marilyn, 144
- Hamburger, Michael, 106
- Heaney, Seamus, 20
- Heidegger, Martin, 29
- Homer, 9, 109, 119, 144
- homosexuality, 43–44, 49–50
- Housman, A. E., 24
- Huchel, Peter, 106–7
- Hughes, Ted, 28, 45
- Humbaba, 50, 56–62, 69–70, 134
- Humble, Steve, 5
- Hussein, Saddam, 157
- Iliad*, xiv–xv
- Iraq, 115
- Ishtar, 47, 65–68, 71, 137
- Jacobsen, Thorkild, 109
- Jiljamis, 134
- Josipovici, Gabriel, 30–31, 103, 133
- Khalvati, Mimi, 144
- Kiefer, Anselm, 157
- Komunyakaa, Yusef, 108
- Kovacs, Maureen Gallery, 26, 62,
 151–52
- Kramer, Samuel, 95n
- languages, 121, 123, 139; Biblical
 story of, 136–37; of *Gilgamesh*, xiv,
 29–30, 48, 116, 121–25, 139; of
 poetry, 29, 132; purpose of, 50,
 113
- Levin, Gabriel, 19–20
- Lewis, Jenny, 26–27, 28, 79, 153–54
- Lugalbanda, King, 38, 56, 97, 137
- Martinů, Bohuslav, 157
- Mason, Herbert, 58
- McCarthy, Thomas, 66
- McLane, Maureen, 23
- Mengham, Rod, 1, 103
- Milne, Drew, 26
- Mitchell, Stephen, 4, 26, 28, 82,
 99–101
- Moore, Marianne, 142
- Morgan, Edwin, 28, 49–50, 73, 107,
 112, 142–43
- Muldoon, Paul, 142

- Nerrière, Jean-Paul, 145n
Netherworld, 95–98
Nimrod, King, 135–36
Ningiszida, 137
Ninsun the Wild Cow (*also* Rimat-Ninsun), 38, 44, 49, 52, 53, 97
Ninurta, 39–40, 46–47
numbers, 9–10
- Odyssey*, xiv–xv
Olson, Charles, vii, 25–26, 32, 88, 95n
Oppen, George, 18
- Peisistratos, King, 119
Postgate, Nicolas, 35, 141
Pound, Ezra, 7
Prynne, J. H., 101
- Rassam, Hormuzd, 61–62, 120
Rilke, Rainer Maria, 103–5
Rimat-Ninsun. *See* Ninsun
Rohl, David, 135
Roth, Philip, 157
Rumens, Carol, 28, 99
- Sallust, 16–17
Sandars, N. K.: *Gilgamesh* translation, xvi–xvii, 16, 21–23, 99, 111–12, 133, 149–50; on shared poetic knowledge, 109
Schlegel, Friedrich, 17
Schnack, Ingeborg, 104
Schrott, Raoul, 109
Schwerner, Armand, 17–18
Shamash, 53, 56, 60, 68, 74–75, 80–81, 90, 96; poetic portrayal of, 20
Shamhat, 40–45, 48, 74–75; poetic portrayals of, 147–56
Shangashush, 40–41, 44–45, 46, 74
Shiduri, 82–83
Shulgi of Ur, King, 135
Sin-leqi-unninni, 98, 105, 109, 116–18, 130, 132, 157
Smart, Christopher, 38
Smith, Ali, 5, 142
Smith, George, 6–7, 88, 121–22, 123
Speiser, E. A., 148–49
Star Trek: The Next Generation, 143
- Temple, Robert, 55, 77
Terry, Philip, 145–46, 154
Thompson, R. Campbell, 147–48
Tower of Babel, 135–37
translation, 8, 13, 29–31, 102. *See also* *Gilgamesh*, translations and adaptations of
- Ungnad, Arthur, 103
Ur-shanabi, 13n, 84–85, 92–94; wife of, 92, 93
Uruk, description of, 46, 113–15
Uta-napishti the Distant, 7, 23–24, 70, 71, 79, 85–93, 111–13
- Virgil, xiv–xv, 29
- Wainwright, Jeffrey, 99
Wall, Alan, 48
Whitman, Walt, 38, 142–43
Wilkinson, John, 116
Wisnom, Selena, 62–64
Woods, Greg, 43
Wright, Judith, 144
writing. *See* cuneiform writing
- Ziolkowski, Theodore, 157
Zukofsky, Louis, 151