

Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic

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Theodore Ziolkowski has been writing in the fields of German literature (especially Hermann Hesse) and comparative literature for some 50 years. One of his abiding interests has been an examination of what happens to the mythology, themes and plots embedded in works of ancient literature when modern writers and other artists encounter them. Previous books to emerge from his study at Princeton have explored the impact on modern creativity and intellectual life first of the Roman poets Virgil (1993) and Ovid (2005), and then of the Cretan myths of Europa, the Minotaur and Icarus (2008). This new book surveys the reception and influence of a yet older piece of literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a Babylonian poem with an ancient history stretching across 17 centuries, from about 1750 to 100 BC. The surviving manuscripts are clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform script in several different languages – Akkadian in Mesopotamia and Syria, and Hittite and Hurrian in Anatolia – excavated among the ruin fields of the Middle East from 1850 to the present. The poem's literary antecedents reveal an even older history, for some of the episodes that occur in the poem also feature in shorter poems about Gilgamesh composed in Sumerian, the language of the oldest large corpus of literature in human history. All these compositions are fragmentary to a greater or lesser degree, and are still in the process of reconstruction as further manuscripts are discovered.

The labour of reconstruction falls into the academic field of Assyriology, where the skills in decipherment and philology of a tiny number of adepts have resurrected Gilgamesh and other ancient literature from an oblivion that lasted 19 centuries. Something of the history of this labour can be learned from Ziolkowski's fellow east-coast comparatist, David Damrosch, of Columbia and Harvard, whose contemporary account of

the archaeology and Assyriology in their Orientalist contexts is entitled *The Buried Book. The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh*.⁽¹⁾ Ziolkowski's new book continues Damrosch's story of Gilgamesh's rediscovery as a modern cultural phenomenon.

Ziolkowski refers only in passing to the progress of generations of Assyriologists' work on the original manuscripts. Indeed, there is no up-to-date comprehensive *Forschungsgeschichte* of Gilgamesh. Successive discoveries, from 1850 to the present, have led to ever-increasing knowledge of the Babylonian poem and its analogues in other languages. But for Ziolkowski's purpose, the Assyriologists' story is only the background to a cultural history of the reception of Gilgamesh in modern times, especially its popular reception and its impact on literature, art and music.

Ziolkowski's study is divided into historical episodes. The first is the period up to the Second World War, beginning with Leonidas Hamilton's 'Ishtar and Izdubar' (1884). This extraordinary feat of invention already demonstrates what happens when writers who do not feel constrained to render an ancient text faithfully allow their imaginations to direct their work. In this case the result was a Swinburnesque romantic fantasy, far removed from the darker concerns that even then could be seen to be the matter of the poem of Gilgamesh. John Maier, a previous critic of Hamilton's work, observed that Hamilton interspersed his work with Babylonian words of his own making, passed off as quotations of an original text.⁽²⁾ In this way Hamilton clearly intended that his readers would think that what they were reading was a text very close to the ancient poem. From any point of view, this was a fraudulent trick. Assyriologists have a deep mistrust of translation by those who cannot read the original languages, and that mistrust begins with Hamilton.

The first chapter continues with the 'Babel und Bibel' controversy in Germany stirred up by Friedrich Delitzsch's Berlin lecture of 1902, and describes the impact of Arthur Ungnad's translation of the Babylonian Gilgamesh (1911) on the psychoanalysts Freud and Jung, and on the poets Rilke and Hesse. The first responses by painters and artists are also considered. The chapter ends with a juxtaposition of two renderings of the poem's seduction scene, one into clunky dactylic hexameters by a British Assyriologist (Campbell Thompson, 1929) and the other into attractive free verse by an American poet working from the 1924 translation of the German Assyriologist Hermann Ranke (William Ellery Leonard, 1934). The comparison brings to the fore another issue in Assyriological translation, and in the translation of literature in dead languages generally. Often those who do not control the ancient languages are nevertheless – some would say for that reason – better at writing an English that contemporary readers find to their taste. Ziolkowski's first chapter thus raises at its extremities important issues in translation that beset the fields of ancient and alien literature, especially these two questions: can a reader know whether he is reading something literal or free, and can an academic translator make an ancient poem readable in the way a poet can?

Ziolkowski's second chapter covers the 1940s and 1950s. He begins by categorizing the relationship of his material to the original Gilgamesh. First are translations proper, literal and free; these are mentioned only insofar as they are sources used by writers and other artists working in three other categories: (a) 'fictionalizing and dramatic revisions', (b) works 'set in the writer's own time' but modelled on the 'pattern' of the ancient text, and (c) 'thematic or motivic analogues' with a 'loose thematic connection with the source work'. These categories are fully populated by the following studies, which range in time from Frank Lucas' rationalizing version, a narrative poem entitled 'Gilgamesh: King of Erech' (1948), to Hans Jahn's trilogy, *Fluß ohne Ufer* (1949–61), an elaboration of the Gilgamesh theme that Ziolkowski describes as 'one of the most remarkable novels of the twentieth century'. The chapter considers the continuing history of Gilgamesh in art and the beginnings of the musical reaction to his story, notably the Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů's much recorded oratorio of 1955. It concludes with an important observation on the poem's differing receptions in Germany, where it had achieved a much greater cultural prominence before the war, and the English-speaking world, where translations had as yet had little impact on writers and artists.

Chapter three covers the period 1959–78, which Ziolkowski finds a time when Gilgamesh was increasingly popularized, especially in the English-speaking world. Translations had become available in a growing number of modern languages and were reaching a wide readership. Through the extraordinary success of the

mass-market adaptation by Nancy Sandars, first published as a Penguin Classic in 1960, the approximate content of the Babylonian and Sumerian poems gained very wide exposure and caught the imagination of many writers, dramatists, musicians and artists. Ziolkowski moves swiftly through the throng, mentioning some in passing, dwelling longer on others. Here are Herbert Mason, who sought to 'revivify' Gilgamesh in a personal and emotional poem published by the New English Library as *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative* (1970); Louis Zukofsky, who included the tale of Gilgamesh in Canto 23 of 'A' (1975), described by one critic as 'perhaps the most obscure poetry written in English this century' (which is some accolade, given the competition); and Gil Gamesh, the baseball star of Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1973). The 1960s and 1970s also saw Gilgamesh (and his bosom friend Enkidu) co-opted to serve various social and political agenda, particularly the movement for civil rights of homosexuals.

Ziolkowski characterizes the last decades of the 20th century as a period of even greater contemporization. The fourth chapter further demonstrates how 20th-century intellectuals, particularly writers, co-opted the story of Gilgamesh for their own purposes: psychoanalysts of the schools of Freud (Luke and Pruyser) and Jung (Kluger), literary deconstructionists (Leutenegger), historical novelists (Silverberg), literary ecologists (Braem, Mielke), and so on.

Shortly after the turn of the century a succession of events – notably the destruction of the World Trade Centre by Eastern fanatics inspired by religious fundamentalists and the occupation of Muslim countries by Western armies despatched by political ideologists – brought a new reaction to the Middle East and Islam that Ziolkowski shows soon coloured the reception of Gilgamesh. Stephen Mitchell's adaptation of the poem for a modern American readership is notable not only for its explicit treatment of sexual intercourse (adding gratuitous pornographic detail to the original to meet the perceived demands of modern readers), but also for its introduction, where Mitchell finds Gilgamesh's raid on the Cedar Forest and ill-advised slaughter of its guardian a counterpart of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and toppling of Saddam Hussein. The Sumerian poem's subtle criticism of Gilgamesh's foreign adventure calls attention to the dubious morality of the pre-emptive strike as a military strategy. Here too is Joan London's fine novel *Gilgamesh*, in which the ancient poem is the structural key to a modern narrative about a quest and return set in Australia, London and the Middle East during the Second World War.

Ziolkowski's book brings together an extraordinary assemblage of creative endeavour, literary, musical and artistic, all bound in some way to the ancient poem recovered by Assyriology. Only a few of them have been mentioned here. As a consequence of my own interest in the ancient text of Gilgamesh, writers have sometimes sent me their books inspired by the old hero. Only one such gift does not find a place in Ziolkowski's narrative: a volume of Italian poetry by Antonello Catani called *Ghilgamesh e altre poesie* (3), which begins with the eponymous composition, a collection of seven short meditative poems that refer by name to characters from ancient Near Eastern mythology. The author writes that 'il poema s' ispira all' antica epopea mesopotamica di Ghilgamesh' (the poem is inspired by the ancient Mesopotamian epic of G.). It falls into Ziolkowski's category of 'thematic or motivic analogue'.

Ziolkowski's preoccupation is with English and German literature and culture. These specialisms necessarily provided his hunting ground. In the last 25 years academic translations by Spanish and Italians have been published in mass-market form: Giovanni Pettinato's *La saga di Gilgamesh* (1992), Jorge Silva Castillo's *Gilgamesh o la angustia por la muerte* (1996), José Luis Sampedro's *La epopeya de Gilgamesh* (2004), and Joaquín Sanmartín's *Epopeya de Gilgame-, rey de Uruk* (2005).(4) Likewise mass-market translations have been published in Denmark and Norway: Ulla and Aage Westenholz's *Gilgamesh, Enuma Elish: Guder og mennesker i oldtidens Babylon* (1997) and Jens Braarvig's *Gilgamesh og Atrahasis: To babylonske helter* (2001).(5) These, like comparable works in English and German, have surely spawned the artistic creativity that is Ziolkowski's subject. He does dwell a while on José Ortega's *Gilgamesh y la muerte*, the first of a trilogy of novels published in the 1990s, but commentators more deeply immersed in the contemporary literary, musical and artistic culture of the Mediterranean and Scandinavian countries could no doubt add much to Ziolkowski's study.

However many more creative works have sprung from the seeds sown by Gilgamesh, it is certain that they

would support Ziolkowski's conclusion, that 'Gilgamesh constitutes a finely tuned seismograph whose reception registers to a significant degree many of the major upheavals of the past century' (p. 197). Students of literature understand that it is exactly this ability to bear profound meaning to new and different readerships that is the mark of a great work. When Ziolkowski identifies Gilgamesh as 'that great foundation stone of world literature' he has good grounds. Similarly David Damrosch has made room for Gilgamesh in the *Longman Anthology of World Literature* and devoted to it the first case-study in his book on *What is World Literature?*⁽⁶⁾ The endorsement of Gilgamesh in this way and its emergence into the company of what are now identified as the 'great books' is fully explained by the reception history that Ziolkowski describes.

For this reviewer a salient problem is how Assyriologists respond to the phenomena Ziolkowski documents, especially to those renderings of the poem of Gilgamesh that fall into the category 'fictionalizing and dramatic revisions'. Like Classicists, Assyriologists elucidate ancient literature through epigraphy, philology and historical study, and would like also to be guardians of this ancient literature. They recoil at 'unfaithful' popularising translations and excoriate adaptations and retellings, not only on grounds of historical accuracy but also because of their capacity to mislead even those who should know better.

The history of academic study of Gilgamesh outside Assyriology shows that even well-respected scholars have been deluded into using free adaptations, e.g. Sandars' prose version of 1959 and even Mason's poem of 1970, as if they were reliable sources for the original text. The non-academic reader is just as likely to fall into this trap. Looking up Gilgamesh on any internet bookseller one finds a bewildering array of competing titles, undifferentiated in terms of faithfulness to the original and all put forward by their publishers as somehow the best on the market. In the face of this proliferation of free translations and freer adaptations, the answer to the first question about translation prompted above by Ziolkowski's first chapter – can a reader know whether he is reading something literal or free? – is more than ever negative. Distinguishing the mother from her daughters becomes progressively harder.

Writers of free adaptations of Gilgamesh almost always acknowledge the distance between the original text and their own version. The real villains here are those publishers who, knowing that Gilgamesh sells books, place unwarranted claims of authenticity on book covers for commercial reasons. Free-market capitalism is thus a force in the evolving reception of any cultural artefact where judgement of authenticity made by a third party cannot be verified or falsified by common knowledge and experience.

To answer the second question raised earlier, the perception also remains that no academic translator can make an ancient poem readable in the way a poet can. This perception persuades most writers that, in converting an ancient poem into a modern language, it is necessary to take freedoms with the original in a way that with more modern classics normally happens only in transferring the text to another medium, like film or television. A film version of a novel often outrages those who know the book. Except among academics the same outrage does not greet adaptations of ancient literature. The absence of the original text from most people's personal experience allows writers to adapt with impunity. Thus, since ancient Greek ceased to be within the competence of most educated people, free versions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have become more numerous, and met with less protest.

As Ziolkowski shows, Gilgamesh has already travelled far down this road. There is, like it or not, no stopping it. Assyriologists have never been able to control the reception of Gilgamesh. Such control, of what is the property of all, is unrealistic. Indeed, it is now, more than ever, as vain an aspiration as the hero's own quest for immortality.

Notes

1. David Damrosch, *The Buried Book. The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York, NY, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John R. Maier, 'The file on Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton', *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910*, 11

- (1978), 96.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Antonello Catani, *Gilgamesh e altre poesie* (Athens, 1997).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Giovanni Pettinato, *La saga di Gilgamesh* (Milan, 1992); Jorge Silva Castillo, *Gilgamesh o la angustia por la muerte* (Mexico, 1996); José Luis Sampedro, *La epopeya de Gilgamesh* (Barcelona, 2004); Joaquín Sanmartín *Epopeya de Gilgame, rey de Uruk* (Barcelona, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Ulla and Aage Westenholz, *Gilgamesh, Enuma Elish: Guder og mennesker i oldtidens Babylon* (Copenhagen, 1997); Jens Braarvig, *Gilgamesh og Atrahasis: To babylonske helter* (Oslo, 2001).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. David Damrosch, *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (6 vols., New York, NY, 2004); *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ, 2003)[Back to \(6\)](#)

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