CHAPTER 4

LITERARY THEORIES: STRUCTURALISM

The first part of this thesis examined the *sources* of the *Gilgamesh Epic.* In the following chapters two literary theories will be appropriated in order to analyse the *discourse* of the *Epic -* in other words, the text itself will receive attention. It must be stressed once again that this thesis does not pretend to be exhaustive. Only two of many recent literary theories were chosen; these two theories are also considered to be representative of two opposite approaches towards literature. These are (i) a text-immanent structural analysis, and (ii) a reader-orientated approach. However, a structural analysis does not necessarily oppose a reader-orientated theory. It will appear in the end that these two approaches rather complement than exclude each other.

1.   Why is a theory necessary?

Perhaps one should reflect for a moment on *theories* in general. What is the sense of having a theory at all? Is it really necessary? Can one not simply read the *Epic of Gilgamesh* enjoying it for its own sake?

It appears that every scholarly discipline has its theories. Natural sciences, humanities, theology, music – all have theories. Likewise theories are also formulated within the field of literary studies. And just like scholars in other fields of research, literary scholars were also appointed or denied posts at universities, due to a particular theory associated with them (see Selden 1986:1-2). Thus, theories seem to be powerful instruments in academic circles: they open or close the doors towards academic promotion.

On a basic, non-academic level, one may argue that a theory spoils the joy of reading, that a theory *tends to undermine reading as an "innocent" activity* (Selden 1985:3). Yet literary theories are also instruments for looking at literature in a different, even in a completely new way, thereby revitalising the engagement between text and reader. Without entering into the debate on one literary theory over against another, this part of my thesis aims to do just this: to look at the Epic of Gilgamesh in different ways and to re-activate its meaning anew.

What is a theory?

A theory is a speculative instrument (Freund 1987:15), an abstract level of discourse...which attempts to formulate, conceptualize (sic) and generalize (sic) the underlying principles of certain phenomena. In other words, a theory is a way of looking at something, and an effort to understand it. Furthermore, the general nature of underlying principles is stressed. One may thus deduce that theories – literary theories, to be specific for this study – should be appropriable to a variety of texts, not only one.   Literary theories usually approach a text by asking questions from one of the following angles: questions regarding the author, the text, or the reader (see Seldon 1986:3). Recent literary theories are less interested in the author. Even if a real author

is known, his or her personal feelings, motivation, imagination, psychological make-up and so forth are matters that are discussed in the media rather than within theories of literature. Even autobiographies are regarded as literary compositions, however self-revealing these may be. Literary theories rather focus on the other two components: the text and the reader. But although only the text and the reader remain, there are many – even conflicting theories concerning these two parties: this thesis chose two.

The two literary approaches that are dealt with in this study both originated during the first half of the twentieth century. Behind each one lies a particular philosophy – a history – circumstances that necessitated the formulation of such a theory. Consequently the first approach – a text-immanent approach or a structural analysis – will be examined in more detail.

2.   Continental structuralism

2.1.   Ferdinand de Saussure

The basis of a theoretical approach towards language which was later extended towards literature was provided by Ferdinand de Saussure. Underlying the understanding of language of the Russian Formalists, the Prague Linguists and the French Structuralists, is De Saussure's work (Davis & Schleifer 1991:120). Literary structuralism which became popular in the 1960s was an application of De Saussure's linguistic insights to literature (Eagleton 1983:96). De Saussure lectured on general linguistics at the University of Geneva from 1907 - 1911 and emphasised the need for a *scientific* study of language. Apparently the book *Course in General Linguistics (1916)* which appears under his name, is a transcription of notes taken by his students during lectures: he himself never kept any of those.

De Saussure was not the first to study language*.* During the nineteenth century much research was done in the field of language, but these were

mostly diachronic studies carried out by historical linguists. They were interested in the origin and development of related languages, especially the Indo-European group. By means of comparing the words of different but related languages, going systematically back in time, these linguists aimed at discovering a common language source which they called Proto-Indo-European (Davis & Schleifer 1991:121).

De Saussure does give credit to the accomplishments of diachronic linguistics. This was also an endeavour to understand the nature of language, and the means by which to come to this understanding, was to trace the historical occurrences of words. However, according to De Saussure these studies fail in that they do not perceive the true nature of the object of study. Elemental words contained within a language is not its nature: the nature of language is to be found in the formal relationships which give rise to words and expressions. What people actually said was not as important as the structure which allowed them to say it (Eagleton 1982:114). Accordingly De Saussure proceeded to re-examine language and to provide a *scientific* understanding of the object of study.

Some of De Saussure's basic assumptions

1. A *synchronic* approach as opposed to a diachronic one. De Saussure conceived of language as a *system of signs* (Zima 1999:1-2; Eagleton 1983:96), therefore a *scientific* study of language needed a *system* as its point of departure (Davis & Schleifer 1991:121). Furthermore, language functioned as a *complete system at a given point in time* - its historical development and changes through the course of time were less important than its present qualities. Accordingly De Saussure distinguishes between speech-events *(parole)*, and the system or code governing those events *(langue)* (Davis & Schleifer 1991:122). The study of *langue* is the *synchronic* study of the relationship among the elements of language at a particular point in time: therefore *langue* should be studied, not *parole*.

2. A *functional* relationship as opposed to a *causal* one. A *word* is merely a *linguistic sign* (Davis & Schleifer 1991:122).   A *sign* is made up of a *signifier (signifiant)* - a sound-image of its graphic equivalent, and a *signified (signifié)* - a concept or meaning (Davis & Schleifer 1991:123; Eagleton 1983:96).   Neither is the *cause* of the other. *Signifiant* and *signifié* both exist simultaneously in a relationship of *reciprocal presupposition*: their combination is completely *functional* as this combination *differs* from all others. Linguistic signs differ due to different combinations of *signifiant* and *signifié.*

3.   An *arbitrary* relationship as opposed to a *motivated* one. There is no inherent reason why a *sign* consisting of a *signifiant* and a *signifié* refers to a particular object (Eagleton 1983:97). For example, neither the letters in *c a t* nor the phonetic sound of the word *cat* resembles anything connected to a four-legged furry creature uttering the sound *miaau.* The only reasons may be cultural and historical convention.   Therefore, the *arbitrary* relationship between the word-sign and the object it refers to, is stressed.

2.2.   Russian Formalism

De Saussure's structural linguistics were first appropriated for the study of literature in Russia in the beginning of the twentieth century (Davis & Schleifer 1991:128; Eagleton 1983:97). Two groups of critics began working towards what became known as *Russian Formalism*: the Moscow Linguistic Circle (in 1915) and Opojaz - the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (in 1916) (Zima 1999:26; Davis & Schleifer 1991:129). Initially the fundamental aim was to analyse poetic or lyrical texts. Indeed, in these early years *literature* was identical to *poetry.*

A name to remember is that of Roman Jakobson: in fact, he is seen as the major link between *formalism* and modern-day *structuralism* (Zima 1999:36;

Eagleton 1983:98). He was also one of the leaders of the Moscow Linguistic Circle (Zima – above; Davis & Schleifer 1991:128; Du Plooy & Viljoen 1992: 28). Although he fled more than one country more than once, he left a remarkable impression on literary circles wherever he came. But initially he worked in Moscow – Russia.

What are the basic principles of Russian Formalism?

In the first place a literary text – for the Formalists a poem – was to be bracketed off from its social and historical circumstances. Literature is an autonomous work of art (Zima 1999:27; Davis & Schleifer 1991:129). In other words, the material forces of production and the positive or negative appreciation on the receptive side are more or less ignored. I say *more or less ignored,* because of course it is impossible not to receive a literary text in some way or another. But the *content* of the text was considered subordinate to its *expression* – its *form* (Zima 1999:28). Thus, just like De Saussure had dissociated *sign* and *referent,* so the Formalists dissociated the *form* and the *content* of literary texts. Consequently

the *literary form* of a text was foregrounded, formal textual properties became the prime concern.

According to the Formalists, a literary text can be analysed only by means of its formal textual properties – its underlying laws and structures (Eagleton 1983:98). Literary innovation is not due to new historical circumstances, but by means of new literary *forms,* once the existing ones had become dated (Zima 1999:28). The same concept of innovation was applied to language: ordinary language that one used for everyday communication was *made strange* – or *defamiliarised* (see also Du Plooy & Viljoen 1992:28; Davis & Schleifer 1991:131).

Russian Formalism had the following major consequences for literary studies later in the Western world: firstly the interior patterning of the text becomes obvious - one can understand how it *works* (Davis & Schleifer 1991:129). Secondly *form* designates a text as belonging to a particular genre, for example a novel, a poem, a drama and so forth. Therefore, according to *formalism* literature is constituted by relational patterns within a text and which are relevant to that particular text or genre. In this way *Russian Formalism* produced a *science of literature*: *formal devices* created *literary effects* which could be *investigated* and *analysed* by studying the *text only.* The inspiration of the author and the subjective emotions of the reader were irrelevant: by means of an *objective analysis* of *formal devices* one could eventually get a grip on a *literary text.*

Both the Moscow Linguistic Circle and Opojaz were disbanded in 1930 by the Russian government. Their focus on the autonomous existence of the text governed by its own regularity and independent of history and society was not in line with the ideological standards of socialist realism (Davis & Schleifer 1991:129): they failed to make communist propaganda. So, many of the members of these movements fled to Prague to join the Prague Linguistic Circle where Roman Jacobson had already been working for some time (see below).

2.3.   Prague Semiotics

Roman Jacobson migrated to Prague in 1920. When the Prague Linguistic Circle was founded in 1926, he became one of the major theorists of Czech Structuralism (Zima 1999:36; Eagleton 1983:98). Prague Linguistics also used De Saussure's concepts as their point of departure, especially his emphasis on the *arbitrary relationship between sign and referent* - that is, between word and thing. This was also one of the basic concepts of the Formalists: consequently Prague Linguistics agreed that the text was indeed an *autonomous object,* detached from its social, cultural and historical

circumstances.   But, more than the Formalists, the Czech structuralists stressed the *structural unity* of a work. The different *elements* of a text were in fact *functions of a dynamic whole:* texts were viewed as *functional structures* which ought to be studied in their own right as they functioned according to their own rules (Eagleton 1983:100). In a sense Prague Linguistics took over the ideas of the Formalists, elaborating on them and systematising them further.

The Prague school of linguistics represented a kind of transition from Formalism to modern structuralism. Later on the terms *structuralism* and *semiology* became merged, as *semiotic* or *semiology* means the systematic study of signs. *Structuralism* especially transformed the study of poetry, however, it *revolutionized the study of narrative. It created a whole new science - narratology* (Eagleton 1983:103)*.*

However, after 1930 Russian Formalism and Prague structuralism had almost no impact on Western criticism and theory until 1960 in France with the coming of French Structuralism (Martin 1987:25; Davis & Schleifer 1991:129).

2.4.   Narratology

The *Second World War* broke out and Roman Jakobson migrated once again, this time to the United States (Eagleton 1983:98) where he met the French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. The development of modern structuralism was the result of this encounter, this intellectual relationship between linguist Roman Jakobson and anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss studied many and varied myths, mostly Amerindian (Davis & Schleifer 1991:138). Jakobson helped him to see that linguistic analytic methods could also be used by anthropology (Martin 1987:25; Selden 1986: 58-59). Cultural narratives were the object of Lévi-Strauss's interest: linguistic methodology made him realise that myths, just like texts also consisted of

elements structured in a particular way (Davis & Schleifer 1991:138). These individual basic units he called *mythemes.* Combined in a particular way and according to particular rules, *mythemes* contributed toward the meaning of the myth. Thus, Lévi-Strauss came to the conclusion that all these apparently different myths were variations on but a few themes (Eagleton 1983:103) and that any particular myth could be reduced to some *constant universal structures.* In a sense Lévi-Strauss succeeded to *demythologise* the myth.

Structural narratology developed from an appropriation of linguistic models to narratives (Selden 1986:59-61; Eagleton 1983:104) – that is the concept that there are basic underlying structures to all narratives, no matter how simple or how complex. The most important exponents of structural narratology are on the side of the French: Gérard Genette, Claude Bremond, A.J. Greimas and Roland Barthes. Mieke Bal in the Netherlands closely follows their insights, occasionally elaborating on them (see Ohloff 1985:46). However, the way towards structural narratology was being paved from Russsia, as far back as 1928 by a Russian Formalist, Vladimir Propp.

Russian Formalist theory of narrative takes as point of departure the distinction between *story - fabula* and *plot – sjuzet* (Selden 1986:12). This distinction pertains to the difference between the raw material that an author has at his or her disposal *(fabula)* and the way that he or she arranges this material in a literary text *(plot).* Thus, the *plot* or *sjuzet* has bearing on the literary text. Propp took an interest in the *plot* of Russian fairy tales (Selden 1986:57). He reduced all folk tales to *seven spheres of action* and *thirty one functions* (Ohloff 1985: 46; Eagleton 1983:104).   Following the *reductive* principles of Propp, Greimas in 1966 simplified the units of *narratology* even further by acknowledging only *six actants* - *actants* do not refer to characters of narratives, but are merely *structural units.* These are Subject-Object; Sender-Receiver; and Helper-Opponent. But it was Gérard Genette who elaborated extensively on the Formalists' distinction between *fabula and*

4–116

sjuzet and suggested a narrative should actually be divided in three levels: *histoire, récit* and *narration* (to be discussed in the next chapter).

3.   A choice for Gérard Genette's model

What makes Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) especially suitable as a model for structural analysis, is that he does not merely provide a theory, but also applies this to a complex novel - that of Marcel Proust: *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*). This novel consists of three volumes, 1300 pages in total.   Culler (in his foreword to Genette 1980:9) states: *It is as though Genette had determined to give the lie to the skeptics who maintained that the structural analysis of narrative was suited only to the simplest narratives, like folk tales, and, in an act of bravado, had chosen as his object one of the most complex, subtle and involuted of narratives.*

If one accepts that a theory formulates general principles that are appropriable to all specific instances (see above), Genette's theory of narrative discourse should be equally suitable for Proust's *Recherche* and Sîn-lēqi-unninni's *Gilgamesh Epic.* This model was furthermore deliberately chosen for its complexity. Although the *Gilgamesh Epic* belong to *temps perdu*, it is anything but a *simple folk tale.*

For the purposes of the analysis that is to follow, I regarded only tablets I – XI as the *narrative proper.* Although the previous chapter argued that tablet XII was intended as part of the *Epic,* this tablet does form an *appendix* to the narrative structure that is so neatly enclosed by the walls of Uruk. Furthermore – for reasons that I stated in the section on Methodology – the *Epic* is treated as a *narrative,* not as a *poem.* Thus, what follows is a *narrative analysis of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, tablets I – XI.*