CHAPTER 6

MOVEMENT TOWARD READER-ORIENTATED THEORY

Introduction

The previous chapter analysed the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in terms of its narrative structure. This analysis is representative of a text-immanent one: it focuses only on the text and its inherent qualities. A text-immanent analysis is also the most obvious way in which to approach an ancient text – like the *Epic of Gilgamesh.* It is impossible to question its original author or its original readers about the production or the reception of the text: all that really remain are the twelve broken clay tablets on which the *Epic* is inscribed. And modern readers have to rely on their – extremely variable – competencies in Akkadian to understand and to interpret the text.

Structuralism's point of departure is that a literary work is a construct, thereby providing for an analysis of its mechanisms (see chapter 4). Just like any other scientific analysis, the different parts or elements in a literary work can be identified, taken apart, scrutinised and be put together again. A structural analysis of literature leaves no room for personal likes or dislikes. This is an important point in favour of a structural approach: it does provide an objective measure for appreciating a literary work: a text is liked or disliked in terms of its own merits, and not subjected to the whims and fancies of the critic. It is of no concern whether the *Epic of Gilgamesh* appeals to the one who reads it: judged purely on the basis of a structural analysis, the previous chapter indicated the artistic, even aesthetic composition of the narrative.

Thus: a structural approach towards the *Epic of Gilgamesh* proved to be effective – but the question now is: is this approach sufficient?

1. A critique on a structural approach

With regards to the *Gilgamesh Epic,* this thesis did sketch the Mesopotamian background against which the narrative originated and developed (see ch. 3). However, any reader of the twenty first century who has no information about the Ancient near East and who picks up the *Epic* and reads it for the first time, will be completely baffled by many issues. For example, there are many gods with strange names who do strange things. There are monsters. The heavenly realm and the Netherworld are foreign domains. And how come a mortal can be two thirds god and one third human? And so forth.

Thus, there are issues within a text, especially a text that is culturally and historically removed from the situation of the reader that a structural analysis does not address.

Critique on Formalism and its structuralist approach came fairly early from within its very own ranks, namely from Prague structuralist circles (Zima 1999:40; Holub 1984:31; Senekal 1983:3). The important name in this regard is Jan Mukařovský, the most important literary theorist from the Prague Structuralist School. As early as 1930 he pointed out that it is impossible to bracket of a literary text from social realities. He agreed that each individual work of art is a unique structure, but not one that is independent of history. His argument was that history and social realities interpenetrate art (structures), thereby altering them continuously. Art forms are produced and changed by social and historical forces.

Also Macherey in 1965 criticised the implicit assumptions of structural literary analysis (see Young 1990:4-6). His objections are expounded in an essay which he called: *Literary Analysis: the Tomb of Structures.* Macherey protests against the a-historical nature of a structural analysis. He labels it an idealistic system that does not take historical and institutional practices into account. But there are other matters that are problematic as well. In the first place the

discipline of linguistics is simply transposed to literary criticism, which is a different discipline altogether. This practice is not only impermissible, but also unscientific. Furthermore, the whole concept of *structure* as it pertains to linguistics, is not suitable for literature. The *structure* of a language lays bare the grammatical rules: a literary structural analysis assumes that a text is an autonomous entity that also has an own interiority with its own – initially hidden – rules that can be disclosed by using a particular method. But just how valid is this assumption?

His third objection pertains to the contradiction in terms of what a structural analysis aims at doing. A structural analysis proposes to make a reconstruction of the rules underlying the text. In this sense it is a repetition of what has been said, and it asserts that it remains true to the text, not bringing personal feelings or emotions into play. At the same time a structural analysis also proposes to illuminate a new meaning, something has been concealed or invisible previously. In this sense a text has a deeper or original meaning that can only be disclosed by means of a structural analysis. So, the structure that started off as a reflection of the text, is in fact more original than the text itself. The question is: what is the original – the text or its structure?

His last remark is directed to the notion that a text – according to structural principles – exists as a harmonious entity. A text is explained by means of its inherent structure. The material circumstances in which it was produced and received are not taken into account. In other words, the a-historical nature of a structural approach is criticised.

Terry Eagleton (1983:109) agrees with this and sums up the weaknesses of structuralism as being *hair-raisingly unhistorical.* He repeats what has been said: a structural analysis proposes to characterise the underlying system or rules of a literary text. The method by which to achieve this goal is to focus on the text and nothing but the text itself – thus, a text-immanent approach. The text is bracketed off from anything else and stands in isolation. But by

bracketing off the text, the human subject and the world that he or she lives in, are also blocked out. All that remains is a system of rules that has its own independent life (Eagleton 1983:112).

Mukařovský went further and pointed out the *semiotic* nature of an artwork (Zima 1999:44; Holub 1984:31). Art forms are more than basic structures. Art forms act as complex signs that communicate meaning to some recipients. All recipients find themselves in a specific historical, social and cultural milieu, and are therefore products *of social relations* (Zima 1999:45; Holub 1984:32). Thus, the work of art and those receiving it are parts of a larger whole: society. This observation brings another matter to the fore: that of the collective nature with regard to the reception of art (see also Senekal 1983:3). Art forms are seldom received individually and subjectively, they are also part of a collective process. By stressing the collective nature of reception Mukařovský was also answering the critique of the Formalists who maintained that evaluation of art on the part of the recipient was far too personal and subjective to be reliable. He pointed out that it is impossible to isolate an artistic structure as an autonomous entity: on the contrary, every work of art and every recipient were permeated as it were by historical and social influences.

Furthermore, historical and social influences do not stop at the artistic structures and the recipients. They also permeate evaluative norms. Norms for evaluating work of art change from time to time, what was once popular goes out of fashion later. But not only do evaluative norms change, different norms at the same time are often in conflict. Societies are never homogenous – all societies consist of different social levels. An object of art, which is produced at one social level, is usually received differently at another level, according to its different evaluative norms. Holub (1984:33) explains: *Unlike the Formalists, he (Mukařovský) does not restrict his attention to avant-garde or "lofty art", but observes instead the penetration of "lofty art" into various strata of society as well as the influence of folk art in the so-called avant-garde.*

Also the later Formalists needed to acknowledge that it is impossible to detach literature completely from its social and cultural environment. The contributions of Jurij Lotman are significant in this regard (see Shukman 1976:317-338). Lotman was a member of the Moscow Tartu group who continued the project of the Russian Formalists, namely to stress the differences between poetic language and ordinary speech. Lotman was especially interested in a semiotic analysis of poetic texts. He used the term *extra-text* in order to refer to other semiotic codes – those that lie outside of the literary (poetic in Lotman's case) text. A literary/poetic text should be understood in terms of its relationship with other texts of the same genre, as well as in terms of its relationship with the cultural and social community. Shukman 1976:324 states: *What was to prove the most far-reaching of all Lotman's ideas...was his notion of the oppositional relationships between "text" and "extra-text": the idea that the work of art (and he is thinking here specifically of literature) exists, and can be understood, only in terms of the norms, traditions and expectations that make up its "extra-text".* Thus, Lotman agrees that literature and the social cultural world are inter-related, not un-related, as the former Formalists wished to emphasise. In fact, literature is *a manifestation of culture* (see also Senekal 1983:4).

Lotman further observed that readers have a particular relationship with their texts (cf Shukman 1976:324-325). Some literary texts meet the expectations of their readers: such texts operate according to the *aesthetics of identity.* These are texts that meet the current literary norms and traditions, and are mostly stereotype. However, some other texts question or even violate the expectations of their readers: these texts operate according to the *aesthetics of opposition*.

Hereby Lotman has prepared the stage for the entrance of the reader.

Remarks

Structuralism does lay bare those artistic literary devices that a literary work consists of, but nothing else: the reasons for its production and the effects of its consumption are simply of no concern. The blocking out of the human subject who is also primarily involved in a literary text, is the weakest point of structuralism. In other words, a structural analysis does not in any way relate a work to realities outside of the text, not to those conditions that produced it, nor to the actual readers who studied it. Structuralism points out correctly the constructed nature of language, but language certainly involves people, their experiences and their intentions. To dissect literature as a product of language is but one possible analysis: a text is always produced within certain material conditions and is always consumed by readers in various ways.

2. Reader-orientated theories

The work of Mukařovský that originated during the 1930's was not really known in Germany – or elsewhere in the Western literary world, for that matter – until the 1960's (Holub 1984:29). During the first half of the twentieth century the countries of the First World had to grapple with the devastation and the miseries of two World Wars and come to terms with its ugly realities. Once again, it seems that turbulent times create a need for security, a need for firm ground, a need for something that remains true and tangible throughout all the upheavals and downfalls of history, society and culture. This was what the German philosopher Edmund Husserl had in mind after the war and revolutions of the first decade of the twentieth century (Eagleton 1983:54). Husserl was concerned about that which one can be certain of: within a disintegrating society there was a desperate need for absolute certainty: but what was this certainty, and where should one look for it?

Husserl developed a philosophical method that he called *phenomenology* (Selden 1985:111; Eagleton 1983:55; see also Zima 1999:44) that, as the

word conveys, concerns pure *phenomena.* *Phenomena* pertain only to whatever realities are immanent to one's consciousness, and anything beyond this consciousness is irrelevant. However, this so-called *phenomenological reduction* is only the first important move. After all, the contents of one's mind are mostly disorganised, chaotic and often not very certain. *Phenomena* in Husserl's sense are *pure phenomena*; with this he means that within each object or *phenomenon* there is an essence, a universal type, something which is invariable and which of course constitutes the very *phenomenon.* So, real understanding occurs when one understands what is essential and unchanging about a *phenomenon,* that is understanding the *phenomenon* itself.

According to *phenomenological criticism* the inner meaning of a literary work is expressed by its language. But meaning as it is expressed by language pertains to the consciousness of the author (Selden 1986:111; Eagleton 1983:59). The historical circumstances of the production of the text as well as its reception are ignored, therefore *phenomenological criticism* is not really different from text-immanent criticism. The only difference is that a text-immanent criticism like structuralism or formalism also ignores the role of the author: *phenomenological criticism* regards the text as the embodiment of the consciousness of the author. However, this consciousness has nothing to do with the biographical details of his or her life. The focus of *phenomenological criticism* is the experience of the author, the structures of his of her mind, as these are conveyed by the text - and accidentally the text has only language at its disposal to express the thoughts of the author. Somehow meaning appears to be fixed, something which pre-dates language, something which exists even independently of language. Language is hardly more than a convenient tool to express meaning.

Although *phenomenology* is concerned primarily about the thoughts and experiences of the author, its major shift is nevertheless towards the perceiver (Selden 1985:110): its focus is on the contents of human consciousness and not on blocked off objects that exist by themselves. As regards literature, both

Formalism and Structuralism are interested in structures and literary devices, whereas *phenomenology* sees the text as a reality which is organised and experienced by an individual subject, firstly of course the reality which is in the mind of the author, but also as a next step, how this reality is decoded by the reader or the critic. This relates to what is called in German *Lebenswelt* (Eagleton 1983:59). What is at stake is the *world of the writer* that the critic tries to enter into with the greatest sensitivity. A purely subjective appreciation is not encouraged. The critic tries to understand the underlying nature or essence of writings in order to derive at some meaning. So, just like Formalism and Structuralism it aims at understanding as objectively and as unbiased as possible, not the text, but what it felt like to be the author.

Objectivity is the aim. The critic or the reader needs to free him or herself from all prejudices and plunge himself or herself wholly into the *world* of the text. Personal value judgments are to be put aside, for the critic is not allowed to carry these into the text. Literary criticism requires objectivity, is to be performed uncritically and non-evaluatively: *a mere passive reception of the text, a pure transcription of mental essences* (Eagleton 1983:59).

But *phenomenology* makes the same error as both Formalism and Structuralism: it neglects the role of history. Meaning is not something that can be derived from the structures of the text, nor is meaning something that is situated in the contemplations of the author. Human meanings are essentially historical by nature, human meanings are matters of changing, practical transactions between social individuals.

It was Martin Heidegger, one of Husserl's pupils who broke with his teacher's system of thought and who recognised that meaning is historical. The *essentialism* of Husserl is rejected by Heidegger's *existentialism* (Eagleton 1983:62) - *existentialism* focuses on what it feels like to be alive in the world. Human existence is characterised by its givenness - or *Dasein* - (cf. also Selden 1986:111). People do not live in isolation, but people share their lives

with others and with the world of which they are part. It is impossible to look at life objectively, exactly because one is involved in a dialogue with others and with the world. One is subjectively part of a reality, one is subjected to the world simply because one exists in it. This inescapable subjective awareness Heidegger calls *pre-understanding* (Eagleton 1983:62). From here one emerges and projects the things of the world, the objects of one's consciousness. Thus, the perception of reality is something that is subjective and objective at the same time, something that is constituted by the individual, the individual who is constituted by that same reality. So: this process is one of being constituted and of constituting at the same time, and the individual who is part of this process recognises the existing possibilities but also realises the fresh possibilities of being.

Existence, this matter of fresh possibility is always problematic, because a human being is constituted by history or by time (Eagleton 1983:63), and is therefore part of a concrete situation. Furthermore human beings exist and partake within this concrete situation, this reality or this world - by means of language. For Heidegger being human is constituted by time and made up of language. Here then Heidegger seems to agree with the ideas of structuralism about language: language constitutes the world in which people live, language is not simply a vehicle for communication, for expressing ideas, for conveying inner thoughts. Language is the very dimension of being.

But Heidegger does not view history in the broader socio-political and economical realm. For Heidegger history pertains to one's own inward, authentic or existential history, *a mastering of dread and nothingness, a resoluteness towards death, a 'gathering in' of my powers* (Eagleton 1983:65) - exactly that which Gilgamesh realises at the end of the *Epic.* Understanding is a dimension of being, of *Dasein*, something which happens through inner experiences and self-transcendences, but which is also caught up in a concrete situation that needs to be surpassed. Understanding is the very structure of human existence.

Art - or literature - is a medium which speaks to an authentic being. Where Husserl focused on the inner thoughts of the writer, Heidegger is only concerned about the reader. But literary interpretation is not something that the reader actively and constructively does, it is something that happens passively: the reader needs to open himself of herself to the very being of the text in a receptive way. However, by emphasising the authentic being of art or of literature, Heidegger is in fact echoing the formalists: art or literature is characterised by defamiliarising the familiar.

The Formalists give the reader a superior position to literature by claiming that one can get a grip on the meaning of a text by means of a method - a structural analysis. The position of the reader is for Heidegger exactly the opposite - that is one of total submission to the text, almost delivered into the power of its being. So, although Heidegger recognises the fact that one can never be objective, can never escape one's involvement with the world in which one lives, he fails to see history as part of human interrelations, as a part of social institutions, as a part of power relationships in a greater framework. For Heidegger, history is one's personal history of existence (Eagleton 1983:65).

Heidegger's philosophy is referred to as *hermeneutical phenomenology.* Initially this terminology was used to distinguish Heidegger's philosophy from Husserl's *transcendental philosophy* (Eagleton 1983:66). *Hermeneutics* is a term which philosophy borrowed from theology: originally *hermeneutics* had to do only with the interpretation of sacred scripture. Nevertheless, during the course of the nineteenth century *hermeneutics* came to pertain to the problem of textual interpretation as a whole - also with regards to literary non-biblical texts.

So, when Hans-Georg Gadamer rose to the occasion, the road was paved to apply Heidegger's situational approach to literary theories (Selden 1986:111). Gadamer emphasised the historical situation of the reader. A literary work *does not pop into the world as a finished and neatly parceled bundle of*

meaning (Selden 1986:112). Several other aspects need to be kept in mind when one approaches a text. Seemingly an objective approach is totally out of the question. But is it possible to ascertain the intentions of the author if he or she is unknown? And what about literary texts that originated in different cultures? What about ancient literary texts, those texts that are not only culturally but also historically removed from the context of the present reader? Is there any hope at all for understanding literary texts?

Gadamer elaborated on Heidegger's idea that language is a social matter (Selden 1986:111; Eagleton 1983:71; see also Zima 1999:56-57). The meaning of a literary work can never be exhausted. The intentions of the author is but one aspect of meaning, but as a text passes from one context to another - be it a cultural or a historical one - new meanings are derived from it. These meanings are not those of the author, nor those of the contemporary audience. Interpretation is something that happens in a context: a context that consists of a situation and a culture.

Thus, the reader can never dissociate himself or herself from his or her present context. Objective understanding is impossible. Interpretation is *situational, shaped and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a particular culture; there is no possibility of knowing the literary text 'as it is'* (Eagleton 1983:71). The past speaks to the present that questions the past that answers the present - and so forth. Interpretation of a literary work is a continuous dialogue between past and present (cf also Selden 1985:115). The ancient text questions past concerns, but raises new questions that ask for different answers. Therefore one needs to go back in time and ask which questions the original text addressed, and how these agree or differ from the present situation. Every text is a dialogue with its own history. Understanding or meaning is something that can never be fixed or grasped exhaustively.

Within every text there are new potential meanings, different understandings. For Gadamer there is not a break between past and present, but a *living*

continuity (Eagleton 1983:71): the present can only be understood through the past. Gadamer speaks of the *fusion of horizons.* The past has a *horizon of understanding* of its own, but so does the present. Understanding *happens* when these horizons fuse - historical meanings and assumptions meet those of present meanings and assumptions. The ancient and alien world is encountered, but at the same time this distant world is assimilated into the present world of here and now. *Rather than leaving home...we come home* (Eagleton 1983:72).

But present prejudices, those cultural preconceptions and pre-understandings do not affect the appreciation of a literary work negatively. On the contrary, one needs to realise that the literary work itself is an integral part of such prejudices and preconceptions. These are part of the tradition of the literary work that starts in the past, which includes the present and which reaches into the future. Prejudices are therefore positive and creative values, they are not to be regarded as values that are negative and obstructive by nature. The tradition is authoritative enough to sought out which prejudices are legitimate and which are not.

This line of philosophical reflection paved the way for new theories to take shape with regards to literary criticism. In due course it became apparent to the Western world – that which Mukařovský realised in the 30's – that literary texts are unthinkable without a reader. With the focus on the reader, many *reader orientated* theories of literary criticism developed. Many names are associated with *reader response criticism*: Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Gerald Prince, Michael Riffaterre, Jonathan Culler, Norman Holland, David Bleich, Roman Ingarden – to name but a few (see Selden 1985:106-127; Eagleton 1083:77-88). Although these critics agree on the importance of the role of the reader, they differ considerably in the way that they appropriate their various theories. This thesis chose to single out the views of Hans Robert Jauss as an exponent of a *reader orientated approach* that may contribute towards a better

understanding of the discourse of the *Gilgamesh Epic* – the reasons for this choice will become clear in due course.

During the 1960's the Konstanz School of Literary Studies in Germany developed a *Rezeptionsästhetic* (cf. De Man in Jauss 1982:viii; Segers 1978:9). *Rezeptionsästhetic* – or *reception aesthetics* as it is usually translated in English - was directed against the traditional way that literary criticism was conducted at the time, that is the concept that a literary text existed as an objective and autonomous unit (Structuralism), or that good literature consisted of certain eternal values (New Criticism). Instead, the text was regarded as a medium of communication that had various other relationships: with its social cultural milieu, with other texts, as well as with the reader (Senekal 1983:4). Thus, it was unacceptable to reduce a literary work to its structure.

2.1. A choice for the theory of Hans Robert Jauss

German *Rezeptionsästhetic* derives from the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (Zima 1999:57-59; De Man in Jauss 1982:xi), in fact, one of Gadamer's pupils, Hans Robert Jauss became one of the most important exponents of the *Rezeptionästhetic* approach (Senekal 1983:6; Segers 1978:10). [Wolfgang Iser is another name associated with the Konstanz School, however, his approach differs significantly from that of Jauss and will not be discussed in this thesis.] Jauss is deeply influenced by Gadamer's hermeneutical idea of *a horizon of understanding* and the dialogue between different *horizons of understanding* especially because Jauss, just like Gadamer is concerned about a dialectic between past and present, the realisation that the present is always being shaped and re-shaped by the past (Selden 1985:115-116).

Jauss (1982:16-18) credits but also criticises Formalist and Marxist theories. His main critique against the Formalists is that they ignore history, whereas Marxism social theories tend to ignore the text. From the very start he (Jauss

1982:19) foregrounds the role of the reader: whether one criticises a literary work, whether one actually produces a literary work as an author, or whether one is involved in some way or another in the classification or canonisation of literature, one starts off simply as a reader. All critics, authors and literary historians were readers in the first place. Reception of a literary work is the result of an active engagement with the text, an engagement that may even lead to the production of new text. Thus, there is a complex and dynamic relationship between text, author and reader that changes continuously.

Jauss is mainly concerned about *literary history* – about those texts that reach the literary canon of a country (in his case Germany), and why they do so. Why are some texts regarded as *serious literature* and taken up in the literary canon for the acknowledgement of future generations, and why are some texts read only for a limited period of time and discarded afterwards? Put differently: why is Shakespeare still read and Barbara Cartland not? Jauss endeavours to answer this question by means of seven theses (Jauss 1982:21-38).

Thesis 1: *A renewal of literary history demands the removal of the prejudices of historical observation and the grounding of the traditional aesthetics of production and representation in an aesthetics of reception and influence. The historicity of literature rests not on an organization* (sic) *of "literary facts" that is established post festum, but rather on the preceding experience of the literary work by its readers* (Jauss 1982:20).

This thesis refutes the idea of historical objectivism. Jauss foregrounds the historical reading public and its ever-changing expectations and reception of texts. Literary works are not appreciated according to stable objective criteria that are valid for all times and ages. Literary appreciation is rather dependent on the experience that readers have of a text, and on the degree that this text influenced their lives – or for that matter, the life of the society as a whole. However, the important point is that reception and influence are not stable and invariable matters: these change according to different readers and the different

historical periods in which they live. With this thesis Jauss once again affirms that a literary text can neither be detached from the circumstances that produced it, nor from the audience that received it.

People are made up of memories (Jauss 1982:21). This is true of readers and authors. New information and new insight are being continuously compared to existing knowledge. Existing knowledge is either refuted or transformed by different responses to what is new. Exactly the same happens with literature. Both author and reader do not read a literary work as though he or she had never read anything before. On the contrary! Authors and readers usually read widely and therefore have knowledge of many literary works that all have an particular effect on them. An author appropriates any new knowledge to create something new for a specific – often different – purpose. A reader may either reject what he or she reads new, or respond to it by taking it to heart.

Put very differently and very briefly: real literature should make one think and make one do.

Thesis 2: *The analysis of literary experience of the reader avoids the threatening pitfalls of psychology if it describes the influence of a work within the objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetical and practical language* (Jauss 1982:22).

This thesis warns against the concept that *anything goes,* that it is for the reader to judge personally whether he or she likes a work or not. There does exist something like literary categories – or genre. Every literary work falls into a particular literary genre, for example a poem, a novel, a letter, a satire and so forth. A reader reads a poem differently than he or she would read a letter (although some letters can be extremely poetic, nevertheless!). So, a reader approaches a text with certain expectations.

Reader response theories are often criticised that they emphasise the response of the reader, that they neglect the text and only pay attention to the subjective impressions of the reader. This second thesis of Jauss provides a cover-up. Impressions of the reader are subjected to the genre he or she is dealing with. A reader always compares a text that he or she is reading with texts that he or she has read. A reader therefore approaches any new text expecting something from it. Admittedly, these expectations may be violated. On the one hand a reader may find in a poem or a novel everything he or she expects. On the other hand a reading of a novel or a poem may turn everything upside down and demand from the reader to think differently and change his or her existing expectations.

Familiar expectations Jauss (1982:23-24) labels *horizon of expectations.* These pertain to the memories a reader has from earlier texts. A *horizon of expectations* is construed on the basis of familiarity with the norms of existing texts, the relations of the text with other texts from the same historical period, and the measure in which a new text deviates from existing norms. A new text may either soothe or challenge an existing *horizon of expectations* by appropriating the very disciplines of a genre in a different way. The reader then needs to replace, correct, vary or alter his or her *horizon of expectations* accordingly.

This thesis of Jauss seems to correspond to the Formalists' notion of *defamiliarisation.* However, for Jauss *horizon of expectations* is a broader concept than what one may expect from a particular literary genre. More than literary conventions, *horizon of expectations* also indicates the expectations and beliefs from a particular historical period in time. Especially the latter cannot be examined objectively because they are never stated overtly. The historical consciousness of a particular period exists in a subconscious manner that is impossible to be defined objectively: neither author, nor contemporary readers or later recipients are able to do so (De Man in Jauss 1982:xii).

Thesis 3: *Reconstructed in this way, the horizon of expectations of a work allows one to determine its artistic character by the kind and degree of its influence on a presupposed audience. If one characterizes* (sic) *as aesthetic distance the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work whose reception can result in a "change of horizons" through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness, then this aesthetic distance can be objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience's reactions and criticism's judgment (spontaneous success, rejection or shock, scattered approval, gradual or belated understanding)* (Jauss 1982:25).

Aesthetic distance is the key word in this thesis. Jauss uses this concept to distinguish between *literature* and *writing*, in other words, to answer the question: when does *writing* become *literature,* and when is it only suitable for *entertainment*? As has been stated, a reader approaches a new text with a particular *horizon of expectations.* If the text simply affirms that which the reader expects from it, he or she does not need to adjust his or her expectations in any way. In other words, the *aesthetic distance* is small. On the other hand, if the text demands from a reader to adjust or to change his or her existing expectations, the *aesthetic distance* is significant. In this sense *aesthetic distance* serves as a measure for estimating the literary value of a text. Pleasurable reading, soothing bed-time romances probably would fall into the category of texts that have little or no *aesthetic distance* from the *reader's horizons of expectations.* These texts are also hardly likely to be taken up in a *literary canon* of any sort. On the other hand there are texts that leave the reader uneasy, upset, or downright confused. These are the texts that challenge the *aesthetical distance* and *horizons of expectations* of readers.

Thesis 4: *The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations in the face of which a work was created and received in the past enables one on the one hand to pose questions that the text gave an answer to and thereby discover how the*

contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work. This approach corrects the mostly unrecognized (sic) *norms of a classicist or modernizing* (sic) *understanding of art and avoids the circular recourse to a general "spirit of the age". It brings to view the hermeneutic difference between the former and the current understanding of a work; it raises to consciousness the history of its reception which mediates both positions; and it thereby calls into question as a platonizing* (sic) *dogma of philological metaphysics the apparently self-evident claims that in a literary text, literary (Dichtung) is eternally present, and that its objective meaning, once and for all, is at all times immediately accessible to the interpreter* (Jauss 1982:28).

Jauss points out in this thesis that meaning is not fixed. Meaning can change. The meaning of a text cannot be disclosed by means of some or other method. The meaning of a literary text changes as its receptive audience changes. In other words, the meaning of a text has to do with the way in which its contemporary recipients understood it, the way in which a new or later audience receives it, with the differences taken into account. What is at stake is the history of the reception of a text.

However, this is all easier said than done. When one deals with ancient texts, the author, his or her intentions and the response of the audience are only indirectly accessible. Ancient horizons of understanding are very distant and difficult to penetrate into. For Jauss (1982:28) this problem may be addressed by means of inter-textual references – those contemporary texts that the author assumes his or her readers were aware of. Nevertheless, it remains impossible to reconstruct an exact *horizon of expectations* of the distant past, because the shadow of an existing *horizon* is ever present. The past is *enveloped* by the present, as it were (Jauss 1982:30).

Consequently it would be unfair to consider a literary work only in terms of its actual creation and reception. In other words, a literary work should not be restricted to the period of its origination because its reception may reach

beyond its immediate context (Jauss 1982:31). A literary work may address immediate problems within an immediate context; however, at the same time such a work may embed issues of an imaginary future. As the various stages of historical reception unfold, meaning is actualised anew within every different stage.

Thus, the meaning of a literary work is not something that can be fixed or pinned down to a certain historical period. An aesthetics of reception demands imagination on the part of its message: besides addressing direct questions of its time, it should also imagine future problems, perceptions and experiences. In this way the distance between the actual and the virtual significance of a literary work becomes pregnant with meaning. A creative tension exists between the *horizon of expectations* of the distant past and *the horizon of expectations* of the present. Within this tension lies the potential of meaning.

Thesis 5: *The theory of the aesthetics of reception not only allows one to conceive the meaning and form of a literary work in the historical unfolding of its understanding. It also demands that one insert the individual work into its "literary series" to recognize* (sic) *its historical position and significance in the context of the experience of literature. In the step from a history of the reception of works to an eventful history of literature, the latter manifests itself as a process in which the passive reception is on the part of the authors. Put another way, the next work can solve formal and moral problems left behind by the last work, and present new problems in turn (*Jauss 1982:32).

Once again Jauss (1982:32-33) criticises the approach of the Formalists that focuses on matters like literary devices and defamiliarisation to designate *literary evolution*. Everything seems to boil down to an automatic process where new forms simply substitute existing ones: in due course the once new forms become institutionalised, only to replaced with other new forms. And so forth. Such an approach is one-sided and limits understanding.

The transition from and old form to a new form is a far more complex process in which the interaction between the work and its recipients is of the utmost importance. *Recipients* pertain not only to contemporary readers: *recipients* are the whole audience, the critics, and the new producer (Jauss 1982:34). Furthermore the interaction between past and successive reception also come into play. In other words, the *horizon of expectations* of the present needs to enter into dialogue with the *horizon of expectations* of the past. A recipient can never detach himself or herself from his or her own experiences, moreover, this should not be done. Present experiences are vital in the whole historical process of aesthetic reception and production.

An important implication of Jauss's view of *literary evolution* as opposed to that of the Formalists is that the meaning or the interpretation of a literary work can never be exhausted. Furthermore, *literary evolution* does not pertain to *formal* matters only. In the process of *literary evolution* the aesthetic distance increases with every *new* reception. It may happen that a work's original significance was not recognised within the first *horizon* of its understanding; only within a later and distant horizon the unexpected is encountered and realised for the first time – new.

Thesis 6: *The achievements made in linguistics through the distinction and methodological interrelation of diachronic and synchronic analysis is the occasion for overcoming the diachronic perspective – previously the only one practiced – in literary history as well. If the perspective of the history of reception always bumps up against the functional connections between the understanding of new works and the significance of older ones when changes in aesthetic attitudes are considered, it must also be possible to take a synchronic cross-section of a moment in the development to arrange the heterogeneous multiplicity of contemporaneous works in equivalent, opposing, and hierarchical structures, and thereby to discover an overarching system of relationships in the literature of a historical moment. From this the principle of representation of a new literary history could be developed, if further cross-*

sections diachronically before and after were so arranged as to articulate historically the change in literary structures in its epoch – making moments (Jauss 1982:37).

Literary texts do not exist in a vacuum. A literary work forms part of a literary milieu. Every text is preceded by others, exists contemporaneously with others and is followed by more texts. Furthermore, literature does not exist for its own sake or by its own means. Literature engages into a dialogue with its world – explaining, criticising, and understanding what is happening around it. And somehow the world *out there* finds its way back into literature – changing and reshuffling the literary system (Jauss 1982:38). The transformation of literary forms and contents involve more than the automatic defamiliarisation of form and content.

Thesis 7: *The task of literary history is thus only completed when literary production is not only represented synchronically and diachronically in the succession of its systems, but also seen as "special history" in its own unique relationship to "general history". This relationship does not end with the fact that a typified, idealized* (sic) *satiric or utopian image of social existence can be found in the literature of all times. The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his* (sic) *lived praxis, performs his understanding of the world and thereby also has an effect on his* (sic) *social behavior* (Jauss 1982:39).

Literature – language – does not merely reflect or represent the given reality, it actually has the power to transform it. The creative capabilities are not restricted to artistic formal literary devices: literature influences experiences, makes new perceptions possible. Aesthetic perception becomes accompanied by moral reflection (Jauss 1982:41). In this way literature is not only an *object of artistic or aesthetic beauty.* Literature influences ethical and social values as well. A literary work succeeds in breaking through an existing *horizon of*

expectations of its readers, thereby confronting them with new questions that demand a revision of those existing *horizons.* Often existing canonised morals, whether these are religious or official by nature are challenged by literature: often challenging literature is banned by religious or official authorities.

Literature directs the reader towards the answer it demands. But the reader is forever decoding his or her perception in a to and fro manner. At a certain stage the answering of the question of literature becomes reversed and the reader becomes aware of the fact that he or she is in fact working out what the problem is. In this process the perception of the world and problem which literature is addressing, becomes decoded. Thus, literature has the power to unmask, to transform, to free human kind from its natural, religious and social bonds.

Remarks

It appeared that although a structural approach can be useful for the analysis of the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* certain matters are still unclear. Genette's (1980) model illuminated the interesting and artistic way in which *stories* were interwoven with other *stories* and also the way in which the *Epic* moved forward and slowed down according to its own unique rhythm. However, most readers today would need some explanation with regards to the gods, the monsters, and so forth.

It was then argued that it is not really possible to detach a text from its historical and cultural environment. Literary texts are produced by and received within material circumstances. Consequently the focus shifted from the *text* to the *reader.* The reader is not some abstract or objective entity that deals passively and in a remote way with a text: on the contrary! The process of reading involves a dynamic interaction with the text. The *reader* is not only someone who does something to the *text,* but the *text* has the ability – power if you like – to influence the *reader,* even the whole of society and to change prevailing ideas and ideologies altogether.

Of the many *reader-response* critics, this study focused on the *reception-aesthetics* of Hans Robert Jauss. His *seven theses* were then explored in more detail. It appeared that he takes the extra-textual social and historical matters into account – in other words, he also examines the forces of production, reception and alteration associated with a literary text. Furthermore, two very important aspects are foregrounded: *horizons of expectation* and *aesthetic distance.*

Jauss's *reception-aesthetics* is especially appropriable to the *Gilgamesh Epic,* because this narrative has a long history of production and reception, underwent some changes and also is received anew today. The next chapter will deal with these.