

CHAPTER 7

THE *GILGAMESH EPIC* AND JAUSS'S THEORY

Introduction

Hans Robert Jauss indicated that every *narrative* is part of many more *narratives*: a *narrative* of production, and a *narrative* of reception. The process of production and reception is not static, but a dynamic one of re-production and re-interpretation – provided that a given text is worth re-interpreting and re-producing! And, as Jauss also indicated, re-production and re-interpretation happen especially when existing *horizons of expectations* are challenged to provide *aesthetic distances* that demand from the reader to adapt or even to change his or her existing ideas.

1. Sumerian origins

The oral poems of Bilgames have their roots in Sumerian soil, within the larger settled communities that were later called *city-states*. Because writing was mainly appropriated for mercantile purposes, it is impossible to know exactly by whom these poems were composed, to whom they were addressed, and what their purpose was. However, an intelligent guess is possible: the background is unmistakably the royal court of a Sumerian king, politics and religion are likewise Sumerian by nature (see chapter 3, 2.3).

Thus, one may assume that the poems on Bilgames very much echoed *the horizon of expectation* of the recipients. The *aesthetic distance* was small. Bilgames is a Sumerian king in a Sumerian city-state - most probably Uruk - and he says and he does everything that is expected from a Sumerian king. Within this horizon the function of the Bilgames poems was most probably to provide entertainment in the royal court of the Sumerian kings of Uruk. With regard to their literary value one may label them *culinary* or *entertainment* art –

that is, if one assumes that reception was restricted to the royal court. Whether any one outside the palace walls took note of what the court musicians and poets did, is to be doubted.

However, the person of *Bilgames* crystallised as a main character, the prototype of a king: why he and not any of his contemporaries or successors remains a mystery. And whether these poems originated in the royal court of the real king Bilgames, is impossible to determine. But by the time that these poems were recited after his death, the first *historical distance* was achieved. *Bilgames* became a literary poetic construction: the poets were now free to manipulate the character without fear that they may tread on sensitive toes.

2. The Ur III period

Within the royal courts of Ur-Nammu and Shulgi, the Bilgames-poems continued to be sung or recited for the amusement of the king, but also for promoting Sumerian culture and ideology (see chapter 3, 3.3). However, during the Ur III period, the poems were also being written down – probably for preserving them in memory, but also for educational purposes. Nevertheless, although the *historical distance* was considerably larger after the lapse of several centuries since the Sumerian age, the *aesthetic distance* was still small, and the *horizon of expectations* of the poems and that of the recipients very much overlapped quite neatly. This was the time of the *Sumerian renaissance*: the kings of the Ur III period conducted their reign in Sumerian style and did what they could to promote Sumerian culture – politics, religion and ideology. Sumerian entertainment suited the purpose.

3. The time had come to pass...

In due course writing and the scribal art took on new dimensions. Besides recording mercantile transactions, scribes were developing their inherent creative abilities. They started to realise the power of the word – of language.

They had at their disposal the old Sumerian poems of a certain king Bilgames. He and his age became obsolete soon after the Ur III period. But something stuck: a name and some stories. These were remote enough not to give offence to any of the present royalties, however, contemporary kings needed to be instructed according to conservative principles of reign. Bilgames and his Sumerian background suited this purpose excellently.

The first major shift in *horizons of expectations* probably occurred during the time of the composition of the first *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. Akkadian literature was blooming (see chapter 3, 3.5.1). New literature was composed, but at the same time the existing canon underwent a change of form. The poems of Bilgames were reinterpreted: instead of five short individual poems, a new literary genre took shape – one long poetic narrative that would later be called an *epic*. And instead of five individual recounts, a central theme was wrought around one person: the Akkadian Gilgamesh.

A further *aesthetic distance* was achieved. The Babylonian pantheon differed from the Sumerian one. Marduk was the head. Ninsun and Sakan had disappeared. The other deities were known by Akkadian names (chapter 3, 3.5.2). Individual city-states had disappeared; instead there was the centralised authority of the Babylonian empire.

Also at this stage scribal art was firmly founded as an academic discipline. Scribes were no longer mainly accountants. Although an elitist few, scribes exercised considerable influence by means of their medium: language. They appropriated what they had at their disposal creatively. They exploited the possibilities of the Sumerian poems as well as the *aesthetic distance* – by doing so they could underscore the existing Babylonian kingship ideology without coming into any trouble with the present reigning authorities.

However, familiar *horizons of expectations* were not challenged as yet. The *Old Babylonian* king Gilgamesh was still the one who was supposed to *surpass all*

other kings. He still had the answers to most of life's problems. In short: he was a hero, despite bad luck. But already the *Old Babylonian Epic* addresses the perplexing question: how does one – even a king – cope with the reality of death?

Already at this stage the *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* started to reach beyond its immediate context. No longer was it restricted to its perspective of the past. Not only was it addressing direct questions, it was also imagining future ones, those perceptions and experiences that were to come: in other words, the *historical understanding* was starting to unfold.

True enough, the *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* had manifold purposes. Initially it was experimental of a new literary form, something that was vibrant and creative, and something that challenged the existing Sumerian canon. In due course it became institutionalised, suitable for educational and pedagogical practices (see chapter 3, 6). But somehow this was not the end.

4. Sîn-lēqi-unninni

Matters took a turn for the worse. The Babylonian empire was crumbling. Nothing was predictable. No matter how good a king, he would die and his reign would come to an end. Furthermore, it was not guaranteed that his legitimate heir would succeed him. Foreign powers were closing in. The gods seemed remote, even hostile. The logic of cause and effect seemed to backfire. The harsh events of history replaced the easy solution of myth (see chapter 3, 5.1).

This was the background of Sîn-lēqi-unninni. He was faced with the reality of the futility of human endeavours: everything comes to an end. Kings and paupers die alike. Heroic achievement is of little value. Whether one defies men, gods or monsters, eventually one shall venture towards the Netherworld where Ereshkigal lies. This grim reality is the only security. What now?

So Sîn-lēqi-unninni first exploits the *aesthetic distance* that his forerunners had created. He zooms into the Sumerian milieu with its city state of Uruk and all the ancient deities. However, he adheres to their now familiar Akkadian names. He also appropriates the literary form of the longer narrative poem – the *epic*. But this time he challenges the *horizon of expectations* of his royal audience. Instead of a hero who *surpasses all other kings*, Gilgamesh is a rogue. His arrogant endeavours of conquering Humbaba and spurning Ishtar only brings along misery and sorrow.

Sîn-lēqi-unninni casts Gilgamesh into the depths of his own fear and humiliation. Gilgamesh is stripped from his kingliness and godliness, he is but a man. He sinks into the despair of incompetence and the shame of his own filth. He cries for help in vain. Eventually he is turned down: he is thrown to his own resources. There is nobody that can help him. He is all alone.

Everything happens on the walls of Uruk. Sîn-lēqi-unninni invites his reader by means of a reflective prologue to extend his or her *horizon of expectations* and to reach back to ancient Sumer, to climb with him onto the walls of Uruk and to witness the life of a king – a man – a person. Thus the reader's *horizon of expectations* is also challenged in terms of an *aesthetic distance*: the narrative pertains to events that took place before time and history, furthermore, the narrative is not really the traditional success story. Gilgamesh – the king -has the familiar aspiration of doing something worthwhile with his life, but he goes about the whole matter rather foolishly. *Doing* rather than *being* is his motto. He wants to *do* many things: firstly he wants to erect monuments of heroic deeds during his lifetime, then he wishes to challenge the *Grim Reaper* itself by means of tangible achievements. But nothing works out. The king is not in control.

A disparity is created between the *horizon of expectations* of the text and that of its recipients. A *change of horizons* is demanded on the part of the reader for the text to make sense.

Gilgamesh finds himself back on the walls of Uruk, together with the reader. They are looking in retrospect at his life – one of failure and shame. This is the stark reality of life. No-one is infallible. Suffering is part of life, it cannot be avoided. Sooner or later everyone shall die, even a king. Back on the walls of Uruk Gilgamesh changes his *horizon of expectations* about the meaning of life. Whether one is remembered afterwards for death-defying heroic deeds is not really of any concern. Neither is it possible to obtain everlasting life. What is at stake is life itself and the way that it is lived. Put differently: the meaning of life is living in full, living meaningfully whilst life lasts. To understand this, the reader also needs to change his or her *horizons of expectations* – together with Gilgamesh.

Remarks

In the course of the many centuries since the Sumerian Age until the end of the Middle Babylonian Empire, the story of *Bilgames/Gilgamesh* underwent considerable re-interpretations. Within the first Sumerian poems lay a pregnant potential of meaning. However, this meaning unfolded and was actualised only within the various stages of historical reception. This process also involved a formal innovation of the genre: a longer narrative one with one central theme replaced short individual unconnected poems.

This change was not the result of a clever and objective manipulation of the formal aspects of the Sumerian poetic devices, rather, the new form was mediated by the interaction between the work and its recipients (thesis 2 of Jauss). The audience was Babylonian, therefore the new producers had to communicate in a new recognisable fashion. In no way did the later interpreters of the Sumerian Bilgames detach themselves from their own experiences

(thesis 1 of Jauss). However, the new literary form reopened access to literature that may have been forgotten otherwise. The past was drawn back into the present and realised anew. And Sîn-lēqi-unninni made diachrony and synchrony intersect on the walls of Uruk (thesis 7 of Jauss). The *historic* and *aesthetic* distances were far enough not to be too personal, however, the Sumerian heritage was still alive in the memories of the late Middle Babylonian society (theses 2 & 3 of Jauss). Perhaps vague and distant, but Old Sumer was not to be forgotten easily.

In due course the *Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* became canonised, institutionalised and part of the *literary canon* together with works like *Enūma eliš*, the most famous Babylonian literary composition besides the *Epic, Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, the Marduk prayers and some other texts (theses 5 & 6 of Jauss). The relationship of the *Epic* with its contemporaneous literature has been discussed in chapter 3 (point 6) and will therefore not be repeated. Suffice it to say that canonised literature of the high Mesopotamian culture found its way into the royal libraries of king Ashurbanipal – 668-627 (George 1999:xxi - xxii) – in his capital Nineveh. However, soon afterwards Nineveh was sacked – but more about this a few paragraphs later.

Before proceeding towards a discussion of modern reception, it may be necessary to reflect on Jauss's theory of *reception-aesthetics* and how this theory contributed to a better understanding of the *discourse of the Epic*.

The main contribution is that the continuous dialogue between text and readers became clear. Existing *horizons of expectations* were violated time and again, thereby creating considerable *aesthetic distances*. This became a never-ending process: *Gilgamesh* addressed every new audience in a new way and demanded new ways of perception – every time. Put differently: the *meaning* of the *Gilgamesh Epic* was re-activated in a different manner for its different audiences, therefore the text was kept alive. This may also be the reason for the recent *hype* – as Hanson (16 November 2001) states.

5. Gilgamesh in post-cuneiform tradition

Nearly two millennia after the Old Babylonian period cuneiform writing ceased to be taught (George 2003:60). The old medium of writing was abandoned, and so also its associated literary compositions. New texts and new genres saw the light. New cultures from east and west were infiltrating the old region of Sumer and Akkad and made sure to leave their mark indelibly. Mesopotamian history, culture and religion gradually started to fade away firstly with the Persian newcomers, then the Greeks, and eventually the Romans. So, what became of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* midst the changes of times and tides?

Apparently *Gilgamesh* survived in the post-cuneiform period, however in a different capacity. Fragments from the *Book of the Giants* of the Qumran community call him *Gilgamêš* and portray him as a figure in Jewish mythology. According to this tradition he was one of the evil giants of ante-diluvian times – a race that was spawned by the fallen angels who corrupted the human beings on earth and consequently also God's good creation. Another one of these evil giants bears the name Hôbābīš who most probably is Humbaba (George 2003:60).

The followers of Mani adopted the *Book of the Giants* as scripture in the third century AD. Unfortunately many sections of this text are lost. However, Gilgamesh and some other wicked characters survived in memory into late medieval times. As late as the fifteenth century AD a certain Al-Suyūṭī an expert with regards to Islamic magic, composed some conjurations against evil spirits of which one is the malevolent demon *Jiljamis* (George 2003:61).

Gilgamesh also not escaped the attention of the Greek rhetorician Aelian. He wrote *On the Nature of animals* approximately at the turn of the second century AD (George 2003:61). With this work he wished to illustrate the love that animals have for human beings, and for this purpose he recorded the tale of

Gilgamesh's miraculous birth and survival. The king of Babylonia, Senecheros (i.e. Enmerkar) was warned that the child borne by his daughter – at that stage unmarried and not pregnant as yet – would someday usurp the throne. Rather alarmed the king took the best precautions he could to obstruct this course of events – he had his daughter locked up in a citadel. However, in due course she became pregnant – by a *nobody* – and gave birth to a son. From this fortress the baby was mercilessly slung, however miraculously saved by an eagle. The bird carried the baby to a gardener who nursed him and cared for him until he grew up. He became Gilgamesh who ruled over Babylonia, *fulfilling his destiny*.

This narrative seems partly influenced by the one of Sargon's birth, nevertheless it has several points in common with the tradition around Gilgamesh. In the first place Gilgamesh was a successor of Enmerkar. In the second place he was of uncertain parentage. And thirdly he was a king associated with Babylonia (George 2003:61). Although this legend is not informed directly by the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, it does reflect some knowledge of ancient Babylonian tradition with regards to Gilgamesh.

Theodor bar Kanai was a Nestorian Christian writer who lived some six centuries after Aelian. He drew up a list of twelve post-diluvian kings who allegedly reigned during the ages between Peleg – a descendant of Noah's son Shem – and Abraham the patriarch. The tenth king he called *gmyws* or *gmngws*; the twelfth, the king during whose reign Abraham was supposed to be born, he called *gnmgws* or *glmngws*. Both names probably represent garbled spellings of Gilgamesh (George 2003:61).

Thus Gilgamesh survives in post-cuneiform tradition. He is represented either as a legendary figure of ancient times who is connected to miraculous events, or as an evil demonised being within the later pagan mythology. However, it is important to note that these later sources only attest to the name and the figure of Gilgamesh – they have no direct dependence on the original narrative

recorded in the *Epic* itself. It seems that the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* was to remain buried in Ashurbanipal's palace for the many centuries to come.

George (2003:62-70) discusses the research of some present day scholars who propose to present evidence for the adaptation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* into other Near Eastern languages. According to these scholars some episodes and themes of the ancient *Epic* did survive into the post-cuneiform period and found their way into other narratives. He refutes all these proposals convincingly and concludes: *the epic that we know died with the cuneiform writing system, along with the large proportion of the traditional scribal literature that was of no practical, scientific or religious use in a world without cuneiform* (George 2003:70). Thus, no more scribes to train, no pedagogical purpose, and no more wisdom to learn: the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was obsolete.

6. Modern reception

Nineveh was sacked by the Median and Babylonian alliance in 612 BC. The *Standard Babilonian Gilgamesh Epic by the mouth of Sîn-lēqi-unninni* so neatly copied out and catalogued was crushed and shattered and *lay in pieces on the floors of Ashurbanipal's royal palaces, not to be disturbed for nearly 2 500 years* (George 1999:xxii).

Then matters changed. Austen Henry Layard and his assistant Hormuzd Rassam, an Assyrian Christian ventured towards Nineveh during the 1850's in search of Assyrian sculpture. However, what they did discover instead were the first broken cuneiform tablets of Ashurbanipal's libraries in his ransacked city. Gilgamesh's peaceful rest was disturbed. Although the two archaeologists were unable to read the tablets, they knew that these were extremely valuable and sent what they had found to the British Museum. So also Gilgamesh, fragment for fragment, made his way to the British Museum. And the painstaking process of deciphering cuneiform had begun.

Gilgamesh hit the headlines in 1872. George Smith, one of the most renowned scholars of Assyriology was sorting through the Assyrian tablets in the British Museum. He was given a tablet that happened to be the eleventh one of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, also the best preserved one, namely the story of the Deluge. George (1999:xxiii) describes what followed: *Smith took the tablet and began to read over the lines which Ready [the conservator who had cleaned the tablet] had brought to light; and when he saw that they contained the portion of the legend he had hoped to find there, he said, "I am the first man to read that after two thousand years of oblivion." Setting the tablet on the table, he jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself!* Gilgamesh created a stir. Quite frankly, I must confess: I had the urge to do likewise when I held some original tablets of the *Gilgamesh Epic* in my hands right there in the very British Museum, except, it was London, November, and bitterly cold. However, it must be pointed out that this response on the part of the *reader* is rather extreme, most readers would respond to great literature in a more controlled and sober manner.

Nevertheless, Gilgamesh was back in circulation. Since Smith's time extensive scholarly work was done with regards to the *Gilgamesh Epic*. The following names need to be mentioned: Paul Haupt (1891) and Peter Jensen (1900) who did much of the pioneering work in collecting, transliterating and translating; R Campbell Thompson provided the first *coherent* edition of the *Epic* in the 1930's with the sources that he had at his disposal; also in the 1930's and 1940's Samuel Noah Kramer indicated the importance of the Sumerian Bilgames poems with regard to the *Epic* (see George 1999:xi). In 1982 Jeffrey Tigay incorporated, consolidated and updated all the previous research into his well-known edition: *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. This was considered the standard work on the *Epic of Gilgamesh* until Andrew George's latest updating in 2003: *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*.

Furthermore many scholarly articles are published on various aspects of the Epic. George's 2003 edition indicates some of these in the many footnotes. Occasionally their merits as well as their blunders are pointed out. In another study somewhat earlier this year I did research on parallel motifs and lines of thought between the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the *Old Testament*. A discussion of this research falls outside the scope of the present thesis, however, suffice to remark that the *Gilgamesh Epic* receives considerable attention also from biblical scholars and theologians.

Much information regarding *Gilgamesh* is also available electronically – there are lists measured by the yardstick of articles that pertain to *Gilgamesh*. However, some caution is necessary. Not everything that one may find attests to scholarly research. But the purpose of this thesis is not to go into the detail of everything that has been published on the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as such: however, it does propose that *Gilgamesh* is catching the attention of recipients anew.

Reference has been made to *De Volkskrant* and the journalist Hansen's remark that the *Gilgamesh Epic* is recently experiencing *een opvallende wedergeboorte* (see chapter 1, 1). *Gilgamesh* is reviving. One of the reasons for this revival that Hanson proposes, is that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is able to enter into the actual experiences of modern readers, especially religious experiences. Everybody – in ancient times as well as in modern times – wishes for divine intervention in a time of crisis. But *Gilgamesh's* gods are really not much of a help – even Shamash, although sympathetic to the case of the hero – remains distant and far. *Where is/was God?* is a question that is frequently asked in times of distress, by believers and atheists alike. There are times when trust in a good and almighty God simply does not make sense. There are times when a person realises with a dreadful shock that he or she is left to his/her own devices. When he or she is left alone to make sense out of a mess, looking backwards and forwards...mostly a vision blurred by tears.

Just like Gilgamesh, on the walls of Uruk.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is translated into many different modern languages – mostly in English, but also in Dutch, in French and in German for example. Some translations, especially those with a more scholarly inclination follow a literal word for word order, indicating all gaps and lacunae in the text. Andrew George's 2003 translation is such a scholarly one. Other translators like Danny Jackson (1992) chooses for what one may call a poetic paraphrase. Such a translation reads more smoothly, more easily but is deceptive with regards to the real fragmented state of the *Epic*.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is also encountered within academic circles. It forms part of the curriculum for the study of *Ancient Literature*, *Assyriology*, studies of the *Ancient Near East*, as well as for the study of *Akkadian* and cuneiform writing. Thus, once again *Gilgamesh* revives in centers of learning, serving its purpose of instructing students in various ways.

7. Other genres, other forms of art

However, besides scholarly research, translations and paraphrases on the *Gilgamesh Epic*, creative minds are also experimenting with other forms of art. The Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu gives a musical interpretation in 1955 in the form of an oratorio. Martinu's composition is based on the translation of Campbell Thomas (despite its datedness) and also does he not appropriate all twelve tablets. Part one is based on the first two tablets, part two on Tablets VII, VIII and X, and part three on Tablet XII. Probably the choice for these tablets was based on their suitability for a musical performance.

On the literary side Raoul Schrott (2001) re-cast the *Epic* in the form of a drama – a play. Apparently this is less successful. Hansen in *De Volkskrant* (16 November 2001) evaluates: *Helaas heeft hij het nodig geoordeeld om behalve*

een vertaling een toneelstuk van zijn hand op te nemen dat sterk gebaseerd is op Gilgamesj. Wat stoort mij er eigenlijk zo aan? De ironie, die godezijdank in Gilgamesj zelf afwezig is? Het determinisme waarmee het stuk doordrenk blijkt te zijn? Die psychologische nuanceringen, die het krachtige beeld dat de oorspronkelijke Gilgamesj van de personen oproept, doen verwateren? Ik weet het nie precies, maar ik word er kriegel van. The re-interpretation in the new formal genre added additional undertones that are perhaps implicit in the *Epic*, however by foregrounding these, the beauty of the original poem is marred. In this case the original work is received much more positively than its reworking in a different genre.

Gilgamesh is clad in a completely different robe by the Australian author Joan London. Her novel *Gilgamesh* (2003) has nothing to do with the ancient world – it focuses on the new. The setting is the Great Depression and World War II. The *heroine* is a young Australian girl – Edith - who falls unwontedly pregnant by her educated English cousin's Armenian friend. In a very indirect and perhaps a very far-fetched manner one may infer that Edith takes on the roles of both Shamhat and Ninsun. In the first place Edith seduces the Armenian Aram (Enkidu?), the illegitimate father of her child. In the second place her son Jim, misplaced, an outcast, also labeled a *bastard* needs all her support - and prayer ?

Exclusive Books regarded this novel as one their best in 2003. It reverses the *Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* completely. Instead of a hero, there is a heroine. Instead of the royal Sumerian court, there is the struggle to make ends meet on an Australian farm. The main point of correspondence between London's novel and that of the *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* is that of a long journey as an escape of circumstances, perhaps in search for a more tangible truth. Traditions around *Gilgamesh* rather than the *Epic* proper are reflected in this novel (see also the review of Cobb: Aug 22, 2003. 10:24 AM at www.chron.com/cs/CDA/printstory.htm/ae/books/reviews/2059744).

Remarks

The reception history of the *Gilgamesh Epic* reflects the dialectical process between production and reception. Current conditions changed the *reception* of the *Epic* in Babylonian times, likewise present *recipients* hold the ancient text against their own present *horizons of expectations*. These differ, whether in Germany or in Australia. Somehow there seems to be a vital link between the Babylonian past and the global present. At a certain point *horizons* of the past overlap with those of the present to give birth to something new.

Time and again *Gilgamesh* appears in different guises: long before the time of the *Standard Babylonian Epic* – that is since the early second millennium and onwards - episodes concerning Gilgamesh's heroic enterprises were depicted visually on bronze situlas, clay plaques and cylinder seals (see George 2003:100-101). And as it was indicated in previous chapters, parts of the *Epic* may have been sung or recited aloud in the royal courts of Mesopotamian kings. That modern recipients rework the *Epic* in the form of music, drama or a novel, should come as no surprise.

At this point a valid question is whether it is important for the present reader to know all the detail of the ancient world? For example, is it important to know all the Mesopotamian deities and what their different functions are? What about city states: would ignorant readers be inclined to think of Uruk in the same manner as he or she would think of Paris, London or New York? Is the intermingling of the natural and the supernatural worlds necessarily a problem?

The rather lengthy discussion in chapter 3 of first the Sumerian and then the Babylonian backgrounds should make it clear that an understanding of the world of the *Epic*'s setting is certainly a help. A background of religion is perhaps more illuminating than historical processes, yet, history also explains

some major changes wrought to the *Epic*. Furthermore, it should be obvious that a direct transposition of the ancient world on top of the present one creates hermeneutical problems. On the other hand any reader who enjoys reading *science fiction* and texts like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, should be able to appreciate also the *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* as a masterpiece in its own right. It is not always necessary to explain everything.

8. Critique on response-orientated theories

At first glance it seems that the life of a text is dependent on its engagement with the reader (Holub 1984:148). The reader is the one who takes initiative and who evaluates a text as meaningful or simply casts it aside. Thus, it seems that *reader orientated theories* shift radically from a text-immanent approach to yet another one-sided theory: the reader is in full control.

However, reader orientated theories do not aim at reducing the meaning of a text to the interpretation of the reader, rather they propose to indicate the interaction between the text and its reader (De Jongh 1983:43). For texts have their own story. Texts wish to communicate something to their readers, but more important, texts also wish to have an effect on their readers. In other words, texts aim to elicit a *response* from readers. Texts have a power of their own. The major breakthrough of *reader orientated theories* is the emphasis that they place on both *reader* and *text* – not only the one or the other. This – the *reader-text-interaction* – is the strongest argument in favour of *reader-response orientated theories*.

Jauss's *reception aesthetics* is appreciated as well as criticised by some scholars. Segers (1978:11-12) agrees that the concept of *horizon of expectations* is valuable, but he raises a question mark over the matter of *aesthetical distance*. The latter is far more complicated than Jauss cares to admit. To violate an existing *horizon of expectations* does not necessarily lead to an *aesthetic experience*. A far more serious point of critique pertains to the *reconstruction of a particular horizon of expectations*. Just how reliable is such

a construction? Especially with regard to ancient texts, the original readers who could be of some help are no longer there, and more often than not, historical sources are also lacking.

Kloek (1978:88) also point out the limits of a hypothetical reception – especially with regards to ancient texts. For example, in this thesis I proposed that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* transgressed the *horizon of expectations* of its readers – his disgraceful conduct as young and arrogant king - but I have no documentation. There are no clay-tablet reviews discussing the latest literary editions. My whole supposition rests on my own image of what the Sumerian/Akkadian/Babylonian *horizon of expectations* was. Therefore, a hypothetical reception is bound to many limits. And Eagleton (1983:84) agrees: the whole problem with Jauss is of an epistemological nature. Jauss proposes that a text be measured against a particular expectation of that very text – but is that reconstructed expectation anything more than the critic's own reconstruction?

Once again, subjectivity creeps in. The problem is that *readers' responses* are extremely variable. A *structural analysis* at least provided a tangible model, measures by which to recognise and to appreciate literary devices: *reader orientated theories* are more vague and rather indicate *directions* for the way in which a reader may deal with the text. The main question in this regard is again: can one determine whether one interpretation is more valid than the next? And on what grounds?

To this question *reader response* theories would answer that a text has its own rights, it sets its own parameters for interpretation (De Jongh 1983:55). Thus, the reader is not in control, he or she needs to engage into a serious and responsible dialogue with the text before deriving at that something called *meaning*. Both texts and readers are caught up in historical circumstances that determine *horizons of expectations* and influence the interaction between the two parties. Interpretation –the meaning ascribed to a text – thus reflects an

interaction rather than the text itself (De Jongh 1983:55) – exactly what *reception theories* propose to highlight.

But who is the reader? Who actualises meaning: the intended reader or the real reader (Holub 1984:152; De Jongh 1983:49)? How does one distinguish between an *imaginary reader*, an *appropriate reader*, an *ideal reader* and an *idealised reader* (Holub 1984:153)? Furthermore, is the matter of transition from one stage of reception to another really a smooth process? Do different *horizons of expectations* simply meet, be extended and then merge – do they not sometimes clash? Is *aesthetic distance* necessarily a positive criterion, or may such a difference just border on alienation?

A problem with *reader-orientated* theories are that there are so many of them. Different exponents were mentioned, for example Jauss, Iser and Fish (see Seldon 1986:112-118 for a brief but informative overview). However, the most serious critique that can be launched against *reader orientated* theories is that they fall yet again into the trap of positivism. Regardless of how open, or how accommodating these theories are with regards to the role of the *reader*, the dichotomy subject/object is still implied. The reader is the (human) subject – its object is the literary text. *Interpretation* is still the key word (Tompkins 1980:225). Just like *formalist theories*, *reader orientated theories* also regard the text as the primary unit of meaning.

But now, at this point I decide to call a halt. Where does one stop? This thesis aimed at illuminating Gilgamesh's world and his story, not to give a powerful performance of literary analysis. Of course there are more possible literary models than the two that were appropriated in this study – furthermore, the models of both Jauss and Genette are anything but perfect!

The ancient world did not regard language as a system of signs (Tompkins 1980:203). Literature was not an object for critical investigation. Meaning was not something that had to be derived at by means of appropriating

sophisticated critical apparatus. In the ancient world language was a force that acted upon the world. The prime concern was not the literary analysis of a text, nor the discovery of its meaning, but *what did the text do to its recipients*. Language was meant to have an effect on whoever was listening or reading. In short, language was a form of power.

Thus, in the final instance one may ask: what did the *Epic of Gilgamesh* do to its recipients, both ancient and modern?

Well, it made me write this thesis.

I don't know about you.