

GILGAMESH



A NEW RENDERING IN ENGLISH VERSE

DAVID FERRY

G I L G A M E S H

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A New Rendering

in English Verse



David Ferry

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This book is dedicated to Suzie and Bill

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INTRODUCTION

According to Sumerian tradition, Gilgamesh was an early ruler of the city-state of Uruk, biblical Erech, and the evidence, admittedly meager and indirect, puts him there around the twenty-seventh century B.C.E. Of his actual achievements we know nothing except what is perhaps reflected in the later traditions of him as heroic warrior and builder of his city's mighty walls.

For the Sumerians, and later for the Assyrians and Babylonians, Gilgamesh was both god and hero. As the former, he appears in a god-list about a century after his death, and he continued to be worshipped for another two thousand years, until the end of the Assyro-Babylonian civilization. He was an underworld deity, a judge there and sometimes called its king. His statues or figurines appear in burial rites for the dead, and his cult was especially important in the month of Ab (July-August), when nature itself, as it were, expired.

As hero, Gilgamesh undoubtedly lived on in the oral traditions of the Sumerians, especially at the court of Uruk. When these traditions were first committed to writing is not known. The earliest compositions we have, five or six, probably do not go back further than the late third millennium B.C.E. Though they are sometimes poorly preserved, we can identify in them themes and tales that will later be integrated in the Babylonian epic. Thus, in one lay, we find Gilgamesh, along with Enkidu and other retainers, striving to achieve the immortality of fame by the slaying of the monster Huwawa (see below, Tablets

IV-V). In another, we read of the royal oppression of Uruk (see below, Tablet I). In another, the goddess Inanna unleashes the Bull of Heaven upon Gilgamesh and Enkidu (see below, Tablet VI). In still others, Enkidu is trapped and must remain in the underworld (see below, Tablets VII-VIII), and Gilgamesh resents his own mortality (see below, Tablets IX-XI).

These compositions in Sumerian, or similar ones, written or oral, in the Sumerian or the Babylonian languages, were the sources for the Babylonian composition that followed in the early second millennium B.C.E., what is known as the Old Babylonian period. This epic is not a translation of a Sumerian original. It is, rather, a highly selective and creative adaptation and transformation of what we find in the earlier works. It is still known only in fragments, but it was certainly a work of at least one thousand lines, perhaps much longer, focused on a central theme, man's mortality. It begins with Gilgamesh's exhausting his people with the labors of the *corvée* and introduces a very new Enkidu, not the retainer of the Sumerian tradition, but a hairy Wild Man, created by the gods to match Gilgamesh's enormous energies, eventually humanized, and Gilgamesh's beloved friend and companion in his adventures. He joins Gilgamesh in his quest for the immortality of fame, an old Sumerian theme, but then the text goes its own highly original way: Enkidu is punished for his part in the death of Huwawa and dies. Consumed with grief, Gilgamesh reacts by rejecting the heroic ideals of the past and, in effect, rejects his humanity. He will be content now only with the true immortality of the gods. He therefore journeys to the end of the world to find the one immortal man, the Babylonian Noah, Utnapishtim, and to learn from him the secret of his unending life.

In the centuries that followed, knowledge of the epic spread across the ancient Near East, not only in its Babylonian form but also in versions written in the Elamite, Hittite, and Hurrian languages. Recent discoveries indicate that the epic had as-

sumed more or less its standard form by the thirteenth century B.C.E. The standard version of eleven tablets (with a twelfth as an appendix, a later and poorly integrated addition and, unlike the rest of the epic, a literal translation into Babylonian from a Sumerian original) is a work of about three thousand lines and is known mainly from the Nineveh recension on tablets of the seventh century B.C.E. Babylonian tradition credited it to a poet-editor by the name of Sin-leqe-unninni, "Sin (the moon god), accept my plea."

It is this relatively late, standard text, with occasional assistance from the Old Babylonian version, that is the basis of the poem by David Ferry that follows. And let it be stated at once: it is David Ferry's poem. It is not Sin-leqe-unninni's or anyone else's, any more than *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is Juvenal's and not Johnson's. He has given us, not a translation, not at least as that term is ordinarily understood, but a transformation. He does not compete, therefore, with the earlier translators, whose contribution to his own work he generously acknowledges, nor should his work be compared with theirs. He has given us what they have not and what as authors of word-for-word translations they could not aspire to. He has given us a work of verbal art. He has thereby communicated to us some sense of the beauty of the original and some sense of the emotions that reading or hearing the original must have aroused. In this respect, however free his version on one level may be, on another and deeper one it seems remarkably faithful to the original. It is, therefore, a major contribution to our understanding and appreciation of this ancient and moving poem.

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G I L G A M E S H

T A B L E T I

i

The Story

of him who knew the most of all men know;
who made the journey; heartbroken; reconciled;

who knew the way things were before the Flood,
the secret things, the mystery; who went

to the end of the earth, and over; who returned,
and wrote the story on a tablet of stone.

He built Uruk. He built the keeping place
of Anu and Ishtar. The outer wall

shines in the sun like brightest copper; the inner
wall is beyond the imagining of kings.

Study the brickwork, study the fortification;
climb the great ancient staircase to the terrace;

study how it is made; from the terrace see
the planted and fallow fields, the ponds and orchards.

This is Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh
the Wild Ox, son of Lugalbanda, son

of the Lady Wildcow Ninsun, Gilgamesh
the vanguard and the rear guard of the army,

Shadow of Darkness over the enemy field,
the Web, the Flood that rises to wash away

the walls of alien cities, Gilgamesh
the strongest one of all, the perfect, the terror.

It is he who opened passes through the mountains;
and he who dug deep wells on the mountainsides;

who measured the world; and sought out Utnapishtim
beyond the world; it is he who restored the shrines;

two-thirds a god, one-third a man, the king.
Go to the temple of Anu and Ishtar:

open the copper chest with the iron locks;
the tablet of lapis lazuli tells the story.

ii

There was no withstanding the aura or power of the Wild
Ox Gilgamesh. Neither the father's son

nor the wife of the noble; neither the mother's daughter
nor the warrior's bride was safe. The old men said:

"Is this the shepherd of the people? Is this
the wise shepherd, protector of the people?"

The gods of heaven listened to their complaint.
"Aruru is the maker of this king.

Neither the father's son nor the wife of the noble
is safe in Uruk; neither the mother's daughter

nor the warrior's bride is safe. The old men say:
'Is this the shepherd of the people? Is this

the wise shepherd, protector of the people?
There is no withstanding the desire of the Wild Ox.'"

They called the goddess Aruru, saying to her:
"You made this man. Now create another.

Create his double and let the two contend.
Let stormy heart contend with stormy heart

that peace may come to Uruk once again."
Aruru listened and heard and then created

out of earth clay and divine spittle the double,
the stormy-hearted other, Enkidu,

the hairy-bodied wild man of the grasslands,
powerful as Ninurta the god of war,

the hair of his head like the grain fields of the goddess,
naked as Sumuqan the god of cattle.

He feeds upon the grasslands with gazelles;
visits the watering places with the creatures

whose hearts delight, as his delights, in water.

One day a hunter came to a watering place
and saw Enkidu; he stood expressionless,

astonished; then with his silent dogs he went
home to his father's house, fear in his belly.

His face was as one estranged from what he knows.
He opened his mouth and said to his father: "Father,

I saw a hairy-bodied man today
at the watering place, powerful as Ninurta

the god of war; he feeds upon the grasslands
with gazelles; he visits the watering places

with the beasts; he has unset my traps and filled
my hunting pits; the creatures of the grasslands

get away free. The wild man sets them free.
Because of him I am no longer a hunter."

His father said: "Go to Uruk and there
present yourself to Gilgamesh the king,

who is the strongest of all, the perfect, the terror,
the wise shepherd, protector of the people.

Tell him about the power of the wild man.
Ask him to send a harlot back with you,

a temple prostitute, to conquer him
with her greater power. When he visits the watering place,

let her show him her breasts, her beauty, for his wonder.
He will lie with her in pleasure, and then the creatures,

the gazelles with whom he feeds upon the grasslands,
and the others with whom he visits the watering places,

will flee from him who ranged the hills with them."
So the hunter went to Gilgamesh in Uruk

and told him about the power of the wild man,
and how he had unset the traps and filled

the pits, so that the creatures got away free.
The lord of Uruk said to the hunter then:

"When you return, a temple prostitute
will go with you and with her beauty conquer

the wild man. He will lie with her and then
the gazelles with whom he feeds upon the grasslands,

and the others with whom he visits the watering places,
will flee from him who ranged the hills with them."

iv

The harlot and the hunter traveled together,
taking three days, back to the watering place.

For three more days they waited, and finally
Enkidu came with the creatures that love the water,

the gazelles and the others, so as to drink their fill.
The temple prostitute looked at him, Enkidu,

the hairy-bodied wild man of the grasslands,
the hair of his head like the grain fields of the goddess,

naked as Sumuqan the god of cattle.

"That is Enkidu, Shamhat, show him your breasts,

show him your beauty. Spread out your cloak on the ground.
Lie down on it. The wild man will look at you.

Show him your body. The hairy-bodied man
will come to you and lie down on you; and then

show him the things a woman knows how to do.
The gazelles and with them all the other creatures

will flee from him who ranged the hills with them."
And so the harlot, Shamhat, showed him her breasts,

showed him her body. The hairy-bodied man
came over to her, and lay down on her, and then

she showed him the things a woman knows how to do.
For seven days Enkidu in his wonder

lay with her in pleasure, and then at last
went to seek out the company of the creatures

whose hearts delight in feeding upon the grasslands,
and visiting the watering places, and

ranging the hills. But seeing him, they fled.
The creatures were gone, and everything was changed.

His body that loved to range the hills was now
unable to follow; but in the mind of the wild man

there was beginning a new understanding.
Bewildered, he turned, and sought out the company

of the temple prostitute. He sat down beside her,
and looked into her face, and listened to her:

"Enkidu, now you are beautiful as a god.
Why do you seek the company of beasts?

Come with me to the city, to Uruk,
to the temple of Anu and the goddess Ishtar.

Gilgamesh is the ruler, the strongest of all,
the terror. The aura and power of his desire

can be withstood by no one." Then Enkidu,
whose heart was beginning to know about itself

and longed for a companion, cried aloud:
"Take me to Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh,

whose aura and power cannot be withstood.
I will cry out in Uruk, challenging him:

'It is I, Enkidu. The strength of the wild man
born in the wilderness cannot be withstood.'

The temple prostitute replied: "Come then
to Uruk, where the processions are, and music,

and let us go together through the dancing
to the palace hall where Gilgamesh presides,

the favorite of the gods, the beautiful,
strongest of all, the terror, the most desired.

Look at his radiant face, the favorite
of Shamash and Enlil, Ea, and Anu.

While you were grazing beastlike with gazelles,
before your mind had any understanding,

his mind, a gift to the gifted of the gods,
had a dream of you before you knew of him.

In the early morning Gilgamesh arose
and told his mother his dream: 'I had a dream.

A star fell from the heavens, a meteorite,
and lay on the empty plain outside Uruk.

The men and women came and wondered at it.
I strove with it to lift it but could not.

I was drawn to it as if it was a woman.'
All-knowing Rimat-Ninsun spoke to him,

the lord of Uruk, Gilgamesh. His mother,
All-knowing Rimat-Ninsun, spoke and said:

'The star that fell from the heavens, the meteorite
that lay on the empty plain outside Uruk,

the star you could not lift when you strove with it,
the star you were drawn to as if drawn to a woman,

is the strong companion, powerful as a star,
the meteorite of the heavens, a gift of the gods.

That you were drawn to it as if drawn to a woman
means that this companion will not forsake you.

He will protect and guard you with his life. ✪ ✪
This is the fortunate meaning of your dream.'

Then Gilgamesh the lord of Uruk said:
'May the dream as you interpret come to pass.' "

The temple prostitute thus told the tale.

T A B L E T S I I A N D I I I

i

Shamhat took off her robe and divided it
so that the wild man also could be clothed.

When this was done and both of them were clothed,
she took him by the hand as a goddess might,

leading a worshipper into the temple precinct;
as if he was a child she held his hand

and they began their journey. They came to a camp
where shepherds lived, who gathered about and wondered

at the huge size and strength of Enkidu,
the hairy-bodied wild man of the grasslands.

They said to each other: "He is like Gilgamesh,
twice the size of ordinary men,

stronger and taller than a battlement.
He is like a star that has fallen from the heavens."

They cooked food and set it down before him;
they brought out beer they had brewed and set it down.

But Enkidu knew nothing about these things,
so he sat and stared at the cooked food and the beer

for a very long time, not knowing what to do.
Then Shamhat, the harlot, the temple prostitute,

said: "Enkidu, this is the food and drink
men eat and drink. Eat and drink your fill."

So Enkidu ate his fill of the cooked food,
and drank the beer. Seven jugs of the beer

and he was suddenly joyful, and sang aloud.
Then he washed his hairy body, anointed himself

with oil, and dressed his body in new clothes,
so that he looked as beautiful as a bridegroom.

He took up a weapon to guard the flocks and shepherds
against the wolves and lions that preyed upon them.

Therefore, at night, with Enkidu to guard them,
the shepherds could lie down in peaceful sleep.

ii

One day a stranger came into the camp
bearing a richly decorated platter,

and Enkidu asked Shamhat to question him.
"Where are you going? Where are you hurrying to?"

The young man opened his mouth and said to them:
"I am going to the wedding feast in Uruk,

bearing delicious offerings on the platter,
ceremonial offerings for the feast.

Before the husband, Gilgamesh will lie
in pleasure with the bride in the marital chamber.

There is no withstanding the aura or power of the desire
of the Wild Ox Gilgamesh, the strongest of all."

Then Enkidu was full of anger and said:
"Take me to Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh,

whose aura and power cannot be withstood.
I will cry out in Uruk, challenging him:

'It is I, Enkidu. The strength of the wild man
born in the wilderness cannot be withstood.' "

So they set out for the wedding feast in Uruk.

iii

Enkidu entered Uruk; then, amazement
crowded the streets at the sight of the size of him,

the strength and beauty, the likeness to Gilgamesh.
"One has appeared worthy of Gilgamesh,

stormy heart to struggle with stormy heart."
"The wedding feast of the goddess of love is ready."

Enkidu stood, guardian on the threshold
of the marital chamber, to block the way of the king,

the aura and power of the Wild Ox Gilgamesh,
who was coming to the chamber to take the bride.

Stormy heart struggled with stormy heart
as Gilgamesh met Enkidu in his rage.

At the marital threshold they wrestled, bulls contending;
the doorposts shook and shattered; the wrestling staggered,

wild bulls locked-horned and staggering staggered wrestling
through the city streets; the city walls and lintels

shuddered and swayed, the gates of the city trembled
as Gilgamesh, the strongest of all, the terror,

wrestled the wild man Enkidu to his knees.
And then the rage of Gilgamesh subsided.

He turned his chest away. Enkidu said:
"You are the strongest of all, the perfect, the terror.

The Lady Wildcow Ninsun bore no other.
Enlil has made you sovereign over the city."

Then Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced,
and kissed, and took each other by the hand.

iv

Enkidu listened as Rimat-Ninsun spoke
to Gilgamesh her son: "Enkidu has neither

father nor mother; there is no one to cut
the wild man's hair. He was born on the grasslands and grazed

with gazelles and the other beasts on the grass of the grasslands;
Enkidu, the companion, will not forsake you."

Enkidu listened, and wept, and felt his weakness.
Then Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced,

and kissed, and took each other by the hand.

v

Enkidu spoke these words to Gilgamesh:
"Huwawa's mouth is fire; his roar the floodwater;

his breath is death. Enlil made him guardian
of the Cedar Forest, to frighten off the mortal

who would venture there. But who would venture
there? Huwawa's mouth is fire; his roar

is the floodwater; he breathes and there is death.
He hears the slightest sound somewhere in the Forest.

Enlil made him terrifying guardian,
whose mouth is fire, whose roar the floodwater.

Helpless is he who enters the Cedar Forest."
But Gilgamesh replied: "Who is the mortal

able to enter heaven? Only the gods
can live forever. The life of man is short.

What he accomplishes is but the wind.
Where is the courage that you used to have?

Where is the strength? It is Gilgamesh
who will venture first into the Cedar Forest,

and you can follow after, crying out:
'Go on, go forward, go on, embrace the danger!'

You who have fought with lions and with wolves,
you know what danger is. Where is your courage?

If I should fall, my fame will be secure.
'It was Gilgamesh who fought against Huwawa!'

It is Gilgamesh who will venture into the Forest
and cut the Cedar down and win the glory.

My fame will be secure to all my sons."

vi

So the two warriors went to the armor makers,
who made them weapons as they watched them work,
axes, and swords, and adzes, weighty and mighty,
making each of them ready for the adventure.

The people gathered at the Seven-Bolt Gate,
and Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, said:

"It is Gilgamesh who will venture into the Forest
and cut the Cedar down and win the glory.

My fame will be secure to all my sons.
The journey I will undergo has never

been undergone before. Give me your blessing.
I will return to celebrate the feast

of the New Year. Uruk will shout in praise."
The old men of the city said to him:

"Gilgamesh the king is a young man. His valiant heart is restless and does not know its danger.

Huwawa's mouth is fire; his roar is the roar of the floodwater; he breathes and there is death.

Helpless is he who enters the Cedar Forest."
Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, said:

"It is Gilgamesh who will venture into the Forest."
The old men said: "Though you are strongest of all,

do not put all your trust in your own strength.
Let Enkidu, who knows the way to the Forest,

who knows the wilderness, let him go first.
Enkidu the companion will not forsake you.

Let him go first to find the way through the passes.
Let him whose heart delights in water find

the hidden wilderness places where the cold pure secret of the earth may be disclosed

to quench your thirst. Offer to Shamash water.
May the god Shamash grant you your desire.

Be mindful of your father, Lugalbanda.
Be mindful of his memory. May he protect you."

Then Enkidu spoke and said to Gilgamesh:
"It is your restless heart's desire to venture

into the Cedar Forest. Enkidu
the companion will not forsake you. Let Enkidu,
who knows the wilderness, and knows the way
to the Cedar Forest, let Enkidu go first
to find the way through the passes and find the water
to quench your thirst and offer to the god."

vii

Then Gilgamesh and Enkidu together
went to the palace, Egalmah, to Ninsun
the All-knowing, mother of Gilgamesh.
Gilgamesh told his mother about the adventure,
how it is Gilgamesh who would kill Huwawa,
and cut the Cedar down and win the glory.
Ninsun listened grieving to what he said,
and then went grieving to her chamber where
she purified herself and put on garments
suitable to her task, and sprinkled ritual
water on the ground. She mounted the stairs
to the palace roof and at the altar burned
and offered offerings of plants, fragrant
and sacred, to propitiate the god:
"Why have you given my son a restless heart?
No one has ever undergone the journey

that he will undergo. Huwawa's mouth
is fire. O Shamash, my son Gilgamesh

is going to the Forest on your errand,
to kill the demon hateful to the sun god.

When Shamash sees him setting out on the road,
or in the mountain passes, or entering

the Forest, may Shamash guard and keep him safe.
And may the stars, the watchmen of the night,

watch over Gilgamesh and the companion."
Rimat-Ninsun, the mother of Gilgamesh,

in the company of the votaries of the temple,
spoke and said to Enkidu the companion,

placing a sacred pendant about his neck:
"Though not my son, here I adopt you son,

not to forsake my son in the future danger."
Then from the Seven-Bolt Gate the two departed,

hearing the warnings and blessings of the city.

T A B L E T S I V A N D V

i

The two of them traveled fifty leagues a day,
never resting except at night trying

to rest, stopping only once a day to eat;
in three days' walk a hundred and fifty leagues,

a three weeks' walk for an ordinary man.
The third day Enkidu found the hidden water

to quench their thirst and offer to the god.
They dug a well and drank their fill and offered

a libation to the god. Then Gilgamesh
climbed to a high place on the mountainside

and offered the god an offering of flour:
"May the mountain bring a fortunate dream from Shamash."

They made camp there that night and Enkidu
prepared a sleeping place, prepared a shelter

against the wind that blew along the mountain.
The two of them sheltered themselves against the wind.

After a time the oblivion of sleep
poured in upon the king, the strongest of all.

He slept, but at midnight suddenly awoke,
and awakened the companion, Enkidu:

"Did you call out to me, just now, in the night?
Why did I waken? Was it you that touched me?

Was it a god went through the camp? A dream?
What makes my skin creep? I had a dream.

I dreamed we were going through a mountain gorge
and the huge mountain fell down on the two of us.

We were as little as flies compared to the mountain."
Enkidu, born in the wilderness, replied:

"The dream you dreamed tonight is fortunate.
The mountain that you dreamed about is Huwawa.

Huwawa will fall down like a mountain and die.
His dead body will lie on the plain like a mountain."

On the next day they traveled fifty leagues,
and fifty leagues a day for two days more.

Then Enkidu found the water. They dug a well
to quench their thirst and offer to the god;

and Gilgamesh offered his offering of flour:
"May Shamash grant a fortunate dream tonight."

Enkidu, born in the wilderness, made a shelter.
The two of them sheltered themselves against the wind.

After a time the oblivion of sleep
poured in upon the king. He fell asleep,

but at midnight suddenly woke up, disturbed,
and said to the companion, Enkidu:

"Did you call out to me in the night? Was it you
that touched me? Was it a god went through the camp?

In the dream I had, a great bull head was thrashing
over my body in glory, and bellowing

over me, me helpless on the ground; the breath
of the bull snout breathed on me; the bellowing

bull noise shook the earth and broke it open;
the choking dust rose up and filled the dream.

Then one brought water to me in my dream."
"The dream you dreamed tonight is fortunate.

The bull you dreamed of in your dream is not
the demon enemy guardian of the Forest.

The bull is Shamash. The wrestling is his blessing.
The one who brought you water is your father."

On the next day they traveled fifty leagues,
in three days' time one hundred and fifty leagues,

a three weeks' walk for an ordinary man.
Then Enkidu found the place to dig a well

to quench their thirst and offer to the god,
and Gilgamesh made his offering of flour:

"May Shamash grant a fortunate dream tonight."
Enkidu, born in the wilderness, made a shelter.

Gilgamesh is the great epic of Mesopotamia, one of the oldest works in Western literature, contemporary with the oldest parts of the Bible. It is the story of a legendary king who achieves heroic victories with the help of the wild man Enkidu; but when his friend dies, Gilgamesh goes in search of the way to escape death, a secret he can learn only from the one man who survived the Great Flood.

The *Gilgamesh* Epic . . . came to light again in the mid-nineteenth century and, thanks to the labors of an arduous, exacting philology, slowly began to assume its place as one of the great poems of the world. Hitherto, however, it has existed only *in posse*, waiting for a poet who could actualize it. David Ferry has performed this service, and has given us a noble poem as close to the ancient original as we in our ignorance have any right to. May his achievement quickly win the recognition it deserves.

—D. S. Carne-Ross, *The New Criterion*

There have been other English accounts of this hero with a thousand descendants, but this is the first one that is as much poetry as scholarship.

—Michael Dirda, *The Washington Post Book World*

Ferry's version will . . . become the standard English text of *Gilgamesh*.

—Fred Marchant, *The Harvard Review*

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