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Introduction

My interest in the poetry of The Epic of Gilgamesh began during my study of The Book of Isaiah. I am not a scholar of Proto-Hebrew, Old Babylonian or Akkadian languages. I studied the structure and versification of ancient Hebrew poetry. I was working on a parallel verse version of the prophet Isaiah's work and discovered that the poetry I read in the work of Gilgamesh was of the same structure. I could sense it, when I read even prose versions of Gilgamesh. I had to research more about this poetry to verify my premonition, but I found it to be the case. Then, I began to look for poetic translations of The Epic of Gilgamesh and I was dismayed. Strangely, most versions of the epic that attempted versification or poetic structure were wildly different and did not represent the semantic parallelism I so easily found in my readings. Many versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh were left to prose because of the confusion.

One translation of Gilgamesh that of R. Campbell Thompson (c1927) reports that the poetry of Gilgamesh is similar to the **"simplicity, not devoid of cumbrousness, of Hebrew** rather than the flexibility of Greek...[he ponders] whether there is justification for taking the risk of turning it into ponderous English hexameter metre." He writes that in the end he decides to "preserve an absolutely literal translation..." (Preface, Pg. V)

In a prose version of **Gilgamesh that of N.K. Sanders (c1960)** we read in his introduction that, "We have become so used to the more sophisticated literary versions of myth, that **we may be tempted to suspect a 'poetic' or 'literary' overtone where none exists [in Gilgamesh]**...we are confronted by the *disjecta membra* of a poetry which never quite emerges." (Introduction Pg. 49)

One book by **Herbert Mason, (c1971)** had a **free verse** translation of Gilgamesh and in the introduction mentions that no one knows what the poems structure is and he calls Gilgamesh a "non-oral epic":

"Though non-oral epics like Virgil's Aeneid and Dante's Divine Comedy have an intellectual coherence to us which it [Gilgamesh] lacks, **its intense and sophisticated grouping of stories around the theme of death and the human challenge to death gives it an elemental coherence which cements and heightens its otherwise rambling structure, and places it in their magnificent company.**"

Later the author, mentions that his work is:

"...a personal attempt to revivfy the Gilgamesh in **free form** as a living poem..." (About the Gilgamesh, Pg. 95)

In the work translated by **Andrew George (c1999)** we read this about the poetry:

"Since the passages are poetry one must ask...where are the pauses and accents that mark the rhythm in such text? First, it is possible to identify pairs of lines, or couplets, and punctuate accordingly. Each line of poetry, or verse, can then be divided into three or four smaller units, which comprise essentially a word or a word and its adjunct or adjuncts...In Babylonian poetry it seems that each such unit is defined by a heavy beat, which falls on the syllable that carries the principal stress. **Verses of four units fall into two equal halves either side of a caesura...** In this way, we have a text that can be recited in a manner that one hopes a Babylonian would recognize (stressed syllables are underlined)..." (Appendix Pg. 219)

In a Gilgamesh verse version of 2013, by Stephen Mitchell, the introduction includes this description of the poetry and the author's intention, "to re-create the ancient epic, as a contemporary poem, in the parallel universe of the English language." He describes his poetry at "**loose, noniambic, nonalliterative tetrameter.**" He describes, "**feeling out the contours of the original text by flinging sound waves into the dark...**" (Introduction Pg. 66)

In a version by **Stanley Lombardo (c2019)**, he writes that he wishes to put his verse version into "English narrative poetry" and that he has... "**arranged the text into verse paragraphs rather than reproducing the couplet, and sometimes triplet and quatrain structures**, that are implicit in the Akkadian text." He does "**retain the couplet structure where it is rhetorically important, as in Gilgamesh's lament for Enkidu in Tablet VIII.**" He also mentions that he has "**eliminated or varied some of the formulaic language and repetition common in the original.**" (About this edition, Pg. XXV)

So, we see that scholars have wanted to give Gilgamesh a poetic structure of hexameter poetry, tetrameter poetry, free verse or other. If you understand the premise that The Epic of Gilgamesh was written in the same poetry of ancient Hebrew poetry then you understand that the poem does have a "grand structure" but it has little to do with meter. As Robert Alter writes in his book, "The Art of Biblical Poetry", "the term meter should probably be abandoned for biblical verse." Pg. 9 Robert Lowth, who in 1742 gave lectures on The Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, admitted that there might be a meter in the ancient Hebrew poetry but that it was impossible for us to discover. He writes that, "the state of the Hebrew is far more unfavourable, which, destitute of vowel sounds, has remained altogether silent (if I may use the expression) incapable of utterance upwards of two thousand years. (Lecture III, Pg. 34) He goes on to explain that what we **can** perceive is the "parabolical or poetical" style of the Hebrews. He goes on to show semantic "distiches" or couplets that without rhyme make up meaningful pairs or lines in Hebrew Poetry. He goes on to say, "The Hebrew poets frequently express a sentiment with the utmost brevity and simplicity, illustrated by no circumstances, adorned with no epithets (which in truth they seldom use;) they afterwards call in the aid of ornaments; they repeat, they vary, they amplify the same sentiment; and adding one or more sentences which run parallel to each other, they express the same or a similar, and often a contrary sentiment in nearly the same form of words." (Lectures IV, Pg. 43)

I believe the Epic of Gilgamesh was a poem meant to be recited orally. I have found examples of beautiful semantically structured ideas and chiasmus in the poetry. I show these structures in my work whenever I happen to find them. I believe the “parallel ideas” structure was meant to aid in memorization and retention of the story, much the same way that alliteration does in the epic Beowulf and hexameter poetry aids in the memorization of Homer's works. So, as with other epic works of poetry, I believe that Gilgamesh should be read out loud. I also feel that the repetition of phrasing and idea is of tremendous value. If you imagine a poet telling sections of this story each night by a fire to mesmerized crowds, you understand how the repetition was part of the build of the story. In this way, I feel my version most accurately reflects “what a Babylonian would recognize” (Andrew George); dominant parallel ideas in non-rhyming couplets or versets.

I work with the translation of this great work by Andrew George, his “The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian” c1999 by Penguin Books. It was his representation of the poem into smaller (usually four segments) phrases or parts of a sentence that was familiar to me. The translation of Isaiah I worked from had the same scholarly structure. My version was not written for scholarly use only. I wanted this version to be read and understood as a piece of literature. When the original clay tablets left “ellipses” or “lacunas”, I used the “parallel idea” structure to help me fill in parts of the story that were missing.

Read out the travails of Gilgamesh!
Read about all that he went through!

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