“The exemplary version for our time.” —Jerome Rothenberg

Composed over 2,500 years, lost in the deserts of Iraq for 2,000 more, Gilgamesh presents a palimpsest of ancient Middle Eastern cultic and courtly lyrics and lore. The story of a visionary journey beyond the limits of human experience, Gilgamesh is a tale of friendship, adventure, mortality, and loss. The legends it collects ultimately informed Greek and Egyptian myths, Hebrew Scriptures, and Islamic literature.

Scholarly translations of Gilgamesh often dilute the expressive force of the material through overzealous erudition. Popular versions of the poem frequently gloss over gaps in the text with accessible and comforting, but ultimately falsely ecumenical language.

In this new translation, Stuart Kendall animates the latest scholarship with a contemporary poetic sensibility, inspired by the pagan worldview of the ancient work. Transcriptions of all of the available tablets and tales have been harnessed to present a fluid and holistic Gilgamesh, true to the archaic mind.

This Gilgamesh is a poem of environmental encounter and, ultimately, ecological disaster. It is a contemporary poem rooted in the origins of our civilization, a record of the first break of light at the dawn of our consciousness.
“As *Gilgamesh* enters the domain of the classical—as it has for several decades now—each new generation looks for a way to bring it from its ur-world into the living present. Toward this end Stuart Kendall’s is the exemplary version for our time, a reading that allows the mind to see what had been too long lost to us and what we so much need to make us fully human. This is the place to go for further sustenance.”
—Jerome Rothenberg

“This new translation of the *Gilgamesh* tale ventures outside the straitjackets that have often constrained the text, understanding its complicated transmission-history in the Sumerian and East Semitic languages of the ancient Near East and the way it evades modern ideas of ‘epic’ and ‘fiction’ often foisted upon it. In sharp, imagistic prose, Kendall shows how *Gilgamesh*’s story is not just an instructive yarn but a concerted act of ontological investigation. A needed provisioning of a much-discussed but little understood work.”
—Nicholas Birns, Eugene Lang College, The New School
Also by Stuart Kendall

Georges Bataille
*The Ends of Art and Design*

**Translations**
Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*
Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade*
Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*
Jean Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred*
Paul Éluard, *Love, Poetry*
Guy Debord, *Correspondence*
Georges Bataille, *Guilty*

**Edited**
*Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy* [with Thomas Deane Tucker]
GILGAMESH

Stuart Kendall
English translation and Introduction © 2012 by Stuart Kendall


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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Gilgamesh. English.

Gilgamesh / translated from the Sîn-lēqi-unninni version.
1st Contra Mundum Press ed.

ISBN 9780983697206


2011944347
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Gilgamesh

The tablet numbers are given in the header. The chapter titles are my own, based on the major episodes of the text. Ellipses indicate gaps in the text. Italics indicate interpellations that are my own.
Invocation

He who saw the depths
    the wellspring
        the foundation
Who experienced all things
    went everywhere
Saw the hidden
    secret
Returned with word
    from before the flood
Who made a distant journey
    exhausted
        in peace
Left his story
    in stone
He built the walls of Uruk-the-Sheepfold
Sacred Eanna
    the storehouse
    the sanctuary
See the upper wall gleam
    the inner wall unequaled
Scale the ancient stone
    stairs to Eanna
    house of Ishtar
    Unmatched by later kings
Study the foundations
    the bricks
Kiln fired
    laid by seven sages
A square sar each
    of city
    garden
    and quarry
one half sar
    Eanna
Three and a half sar square
    Uruk
Find the copper tablet box
Release its bronze lock
Raise the lid of secrets
Take and read the tablet of lapis lazuli
The travails of Gilgamesh
Enkidu

Surpassing all kings
His stature renowned
Heroic child of Uruk
A wild bull
    charging
In front
    leading
Behind
    supporting
    his brothers
A floodbank
    protecting
A flood
    smashing
    stone walls

Wild bull of Lugalbanda
    perfect in strength
Suckled by the revered Wild Cow
    Ninsun
Towering
  awesome
He opened mountain passes
Dug highland wells
Crossed the ocean
  the vast sea
  where Shamash rises
Sought eternal life
Throughout the world
  by force
Reached Utanapishtim
  the distant
Restored the sacred places
  destroyed by the flood
Restored the people
  their rites

Is there anywhere a king
  like Gilgamesh
To claim the name king
From the day of his birth
Gilgamesh
  his name
Two thirds god
One third human
Belet-ili
the great goddess
Drew the form of his body
Nudimmud
wisdom
Perfected him

...

Three cubits tall
His stride six cubits ...
Bearded
His hair thick as Nissaba
grain in the field
Perfect in height
The most handsome man
A wild bull pacing  
Uruk-the-Sheepfold

Lording  
head high

Drum and staff unequalled

Weapons unequalled

His companions ever ready  
for contests

The young men of the city  
harried

Beyond reason

Gilgamesh leaves no son to his father

Day and night  
endlessly

Gilgamesh  
The shepherd of Uruk

The shepherd of the people

Leaves no daughter to her mother

No warrior’s daughter  
no young man’s spouse

No bride to her groom
The goddesses hear their complaints
The gods above
the gods who command
Spoke to Anu
keeper of Uruk:
You bred this bull
whose weapons are unequalled
Whose companions are ready for contests
harried beyond reason
Who leaves no son to his father
Day and night more and more
Shepherd of the Sheepfold
Gilgamesh
protector
powerful
eminent
able
wise
Leaves no bride for her groom
No warrior’s daughter
No young man’s spouse
Anu heard their complaints
He spoke:
Let them summon Aruru
     the great one
Who created the teeming human race
Let her create an equal partner
For Gilgamesh
     a power
     to contend with
That Uruk may be in peace

They summoned Aruru
     the great goddess
And said:
You created the teeming human race
Now create as Anu commands
The equal of Gilgamesh
     in stormy heart
To contend with him
That Uruk may be in peace

When Aruru heard this
She conceived within her an idea
     as Anu asked
She wet her hands
Pinched a piece of clay and cast it
into the wild
She made Enkidu
primeval
in the wild
Born of silence
knit by Ninurta
war
His body covered with hair
On his head as on a woman's
thick as Nissaba
grain
Knowing neither people nor place
Dressed as Sakkan commands
as the god of animals commands
as animals do
He fed on grass with gazelles
He drank at springs with animals
Satisfied his thirst with the herd
A hunter saw him at the spring
One day
    the next day
    and the next
Seeing Enkidu
The hunter stood still
    in terror
Enkidu ran with the animals
The hunter was silent
His face still
    distant
His heart in turmoil
Saddened
Distant
The hunter spoke to his father:
‘Father
    there is a man from the hills
Mightiest in the land
    in strength
    like a piece of Anu
    a stone from the sky
He roams the wild all day
Always grazing with the beasts
His tracks always at the spring
I am too frightened to approach him
He fills my pits
Tears my traps
He frees the beasts of the hills
    my prey
He won’t let me work the wild’

The father spoke to the hunter:
‘My son
    Gilgamesh lives in Uruk
No one is stronger than he is
Like a stone from the sky
    his strength
Take the road to Uruk
   the mighty
Return with Shamhat
   the harlot
   instead of a man
When the beasts come near the spring
   reveal her charms
He will see her and approach
And the beasts will reject him’

The hunter listened to his father
He took the road to Uruk
To Gilgamesh
   he said:
‘There is a man from the hills
Mightiest in the land
   in strength
Like a stone from the sky
He roams the wild all day
Always grazing with the beasts
His tracks always at the spring
I am too frightened to approach him
He fills my pits
He tears my traps
He frees the beasts of the hills that I have caught
He won’t let me work the wild’

Gilgamesh spoke to the hunter:
‘Go
Take Shamhat with you
When the beasts come to the spring
Let her strip off her clothing
    reveal her charms
He will see her and approach
And the beasts will reject him’

The hunter went
    taking Shamhat with him
Following the road
They arrived on the third day
They sat down to wait
    one day
    a second day
They sat at the edge of the spring
The beasts came to drink
Satisfied their thirst
And he too from the hills
   Who grazes with the gazelles
   Drinks with the beasts
   Satisfies his thirst

Shamhat saw the rough
Man from the hills
The hunter spoke:
‘There he is
   Shamhat
Open your arms
Open your legs
   let him take your charms
Don’t be afraid
   take his breath away
He will see you and approach
Open your clothes
   let him lie upon you
Do a woman’s work for the man
Caress and embrace him
As he embraces you
And the beasts will reject him’
Shamhat opened her clothes
Opened her legs
He saw her charms
She was not afraid
And he lay down on her
She did a woman’s work for the man
Six days
    seven nights
Enkidu coupled with Shamhat
    breathless

When he had satisfied his desire
He faced the wild
The gazelles shunned him and moved away

Exhausted
    Enkidu’s legs would not move
As the beasts moved away
He could not run as he had before
But he had reason and broad understanding
He returned and sat at Shamhat’s feet
Looked at her face
    as she looked at his
He listened to her speak:
‘You are handsome
    Enkidu
  like a god
Why wander the wild
  with the beasts?
Come
    let me lead you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
To the temple
  home of Anu and Ishtar
Where Gilgamesh is
Perfect in strength
A wild bull
Lording over men’

Enkidu heard her and her words found favor
Aware
  he knew
He should seek a friend
Enkidu said to Shamhat:
‘Come
   Shamhat
       lead me to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
To the temple
       home of Anu and Ishtar
Where Gilgamesh is
Perfect in strength
A wild bull
Lording over men
I will challenge him
       boldly

Cry
      I am the most mighty
The one born wild is most mighty
Come to change the order of things
       destiny’

Shamhat answered:
‘Come
   let the people see your face
I know
Come Enkidu
to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
Where the young men are dressed for feasts
And every day is feast day
Where they beat the drums
And the women are beautiful
Delights
Enough for even the nobles
   in bed at night

Enkidu
   you know nothing of life
Let me show you Gilgamesh
   the joyful
Look at him
   at his face
Beautiful as a man
   dignified
Seductive body
Mightier in strength than you
Restless day and night
Enkidu
   renounce
Your challenge
Gilgamesh is beloved
Of Shamash
Anu, Enlil, and Ea
Made him wise
Before you came
From the mountains
Gilgamesh saw you
In dreams:
Gilgamesh arose and described a dream
To his mother:
‘Mother
     I had a dream in the night
Of stars in the sky around me
One fell
     like a stone
Like a bolt
     from Anu
From the sky
     before me
I tried to lift it
     but it was too heavy
I tried to turn it
     but it wouldn’t move
The people of the land were gathered around
over it
Kissing its feet
     like children
Like a wife
     I embraced it
     attended to it
Laid it at your feet
     You made it my equal’
The mother of Gilgamesh all-knowing Ninsun the Wild Cow spoke to her son:
‘The stars in the sky falling You trying to lift it too heavy You trying to move it immovable You embracing it caressing it Laying it at my feet My making it your equal Means that a strong one an equal Will come A companion to save A friend He will be the most powerful of the land As strong as a bolt from Anu
Like a wife
You will love him, attend to him
He will be mighty and often save you’
Gilgamesh spoke to his mother:
‘Mother
    I have had a second dream
An axe fell over Uruk
The people of the land gathered over it
Crowded over it
I carried it and laid it at your feet
I embraced it
    like a wife
Attended to it
You made it my equal’

The mother of Gilgamesh
    all-knowing
Ninsun
    the Wild Cow
spoke to her son:
‘The axe you saw is a man
you will attend to him as a wife
and treat him as an equal.
A strong one will come to you
A companion to save
A friend
He will be the most powerful of the land
As strong as a stone from Anu’

Gilgamesh spoke to his mother
‘Let it fall
By the word of Enlil
the counselor
I will gain a friend
to advise me’

Shamhat told Enkidu
the dreams of Gilgamesh
The two
coming together
Enkidu sat before Shamhat

She spoke:
‘Enkidu
    you have become
like a god
    why wander the wild
with the beasts?
Come
    let me lead you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
To Eanna
    home of Anu
    home of Ishtar
Where skilled men work
Where Gilgamesh is perfect
    in strength
Lording over men
You will find a place for yourself
Come away with me
    from out of the wild’

Enkidu heard her
    and her words found favor in him
Shamhat disrobed and dressed him
in one of her robes
herself in another
She took his hand
and led him
like a god
To a shepherd camp
a sheepfold
Shepherds gathered around
spoke amongst themselves
‘How like Gilgamesh he is
in build
Majestic as a battlement
born in the hills
Strong as a stone from the sky’

The shepherds set bread and beer before him

Suckled on the milk
of the wild
Enkidu looked
squinted
stared
He knew nothing
    of food

Shamhat spoke to Enkidu:
‘Eat the bread
    staff of life
Drink the beer
    destiny of the land’

Enkidu ate of the bread until sated
He drank of the beer until sated
    Seven mugs
He felt free
    joyful
Happy
    his face bright
He anointed himself
    his hairy body
    with oil
He became a man
    dressed in robes
A warrior
    who took up his weapons
    to fight lions
The shepherds rested at night
Enkidu fought off wolves
    and lions
The elder shepherds slept
Enkidu stayed
    awake
Enkidu lay with Shamhat
   raised his eyes
   saw a young man
He said to Shamhat:
‘Bring that man here!
Why has he come?
Let him give account’
Shamhat called the young man
Spoke to him:
‘Where are you rushing?
What is your burden?’

The young man spoke:
‘I am invited to a wedding feast
   the people arrange a marriage
I shall prepare the feast table
   with tempting foods
   to part the veils of the people
The king of Uruk
   Gilgamesh
Will couple with the bride
He first
   as Anu’s counsel decreed
Destined
   from the time
His cord was cut

At these words
   Enkidu's face grew pale
In anger
Enkidu went
in front
Shamhat
followed
Entered Uruk
Men gathered around him
He stood on the street
with the people of the land
Gathered around
like children

The people said:
‘He is the image of Gilgamesh
but shorter of build
stronger of bone
born in the wild
suckled on milk
of the wild’

In Uruk
The festival was underway
The sacrifices were constant
For the young men to purify themselves
the flute plays for the one who is upright
A match
At last
For godlike Gilgamesh
The bed was made for Ishara
the goddess of coupling
For godlike Gilgamesh
The bed was made for the bride that night
Enkidu approached Gilgamesh
  in the street
Blocked the door to the wedding chamber
Blocked Gilgamesh
At the center of Uruk
  blocked the door

They grappled like bulls
  wrestled
Destroyed the door
  shook the walls
  shook the city

Gilgamesh and Enkidu like bulls
Destroyed the door to the wedding chamber
In the main square

Gilgamesh fell
  his foot on the ground
His rage passed
He turned away
  broke off
Enkidu said:
‘Your mother bore you
unique
The Wild Cow of the Sheepfold
Ninsun
Raised you
over warriors
Enlil decreed your kingship
over the people of the land.’

They kissed one another
in friendship
Gilgamesh spoke to his mother
of Enkidu’s strength
‘like a stone from Anu
as sturdy as the walls of the city’

Ninsun spoke:
‘My son …
bitterly …

Gilgamesh spoke to his mother
‘Enkidu without father or mother
his hair hanging loose
born in the wild
without a brother’

Enkidu stood
 listened
 Thought
 sat down
 Tears in his eyes
 His arms limp
 lacking strength
They grasped one another
Joined hands

Gilgamesh spoke to Enkidu:
‘Why are your eyes filled with tears?
Your arms limp
lacking strength.’

Enkidu spoke to Gilgamesh:
‘Terror has entered my heart’
Humbaba

Gilgamesh spoke to Enkidu:
‘The fierce monster Humbaba lives in the cedar forest
Let us kill him in his lair
And bring down the forest’

Enkidu spoke to Gilgamesh:
‘My friend
    I know Humbaba
I know the forest
I roamed the wild

‘Wilderness
    for sixty leagues
who could pass within it?

‘Humbaba’s voice is the flood
    his mouth is fire
his breath is death
'Why do you desire such a thing?
Humbaba’s home is hopeless'

Gilgamesh spoke to Enkidu:
‘I must go to the mountain to the forest
to fell the trees’
Enkidu spoke to Gilgamesh:

‘My friend
how can we go there?

Enlil appointed Humbaba
To protect the cedars
To terrify the people of the land
Gave him seven veils
The journey is not to be made
Humbaba is not to be looked upon
The guardian

his voice is the flood
his mouth is fire
his breath is death
he can hear rustlings in the forest
at sixty leagues
who can go there?

Adad is first
Humbaba second
Who can attack him
even among the Igigi
the many gods

Enlil appointed Humbaba
To protect the cedars
To terrify the people of the land

Weakness
disease
tremors
Overcome
he who violates
The forest’
Gilgamesh spoke to Enkidu:
‘Why do you speak with such weakness?
Who can go up into the realm of the gods?
The gods live forever with Shamash
the sun
The days of men are numbered
The deeds of men are wind
Even you are afraid of death
What has become of your brave strength?
You were born
raised in the wild
Lions leapt at you
you experienced everything
Men fled from you
I will go in front
You can tell me
‘Go on
do not be afraid’
If I fall
I will establish my name:
Gilgamesh
who entered into combat
with fierce Humbaba
I must cut down the trees
to establish my eternal fame
Come
    let us go
To the forge

Let them cast axes’
Hand in hand they went
to the forge
To the smiths in counsel

They cast great axes
    weighing seven talents each
Great blades
    two talents each
The hilts of their handles
    one half talent each
Daggers worked with one half talent of gold
Gilgamesh and Enkidu bore
    ten talents each
Gilgamesh bolted the gates of Uruk
convened counsel
The crowd gathered round
the main square
Gilgamesh on his throne
the crowd before him

He spoke:
‘Listen to me
I, Gilgamesh
will see
the god of whom men speak
whose name echoes through the land
I will hunt him down
in the cedar forest
Let the land hear how the mighty
heir of Uruk
Will cut down the cedar
To establish an eternal name

‘Listen to me
young men
You who know
I will go
Take the distant road
  face a struggle
I know not

‘Give me your blessing
  as I go
Let me see your faces
  and return joyfully
To the gates of Uruk

‘On my return
  Akitu
  a New Year’s festival
For the second time
  in a year
A joyous festival
  let the drums resound
Before Ninsun’
Enkidu counseled the elders
and the young men of Uruk
Who know combat:
‘Tell him not to go to the forest
The journey is not to be made
Humbaba is not be looked upon
The guardian
   his voice is the flood
   his mouth is fire
his breath is death
   he can hear rustlings in the forest
at sixty leagues
Who can go there?
Adad is first, Humbaba second
Who can attack him
   even among the Igigi
      the many gods
To protect the cedars
Enlil appointed Humbaba
To terrify the people of the land
Weakness
disease
tremors
Overcome
he who violates
The forest’
The elders rose
   counseled Gilgamesh:
   ‘You are young
Moved by emotion
You do not know
Of what you speak
   Humbaba
   his voice is the flood
   his mouth is fire
   his breath is death
   he can hear rustlings in the forest
at sixty leagues
Who can go there?
Adad is first, Humbaba second
Who can attack him
   even among the Igigi
   the many gods
Enlil appointed Humbaba
To protect the cedars
To terrify the people of the land’
Gilgamesh heard his counselor’s speech
He looked at Enkidu

He laughed
COLOPHON

GILGAMESH was designed by Contra Mundum Press. The text is set in Centaur. The page numbers are set in Hoefler Text.

GILGAMESH is published by Contra Mundum Press and printed by Lightning Source, which has received Chain of Custody certification from: The Forest Stewardship Council, The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, and The Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

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is a writer and translator working in the history of consciousness at the intersections of poetics, philosophy, theology, and visual culture. His other books include The Ends of Art and Design, a biography of Georges Bataille, and translations of books by Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Éluard, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy Debord. He lives in Oakland, California where he teaches at the California College of the Arts.
“The exemplary version for our time.” —Jerome Rothenberg

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ISBN 978-0-9836972-0-6

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