

## GUMILEV, GILGAMESH AND THE TRANSLATOR'S STUDIO

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**Abstract:** This article reconsiders Nikolai Gumilev's 1919 translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* through Maxim Gorky's *Vsemirnaia literatura* in the years immediately following the Revolution. Rather than treating *Gilgamesh* as an isolated literary experiment, it situates the translation within Gumilev's wider theoretical, pedagogical, and institutional activity: his "nine commandments" of poetic translation, his teaching at the Translators' Studio, his engagement with non-European literary traditions, and his collaboration with the Assyriologist Vladimir Shileiko. The article argues that the fragmentary nature of the ancient epic made it an especially revealing test of Gumilev's theory of translation, requiring reconstruction rather than literal transfer. *Gilgamesh* consequently becomes a stress-test of this model: a text reconstructed from fragments, mediated through scholarship, and transformed into Russian poetic form.

**Keywords:** Soviet studies; translation theory; Nikolai Gumilev; Silver Age; ancient epic

### 1. Introduction

How does one negotiate translation if one is trying to translate the world? This is a large and unwieldy question, no doubt, but one that dogged Russian author Maxim Gorky once he agreed to pioneer a World Literature project with the support of the new Bolshevik government. Hundreds of books would be translated between the outside world and the Russian masses, entailing a need for authors, experts and linguists. In his Introduction to the Catalogue for the project, in 1919, Gorky asserted that its mission was to give readers access to "every literary treasure" created by the "European spirit." (1919: 17–21) But delivering this vision was difficult. It would entail broadening the geographical scope of texts to be translated, while training the next generation of translation to continue the job.

Prominent in Gorky's project, actively involved in the teaching of translation, was Nikolai Gumilev (1886–1921). The poet 'spent almost all of World War I in the saddle,' as his wife Anna Akhmatova recalls, "and at night in his sleep would shout: 'Mount your horses!'" (Akhmatova 115) His poetry was unusually global, working variously off African, Babylonian and Chinese texts. Bringing to light Gumilev's

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contribution to early Soviet translation theory, and Gorky project's more specifically, I organize the following article according to the different roles that Gumilev assumed in this brief but busy period, between 1919 and 1921, each of which would open up the question above into more discrete inquiries: (i) How does one negotiate translation through theory? (ii) How much of the world does one need to know already to negotiate with foreign texts? And, finally, (iii) how to teach these things to the next generation? The following article therefore tries to apportion its account between these roles: Gumilev as a theorist of translation; as a translator of an ancient epic; and as a teacher in the Translator's Studio.

## 2. Gumilev as Theorist

Gorky's project came to questions about translation and world literature through practice, teaching, and fierce debate. One of the most vivid disagreements was between two of its key recruits, Nikolai Gumilev and Kornei Chukovsky. On 12 November 1918, at a meeting of the *Vsemirnaia literatura* editorial board, Chukovsky recorded a "heated clash" with Gumilev over the latter's attempt to formulate rules for translators.

"I had a heated dispute with Gumilev at the meeting. This gifted craftsman had taken it into his head to formulate rules for translators. In my view, there are no such rules. What rules can there be in literature? One translator invents [a solution], and it turns out brilliantly, while another reproduces the rhythm and everything else, yet it leaves you unmoved. What rules, then? And he became angry and started shouting. Still, he is amusing, and I love him." (Chukovsky 1991: 40, translation mine)

Not for the last time, the question of whether a totalizing model for translation was possible would provoke heated disagreement. Out of their initial debate, both felt compelled to lay out their theories of translation in clear and accessible terms. This produced two short essays, on translating poetry (Gumilev) and prose (Chukovsky) as companion pieces. Both were published in a small booklet in early March 1919 as *The Principles of Translation*, an 'in-house guide for translators' (Baer 2026: 201). This would not reconcile their positions, but would come to inspire further disagreement, as its reception will shortly reveal.

Gumilev's most memorable contribution to the booklet was a series of nine "commandments" for the translator. Rather than leaving the principles of poetic translation at the level of general aesthetic intuition, he recast them as a practical code of obligations. The translator was to preserve the number of lines of the original; reproduce its metre and, where possible, its rhyme scheme; attend closely to enjambment and the character of its rhymes; reproduce the distinctive vocabulary of the original; preserve the comparisons and images of the original; retain its special poetic devices; and reproduce changes of tone. Above all, the translation was to correspond formally to the original while remaining a natural and aesthetically convincing Russian poem. Gumilev concluded with a deliberately biblical flourish: "These are the nine commandments for the translator", and since they were "one less than Moses", he hoped, they would "be better obeyed" (Gumilev 1919b: 30).

Responses to the *Principles of Translation* (*Printsipy khudozhestvennogo perevoda*, 1919) came immediately. The first edition appeared in early March, and by 8 March Nikolai Lerner had already reviewed it in *Zhizn' iskusstva*. (Lerner 1919) Gumilev's colleague at the Translator's Studio, Mikhail Lozinsky, took Gumilev's commandments to heart, and even tried to shape his classes around those tenets. Under Lozinsky's direction, groups of translators worked line by line through difficult French verse, generating successive alternatives before settling upon a collective solution. (Page 2018: 141) In a letter to Gumilev, Isabella Grinevskaya (who had translated prolifically from Armenian, French, Georgian, German, Italian and Polish into Russian) accepted much of Chukovsky's account of translation as a creative act, while carefully objecting to what she saw as the rigidity of Gumilev's commandments. From the principal propositions of Gumilev's essay, she concluded that the poet-translator, like the poet being translated, "is not a slave, but a free creator." To drag oneself, chained to the chariot of even the greatest poet, she argued, was unbecoming even for a lesser poet — and would ultimately do nothing to enhance the reputation of the poet being translated (Grinevskaya 1919–1920).

It would be misleading to think that all responses were positive. On 6 May 1919, the Turkologist V. D. Smirnov attacked the booklet at a meeting of the Eastern Series editorial board, calling the booklet "extremely unserious" and declaring that it could serve neither as a basis nor as a model for discussion of the problems of translation (Chechnev 2022: 734). "We too need to make our debut, or better still, bring the series to a conclusion with a special treatise on the principles of translation from Eastern languages, in the form of a collective booklet or even a large book," claimed the Sinologist Vasily Alekseev, "especially since many of those present have not thought about this question, or even discussed it in their books" (Arias-Vikhil & Chechnev 2025: 734–735).<sup>1</sup>

Such angry rebukes are important here. None of them hold any more weight than another. But seen together, they prevent the 1919 *Принципы* from acquiring a certain retrospective authority it did not possess at the time. The novelist and translator Fyodor Sologub's annotated copy of the 1919 *Принципы художественного перевода* survives in his personal library. On 12 July 1919, A. N. Tikhonov invited Sologub to participate in a meeting at *Vsemirnaia literatura*, scheduled for 18 July and devoted specifically to "the principles of artistic translation." (Filcheva 2018: 222). A third essay, this time by Fyodor Batiushkov on translating drama, would be added to the 1920 reprint (Baer 2026). Notably, Batiushkov quarrels with Chukovsky's essay, but not with Gumilev's, suggesting a tentative alignment. Importantly, this did not mark a failure in the booklet's reception, or an error in its previous imprint. *The Principles*

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<sup>1</sup> "All the students of Alekseev translated poetry. For example, Alexey Shtukin (Алексей Александрович Штукин, 1904–1963), mentored by Alekseev, translated into Russian the verses of the Book of Songs. But Chinese poetry was opened to a broad Russian readership by a small collection, *Anthology of Chinese Lyrics of the Seventh-Nineteenth Centuries* (Антология китайской лирики VII–XIX веков) published in 1923, [...] Alekseev wrote an introductory essay and brief remarks on the chapters. This book was unusually popular; the readers liked the translations immediately and remembered them for a long time." See: Dreyzis (2023: 132).

were published precisely so that translation would be discussed, theorized, and (con)tested.

### 3. Gumilev as Translator

When the project began, Gorky prioritized Western literature written since the French revolution. This was arguably a gesture of legitimization by positive association. It also betrayed a criterion among the writers who were and were not translated, with a notable preference for authors who personified (or seemed to anticipate) the Marxist class struggle. This soon came to be seen as insufficient. An Eastern Series was established, as an extension to Gorky's project, with the goal of 'publishing a hitherto inaccessible range of literary, historical and religious documents.' This would run the gamut from the oldest literatures of "Egypt, Assyria and Babylon" to the "literary heritage of India, Japan and China." (Khotimsky 2023: 105) The rationale was therefore both literary and scholarly: texts that could not ordinarily be encountered by Russian readers were to be made available through translations supported by the relevant Orientalist expertise.

In June 1919, the Eastern Department considered a proposal from Gumilev and Vladimir Shileiko for a new joint, rhythmically rendered translation of *Gilgamesh*, and accepted the proposal in principle ("Protokol zasedaniia" 1919). This was a new undertaking, however, rather than a decision to reissue Gumilev's recently published version. Shileiko's involvement pointed towards a substantially different translation project, grounded in his direct engagement with the Akkadian text, and the two versions consequently occupied distinct positions within the publishing programme of *Vsemirnaia literatura*.

This distinction also helps explain why *Gilgamesh* brought Gumilev into particularly close contact with Shileiko. An Assyriologist, poet and specialist in the languages of ancient Mesopotamia, Shileiko occupied precisely the position that the Eastern Department's conception of literary translation required: he could provide the linguistic and historical knowledge that Gumilev himself did not possess. The 1919 edition bears their names in complementary capacities, with Gumilev credited as translator and Shileiko as the author of the introduction. Their collaboration should not be reduced to a biographical episode, despite the complicated personal relationships surrounding the Acmeist circle. For the history of the translation, the significant point is that Shileiko mediated between Assyriological scholarship and the poetic culture in which Gumilev was working.

Gumilev's engagement with *Gilgamesh*, moreover, did not emerge in isolation from his earlier poetic encounters with cultural alterity. His repeated travels in North and East Africa, culminating in his 1913 expedition to Abyssinia, had already made questions of geography and ancient civilisation central to his poetic imagination. (Naydan 2018) Yet Africa was not merely a reservoir of exotic imagery. It provided Gumilev with a means of imagining different systems of ritual, memory, geography and historical continuity. 'He told me countless times about the "golden door" that must open before him somewhere in the depths of his wanderings,' Ahkmatova recalls,

‘but when he returned [from Africa] in 1913, he confessed that the “golden door” did not exist. That was a terrible blow for him.’ (119) A ‘terrible blow’ it may have been, but it did not stop the poet subsequently exploring and translating Chinese poetry, Giacomo Leopardi and William Shakespeare (Dreyzis 2023). Sometimes he worked from original language, but (as with *Gilgamesh*) often not. The grasp of another language was secondary to accessing its material, its textures, and its ideas.

The nature of *Gilgamesh* itself made the problem of translation unusually complex. Gumilev was not confronting a single, intact ancient manuscript that could simply be transferred from one language into another. The epic had survived in fragmentary form on damaged tablets and had already required scholarly reconstruction before it reached the modern translator. The Russian translator therefore confronted a text that was itself the product of previous acts of interpretation, comparison and conjecture. Gumilev’s intervention represented another stage in that process. He translated not an untouched ancient original, in other words, but a modern scholarly reconstruction of an ancient poem, while also undertaking its further reconstruction for a Russian poetic audience.

Gumilev makes the nature of this undertaking unusually explicit in his preface. He begins by disclaiming any Assyriological authority: he was, he states, not an Assyriologist and did not intend his translation to possess scientific value in that sense. He identifies Paul Dhorme’s French work as his principal source and acknowledges the occasional assistance of Shileiko. Yet this admission is immediately followed by a declaration of purpose. Gumilev wanted to make the poem accessible to readers who loved poetry. To accomplish this, he reconstructed passages where the text was incomplete, removed what he regarded as tedious repetitions, joined episodes separated by lacunae, and supplied brief passages where the surviving text seemed insufficient to sustain continuity. At the same time, he claimed to preserve the versification of the original and to establish a semblance of rhythm throughout. When Gumilev declares that *Gilgamesh* ‘should be for everyone’ and ‘not just for specialists’ (Gumilev, 1919a, p.XX), was this also a sly dig at the editorial board, who had considered him “extremely unserious”? One can only speculate that this was partly directed to the editorial board of the Eastern Series as it was for the Soviet reader.

The reception of the translation confirms that contemporaries (this time) recognized this combination of scholarship and poetic reconstruction. Nikolai Lerner’s review in *Kniga i revoliutsiia* in 1920 described Gumilev as both “one of our best poets” and a translator who was cautious, thoughtful, and possessed a “scientific method”; he further suggested that *Gilgamesh* had thereby entered Russian artistic literature (Lerner 1920: 52–53). Lerner’s formulation is particularly revealing because it captures the paradox at the heart of Gumilev’s undertaking. Gumilev himself had denied producing a scholarly translation, yet the work could nevertheless be praised for the seriousness of its method. The achievement of the translation lay precisely in the combination of scholarly mediation and poetic reconstruction: Dhorme supplied access to the reconstructed ancient text, Shileiko supplied specialist knowledge, and Gumilev transformed that mediated material into a Russian poetic work.

Gumilev’s negotiation with his knowledge (and lack of knowledge) of the world was to delegate and collaborate where gaps occurred. Translation, in this account, required the translator first to identify what was structurally characteristic of the

original and then to reproduce those relationships in Russian. *Gilgamesh* confirms and complicates this principle. On the one hand, Gumilev's attention to rhythm, versification, and the continuity of the epic demonstrates his commitment to the proposition that literary form cannot be separated from meaning. On the other, almost every condition of the translation challenged the possibility of applying his commandments literally: the ancient text was fragmentary, Gumilev did not know the original language, and his Russian version depended upon Dhorme's French scholarly reconstruction.

Rather than abandoning his theory in response to these difficulties, Gumilev negotiates his object. Rules outweigh language. Fidelity could no longer mean the reproduction of a fully recoverable verbal surface; it meant reconstructing the formal identity of the work as an epic. His removal of repetitions, reconstruction of lacunae and attempts to establish rhythmic continuity therefore look less like departures from his earlier theory than its application under extreme conditions. *Gilgamesh* reveals that the deepest premise of Gumilev's theory was not a literal correspondence, but the preservation of whatever made a work recognizably itself.

#### 4. Gumilev as Teacher

Gumilev's *Gilgamesh* cannot be understood apart from the pedagogical and institutional framework of the Translators' Studio in Petrograd, active between 1919 and 1921 under Gorky's *Vsemirnaia literatura* and held at the House of Arts. Contemporary testimony of Gumilev's classes there consistently emphasize his composure, precision, and clarity of purpose. Anna Akhmatova later recalled that Gumilev "knew exactly what he wanted from poetry" and demanded the same discipline from others (Akhmatova 214). Memoirs by former students and colleagues describe his measured gestures, controlled delivery, and insistence on formal rigor, traits that mirrored his poetics rather than merely his temperament (Hickey 2009: 84–90).

From the outset, the Studio functioned less as a school than as a laboratory in which competing models of translation were tested and argued through practice. Hickey's materials bring the Studio to life with remarkable vividness. Students recall Gumilev standing at the blackboard, chalk in hand, reducing poems to patterns of stress and pause, drawing metrical grids, and asking students to hear what they could not yet understand. He was remembered as austere, even severe, but also intensely focused — less a charismatic performer than a master craftsman. In one recollection, a student notes that Gumilev could dismantle a poem line by line, "as if taking apart a mechanism," only to reassemble it so that its logic became newly visible. Despite their differences, Chukovsky conceded in his diaries that Gumilev had a "wonderful capacity to inspire everyone around him with the belief that poetry was the most important and noble of all human actions and that the calling of the poet was higher than all others" (Hickey 2009: 89).

Chukovsky's own son would attend these classes, later recalling Gumilev's approach to poetry as a system of techniques. At the seminar, Gumilev required

students to construct elaborate tables of metre, rhythm, rhyme, stylistics, composition, and other poetic devices, insisting that poetry could be mastered through the systematic acquisition of such techniques. At public readings, meanwhile, he could assume the role of a *конференсье* [*compere*], introducing each poet before their performance. Chukovsky recalled Gumilev's pronounced *galomania*: he constantly invoked French poets, while placing his mentor Innokenty Annensky above all other twentieth-century Russian poets. His students, including Odoevtseva, viewed him as old-fashioned yet magnetic.

The contrast between Gumilev and Aleksandr Blok provides a useful way of situating this pedagogy historically. In the final years of imperial and revolutionary Petrograd, the two poets occupied strikingly proximate yet divergent positions within the city's literary landscape. They lived near one another, moved through overlapping social and institutional spaces, and were bound by a shared awareness that Russian poetry stood at a historical threshold. Yet their responses to this condition could hardly have been more different. Blok increasingly experienced history as exhaustion: the dissolution of inherited forms, the fading of visionary language, and the sense that poetry itself had reached an impasse. In his 1919 essay "The Collapse of Humanism," he diagnosed this crisis not simply as political or moral, but as formal and rhythmic, arguing that "humanism has lost its style: style is rhythm; and with its rhythm humanism lost its integral unity" (Blok 1931).

Gumilev's pedagogy, in turn, took this interest in rhythm and prosody in another direction, in his surviving "Programme of Lectures on the History of Poetry." Rather than presenting poetry as a succession of great authors, languages or national traditions, the syllabus organizes poetic production into historical stages, social formations, and functional genres. His 1919 course begins with Druidism and the emergence of creative and religious forms, proceeds through the military-priestly caste and the great and small epics of antiquity, folk lyric and the beginnings of theatre, and then moves through classical Greek and Roman poetry, Christian and folk mystical poetry, medieval epic, lyric and theatre. From there to the flowering of poetry from Dante to Milton, the decline of the eighteenth century, the renewal of the nineteenth century and contemporary poetry. The range of these readings are staggeringly transnational: a Mongolian poem about the swan, Assyro-Babylonian texts including *Gilgamesh*, the *Kalevala*, the *Rig-Veda*, the Chinese *Shi-khing*, the *Edda*, Celtic epics, Malay *pantushi*, Egyptian poems, and the *Ramayana* appear alongside the later European canon. The course concludes with "the opportunity to outline the future of poetry" (Gumilev 1991: 230–231).

What is absent from the syllabus is as telling as what is present. There is no emphasis on originality, self-expression, or national character. No privileging of Russian poetry as exceptional. Instead, poetry appears as a transhistorical practice governed by recurrent formal problems and solutions. This makes the syllabus an implicit justification for translation as a central pedagogical activity. From Gumilev's perspective, if poetry is a system rather than a national essence, then it can be dismantled, transferred, and reassembled across languages. Placed alongside student testimonies, the syllabus clarifies why Gumilev's teaching left such a mechanistic impression. Translation in this case is an operation that tests this system's resilience by

forcing it to function across languages, epochs, and cultural boundaries. Most revealing, however, is its conclusion: “Contemporary poetry. Exhaustion of forms. Fragmentation. The possibility of outlining the future of poetry.” This final gesture is extraordinary. Poetry is treated as a system whose future configurations can be anticipated, or possibly even engineered. Such a claim only makes sense when recalling how poetry is understood in these classes as a mechanism with identifiable components and clear trajectories.

## 5. Conclusion

Ancient epic remains a curious and stimulating lacunae in the history of Soviet internationalism. The prominence of works such as *Gilgamesh* against the backdrop of *Vsemirnaia literatura* suggest that the project of translating ancient literature was never antiquarian. It belonged to a much larger attempt to reorganize Russian literary culture around a genuinely international field of reference, in which the histories of Mesopotamia, India, China, Scandinavia, Africa, Greece and Rome could be brought into a common (if uneven) space of literary comparison. Yet because this program was so ambitious, and because many of its institutional and pedagogical experiments were interrupted before they could mature, its history remains incomplete. *Gilgamesh* offers an especially vivid point of entry into this unfinished history: an ancient epic reconstructed from fragments, translated through layers of scholarship, and made to speak to a revolutionary present through the formal resources of Russian poetry.

Gumilev’s execution in 1921 makes the incompleteness of this project brutally literal. At thirty-five, he was deprived of a further poetic career, but also, the opportunity to develop the pedagogical and translational programme that the Translators’ Studio had only just begun to institutionalize. The poignancy of this interruption is captured by Anna Akhmatova’s later lament that “Gumilev is still an unread poet” (116), followed by the striking declaration: “It is astounding that no one else took this on. His so-called disciples have behaved disgracefully” (117). Her remarks point to a paradox that extends beyond Gumilev himself. The problem is not simply that his work was suppressed or neglected. The very intellectual network around him — the students, collaborators, pedagogical experiments and institutional practices through which his ideas might have continued — was itself fractured. What survives is consequently less a school than a series of fragments: translations, syllabi, memoirs, theoretical statements and unfinished projects.

It is precisely these fragments that make the brief period of early Soviet translation culture so compelling. To revisit its theories and practices today is not to impose upon them the coherence of a school that never fully existed, but to consolidate, provisionally, the pieces of an intellectual formation that was both exhilaratingly experimental and bitterly short-lived. Gumilev’s *Gilgamesh*, his theory of poetic translation, his teaching at the Translators’ Studio, his African writings and his conception of poetry as a system of transmissible forms belong to this larger constellation. Taken together, they reveal a moment in which translation could still be imagined simultaneously as literary craft, historical inquiry, pedagogy and

internationalist practice. The achievement of recovering this history therefore lies not in discovering a finished “Gumilevian” theory of translation, exactly, but rather through recognising anew how much sophistication was present in a field whose development was cut short before its possibilities could be fully tested.

By recovering the institutional circumstances in which translators, poets, philologists and teachers actually worked, it allows us to see early Soviet translation culture not as a prehistory awaiting the arrival of a later, more systematic discipline, but as an intellectual field already experimenting with questions that remain central to the field today. The Gorky-Vostok project, led by Yakov D. Chechnev, with Marina A. Arias-Vikhil and Mark Yurievich Ulyanov, continues to do a brilliant service in bringing this period back to life through a series of archival interventions and revelations. The fragments are incomplete, but they are far from silent. They continue to offer the possibility of recovering an alternative history of translation. A history whose development was tragically interrupted, but whose questions remain very much alive.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

### Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.