Introduction

Barbara Köhler formed the idea of writing a cycle of poems responding to Homer’s *Odyssey* which would bear the title *Niemands Frau* in the mid-1990s, around the time of the publication of her second collection *Blue Box* (1995) and not long after she moved from east to west Germany, from her native Chemnitz in Saxony to Duisburg in the Ruhrgebiet in 1994. The first two poems that would later become part of the *Niemands Frau* cycle were published in the literary journal *Akzente* in 1996. Then in 2000 a total of nine poems, placed in the same order as they would be in the completed work, appeared in what Köhler described in a prefatory comment as a ‘für mich eigentlich unverantwortliche – Vorveröffentlichung’ in Heinz Ludwig Arnold’s Göttinger Sudelblätter series. At that point, she described the nine poems as ‘Teil eines Projektes, von dem ich z.Zt. weder ein Ende noch eine gültige Form absehen kann und will’.

Köhler’s reference to having been ‘10 Jahre on sea’ with the *Odyssey* material in her ‘interim afterword’ (‘NACHWORT, VORLÄUFIG’) to the completed 21-poem cycle *Niemands Frau* (2007) serves in part to create a symmetry with Odysseus’ ten-year journey back home to Ithaka from the Trojan war which the *Odyssey* narrates and which Köhler herself came to understand in the course of writing her cycle as a mirroring of the ten-year siege of Troy: ‘Zehn spiegeljahre bilder im / verkehrten film: das ungeschehen eines krieges’ (‘MIT ANDEREN WORTEN: WAS ODYSSEUS ERZÄHLT’, p. 26). In fact, she was preoccupied to a greater or lesser degree with the *Odyssey* project over a period of some twelve years, as she also acknowledges in the afterword (p. 82).

Köhler’s interest in the mid-1990s in going back to the classics in general and to Homer in particular might be pinpointed as part of the notable ‘classical turn’ in German poetry of the period which Karen Leeder discusses in her chapter in this volume. More specifically, it could be read in relation to the collapse in 1989-1990 of the GDR, a state in which classical mythology and the classical literary heritage were frequently used by writers as a medium not just for evading the censor, but for provoking larger questions about contemporary civilisation. In the aftermath of German unification in 1990, a number of eastern German writers worked with classical material as a way of relating present historical reality to mythological patterns and models that might
help to dig deeper into the issues of historical rupture or the encounter with irreconcilable differences characteristic of the unification moment. Yet Köhler’s engagement with classical material had been a feature of her work from the outset. A case in point is her early poem cycle ‘Elektra. Spiegelungen’, written between 1984 and early 1985, in which she is already thinking above all about the entrapment of the figure of woman in the prefabricated images inherited from a male-oriented cultural tradition and asking questions about the possibilities for the female writer seeking entry into this tradition as a free agent, not as a reflection or projection of an ‘er’, of a male subject. As the subsequent poem ‘VERKÖRPERUNG: EURYDIKE’ in the Blue Box collection attests, work with the classical mythic and literary heritage was for Köhler always driven by the impulse to interrogate the grammar of patriarchal power and to tease out the potential for difference contained within European culture’s familiar foundational myths and models. In this sense, Köhler’s preoccupation with Homer can be seen as the development of a theme inherent to her own self-understanding as a poet, rather than as an in any sense politicised response to the particular historical moment of unification or to a more widespread trend in German poetry of the time. This accounts in part for the qualitative difference which Leeder identifies in Köhler’s writing when compared with her contemporaries.

The first poems written, quite quickly, as part of the cycle Niemands Frau – the as yet untitled ‘POLYMORPHEM’, ‘NAUSIKAA : RAPPORT’, ‘KIRKE’, ‘SIRENEN’ and ‘DIE KATZ’, plus the poem at this stage entitled ‘NACHTSTÜCK / ARHYTHMIE’ (all completed before May 1997) – were approaches to the female figures in the Odyssey. These poems were written at least in part under the influence of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s reading of the Homeric epic in Dialektik der Aufklärung, a meditation on the emergence of the unified, self-contained and self-disciplined masculine subject of the European cultural tradition at the cost of alienation from nature, the body and the feminine. Prominent in these earliest poems is the theme of the male individual subject and his power, his invention of the techniques of cultural transmission – writing, stone monuments, the name – which enable his version of history (his ‘Er-zählung’) to become the only one that counts (‘zählt’), as well as his privileging of sight above the other senses, with repercussions for the fixing of the image of woman as his love object. Köhler’s motivation is to explore the preconceptions underlying this form of subjecthood, always a first step towards rethinking a taken-for-