This chapter examines the background to the ‘classical turn’ in contemporary German-language poetry, and explores how a number of major poets from Brecht onwards take up classical sources. The widespread use of classical motifs by writers like Heiner Müller, Günter Kunert and Volker Braun has been well documented as a way of commenting on the fall of the GDR and the decline of civilisations. Other, younger writers, like Raoul Schrott in his translation of the Ilias (2008) and his controversial Homers Heimat (2008, reissued 2010) or Durs Grünbein in numerous essays (‘Antike und X’, ‘Bruder Juvenal’) and in collections since Nach den Satiren (1999), use their work to explore far-reaching affinities between their own time and antiquity and between their own poetic project and their illustrious forebears. However, recent years have also seen the coincidence of works by a number of female poets (including Barbara Köhler, Brigitte Oleschinski and Ulrike Draesner) taking their inspiration from Homer’s Odyssey and other classical sources. The chapter concludes by introducing some of these briefly before focusing on Köhler, taking its cue from the recent Homer und die deutsche Literatur (2010) to explore the contemporary interest in the reffunctioning of the classics and what it means for the poetic and political understanding of the moment.

‘…den tod in die matrix’
Barbara Köhler, Niemands Frau

‘If you’re killed in the matrix, you die here?’
Neo in The Matrix (1999)

I. ‘Berichtigungen alter Mythen’

In spring 1933, on reading Franz Kafka’s story ‘Das Schweigen der Sirenen’ in the 1931 edition of Kafka’s work given to him by Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht began to consider how other myths, ‘wirklich nicht recht glaubhaft in neuerer Zeit’, could be usefully corrected. In Kafka’s story, itself a reworking of a Homeric source (Brecht calls it a ‘correction’), Odysseus binds himself to the mast as in the Homeric version, but also stops his ears with wax. However, the Sirens had according to Kafka, discovered ‘eine noch schrecklichere Waffe als den
Gesang, nämlich ihr Schweigen’. Odysseus’ ‘Mittelchen’ appear to save him from the Sirens’ deadly allure and secure his reputation for cunning in posterity (though in a final thought Kafka’s text suggests that Odysseus might have been even more cunning and recognised their strategy all along). Brecht, however, ‘doubted’ the story. (‘Zweifel am Mythos’ is the alternative handwritten title on the manuscript sheet in the archive.) Writing from a Marxist perspective and in face of the rising fascist threat, he inserted himself and his age into the narrative: ‘Das ganze Altertum glaubte dem Schlauiling das Gelingen seiner List. Sollte ich der erste sein dem Bedenken aufsteigen?’ Brecht was sceptical that the Sirens ‘ihre Kunst wirklich an Leute verschwendet haben, die keine Bewegungsfreiheit besaßen’. Instead he published his own ‘correction’, ‘Odysseus und die Sirenen’, which downgrades the cunning hero Odysseus to a ‘vorsichtiger Provinzler’ (BFA 19:338) and makes of the story a parable about the function of art under fascism that chimes in part at least with the analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer. This was one of three published texts in the series (the others concern Sophocles’ Oedipus and Herodotus’ Candaules). But in addition he left, under a heading ‘Mythen für den intimen Gebrauch’, a list of further topics from all manner of classical and more modern sources – from Parsifal to Hamlet – that represented examples of human behaviour also to be corrected (BFA 19:663).

Brecht’s intention to rub such sources up the wrong way and create stories useful for his own times feeds into his political and aesthetic agenda for art in the scientific age – and is in essence an acute form of his method of Verfremdung, which is a form of overt retelling, of historisation. This might be thought of as part of the larger project of ‘Arbeit am Mythos’, to borrow Blumenberg’s term, which has had such a profound impact on twentieth-century literature and art. In such work the artist leaves the core of the ‘narrative’ intact to ensure the identity of the myth but allows ‘variation’ of the story, though Brecht’s intervention here could be said to be at the limits of what ensures the integrity of the core. But for Brecht it is also born of two further motives: first, the desire to place himself within a tradition of great writers and explore affinities (and rivalries) with them. Famously, for example, he has Shakespeare, Ovid, Dante, Voltaire and others greet him as an equal in his exile poem ‘Besuch bei den verbannten Dichtern’ (BFA 12:35-36). Second, however, Brecht wants to enter, through the ancient text, into a dialogue with his own historical moment. It is the shadow of the Third Reich that falls across the exile poem and the Sirens fragment, as