**Barbara Köhler interviewed by Elena Theodorakopoulos (25/02/2013), translated by Elena Theodorakopoulos**

**ET:** Let's start with how you came to ancient Greek literature and to Homer in the first place?

**BK:** In my case, there was an original moment, or initial experience. It was a very rainy, boring holiday on the Baltic coast. I can remember the scene very well. It was in a tiny village- and in the GDR there were bookshops even in tiny villages. And there, in the window of the bookshop was an illustrated edition with beautiful woodcuts of Franz Fühmann's re-telling of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *Das Hölzerne Pferd*. And I stood in the rain in front of this shop-window, and refused to leave without the book. And that was really the beginning of everything. I was around ten years old. It was one of the wonderful books. I read Schwab too a little later- I just always loved the material.

**ET:** Did you learn Latin or Greek in school at all?

**BK:** None at all. Ancient languages were only provided, so to speak, for those who intended to study Medicine or Theology I think. And this meant that you would be in a *Gymnasium* to take your *Abitur*. I didn't do that, I did the *Fachabitur*, so I never got anywhere near the ancient languages.

**ET:** But still, you were always engaging with this material?

**BK:** Yes, well then in the mid-nineties, I had come here to Duisburg. In 1995 I had a grant in Rheinsberg, near Berlin. And there I began to work with the *Odyssey*. And as I was working with a number of different translations, I realized that I had to get to the original text, there was no way round it. Your realize this, especially when you are working with many translations – you get to a point, where everyone has something else, and you start to think: hang on a minute, there has to be something interesting going on here, and I want to know what it is. So I just worked on Ancient Greek to the point where I can read it and work with a dictionary.

**ET:** You taught yourself?

**BK:** It's full of mistakes – and I hardly ever dare to speak it in public. Well maybe now and then, a little bit – for instance the first line of the Sappho poem, for a reading or something. I just think it's a wonderful language. I have problems with Latin – they have such militant grammar! Except Latin can also be unbelievably beautiful – in Ovid. The *Metamorphoses* is one of my favourite texts; I dip in and out of it – I don't think I've read the whole thing, but I have some favourite episodes: the Narcissus and Echo for example. I have done at least three adaptations of it, working with installations mainly. I did something for a programme for ORF (Austrian Radio)in Vienna, for a series titled 'Literatur als Radiokunst' (Literature as Radio-art). It was wonderful: the premise is, there is nothing but the studio and the author's voice, and you get three days. With five-channel dolby-surround sound. It's a fantastic technical facility. And it seemed ideal to work with Narcissus and Echo there: it's such an amazing text about the voice, and the body and communication: there wasn't anything better, quite simply. [1]

**ET:** Can we talk about your work as a translator, and your experience of the reception and translation of ancient texts, especially the *Odyssey*? You have coined this fantastic phrase to describe

[1] The piece is called 'Echos.Quelle' and was broadcast on 9/07/2006. A description and recording is available on www.kunstradio.at/2006A/09_07_06.html. (ed.)

the power and authority exerted by translators: 'wortmachthaber', those who have the power over words, and who have power through words. And then you also talk about how the women fall through the gaps between the different powerful (male) interpretations and translations. Do you feel that as woman and as lyricist you have something different to contribute to this reception history?

**BK:** Yes, definitely. It's another form of reading. How do I translate , what do I translate? One place that really struck me for instance was the description of Helen as κυνωπις, translated in German as 'die hündische' (the dog-like). But why is it different from Hera, βοωπις? To have animal-eyes could be a divine attribute. It should be 'dog-eyed', not dog-like. It seems that in Helen's case the contemptuous tone, the value judgement is added in translation. There may be not a hint of value-judgement in the original.

**ET:** In English it's often 'Helen the bitch'.

**BK:** Quite! Translation just isn't objective at all. My favourite of all these histories of interpretation is the Adorno- Horkheimer one, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where Odysseus' great trick is celebrated, that he has himself bound to the mast, and has the crew block their ears- except it isn't Odysseus' great trick! The text tells us three times, it's Circe's tip to do that! She came up with it, it isn't Odysseus' idea! It's things like this where I think : 'did they just make that up out of thin air? Or where did they get it from?' But it's the casual sense of self-evidence, the certainty of the power of the interpretation…

**ET:** Which is then perpetuated…

**BK:** It changes the view of the myth. For that reason I thought it was enormously expanding to keep going back to the original, to keep looking. What is also really exciting is to see how Homer keeps looking at the same stories – as *Figurengeschichten* (character-histories). Take for instance the Agamemnon story, which runs all the way through, it keeps coming back, each time is told differently. Each time the 'bashing' is stronger: in the first book when Zeus and Athena are discussing things, there is no mention of Klytemnestra. But at the end: she's the one who did it! That's *Figurengeschichte*. Of course it would be nonsense to say that Homer is doing something misogynistic there. But there is a very precise narration there. But I think it's one of the most basic 'moves' in the *Odyssey*, this shifting, almost a change in voice.

There's a very small example, I don't know if this has been paid any attention to in the reception history: in the middle of the *nekyia*, Odysseus suddenly stops. Just after the fourteen women have finished, the end of this catalogue of women – he says, right that's enough, let's go to sleep. And it's a kind of cut – like this really brilliant film-cut. The narration breaks off all at once, and Odysseus doesn't speak any more. Then Arete begins to speak, and suggests that all was said well, and now there should be gift-exchanges. But then the word is given to Alkinoos who wants the story to continue. And now, in the next part of it, we only hear of men. That's when we hear from the war heroes at Troy, Sisyphos and so on. It's a very clear change of emphasis and perspective. And that is the dramatic centre. Structurally, it's terribly important.

**ET:** I really liked what you did with Heinrich Voss at the start of *Niemands Frau*. You take this very famous, canonical translation of the opening of the *Odyssey*, and you just take it apart. It feels like a very strong intervention.

**BK:** It was just this thought – what happens if it's a woman's voice in this address, at that moment? I was surprised then, I surprised myself, that I started with a hexameter- but how it then crept out and the rhythm changed.

**ET:** I'm also interested in your performance, your reading of it, and how important your voice is to this. It's like a rejection of the written culture and all the accretions of that which have become a part of how we 'read' Homer.

**BK:** It's cultural history. Where the voice becomes flatter and is chased out of the text, in favour of abstraction, and in favour of an ostensible translatability. I'm just working on that for Cornell, on translatability and 'what gets lost in translation'.

**ET:** It's the voice, that's what gets lost.

**BK:** You really sense that with Homer, as far as I can understand it. It's such a sound-rich text, such volume- you keep thinking wow- what is he doing? The acoustic luxury of it is enormous. I also found it quite exciting also that language or words are not yet *logos* there. There is only one place where we get *logos*, and I think it's when Calypso or Circe is talking to Odysseus intending to flatter, or seduce him with beautiful-sounding words. *Logos* is clearly something quite different still.

**ET:** I'd like to come back again to your opening verses in which you ask *who is he, who is Homer, why is he he, why does it matter?* It's quite difficult for English-speakers always to grasp the significance of grammatical gender, which is so important to you.

**BK:** It's the difference between English and German- that the third person singular functions so differently. There are three, *er*, *sie*, and *es* ( he, she and it). But *sie* is polymorphous: it can be the third person singular (she), or plural (they); or it can be the second person, addressing one person but in the polite plural form [like the French *vous*]. So it's a multi-shaped word , while the masculine form *er* (he) is monomorphic. It's always just one. While *sie* can be many or one. The difference is between singular and possible plural- so there is always a reality and an alternative, a kind of optionality that is built into the word. And I've been interested in this for years.

**ET:** I want to ask you about Penelope; for many women readers and authors in the late 20th/early 21st centuries the enigma of her character has given rise to fruitful re-readings. 'Taking Penelope Seriously' is a very big movement in Homeric studies, and in reception I think.

**BK:** Well, even Botho Strauss, *Ithaka*! I've just been reading about it. Anthonya Visser has been writing about it. Strauss is often seen as rather neo-conservative. It's very close to Homer; but Visser suggests that he has managed to give Penelope real bodily presence. In the play, she is incredibly fat and present.

**ET:** I was wondering to what extent Penelope is a major preoccupation in *Niemands Frau*?

**BK:** Well, amongst others. What I didn't want was the standard model of 'the one and his only one'. There is always this way of looking at couples, where there is the one man and he has one woman,

and, yes there are many others, too, but she's the one. I wanted to undermine this a little. So, one thing I found very exciting, was the idea of Helen in the *Odyssey* , and the extraordinary stories she tells. Such as the one where she is circling the horse and calling out to the men inside, using their wives' voices – she is the mistress of the voices.

**ET:** And it's Menelaos who tells this story – after she has been telling about recognizing Odysseus, disguised as a beggar.

**BK:** Well, yes, it's all so bizarre. When I asked my students, what they found most strange about Book 4, it was these Helen stories that did it for them. She is such a fascinating figure. Even her first appearance, with the silver basket on wheels, the mobile machine – the mobile woman! Who has been in all sorts of places, or hasn't been there. And then there's the spindle lying across it – she is the only one who spins – she and Arete, they are the only ones. And in the *Iliad*, when she's looking down on the battlefield, Helen is the one who knows everyone's name, she knows who's who.

**ET:** And what do you think of that passage at the end of the *Odyssey*, where Penelope tells Odysseus that she, too, might have acted like Helen, if the madness had overtaken her.

**BK:** The story with the suitors, is a kind of replay of the pre-history of the Trojan war, which ends differently here. What I really like is how the story with Penelope's weaving is told three times, using the exact same words (or very nearly – once when she tells it herself it's in the first person). But it's like a poem in the text, literally remembered. So Penelope is a special case in the text.

And there is another thing, that I find really exciting. Two examples really, where there is total reversal. One is in Book 8 when Odysseus breaks down in tears after Demodocus' song of the sack of Troy, where Odysseus hears his own heroism. And the simile is extraordinary, because the weeping Odysseus is compared to a woman clinging to the body of her barely-alive husband, and about to be taken off into slavery. It's an identification with the victim, and with the other gender. And then, at the recognition scene when Penelope embraces him she is compared to shipwrecked sailors – in the plural!- who finally reach land. Again, it's a remarkable inversion. It's such a fantastic text! How could they be so good, three thousand years ago?

**ET:** I wanted to ask you about the hanged maids – you mention them in one of the notes in *Niemands Frau*.

**BK:** That's really a Telemachus story. A coming of age story – how you become a man. Really, Odysseus just asks Telemachus to have them killed, with swords – but it's Telemachus' idea to hang them because that's the most dishonourable death. So that's his first real adult decision- and it's gruesome. That's how heroes are made. It tells us a lot about Telemachus, and about what makes a man.

**ET:** You've recognized the significance of the father-and- son motif in the poem, and you've treated it very well. I was interested that you don't, as a woman writer, approach the text only from a female point of view.

**BK:** I'm more interested in what difference is and how it's made, than in adopting a female point of view. I'm interested in interaction, rather than cause and effect. Really, physically, all effects are interactions. You don't always know how something is changed, but it always takes two to tango.

**ET:** Can we talk about your Sappho translation 'The Most Beautiful'.[2] How did that come about? Do you have plans to do more Sappho?

**BK:** I'm not sure- much of it has been done I think. I would like to look at Anne Carson's work on Sappho – I'm really looking forward to that. I do think Sappho is very exciting – I would also like to do some Heraclitus.

**ET:** I'm not so sure if you're right that everything's been done with Sappho. One thing I noticed that you do in your version, which Anne Carson also does by the way, is not to fill in the gaps. Certainly, in English translations there can be tendency to fill in the gaps, to form or invent complete poems out of the fragments. It's still a dominant tendency.

**BK:** I think that's kind of horrible. I'm sure there are good reasons. But look at Emily Dickinson for example – it's a similar situation. Look how long it took for there to be a proper edition, with the original punctuation in place.

**ET:** Yes, that's what's so wonderful about Ann Carson's edition – there's all this empty space. There'll be a whole page and just a word, or half a word on it.

**BK:** But that's what matters. I noticed that with fragment 16, that final line εξ αδοκη[τω, I saw a lot of editions where that just wasn't included at all.

**ET:** Yes, that happens a lot. Fragment 31, too, there is a line, or part of a line of a fifth stanza, which is almost always left out in translations.

**BK:** It just gets in the way.

**ET:** Well, I think you should do more work with Sappho. What I also like very much about 16 is the contrast between the lyrical and the epic voice, or maybe masculine and feminine.

**BK:** Well, yes, it tells the same story. What always disturbed me about it was the arbitrary sense of it: 'the most beautiful thing is what you love'. Well – anyone could say that. In German the problem is how do you articulate that in a gender-neutral manner? '*Was einer* [masculine] *liebt*' [What one loves]. How can I get the woman's voice back into that? Or even as a possibility, not as an excluded possibility. I thought maybe the most beautiful thing is not what one loves, but moves one to love. So, to give the energy to the object, and that transfers, and then you can say that is the most beautiful – that which moves me, and which gives me that energy. I think it's more precise that way. And I think this is a different approach, philosophically, in all sorts of ways. And that's why I thought I should have a go at it.

**ET:** Would you like to tell me about your teaching, about the *Odyssey* Seminar [At the University of Bonn, 2012-13]?

**BK:** Well it was quite a job getting to grips with the many different needs and levels of the students. We started off talking about the proem a bit, and then I got them to look at that as a pair with Odysseus' own introduction in Book 9. So, there were two versions of the hero's introduction. Then I asked them to write ten lines of poetry of their own, to introduce themselves. Really, I'd planned to

[2] translation of frg 16, in B. Köhler, *Neufundland*, Edition Korrespondenzen: Wien, 2012

have them read a lot of it out loud – and I thought it would be nice if we read it in unison all together – but we tried it once , and gave up.

**ET:** And did you use a particular translation?

**BK:** Mainly I worked with Hampe [Roland Hampe]; it's cheap with Reclam- but I also think it's a comparatively good translation. And with these introductions it became quite clear which of the students were there because they were writers, and which were there because they were interested in antiquity. So, then I had to come up with things that would interest both types of student. I really can't stand 'creative writing'; I just won't do it. So then I we just travelled through the poem, book by book. And for each book I asked that one student should do either a creative treatment (change the genre, modernize it, tell the story from the point of view of a minor character- that sort of thing), or a discussion of the book, perhaps bringing in something from their other disciplines. Then in the second semester I worked with motifs – weaving, blindness, islands, the Agamemnon story – that run through the poem. One student worked on Polyphemus' story from the perspective of his mother, Thoosa. She is only mentioned once, but she becomes this amazing story-teller in the version.

**ET:** So you were generating new classical receptions in the seminar.

**BK:** I hope so. I was very enthusiastic about it. When I asked the students what they had got out of it, one said: 'I had never imagined that the *Odyssey* is such an exciting book!' That was great! It's just such a perfect text.

**ET:** Are you going to go back to the *Odyssey* at all?

**BK:** Given the time and opportunity –maybe yes, I do think it's material that needs to keep being looked at from different perspectives. I have the pieces in *Neufundland* of course. What I would still like to do is to work with this idea of *istos* that I find so intriguing. I haven't done enough work on this, I don't know what there is about in the scholarship. I just noticed that the word is the same for the mast of a ship – but it's also both the beam of the loom *and* the warp. So it's another singular and plural story, and it's to do with women who remain static, in place, weaving, and men who go on journeys. It's all so metaphorical. And maybe it's the word that we get history from, and that is where it's made. I'm sure someone's done something already about it. But maybe I can do it a bit differently.