From Epic to Lyric: Alice Oswald's and Barbara Köhler's Refigurings of Homeric Epic

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This chapter considers work by two contemporary poets, the English poet Alice Oswald and the German poet Barbara Köhler, both of whom have recently published works that respond, albeit in quite different ways, to Homeric epic. In *Niemands Frau* (Nobody's Wife), a cycle of twenty-one poems and three poetic afterwords, published in 2007, Barbara Köhler draws threads from Homer's *Odyssey* in order, via a Penelopean poetics,[1] to reweave them into a new, highly complex poetic form. (Penelope is, of course, the eponymous Nobody's Wife.) Köhler's work is discussed here alongside Alice Oswald's 'excavation'[2] of Homer's *Iliad* in her long poem *Memorial* of 2011. What links these two quite distinctive works in the reading presented here is that they share an interest in countering the epic narrative mode of Homer's masterpieces in favour of what I shall be arguing is a gender-inflected preferment of the lyric dynamic. In so doing they draw our reading of Homer into their own lyric orbit. My reading of these two texts is prefaced by some thoughts on epic and lyric as poetic modes; and I include some reflections on the poems in performance, which is central to these poets' conceptions of both poetic modes.

In a recent essay on Barbara Köhler's explorations of ancient Greek literature, Hans Jürgen Scheuer comments on the relationship of epic and lyric with reference to a short text by Köhler entitled 'THE MOST BEAUTIFUL'.[3] This text, first published in 2010, three years after the completion of *Niemands Frau*, combines a contemplation of two apparently

[1] See Clayton (2004).
[2] Oswald (2011).
[3] Köhler (2012).

unrelated phenomena. The first is the lyric poet Sappho's 'rescue'[4] of the figure of Helena from her role as the cause of the war between Greece and Troy in Sappho's ode to Anactoria (Fragment 16 in Lobel/Page's numbering), of which Köhler provides a new German translation in her text. The second is the 1961 double-slit experiment with which the German physicist Claus Jönsson demonstrated the wave nature of electrons. This experiment, which was instrumental in advancing understanding of the principles of quantum mechanics, was nominated 'the most beautiful experiment in science' by the readers of *Physics World* magazine in 2002.[5] Quantum theory will prove surprisingly relevant to thinking about lyric poetry, a point to which I will return later. I begin, though, with Sappho.[6]

[4] Scheuer (2013), 60 (my translation).
[5] Köhler (2012), 245.
[6] Page (1955), 52-3.

οἰ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον, οἰ δὲ πέσδων,
οἰ δὲ νάων φαῖσ᾽ ἐπὶ γᾶν μέλαιναν
ἔμμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν᾽ ὅττω τις ἔραται.

Some say a host of horsemen, others of infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the dark earth: but I say, it is what you love.

πάγχυ δ᾽ εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι
πάντι τοῦτ᾽, ἁ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
κάλλος ἀνθρώπων Ἑλένα τὸν ἄνδρα
τὸν πανάριστον

Full easy it is to make this understood of one and all: for she that far surpassed all mortals in beauty, Helen, her most noble husband

καλλίποισ᾽ ἔβα᾽ς Τροΐαν πλέοισα
κωὐδὲ παῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων τοκήων
πάμπαν ἐμνάσθη, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ᾽ αὔταν
[…]

Deserted, and went sailing to Troy, with never a thought for her daughter and dear parents. The [Cyprian goddess] led her from the path ...

[…]με νῦν Ἀνακτορίας ὀνέμναι-
σ᾽ οὐ παρεοίσας,

... [Which] now has put me in mind of Anactoria far away;

τᾶς κε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα
κἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα καὶ πανόπλοις
πεσδομάχεντας

Her lovely way of walking, and the bright radiance of her changing face, would I rather see than your Lydian chariots and infantry full-armed.

In this still beautiful, though now fragmented poem, Sappho places the figure of Helena, the most beautiful of women, between a narrative account of her desertion of her home to undertake the fateful journey that would spark the Trojan War, and Sappho's vivid recollection of Anactoria, the radiant woman whom she loves or, as Köhler's translation has it, who *moves* her to love. (Köhler translates 'ἔγω δὲ κῆν᾽ ὅτ-/τω τις ἔρατται' as 'doch mir: das, was jemand zu lieben bewegt': 'but to me: that which moves someone to love'.) Through the *movement* of the poem, Sappho transposes the figure of the 'most beautiful' conjured by the name of Helena from an epic context to a lyric one, preferring the dynamic radiance of the absent beloved to the subject-matter of male-focused heroic epic such as Homer's *Iliad*, as implied by the military topoi of the opening and (what is probably) the closing strophes. Scheuer notes the aspect of contest between the poetic genres, but he also sees Sappho in Köhler's translation as sidestepping the contest. What is 'the most beautiful' is not, after all, decided here in terms of genre hierarchy:

> Rather, Anactoria – to judge by her lithe, light-footed gait, a dancer, and to judge by her name, a chorus-leader – conducts the amatory movement out of the narrative frame. In this manner, she abducts Helena for a second time: dancingly out of the epic and into the dynamically spatial [*areale*] imagination of the lyric form. In other words: Helena is cunningly prised away from Homer by Sappho and the most beautiful liberated in the name of Anactoria, the chorus-leader, as a phantasma of the absent beloved, moved purely by the dynamic of the ode.[7]

[7] Scheuer (2013), 63.

Scheuer's reading of Sappho's ode, in which he finds retrospective evidence of Köhler's 'search for her own, non-epic voice' in *Niemands Frau*,[8] opens up a potentially fruitful way of thinking about the contrast between epic and lyric forms. On the one hand, there is epic's commitment to narrative, the organisation of events and characters into a storyline, like the progress of an alphabet from A to B to C up to omega or Z, or of a row of numbers, 1, 2, 3: 'Helen, her most noble husband / Deserted, and went sailing to Troy, with never a thought for her daughter and dear parents' and so on, until the war is lost, the city destroyed and the victors set off on the journey home and into the next epic (Fig. 1).

Epic (model)

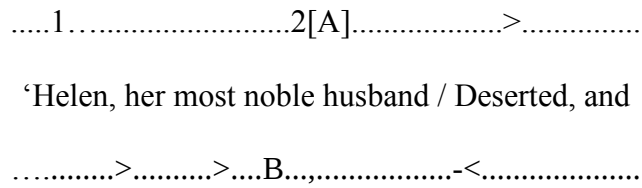


Fig. 1. Numbers denotes characters in the narrative; letters denote [implied] locations. Notable is the forward momentum of the narrative line, albeit narrative retrospection is possible, even if it does not enter the mind of the character.

On the other, there is lyric's suspension of narrative, its linguistic recreation of an image held intensely in the mind's eye – '[Which] NOW has put me in mind of Anactoria far away / Her lovely way of walking, and the bright radiance of her changing face' – , the making-present

[8] Scheuer (2013), 63.

of something or someone absent. Striking is the ability of skilfully descriptive lyric language to hold the moment timelessly, passing its presence-even-in-absence down through the ages. For isn't it true that Anactoria's bright radiance beguiles us still, thousands of years after Sappho was momentarily put in mind of her? So that Sappho's long-gone NOW is reactivated as our NOW?[9] This highlights that lyric is (potentially) scenic. However, Scheuer's reading also suggests that, as a linguistic structure, lyric is spatial, an *Areal*. This key term in Köhler's poetological vocabulary means a 'space', 'area', or 'terrain'. Within that imaginative *Areal* (see Fig 2), the poetic/verbal elements may be positioned or placed, but they should not be regarded as static. Rather, they are both full of movement in themselves – see 'Her lovely way of *walking*', 'her *changing* face' – and are also the product of, and reproduce in the reader, mental movement, as in the associative leap of the imagination – '[Which] now has put me in mind of' – that connects Helena and Anactoria in Sappho's poem. The dynamism of lyric means, among other things, that, reading or listening to it in performance, we are intent on connecting up words, images, but also sonic elements such as assonance or rhyme, across the structure of the poem in ways which might not be clearly determined and are certainly not linear. Meaning is created in the form of webs of connection rather than through following the progress of a storyline.

Lyric (model)
AREAL
'[Which] NOW has put me in mind of Anactoria far away / Her lovely way of

[9] See Culler (2015), 14, 37 on the propensity of lyric to recreate presence.

walking, and the bright radiance of her

changing face'

Fig. 2. The lyric images are held simultaneously in the space of the poem. Though Anactoria is elsewhere, 'far away', the verbalised mental images make her present within the space.

The notion of the lyric poem as an *Areal* in which the elements of the poem are in a dynamic relation to each other may seem to be relevant above all to our approach to it as readers. On the page, the poem self-evidently occupies a certain space determined by page layout, and the eye of the reader moves between the different elements, construing connections across the poem's terrain according to her idiosyncratic impulsions. Can the poem be an *Areal* when it is performed? Both Köhler and Oswald are interested in Homeric epic as poetry that is realised in oral performance, with Oswald insisting of the *Odyssey*: 'It is not a spatial text, but something temporal and sounded'.[10] Oswald's recitals of *Memorial* from memory without reference to the text, conveying to her audiences an idea at least of ancient rhapsodic performance, have become legendary to those who have witnessed them. The experience of listening to the seemingly miraculous emergence of poetic speech from the mouth of the poet during a recital of some ninety minutes' duration gives a forceful impression of why the ancients thought of poetic speech as divinely inspired. Interestingly, the repetition of the passages of simile in *Memorial*, which some critics found an irritation on the page,[11] comes into its own when heard aloud. The first recital of the simile unfolds on the linear temporal axis. When it is completed, the listener has a sense of the whole shape of the passage and all its elements. During the recital of the repetition, the listener hears both that

[10] Oswald (2014).
[11] See Logan (2012).

complete shape again and is able now to construe aurally the relations between the simile's words and images within that dynamic shape as well as in relation to the short biography that preceded it (and indeed to other similes so far heard, since patterns are detectable in the imagery of the entire poem). In fact, the poem becomes a sonic *Areal*, with the soundwaves of recital if anything more dynamic than the words on the page as the instigators of mental movement in the listener.

Köhler similarly invites the listener to project backwards to a time before print and reading were crucial to the preservation of cultural memory:

> [...] sag vers und sag zeile maschine
>
> sag READ ONLY MEMORY & vergisses vergiss diese sp
>
> rache als eine als seine beherrschte [...]
>
> say verse & say line machine / say READ ONLY MEMORY & forgeddit forget this langu/age as one as the one he has mastered[12]

Köhler's use of what she calls the 'box' form, in which each line has the same number of characters, creating a strictly justified appearance of the poem on the page, might seem to privilege the printed form of the text and a visual reading over the poem's orality. In recital, however, the sternness of the form transpires to create a kind of contained virtual space within which the voice resonates dynamically. Reading aloud, Köhler makes reference to the printed form by taking a breath at line-breaks, even when the sense runs on, but the effect is

[12] Köhler (2007), 12.

to lend syncopation to what is now apprehended as a strong rhythmic shape, and she underpins the 'choreography' of the reading with an idiosyncratic gestural play with her right hand, like a metronome above the lectern, visualising each poem's rhythms before the eyes of the audience. Moreover, while the density of meaning in and across Köhler's lines can be offputting to the reader, who struggles to grasp the sense in poems that are highly resistant to unambiguous understanding, for the listener the musicality of the recital becomes compelling (as the opening invocation of the Muse(s) and the 'SIRENS' poem explicitly address, with their references to song[13]) and the ear is strangely more adept than the eye at picking up the verbal cross-references that weave patterns between the different poems in the cycle.

This provides a context for thinking further about the contest between the poetic genres. Sappho might, as Scheuer argues, elegantly sidestep that contest by appealing to what moves us to love, but her poem is nonetheless haunted by the issue of genre hierarchy, as Scheuer's reading itself demonstrates. Historically, the genre of epic has long counted, not necessarily as the most beautiful, but certainly as the most skilful and most elevated of all the poetic forms. This is in part to do with the influence of Aristotle, Western culture's great arbiter of taste, who, though ultimately persuaded of the superiority of tragedy because of its greater unity of action, nonetheless acknowledged epic's 'grandeur' in the *Poetics*:

> But the scope for considerable extension of length is a particular attribute of epic's. [...] epic, on account of its use of narrative, can include many simultaneous parts, and these, provided they are integral, enhance the poem's dignity. This lends epic an advantage in grandeur.[14]

[13] Köhler (2007), 10-12, 46-48.
[14] Halliwell (1987), 59.

Hundreds of years later, another arbiter of taste, Samuel Johnson, writing on Milton, continued to assert the superiority of epic:

> By the general consent of criticks, the first praise of genius is due to the writer of an epick poem, as it requires an assemblage of all the powers which are singly sufficient for other compositions. [...] History must supply the writer with the rudiments of narration, which he must improve and exalt by a nobler art, must animate by dramatick energy, and diversify by retrospection and anticipation; morality must teach him the exact bounds, and different shades, of vice and virtue; from policy, and the practice of life, he has to learn the discriminations of character, and the tendency of the passions, either single or combined; and physiology must supply him with illustrations and images. To put these materials to poetical use, is required an imagination capable of painting nature, and realizing fiction. Nor is he yet a poet till he has attained the whole extension of his language, distinguished all the delicacies of phrase, and all the colours of words, and learned to adjust their different sounds to all the varieties of metrical modulation.[15]

As Johnson's criteria imply, since one can discern behind them the model of epic's greatest attainment, part of the reason for epic's place at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of the poetic genres is not least the supreme artistry of Homer. Emerging from the shadows of pre-literate culture, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are works of astonishing poetical accomplishment which,

[15] Johnson (2009), 100.

precisely because they are foundational for Western culture, set the standard against which the ambitions of later poets are measured.

To excel in the epic form, though, to master its grandeur of scale and its demands on the moral and verbal imagination, is to subject oneself to an immense intellectual discipline. Virgil spent the last decade of his life afflicted by self-doubt as he struggled to complete the *Aeneid*, while his close friend Horace stuck to writing lyric about what he loved the most.[16] As the case of Virgil pointedly demonstrates, the writer of epic might, as a reward for his self-discipline and *virtù*, attain a place for himself in the pantheon of the nation, the lonely desk worker alongside the great commanders of armies and rulers of men. The master of words conflates with his hero as the master of destiny, as is demonstrated by Aeneas's journey to glory in Rome, pre-empting that of his maker, or through the thoughtful and eloquent passage to heaven of Dante's *alter ego*. The great epic poems of world history are admired so much because they demand a vast, a divine-seeming skill, like Hephaistos's in creating the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, a piece of art that stands in the poem as an emblem for that poem itself in presenting to our admiring eyes a panoply of human life.[17]

In the confrontation of epic and lyric, then, we have, in brief, on the one hand, supreme mastery, and on the other, what moves someone to love. In the commercially oriented culture which has developed over the course of the millennia that lie between Homer and us, love might consistently attract us, but it is also synonymous with weakness, or so Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno argue in their essay on the *Odyssey* in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

[16] Eyres (2013), 15-16.
[17] See Hubbard (1992).

> In the world of exchange the one who gives more is in the wrong; but the one who loves is always the one who loves more. […] The inability to master himself and others demonstrated by his love is reason enough to deny him fulfillment.[18]

Odysseus, by contrast, is for Horkheimer and Adorno the very model and prototype of the Enlightenment subject, who learns to master his emotions and apply his calculating reason in order to escape the clutches of the mythical creatures with whom his long journey home confronts him. Such mastery, self-discipline, and self-containment are regarded as the most admirable qualities in our culture, while the narrative line of epic, to the degree that it successfully organises and regulates the multiple strands of the mythical stories which preceded Homer's epic structure, produces, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, that unity of the self which is the mark of the modern (male) subject and the prerequisite for his self-preservation. This points to a formal parallel between epic's grand narrative organisation and the sort of qualities regarded as the most admirable.

Nonetheless, to insist on the *narrative* aspect, as most definitions of epic do, is to overlook the centrality to great epic poetry of non-narrative aspects. The aforementioned Achilles' shield, or more precisely, the *making* of Achilles' shield by the god Hephaistos, is described in a striking passage of well over a hundred lines of ecphrasis in Book 18 of the *Iliad* (ll. 478-607). It is an exceptional example of Homer's suspension of the linear narration of the story in favour of an *Areal* that works like lyric poetry in that, though it unfolds as sequential description, it is *spatially* defined.[19] The shield forms a surface on which are elaborated the multiple scenes of everyday life that Hephaistos's masterly metalwork and

[18] Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), 57.
[19] Hubbard (1992, 28) argues that the ecphrasis falls into four parts corresponding to different genres of poetry, of which only ll. 590-606 ('The dancing place') refer to the tradition of lyric poetry. But he also notes that 'the dancers themselves form the periphery of the shield's symbolic land' (32), which supports my reading of the shield of Achilles as a lyric *Areal*.

Homer's lines of poetry depict. In an important article published over thirty-five years ago, Oliver Taplin observed in detail how the quotidian scenes on Achilles' shield both summon into the epic poem's account of a bloody and terrible war the memory of happy daily life in peacetime and also connect, through verbal repetition and through similarity of images, to other parts of the poem and indeed to other parts of Homer's *oeuvre*.[20] As Taplin's article itself reveals, the prevailing attitude toward the description of Achilles' shield amongst the leading scholars of Homer at the time, at least in the Anglo-American field, was that it represented a sort of detour from or derailment of the overall narrative purpose of the epic poem, a kind of weakness on Homer's part since he was held to have fallen too much in love with his description and let it get out of hand. To such scholars, the passage on Achilles' shield appears as an aberration, rather like the extended similes which likewise arrest the narrative flow and draw references to the natural world and to everyday peacetime domestic and agricultural life into the *Iliad*'s representation of the warring sides and of battling heroes. G. S. Kirk, for example, refers to the similes and the Achilles' shield passage as 'intrusions' in the poem, concluding: 'what is happening here is that the *subsequent poetical tradition* has allowed these occasional flashes of humanity to illuminate the severer architecture of the heroic soul'.[21] Taplin, by contrast, sees in Homer's appreciation of the beauty of peacetime life – its dancing, singing, pastoral pleasures, celebrations of marriage and love, and human beings' kindnesses to one another – a deliberately placed counterworld to the world of 'force' represented in the scenes of fighting.

Taplin's vision of Homer draws on the French philosopher Simone Weil's reading of the *Iliad* as a 'poem of force'.[22] Weil, while emphasising the epic poem's depiction of

[20] Taplin (1980).
[21] Kirk (1976), 11 (Kirk's emphasis). See Taplin (1980), 13.
[22] Cited in Taplin (1980), 17.

violence, nonetheless sees its true greatness as lying not in its celebration of mastery, but in its ability to move us to love:

> Justice and love, totally out of place in this depiction of extreme and unjust violence, subtly and by nuance, drench all with their light. Nothing of value, whether doomed to die or not, is slighted; the misery of all is revealed without dissimulation or condescension; no man is set above or below the common human condition; all that is destroyed is regretted.[23]

The light mentioned by Simone Weil here may well be the same light as inspired Alice Oswald. In her preface to *Memorial*, Oswald draws a distinction between the 'nobility' that most commentators since Matthew Arnold have admired in the *Iliad*, and what the ancient critics valued: 'its "*enargeia*", which means something like "bright unbearable reality". It's the word used when gods come to earth not in disguise but as themselves.'[24] Oswald's poem is, in a sense, a translation of Homer's *Iliad*, albeit a selective translation which radically cuts out the plot to leave only the accounts of the men who in the course of the poem are killed on the battlefield before Troy (the passages in Homer's poem generally referred to as the 'short biographies' or, in Christos C. Tsagalis's terminology, the 'short obituaries') together with a number of the passages of simile, arranged antiphonally. The result is a new poem, clearly influenced by Weil's reading of the *Iliad*,[25] which does not celebrate the self-mastery of the hero glorious in battle, but rather mourns the loss of those who were ineffably dear to their

[23] Holoka (2003), 64.
[24] Oswald (2011), 1.
[25] Weil writes: 'Force is that which makes a thing of whoever submits to it. Exercised to the extreme, it makes the human being a thing quite literally, that is, a dead body. Someone was there and, the next moment, no one.' (Holoka 2003, 45) Oswald quotes the last sentence in *Memorial* (Oswald 2011, 33).

families and friends, placing death and loss in relation to the rhythms of the natural world which are the prominent subject-matter of the similes. Justifying her approach in the preface, Oswald writes:

> This version, trying to retrieve the poem's *enargeia*, takes away its narrative, as you might lift the roof off a church to remember what you're worshipping. What's left is a bipolar poem made of similes and short biographies of soldiers, both of which derive (I think) from distinct poetic sources: the similes from pastoral lyric (you can tell this because their metre is sometimes compressed as if it originally formed part of a lyric poem); the biographies from the Greek tradition of lament poetry.[26]

Oswald's poem reproduces the entire structure of the *Iliad*: the deaths her poem records occur in the same order as they do in Homer's poem, from Protesilaus, '[t]he first to die' (the opening words of *Memorial*) to Hector, who, since he has no plot to support him, is made equal to all the other men whose deaths we have witnessed in the course of the poem: 'And HECTOR died like everyone else'.[27] I hesitate, because of its status as a translation of an epic structure, to define *Memorial* as a lyric poem, but as Oswald's statements in the preface about the perceived traces of pastoral lyric and choral lyric retained in Homer's epic poem reveal, what is at issue for her is to bring to the fore the lyric elements in Homer and to reconnect to their original social function.

In her preface, Oswald draws attention to her different treatment of the two types of poetry she has used as the basis for her own poem: the 'biographies' are 'paraphrases of the

[26] Oswald (2011), 1.
[27] Oswald (2011), 71.

Greek' while the similes are 'translations'. Her paraphrases gather from across the *Iliad*, and in some cases re-order, information about each soldier killed. While they remain committed to the epic's narrative mode, in that each passage tells the story of the individual's death, they also notably give emphasis to the emotional response to those deaths, mentioning the dead men's families, mothers, and wives who are left grieving. The accounts of the deaths of Protesilaus[28] and Simoisius[29] are good examples, with the emotional response to the deaths placed in each case in the rhetorically powerful final position, before the antiphonal simile.

It is in the rendering of the similes, however, that the full lyrical force of the contemporary poet comes to the fore. Oswald describes the passages of simile as 'translations', though she acknowledges that her approach to translation is 'fairly irreverent'.[30] An example is the simile embedded in Homer's account of the death of Euphorbas in Lattimore's translation:

> As some
> slip of an olive tree strong-growing that a man raises
> in a lonely place, and drenched it with generous water, so that
> it blossoms into beauty, and the blasts of winds from all quarters
> tremble it, and it bursts into pale blossoming. But then
> a wind suddenly in a great tempest descending upon it
> wrenches it out of its stand and lays it at length on the ground; such

[28] Oswald (2011), 13.
[29] Oswald (2011), 15.
[30] Oswald (2011), 2.

was Euphorbos of the strong ash spear, the son of Panthoös,

whom Menelaos Atreides killed […][31]

Oswald transforms it into this:

Like a man put a wand of olive in the earth

And watered it and that wand became a wave

It became a whip a spine a crown

It became a wind-dictionary

It could speak in tongues

It became a wobbling wagon-load of flowers

And then a storm came spinning by

And it became a broken tree uprooted

It became a wood pile in a lonely field[32]

Here, as elsewhere in the passages of simile in the poem, Oswald's own voice and passions as a poet and horticulturalist shine vibrantly through the relation of the words to the Homeric text. In collections such as *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996), *Dart* (2002), and *Woods Etc.* (2005), Oswald's close knowledge and observation of the natural environment informs her poetry. Inhabiting the role of lyric poet in a very ancient manner, she mediates between human activity and the forces of nature that contain and sometimes oppose us, something that is reflected in the antiphonal relation of the two types of poetry in *Memorial*. Her translations

[31] Homer (2011), Book 17, ll. 52-60.
[32] Oswald (2011), 31.

of Homer's similes seem to spring from her own experience of the countryside which gives them a vivid presence, a sense of Now rather than a translation of Then.

The particular quality of lyric strangeness, of stepping through into a parallel world to the battlefield, whether of nature or of domestic daily ritual, that characterises the passages of simile in Homer too, is exacerbated in Oswald's poem through her treatment of Homer's similes as free units. She lifts them out of their original context and re-attaches them in new ones. For example, this simile from the opening of Book 16 in Homer:

> Meanwhile Patroklos came to the shepherd of the people, Achilleus […]
> and swift-footed brilliant Achilleus looked on him in pity,
> and spoke to him aloud and addressed him in winged words: 'Why then
> are you crying like some poor girl, Patroklos,
> who runs after her mother and begs to be picked up and carried,
> and clings to her dress, and holds her back when she tries to hurry,
> and gazes tearfully into her face, until she is picked up?
> You are like such a one, Patroklos, dropping these soft tears.[33]

Oswald repositions it as an antiphon to one of the short obituaries:

> SCAMANDRIUS the hunter
> Knew every deer in the woods

[33] Homer (2011), Book 16, ll.5-13.

He used to hear the voice of Artemis

[…]

But impartial death has killed the killer

Now Artemis with all her arrows can't help him up

His accurate firing arm is useless

Menelaus stabbed him

One spear-thrust through the shoulders

And the point came out through the ribs

His father was Strophius

Like when a mother is rushing

And a little girl clings to her clothes

Wants help wants arms

Won't let her walk

Like staring up at that great tower of adulthood

Wanting to be light again

Wanting this whole problem of living to be lifted

And carried on a hip[34]

A passage that in Homer has something of the taunt about it (Achilles calling Patroclus girlish) is here turned into something different. In Oswald's context, the two passages (and two distinctive types of poetry) are connected through the linking word 'help'. And as the reader or listener construes what is in fact a disjunctive relationship between short obituary

[34] Oswald (2011), 18-19.

and simile, the man Scamandrius gets translated into a female child in a relationship of dependency with the mother, perhaps identifiable with the goddess Artemis who even 'with all her arrows' was unable to protect him. Furthermore, the simile reaches out to our own identification with the position of the child, especially in its invitation to us to think of ourselves in extremity, 'Wanting to be light again / Wanting this whole problem of living to be lifted / And carried on a hip'. At least, that is how *I* read it. But the point about disjunctive relations between proximate words and phrases, which is a characteristic of much highly rated contemporary lyric and the aspect on which poetry's continuing mystery depends, is that we are as readers or listeners left to our own devices in how we construe relations between the disjunctive parts. What is achieved through the exacerbated *dissimilarity* between the two elements of the simile in *Memorial* is a heightening of the function of the simile in Homer's poem, as described by Christos C. Tsagalis:

> [...] since similes refer to the physical world and not to the epic past, they conjure up, in the listeners' minds, multiple mental image-mappings. The condensed or abbreviated form of Homeric similes engages the audience in an active interplay, since the mental template of each listener will allow him [sic] to visualize the simile's short story according to his own experiential storage.[35]

These 'multiple mental image-mappings' take us back, albeit from the perspective of the audience member rather than the writer, to Köhler's idea of the lyric poem as an *Areal* in which the connections between words and images in the space of the text are not linear and not clearly determined in their relationship to each other and are not dependent on a model of

[35] Tsagalis (2008), xxii-xxiii.

forward progression (like narrative). Rather, the lyric verse is constituted by words which entertain multiple potential relationships with each other and with the mind of the listener responding to them. We react to those words not only in terms of what they mean and what images they conjure up, but also in terms of how they sound (in the examples above, the instances of alliteration and assonance are very striking), how we perceive the patterns they make (the repetition of the word 'want' is prominent in the last example from Oswald), as well as whether and how they activate reminiscences from what Tsagalis calls our 'experiential storage', triggering our emotional responses. Moreover, as long as there is a perception of *some* degree of connection, the more disjunctive the relationship between things that are posited as similar becomes (each passage of simile in Oswald begins with the word 'like'), the more our minds become energised to instigate connections, perhaps in quite creative ways, between the disjunctive elements, whereby different listeners will instigate connections differently from one another. Or we might perhaps even be moved to relinquish the will to connect in any sort of rationalised way and simply to accept the beauty of the mystery of connection – like when we are moved to love.

Barbara Köhler's poem cycle *Niemands Frau*, even more radically than Oswald's *Memorial*, disintegrates the narrative line of the Homeric epic. Rather than consisting of one long poem, as with Oswald, Köhler's cycle is made up of twenty-one poems and three afterwords that remain poised between the genres of explanatory commentary and poetic speech. Significantly, the twenty-four texts in total that make up the cycle correspond in number to the twenty-four books of the *Odyssey*, so that Köhler's response to the *Odyssey* is in a sense reproducing its entire structure, as *Memorial* does with the *Iliad*. The sequence of invoked names in Köhler's texts, as Scheuer points out, largely follows that of Homer's poem: from the invocation of the Muse via Polyphemus, Circe, Hades/Persephone, the Sirens, Scylla, Calypso and Ino/Leucothea to Penelope, with only Nausicaa and Helen changing their

places in the sequence. Oswald's text entertains a relationship of translation to the *Iliad*. This is less evidently the case in Köhler's cycle, though a sentence in the third and final afterword tantalisingly refers to the project as a translation not one-to-one, but 'eins zu anders', one-to-other.[36] Rebecca May Johnson has taken up this suggestion to argue that we should look at Köhler's *Niemands Frau* as a translation from 'er' to 'sie'.[37]

This can be understood in a number of ways. Firstly and most obviously, Köhler 'translates' the focus of the *Odyssey* from the singular male hero, Odysseus, to a plurality of female figures. This also has implications for the change of genre, from the epic storyline that follows the fate of a central character to what is presented as literally a network or web of interrelated female characters. For example, in the poem 'NAUSIKAA : RAPPORT', Odysseus, the 'er', contemplates the many mythically interconnected female figures:

> […] Persephoneias schatten
> Kirke Sirenen Kalypso und Ino
> Leukothea: von fünf göttinnen
> ist seine rede. Sie sind eins
> sie ist viele. Mächtig & rede
> begabt nennt er sie, sängerin
> wissende vom Großen Gewebe in
> dem er sich an den faden hält
> an das schiffchen das hin&her
> geworfne lässt sich erzählen:

[36] Köhler (2007), 87.
[37] Johnson (2013).

> […] Persephone's shades / Circe Sirens Calypso and Ino / Leucothea: of five goddesses / is his speech. They (she) are one / she (they) is many. Powerful & talented / in speaking he calls her/them, songstress / the one/s who know/s of the Great Web in / which/while he holds on to the thread / to the shuttle/little ship tossed / hither and thither enables storytelling[38]

As this passage demonstrates, Köhler's reading of the *Odyssey* in her poem emphasises the narrative thread, or what Odysseus's voice later in the same poem calls 'MEINE GESCHICHTE' ('my story/history'), as the storyline that supports the making of a singular male subject, an 'er'. 'His' story becomes the epic narrative of an 'ich' or 'I', adopting a centralised perspective as a means of organising experience. By contrast, the female characters are associated with a more complex web, also of connection to each other, which, as Köhler's poem subtly alludes to, is created by verbal echoes between different parts of the poem. Moreover, the female figures are intriguingly suspended between singularity and plurality, a position, if it can be called that, with which the 'ich' of Köhler's lyric persona is identified: the final phrase of the poem is the grammatically impossible 'sie ist die / Ich sind' ('she is who / I are').

The difficulty of pinning down whether some of Köhler's phrases refer to a singular or plural female accusative object in the lines quoted arises from the ambiguity of the pronoun 'sie' in German – and it is this that adds another layer to what might at first sight seem a feminist impelled project to shift the gaze of the reader from the male hero to the

[38] Köhler (2007), 22. The 'Großes Gewebe' is Steinberg's German translation of the 'great web' ('megan histon', Homer Book 19, l. 139) woven by Penelope, which resonates with the web that Circe is seen to be weaving in Book 10.

multitude of female figures in Köhler's response to Homer. Where the German pronoun 'er' can only denote the masculine singular nominative, 'sie' simultaneously denotes the feminine singular, the ungendered plural, and (since Köhler habitually uses lower case, where upper case in normal orthography would mark the difference) the formal second person address: 'Sie'. In other words, Köhler is not just interested in shifting the perspective from the hero 'er' to the female figure or figures 'sie', but is interested in the polysemy of the word 'sie' which becomes a figure for the issue of plural probabilities in the construction of meaning in the poems (and poetry) more generally. Unlike telling a story, where single meanings count ('er zählt' = 'erzählt'), Köhler, undoing the great web that Homer made and reweaving it differently, makes a sequence of textual *Areale* in which we are at liberty to construct meaning variously as we seek to make our own connections between the many recurring words, motivic phrases and intertextual allusions that occur within and between the separate poems of the cycle. 'Sie' becomes what Rebecca May Johnson calls the 'quantum linguistic particle' of the cycle.[39]

In quantum mechanics, entities such as electrons are conceptualised in terms of being both particles (occupying a single location) and waves (enabling the conceptualisation of velocity or movement). The 'wave-function' is a form of calculation intended to deduce the most likely values for the velocity and location of a particle and depends not just on 'real' numbers (1, 2, 3 etc.), but on the use of 'imaginary' numbers, designated 'i'. The relation of real to imaginary in so-called 'complex' numbers can be thought of as two lines orthogonal to each other like the x and y axes on a graph. For example 3+4i means 3 units along the x axis and 4 units up the y axis. It enables a calculation to be made that can take different values at every point of space and time to deduce the multiple probabilities of location in space and velocity. This is what quantum theorists mean by a 'field'.

[39] Johnson (2013), 81.

The ‘wave-function’ of quantum theory corresponds to the dynamic movement of multiple probabilities of meaning within the *Areal* of the lyric poem, as I have been presenting it here. Through the references to quantum theory in her poems, Köhler draws attention to the ‘isomorphism’[40] between quantum mechanics and poetry. But by suggesting, too, a relation between the way her own poems work and how Homer’s poem works as a poem, she encourages us to reconceptualise Homeric epic, focusing not on the narrative line, but on the function of the poetic language within the vast *Areal* that is that poem. How each of us hears the multiple possible connections between words and images across the poem is not predetermined or linear, but impelled by a certain dynamic – perhaps expressible as ‘what moves us to love’.

The experience of the poems as decisively and necessarily sound objects is as compelling for the reciter as the listener. I have read several times with Barbara Köhler at bilingual readings, performing my English translations of her texts alongside her performance of the German – in some cases literally ‘alongside’, since in recent readings we have performed the ‘SIRENS’ poem in German and English simultaneously, creating a thrilling overlap of different languages and voices that enacts the poem’s exploration of a twofold or ‘selbanders’ form of selfhood.[41] The live reading is undoubtedly more impactful than the voice recording (both Oswald’s *Memorial* and Köhler’s *Niemands Frau* are available as CD recordings by the poets), not least because of the aspect of control of vocal performance within the specific recital space. As anyone will know who has read poetry before an audience, the performer feels for the space of the room as the outer limit of the voice projection. At best, one hears one’s voice resonating back from the bounds of the walls as the affirmation that every member of the audience can hear clearly. This is the creation of sonic

[40] Littler (2013), 176.
[41] Köhler (2007), 46-48.

space in action. The recital room becomes the quantum *Areal* within which the particles of speech and meaning are projected, evoking in response the 'multiple mental image-mappings' that are the mind's and the minds' dynamically imaginative answer to the strange, un-quotidian language that is poetry.

For Köhler, thinking back to the way Homeric epic would once have been performed, this makes of the collective of listeners 'ein geteiltes erwidertes ungehöriges / beisein in dem wir sind' (a presence or togetherness 'shared reciprocal im / proper in which WE are')[42] – a possibility for both epic and lyric when performed, not read silently.

[42] Köhler (2007), 11.

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