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Epiphanies at the Supermarket: An Interview with Brigitte Kronauer

Abstract

Brigitte Kronauer has been called "the greatest German [female] fiction writer of our time" (Marcel Reich-Ranicki). Her stories, novels, and criticism have established her as a uniquely sophisticated literary voice and won her many literary prizes. Kronauer's trademarks are her laser-sharp vision, her luminous prose, and the intricate structures of her uncannily realistic literary universes. Finding the mystical in the mundane and exposing human foibles with subtle irony, Kronauer creates, in the words of one critic, epiphanies at the supermarket. Beneath its everyday surface her fiction deals with the eternal human questions of life, death, and love. At a still deeper level it circles around philosophical issues such as our futile attempts to find truth in our own constructs of reality. In her interview with Jutta Ittner the author reflects on her individual path to writing. She describes the role of literature in creating a semblance of order in a multifaceted reality, and she discusses the structure of her literary universes, her characters and their aspirations, and the importance of animals for man's quest for a meaningful life. Finally, Kronauer explains how she sees herself in terms of women's literature and indicates where her writing is headed.

Keywords

Brigitte Kronauer, greatest German [female] fiction writer, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, stories, novels, criticism, vision, prose, structures, realistic, universe, mystical in the mundane, mundane, mystical, irony, subtle irony, futile, reality, construct, Jutta Ittner, interview, writing, literature, reality, animals, animal, man, meaningful life, women's literature

Epiphanies at the Supermarket: An Interview
with Brigitte Kronauer

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Brigitte Kronauer has long been one of Germany's most highly acclaimed contemporary women writers. Her stories, novels, and criticism have established her as a uniquely sophisticated literary voice and won her many literary prizes. The German literary media reviewed her latest novel *Teufelsbrück* with nothing but awe, calling its author "the greatest German [female] fiction writer of our time." Kronauer's trademarks are her laser-sharp vision, her luminous prose, and the intricate structures of her uncannily realistic literary universes. Finding the mystical in the mundane and exposing human foibles with subtle irony, Kronauer creates, in the words of one critic, "Epiphanies at Aldi's." Beneath its everyday surface her fiction deals with the eternal human questions of life, death, and love. At a still deeper level it circles around philosophical issues such as our futile attempts to find truth in our own constructs of reality.

Kronauer's style is already fully developed in her early stories that are sensuous, funny, and of a blinding clarity. Her texts are simple and at the same time artificial and structured to such a degree that some readers find the mind behind them more calculating than poetic—characteristics reflecting the influence of the *nouveau roman*. Kronauer's stories do not reproduce reality or create an imagined world. Instead, they "seduce [the reader] into a slow, bright trance of attentiveness" which shines on the minute detail, the "zero-events." Their first-person narrators are so detached and impersonal in their scrutiny of reality that they seem

mediums of perception and observation rather than literary creations. The substantial body of her work includes several collections of short stories (e.g. *Die gemusterte Nacht* (*The Patterned Night* [1981])), as well as numerous critical essays and prose studies. *Die Einöde und ihr Prophet: Über Menschen und Bilder* (*The Wasteland and its Prophet: About People and Paintings* [1996]) is a collection of stories and essays about paintings, the author's latest attempt to mirror life in its myriad reflections.

Kronauer won instant fame with her first novel, *Frau Mühlenbeck im Gehäus* (*Mrs Mühlenbeck in Her House* [1980]). In it a widow who aggressively embraces life, and the nameless narrator, a withdrawn schoolteacher, reflect two radically different experiences of female existence. Despite its autobiographical tone Kronauer positioned her novel outside the mainstream of women's literature of the time. Her anti-psychological narration defies the literary trend of the 1980s, because instead of focussing on her own subjective experience, the author "surrendered completely to her subject." Her subsequent novels consolidated her position as a literary nonconformist. Kronauer's work reflects on female existence, exploring women's minds with great sophistication and depth, yet it eludes easy classification as *écriture féminine*.

The major driving force behind all her novels is a fascination with the confusing and elusive experience of reality. *Rita Münster* (1983) is a perfect example of how our perspective determines what we see. The first-person narrator plies the reader with portraits of her friends, neighbors, and relations that are as memorable as they are ungenerous. However, she doesn't identify herself by name until more than halfway into the novel. Gradually she becomes more compassionate as she connects with herself, and when she finds love, her world completely changes. The aging scholar Matthias Roth in *Berittener Bogenschütze* (*Archer on Horseback* [1986]), can be seen as Rita's male complement. As intricately structured as its predecessor and as "uncompromisingly realistic," the novel describes the hero's desperate search for meaning in life. Yet the more he scrutinizes his thoughts and his feelings, the more love eludes him. The more he researches passion

in literature, the more banal his own life appears to him. When he finally experiences what a critic has called “domesticated ecstasy” it is, in true Kronauer fashion, embedded in both modernity and the literary tradition of German romanticism.

The author’s most complex novel, *Die Frau in den Kissen* (*The Woman in the Pillows* [1990]) is no less than a “grand imagination of life itself”—life as a panorama of multifaceted fragments. Its 400 pages of observations, reflections, and imaginings on human and animal existence span 24 hours and review the history of life. The novel is populated by fleeting characters and images that are mediated by the mind of the narrator who drifts through a multi-dimensional, multi-colored universe, traversing time and space until she reaches the deepest recesses of memory. The stories that emerge from the stream of consciousness are poignant explorations of the many facets of love. The bizarre Duchess and her many lovers or the lonely old woman who has a love affair with a wolf in the zoo are only two of the many nameless, funny, unforgettable women in the pillows.

Kronauer’s shorter and more conventionally narrated novel *Das Taschentuch* (*The Handkerchief* [1994]) revolves around Willy Wings, one of the many invisible rebels and unsung heroes who don’t quite belong. We watch his life being reconstructed by a woman on a mission to remember a definitely forgettable man. Irene Gartmann’s attempts to imbue a colorless pharmacist and his conventional family life with importance are poignant and heroic—a labor of unrequited love and, of course, a humorous portrait of a woman’s secret passion. On another level they illustrate how postwar Germany reinvents its history during endless coffee klatsches, the author’s satirical portrait of a society that is an “idyll in mourning.”

Kronauer’s fifteenth book, *Teufelsbrück* (*Devilsbridge* [2000]) has been called by most critics her greatest and also her most accessible book. At first glance it seems to be the story of an ill-fated love triangle. But it is also a fairy tale, a mystery, a postmodern legend complete with saints and devils, and an exploration of the “eroticism of perception, the fascination with objects—the world.” Its flawless and powerful language shows Kronauer to be a writer

in complete mastery of her trade. *Teufelsbrück* continues to transcend traditional chronological narration by combining the tightly-woven plot of a detective novel with the author's multi-layered structure and sophisticated use of perspective. The story's trajectory begins with a fall in a shopping center, rises towards ecstasies of love, and then slides down into murder and death. The moment that middle-aged jewelrymaker Maria Fraulob looks into the eyes of the man she collides with, she is doomed. Once she embarks on the ferry at Teufelsbrück to enter the Alte Land across the river Elbe she becomes trapped in the realm of Zara, a woman larger than life. In Zara's shadowy, rambling house the shoes, birds, and plants have lives of their own, full of mystery and magic. Zara's identity, age, and her schemes prove as elusive as Maria's object of desire. The oddly assorted people that Zara collects provide background and commentary to a drama of love and revenge. Kronauer's virtuoso novel plays with classic clichés and allusions from a wide literary spectrum—German romantics such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Brentano, or Hölderlin, but her literary references include also Thomas Mann and Joseph Conrad. The leading German critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki predicted that *Teufelsbrück* would feature in Germany's future literary history—no small triumph for an author who has steadfastly followed her own path and never catered to public taste.

My interview with Brigitte Kronauer took place on two occasions—in July, 1999 and December, 2000—in her old brick house in Nienstedten, a leafy suburb of Hamburg on the river Elbe. In it the author reflects on her individual path to writing. She describes the role of literature in creating a semblance of order in a multi-faceted reality, and she explains the structure of her literary universes. She discusses her characters, their male/female roles as well as their aspirations, and the importance of animals for man's quest for a meaningful life. Finally, Kronauer explains how she sees herself in terms of women's literature and indicates where her writing is headed.

Interview

J.I.: You write in the “Afterword” to your collection of stories *Die Wiese* (*The Meadow* [1993]) that when you were a child you wanted to hear about real events rather than listen to fairy tales. All your writings seem to be located in the “clinch of life and literature.” How would you describe the dichotomy between fiction and reality in your work?

B.K.: In my first novel *Frau Mühlenbeck im Gehäus* I dealt with that dichotomy quite programmatically. And it is certainly a characteristic of all my texts that someone is struggling with it. A person confronted with reality might, for example, succumb to a chaotic reality—that would be one end of the continuum—or instantly press it into a mold, as Mrs Mühlenbeck does.

In the “Afterword” that you mentioned I tried to explain biographically how I became aware of this dichotomy. As a child I loved to listen to my mother’s stories about real events, but at some point I invariably discovered that reality was different—less stylized and more differentiated, more interesting and more confusing at the same time, foggier, or more disorderly. But, of course, such a stylization of my writerly genesis is yet another fictionalizing in retrospect—which is exactly my point. To me it’s a central part of our coming to grips with the world that we select certain events, attribute weight to them, and, very basically, establish a beginning and an end. Without this ability we would not exist—certainly not as human beings. But in doing so we reduce the multiple possibilities that reality has to offer. In my work I attempt, therefore, to present such different individuals or ways of being so that the reader watches some individual forcing a multifaceted reality into a certain pattern and understands that reality is much more complex than the act of ordering which I portray. In the confrontation with reality we will always, whether consciously or not, make decisions—to abbreviate things, skip things, discard things, so to speak, from our horizon. But in order to know reality, we need to practice noticing it, and we always need to keep in mind that we’re doing it and that reality has a huge untapped potential.

J.I.: Your early stories have been called exercises in perception, or explorations of the central Kronauer question “What is it that we see?” How did the perception of reality become the impetus for your writing, and how has it influenced your development as a writer?

B.K.: Well, where do I begin? I had a tendency to verbalize, to delight in language from very early on. Yes, and also to charge what I saw with movement, with history, with a past and maybe a future. I loved to look at illustrations as a young girl. I had this heavy old schoolbook which I looked at for hours. It depicted a room with one or two figures that stood in some relationship to each other, and I invented what might have happened before, what they’d say to each other, and what might happen next. The urge to animate frozen scenes and people was there, certainly, but also the opposite tendency—to freeze observations, events into a moment which had all the power of compressing the past and the future, creating a scene of historical impact, I might say.

J.I.: A photographer might describe his work that way . . .

B.K.: No, it wasn’t that, it wasn’t a snapshot that would record reality, but rather a compressed scene, a charged scene which didn’t symbolize something abstract. It was a scene which vibrated, exploded—and that’s only possible by manipulating reality.

I could structure my development roughly into three big chapters. The first would be my wish to tell stories—however such a wish might arise—and then re-writing certain models, not always consciously, that is telling stories with the traditional structure, the way I knew it back then.

Then there came this crisis when I realized that what I wanted to tell was something completely different. These weren’t my stories at all, they were some other author’s. Well, what do you do then? What did I really want, and how could I give it a form? As a result the following stories were very complicated—highly sensual, but always following some abstract idea and exemplifying it in a way.

And then when I was around thirty, when I was basically clear about what I wanted in my fiction and what was important for

me—the relationship between literature and life—it took a while before I knew how to put it into words. The result of this process was the first collection of stories, *Der unvermeidliche Gang der Dinge* (*The Inevitable Course of Events* [1974]), and that would be the third chapter, I guess, which still continues. I do think that my writing has developed in a series of tests, so to speak. The first stories were very ascetic, strictly programmatic, and they became richer as I gradually admitted reality in its abundance, yet reined it in as I wanted.

J.I.: In this continuum of complexity the multi-layered universe you created in *Die Frau in den Kissen* certainly represents a climax. Yet your latest novel, *Teufelsbrück*, surprised everybody with what seems a literary about-face: Does its calm, unperturbed flow of narration signal a return to traditional storytelling?

B.K.: Actually, that was the initial reaction when *Das Taschentuch* came out six years ago. When I started to write I considered chronological narration to be old hat. In my early stories I didn't have the tools or the insight to admire it for the artifice it is, and when I did use it I caricatured it. I've gone through all the "no's" of literary modernity; therefore, chronological narration is not a return for me, but a new start. To me it is more *avantgarde* than to be still working with *montage*, fragmentation, or *collage*. When I wrote *Teufelsbrück*, one of the most exciting things was to make use of the multitude of literary tools which I used to deny myself. And here even more so than in *Das Taschentuch*, an attentive reader will realize that narration is not naïve chronology but in fact a highly artificial process. Instead of an autonomous narrator there is a clearly recognizable narrative voice that constructs reality from her specific, limited perspective. The characters in *Teufelsbrück* all create their own obsessive, even crazed, concepts of the world around them. Their view of reality is constructed in the same way as fictive reality: in a process that is like touching reality with a magnet and watching the iron filings move towards it and create fields. So I haven't put aside my basic doubts about an objective chronology or a formed reality—quite the contrary. If literature wasn't short-circuited by life, it wouldn't interest me

at all. Literature concentrates, heightens, and polemically pinpoints what we all do as we battle with reality.

J.I.: In that sense the reality you create in *Teufelsbrück* is no less challenging than that of the monumental novel *Die Frau in den Kissen*. In these novels as in all your works the reader might look to the narrator for guidance, but he'll be looking in vain. In one of your early stories, "Ein Tag, der zuletzt doch nicht im Sande verlief" ("A Day That Didn't End Hopelessly After All"), that lesson is made explicit. When the narrator announces that "instantly everything made sense," we feel the inner meaning is right around the corner. But in fact the task has just been spelled out—we must find our own answers. In order to see everything fall into place, we need to surrender to the unique logic of your fictive world. Do you expect your readers to recognize the "truth" in the underlying structure in each novel, or can each reader find his or her own individual meaning, or "private system" of understanding?

B.K.: Well, I don't at all believe that a reader needs to recognize the textual structure. Naturally I want my novels to be read at many different levels, especially such a substantial and probably challenging one as *Die Frau in den Kissen*. I also think that a book of mine can very well be read at various speeds and that quite a lot can fall through the cracks. A reader can have totally different associations in mind, as long as he finds it worth reading, and it makes him want to continue. Initially, I assumed that my readers would only get what I was aiming at in my stories, and consequently would only be able to enjoy them if they understood what I wanted. That's why I wrote the blurbs for both of my early books myself. And who knows, maybe it was necessary, because the stories were so spartan. No, I really think that the dichotomy between life and literature is the aim of my work, its focal point, its perspective. But it's up to the reader to see it as a whole. Between his heart and his intellect he'll have to see what to make of such a book.

I'm sorry, I really have no intention of making it hard on the reader, but I always go to great lengths to present what I create in

the way that seems right to me. I certainly hope that my writing won't be considered difficult. There are always people who don't think it is, and whenever that happens I'm overjoyed. So I hope that my writing—notwithstanding how it was created—will be a kind of surface to my readers which triggers their interest depending on their own moods, like the surface of nature which doesn't need to be perceived in its molecular structure to be enjoyed.

J.I.: Would you accept a reader who ignores the architecture of your texts, who opens to a page and then skips ten pages until he finds another passage that fascinates him?

B.K.: Now I would, certainly. Not originally. Back then I was very strict with my readers. But now—absolutely. You know—let me say it the other way around—what I'd find terrible are readers who, seeing that there's a man and a woman, immediately conclude, "I got it, a romantic set-up." Readers, in other words, who with one roundhouse blow finish off all the differentiations a writer tries to achieve by way of language and shifts of balance. But actually it's not readers who do that—rather it's critics. If I could wish for a reader it would be someone who wouldn't instantly be looking for a meaning. Someone who has an ear for word-sequences, clusters, nuances, and the rhythm of a sentence, for example. A reader who cares where precisely a certain word appears, whether it's an exclamation or a question—who notices the minor structures. And, of course, a reader who doesn't have the story he's expecting in mind and is disappointed when it doesn't happen.

J.I.: As you indicated before, Maria, the narrator in *Teufelsbrück*, lives inside her own bubble of reality. From this vantage point she relentlessly scrutinizes the major as well as the minor characters, as do all your first-person narrators. And readers gleefully watch the character becoming transparent—until they feel seen through themselves, caught in the act by the author and her laser-sharp vision of her fellow humans. You said once that you weren't too keen on psychologizing your characters. If the inner life of your

characters is not important to you, what makes looking at and through them important?

B.K.: I said in an early text and have been stressing ever since that psychology is not important to me. What I mean is this: of course, an author, especially a novelist, cannot get along without observing the psyche. What I object to is the transference of psychological findings in the scientific sense to reality. It creates a dependency and reduces literature to an illustration of psychological processes. Apart from that, I believe that psychological systems are ideologies, cobbled-together systems, master keys which will keep changing according to the development of the science. There used to be this tendency to create psychological case histories in literature, and in my opinion that was barking up the wrong tree. What's important to me—and this touches on the question of why I write novels at all—is to present individuals from a specific perspective. Rita Münster, for example, to make it concrete, observes many very different individuals, and her look changes. First, it's a look that simply perceives certain moments, an irritable, unjust, even hateful look which is more loving toward some people. In other words, what's being said here about these people? Nothing really, nothing objective. What's being said refers to Rita Münster herself and her shifting attitude toward people. Her own development is completed as she tries to attribute to everybody his or her individual history.

J.I.: Could we say that the author leaves psychological explorations to her characters?

B.K.: Well, that's probably a logical consequence of the fact that I don't believe in an objective reality and even less in one that psychology wants me to believe. As an author I don't take this act of explaining others seriously. I do take it seriously as a completely normal human strategy, but I don't mistake it for my personal reality. Look at Zara, the main character in *Teufelsbrück*. She is clearly unconventional, extravagant, admirable and disturbing at the same time—the untamed individual that may be in all of us if we let her come out. Ubiquitous and larger than life, she's an almost mythological figure. But what do we really know about

her? She seems ageless, so we can't even begin pigeon-holing her; she hides her individual characteristics with makeup and becomes unrecognizable for others. We really only know the fascination she holds for the narrator. Zara exemplifies the impossibility of understanding a human being. In that sense she's more "real" than literary characters usually are.

J.I.: Where are your heroes headed? Even in texts that seem like a continuum of frozen moments they seem to be moving towards some goal, although it may be only vaguely sensed. What kind of liberation—or redemption—are your characters trying to find?

B.K.: Well, off the cuff I'd say that it would contradict all my beliefs to regard an individual as finished. In all of us there are—at least that's what I'm hoping—a lot of different possibilities which haven't surfaced yet, and just for that reason we're involved in a constant process. Even old people—and in my writing there are always a lot of old people, especially old women—are really capable of certain changes and can have epiphanies up to the grave. At least that's what I believe. And even when someone's growing senile or losing her mind, all we see are the exterior symptoms; we don't know what's happening in her soul. Maybe a more concrete reason is that I simply believe in the mystery and the true, absolute intimacy of an individual into which I don't want to intrude even though I created that character. In other words, I have an unlimited respect for what goes on inside a person—for her fate up to her last breath, and for the fate of her inner life or her soul, however you want to call it.

Of course, I know that the meaning of life is a very questionable concept—as if there were such a thing as an objective meaning for each of us. And I'd like to say first of all that you'll find me always using it somewhat ironically in my texts. At the same time, although we may say we've long ago thrown meaning overboard, it's a fact that our lives are directed from A to B and have some kind of inherent purpose. Otherwise we'd all be sitting around like pancakes in a frying pan. It's a fact that we progress from birth to death—no living being can fight it, even rocks emerge and disintegrate.

But then for me to say that we move from A to B, from a beginning to an end, is yet again to use an artificial pattern, a paradigm which literature has possibly borrowed from biology. Therefore, when I'm using concepts such as meaning and purpose, I should add that neither are givens but just concepts that we use as a perspective in order to have a structure. Only people who've completely given up on themselves won't develop such objectives. Even if they're pure materialists, then they'll have materialistic objectives. That there also exists a kind of meta-physical search for meaning—I don't much like saying that word—is reflected by our feeling that we're lacking something, and it's really what's making us unhappy.

Literature has many deficiencies compared to science, because it cannot rely on a palpable surface or a visible correctness, being by definition fiction. But the beauty of it is that it can create imaginary models. My idea of literature is inseparable from poetry inasmuch as it attributes an order and a meaning to things. Not order in the sense of a classroom but in the sense that nothing happens coincidentally, irrespective of whether that's true in real life as well. That it gives a specific meaning to things, to events, to life—for example, by interweaving motifs or by using signals. What makes literature so exciting and also healing for our minds, I think, is that it presents a kind of poetic order. Of course, there's the underlying hope that reality might be no different, that there would be such meaning if we'd only recognize it. But as I'm no theologian, philosopher, or scientist, it's not my job to talk about that. What literature can do perhaps is remind us of our need for such meaning.

J.I.: What role do animals play in this human quest for a meaning of life? In your novel *Die Frau in den Kissen* the old woman's fascination with a maned wolf and her attempts to communicate with him blur the boundaries between the animal and the human universes. In your latest novel, *Teufelsbrück*, these boundaries have become even more porous. Shoes, flowers, and birds are sometimes hard to distinguish; characters are called Leo or "Wolf Specht" ("Woodpecker"). But as messengers from a "pre-human kingdom" all animals—the old woman's exotic object of desire as

well as her purring cat—remain the completely Other. What can they teach us?

B.K.: If I only knew . . . I'm planning to write a book that will focus even more on animals, by the way, but it'll be hard to describe what exactly makes animals so important to us. So the first question would be: what do animals touch in us? Anybody in a fairy tale who treats animals badly has proven his depravity. Likewise, in novels you can observe time and again how someone is instantly characterized by being good to an animal or cruel or malicious, as if mistreating an animal were a graver sin against the natural order than being nasty to a fellow human. And surely the author can rely fully on his readers' psychological reaction. Such behavior will invariably hit home, even though valuing the animal higher than the human absolutely contradicts Western civilization.

The zoo chapter in *Die Frau in den Kissen* with its ten subdivisions tries to shed light on a number of totally different ways we relate to animals. To show the range let's take a contemporary example, the astounding degree to which animals are used in commercials by the very market which exploits and endangers them in the first place. And then remember how frequently the Bible blends the animal and the spiritual spheres, how the holiest representatives—the angels—are furnished with bird's wings or Jesus is represented as a lamb. How often, on the other hand, the animal is used as the sign of the unholy.

J.I.: Zara owns a triptych where Jesus isn't depicted as a lamb but as a zebu surrounded by a bear, a cat, and a giraffe. It seems shocking because we're used to certain sanctioned images. Why did you reimagine Christian mythology?

B.K.: It was the only way for me to tell very beautiful old stories anew. And there's nothing new about it, either. Just think of the Apocalypse with all its human-animal combinations, very modern mixtures, really, or think of South-American folk tales, for example, which are a lot more grotesque.

But back to real life. For me to face an animal, just to look into a cow's beautiful eyes is a tragic, or at least deeply melan-

choly experience which makes me want to try and explore this relationship. Certainly it has to do with the Fall from Paradise, our expulsion from that innocent world when we didn't eat animals, when all living beings were alike before God—to stay within this image—before we humans took the intellectual route, reducing nature to a commodity. But when we look at them now—whether they do us the honor of noticing us or not—there's a dim recollection of our beginnings, and a feeling of deep loss, and of guilt.

J.I.: The mystery of life and love eludes Matthias Roth, the hero of *Der Bogenschütze* for the longest time, no matter how intense his efforts are. Women like the narrators in *Frau Mühlenbeck*, or in *Die Frau in den Kissen*, on the other hand, are naturals for experiences called “ecstasies of perception.” Is striving, the “aggressive look which causes the world to resist,” the male way? Is the willingness to let things happen, the urge even to dissolve, the female way?

B.K.: I'd agree to the following concession. If one posits for simplicity's sake that the male approach to life is decisive and aggressive, while the woman's is rather to surrender, to accept a dissolution of the ego boundaries and even enjoy it, then one could say—and this is the important point here—that every man and every woman owns both of these parts. If you call them A and B, you can argue that since society clearly promotes the A aspects for men, and the B aspects for women, they would seem to be gender-congruent. And yet there are a lot of male writers who can describe the feelings of women with such insight that you'd swear the authors would have to be women. Take Shakespeare or Nabokov. Of course there are those who maintain that artists tend to be “feminine” males, in which case I can't argue any further.

It would be idiotic indeed to deny that there are differences between men and women, biological ones and others which are the result of education, vast differences in fact, but they shouldn't be regarded as exclusive. It's all right in my view to use these stereotypes in order to establish some preliminary structures, as long as they are clearly makeshift vehicles. Reality shows that these

boundaries are blurred, and it also shows that the lines might not be correctly drawn the way they usually are—the man as the constructive thinker, tending towards the abstract, the woman tending toward the concrete, human, even “earthy.” This is a division of roles which I resent, to be honest, and in my experience—although this may sound a little nasty—women are perfectly capable of formulaic and ideological thinking. In my opinion something as important as the women’s movement has for whatever reason been ideologized much too quickly and has been stereotyping women in very much the same manner. There can only be progress if we move towards more complexity, not by defining or redefining what it is to be a woman and excluding the men in the process. It’s just not what real life is about, it seems to me.

J.I.: Your decision to make Matthias Roth the hero of a novel of a kind of “Bildungsroman” and to choose a woman, or rather two, for the transpersonal experiences in the *Frau in den Kissen* continues, if you will, such stereotyping.

B.K.: Yes. The reasons for these choices are simple. For *Frau Mühlenbeck* I took two women as the main characters, although they might just as well have been men. One has the dominating part, a woman who thinks in clichés and maxims despite all her positive qualities, and who takes the conventional “male” approach to dealing with life—a woman’s life in that case. The other one is the exact opposite. The next novel with Rita Münster as the central character is told from a decidedly female perspective. Back then I wouldn’t have felt confident enough to focus on the central experience of love from a male standpoint. And of course it’s obviously easier for me to write about personal experiences from the female point of view. As far as the *Frau in den Kissen* goes—and there is more than one “woman in the pillows”—it is left partially open as to whether the narrator is a woman at all. She certainly doesn’t reflect on her gender, and even though she isn’t genderless she moves in a rather transgender realm. After my first two novels with their female characters—even though there are minor male destinies in *Rita Münster*—I felt it was really time for a change. That was a major reason for the *Bogenschütze*. I

would have found it disastrous to have become a specialist in women. Also, I had an excellent model for the central figure with many of the crucial characteristics which gave rise to this novel—a man as it happened, who incidentally was gay. More important, as an author I needed to take an aggressive stance towards the main character because I wanted to destroy him. I wanted to scratch his smooth self-image, his polished surface, and it was psychologically consistent for me to take a man for that in order to create the necessary distance. This kind of aggression does not exist in the case of *Rita Münster* or the *Frau in den Kissen*.

J.I.: Your fiction has been called a radically female world, not only thematically—which was only possible before the *Bogenschütze*—but also in terms of perspective and style.

B.K.: Well, those are people who choose to forget how important the structure or—to use one of my favorite words—the architecture of my novels is. That is to say, the abstract and the cold quality, if you will. In my view writing requires coldness, no question about it, as a counterpart to flesh and sumptuousness and sensuousness.

J.I.: The “geometrization of growth,” as you once called it?

B.K.: Yes, both of these aspects, and irrespective of the author’s gender that’s what you cannot do without. A plant consists of the architecture of its cell walls and its visual appearance, its surface. Literature is no different. I really think it’s wishful thinking—friendly or ill-meaning or lazy—to overlook that fact. Now if someone says construction is a male thing, so let’s keep it out of literature—literature should be spontaneous—that simply won’t work. Literature, art, is by definition spontaneous; its origins are spontaneous and you need to be always open to spontaneity. But the next step is working on it, reworking, and editing. Literature is not nature, it’s art—artificial.

J.I.: So categories like male and female are not applicable?

B.K.: I don’t think they’re helpful. If you take “male” to be something abstract and cold, then you might be able to work with that, but I find this kind of stylizing counterproductive. And I don’t

think anybody would expect a detective novel to be spontaneous and growing in whichever direction. On the contrary, we admire the clever and intelligent scheme. By the way, women are excellent detective novelists, especially in Britain. Nobody would expect a piece of music and much less a building to have grown from emotion. Only literature gets the bad rap unless it's in diary form or pours out its soul. . . . But then I think those times are over now.

J.I.: What's your attitude toward so-called women's literature?

B.K.: If you mean by that women writers who make gender their main issue—the conflict, the suffering, or the alienation in a male world, the experience with their sisters, or the discoveries of female experience—then I must say I've never been interested in any of this, and I really can't imagine ever being interested in it—as a subject, that is. That said, I'll always be a woman, and I have no objections at all to that, why would I? Maybe I should add so it doesn't sound too harsh that everybody should try their luck any which way they choose, and if someone writes a good novel using such constructs, why not? Only it's hard for me to conceive. And since I am an enemy of all ideologizing and take the view that literature should not be ideological, it is only consistent of me not to write from an intentional, decidedly female perspective. Which is not to say that you cannot attack certain aspects of the male world within a polemical context, such as a satirical play. That's a marvellous thing to do. But then it's a polemic and makes that obvious. It isn't sentimental trash which pretends to be reality. A polemicist is always aware of the fact that she's over the top. If a woman creates a truly original world, however, a world which is not programmatic or subscribing to conventional truisms but coming from her own sources, fed maybe by hatred of men or a strong sense of alienation, then such a creation can be magnificent. A really distinct bias can be very interesting, unbalanced, extreme. That's an option I wouldn't deny.

J.I.: In your writing you have always pursued the opposite. Your characters keep trying to experience the world without any preconceptions in the hope of catching a glimpse of reality, that

moment of blazing truth. Wouldn't writing "as a woman," or with any issue in mind obstruct the world and obfuscate reality?

B.K.: Indeed. Although I could imagine that you can work with exaggerations and slants, and that it can be a lot of fun. For example, if you write a play and distribute the problem onto several shoulders.

J.I.: In a sense that's what you do in your novels.

B.K.: Of course. That's exactly it. But the way I do it it evens out, if you look at it as a whole. In fact, I personally like polemics. I find it far better than a constant balance, because polemics never confuses itself with reality and therefore never gets ideological. A polemicist knows that he overstates, whereas an ideologue likes to think he doesn't select and exaggerate. I must say that I find the option of taking things too far, and making a point of it more and more interesting. Take opera, for instance, which is an extraordinarily artificial event, an event which works with what you might call emotional polemics. By being totally over the top opera makes it clear that larger than life isn't real life. And yet it's precisely this overstating that has an enormous impact on those with an ear for it. I have the feeling that there might be some good possibilities out there.

J.I.: A good reason to be looking forward to what's next?

B.K.: I certainly think so.

Note

1. All translations of Kronauer's book titles, the translation of the interview, and of the quotations are my own.

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