

Nelly Sachs' Chorus Poetics

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Nelly Sachs' first two poetry collections are entitled *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (In the Habitations of Death) and *Sternverdunkelung* (Eclipse of the Stars)¹ published in 1947 and 1949, respectively. Although she had been publishing her poems since 1929, asked when she began writing poetry, she answered "*in den Wohnungen des Todes*", "in the Habitations of Death". A lot has been written about Nelly Sachs' poetry in relation to inhabiting the experience of death and also about this statement of hers². As Aris Fioretos has insisted in his readings of her poetry, "everything said is dedicated to the dead".³ The common and unquestionable reading is that her poetry accomplished a fundamental turn at the end of the war when the extension of the horror of the crimes against the Jewish people and their suffering became public. Having this in mind, I would like in the following reflection to focus on what it means for Nelly Sachs to give birth to poetry in the habitations of death.

But how to begin in the habitations of death (*In den Wohnungen des Todes*)—how is such a beginning to be understood? How can death give birth? A central cycle of this collection is called "The "Choruses after Midnight". It is an extensive circle of choruses: "Chorus of Abandoned Things", "Chorus of the Rescued", "Chorus of the Wanderers", "The Chorus of the Orphans", "Chorus of the Dead", "Chorus of the Shadows", "Chorus of the Stones", "Chorus of the Stars", "Chorus of Invisible Things", "Chorus of the Clouds", "Chorus of Trees", "Chorus of the Comforters" and "Chorus of the Unborn". It is a circle of choruses inside a chorus. One begins in death like an abandoned thing, like something that has been rescued, like a wanderer, an orphan or a comforter, like shadows, stones, stars, clouds, trees or as invisible things and the unborn. As Walter Berendsohn wrote once, Nelly Sachs let "the whole universe, from stones to the stars, sing together in these huge choruses of the dead and of the survivors".⁴ In the habitations of death poetry begins like a multitude of choruses, choruses of abandoned, rescued, wandering, orphaned, shadow-cloud-tree-stone-like, invisible and unborn voices. But not only so. Poetry begins in the habitations of death as chorus inside chorus, multi-voices inside multi-voices, voices within voices. How do all these poetic multivoiced choruses sing? And moreover, what do they tell us about the poetic purpose of a chorus?

First, they tell us something about the kind of "we" that arises from these choruses. It is indeed a chorus-like "we". But why are these choruses within

the chorus called “Choruses after Midnight”? After midnight is the time following the end of the day and before the start of another day. After midnight is the time when the dead and the unborn day meet. In “Chorus of the Dead” we hear the following:

Wir von der schwarzen Sonne der Angst
 Wie Siebe Zerstochehenen –
 Abgeronnene sind wir vom Schweiß der Todesminute.
 Abgeweckelt an unserem Leibe sind die uns angetanen Tode
 Wie Feldblumen abgeweckelt an einem Hügel Sand.
 O ihr, die ihr noch den Staub grüßt als einen Freund
 Die ihr, redender Sand zum Sande sprecht:
 Ich liebe dich.

Wir sagen euch:
 Zerrissen sind die Mäntel der Staubgeheimnisse
 Die Lüfte, die man in uns erstickte,
 Die Feuer, darin man uns brannte,
 Die Erde, darin man unseren Abhub warf.
 Das Wasser, das mit unserem Angstschweiß dahinperlte
 Ist mit uns aufgebrochen und beginnt zu glänzen.
 Wir toten Israels sagen euch:
 Wir reichen schon einen Stern weiter
 In unseren verborgenen Gott hinein⁵.

“We dripped from the sweat of death’s minute”, “we” are the survivors. But not only because we escaped death, because we should have been dead but are alive, but because we inhabit death in a certain way. We are in death in such way that the deaths done unto us “withered on our bodies” [...] like flowers of the field withered on a hill of sand”. This is very uncanny, insofar as we are the closest to them, since they are the deaths done unto us, withering in our bodies, but at the same time we are the most distant from them, since they are dead and we are alive. As such they are “our” dead. Our dead are the screaming closeness to this distance. One cannot talk with the dead; but the dead, on the other hand, speak with us and we say words, poetical words to them. An essential asymmetry binds us to them. We talk not with them but to them and also for them. It is indeed from the dead that we say “we”—“We the dead of Israel”. It is to the dead that we say “you”—you who still greet the dust as friend”. The poem takes up this uncanny extreme closeness to the abyssal distance between us—the living, those who are together because we are not dead—and you—our dead, and not just any dead, but “ours”, since it is to them and for them that we speak, that is, we exist, since

they are in us, withered in our bodies. The poem speaks about a “we” and a “you” that arise out of an amalgam of the living and the dead, an amalgam like “air in which we are suffocated”, as “fires in which we are burned”, as “the water which has beaded with our sweat of fear”. “We” is the amalgam of a “we” and a “you”, dead and living that arises when the four elements became deadly nascent, nascent deadly.

The word for “we” in German is *Wir*, which sounds almost like *wie*, meaning “how” or “in what way”. “You” (informal plural) in German is *Ihr*, which sounds exactly like *irr*, from the verb *irren*—to wander and go astray. These resonant proximities between *wir* and *wie*, *ihr* and *irr*,⁶ appear when listening itself speaks, as when what is said reverberates like an echo in which various differences or solitudes speak simultaneously. Even if they are not written down explicitly like that in the poems, these resonances sound in the reading. We listen to their mute sounding. The chorus is not only the proper voice of a “we” that is the elemental amalgam of a we and a you, of living and dead, but their multiple voices resonating and echoing in each other within us. For Nelly Sachs the chorus is a dramatic song of several voices whose drama consists in the fact that the same word sounds differently than it does by itself because what is speaking in it are the voices of others in our voices—the living, as much as our voices in the echo of the voices of the others—the dead. To be able to listen to such resonant proximities, our ears need to change so that we can hear differences in the middle of such a mix and thereby hear what is being separated when it is bound together. Separating and binding together *we* and *you*—we the living and you the dead—the blend of living and dead, has a decisive impact on Nelly Sachs’ chorus poetics. We are those who live after the death of our dead—we are nodes of a life after death, a life that can only be lived because it comes after the dead who went before. But in order to become aware of that, we need chorus-ears. A change of poetic language can be traced in Nelly Sachs’ works around the end of the war, something, as was observed above, that she insisted on pointing out. But what should also be pointed out is how this new language is the language of listening; the language of a listening that speaks in its mute resonating way. It is therefore very much a change in the ears that happens in these years. As she says in a poem of *The Habitations of Death* called “How long have we forgotten how to listen!”

Und ihr werdet hören, durch den Schlaf hindurch
 Werdet ihr hören
 Wie im Tode
 Das Leben beginnt.⁷

Listening carefully to this mute resonating of multiple voices within multiple voices and those inside ourselves, we discover that we are not only those who live after death but also those who live before the unborn. In the voices of the dead, heard as a memory or echo, we also listen to the voices of the unborn, strange voices of those “who are sick with parting”, as it is said in the “Chorus of the Unborn”, one of the “Choruses after Midnight”. What separates and binds together the dead and the unborn? The dead and the unborn are absent bodily in relation to life here and now. Their absences differ, however, to the extent that the dead have in fact lived, been born, left traces and remained. Their souls depart too early. The body simply cannot keep up. The dead are no longer a body. Having been alive and now exterminated, they are sand and ashes, traces and remnants in the air, in fires, in the earth, in water. But precisely because they have been a body, the dead are the ones we know even without knowing. The fact that they have existed, shown themselves, can be traced, tells us that they are our acquaintances, even if we may have an albeit distorted, imprecise, idealized and guilty acquaintanceship with them. The unborn, however, are a very different kind of body. They are those who are too early for a body, those who are too early to arrive. They have no trace, no before, because it is they who are the before. The unborn have a peace of their own, as the Austrian poet Georg Trakl wrote once.⁸ They have a peace that is different from the peace of the dead. The peace of the unborn is close to early morning—the time before sunrise, a time when the only thing that exists is a coming from the night. The unborn, who rest in the too-early, come like a morning hour, *with the after* the night, the night that cares for what can only be seen when being lost. The night is “our black nurse” that “let us grow”, as we can read in the “Chorus of the Unborn”, to become “future lights for your (the unborn) sorrow.”⁹ The unborn have an inverse chronology, in so far as their before is existentially after—a future past or a past future; they invert love and sorrow, thus their love anticipates the sorrow that has already taken place. And if with them “like dew we sink into love”, “[...] still the shadows of time lie like questions/Over our secret”.¹⁰ The unborn are the pregnant, impossible experience of the existence of others within us that are not with us, at the same time as we in them are those who begin to live in (their) glances. The unborn are eyes in which we mirror ourselves, ears into which we speak when the night, this “black nurse”, “lets us grow”. They are the very coming to the alien and the unfamiliar that like the night renders possible the vision of the invisible; thus to see it we have to lose ourselves in it. The unborn are a breath inhaling us. Life after death and life before birth meet in the element of the night to tell

about a coming to the alien, albeit from opposite or complementary directions, to the alien of the butterflies of transformation. It says on Paul Klee's gravestone that he lives as well among the dead as among the unborn, since that way he is closer to the beginning than usual yet not close enough.¹¹ This placeless place of a life after death and a life before birth is located neither here and now nor off over there. It is the impossible, evasive place of our own existence, an in itself beyond and outside itself, a life coming to the unknown. A fundamental difference in relation to Klee's living well both among the dead and the unborn is that in Nelly Sachs' poetic experience what is at stake is to live *with* "our" dead and "our" unborn, with a "we" that is the elemental amalgam of "we" and "you", dead and living, no longer living and not yet born, we, living dead of Israel, you, deaths done unto us, withering in our bodies. Thus, we are the life that begins at death and with the unborn, and it is this beginning at the point where death and the not-born meet that we, voices—of our dead and our unborn—to which we must listen, begin to exist. And then it becomes possible to hear how "life begins in death" and that all we say we say to the voices of our dead and unborn rather than for our dead and unborn.

To speak to all these voices, we must transform ourselves into "reed pipes of seclusion" (*Röhren der Abgeschiedenheit*),¹² "hollow bones" ("*hohles Gebein*")¹³ through which voices of this you, voices of our dead and unborn, become resonant. To speak for a voice that is the voice of choruses within choruses, the voice of so many dead, unborn, wandering, rescued, orphaned, clouds and star-like, is to speak within a speaking. It is to speak the speaking, to say the saying, and not primarily the content of what is being spoken or said. The voices of our dead and unborn are "sand that speaks for sand".¹⁴ The image that Nelly Sachs gives us is the hissing breath of the sand. What the hissing breath of this sand is saying, as we listen to the "Chorus of the Dead", is "*ich liebe dich*", (I love you), which in German is a very explicit fricative breath: *ich-dich* [which disappears in the English version], which when it is said in German and spoken aloud sounds almost like *jiddisch/Ich-Dich*, "Jewish", the resounding name that resembles the hissing breath of the sand.

Our dead and unborn—the "we" and the "nodes" of Nelly Sachs' poetry—are the dead and unborn brothers and sisters in Shoah. *In The Habitations of Death (In Wohnungen des Todes)* is dedicated to "the dead brothers and sisters". Our dead and unborn, our brothers and sisters say to us "*Ich liebe Dich*", sounding the name that is our, of our people, "Jewish", and speak to us in the hissing language of the sand in which it becomes possible to hear

how life after death and life before birth coincide, how they are one and the same life. These we-nodes are those who have been rescued.

“We the rescued”, which can be heard in another chorus after midnight, “Chorus of the Rescued”:

Wir Geretteten,
 Aus deren hohlem Gebein der Tod schon seine Flöten schnitt,
 An deren Sehnen der Tod schon seinen Bogen strich –
 Unsere Leiber klagen noch nach
 Mit ihrer verstümmelten Musik.
 Wir Geretteten,
 Immer noch hängen die Schlingen für unsere Hälse gedreht
 Vor uns in der blauen Luft –
 Immer noch füllen sich die Stundenuhren mit unserem tropfenden Blut.

 Wir Geretteten,
 Immer noch essen an uns die Würmer der Angst.
 Unser Gestirn ist vergraben im Staub¹⁵.
 ...

These choruses after midnight speak to us of another experience of transcendence and rescue. They point neither to a life beyond this life nor to another world. They point to our life here and present it as a life after death and before birth and/or as the place of the rescued. What has been discussed for several centuries about the immortality of the soul and life after death appears here as a kind of acute phenomenology of current existence, of a life here. *Here* is life after death and the place of the rescued, a life after midnight and before morning. It is a life “between yesterday and tomorrow”,¹⁶ the life of an end that does not end and of a belated beginning. Therefore, the motive of exile which is Nelly Sachs’ life and the central matter of her poetry, is not merely one of a here that moves to a there, a relationship between the known and the unknown; thus the “here”, being already an after-life, is already a there. The exilic motive is much more the habitation in the “between yesterday and tomorrow”.¹⁷ “We” the rescued are already hollow bones from which flutes to our dead are made—we are already the flutes that preceded “us”. These lines speak of the peculiar temporality of a life existing after death and before birth, a life after midnight, a life searching for mornings. We are already the hollow bones into which our dead of Shoah are carved. We are already those who have disappeared and those who will be. We are already before we are.

Another poem from *In The Habitations of Death (In den Wohnungen des Todes)* begins: "Someone/Blew the Schofar" (*Einer war,/ Der blies den Schofar*)¹⁸. The schofar is the Jews' holy flute made from the bones of a purified animal that cannot be a cow or a bull. The poem presents a scene in which the schofar player throws back his head like a deer that has fallen into a trap and dies, exhausted. This image followed Nelly Sachs ever since she began writing poetry. It is an image of Eli, the little eight-year old boy in occupied Poland who began playing the flute when he found himself entirely alone after the German soldiers took his parents prisoner. He plays, throwing back his head to point the flute upwards toward God to pray, lament, and worship in the only way he can, by playing. The German soldiers interpret his gesture as a coded signal and kill him with several blows to the head. To Nelly Sachs the blowing of the schofar is an image of Shoah. The boy with his head thrown back illustrates a strict instruction from the Kabbalah, the Book of Zohar, which teaches how the player must tilt back his head while at the same time lifting it toward the sky. Eli's grandfather, who by a freak of chance survives the boy's sacrifice, the death of a child, is struck silent forever by this scene of terror. Life after death, the lives of those who were rescued, life that begins with death is life silenced by terror. This silenced life, however, is a life not really of silenced speech, but of a silence that speaks, and of a listening to this silence that speaks within this silence. Our language is a silence that speaks, Nelly Sachs insists, and in doing so she shows how hard it is to be a poet of life after death and before birth.

This "image" of the flute-playing boy throwing his head back in order to touch the heights of God and the stars brings out a special feature of Nelly Sachs' poetics, namely the significance of the dramatic scene. In addition to poetry she wrote a couple of dramas. One is entitled *Eli*, another, *Abraham im Salz*. In the few notes in which she comments on her works she speaks of her need to write dramatic pieces when she becomes acutely aware of the limits of poetry. This should not be understood as resembling Adorno's view that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, especially in German. Nelly Sachs would never argue anything like that, primarily because she writes not only after the dead but also for the unborn. She does, however, ask herself, as in a poem from her late cycle *Glowing Enigmas (Glühende Rätself)*:—"Only where find the words/illuminated by the first sea/those opening their eyes/those not wounded by tongues?"¹⁹ She is asking not for innocent or pure words, guiltless words or beautiful words, but for words that languages could not wound or damage, words capable of speaking the unspeakable, about the journey of the bonfire to the sky, the incense of the bodies dispersing in the

air. She looks for words on the boundary of the word, on the edge of words, and she searches for words without words, where “who knows”, one of the words not wounded by languages can perhaps be uttered, where a poetic word perhaps can begin in the habitations of death.

The beginning of such a word is extremely dramatic; it is the drama of the word’s drama; for the word appears as it plunges, when the word is scattered to pieces and becomes only vowels, just tone: “O-A-O-A—a rocking sea of vowels/all the words have crashed down”.²⁰ It is about the drama of the word, the staging of a “between us” that begins to sound on its own. For a word is always what sounds in a “between” us, in a between us and them, the dead and the unborn. The poetic question in Nelly Sachs—and for a poet a poetic question is always a question of life and death—is never a question of style, a formal or intellectual question, nor is it a question of how the extermination of a people can or cannot be represented. It is instead a question of allowing the beginning at death to appear, a fate of Israel for so many, for so many “yous”, for so many voices. The discussion about the possibility or impossibility of creating from joy, which Ionesco answered by asserting its impossibility, the discussion about the justice and correctness of searching for an image for this pain, is according to Nelly Sachs like an exit ramp, for there is no other state than that of our hollow bones, a pipe of parting through which the voices of all these “yous”, of our dead touching our living, can resound. As she writes in a letter of 14 July 1946 to Walter A. Berendsohn, it is about “the transformation of matter in what is hidden from us ...”, a “violent theme hovering constantly within me”.²¹

This occurs not only in the dramatic scenes she wrote but in all her poetry. Her poems are actually dramatized scenes—plays for “words, pantomime and music”, as she titles her play

The Great Anonymous (Der große Anonyme).²² In these notes Nelly Sachs maintains that the play for “words, pantomime and music” wants to show the child of mystery, that is, that mystery is a child, that which remains vulnerable like an open sore in the story of Eli, the boy who played the flute for the divine. Eli is a “he” who appears as an open sore, what in another line in another chorus, the “Chorus of Wanderers”, she calls “the orphan-eyed Israel of animals”. The gaze of an orphaned animal sacrificed in burning fire has been given the name Israel by history. This gaze is what has seen the seeing. In another poem from *In the Habitations of Death, (In Wohnungen des Todes)* she speaks indeed about the eyes of an I-saw-that-he-saw, quoting Jehuda Zwi, following these eyes “with pupils of long rainbows”²³. The eyes of this I-saw-that-I-saw, the orphaned eyes of this sacrificed animal called

Israel are the eyes of a sacrificed word that has been wounded by languages. Nelly Sachs explains in the notes mentioned above that what she is striving for is to show how the word is conveyed through gestures, how a movement is transferred to other movements, and also how the movement of the word passes down from generation to generation by leaning back to see the sky above. When the word is uttered as a beginning at death, what is considered are not comprehensive doctrines or some sort of grammatical order but the birth of the word at the death of the word, the birth of the word as a silence that speaks. The sound of Eli's flute, the sound of Eli's shofar, is a saying of words that begin at the death of the words, words under threat of being burned like dry wood in the fire, words that make the sweat of fear glow like pearls. What is passed down from generation to generation is this leaning back to see an above, since "it is we who point to a mystery that comes from the night", as we read and hear in another chorus, "Chorus of the Clouds".²⁴ What goes on from generation to generation are not the words themselves but the inability to say what belongs to the words as their depths. It refers to a saying that is planted in salt, in soil that does not bear fruit, a saying of what saying cannot say. This can never be said by itself, but only in a chorus bearing multi-voiced choruses.

Nelly Sachs understands this beginning in the "salt of death" to be the emergence of a new word as this occurs in the choruses of the Greek tragedies. She goes so far as to say that it is out of this new word born in the salt of death, risen as in the chorus of a tragedy, that a religious experience arises. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle asserts the contrary with respect to the birth of tragedy, maintaining that tragedy arises as a chorus but that the chorus develops from rites and holy rituals in veneration of the god Dionysus. Nelly Sachs' poetics presents a different genealogy—she derives the religious from the tragic chorus and not tragedy from religious rituals. Her poetry sings choruses in the form of psalms and hymns. There the Greek tragedy is the salt of death out of which Biblical psalms and hymns are born from tragic refrains. She suggests a different chronology—the chronology of a beginning at death, not the death of a beginning. According to Aristotle there are three kinds of tragic choruses: those which announce arrivals (*chorikou parodos*), those which concern the present location of the dramatic action (*stasimon*) and those which sing songs of lamentation (*kómmos thrénos*), which can also be interpreted as songs of farewell. The chorus is itself a character, a *person*, who acts both with and against the performers; it is a plural voice, the voice of many voices. This is clear from Nelly Sachs' poetry, except that there the

three kinds of choruses—those singing of arrivals, present location and farewell laments—simultaneously sing in a chorus of choruses breathing out psalms, the hissing breath of hymns that mourn our dead and our unborn. Her choruses after midnight blow like the flute played by the bewildered child's gaze, Israel's gaze, and in so doing they sing of the place where we find ourselves—our existence's *stásimon*. They sing dissonant polyphonic voices, like hissing sandstorms. This place is defined as the articulation of four elements—"the air in which we were suffocated", "the fires in which we were burned", "the earth into which our remains were cast", "the water which was beaded with our sweat of fear" (*Chor der Toten*). This place is not a state but a fate: the fate of being a beginning at death, of being life after death and before birth, of being between yesterday and tomorrow; the fate of being a wanderer.

In relation to Aristotle's classic discussion on the origin of the chorus, meaning and role in tragic poetry, in Nelly Sachs' chorus poetics Biblical hymns and psalms arise out of a choir in which each word is sung as being a presence in the present rather than being merely present. They arise more like sounds in-between a giving away and an arriving, sounds of simultaneous voices "between yesterday and tomorrow". The chorus sounds forth a wandering place, the only possible poetic place for a wanderer's fate, the fate of those who drag the road behind them and show that it is the road that is their baggage, those who dress in rags of the land in which they pause. This wandering place, therefore, is not really the wanderers' place; rather, it is the very experience of moving that is the only possible place when the poetic word is to be born in the habitations of death.

Thus understood, the chorus is no longer a demarcation on life's stage meant to show poetry as a place alongside life—a kind of place of consolation—or as the only place where life can happen. This alternative conforms to traditional notions of the role of the chorus in the modern tragedy as represented from opposite positions by, among others, Diderot and Schiller. In *De la poésie dramatique* Diderot formulates his thoughts on "the fourth wall" as follows: "Imaginez, sur le bord du théâtre, un grande mur qui vous sépare du parterre; jouez comme si la toile ne se levait pas"²⁵ He maintains that the chorus was a kind of fourth wall which, by pretending that the audience did not exist, showed them that the theatrical setting was the scene of an illusion. Similarly, the chorus was to show that poetry was a stage alongside life itself. In contrast to Diderot's concept, in his foreword to *The Bride of Messina* Schiller considers that what the chorus does is in fact to cancel the illusion

of the theater, which, almost like an acid in photography, brings out or develops the reality around it by showing that the stage is part of life and not something on the side. Analogously, the poetic chorus is the only place where life reveals its soul.

Nelly Sachs' "Choruses after Midnight" no longer sing of this difference between illusion and reality, between consolation and trust. They sing of wandering and going "from yesterday to tomorrow", "between yesterday and tomorrow", and appear as ears that themselves resonate when the voices of the dead and unborn blow into them. These choruses after midnight, these resounding ears, do not reflect on what has happened, is happening or can happen, nor do they demarcate the poetic scene. They make the many voices resonate in unison to emphasize how "the shadows of time still lie like questions over our secret".²⁶

In the notes on her work mentioned above Nelly Sachs writes that she cannot describe the inner process of which her poetic language was born. She can only say that she tried "more and more to spiritualize the moment and make it transparent" (115). To spiritualize this place that is the going in which we already find ourselves—that is, the moment—means making it transparent, it means making it appear. This place appears as a coincidence of our dead and unborn, as a shaking between, as an interweaving of the All in nothing and nothing in the All. This confluence is suddenly like the flash of disappearing stars; it is immeasurable and immense like the horizon that is fed by grains of dust; Yes, for these "dead", the dead who ascribe to us an "our", lie on the ground not like just any bodies but like grains of dust. Our dead are "stones that have faces, father and mother faces," as we read in "Chorus of the Orphans",²⁷ they are grains of dust that sprout.

Specks of dust, grains of dust, *Staubkorn*, is a central expression in Nelly Sachs' poetics. It is discussed in several letters exchanged with Paul Celan, the author of *Todesfuge* and *Sprachgitter*, the copy of which he sent her she reads as a new *Zohar*, a new work of Jewish mysticism. She views the beginning of life at death as a sprouting grain of dust, a sprouting that cannot be shoved into the ground, that does not develop a web of roots, that passes without leaving a trace, but whose passing without a trace surrounds, suffocates and hurts like a sandstorm. It is a kind of cultivation in the air, an inscription of smoke in the air.

While the poet John Keats chose "*Here lies one whose name was written in water*" for his gravestone, the epitaph dedicated to Nelly Sachs' poetry is for a people whose name was written by "Israel's body drifted as smoke through the air"²⁸ The air of the dust of smoke, the dust of the air sprouts

when it passes by, not when it stays. The air is the element of passing, that which involves in the past that which goes on. For the course of life sees itself utterly saturated with this pain. Nelly Sachs describes this phenomenon with new expressions such as *Durchschmerzung* and *Umschmerzung*—permeated with pain, surrounded by pain.

This place that Nelly Sachs' poetry attempts to spiritualize, or, as she puts it, wants to make transparent, is the place of the moment, the place of being that is as incomprehensible as a bolt of lightning and as immeasurable as a grain of dust. It is a place of a between—between the dead and the unborn, whence between the no-longer and the not yet, a we and a you are defined. This place is a place without place, a place where we are always with a without—with the without-our-parents, with the without-our-children; the place is the experience of being an orphan rather than a son, the experience of embracing the childless state as a child. This place without place is the experience of existence as exile—the place without place of the exile of being, a constant motif in both the history and the mysticism of the Jewish people. One of the teachings in the Kabbalah concerns God's *tsimtsum*, a doctrine formulated by Isaac Luria in the seventeenth century, a teaching about God's exile, about the experience of God's withdrawal during the creation of the world. Mystical and Kabbalistic motifs are ubiquitous in Nelly Sachs's poetry. She often reads Scholem and Buber, but also Christian religious thinkers such as Pascal, Kierkegaard and Simone Weil. The transparency of the moment as a place where we are no more than the fate of wanderers, what she has called the spiritualization of the moment, is in addition a dominant motif in her correspondence with Paul Celan, especially when, after years of writing to each other, they met in Zurich in 1960 at the Zum Storchen café, which serves as the title of a poem dedicated to her.

Nelly Sachs felt that Celan's poetry had given her a homeland, a *Heimat*. Only there did she feel at home. In one letter to him (24 March 1960) she even wrote that Celan had "touched the roots of language as Abraham had touched the roots of faith".²⁹ For her, Celan was the patriarch of the root of language, of language as a beginning at the sacrifice of the child who plays his flute for God, of the word that begins at the death of the word. Paul Celan, however, viewed her poetry as the poetics of words that cannot be heard, words to which he needed to be close despite his deep sense of alienation in their presence. "The talk was of your God [...]. I spoke against him" [...]. "The talk was of too much, of too little".³⁰ Celan was always willing to meet Nelly Sachs. He wanted to agree to her request to travel to Stockholm when she was in a deep emotional crisis that resulted in a long stay in the hospital.

He did in fact come to Sweden, but he was unable to meet her owing to the seriousness of her condition. He says in a letter that he came to give her “words and silence”. Poets speak with each other about the language of silence. Poets do not converse, they do not conduct dialogues—but their silences speak in a chorus—silence speaks for silence as sand speaks for sand, the saying of silence in the silence of saying. In other late poems we can read what it means to hear, the imperative: “put your finger on your lips: *silence silence silence*”—a line ending with a dash that underscores the “s” in the breath of silence.

This saying in a chorus of silences both denies and creates a distance from current ideas about language as dialogue and conversation. How can dialogue and conversation be possible if the words begin at the death of the words, if the words are words after death and before birth, if the words are words after midnight? The letters between Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan show just what a poetic correspondence is: a listening that says, a saying that listens, a saying within the saying by those who have left us and those who have not yet come to us. It is more a chorus-speech, a co-responding to these you-voices that lay a finger to their lips in order to say: silence, silence, silence, quiet, quiet, quiet. Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan answer together, co-respond to the fate of being poets in the language of their own annihilation—the German language. To be an unwounded word in the language of all wounds; to be the life of saying in the language of the death of saying, to be a Jewish poet of the German language. This means to remain the ears of the homeless. To be words like wind in the wind, like choruses within choruses, choruses of the winds. Nelly Sachs’ poetics is about this fate, the fate of poetry as the chorus of the choruses of the winds.

[...] Winds:

You homeless, you homeless [...]
 We winds, we winds, we winds
 We have a home in the shell
 In the shofar, in the flute
 [...] ³¹

¹ For the English translation, see Nelly Sachs, *Collected Poems 1944–1949*, trans. Michael Hamburger, Ruth and Matthew Mead, and Michael Roloff (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2011).

² Aris Fioretos, *Nelly Sachs, Flight and Metamorphosis, an Illustrated Biography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), and Kathrin M. Bower, *Ethics of Remembrance in the Poetry of Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer* (Suffolk: Camden House, 2000)); W.A. Berendsohn: *Nelly Sachs: Einführung in das Werk der Dichterin jüdischen Schicksals* (Darmstadt: Agora, 1974)

³ Fioretos, *Flight and Metamorphosis*, 149.

⁴ Quoted in Fioretos, *Flight and Metamorphosis*, 201 (“läßt das ganze Universum, von den Steinen bis zu den Sternen, mitsingen in den riesigen Chören der Toten und der Überlebenden”).

⁵ We from the black sun of fear/ Holed like sieves – /We dripped from the sweat of death’s minute./Withered on our bodies are the deaths done unto us/Like flowers of the field withered on a hill of sand./O you who still greet the dust as friend/ You who talking sand say to the sand:/I love you./

We say to you:/ Torn are the cloaks of the mysteries of dust/The air in which we were suffocated,/The fire in which we were burned,/The earth into which was beaded with our sweat of fear/ Has broken forth with us and begins to gleam./ We dead of Israel say to you:/ We are moving past one more star/Into our hidden God. “Chorus of the Dead” in Nelly Sachs, *Collected Poems*, 113.

⁶ If we translate these pronouns into, for instance, Portuguese, it becomes immediately apparent that *wir* is *nós*, which sounds and is written exactly like “*nós*” (nodes), while *Ihr* is *vós*, which takes us to *voz* (the voice). Here the resonances of meaning are even stronger.

⁷ “And you will hear, through your sleep/You will hear / How in death / Life begins,” Sachs, *Collected Poems*, 53.

⁸ Georg Trakl, “Heiterer Frühling,” in *Werke, Entwürfe, Briefe* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986)

⁹ Nelly Sachs, “Chor der Ungeborenen” in *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1947); “Chorus of the Unborn,” trans. Ruth and Matthew Mead, in Nelly Sachs, *Collected Poems*, 139–141, *O the Chimneys. Selected Poems, including the verse play Eli* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Paul Klee, “Diesseitig bin ich gar nicht fassbar. Denn ich wohne grad so gut bei den Toten wie bei den Ungeborenen. Etwas näher der Schöpfung als üblich und noch lange nicht nahe genug”.

¹² In the poem “*Stimme des heiligen Landes*,” translated into English as “*The Voice of the Holy Land*” that also belongs to *In The Habitations of Death*, in *Collected Poems*, 142–143.

¹³ “Chorus of the Rescued”, Sachs, *Collected Works*, 101.

¹⁴ “Chorus of the Dead”, Sachs, *Collected Works*, 113.

¹⁵ We, the rescued,/From those hollow bones death had begun to whittle his fluets,/And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow —/Our bodies continue to lament/With their mutilated music./We, the rescued,/The nooses wound for our necks still dangle/ before us in the blue air —/Hourglasses still fill with our dripping blood./We, the rescued,/

The worms of fear still feed on us./Our constellation is buried in dust./ Sachs, *Collected Works*, 101.

¹⁶ “Chorus of Comforters”, Sachs, *Collected Works* 135.

¹⁷ For a discussion about the poetry of Nelly Sachs as a poetics of a “from here to there”, see Aris Fioretos, *Flight and Metamorphosis*, 114–116.

¹⁸ From the poem “*Einer war, der blies den Shofar*,” Eng. “Someone blew the Shofar,” in Sachs, *Collected Works*, 39.

¹⁹ Nelly Sachs, “Glowing Enigmas II,” trans. Michael Hamburger, in *O the Chimneys*, 279.

²⁰ “ein wiegendes Meer der Vokale/ Worte sind alle abgestürzt”—as another poem in *Glühende Rätseln* puts it.

²¹ Quoted in Nelly Sachs, *Werke, Gedichte 1940–1950*, Matthias Weichelt, ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 250.

²² Swedish translation in Nelly Sachs, *Den store anonymen*, trans. Magaretha Holmqvist (Stockholm: Ersatz, 2010), 141.

²³ “*Deine Augen, o du mein Geliebter*,” Eng. “Your eyes, O my beloved,” in Sachs, *Collected Poems*, 87.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 131.

²⁵ Denis Diderot, “De la poésie dramatique,” in *Oeuvres esthétiques* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1959), 231.

²⁶ “Chorus of the Unborn, in Sachs, *Collected Poems*, 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁸ “Dein Leib im Rauch durch die Luft”, *O the Chimneys*, 21.

²⁹ Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs, *Correspondence*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann, trans. Christopher Clark (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1995), 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

³¹ *Chor der Winde/ Ihr Heimatlosen, ihr Heimatlosen!/ O ihr mit dem feinen Gehör begabten./ Wir hauchen euch ein, jeden Seufzer der Natur./ Geschwister sind wir mit euch. Der Grille Ton hat sein Nest in eurem Ohr/ Und ihr seif es die diesen Stern sich drehen hören/ In den Nächten. Wir Winde, wir Winde, wir Winde/ Wir drehen die Mühlen der Armut/ Am Wege der Heimatlosen/ Wir treiben das große Meer in eine Muschel hinein —/ Lauscht an der Ewigkeit Schlüsselloch, ihr Heimatlosen —/ Wir Winde, Wir Winde, Wir Winde/ Ein zu Hause haben wir in der Muschel,/ Im Schofar, in der Flöte —/ Gute Nacht*