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Elaine Martin

NELLY SACHS

THE POETICS OF SILENCE
AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION



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Introduction

The positive reception of Nelly Sachs' poetry in the late 1950s and 1960s culminated in Sachs being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, jointly with the Israeli author Samuel J. Agnon. Virtually unknown during the previous decade, Sachs was suddenly hailed as West Germany's "Dichterin der Versöhnung": she and her work became symbols of German-Jewish reconciliation in an era preoccupied with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – the attempt to critically address the legacy of the National Socialist past. A close examination of how Sachs' poetry was received in West and East Germany, and of the socio-political factors which led to her person and her work becoming icons of German-Jewish reconciliation in the Federal Republic, sheds a fascinating light on the social and psychological trends that dominated the post-war German landscape. The manner in which literary works are received in the public domain is, of course, inextricably linked with the prevailing socio-political conditions. Topics, Raul Hilberg writes, "may be suppressed or catapulted to public attention, but always for reasons that reflect the problems and needs of a society" (Hilberg 1996: 123). Correspondingly – so the premise of the first section of this study – the socio-political conditions of the post-war period reveal why the tables turned with respect to the reception of Sachs' work in the East and in the West as the events of the Holocaust receded in time. The initial disregard for Sachs in the Federal Republic, followed by the sudden discovery and ensuing appropriation of her person and work a decade later on the one hand, and the initial reception of and subsequent disregard for her work in East Germany on the other, can be attributed to the socio-political concerns of the day.

The focus is then shifted to the 'unspeakability' maxim associated with Theodor Adorno, whose position on post-Shoah art so pressingly requires a re-examination. The debate on what has mistakenly come to be known as Adorno's 'dictum' concerning the 'barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz' – "nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch" (Adorno 1977: 30) – dominated academic discussion in the decades following its publication in 1951. This debate serves as an effective springboard from which to evaluate Nelly Sachs' Holocaust poetry given that the aporetics of Holocaust art identified by Adorno, namely, the impos-

sibility and indispensability of bearing witness, are so evident in Sachs' poetics. Time and time again Adorno's extensive theoretical considerations on the possibilities and limitations of art in the aftermath of the Holocaust have been reduced to this single sentence, itself constituting but a sub-clause of the original passage. This frequent tendency towards simplification and misinterpretation has arguably been facilitated by the erroneous inclination to separate Adorno's critique of modernity from his views on Holocaust art. This separation has done a disservice to Adorno's thought in light of the fact that his theoretical considerations on Holocaust art are intertwined with this same critique. By exploring the 'dictum' within his larger assessment of capitalist modernity, and specifically within his assessment of modernity's facilitation of the reification process, the 'dictum' can be restored to its original context. Reification, in conjunction with what Adorno viewed as the perilous legacies of modernity – all-encompassing instrumental rationality fused with irrational ends, technological domination and the reduction of all thought to the calculation of the efficiency of means – had its apotheosis in the Nazi death camps. The result was the liquidation of individualism which had formed the core of critical consciousness, the obliteration of the very *concept* of the autonomous subject. In light of this, Adorno considered any return to artistic subjectivism a problematical endeavour.

Of further significance for a recontextualisation of the so-called 'dictum' is the fact that Adorno, crucially, does not view Auschwitz as an accidental relapse or a temporary 'glitch' in an otherwise progressive culture. Rather, he views Auschwitz as part and parcel of that 'civilising' process which we call 'modernity.' The fact that the heinous mass murder of millions had been carried out within the framework of a society that had achieved so much culturally and artistically meant that the legitimacy of artistic discourse, after this culture had gone so catastrophically awry, was suddenly called into question. However, while Adorno makes clear that culture's complicity is irrefragable – and that of art as integral to this same culture – he nonetheless calls for testimony rather than an insistence upon silence. In the face of the seemingly insurmountable barriers which confronted the writer in the aftermath of Auschwitz, Adorno did not call for an end to art as has been claimed by critics such as Walter Jens (1997), Günther Bohnheim (2002), Susan Gubar (2003), Elrud Ibsch (2004) and Stephen J. Whitfield (2007) – to mention just a few relatively recent contributors to the debate. On the contrary; "das Bedürfnis Leiden beredt werden zu lassen," he stated in *Negative Dialektik*, "ist die Bedingung aller Wahrheit" (Adorno 1973: 27). Adorno's pronouncements were

never meant as silence-inducing taboos, but rather as theoretical reflections upon the moral status of art in the aftermath of the Shoah and as warnings of the moral peril involved in the artistic rendering of mass extermination.

Against the backdrop of Adorno's deliberations, Nelly Sachs' poetic works will be examined as illustrative of what Annette Jael Lehmann has described as "die Poetik des Scheiterns":

Für keine Art von Dichtung ist die 'Poetik des Scheiterns' so grundlegend wie für die Holocaust-Dichtung. Das Scheitern ist immer schon im Gedicht angelegt. Sein Scheitern muss nicht nur eingestanden, sondern gewagt werden. Jedes Holocaust-Gedicht muß zu einem bestimmten Grade an seinem Thema scheitern. [...] Jede literarische Äußerung und ästhetische Reflexion im Horizont der Shoah steht [...] in der Spannung zwischen einem traumatischen Verstummen und dem Dilemma der Inadäquatheit aller Artikulationsversuche. [...]: dem unbedingten Darstellungsgebot, der Unangemessenheit des Schweigens steht immer wieder ein Verstummen gegenüber, das die Unmöglichkeit bezeugt über und nach Auschwitz zu schreiben. (Lehmann 1999: xxv and 3–7)

Lehmann summarises the aporetic thread that runs through Sachs' entire body of poetry. Her work is marked by a three-pronged tension between speechlessness, the recognition of the inevitable inadequacy of all attempts at communicating the suffering, and an attendant cognizance of the necessity of bearing witness. Erhard Bahr has issued a similar thesis: "Daß im Extremfall des Holocaust die Leistung der Literatur eng mit ihrem Versagen verbunden ist, versteht sich von selbst." (Bahr 1980: 78) Sachs' poetry, so emblematic of this crisis within artistic discourse in the wake of the Shoah, lends itself particularly well to evaluation within the framework of Adorno's theoretical reflections. The crisis of language in her work, the aporetics of Holocaust representation, her dialogue with the perpetrators, her refutation of eschatological paradigms and, crucially, her refusal to impose a redemptive framework on the suffering by subverting Biblical archetypes together make Sachs' poetry a quintessential case-study of the problematics of post-Holocaust writing as elucidated by Adorno. Biblical archetypes in particular can be considered important representational devices in her poetry, since they serve as an effective means of refuting any redemptive or religious 'sense-making' framework for the horrors of Auschwitz. This is significant given the frequent references to Sachs as a supposedly redemptive poet, an erroneous claim that has found many willing proponents in critical discourse, to the detriment of what is in fact a denunciation of any such sense-making

schema. A consistent objective throughout the close reading of her work is to underscore the disintegrative, incoherent and fragmentary nature of her verse and to determine whether her poetry, in spite of the fact that it thematises the impossibility of adequate representation, has representational value. Representational elements are identified with the aim of assessing if and how, in the context of a poetics of unspeakability, the devices of 'Verstummen' become evocative and representational devices in their own right.

With respect to this close reading, an important methodological qualification should be mentioned at the outset. In an effort to consider the semantic intricacy of individual works effectively, the tendency within the secondary discourse on Sachs to analyse just fragmentary portions of individual poems is avoided. The analyses of two Sachs critics represent welcome exceptions to this trend. Beata Sowa-Bettecken writes: "Die gängige Praxis, Stellen aus dem Kontext des Gedichts herauszureißen und als Beleg oder Widerlegung einer These zu nutzen, wird weder der Textstellung noch dem Gedicht zurecht." (Sowa-Bettecken 1992: 33) While selecting lines can indeed be useful in terms of analysing certain motifs, an interpretation of her work on that basis alone can only provide piecemeal knowledge. Such an approach, as Sowa-Bettecken points out, cannot provide a sound foundation from which to infiltrate the complexity of Sachs' poetics, which is appreciable only within the complete framework of each individual poem. Birgit Stocker-Keller, in a similar vein, writes:

In vielen Aufsätzen [...] werden Gedichte von Nelly Sachs fragmentarisch ausgelegt; bestimmten Motiven werden nachgegangen, ohne dass aber das einzelne Gedicht, aus dem jeweils die Belege stammen, als ganzes verstanden würde. Nelly Sachs hat aber einzelne Gedichte geschrieben, nicht eine Anzahl von Motiven in verschiedenen Texten abgehandelt. (Keller-Stocker 1973:1)

Matthias Krieg, by way of contrast to the methodological course chosen here, has argued that the "Bildwelt" of Nelly Sachs' work exhibits "ein in sich geschlossenes Ganzes" which makes the interpretation of individual poems "zwangsläufig fragwürdig" (Krieg 1983: 88). Paul Kersten also considers an interpretative methodology based on individual poems to be "zwangsläufig problematisch" in the case of a "von weitreichenden Bild- und Motivverknüpfungen konstituierten Werkes wie dem von Nelly Sachs" (Kersten 1970: 12). Krieg's and Kersten's objections are essentially one and the same: the assertion that the imagery and motifs employed by Sachs form a 'system,' and that it is the system as such that

must be analysed. Both approaches are equally puzzling, however. Why, after all, should Sachs' motif nexus render interpretation of individual poems 'necessarily problematic'? If anything, one would imagine that such a nexus would render such a method of interpretation rewarding in terms of untangling that very nexus in the first instance. Surely a deductive method is facilitated in the first instance by an inductive point of departure. As Sowa-Bettecken explains: "[D]er These Kriegen [...] ist entgegenzuhalten [...], daß er dieses Gesamtbild aus den Einzeldichten erhält." (Sowa-Bettecken 1992: 33) In addition, it is on the basis of such an inductive method that the variations in Sachs' motif nexus become appreciable. Thus whilst individual poems are analysed in this study under various thematic headings, and whilst priority is given each time to the heading in question, the theme is consistently embedded within the framework of the respective poem, as opposed to selecting individual lines to suit the theme. This is, moreover, accomplished without losing sight of intertextual connections. A balancing of the analytical scales, in other words, is attempted by focussing on complete poems as opposed to the problematic method of isolating individual parts to accommodate the theme under consideration.

The ethical gravity of the human tragedy that lies at the core of Nelly Sachs' work must be emphasised in any commentary on a proposed study of her work. The suffering that occurred as a result of the depths to which human beings sank during the period of National Socialism makes humility imperative in any approach to her work. Johannes Anderegg expresses this unequivocally when he states: "In der Stille, die die Sprache von Nelly Sachs erzeugt, klingt jedes Wort einer wissenschaftlichen Kommentierung zu laut," and he criticises in particular the 'methodological self-assurance' that some Sachs criticism has displayed (Anderegg 1994: 137). He cites a letter that Sachs wrote in 1958 in which she makes reference to those literary critics who wrote to her requesting the 'meaning' of 'incomprehensible metaphors': "Zuweilen erhalte ich Anfragen über unverständliche Metaphern. Habe doch nicht 'gemeint,' sondern wurde aufgerissen." (Sachs 1984: 183) This state of being 'torn open,' of being denied the luxury of carefully pondering and choosing metaphors and imagery, expresses the torment of the poetic voice in its attempt to bear witness to the horror and the urgency of this undertaking. In line with Anderegg's call for humility in the face of the human disaster that shapes Sachs' work, and mindful of the state of 'aufgerissen sein' outlined by the poet, this study tries not to 'determine' what Sachs definitively 'means.' Such self-assurance has no place given the ethical magnitude

of the atrocities that lie at the core of her oeuvre. Rather, the objective throughout is to explore some ways of unravelling Sachs' intricate portrayal of the greatest human calamity in twentieth-century history.

I Contexts

1 Nelly Sachs: A Tumultuous Reception History

1.1 West Germany's Three Myths

Despite prolific poetic production, Nelly Sachs remained a largely anonymous figure in the West German cultural sphere for a considerable period in the aftermath of the Second World War. An analysis of how the very gradual reception of her work was replaced by marked popularity sheds a very interesting light on the literary scene in the years 1945–1966 in West Germany. The socio-political conditions of the immediate post-war period initially presented a formidable obstacle to the publication of Sachs' work in the West. The title alone of her first volume *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, dedicated to "Meinen toten Brüdern und Schwestern," left little doubt as to the overriding theme of her work. Leonard Olschner writes:

Wo man nach Texten dürstete, die vorgeblich dem Bedürfnis nach Zeitentohbenheit entsprachen, dann eigneten sich die Texte von *In den Wohnungen des Todes* und *Sternverdunkelung* wenig dazu, dieses Bedürfnis zu befriedigen. [...] Der Poesie von Nelly Sachs blieb die angemessene Aufmerksamkeit versagt, da diese Dichtung [...] das leistete, was nicht gefragt war: Erinnern, Mahnung an Verantwortung, Jüdisches. (Olschner 1992: 279–81)

Ralf Trinks similarly outlines some of the criteria which governed reader tastes at this time: "Nur wenn die Autoren eine schlüssige Interpretation des Krieges und eine überzeugende Antwort auf die drängende Schuldfrage anboten, konnten sie den Erwartungen ihres Publikums gerecht werden." (Trinks 2002: 40) Sachs most certainly did not offer a coherent explanation for the war and, as for the question of guilt, her answer was not the exculpatory version sought by the West German populace. Herbert Marcuse has highlighted the three illusory longings which guided the West German populace and, by extension, national politics and, partly also, the literary scene in the post-war years. These were the myths of German victimisation, ignorance and resistance. They served, Marcuse argues, as "suitable tools for effacing the memory of genocide and replacing it with a much more palatable history" (Marcuse 2001: 74). These myths reveal some of the reasons for Sachs' absence on the West German literary stage for a considerable period of time in the aftermath of the war.

To the first of these – the myth of German victimisation. The immediate post-war years, and indeed right up until the late 1950s, saw not only an unwillingness amongst the populace to accept even partial responsibility for the Nazi crimes, but also the self-identification of the Germans themselves as victims – of Nazism, of Allied bombs and of the Red Army. They had been victims of ‘fanatical’ Nazis on the one hand and ‘vengeful’ Allied forces on the other. This illusion of double victimisation was one of the foundational myths that structured post-war memory in the Federal Republic, and it resulted in the long delay before widespread responsibility for the crimes perpetuated under National Socialism received honest recognition. This victimisation myth served two practical purposes in terms of exculpation. Firstly, the Holocaust was interpreted as some kind of ‘mysterious,’ ‘unfathomable,’ ‘extraneous force’ whereby the Nazi leadership had somehow ‘imposed’ its will upon an ‘unwilling’ German population; as the contemporary critic Joachim Boeckh wrote: “Es wird von geheimnisvollen Dämonen gemurmelt, die über die unschuldigen Volksgenossen hergefallen seien.” (Boeckh 1947: 15) This myth resulted in the automatic disassociation of the Nazi leadership from the national body. The consequent focus upon the leadership, and in particular upon the figure of Hitler himself, “dem es auf ‘dämonische Weise’ gelungen sei, das deutsche Volk [...] zu verblenden” (Kogon 1983: 19–20), served an obvious exonerative purpose:

Es existierte die Vorstellung der NS-Herrschaft als monolotischem [sic] Führerstaat unter dem Dämon Hitler, dem man erlegen war. Die Hitler-Zentrierung hatte für die Gesellschaft (und ihre Beteiligung an der NS-Diktatur) eine entlastende Funktion [...], die Faschismusinterpretation dieser Jahre [hat] einen Gutteil dazu beigetragen, daß sich niemand zu sehr mit der Vergangenheit beschäftigen mußte. (Kölsch 2000: 69, 78)

If blame could be laid at the door of the ‘Führer’ and his most senior henchmen, that would render self-examination superfluous, especially so given that the Nazi leadership had ‘led’ the German populace ‘astray.’ The second effect of this victimisation myth was the attempt to equate the German war victims of Allied bombings with the victims of Nazi persecution:

Neben dem verbreiteten Wunsch, das deutsche Volk in seiner Gesamtheit zum Opfer des Nationalsozialismus zu machen und es damit von seiner Mitschuld zu entlasten, fand sich eine Aufrechnungsmentalität, die mit dem Verweis auf die eigenen Opfer des Krieges die Opfer des Holocaust und der Verfolgung in eine Reihe mit den Kriegsopfern stellen wollte. (Bergmann 1992: 332)