

SO MANY SCATTERED SEEDLINGS

An interview with Andrew Shanks on his work translating the poems of Nelly Sachs

His pen, his scalpel cut.
The writer of the Zohar surgically drew blood,
pulsing, from the unseen circulation
of the stars, gathered in a cup
the words, the homesick sparks.
The grave split open, the alphabet arose,
each letter was an angel, each a crystal shard,
each held refracted droplets dating from Creation.
These sang. And there, within, glowed
ruby, jacinth, lapis lazuli,
so many scattered seedlings
not yet stone.
And night, the blackest tiger,
roared; and wounded day
lay writhing there,
in pools of light.
The shining was a mouth tight shut.
An aura, only, showed God hid within the soul.

- Nelly Sachs (trans., Andrew Shanks)

In 2018 I went to visit Andrew Shanks at his home in York, to talk about the 1980s, when he first discovered the work of Nelly Sachs.

Andrew is a theologian and Canon Emeritus of Manchester Cathedral.

Andrew explained that he was in Germany for a year, 1983 to 1984, as the World Council of Churches had given him a scholarship at the University of Marburg: A 'great university town', he says, and one in which he came across a volume - in German - in a bookshop which he thought looked interesting.

'My German at that time was not that good', he says, 'but I can tell if it is going to be interesting or not and I could tell that Nelly Sachs was going to be interesting straight away.'

'I never heard of her before that', he explains, 'but I used to take it on holidays and translate it' and 'subsequently I bought all her books and translated all her lyric poetry into English.'

I asked Andrew when this process became a comprehensive project:

'I would take away either the poetry of Hölderlin or Nelly Sachs. Over the time I accumulated quite a lot of the stuff, and eventually I decided to translate the material systematically; I don't know when, I can't remember when, it just happened.'

I asked him why this material seemed so important to him, as Andrew is essentially a theologian-philosopher, with a keen interest in the work of Hegel:

'I don't think of myself as a poet, I think of myself as a theologian, and so primarily the writing of poetry for me has been a way of connecting with poetry which is interesting to me as a theologian.'

Sachs' poetry - it becomes clear as one immerses oneself in it - addresses the big philosophical and theological subjects of our time.

Andrew has since published some of his Nelly Sachs translations online. I have the Nelly Sachs Penguin Modern European poets volume - which she shared with Abba Kovner - published in 1971, a year after her death.

I suggest to Andrew that 'if I compare the two translations, it's the difference between an old broken lamp and one with a one hundred watt bulb in it', but... *how did he do that?*

Andrew laughs and explains that when Sachs was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1966, there was an appetite for her work. Sachs was jointly awarded the prize along with the short story writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Coincidentally, Agnon died the same year as Sachs, in 1970:

'However, the translation policy back in the late 1960s seems to have been to keep strictly to the German in a way that led to quite stilted English poetry.'

'But', Andrew adds, the existing English translations are 'extremely helpful if you're trying to read the poetry and your German is not that good!'

Andrew's project, then, became one of making versions of Sachs' poems that read well in English, but, he points out, his translations often aren't as faithful to the original German.

'Mostly they are without rhyme or regular form, or "formality" and so it is relatively easy to translate', because 'the formal difficulties just aren't there.'

Sachs, he explains, 'is working with metaphors and they can be translated', it is a 'question of translating *metaphors, not forms.*'

So, I ask, is it that strange old truth, that an unfaithful translation can actually be more faithful?

Andrew agrees, but adds that the translations up until now might not have helped Sachs remain in cultural memory: 'I never found anyone at the time, in the English-speaking world, who had so much as heard of her', he says.

'In terms of popularising her', the 'early translations have not been that successful': They 'don't work that well in English, in my opinion'.

Andrew describes the post-war period as one of 'the German intellectual classes coming to terms with their recent history' and the function that Nelly Sachs' work provided, bearing witness to the horrors of the Third Reich: 'In writing German poetry, she met that need.'

'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', Theodor Adorno famously wrote in 1949, in one of the most misunderstood statements in critical theory. Adorno later revised this statement - and he was an admirer of the work of Paul Celan.

And of course, people did write after Auschwitz, and about it, although Sachs and her mother escaped the camps by a very narrow margin indeed. But Nelly Sachs was writing holocaust poetry as Adorno wrote his condemnation.

And when Adorno revised his statement, in his last work, *Negative Dialectics*, he didn't renege, he made it even more damning. He said that 'it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems', but it is 'not wrong to raise the less cultural question' of 'whether after Auschwitz you can go on living...'

In many ways, Nelly Sachs proved Adorno wrong. She did both. She carried on living as she took in the knowledge of the camps, and she wrote poetry.

But she did not really write poetry directly about Auschwitz. She wrote poetry that is fused with the raw, livid, negative energy of the incommensurable horror of the camps.

However, the point Adorno was making with his quotation was correct in many ways, even though it is more often misconstrued than it is correctly deployed: Adorno really meant Wagner, Mahler and all that was 'poetic' but rotten in Germany, that then became rotten in Hollywood; the cultural inflations of 'beauty', emerging from the rural idyll, that are then inscribed as 'natural', before this 'nature' is re-inscribed, finally, as a measure for who lives or dies.

For Adorno, all that was rotten in Hollywood continued in an unbroken line. For Adorno, World War Two didn't really end. It continued right through into the wars in Indochina, Vietnam and Cambodia. The war didn't really end for Nelly Sachs either.

But Andrew also thinks that Sachs' poetry goes beyond the subject of the holocaust. He is of course interested in Sachs' work as a theologian and philosopher, but also because her poetry was a method of coming to terms with extreme trauma - and not just in relation to the holocaust.

I suggest that Andrew's re-translation of this work seems to arrive at an appropriate moment, as there has been a swing to the right recently and a bit of amnesia creeping in with regard to the mid-twentieth century:

'I think it will always be timely and this will always be a tendency, but the events of the mid twentieth century were so spectacular that they will always be a key reference point.'

'Sachs wrote to memorialise the dead' he explains, 'in the first instance.'

She fled into exile from Berlin in 1940 - to Sweden - having written nothing of any great substance before that. Sachs grew up in a German bourgeois household where she wrote children's stories.

Andrew then reads to me Sachs' poem, 'Prayers for the Dead Bridegroom':

If only I knew
What was the last sight you saw.
Was it a stone, that had already drunk
So many last sights until those sights fell blindly
Onto the blind?
Or was it earth,
Enough to fill a shoe,
And already blackened
By so many partings
And so much death?

Or was it your last journey,
Bidding you farewell from all the paths
You ever trod?

A puddle of water, a piece of mirroring metal,
Perhaps the buckle of your enemy's belt,
Or some other small celestial
Soothsayer?

Or did this Earth
Which lets no-one depart from it unloved
Send you a bird-sign through the air,
A reminder to your soul, so that it shuddered
In your burnt, tormented body?

The piece is chilling. The enemy belt buckle being the last thing you see, an image that immediately conjures someone on their knees, or stooped, and the nameless accompanying violations. Andrew explains this poem:

'She [Sachs] was in a little flat in Stockholm living with her mother. 'Prayers for the Dead Bride Groom' comes out in her first book. The 'bridegroom' is a man with whom she fell in love at the age of seventeen. But it wasn't going anywhere. They met on holiday. It was a very passionate love affair, which however had no future and we don't know why. We don't know his name, he was tall, but we know nothing about him, almost nothing about him. And

she was very secretive. I think she wanted him to be representative of all the victims... and we also know that he was one of the very first victims of the death camps and that he was involved in the resistance to Hitler. So he is then transmitted into this figure of the dead bride groom.'

Sachs' work is almost entirely a response to the trauma of persecution and exile and she begins this work in her early fifties. The first poems are written while the killing is still going on, in 1942 and 1943. Later though, Andrew explains, Sachs writes to deal with memory:

'Sachs' mental health was fragile to begin with, she suffered from acute paranoid schizophrenia in exile in Sweden and was given electrical shock treatment for it, in the 1960s.'

Andrew describes how one of Sachs' neighbours described her as 'egocentric, but not egoistic'. She was 'extremely vulnerable to paranoia' he says, 'because that is the extreme form of pathological egocentricity.'

But 'that egocentricity gave her the sense that she was the person to take on the task of memorialising the dead.' Sachs was 'broken mentally, but not spiritually', and 'poetry helped her to survive spiritually.'

Unlike many who escaped the holocaust, Sachs didn't want to bury her experiences:

'She, from the beginning, on the contrary wanted to remember, to be open, but it broke her.'

But this was the struggle, to not 'be consumed by resentment or self-pity or those destructive desires for revenge.' Sachs' poetry 'is a struggle to get beyond that.'

This could be considered Sachs' blind riposte to Adorno's question about whether to go on after Auschwitz and it takes the form of a vast, cosmic YES.

Jennifer Hoyer, in her recent book on Sachs' work, explains that her poetry is best not viewed as a set of open signifiers, emerging from an event, but as spaces opened by the words themselves.

Andrew tells me that 'one of the things Sachs does very strikingly in her poetry is to frame the trauma within vast visions of the eternity', within 'the infinite', in 'vast expanses of space'. Her poetry, Andrew says, 'is filled with stars.'

Sachs' work seems to me not to be an attempt to belittle human experience within the vastness of it all, but to connect that experience to the vastness - to plug the experience into that - to make it equivalent with its beautiful, brutal and incommensurable nature:

A planetary sleepwalker is orbiting his star.

The feathered morning
wakes him.
Why's the feather stained with blood?
He remembers –
starts –
and drops the moon.
A snowberry-smash
on agate night:
the universe above is nightmare-stained
all over –

'It is Spinozan', Andrew says, 'to see the world in the perspective of eternity.'

Sachs' work 'doesn't lessen the anguish', it 'spreads it everywhere', Andrew says, but 'it universalises it.'

Her poetry 'is entirely sane', but 'she was not sane' and some of her last poetry 'is written about the experience of being in a psychiatric hospital' and it 'is extremely poignant.'

Andrew then explains the details of Sachs' escape from Nazi Germany, which helps to explain her precarious mental balance very well:

As the crisis in Berlin intensified for the Jewish population – and of course other outlawed individuals and groups - Sachs and her mother were helped by influential gentile friends to get visas. They initially tried to leave by rail, but a Gestapo officer told them not to go by train, as even though they had visas, they were closing the borders and they would not get out that way.

So Sachs and her mother went to the airport to get what is now thought to be the last flight out of Berlin to Sweden until after the war.

Sachs and her mother were extremely lucky. The call to labour camp - and thereafter almost inevitably murder - came through the same week as their visas arrived: 'It was very difficult to get into Sweden at that time and she was very lucky', Andrew tells me.

Sachs' poetry, then, often speaks to our era of refugee crisis, perhaps particularly of those fleeing the middle east for the west:

Should a stranger arrive,
who speaks in a language
sounding a bit like a whinnying mare,
or a chirruping blackbird,
or even a grinding saw
that threatens to slice whatever comes near

Should a stranger arrive
disturbing the dog

and maybe also the rats
and it's winter
– give him warm clothes.

It could be that his feet are on fire underneath.
Say he's been riding a comet.
Therefore don't blame him
if then your poor carpet complains.
A refugee carries his home in his arms like an orphan
for whom he perhaps needs no more than a grave

Before they left, Sachs and her mother went through a series of internal displacements. Their flat was confiscated and they downsized three times until they were in a very squalid place. In this last accommodation, the door was broken open, SS and SA men and their wives burst in and ransacked the place: Their comfortable life was ripped apart.

At this point, Andrew tells me, 'her voice went to the fishes' and that is exactly how she explained it. Sachs could not speak for several days. Andrew thinks that 'her poetry is premised on that being silenced', she is overcoming that, 'she is transformed by that trauma.'

It also seems as if ordinary language is no longer enough, and an intense poetic language must be taken up and developed. Andrew then explains the series 'Ember Riddles', in which Sachs 'takes a tiny fragment', and 'you don't know where it has come from' and 'she wraps it up and it becomes decontextualised' and 'that universalises' the suffering:

Tonight it seems that every seam has frayed,
the gag's been ripped,
the world begins to scream.

The poem which begins this article is part of *Ember Riddles*.

Occasionally though, the metaphors come much closer to Sachs' own flight; the fragile creature, escaped almost impossibly from hell, with the potential to transform the earth:

Dust-icon
of such distant prospects,
gem-schemed
testament
to the blazing innards of the earth,
waving veil, weaving together all our farewells:
butterfly,
good night!

All the weight of life and death
is borne upon your failing wings.

So the rose wilts, so the sun sets.
And so we, too, must make our long way home.

Dust-icon
of such distant prospects,
what majesty is signalled
by your little flight!

Andrew explains - which is a surprise to me - that Sachs did not have a scholarly knowledge of Kabbalah, 'she was simply a poet.' She read Martin Buber, but this was popular material, rather than academic.

'Actually', Andrew adds, 'it is very unclear if she was Jewish or Christian.' She had been brought up completely secular, by a Jewish family in Berlin. She didn't have to confront the issue of being Jewish until the Nazis came along. She thought she was German.

Andrew then talks of an interesting contrast with Sachs in the poet Paul Celan: The two of them were friends; Celan was brought up in what is now the Western Ukraine in a Hasidic environment and lost his faith because of what happened; Sachs was brought up secular and found her faith because of it.

However, Sachs 'didn't attend synagogue regularly' and 'she didn't attend church', 'her faith is simply an intensifier' Andrew thinks, 'but that is a wonderful purpose for faith.'

I point out that Paul Celan was also paranoid, and Andrew thinks that this is actually 'what made them great witnesses in both cases', that 'they just couldn't shut down.'

Andrew then talks of Sachs' relation to Zionism. She wrote poems in praise of Israel - and the return to Israel - but she never went there. Sachs also didn't want to be mobilised by any political project, including Zionism.

When Eichmann was captured in 1961, put on trial and condemned to death, Sachs was in a psychiatric hospital. But she felt emboldened to send a letter to Ben Gurion, then the Prime Minister of Israel. She wrote to ask that Eichmann be spared.

Her friends disagreed with her and thought this a symptom of her condition. Sachs even wrote a poem about this, depicting herself as a madwoman hammering on the floor with her stick. 'She had a sense of humour about herself even when locked away in a psychiatric hospital' Andrew adds.

Sachs wanted no more death, only life.

Jennifer Hoyer cites Rudolf Hartung in 1947, describing how the poetry after the war was 'untimely'. Hartung returns to Adorno's concerns about whether

making poetry could be moral at all, in yet another time of the greatest material need.

Hartung had Gottfried Benn's poetry of supposed aesthetic timelessness in his sights. In any case, it fails. What is meant to make Benn's work 'timeless' puts it in orbit around a collapsing star, as modernity moves in to make it implode.

Sachs' work directly mirrors this gravitational implosion. It is its holy opposite. She crushes the protons and electrons of ordinary language to form charged, neutron constellations, in colours we have never seen before.

Tiny, but impossibly dense, many of the later poems are the afterimages of the collapse of the monstrous swell of Benn and others, and their cultural elevation of nihilism to art.

Benn's work, often influenced by his time as a physician - dissecting corpses - views humanity as simply pathos and disease.

Sachs, although she describes the present as a 'wound ripped open', sees the torn curtain of bloody flesh as proof of the inevitability of life, not death.

I am going to conclude with an extremely bold claim - that this work is now completely timely - and as far as I know Andrew Shanks' translations of it are the best way to absorb it in English.

When I saw the poem by Nelly Sachs at the start of this article for the first time, I knew I had to place it at the front of my work *A Shaken Bible*. This will be published sometime in the near future, by Boiler House Press.

I came across the poem a couple of years ago, in a translation by Andrew Shanks, who I had been speaking with about theology, in relation to my book.

Nelly Sachs escaped the holocaust with her mother in May 1940 by the skin of her teeth. Sachs' post-war poetry tried to pull what was left of the Jewish traditions through the eye of a needle: Through a present moment that had been reduced to a grim corridor, and out into the light of another diaspora.

Her poetry doesn't just will the future into being, it returns like an angel from that future. This sense of intensity and vastness in one was exactly the spirit I wanted to capture. It was exactly why I needed to begin my book with that poem.

Here is the line between poetry and mysticism: As Jennifer Hoyer puts it in her recent book on Sachs, the texts 'are often written in the present tense and destabilize the boundaries between then and now'.

Shanks' translations are so powerful because he has somehow managed to become an intermediary between then and now exactly in the spirit of Sachs' original practice.

Notes

Adorno, T.W. (1981 [1966]) *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Continuum.

Hoyer, Jennifer M. (2018) *The Space of Words, Exile and Diaspora in the Works of Nelly Sachs*. Camden House.

Kovner and Sachs (1971) *Penguin Modern European Poets*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Shanks, Andrew (2018) Andrew has re-translated a lot of Sachs' poems. The Penguin Modern European Poets edition presented very muted translations. Shanks' versions are wide-eyed and alive. You can find them here:

<http://www.nellysachs-translations.org.uk/>

Thanks are due to Andrew for his time and hospitality when creating this article.