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Painting Sand: Nelly Sachs and the *Grabschrift*

German Jewish poet Nelly Sachs (1891–1970) observed in 1948: “So muß ich den Vorwurf vieler Emigranten hinnehmen, die ein Anknüpfen an die Vormartyrium-Tradition verlangen, und sind doch in einer Zeit, die aufgerissen ist wie eine Wunde” (Sachs, *Briefe* 99). In 1950 she remarked, “Wir können einfach nicht mehr die alten verbrauchten Stilmittel anwenden. In keiner Kunst ist das möglich” (Sachs, *Briefe* 110). While these comments appear after the publication of Sachs’s first, and arguably most well-known, postwar volume of poems *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, there is ample evidence that she was concerned already in the early to mid-1940s with the precarious position of demanding a link to tradition, but living in a time that, ripped apart like a wound, could not sustain a closed and seamless approach to art as celebrated by her bourgeois Berlin milieu and European aesthetes, whose models were the ancient Greek and Roman poets. In many of her postwar poems and plays, Sachs confronts and examines the legacy of the humanistic tradition in imaginative writing.¹ The emphasis on the wound and its implications for writing and the poet are keenly felt in Sachs’s cycle of poems *Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben*, “Epitaphs/Gravescripts Written into the Air,” which she began writing in Stockholm by 1943² but which were not published until 1947. These “gravescripts,” as William West and Johannes Anderegg have noted, do not strictly conform to traditional elements of the *epitaph*.³ I argue that they further engage, disassemble, and ultimately reject critical elements of the archaic tradition of the *epitaph* and challenge modern expectations for grave markers and their inscriptions, thereby making a significant statement regarding literary form in the postwar era.

Traditionally the poet’s task depends on what classicist and poet Anne Carson calls “...the epitaphic contract: a poet is someone who saves and is saved by the dead” (Carson 74). The contract is fulfilled primarily in the transmission of the name: “It is we who let them go, for we do not accompany them. It is we who hold them here—deny them their nothingness—by naming their names” (Carson 84–85).⁴ The notion of the artist as immortalizer of the fallen, as the guardian of memory through oral epic or textual memorial, is complicated in the post-Second World War context first by the mass of dead, and then by the Nazi method of dealing with that mass: the crematoria. Sachs confronts the challenge to the suddenly inappropriate closure of the tradi-

tional memorial or gravestone by titling the cycle "*Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben*," and then proceeds to confront the complex role of the artist in creating any sort of an immortalization. She does so first by denying the names of individuals, highlighting that absence through initials, and then by demonstrating that the artist who transforms the body into a representative image or text dismembers the *person*, much as death or the murderer dismembers the *body*. The *sujet* of each poem is disaggregated into fragments. In the post-Holocaust era, in which uncovering, reestablishing, and preserving individual identity attains primary urgency, Sachs's practice of obscuring individual identities, and her implication of the artist in their oblivion, compels the reader to reflect on traditional modes of memorialization.

Poetry before and after Auschwitz

The conundrum of poetic tradition after the war was not exclusive to Nelly Sachs. In 1947, poetry critic Rudolf Hartung characterizes contemporary trends in poetry as a landscape too well-known and traveled, which in the ruined geographical and psychological landscape of postwar Europe proved to be insufficient and unsatisfactory.⁵ Embracing neither an entirely nostalgic ("*Vormartyrium*") nor an entirely "Stunde null" or *tabula rasa* position on poetry after the war,⁶ many of Sachs's poems evoke the styles and conventions of the history of European poetry, yet in a disjointed manner. The scope of tragedy and atrocity in the mid-20th century, powerfully represented in the synecdoche of organized barbarity "Auschwitz," challenged traditional modes of memorializing or poeticizing death. These traditional modes rely on the poet's role in crafting a text that identifies and locates, that bears witness and secures lasting fame. Indeed, the *Grabschriften* and other poems that directly confront atrocity and the long European humanist tradition prefigure Theodor Adorno's thought-provoking observation in his 1955 essay *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*: "Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben" (Adorno 31). That is, Auschwitz signaled a collapse into one another of two otherwise diametrically opposed ideas: civilization (through clarity, form, order), and barbarism, etymologically that which does not speak Greek, the seminal language of civilization. After Auschwitz a poem no longer "speaks Greek," which is to say: some of the major prescriptions for poetry as they came down from Simonides, Pindar, Plato, Aristotle, and Horace (by way of Opitz, Gottsched, Lessing, and Winckelmann) are rendered foreign and unintelligible when confronted with content engendered by or appearing in the wake of the organized barbarity of the Nazi genocide, an observation reflected in Hartung's characterization of poetry in 1947 or Sachs's above-cited letters.

Grabschriften, a 17th-century Germanization coined to preserve German against Greek and Latin in learned discourse that is typically rendered in English as *epitaphs*,⁷ evoke in this cycle both the archaic Greek tradition and modern expectations of the *epitaph*. Looking back to the ancient/archaic tradition, Anne Carson writes, “No genre of verse is more profoundly concerned with seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is, than that of the *epitaph*. An *epitaph* is something placed upon a grave—a σῶμα that becomes a σῆμα, a body that is made into a sign,” the body made text, as it were, or monument (Carson 73).⁸ The monument or sign was not complete in itself, but required, as Jesper Svenbro’s literacy study *Phrasikleia* and William West’s summary of epigraphic tradition point out, the active engagement of the reader or the passerby. The *kléos* (literally that which is heard), the identification in the name of the person, of the war, of the event, of the place, whatever the key text locus, must be completed by the reader, who reads—historically out loud—and thus physically enacts the recalling of the past (Svenbro 4; West 82).

Nelly Sachs makes this impossible in her *Grabschriften* by obscuring any such information. The fixedness of a *sêma* in the form of a material, located *epitaph* came to represent authenticity and the status of a scientific source in later eras of Archeology and Classical Studies; such authenticity and status as a source is reflected in the urgent and painstaking efforts to recover and identify individuals for Holocaust memorials.⁹ But it is this very fixedness that Sachs does away with in the title of the cycle: these *Grabschriften* are not only *not* written in stone, they are being dispersed into the air. In doing so, she rejects a modern and especially postwar expectation of the *epitaph* to bear witness to a person, place, and event; at the same time, she takes up a very ancient concern. The fixedness of the material *sêma* was also contentious for the Greek epitaphic poet Simonides (ca. 556–468 BCE), who valued the textual memorial, and certainly the oral song, above the static *sêma*.¹⁰ Simonides found the fixity of an *epitaph* in stone or a similar material lacking because the context of the marker or location may slip into obscurity over time, and indeed the material itself is subject not only to re-interpretation or appropriation, but also to the (potentially ruinous) elements of nature. In fact, the fixedness of writing was a more general point of critique, since the oral nature of *kléos* allowed for mobility that the *sêma* did not have. But perhaps even more damning, in Plato’s “Phaedrus,” Socrates suggests the following critique while discussing Egyptian god Theuth’s creation of letters:

... this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth... (Plato 323)

This is a warning against placing too much authority in representation. The

fixedness of inscriptions, Socrates/Plato suggests, produces a sense of closure, and passes the mind's work of remembering to an inscription that appears, in its fixedness, to make the individual's task and involvement unnecessary. There is false security in an *epitaph* or Holocaust memorial in which the inscription relieves the reader of the work of remembering. Sachs warns against this in her poems, drawing the reader's attention to the palpable absences in the titles, to the disintegrations in the texts, and by placing in question the representation produced by the painter, or the poet. Sachs appears to take Simonides's and Plato's critique a step further, finally trusting neither the poet nor the monument, as the *Grabschriften* demonstrate.

There is a critical balance both here and in the genre conventions of absence and presence. In Sachs's inversion of another conventional feature of the ancient and modern *epitaph*, the address to the passerby, Anderegg finds a "hinüberreden," a language on the margins that, through poetic form, attempts to transform into a language beyond language. For Anderegg, the poet is addressing the dead, who are otherwise not present in the poems. William West, on the other hand, asserts that "Sachs's poems do not seek, in general, to recover the dead; the dead in her work are already too present and bring too much mourning with them" (West 90). I propose a different reading of Sachs's critical engagement of the genre conventions of the *epitaph*: reading work-immanently and developmentally through the cycle, we find Sachs's conscious engagement with the inadequacy of the fixedness of the *epitaph*, and an ethics of the necessity of reading and writing death after the Second World War. The cycle strikes a balance that neither obliterates nor totally embraces genre conventions, just as it strikes a balance that keeps the dead present, and yet also absent enough to make that absence palpable, simultaneously suspending the possibility of memory as well as forgetting. The dead are present in Sachs's work—but their names are not. Sachs purposely does not name their names, and takes care to point out that she is not naming their names; in so doing, she draws on the not infrequent literary practice of obscuring names, but this is a convention that, in the wake of the Holocaust, strikes the reader as troubling. If nothing else, this discomfort is clear from readers'—ours as well as readers even in the 1940s—desire to fill in those gaps, which Sachs never fills. The dialectical relationship of assembling and disassembling present in the *Grabschriften*'s form and content indicate that the dead are present, but not *too present*. They will remain that way, since Sachs will not allow them either to slip away entirely or to follow the other precarious path that Edmond Jabès, recalling Plato, called the "seal of eternal sleep," that is, of slipping into oblivion by being named, and therefore located (Jabès 4).

It is fruitful to read Nelly Sachs's work beyond the immediate referent of the atrocities of the Holocaust, and Sachs's ongoing critical engagement with literary tradition, visual art, and music¹¹ presents a clear point of disembarkation for such an approach; at the same time, the role of the Holocaust in her

postwar work cannot and should not be avoided, as it is an integral part of her postwar poetics. It seems likely that the *Grabschriften* poems were inspired by the certain but unknowable death of friends and family left behind in Berlin, but it is difficult to establish just what Sachs knew about the extent of the atrocities (although it has been documented that the news of atrocity had reached Sweden in 1942),¹² and when exactly the title of the cycle was created. Indeed there is ultimately no reason to conclude that these poems are mimetic, considering that one of the major themes of the cycle is the inventiveness of the poet. However, the cycle's position within *In den Wohnungen des Todes* indicates that the poems are intended to be read together as a reflection on the complications of death, distance, and writing in the post-Holocaust era—for, although it is unclear what Sachs knew at the time they were written, they were published long enough after the war that any mention of *Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben* would evoke, as do the other poems in the collection, the horrors of and complications following the Holocaust, in particular here for the artist. The *Grabschriften* are as much about literature as they are about the dead.

“Die Malerin [M. Z.]”

The seventh of the thirteen poems, “Die Malerin [M. Z.],” is the poem on which the entire cycle hinges. It is the point in the cycle where the artist's attempt to memorialize the individual (what might be perceived as the clear theme of the cycle) is squarely confronted not only with the artist's inability to do so, but also even the artist's role in *obliterating* the individual, a process in the cycle that is perhaps unclear until the reader has encountered “Die Malerin [M. Z.]” A brief analysis of this poem alone before proceeding to the whole cycle provides a point of access. Its juxtaposition of content to form is programmatic for the process of the entire cycle, depicting the textual and meta-textual immortalization and obliteration of the *sujet* through the transposition of *sujet* and poet, made clear in the poet's slip into the first person when the cycle otherwise addresses “du.”

Die Malerin [M. Z.]

So gingst du, eine Bettlerin, und öffnestest die Tür:
 Tod, Tod wo bist du—
 Unterm Fuß du—
 Zum Schlafmeer mich führ—
 Ich wollte die Liebsten malen
 Sie fangen schon an zu fahlen
 Wie ich den Finger rühr.

Der Sand in meinem löchrigen Schuh

Das warst du—du—du—
 Male ich Sand der einmal Fleisch war—
 Oder Goldhaar—oder Schwarzhaar—
 Oder die Küsse und deine schmeichelnde Hand
 Sand male ich, Sand—Sand—Sand—

(Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose* 42)

This is the only poem of the thirteen in which the lyrical I slips from “du” to “ich,” and indeed, the occupation being described—painter—is mimicked by the poet’s occupation. The questions pondered for the painter are as much aimed at the poet, or perhaps more so, since the poet is alive and performing the very occupation she ponders, in the present tense. Underfoot, in the sand, the *Malerin* can find death.

This is critical in two ways for this reading of the cycle: as one reads, it becomes clear within the reference system of the cycle that “Sand,” which appears in six of the poems—and after reading “Die Malerin [M. Z.],” is implicit in every poem—is dissipated flesh. Since it is disseminated widely (in the world as in the cycle), this is a cue for the significance of the title, “in die Luft geschrieben.” What is left of the dead is not located in a fixed grave, but rather dispersed through the air, always everywhere and thus also underfoot. Upon this observation of death underfoot in the *Sand*, the poet breaks her thought and slips into “ich:” “Ich wollte die Liebsten malen / Sie fangen schon an zu fahlen / Wie ich den Finger rühr” (42). The central question in this cycle appears with this series of lines: what happens when the memorializing artist attempts to commit the body to the canvas? Converts the body into text? To capture an image is intended as preservation, yet what is preserved?—“Sie fangen schon an zu fahlen / Wie ich den Finger rühr.” As soon as the artist’s rendering begins, the real, the memory, the person beyond the interpretation begins to wane, or indeed fall into fragments or kernels of sand.

In the following stanza the physical variant of this process is revisited with renewed anguish, compounded with the metaphysical: “Der Sand in meinem löchrigen Schuh / Das warst du-du-du—” (42). Just as the body is reduced to sand, the artist’s rendering reduces the person to interpretation. In Sachs’s rendering, the person fades as the artist works. As death converts the body to sand, the poet converts the person to text. In this relationship of form to content, the significance of the title of the cycle emerges: if the traditional *epitaph* is to locate and immortalize the dead, these poetic texts are not the *epitaphs*. Rather, like initials mark the absence of the name, these poetic texts mark the absence of the *epitaphs*, which are being written into the air. The scripts on the page function like initials as opposed to the entire name or the entire person—they are *Grabschriften* (and not *GrabINschriften*): scripts on a page that are not inscribed on a grave, but are themselves material, frustratingly shoddily-marked graves. They are the location where the person wanes into initials, into “Sand der einmal Fleisch war— / oder Goldhaar—oder Schwarz-

haar—” whatever is represented in the artist’s rendering, by—and here suddenly the second person briefly returns—“deine schmeichelnde Hand” (42). The sudden switch to the second person, however, is displaced again in the final line of the poem by the first person, a resigned acknowledgement that it is the poet who is painting sand. Consequently, memorials do not preserve the full person, only a part of an interpretation—which is in turn a dismembering, a re-membling. If in the postwar world memory has become extremely urgent, these poems urge the reader to confront the actual process of memory and memorialization.

The *Grabschriften* indicate that Nelly Sachs senses the threat of what Stephen Smith suggests is to “ossify the experience,” what Marvin Prosono calls “ritualization and institutionalization of memory,” or what Dominick LaCapra calls “canonization:” a normalized representation of the Holocaust (Smith 440; Prosono 391; LaCapra 23). LaCapra writes that this “canonization” of traumatic events, including the Holocaust,

involves the mitigation or covering over of wounds and creating the impression that nothing really disruptive has occurred. Thus one forecloses the possibility of mourning, renders impossible a critical engagement with the past, and impedes the recognition of problems (including the return of the repressed). (LaCapra 23)

A memorial one need only confront in one place at one time signifies attempted closure or covering over wounds. This closure, which distances and seals off the event in one location, represents just as pressing a threat to critical engagement as oblivion. Indeed for some, they represent one and the same result: captured and contained in a material memorial, the Holocaust ceases to be immediately and constantly relevant, and, therefore, in need of a remembering that would not be necessary if it *were* immediately relevant.¹³ In other words, ‘memorializing’ is as much a ritual of forgetting as it is remembering.

This is nowhere more evident than in the relationship of initials to a name, Sachs’s poetic choice for the title of each poem in the cycle. Andereg, in his interpretation of “Die Tänzerin [D. H.]” (the fourth poem), remarks, “Aus ihrem Brief an Emilia Fogelklou-Norlind vom 18.7.43 wissen wir, daß Nelly Sachs mit diesem Gedicht ihrer Freundin Dora Horowitz gedenkt, die 1942 auf dem Transport nach Teresienstadt verstarb” (Andereg 138). Actually, in the above-cited letter, we learn the following: “Die Tänzerin: meine Freundin, Gattin des Spinozaforschers. Ganz wunderbare Menschen” (Sachs, *Briefe* 31). Nelly Sachs never tells Emilia Fogelklou-Norlind or the reader who the *Tänzerin* was; in fact, it appears that Fogelklou-Norlind asked, as we do today, about the identities of the individuals in the poems in question, to which Sachs in 1943 replies: “Geliebte Ili, ich danke Dir, daß die Inschriften in Deinem Herzen ruhen durften. Ich will Dir nun zu den einzelnen die Personen hinzusetzen.” Sachs proceeds to describe the individuals briefly, but with the exception of one case, one that did not finally appear in the *Grabschriften* cycle,

she *does not* give their names (Sachs, *Briefe* 30).¹⁴ The probability that [D. H.] is Dora Horowitz is the detective work of Ruth Dinesen and co-editor Helmut Müssener, and not something Sachs ever revealed. We might therefore conclude that Sachs felt that the obscuring of the name was an important component of these poems. While we can never know precisely what Sachs intended, French Egyptian Jewish poet and writer Edmond Jabès, writing from similar circumstances of displacement and crumbling cultural tradition as Sachs, sheds some light on the implications of the initial. In an interview with Marcel Cohen that came to fruition over a long period of months, and might be regarded as more of a text in itself than an interview locked into a specific moment, Jabès writes for us and for Cohen:

The letter is anonymous. It is a sound and a sign. By participating in the formation of the name, it creates, through it, our image. It then ceases to be anonymous and becomes one with us. It espouses our condition or our uncondition, lives and dies from our life and from our death. (Jabès 4)

For Jabès, once the name is completed, the letter allows the illusory perception of a full picture. Jabès adds: “The letter is to being what memory is to forgetting: at the same time the unscrolling of its history and the seal of its eternal sleep” (4). That is to say, it is a reciprocal relationship: the more of the name we have, as it and its history are revealed or “unscrolled,” the less there is to find out. The question (of the name, the identity, the history) becomes answered, and, therefore, ironically, left at peace. It then becomes necessary to remember periodically something that for many could never—and should never—be forgotten. But if it must be remembered, then it must have been forgotten. The representation of memory in Sachs’s poetics, for example in *Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben* but also in later cycles, such as “Melusine” from the 1957 *Und Niemand Weiss Weiter*, indicates that she was among those troubled by the relationship of memory to forgetting. To read these poems is to gaze at the decomposing fragments of the person, not virtuous praise or lament inscribed into a static heroic marker. Such *epitaphs*, the title of the cycle tells us, are not being written here, not now. The cycle is as much about literature in the post-war era as it is about death, as much about the *epitaph* and the *Grabschrift*, about the artist and the reader, as about the dead. The balance here is between what is present in writing, and what is not, and while this has necessary implications for the ethics of memory, it also has implications for artistic tradition and practice. Precisely through this unusual balance of absence and presence, the reader is encouraged to look beyond the script, where the dead would be located, to the air, where they cannot be fixed and are therefore always and everywhere present and immediate.

The Cycle

Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben as a whole has several threads, though not all of them appear in every poem. The structure of the titles is consistent and of critical significance for the process of the cycle, that is, how it performs its content. Each poem does carry a title, which is rather the exception in Sachs's body of work, each one in two distinct parts: first an occupation¹⁵ (either a profession or nominalized adjective in the nominative case, as opposed to accusative, which would be "about" or "for," or dative, indicating direct address), and then a set of brackets containing initials: "Der Hausierer [G. F.];" "Die Markthändlerin [B. M.];" "Der Spinozaforscher [H. H.];" "Die Tänzerin [D. H.];" "Der Narr [H. F.];" "Die Schwachsinnige [B. H.];" "Der Ruhelose [K. F.];" "Der Marionettenspieler [K. G.];" "Die Malerin [M. Z.];" "Die Abenteuererin [A. N.];" "Der Steinsammler [E. C.];" "Die Ertrunkene [A. N.];" "Die Alles Vergessende [A. R.]" The titles are both generalizing and reductive, which, in an era of urgency to recover the individual, is ultimately troubling: on the one hand, they might refer to anyone who fit the category; on the other hand, they—the individuals as well as the names—are narrowed, reduced to two letters in brackets, as an aside. Both parts of the title serve a common purpose, to obscure an individual, by defining them through an occupation and then locating them first in an afterthought [brackets], then in two letters, followed by periods, thus marking for the reader the absence of something that *could have been* included, but that the poet has consciously chosen to obscure. Even attempts to unearth the identities in the initials were met with further imprecise descriptions by Sachs, indicating that the absence was purposefully maintained by the poet, intended to be felt by the reader. The manner of death is never specified, unless the reader concludes, as Anderegg suggests one might, "Den Zyklustitel...als Hinweis darauf lesen, daß der Rauch der Verbrennungsöfen die einzige 'Grabschrift' der im KZ Ermordeten war," or if one understands the cycle as a continuation and extension of the *Schornsteine* of the first poem in *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, which has the effect of reflecting two aspects of atrocities of the 20th century: the obscurity of nameless victims and the general uncertainty of actual causes of death (Anderegg 146). They encourage active work of remembering in the reader while underscoring the shortcomings of the conventions vis-à-vis postwar memorializing.

The titles of the *Grabschriften* poems reflect the major thread of the cycle that appears in most of the poems, namely the dissipation of an individual—underscored linguistically by the inclusion of "ver-" verbs in eleven of the thirteen poems—into smaller increments related to their occupation, ultimately to a small signifier, i.e., a body part or other representative image, which is then erased by the final line of the poem. The *Grabschriften* cycle is punctuated with the poem "Die Alles Vergessende [A. R.]: she who forgets everything. This is the final marker of disappearance, the last poem in which

everything is forgotten: word and object (reference and referent, signifier and signified, and in the context of *epitaphs*, *sêma* and *sôma*—sign and body). In the title of the final poem, the woman *is* forgetting everything, a process that, like the title of the entire cycle, continues eternally, and leaves behind the riddle of fragmented relics, be they initials, occupations, or material related to an occupation. It is notable that not only the emphasis on the name and locus—so central to the epitaphic tradition—are undeniably and consciously left unfulfilled in this cycle, but also that a corresponding mistrust of the poet who deals in immortalization through “the epitaphic contract” is undeniably developed (Carson 74). Rather than preserving a whole, the poet’s invocations disassemble the person into meaningless fragments.

“Der Hausierer [G. F.]” and “Die Markthändlerin [B. M.]” which begin the cycle, comprise not so much portraits as descriptions of their lives in the context of their occupations. The *Hausierer*, whose occupation depends on wandering and selling, wanders not only from customer to customer, but wanders from birth to death, and finally: “Doch deine FüÙe, längst gewohnt das Wandern / WuÙten nun den Weg, den andern” (*FiS* 34). This other path is a disembodiment into death, beginning with the occupational eyes that reflect an encounter, and ending with the hands: “Deine Augen, die die Elle abgemessen / Tauten Spiegel aus dem längst Vergessen. / Deine Hände, die die Münze nahmen / Starben wie zwei Beter mit dem Amen” (34). Not only is his life defined through his occupation as a merchant, his death begins as a business transaction as well, as Death comes to him as a customer: “Der Tod kam deinen Kram besehn” which, considering the further development of the cycle, can be read either literally that Death came to see the *Hausierer*’s literal “Kram,” or his metaphorical “Kram,” in essence the bits that make him up, whether that represents the coins he takes, the hands that take them, or the grains of sand that he and every other body in the cycle are (34). The *Markthändlerin* is stationary, but herds her customers to her: “Sanfte Tiere zu verkaufen war dein Tun auf einem Markt auf Erden, / Lockendes sprachst du wie eine Hirtin zu den Käuferherden” (35). In the final lines she, like the *Hausierer*, is reduced to fingers, bloody red (red with parting, or “abschiedsrot”) from the fish she kills and sells: “Deine Finger, das blutge [sic] Geheimnis berührend und abschiedsrot / Nahmen die kleinen Tode hinein in den riesigen Tod” (35). Whereas Death came to shop with the *Hausierer*, the *Markthändlerin* touches the encounter daily—in this poem it is “das Geheimnis,” in the *Hausierer* poem it is “das Vergessene.”

It is in “Die Markthändlerin [B. M.]” that the first *clear* mention of an obscured signifier appears: “Umstrahlt von heimkehrenden Fischen im Tränen-gloriengewand / Versteckten FüÙen der Tauben die geschrieben für Engel im Sand” (35). These grammatically challenging lines obscure the relationships between the feet and that which is written in sand; it also appears to give a pedestrian meaning for *Sand*, as something on the ground that soaks up the

“abschiedsrot.” What remains unclear is what is “umstrahlt” by what: whether the *Markthändlerin* or the “geschrieben für Engel im Sand” is illuminated by the fish going home, or whether the hidden feet of pigeons write or hide the writing. Whatever the case, the lines perform something of their own content, in that they obscure through lack of grammatical clarity that which is written. These two opening poems distinguish themselves from the rest of the cycle in their literal economics. The *Hausierer* and the *Markthändlerin* engage in material sale and commodified death, and while things die around them, they preserve themselves: while “Sand leerte sich aus einem Kinderschuh—” the *Hausierer* “[nahm] an Angst wie an Gewichten zu” (34); the *Markthändlerin* seduces her consumer herds to the slaughter of fish at her booth. Ultimately both persons, about whom we learn only that they were successful merchants, are reduced to the fragments of their trade: hands, coins, fingers, blood. Their names are obscured, their meanings are obscured. They are dismembered rather than remembered.

“Der Spinozaforscher [H. H.]” takes up the element of acquisition from the first two poems (for example of money, of customers), though here it is an economy of information: “Du last und hieltest eine Muschel in der Hand,” rather than coins or blood (36). Where the fingers of the *Markthändlerin* were “abschiedsrot,” the evening for the *Spinozaforscher* is “Abschiedsrose” (36). Where the *Hausierer*’s eye was the place of encounter with the “Vergessene,” the *Spinozaforscher*’s room becomes a place of encounter with “Ewigkeit,” with the “Vergangene.” Depiction of a person here is replaced with moments that hover between the literal and the literary: “Der Leuchter brannte in dem Abendschein; / Du branntest von der fernen Segnung” (36). Here, a candelabra burns at dusk, paralleling the metaphorical burning of the reading soul touched by the encounter with the text; or in a less literary mode, the room has been set alight, and its occupant literally burning transforms the room (as opposed to the eye or the business of gutting fish) into the space for the encounter with, alternately, “Ewigkeit,” “Vergangene,” and “Begegnung” (36). Taking the cue from the *Markthändlerin* that “abschiedsrot” signifies bloody parting, “zart[e] Abschiedsrose” at dusk is no ordinary lamp, but arson. The *Spinozaforscher* is consumed with his work, with the words of his forefathers (“Ahnenschrein”), either in ecstatic study or in flames. The “Ahnenschrein” is all that is left—words on a page (36). The *Spinozaforscher* has himself become a text.

“Die Tänzerin [D. H.]” recalls the *Hausierer* as a wanderer, but “Deine Füße [sic] wußten wenig von der Erde, / Sie wanderten auf einer Sarabande” (37). Already in the first words of the poem she is located in her occupation’s central feature, her feet, and while the *Hausierer* wandered the earth, the *Tänzerin* wandered a path of music. To characterize the *Tänzerin*’s wandering, the poet superimposes the image of the butterfly on the dancer, “Der Verwandlung sichtbarstes Zeichen” (37)—a clever choice for the fragmentation that under-

lies the cycle, as “schmettern” (to shatter) is the root of *Schmetterling*. The *Tänzerin* is, poetically, a “Schmetterling”—not only a butterfly, but also a “shattering thing” or “shatterling,” an ultimate self-destructing *sêma*, or in Sachs’s terms, “Zeichen,” for the process of “Verwandlung.” The poet then comments with eerie doting, “Wie bald solltest du ihn erreichen—” (ihn being in this case *der Schmetterling*) (37). The poet interrupts her own thought to recount the transformation of the butterfly: “Raupe und Puppe und schon ein Ding // In Gottes Hand,” and then superimposes the transformation of the dancer-cum-shatterling: “Licht wird aus Sand” (37). It is in this poem that the implication of *Sand* as the principal property of the human body, most clearly represented in “Die Malerin [M. Z.],” emerges; but if the butterfly is “der Verwandlung sichtbarstes Zeichen,” what of the *Zeichen* of the *Tänzerin*, whose signifier (*Sand*), the shattered *sêma*, has become light (37)? Instead of being located in one marked place, it is everywhere—in light, and thus in air, as the title *Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben* suggests. Sachs’s cycles tend to include periodic resting points, poems that act as a *da capo* for the cycle; this poem, up to this point in the cycle perhaps the most visible performance of *in die Luft geschrieben* in its intensified meta-language, urges a return to the beginning to re-read within the reference system of the cycle.

The cycle continues with “Der Narr [H. F.]” and “Die Schwachsinnige [B. H.]” Where the cycle began with occupations related to specific activities, there are now “occupations” in the sense of behaviors that define the subjects, behaviors which, in this case, develop the epigrammatically appropriate theme of that which is seen and that which is not,¹⁶ and imply that “seeing” is dependent on the sensibility of the reader. The *Narr* appears to be a guileless—or simply foolish—psychic, ostensibly capable of seeing and perceiving things others cannot, but at the expense of seeing what others see. Here it is a question of reading the signs: “Die Kröte mit dem Mondenstein / Sah zur Mitternacht in dein Fenster hinein. // Da hättest du die Musik der Welten gehört— / Aber du schiefst weiter, nur wenig gestört” (38). The *Narr* could have read the signs of the stars and cards—as suggested in the second to last line, “Wahrsager, der Träume und Karten mischt”—but ignored the music of the worlds, and continued to sleep (both literal sleep, but also sleep of obliviousness or blissful unawareness) (38). Standing between night and day, on the “Dämmerungsbrücke beim Hahnenschrei” (an invocation of the *Spinozaforscher*’s “Ahnenschrein” and the last desperate cry of premonition that goes unheeded by the insensitive or senseless), a moment that the reader recalls from the *Spinozaforscher* and the *Markthändlerin* as the moment of death, the *Narr* is coddled in the same eerily doting manner applied to the *Tänzerin*: “Hattest du vom Fischfang der Nacht keine Beute dabei” (38). In his effort to acquire, unlike the *Hausierer*, the *Markthändlerin*, and the *Spinozaforscher*, he is unsuccessful, and thus he is ironically the prophet who was unable to predict and avoid his own demise: “Wahrsager, der Träume und Karten mischt / Und

dem ein Wind sein Licht verlischt" (38). In the last line this poem picks up where the *Tänzerin* left off: her *Sand* became *Licht*; his *Licht* is "verlischt" (38). Another signifier (*Licht*) and signified (the person) is obliterated, left marked only by this body of text. "Die Schwachsinnige [B. H.]" is perhaps more perplexing than the other poems in the cycle for its brevity, but it simply states the effect (the cause is yet to come): her "Zeichen verschwand" as she climbed a mountain of sand and slid down (39). Considering that sand has overwhelmingly borne the meaning of flesh in the cycle, but that the poem presents just enough context to make the absence of sufficient context palpable, "Die Schwachsinnige [B. H.]" performs in an exemplary fashion the question of the relationship of memory to forgetting. The reader is left with the poetic depiction, which provides so little that a ritual of memorial or forgetting is neutralized.

The behavioral occupations continue in the poem "Der Ruhelose [K. F.]," who is a wanderer on all sorts of "Landstrassen" [sic], among them paths that point into the past, and into Sachs's poetic past (40). "In die blaue Ferne," "Berge," "Sterne," and "Apfelbaumalleen" are all direct links to Sachs's writings of the early 1930s, links that are unrecognizable for many, since those earlier texts are not easily accessible for readers (40). The paths into a distant and romanticized past grow increasingly "enger und enger," until they are torn apart and they fall away again entirely: "Wie im Ziehharmonikaspiel // Wurden sie wieder auseinandergerissen—" (40). The accordion lends a *völkisch* irony to the romantic paths that are closed and ripped apart, and a folksy façade to the destructive progress of time (signified by an hourglass—the passing of flesh is evoked here, as well) that extinguishes the tracks, the signifiers: "Windmühlen schlagen wie Stundenuhren / Die Zeit; bis sie verlöscht die Spuren" (40).

"Der Marionettenspieler [K. G.]" returns the reader to occupations defined by an activity, this one essentially a storyteller with his hands, which are his ultimate *Zeichen*, rendered silent in the final line. He is also a collector: "Die weite Welt war zu dir eingegangen / Mit Sand im Schuh und Ferne an den Wangen. // Am Sonnenfaden zogst du sie herein / Da ruhte sie auf deinem Meilenstein" (41). As the rest of the line suggests, he is a weigh station along the path where the weary world, replete with bodies under foot and distance in its cheeks, could tell its stories with his guidance, another nod to the power of the artist (41). The following three stanzas comprise a list of stories told, leading to the final stanza: "So tanzte Erde rund mit ihrer Sternmusik / Auf deiner Hand; bis sie verlassen schwieg" (41). Since all three, "Hand," "Erde," and "Musik" are feminine nouns, all three might be the "sie" that is either left or forsaken ("*verlassen*") and has thus fallen silent. The occupation in this poem relies heavily on signifiers: it is itself a signifier, a "Meilenstein" providing meaning to some part of the wandering world's path by telling its story through other signifiers: masks and marionettes (41).

Following the *Marionettenspieler* is the critical *da capo* of the cycle: “Die Malerin [M. Z.],” in which the poet directly confronts her own role in the disaggregation of the body and person by interrogating the artist, who is supposed to save, and be saved, by the dead. As the individuals are lost, so the expectation for and convention of the *epitaph*, the literal writing in stone, the literary genre of immortalization, is challenged; *epitaphs* are being ‘written,’ that is, are burnt and dispersed, into the air (perhaps dissipated by the windmill of the *Marionettenspieler*) with the countless, nameless dead of the KZ. *Grab-schriften*, gravescripts, the script that is the death of the *sujet* under the flattering hand of the painter who paints sand, exist on the page. They are the fixed *sêma* that threaten to ‘unscroll,’ as Jabès notes, and seal the sleep of the stories of the world. The poet has one last troubling, but—to the sensitized reader—appropriate gesture: the initials. And so, bearing the last line of the poem in mind: “Sand male ich, Sand—Sand—Sand—,” the reader can return to the beginning and read through the poems again, and see the sand being painted toward this one key poem, see the *sêma* and *sôma* fading, the *Vergessen*, the *Vergangen*, the *Verlicht*, the *Verkauft*, the *Versteckt*, the *Verwandelt*, the *Verschwunden*, the *Verlöscht*, the *Verlassen*, to this poem, “Die Malerin [M. Z.],” the only poem in the cycle without a prefix verb of disaggregation or destruction (42). The reader can then continue on, reading the gravescripts that follow.

“Die Abenteurerin [A. N.]” shifts the cycle from primarily visually oriented signs to sound. The *Abenteurerin* plays with nothing more than “Wasserbällen / Die lautlos an der Luft zerschellen” (43). A soundless echo burst into fragments mimics much of the content of this poem, made up of stanzas that read like interjectory answers in a conversation to which the reader is not privy (Wohl—, aber—, doch—), and that nonetheless ends in silence (43). In this poem signifiers and signifieds do not disappear with “ver-;” the signifier of the *Abenteurerin*, the waterballs, disappears in silent, utter annihilation—“zer”-“schellen.” In this the *Abenteurerin* recalls the *Markthändlerin*, who likewise dealt daily in silent annihilation, but of fish rather than water. As in the *Markthändlerin* poem, the reader is presented here with a grammatically confusing stanza: “Aber das siebenfarbige Licht / Gab jeder sein Gesicht” (43). The reference to color spectrum—another articulation of parts distinct from a whole—recalls the work of the painter, in particular in the giving of meaning, whether *Gesicht* is read as “face” or as “vision;” the color spectrum, a breakdown of light (recalling the *Tänzerin* and preparing the reader for the *Steinsammler*, both linked to light), is the means of all vision and thus all appearance. The “jeder” presents something of a challenge, since it implies the dative feminine. It is unclear what the antecedent would be, which might be read as another indicator that this is a conversation, the other side of which the reader does not see. “Doch”—whatever else may happen, the last adventure is silent, like the bursting waterballs: “Still; eine Seele ging aus dem Feuer”

(43). Another signified and signifier *lautlos zerschellt*.

The next poem, "Der Steinsammler [E. C.]," is a list of items collected by the *Steinsammler*, all of which are signifiers of a time, a thing passed on, and yet caught in some particularity of that which they once were:

Wieviel Morgenröten im Berylle
Wieviel Fernen im Kristalle scheinen

Mit der Biene, die auf einer Wicke
Abertausendjährgen [sic] Honig braute,
Doch Opal mit seinem Seherblicke
Längst dein Sterben dir schon anvertraute. (44)

As with the *Narr*, it is a case of reading signs, although it appears the *Steinsammler* has understood, and is resigned to his fate. In fact, he is so familiar with this passage, since it is *anvertraut*—im-part-ed—to him, that: "Du, aus Menschennächten losgebrochen / Sprichst die Lichtersprache aus den Rissen— / Die man spricht, wenn das Gehäus durchstoßen / Und von der wir nur die Funken wissen" (44). Here is a person who is sensitive and attuned to the language of light conveyed by the shatterling/dancer—the *Lichtersprache*—someone who can see the *Zeichen* and interpret them. He, too, is now a body made text, the *Steinsammler* reading and speaking the *Lichtersprache aus den Rissen* like his bees brewing thousand-year-old honey. Even knowing the language, reading the signs ("... von der wir nur die Funken wissen"), is not a deterrent, and is a skill lost without the sensitive and engaged reader (44).

This is followed by the pearl-diving "Die Ertrunkene [A. N.]," who seeks the lost (*verloren*) signifiers of her birth. Her soul is "meerumspült," rather than going out of the fire and into the air, it is trapped under water, where her wound—her signifier—illuminates the fish (45). It is sunk in the deep, perhaps, as is so often the case in these gravescripts, the result of overindulgence in an occupation (*à la* the *Spinozaforscher*, the *Narr*, perhaps even the *Steinsammler*). In her case, the *Ertrunkene* sought pearls too dedicatedly, in a place where only the fish, "die Engel der Tiefe" (recalling the *Markthändlerin*: "... die geschrieben für Engel im Sand") are illuminated by her wound (45; 35). It is a warning, too, to those who would seek a fixed location or idea, instead of heeding the signs all around them.

The final poem of the cycle is "Die Alles Vergessende [A. R.]." This is the artist's final gravescript—she who *is forgetting* everything:

Aber im Alter ist alles ein großes Verschwimmen.
Die kleinen Dinge fliegen fort wie die Immen.

Alle Worte vergaßt du und auch den Gegenstand;
Und reichtest deinem Feind über Rosen und Nesseln die Hand.
(46)

Reciprocally, the *Alles Vergessende* has caused her own end, which, along with any hope for clarification, is now and forever buried in this text: “Alle Worte vergaßt du und auch den Gegenstand; / Und reichtest deinem Feind über Rosen und Nesseln die Hand” (46). She forgot the signifier and the signified; now her own signifier is pared down into *Verschwimmen*, unclear and reduced to the most basic and inarticulate signifier, or in this case *Gegenstand*, of the name, and of the individual, the initial: [A. R.].

Eternal sleep, laying the dead to rest, is not what these poems aim for. Only the initials are present, and Sachs never brought forth their names, thus preventing their being fixed, located, and therefore resisting closure. Can it be, then, that even as these texts, these gravescripts, are the decomposing bodies under the flattering hand of the painter, their history is left just ‘unscrolled’ enough as to not need remembering, because they cannot be forgotten? The riddle—hinted at in “Der Marionettenspieler [K. G.]”—is left standing in the initials, keeping the question of the individual hovering in uncertainty, to perpetually pose the questions, who is the subject, and how is the memorializer performing her task. The resistance against closure is an early indication of Sachs’s developing critique of memory, which, if one follows her poetics, indicates that memory is only necessary where something has been forgotten. If the riddle is kept in place, there is no closure, and therefore no possibility to forget. It is in this turn that the *epitaph* is undone: there is no closure, there can be no closure; there is no memory, because the questions (of the name, the identity, and the history) are still present. We as readers still wonder ‘who,’ ‘what,’ and ‘when.’ One cannot forget what still cannot, will not be known. Sachs appears to be drawing on this idea in an effort to offset the deadly power of the artist’s flattering hand. The subjects remain a mystery, requiring the search of the pearl-diver and the skill of the stone collector, who, fixed in their intellectual search to fill in the gaps, perish in their inability to act, to move on the relevance of the relics they sought to collect—a relevance that was immediate, and in the air. Nelly Sachs’s poetics suggest that so long as they are not known, they cannot be forgotten; and perhaps most importantly, her poetics suggest that we the readers must always be looking into the air and into the sand to search for and read what is always being written there, and to read its immediate relevance.

Notes

¹ Sachs’s earliest postwar works in particular are rich with interrogations of literary traditions, for example of Aristotelian unity in her plays, of the tradition of the Christian mystery play in *Eli, ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels*, or of the Romantic pathos of heroism in the first poem of *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, “O die Schornsteine.”

² A letter to Emilia Fogelklou-Norlind dated July 18th, 1943 is the first mention in Sachs’s published letters of the cycle that eventually became “Grabschriften in die Luft

geschrieben." See Sachs, *Briefe der Nelly Sachs* 30–32.

³ See Anderegg 137-48 and West 77-104.

⁴ See also Svenbro 3ff. The sources in note 9 also discuss the importance of identification in epigraphy.

⁵ See Hartung 378-382.

⁶ The two extremes in this period were represented in particular by exile scholar Walter Berendsohn, who urged a return to the humanistic tradition preserved by German exiles; and Alfred Andersch, whose *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung* accuses humanism of failing to prevent National Socialism and advocated starting over from *tabula rasa*. See Alfred Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung: Ein Beitrag zur Analyse der Literarischen Situation* (Karlsruhe: Verlag Volk und Zeit, 1946); and Walter A. Berendsohn, *Die humanistische Front: Einführung in die deutsche Emigranten-Literatur. Erster Teil; Von 1933 bis zum Kriegsausbruch* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1946). Sachs hovers between these positions, such that, for example, the *epitaph* is still recognizable, its task still clear, but challenged by the grim realities of mass murder.

⁷ There is something quite daring reflected, if not intended, in the word *Grabschriften*, itself a politically-intended rejection of the dominance of Latin and Greek in favor of developing the German language and preserving it from sterilization while attempting to free it from the historical judgment of "barbaric." This lends a certain irony to the entire cycle that I cannot be sure was intended, but bears mention.

⁸ See also Svenbro 14-17.

⁹ On the authenticity and the status of a scientific source of a *sêma* in later eras of Archeology and Classical Studies, see Alison Cooley, ed. *The Afterlife of Inscriptions: Re-using, Rediscovering, Reinventing & Revitalizing Ancient Inscriptions* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2000); and Elizabeth Hallam & Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

¹⁰ D. Thomas Benediktson remarks on this along with other studies that posit Simonides's preference for the poem over the monument in *Literature and the Visual Arts in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2000) 17. I am indebted to Dr. Alexandra Pappas for drawing my attention to this. Thanks also to Dr. Jeffrey L. High for his insightful reading.

¹¹ Invocations, references, and restructuring of themes and forms occur throughout Sachs's work, about which remarkably little has been written. They vary widely, from musicology (the Pythagorean music of the spheres, for example) and sculpture (Laokoon), to folk- and fairytales (Melusine, Genofefa) and painting (Bosch, Munch).

¹² See Koblik.

¹³ For discussions of the Holocaust and conceptions of time and memory, see, among others: Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986); Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992); Carson; Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Edmond Jabès, "Cut of Time," *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, Pierre Joris, Anthony Rudolf, and Keith Waldrop (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1991) 21–27, and "From the Desert..."; Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998); and LaCapra.

¹⁴ See Sachs, *Briefe* 30–32.

¹⁵ The representation of occupations is not uncommon for Jewish gravestones, since family names were often linked to occupations, but I am not certain if Sachs is consciously aware of this. See Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*, Foreword by Chaim Potok (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993).

¹⁶ See Carson 73.

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