

Hanna Strack:

“O hour of births”. The imagery of “Birth” in Nelly Sachs’ poems and its meaning in our culture

The poet

In poems by Nelly Sachs, we frequently encounter the image of “birth” in the whole width of experience: *ovary, all-consuming conception, bud of birth, we, the unborn, stillbirth, embryo, mother fluid, the night giving birth to stars, birth of dreams, hour of births, the scream of the firstborn, helper in birth, the body of birth, bearing the world, woman in labor, tin of birth, umbilical cord, miles of birth and death, the air-born, cradle, golden nurse, black nurse, soul nurse...*

Leonie was born in Berlin on December 10th, 1891 as the only child of a middle-class Jewish family. The mother used to tell stories and tales to the child, and the father played the piano while the little girl danced to it. Later, she writes: *“Dancing was my way of expression even before there were words... dreamed-up dancing movements, the early longing to break free of the invisible dungeon through dance.”*

At the age of 17, Nelly – as she is nicknamed – falls in love with an older man. But it is to be an unfulfilled love. As a result, she refuses to eat, and even back then it is writing that shows her the way back into life. Words become her *arrow of longing*.

In 1939, she sees her loved one, a resistance fighter, again in a Gestapo interrogation – a “terrible entanglement” as she calls it, because she has to witness his agony and his death. Only her mother knows what really happened, and that it put a burden of guilt on her shoulders. For five days, Nelly Sachs loses her voice, which has *“fled to the fish.”*

The National Socialists’ grip of death also deprives her, living intimately with her mother after the death of her father, of air to breathe. Both manage to flee to Stockholm at the last moment.

In 1947, the East Berlin publishing house “Aufbau” publishes the volume of poetry *In the apartments of death*. *Eclipse of Stars* is published in Amsterdam in 1949. Her collected poems *Journey into Dustlessness* are published in Frankfurt in 1961.

Initially, Nelly Sachs had not been widely received in Germany, but she was turned into a kind of saint after the Eichmann trial of 1962. In 1966, at the age of 75, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Being haunted by persecution mania, Nelly Sachs was hospitalized repeatedly. She died on May 12th, 1971 in Stockholm.

In a letter dating back to the year 1966, Nelly Sachs explains the background of her poetry: *“...the terrible events that lead myself to the brink of death and darkness were my mentors. How should I ever have dealt with anything else – my metaphors are my wounds. It is only through them that one can understand my work.”* What she refers to here is both her personal fate and the Holocaust her people suffered. And therefore, Hilde Domin

wrote in an epilogue to an edition of selected poems: “Nelly Sachs was the great undertaker of those millions of deaths, those dead people who were defiled even as corpses... Their funeral was also their resurrection in words. Had it been words of hatred, nobody would have been saved. The fact that they were words of love made them paschal.”

The topic

Nelly Sachs’ poems and prose, written in exile, circle around one topic: longing launches its arrows from the world of guilt, death and dying into the world of life and love. It is the transition from a terrible, painful world to a world of peace, a world where people can breathe, a breakthrough that needs to be effected over and over again.

Over and over again, a new birth happens, a resurrection, because through writing, the poet can be born again, can be resurrected again and again. It is breathtaking to observe how Nelly Sachs writes and re-writes this topic as if every poem was the first and only one. The words she finds for the horror at once unveil and hide.

The style of her poetry hints at the desperate search for that which saves lives. It is characterized by the dissolution of boundaries, by the inclusion of the universe, by a disharmonious world of images, by the urge to intensify and by being absolutely affected. Death breaking through to life is a true birth every time. Here, the images with all their facets find their place. In her poem “Whither O Whither”, she writes:

*you, universe of longing ...
while the soul, folded, waits
to be born again
under the ice of the death mask.*

The metaphor of birth

Nelly Sachs had read the mystic Jakob Böhme, the “teacher of my adolescence” as she calls him, who states that “life is born in the midst of death”. Nelly Sachs’ equalization of birth and resurrection seems to have its roots here.

Birth – life – death: that is the natural sequence of our existential experience. But with her original metaphors, images and unexpected combinations of words, often in the form of genitive compositions, Nelly Sachs drafts that other sequence that arose from her terrible experience: death – birth – life.

In 1947, she writes: “*And so I also or even better believe, and have felt it forever, how the forces that sprung from suffering gather in the infinite to give birth to something ‘new’, that love has the power to create worlds, and I have truly lived the words of the astral constellation of blood.*”

In procreation and conception, poetic words can begin once again. But this beginning is in danger: The *power of procreation* needs to *spell out its birth of the stars* first. Words enable birth. Then, *a root forest of letters sows god's first word in an all-consuming conception* – root being an expression used in romantic literature to describe god's descent. Already with conception, a future can begin, because *the secret of the seed, once thrown, already has its roots in the future*.

The home of the embryo is the amniotic fluid, which Nelly Sachs calls *mother fluid*. According to a Hasidic tradition, it carries a light on its head: *before once again light dawned over the bud of birth of the embryo*. This light already alludes to resurrection: *but above your head / the sea's star of certainty / with the arrows of resurrection / shines in a ruby red*.

This prenatal era is still characterized by non-redemption, as the suffering Job is still *wrapped in the body of birth of the stars*. We are yet *the unborn* in a dark womb, in *dreams that are our ground earth / where our black nurse the night lets us grow*. But nothing is ever unambiguous, there is always a threat: *The golden nurse, the sun, may nurture us to despair, so that we, too, must sink*. We long for birth, *clutching sucking algae in the mother fluid*, we wait in *sleeping bodies for the flaming bite of the parturient*, but nothing is safe in birth, and so *the lonesome wind is the sole helper in birth*. But then, at dawn, while *the mother gives birth in agony*, with the *first rib of Adam a new person is formed*. Once again, Adam is a woman. With her pathetic exclamation *O hour of births*, the poet summons the new person to the longed-for world of love.

AT DAWN,
while a bird practices its wake –
then is the hour of longing of all the dust
that death left behind.

O hour of births,
laboring in agony to form
the first rib of a new child.

Beloved, the longing of your dust
rushes through my heart.

The dissolution of boundaries is continued in another stanza: *In the shiver of births, resurrection is celebrated*. The picture always includes the possibility that birth will not lead into live, but remains an illusion: *puppets hanged in a tree and the larvae of stillbirths*. But Jacob Israel, who struggles with an angel, is *a person released into blessedness*. The child, too, rushes to be born.

Embryo of dreams in the womb,
knocking.

*The creating air slowly covers itself
with the skin of a new birth.*

The child is born and remains tied to the mother with the umbilical cord. The latter can be *painful*, because it forms *the return path of homesickness*.

*IT THROWS the umbilical cord
at the wall of the temple
from the bloody spray of birth*

The newborn nurses at the mother's breast or the breast of a nurse. *The night brims over with mother's milk*. The child rests in its cradle, which is meant to be a place of security:

*O that someone may mean death when saying life
and may mean blood when saying cradle –*

Lovers create heaven, they give birth to the world of peace, because *in the secret of a moan the unsung song of peace may bud*. Peace – *you, quietest of all births*. In a letter, Nelly Sachs writes: "Love is the explosive of the soul that immediately builds bridges."

*The looks of torn-apart lovers are
what creates heaven, giving birth to the world.*

Nelly Sachs is a prophet and a psalmist. In her notion of god, however, there is nothing static. Because *once again, god is ready to travel*. And all of a sudden, it might happen: *called wordlessly / something divine boards the ship*.

And Nelly Sachs is searching for god. She says so herself in a letter: "*But I know nothing and understand less and less. Suffering and loving and yearning. Which religion does that belong to? Religion, this man-made building constructed around a core of ambers. And a core of souls.*"

I will now take a closer look at **the poem DANCER** with you. Composed in six stanzas, it is essentially based on the image of "birth".

*DANCER
like a bride
you conceive
from blind space
the sprouting longing
of distant days of creation –
With the streets of your body's music
you feed upon the air
there*

*where the globe of earth
is seeking new access
to birth.*

*Through
night lava
like
eyelids opening gently
the first cry of creative volcanoes
blinks.*

*In the branches of your limbs
the premonitions
build their twittering nests.*

*Like a milkmaid
at dusk
your fingertips pull
the hidden sources
of light
until you, pierced by the
torment of evening,
surrender your eyes
to the moon for her vigil.*

*Dancer
woman in childbirth
you alone
carry on the hidden navel string
of your body
the identical god-given jewels
of death and birth.*

Nelly Sachs wrote this poem in the 1950ies for Dora Howitz, her childhood friend who went missing in Riga.

Nelly Sachs is a dancer herself. The background of this poem is her personal tragedy, her humiliation and guilt, and the million-fold death of the Jewish people. In one letter, she uses the same linguistic images that she employs in this poem: *“I believe in pain, or in souls penetrating dust as an activity to which we line up. I believe in an invisible universe into which we draw our dark deeds. I feel the energy of light that makes a stone crack with music, and I suffer in my body from the terrible arrowhead of longing that hits us fatally in the very beginning and pushes us to search on the outside, in places where insecurity begins to cascade.”*

The poem’s stanzas are of different length. Unity is formed by addressing a “you” and by using birth as the overall background of the poem.

1. stanza

The dancer is the addressee, spoken to directly in the first and in the last stanza: *“Like a bride you conceive”*, and in the end: *“You are a woman in childbirth and carry the identical jewels of death and birth”*.

It is the world of life, the world of love and peace that is already the aim of the young dancer’s longing. This world has to be created, it has to be born. This new creation lies in the faraway future. But already here and now, the longing for it is budding, and with this longing, it begins to be, just as a child begins to be with conception. The dancer already carries the seed of the longed-for life. But there is darkness still, there is night like a room of blindness.

2. stanza

In dance, body and music unite in ever-changing movements. Just as in psalm 23, the praying man is lead on the right path to the willow and to fresh water, dance leads to roads that cannot be walked on earth yet, but are still figments of the imagination.

The new being is cosmic, it relates to the entire globe. The longing is so immense that it needs the vastness of the cosmos to express itself. Paul the apostle calls it “the groaning of creation” in the 8th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. He, too, talks of the longing of the created. A new entry has to be found. Something new must be born. It is the time of advent, the time of waiting for those who are “in good hopes” for a new life.

3. stanza

The child is still living in the womb, which feels like night. Night is the expression of sorrow and suffering. Night lava evokes the destructive force of an erupting volcano. Underneath the lava, all that lives dies.

And yet: The unborn child, the embryo, opens its eyelids. Volcanoes not only destroy, they eruptively and radically create something new.

When the child is finally born, we hear its first cry. In Nelly Sachs writing it and our reading it, it is already happening. In that way, the poet can survive for a brief moment.

4. stanza

Once again, the dancer is addressed, now in the image of the tree of life formed by her limbs. In its branches, birds build their twittering nests. Hatchlings emerge and twitter for food – a parallel to the first cry of a human child. All this is not present yet, but it is alive in premonitions.

5. stanza

And yet another image for this time of longing and hope. The day has not come yet, but dawn is breaking. Everything is fragile still, immensely brittle. This is why the source of light still lies hidden. Just as carefully as the milkmaid pulls the milk out of the cow's udder, the dancer-milkmaid is to pull something new from hidden spheres. The moon is the sole source of light in the darkness of grief. She keeps watch in the night of suffering. So that she may go on shining, the dancer, unprotected, gives her eyesight to the moon.

6. stanza

Now the dancer is addressed directly again. Now Nelly Sachs becomes unmistakably clear: Only the dancer, and the dancer alone, having conceived like a bride, will give birth to the new world. She is already in labor, she is about to give birth. The umbilical cord of the newborn is not yet visible, it still connects what is new to the times of night in the woman's body.

Thus, death and birth, dying and being born are always intertwined like twins.

It was a god who gave us humans this inseparable twosome, bequeathed it to us like people bequeath jewelry. For Nelly Sachs, however, god is not a watchmaker who at one point made the Creation. God is in motion. *Once again, god is ready to travel.*

Death and birth – this is not the natural flow of things. The natural flow of things would be living and dying. Nelly Sachs's work is about the sequence of death – birth – life. This is why the last word of this poem is "birth".

In many poems, "resurrection" is used as a synonym to birth:

At the limit of our skin

grobe the dead

in the dread of births

celebrating resurrection

Called wordlessly

something divine boards the ship

In writing this word, Nelly Sachs was able to experience the power of birth and resurrection in herself, and to survive.

The meaning of the image of “birth” in our culture

First of all, I would like to express my awe and humbleness towards Nelly Sachs, her fate, the fate of her people, and her poetry. It can only be certain thoughts that we employ fruitfully to our time, a time of peace, a time without misery here in Europe.

1. **Longing** for Nelly Sachs is longing for a place where love and peace may blossom. We are gathered here today because we share a longing, the longing for a more humane world within our technical and scientific perfectionism, and also for justice and conservation of the earth. It is essential to keep this longing alive, as we do here at our conference. Unaffected by this, there is our individual longing that we carry inside of ourselves.

Where does the origin of our longing lie? We see it in conception and in the experience of the mother’s body at the beginning of a life, the beginning of a future.

2. **Birth and resurrection** for Nelly Sachs are metaphors of a breakthrough towards something new. There is a life before death, a resurrection from resignation and tears. Jesus of Nazareth calls to the girl who cannot live: Little girl, I tell you, get up! This imperative is identical to the Greek word for resurrection: *egeire!* To experience the power of birth and resurrection can heal us. Otto Rank writes in his diary: *Blessed are the spirits to whom every day of their being is a birth, until their death* (diary 2, 10).

We have inherited the “**identical jewels**” of birth and death, they are inherent to our lives.

3. The basic meaning of **love**, a love that carries, nurtures, protects and strengthens, goes back to our pre- and perinatal world of experience.

To the question of what love means for her, Nelly Sachs replied: *“Love is the source of all my work. My believe that human beings, each in their own way, are made to live through this substance, to penetrate it with pain, to make it transparent with love, is the fundamental idea behind everything I write, and I try to find an expression for it over and over again.”*

4. What do we mean when saying the word **GOD**? With numerous combinations of words, Nelly Sachs expresses that god is not a static dimension, but can be experienced in feelings of pain and happiness: *God is ready to travel, magnetic points are permeable for god, something divine boards the ship*. This is directed at believers and at atheists, who also mention a god they don’t believe in. **For the**

poet, god is a metaphor for the meaningful point of reference. While I was preparing this paper, I had a dream with which I would like to close: I see a wooden fence with diagonal bars, and I hear a voice: It is hard to say good-bye to god as a static phenomenon. Then I understand that the glances through the bars of the fence are, in Nelly Sachs' words, *magnetic points permeable for god*. I believe that conception, pregnancy and birth are such magnetic points or, as Sven Hildebrand put it: holy times.

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Poems:

Nelly SACHS: Fahrt ins Staublose. Die Gedichte der Nelly Sachs, Frankfurt/M 1961

Except:

Already, Wither O wither, DANCER

Nelly Sachs: Selected Poems including the verse play Eli, trans. by M. Hamburger, Chr. Holme, R. u. M. Mead, M. Roloff, introduction by H. M. Enzensberger, London 1967