“Some Gold Across the Water”:
Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs

Joan Peterson
Saint Mary’s College of California

The poetry of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs marks Holocaust discourse. Through the examination of particular poems, this study looks closely at the images and ideas that reveal how these two poets responded to the great personal and public loss unleashed by the Holocaust, and at the connections between the two of them. Both poets were exiles from their home countries, both suffered mental anguish, and both continued to write poetry exclusively in German. They corresponded over many years, seeking comfort and counsel from one another. The ways in which their poems represent mourning and address rage and despair place them at the center of artistic response to the Holocaust, and continue to influence those who write about it.

The day Paul Celan was buried, May 12, 1970, in Paris, Nobel Prize-winner Nelly Sachs died in Stockholm. Haunted memories of the Holocaust marked their poems as they marked their lives. In art, mourning found form, rage and despair found voice. They have much to teach us about how poetry, and perhaps only poetry, suffers the darkness to admit sounds that will be heard.

The relationship between Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs has been outlined in John Felstiner’s biography Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew, which chronicles their remarkable friendship and reprints some of their fifteen-year correspondence. (One can find all the letters in Correspondence.) Originally written in German, the letters, like the poems, testify to the struggle for right words and right sense in a wrong world. The letters reveal a sweetness in the care Celan and Sachs extended to each other, and give passionate testimony to how difficult it was to be without family or country, each day darkened by memory of the Holocaust. That they both wrote in German is remarkable, given that the language of their persecutors was also the language of their hearts—and of their mothers.

There are several reasons for a dual examination of Sachs and Celan. First, their lives run parallel and yet separate in interesting and compelling ways. Second, a reading of one inevitably sheds light on the other. It is often through analogy, through
similarity and difference, that we come to see an individual writer most clearly. Third, because images fired in their particular crucibles continue to brand Holocaust discourse, their poems lie at the center of artistic response to the Shoah.

Several writers, most notably Theodor Adorno, have wrestled with the problem of creating art out of suffering. Poems about the Holocaust are like gravestones: they intone, remember, witness, and lament. They mix emotion, philosophy, memory, and language all at once. Good poems aim at the heart as well as the mind, and when we hear them we hear a voice giving release to things long contemplated. Our response to poetry is tantamount to a belief about art in general. We trust that an artist has labored, worried, prepared, sought inspiration, agonized over, with, and through the subject—even when the subject is the Holocaust. Because of this belief, we are more likely to accept words in the shape of poems as true.

The attempt, however, to write about poems that arise out of the Holocaust is problematic, and writers like Lawrence Langer, Alvin Rosenfeld, and Elie Wiesel continue to address this difficulty. Criticism invents and categorizes. Poems about the Holocaust, however, rightly resist analytic distance. Revolting against an "art of atrocity," Alvin Rosenfeld writes, in A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature, that "while no literature is beyond judgment, the particular body of writings under review here does not cry out . . . for aesthetic evaluation" (p. 8). Poems about the Holocaust repel the literary "isms" that a Postmodernist critique applies, with relish, to literature. Poems about the Holocaust contain tangible and ponderable expressions and observations that are concealed by historical discourse. They press the reader towards new and different perceptions. They call for attention. Because Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan were forced to "express the inexpressible," their poetry leads the reader into dark waters. The reader has to want to go there.

Commonly thought of as the two foremost poets of the Holocaust, Sachs and Celan wrote poetry perceived as difficult, sometimes inaccessible. Almost everything of Sachs's is, in fact, out of print. Primo Levi found only Celan's famous "Todesfuge" not obscure, writing that "I've managed to penetrate the meaning of only a few among his lyrics; an exception is this 'Fugue of Death.' I read that Celan repudiated it, didn't consider it his most typical poetry; no matter, I carry it within me like an innesto [graft, inoculation]" (quoted in Felstiner, p. 331, n. 53). That such a fearless and discerning witness to the Shoah as Primo Levi would feel branded by Celan's poem provides us with another clue as to why we seek this hard and painful poetry.

Sachs and Celan's early struggles converged in significant ways. Each poet was an only child. Both spent their lives in creative exile, he from Romania, she from Germany. She was able to escape Germany in 1940, immigrating to Sweden with her mother. After the war he moved from Bucharest to Vienna, to Paris, where he settled in 1948. Paul Celan spent several years in a slave-labor camp during the war, and though he escaped, both parents died in camps. Nelly Sachs lost her mother shortly
after the war. Though he was a linguist and could speak and translate several lan-
guages and though she learned Swedish and also translated poetry, both continued to
write in German. She came from an assimilated Jewish family in which she saw her-
self as German and knew little of Judaism. She became deeply religious, however,
embracing both Jewish faith and mysticism. He came from a traditional and devout
Jewish background, and though his poetry is charged with mystical tradition, history,
and law, he declared to Sachs that he “hoped to be able to blaspheme till the end”
(Celan, Correspondence, p. x).

Few events defy language in the way that the Holocaust does. Our most imme-
diate and visceral response, silence, comes out of the attempt to formulate speech
when confronted with the unspeakable. Writers whose voices are trustworthy speak
first of silence and then, after, of silence again. “Before I say the words, Auschwitz or
Treblinka,” said Elie Wiesel, “there must be a space, a breathing space, a kind of zone
of silence” (Insdorf, p. 4). George Steiner wrote that “because their language had
served at Belsen, because words could be found for all those things and men were
not struck dumb for using them, a number of German writers who had gone into
exile or survived Nazism, despaired of their instrument” (Steiner, p. 51). Steiner re-
called Eugène Ionesco on the useless redundancy of words: “Words have killed im-
ages or are concealing them. A civilization of words is a civilization distraught. Words
create confusion. Words are not the word . . . words say nothing . . . There are no
words for the deepest experience. The more I try to explain myself, the less I under-
stand myself” (Steiner, p. 52). Thinkers like Wiesel, Steiner, and Rosenfeld have been
particularly articulate about how the Shoah resists our abilities for summation and
transcription. Silence punctuates discourse on the Holocaust in both critical and re-
fective ways. Our most powerful images are pictorial or photographic, and thus silent.
Our most honest responses cannot be replicated through language, though David
Roskies identifies a strong tradition within Judaism of response to catastrophe. This
dialogic legacy, that he calls the Literature of Destruction, has provided both retort
and restoration to great suffering.1 But to find one’s way back from desolation and
silence, when words are not adequate or commensurate, is a particularly difficult un-
ertaking.

Both Celan and Sachs lived within the tension created by the need to speak
about the Holocaust and the need to stand silent in the face of it. Though this tension
weaves itself in and out of their poems, it was also a part of their lived experience.
Nelly Sachs was completely unable to speak for several days after a Nazi interrogation.
After the war, Paul Celan referred to his own experience in a letter as “silence, which
was a not-able-to-speak and thus believed itself an ought-not-to-speak” (quoted in
Felstiner, p. 60). Writing in 1958, on the occasion of receiving the Literature Prize of
the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, Celan described his tortuous trajectory towards
poetry:

“Some Gold Across the Water”
Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, “enriched” by it all.

In this language I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality. (Celan, Collected Prose, p. 34)

Their eventual ability to speak through poems, however, did not save Celan and Sachs from real and imagined persecution anxieties. Celan’s nervous disorders were triggered by charges of plagiarism in the 1960s. Sachs began to hear “vicious electronic voices,” so agitated was she by Eichmann’s capture (Felstiner, p. 156). Both poets spent time institutionalized, and endured adult hood characterized by severe mental and nervous distress. Celan committed suicide in 1970. One can speculate that their sufferings were worsened by their highly sensitive and acute responses to words—both those they wrote and those they read. Driven to write, both turned out hundreds of poems after the war.

For Celan and Sachs, poetry was a painful, inevitable choice. Each new poem forced them to relentlessly recreate the bitter world in which they found themselves, yet neither was at liberty to do otherwise.

Celan, a very public person who was often called upon to make speeches and receive prizes, found himself forced much more than Sachs to make critical statements about his own work; yet even those statements, like the few we have from Sachs, reveal a great reluctance to discuss the theoretical or metaphoric nature of poetry. Sachs made the now often-quoted statement: “Death was my teacher. How could I have written about anything else? My metaphors are my wounds. This is the only way to understand my work” (quoted in Bahr, Jewish Writers, p. 43). And she wrote in a letter that “occasionally I receive requests concerning the meaning of incomprehensible metaphors. But I never ‘meant,’—I was torn open” (quoted in Anderegg, Jewish Writers, p. 60). Celan is more indirect and ambiguous. In a speech, he refers to those places in poetry where readers struggle as “obscurity, [that] if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of an encounter” (Celan, Collected Prose, p. 46).

Their poems are imprinted by gender and, one might argue, paradoxically so. Though they share many common images, Celan’s tone and imagery almost burrow inward as though to lead the reader (and the writer) to a private, secret place. Much of Sachs’s poetry leads us outward—often towards metamorphosis and even transcendence, but as often as not towards a black sky where sorrow pocks the night. Both poets employ metaphor as their chief vehicle. Sachs’s poems can be either very metaphysical or very concrete. They are grounded largely in the knowable world of chil-
dren and home, but that world, when it becomes uncentered, can be a mystical and difficult one to enter. Paul Celan’s poetry draws us into an abstract and obscure place. His intentional subversion of language endeavors to create a realm wholly different from the one commonly known through concrete words and images. Nazi desecration of language had changed how one could think or write, and so words, phrases, even images had to be created anew. Celan reconstitutes his own poetic language through the creation of previously unheard-of compound words. Images are displaced or unusual. The dispersion of Hebraic and archaic German words and allusions in his poems at once grounds and unsettles. He forces us to see differently, upending what we know, severing what seems natural. This new poetry, disconnected from common associations, asks the reader to become a listener to something like music; we float with chords both dissonant and symphonious. Celan told Robert de Beaugrande that one should read his poems “associating freely without regard for the meaning isolated elements may have had for the poet” (quoted in Foot, p. 194). This free association makes sense. These are poems that defy pulling apart. Almost stream of consciousness, images and words, one senses, come from below the surface, almost like meditation or “automatic writing.”

Clearly attracted to surrealism, Celan, in the preface to a 1948 brochure of the paintings of Edgar Jene, describes following Jene “beneath his paintings.” In this journey he hears words “deep down in the sea where there is so much silence and so much happens.” He waits for the “sea’s mirror surface” to open in order to enter “the huge crystal of the inner world.” He describes how words have become false and distorted—how it is in fact dishonest to pretend that words still mean in their old ways. He realizes instead that “it may be from the remotest regions of the spirit that words and figures will come, images and gestures, veiled and unveiled as in a dream” (Celan, Collected Prose, pp. 3, 6). Though this is an apt depiction of surrealist painting, it is also appropriate for understanding Celan’s work. Given what translator Michael Hamburger has called the “alchemical,” there reside within Celan’s poetry multiple layers of complexity where a word’s meaning can be transmuted into something entirely different. This complex poetic world is fueled from a great linguistic reservoir. Celan spoke and translated Hebrew, German, Romanian, Russian, English, Yiddish, and French. John Felstiner referred to his “polyglot genius,” and noted that within his library there were books on “zoology, geology, mineralogy, crystallography, physics, botany, anatomy, birds, and especially roses” (Felstiner, p. 96). When he was young, Celan translated Shakespeare and he loved words, wordplay, puns, and repetition. His poems, charged with allusions to Judaic narratives, to mysticism, to politics, and to historical thought, challenge the resources of the most sophisticated reader.

Nelly Sachs brings to her poetry a particularly feminine sensibility about nature and about human relationships. She incorporates the things of women and of houses, and of housekeeping; of being a daughter, of losing a mother, of loving children. The murder of children, perhaps the most difficult subject of the Holocaust to write about,
forces Sachs to look as from above at the nightmare below. In “O the night of the weeping children!” she realistically captures the moments, just before these children’s deaths, in a few well-chosen and devastating images. “Yesterday Mother still drew / Sleep toward them like a white moon” is the strong image that cleaves yesterday from today, life from death, the protection of the mother from the “Terrible nursemaids” who have “tautened their tendons with the false death.” Though these children perished, she will not leave them without recollection. They are recalled in the simple tokens of childhood—a doll, with “cheeks derouged by kisses,” a stuffed pet “already / Brought to life by love.” These painful manifestations of particular children awaken our loss of them and evoke the physical deprivation experienced by mothers torn from children whom they shall no longer touch. Sachs renders even this loss, a seeming impossibility of representation, in three final lines that poignantly meld “the wind of dying” with hair that “no one will comb again” (Sachs, O The Chimneys, p. 7).

Through a still, small voice, Sachs moves from the weeping of many children to the cry of a single child. In “A dead child speaks,” separation, and the image of a knife, fuse sign, symbol, and metaphor. A mother bloodies her own hand in an effort to spare her child from “the knife of parting” raised by “someone.” The child transposes Isaac of the Akedah while Abraham’s role is reversed by that of the mother, and the image of a single, murderous knife is inverted, even softened, into a “knife of parting” so that the true terror of a child is of the sundering from its mother—rather than of death. In the eyes of a child, it is irretrievable, aching separation that is relevant—not who wields the knife, or why. This particular knife of parting is an implement identified with loss, but it recalls as well a literal tool for preparing and eating food (“Cut in two each bite I swallowed—”). It remains with the child, is honed by the child’s mind, so that the knife is echoed in the words, “Wind and water ground in my ear / And every voice of comfort pierced my heart—.” Sachs does not need to tell us that there was no voice from above to turn aside the knife that took a mother away—the disparity between the child’s story and the Akedah is enough. However, when we read the lines, “As I was led to death / I still felt in the last moment / The unsheathing of the great knife of parting,” we hear loud reverberations of Isaac’s fear and that of all children murdered in the Shoah (Sachs, O The Chimneys, p. 13).

Sachs’s poems are punctuated by tragic musings about the dead: Whose shoes were these? Whose house? What if? Why? The things we use and see in daily life take on profound significance when there is no one left to inhabit or use or care for them. “I found a hat a man had worn,” is an opening, empty image. The poet also sees “where a stove had stood,” where a “threshold lies without a door,” where “the house of him whom I adore / is all snowed in by God” (Sachs, The Seeker, p. 31). Sachs locates herself behind the eyes of a victim, giving witness for those who cannot speak. Her view extends even to items beheld in the moments preceding death. In “If I only knew,” she wonders about the last sight before death: was it a stone, earth, road, puddle, or the “buckle of your enemy’s belt?” Corporeal objects, however, figure
in only a part of her universe, so in this poem the ugly buckle may not have been the final observation. The hard last glimpse might have been transcendent:

Or did this earth,
Which lets no one depart unloved,
Send you a bird-sign through the air,
Reminding your soul that it quivered
In the torment of its burnt body?
(Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 23)

In this poem, and others like it, Sachs crosses between the real and the metaphysical; between what is irrevocable and what is possible. Though she is very oriented to the body (hands and feet, eyes, fingers), she is better known for images such as sand, smoke, ashes, dust, nettles, sun, fire, flight, constellations, dancers, stars, butterflies, and birds. This tension, between the tangible and the intangible, allows for slivers of hope and for a kind of spiritual speculation that could not take place were her poems pure reportage.

Rather than inert pieces, her poems appear to be in motion. We move through them with her, breathlessly, but wind up suspended. In Sachs there is the suggestion of a mind so enlivened and burdened that it must spin out metaphor on top of metaphor with the consequence that multiple images fuse together. These images are not easily “unpacked,” nor should they be. For example, in “How Many,” we find “drowned ages / in the roaring towline of childhood sleep” and “playing over the moon-colored bones of the dead,” and “virgin with the night-flecked / sun citrus” all in the first ten lines (Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 161). Though the reader longs for logical transitions, Hans Magnus Enzensberger explains that Sachs’s work “demands . . . not cleverness so much as humility: the work does not want to be made concrete or be transformed, but experienced, patiently and with exactness” (Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. vi).

Because she was bound by both earthly and spiritual considerations, nature and allusions to Biblical persons are prominent and often conjoined: “Deborah was stabbed by stars / and yet sang triumphant hymns” (Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 297), stars come to David “like bees sensing honey” (Sachs, *The Seeker*, p. 97), and “Job was swaddled / in the life-bearing body of the stars” (Sachs, *The Seeker*, p. 395). The Hebrew nation is animated by nature: a “tongue of flames” kisses “the invisible sky” (Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 197). She writes of “the setting sun of Sinai’s people / A red carpet under their feet” (Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 17) and describes “Israel’s body” as having “drifted as smoke” (Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 3). These images and metaphors have a sorrowful religiosity. There is a driving need to fill the void, to find the good, to push towards the light—even in despair. We find this stanza of hope in “Someone”:

“Some Gold Across the Water”
Someone will come
and sew the green of the spring bud
on their prayer shawl
and set the child’s silken curl
as a sign
on the brow of the century.
(Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 153)

Even though her all-consuming subject was the Holocaust, Sachs forms a space where faith contends with fact in a vacant landscape. An anonymous “someone” enigmatically comes into view in several poems to continue or to preserve or to salvage that which appears lost. It is a plaintive someone, though, nameless and faceless, who, depending upon the insight of the reader, comes wrapped in hope, dreams, or despair. It is probable that, for Sachs, this someone came dressed in all three guises. In “Someone blew the Shofar,” she establishes a philosophic and religious tone by citing the words from the Zohar that “the sinking occurs for the sake of the rising.” In this poem of mystical and cataclysmic representation, a series of images mirrors the great ascent and descent of birth and death, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, introspection and inscription, the seed of regeneration and the dust of destruction. “Someone,” who once blew the Shofar, was ancient and primal, throwing back his head “as the deer do, as the stags / Before they drink at the spring.” The sounding of Tekiah, Shevarim, and Terua, calls forth death, seed, and light, so that “the earth circles and the constellations circle.” The Shofar’s blast awakens mysteries from the Kabbalah that rise, fall, and swirl beyond the pull of time. Amplified by the repetition of someone blowing the Shofar, this poem builds with exaltation and exuberance, then plummets to earth when we hear “and round the Shofar the temple burns—,” “and round the Shofar the temple falls—,” “and round the Shofar the ashes rest—.” By juxtaposing the Shofar against the destruction of the two temples and the ruin of the Holocaust, Nelly Sachs collides tradition, mystery, rage, and annihilation. The final line, “and someone blows—” assures that there will always be “someone” to blow the Shofar, even, ironically, amidst the ashes of millions (Sachs, *The Seeker*, p. 13).

Though leanings towards hope and rebirth are implicit in her work, her grief is without solace. Tears and sorrow are mournful facts coloring all her poems. What is remarkable is that she never shrinks from the pain. The Holocaust that haunted her life inhabits every poem and so she invokes “nightingales in all the woods of the earth . . . Signpost of broken hearts,” to “Sob out, sob out, / The throat’s terrible silence before death” (*The Seeker*, p. 19). The courage she shows in continually facing the darkest nights of the soul is extended to many aspects of the Shoah. She fearlessly writes of perpetrators and of victims; of fear, of the aftermath, of the weight of history, of God, of angels, and of prophets. Sometimes she compromises her craft to expel
every millisecond of a long breath, unable to stop until all the sadness winds its way out. Her examinations are without guile—she relentlessly seeks, no matter the cost.

This probing poetry, fired continually with images and characters from the Hebrew (and sometimes the Christian) Bible, is also apocalyptic. In “And we who move away,” earth is “losing its lineaments,” the elk peers through blue curtains and “between his antlers bears / a sun-egg hatched pale,” and ocean time “camouflages itself with iceberg masks / under the last star’s / frozen stigma” (Sachs, *O The Chimneys*, p. 113). These strange and arresting images are invoked to show a common theme: the burden of those still living who carry the dead inside themselves, across the seas. To represent how deeply Nazi destruction has torn open the natural, physical world and her own personal one, inanimate objects come alive; the dumb earth speaks, sometimes in Shakespearean proportions. A mountain climbs into her window (*O The Chimneys*, p. 241), the “sealed sky broke open” (*O The Chimneys*, p. 69), ears of corn “know many native languages” (*O The Chimneys*, p. 305), and even straw has a “momentary power of illumination” that paints “loneliness” (*O The Chimneys*, p. 153).

More closed and careful than Nelly Sachs’s, the images commonly found in Paul Celan’s poems are focused inward and evoke silence: ashes, the rose, black, mother, night, snow, wells, blackness, eyes, wine, word, grates or grilles, digging, and earth. He returns to muteness, to a world inhabited by “no god”—by “no-one”—again and again. He shares with Sachs images of stones, smoke, and dust, but usually holds a single thought through to the end of a poem like a secret struggling to be revealed. Her poems are more personal—echoing suffering and anguish and a need to transform fear. She continues to ask questions, to seek answers. His responses, not easily articulated or accessed, are distant, orchestrated, removed. There is a sense in Celan that even if there really is nothing more to tell—there still are words and he has to try to formulate them, order them, control them. Make them say the impossible. Create the strange out of the stranger event. He said that poetry is “a turning of our breath.” That poems are lonely. Michael Hamburger recounts Celan saying that his poems were “messages in a bottle which might or might not be picked up” (Celan, *Poems*, p. 32). Sachs writes eulogies to an audience, embodying a much more public voice. One senses that she believes there are readers who will respond to and understand her poems.

Yet, in torment, Celan is one with Sachs. His is of a different discourse; grief is covert, hidden, perhaps masculine. In “At Brancusi’s, the Two of Us,” he writes of stones that, were they to “give away / what it is that keeps silent about it,” it would open up, as a wound, in which you would have to submerge, lonely, far from my scream, that is chiselled already, white.

(Celan, *Poems*, p. 299)
This is a carefully controlled poem of a carefully restrained emotion. Void of color, the wound doesn’t bleed red. A scream that is “chiselled” and “white” is anguish petrified, suggesting pain long past the release of tears. The only “wetness” in this small poem is suggested by the act of being submerged, drowned, lonely, and away from a scream that must not, or cannot, be heard. Far from the sounds of mourning invoked by Sachs, the senses are strangulated here. Celan disguises and distances pain—his personal confrontation is transmuted into language of another order.

Grief can be further transformed by Celan into bitterness or silence. Silence is worse. Celan, on intimate terms with the kind of grief that can damage all the remaining days of one’s life, recalls Shakespeare’s “all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death” in the poem “Obstructive Tomorrow.” The word “tomorrow,” a hopeful word in any language, pointing as it does to a future and even to a second chance, is altered by the word “obstructive.” One might ask how a day that has yet to arrive can impede. In Celan’s world, what has come before has the power to obliterating or substantially change what follows, resulting in despair. The speaker in the poem moves violently, even sexually, towards tomorrow: “Obstructive Tomorrow / I bite my way into you.” Once the aggressor has forged his way through, he burrows in without a sound: “my silence nestles into you.” The conquest made, Celan and Tomorrow “sound / alone,” so that this merged silence seems to have its own sonority, its own particular, lonely resonance. This difficult idea, that even silence is replete with deathlike sound, is amplified throughout the universe where “eternity’s tones drip away.” Today, too, is colored by the days that came before, “croaked through by / the hodiernal / yesterday.” The words “tones drip away,” and “croaked through” are cynical and convey a sense of hopelessness. In the remainder of the poem, Celan and his conception of “tomorrow,” disembodied and abstract, merge together and appear to move through space and time:

we travel,
largely
the last of the sonic bowls
receives us:
the boosted heart pace
outside
in space,
brought home to the axis
of Earth.

It is as if one could hurl outward, into tomorrow, only to reach an end that rebounds one back—back into the past (or the self) again. That grim return deflates the motion that had been spinning outward and underscores the uselessness of “tomorrow.” The translator’s choice of the words “sonic bowl” is an interesting one. Suggestive of an
end to space, such a bowl would both receive and reverberate back whatever bounces off it. We are forced to imagine a huge, concave dish, which is similar in image to other rounded-out shapes Celan uses in his poems—shapes such as harbor, cove, and furrow. “Sonic,” related both to sound and to speed that approaches that of sound in air, magnifies and personifies the notion of tomorrow into a futuristic one while grounding it by what we might (were we able to) hear and experience. Hamburger surely intuits rightly in his word choice, preserving the difficulty and the paradox that Celan intends (Celan, Poems, p. 317).

Written at the end of his life, this poem, given what we know about Celan’s painful history, can be read as a personal and pessimistic acknowledgment that his past will always darken (or even nullify) all approaching days and years to come. It can also be read as a statement about how the Nazi genocidal past continues to “obstruct” tomorrow and cast an inevitable pall on the future.

Contextualized by Sachs through specific persons and real-life types like old men, children, and mothers, the Holocaust continued on in Celan’s work largely in tone. Themes such as time, space, eternity, and history are tainted by an unnamed event, an unidentified anguish:

**TIME’S EYE**

This is time’s eye:
it squints out
from under a seven-hued eyebrow.
Its lid is washed clean by fires,
it’s tear is hot steam.
Towards it the blind star flies
and melts at the eyelash that’s hotter;
it’s growing warm in the world
and the dead burgeon and flower.
(Celan, Poems, p. 95)

With scalpel-like precision, Celan exposes a nihilistic undercurrent that belies the cool restraint of this poem. Something foul contaminates the poet’s view of time. Though Celan did not say, it is certainly probable that the poison unleashed by the Holocaust infects this poem where “Time’s eye” is reptilian, or, like the eye of the Cyclops, inscrutable and dangerous. This is an eye that lacks comprehension; like stone, things act upon it while the eye itself remains unchanged. This action generates a corruptible heat that germinates something truly horrible. Though enigmatic, there is a real image, an awful eye, with which a reader can associate. The poem is, however, more than pure image. The eye is at the center of Time and the forces that scald it cause an appalling reaction in the physical world—a reaction to which we can relate.
But still, Time’s eye is inalterable. There is no response; this is an eye that does not blink. The blind star may hurl itself towards the volcano, but it is doomed to melt at the edge. The disembodied eye (or “I”) cannot be touched or affected; instead it is both mute and blind. Celan may be suggesting that in a godless world, even an event like the Holocaust will not disturb Time’s eye and that the dead, instead, will continue to “burgeon and flower.” One can then wonder with him how humans can inhabit a cosmos that contains such a wretched “eye.”

Celan’s work has a deathly quiet about it. Exuberant, emotional metaphors in Sachs are pared down and stilled in Celan. Images are white and gray or nondescript: like sleep, snow, smoke, stone, night, clouds, sand, moon, and ice. In search of the center of things, without ever revealing that desire, Celan chooses representations that might be penetrable and then he decenters the reader’s expectation. We are often given one half of a pair of detached body parts—perhaps to note a bifurcation that has become the norm. One brow, one breast, a finger, an eyelash. Instead of eyes, we are asked to view one eye. In “An Eye, Open,” part of an eye, “the tear, half, / the sharper lens, moveable,” is the vehicle that “brings the images home to you.” This poem, like others, is a litany of negatives. There is nothing left to be named, there is no one’s voice, the lid of the eye “does not stand in its way;” the lash “does not count what goes in.” The “you,” not identified, appears to be directed to an unknown, lonely reader or lover who is called up by the mind, or the mind’s eye. This “you” beckons through many poems, and the poet is in transit, always hungering towards a meeting he never achieves. He writes of “You and the arm / with which naked I grew towards you” (Celan, Poems, p. 119), and “O you dig and I dig, and I dig towards you” (Poems, p. 157), and even the “no one” who “moulds us again out of earth and clay” is the one “For your sake / we shall flower. / Towards / you” (Poems, p. 179).

Cryptic and paradoxical, Celan’s poetry occupies an existential space. Futile, but punctuated by brief moments of promise, it is alternately angry and cool, dark and light. Swallowed into the heart of darkness, he asks the reader to enter the loneliness with him as the only measure against the void. Because the Holocaust counters resolution, it is like a corpse that can’t be cut down; it hangs, our gaze fastened to it. By moving away from emotion and mourning, Celan confronts disintegration in increasingly abstract ways. This direction made his later poems smaller, more distant, and abstruse. After the great success of “Todesfuge,” he went on to refuse permission for future reprints in anthologies. Hamburger says “he had refined his art in the meantime to a point where the early poem seemed too direct, too explicit” (Celan, Poems, p. 24).

“Todesfuge,” or “Death Fugue,” however, is the reason why Celan is remembered. The poem has received much commentary. Some have called it the definitive poem of the Holocaust. Lauded for his language and imagery, Celan has also been criticized for making something beautiful out of an event so horrible. He once reported that “Todesfuge” came about because of something he heard about Jews play-
ing dance tunes in a Nazi camp. Celan originally called the poem “Todestango” (Tango of Death, or Death Tango). Though written in German, “Todesfuge” first appeared in print in the Bucharest magazine Contemporanul; in a Romanian translation by Petre Solomon the poem was titled “Tangoul Morţi” (Felstiner, pp. 28–32). This difficult poem defies easy analysis. Celan creates a terrible and hypnotic world where the natural coils in upon itself. The incessant repetition of “we drink you, we drink you,” referring to “black milk,” moves one to think of the vast, unimaginable numbers of men, women, and children who went to their deaths one by one by one. Here is a world of reversal where milk is black and gravediggers dance. Goethe’s golden-haired Margarete is juxtaposed with the Jewish Shulamith, her hair covered by ash. The poignancy of the two women stands for German and Jewish cultures, rent apart. Stillness permeates the image of “a man plays with serpents,” and there is a tacit acceptance—an incontrovertible fact—conveyed in the words “death is a master from Germany.” The tone is at once nihilistic and heart-wrenching. Its music pulls us to it while its content repels us. Though this poem is hardly “representational,” Celan later chose to move away from identifiable images and to move deeper into realms of intentional obscurity and silence.

How language shapes thinking is a particularly provocative question when the poems are about the Holocaust and the poet writes in German. At the very least, Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs would have found themselves more removed and less connected to the passions they wished to express had they written in another language. To speak the same language as the murderer implies a more intimate knowledge of those who would kill you. The very rhythms and images, forged out of German, ignite particular responses in the poet and in the reader. At the very least, a reader of English should listen to the poem in German as well as read a translation.

Celan could have chosen any one of a number of languages in which to write poems. Sachs became fluent in Swedish. Both, however, wrote exclusively in the language of home, mother, loss, and persecutor. Their poems in German have a weight and a melancholy the same poems translated into English lack, though this may be due to the strangeness of Holocaust response rendered in the language of the Nazis. Celan, sensitive to and cognizant of how words sound, wished to change that language. He wrote in 1958 that German poetry could

no longer speak the language that many a ready ear even now seems to expect. Its language has grown more sober, more factual, it mistrusts ‘Beauty,’ it attempts to be true. Thus it is . . . a ‘grayer’ language, a language whose ‘musicality’ has nothing more in common with that ‘euphony’ which more or less untroubled still tripped tunefully alongside the most frightful things. (Felstiner, pp. 111–12)

Even so, German intonation and meter, to an ear accustomed to English, appear solemn and more measured by trance-like repetition. Sachs was especially sensitive to how translation must attempt to capture a tonal quality larger than sound; a pal-
pable spirit that breathes from within. Referring to Celan’s translation of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam she wrote

How you raised him out of the night with all the landscape of his language, still moist and dripping from the source.

Wonderful event. Transformation—and another new poem is with us. This is the highest art of translation.

She alludes to her own translations of Swedish poetry and admits falling prey to “deep doubts.” She wonders “will I be able to pass on the polar light locked in its crystal, even after contact with my unquiet blood?” (Celan, Correspondence, p. 16).

Surely German, the language of their youth and of their mothers, was the only language that could adequately render whole their quietest and deepest thoughts. The German creates a sorrowful musicality and one wonders if the suffering experienced by Celan and Sachs would have been lessened had they tried to dissociate themselves from the language. Would their poems, then, have become more remote, less raw, less alive? This, however, was not a viable path for either. Celan wrote to Israeli relatives in 1958, “There’s nothing in the world . . . for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German” (quoted in Felstiner, p. 56). And Sachs reminded Celan in 1969, “but you understand, we both live in the invisible home country” (Celan, Correspondence, p. 69).

Two responses to the German language are especially emblematic of each poet’s sense of self as well as difference from the other. Celan, a public person and a private poet, wrote in 1962 about how difficult it was to write in Romanian when he encountered no Romanian friends in his daily life. He added that the “German language which is mine . . . painfully remains mine” (quoted in Felstiner, pp. 186–87). Sachs, a private person though public poet, is reported to have said, after receiving the Nobel Prize,

I feel myself to be, solely and exclusively, a human being. When one has lived through so many horrors, one cannot look on oneself as belonging to any particular nation. Of course, I am a Swedish citizen, but my language is German, and it is that which links me with other human beings. (Nobel Prize Library, p. 70)

Sachs’s reconciliation with the German language was best expressed in a letter to Celan: she wrote, “I am so happy that you and your work are there for the best of the young German generation to look up to in admiration” (Celan, Correspondence, p. 7).

Dissimilar in age, sex, disposition, and even Weltanschauung, Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs read each other with great clarity and love. Nelly Sachs may have been Celan’s most insightful critic. In the poem she wrote for him below, she revealed her understanding of his poetry and of his torment:
DESPAIR

Your letters like matches
spitting fire
No one gets to the end
but through the antlers of your words—

Place comfortless
site of sheer madness
before it grows dark
life's stragglers
and first-born of death
without haven
ravenous fever
brushing the secret
of the invisible Messiah
with wild longing for home—

We plunged
into the dungeon of parting
backwards
already black as shadows
poured out
into the void
(Celan, Correspondence, p. 59)

A poem Celan wrote for her chronicles one of their meetings in Zurich where, arguing about God, they both witnessed a glimmer of light falling from the cathedral onto the river below. Respectful of her faith, his poem confirms her as the unequivocal questioner and generously accedes to her the promise he struggled for, but did not find, in all of his poems:

ZURICH, THE STORK INN
For Nelly Sachs

Of too much was our talk, of
too little. Of the You
and You-Again, of
how clarity troubles, of
Jewishness, of
your God.

"Some Gold Across the Water"
Of that.
On the day of an ascension, the Minster stood over there, it sent some gold across the water.

Of your God was our talk, I spoke against him, I let the heart that I had hope:
for his highest, death-rattled, his quarreling word—

Your eye looked on, looked away, Your mouth spoke its way to the eye, and I heard:

We don’t know, you know, we don’t know, do we?, what counts.
(Celan, Poems, p. 161)

Though Nelly Sachs wrote that “the rescued” have bodies that “lament / With their mutilated music” (Sachs, O The Chimneys, p. 25), her poetry, and that of Paul Celan, brought lamentation (and Holocaust discourse) to a higher level. Almost drowned by the Holocaust, Celan and Sachs sustained each other through letters and poems. She wrote, “Your poems are always by me. I read them before sleeping in the evening, this is how we pray” (Celan, Correspondence, p. 69). Clearly, both had to write; had to write in German, to give shape to the dark life experienced within. His last note to her, despite the blackness to which he would surrender, hoped for “All gladness, dear Nelly, all light!” (Celan, Correspondence, p. 71).

**Acknowledgments**

With gratitude to Dean Ed Epstein, who first introduced me to the work of Paul Celan, and to John Felstiner, whose book on Celan inspired this paper, and who kindly granted me permission to reprint material from his book. Thank you also to Sheep Meadow Press for permission to reprint poems and excerpts from the Correspondenceresources.
spondence of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs and from Paul Celan’s *Collected Prose*, and to Persea Books for permission to quote from *Poems of Paul Celan*.

**Notes**

1. David Roskies places the diaries, songs, journals, sermons, and stories that emerged from the Holocaust within a long Judaic literary tradition contextualized by historical events. These responses chronicle and memorialize as they reveal responses to suffering. Most importantly, they link Jewish catastrophe, through ancient archetypes, to both past and future, thus ensuring the continuity of a people and their culture as found in their words. See David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); and *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

2. Celan delivered this speech on October 22, 1960 in Darmstadt on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner literary prize.

3. “Automatic writing” is writing that takes place outside the attention normally given to content or to the process of writing. In other words, the writing appears as spontaneous and without conscious purpose.

4. The Akedah, Hebrew for “binding,” refers to the binding of Isaac by Abraham, a pivotal event in Jewish history. God’s terrible command, Abraham’s great faith, and Isaac’s innocence have initiated impassioned responses from theologians and writers. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin believes that the Akedat Yitzchak has historically been misunderstood as the sacrifice of Isaac rather than his binding. Rabbi Telushkin interprets the story as one in which God in fact repudiates human sacrifice through his staying of Abraham’s hand; and, further, that Kierkegaard’s meditation on Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* has perpetuated the sacrificial idea. He adds, however, “the word akedah remains significant in Jewish life: it represents Jews’ willingness to sacrifice, if necessary, their families and their own lives for God.” *Jewish Literacy* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 37.

5. *Macbeth. Act V, scene V, lines 24–25.* From Macbeth’s famous soliloquy, in which he first learns that Lady Macbeth has committed suicide. Shakespeare’s words, beginning with “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,” show how Macbeth’s ambition and loss have brought him to this moment of futility (lines 21–22). For Macbeth, and for Celan in “Obstructed Tomorrow,” yesterdays all lead to an empty tomorrow.

**Works Cited**


