Translating the Poetry of Nelly Sachs

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Introduction

In the English-speaking world, Nelly Sachs is perhaps best known as the German Jewish poet who wrote "difficult" poetry (Domin 1977: 110), and whose works often address the Holocaust. She is perhaps also known as a Nobel Prize winner (she was awarded the prize in 1966). Her work has been translated into Swedish, French, Spanish, Hebrew, Yiddish, Japanese, and other languages. There are many translations of her work into English, in particular by Michael Hamburger (e.g. Hamburger et al. 1970), but also by Ruth and Matthew Mead (Hamburger et al. 1970, 2011), and Michael Roloff (Hamburger et al. 2011), among others, and several biographical and critical studies, for example by Kathrin Bower (2000), Aris Fioretos (2011), Jennifer Hoyer (2014), and Elaine Martin (2011).

Though the first English translation of her work appeared in 1970 (Hamburger et al. 1970), Nelly Sachs is not a widely-read poet in English (Shanks 2016: n.p.). And yet she is one of the most interesting and challenging of Holocaust poets to translate, not least because her poetry changed and developed over time, as the influence of historical events, of her changing circumstances, and of the poets she translated, all had profound effects on her poetic expression.

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J. Boase-Beier et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Literary Translation*, Palgrave Studies in Translating and Interpreting, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75753-7_2

In this chapter I shall consider how Sachs' poetry has been translated, and what particular challenges its translation poses. I shall ask whether the insights we gain by studying the translation of her work can have consequences for its future translation. One conclusion I come to is that we need to provide readers with enough background to locate the poetry in its historical, political, religious, cultural and poetic context, and we need a careful selection of her translated work that will both demonstrate the broad range of her poetry and emphasize its relevance for readers today. Another conclusion is that, by considering the translation of her poetry, we gain greater insight into the poetry itself. This benefits criticism of her work, which then also has the potential to affect future translation.

Understanding a case study as an examination of "a particular unit of human activity" (Gillham 2000: 1) which is in some way "singular" (Simons 2009: 3), and which will lead to an interpretative narrative (Susam-Sarajeva 2009: 39), I aim in this chapter to outline a narrative that is based on a close consideration of the translation of Sachs' poetry. Nelly Sachs appears particularly suited to a translation case study: her life was interesting and unusual, she was writing at and beyond a time of almost ungraspable pain, disruption, upheaval and tragedy. Her work can only be understood in context, because it is heavily informed by her own situation, secure though this may seem in comparison with that of the millions who died. Yet she was not secure, or content, or balanced: she was deeply traumatized by historical events, and, as she came to understand more about her Jewish roots, her trauma became greater, her poetry both more inward-looking and more complex.

In German-speaking countries her poetry experienced what Martin calls "a tumultuous reception history" (2011: 9), and a brief consideration of the reception of Sachs' original poetry will further help to illustrate the background against which these translations have been undertaken.

Though the purpose of a case study is to provide the basis for a detailed description and analysis of at least some elements of the case in question, it does not exhaust its usefulness with the description itself. It can be used as the basis for inferences about other cases, or to question assumptions made by theories or views of the world. As Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva (2009: 45) points out, there are differing views on the extent to which case studies can be, or need to be, generalizable to other contexts. My intention here is to focus on a few specific exemplary translations, which, together with the facts of Sachs' background and reception, should provide the basis for a more general picture of the translation of Sachs' poetry. The conclusions I draw from this picture are not concerned with the questioning of theoretical considerations but with their possible consequences for future translation of Sachs' work.

Nelly Sachs as Poet and Translator

Nelly (Leonie) Sachs was born in 1891 into an assimilated German-Jewish family in Berlin. Her mother's family appear to have been Sephardic Jews, possibly coming originally from Spain (Fritsch-Vivié 1993: 9). On both sides, the family were fairly wealthy business people, her father's family well-known in Berlin as rubber manufacturers: Sachs' father Georg William Sachs had in 1887 invented the expander (Fioretos 2011: 28–30), an elastic muscle-exerciser still in use today. Her cousin, Manfred Georg, was the biographer of Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism (Georg 1932). Around 1908, at the age of 17, Sachs suffered an unhappy love affair, which she only spoke of much later to the critic Walter Berendsohn (Fioretos 2011: 56–8). As a consequence she had a breakdown in her late teens that resulted in a stay in a clinic, and this was to be the first of several throughout her life (Fritsch-Vivié 1993: 37–42).

Though her biographer and editor Ruth Dinesen remarks that the "love crisis led Nelly Sachs to the word" (Dinesen 1995: 25), she was already writing prose, drama and poetry before this (Fioretos 2011: 21). The poems she wrote up to the outbreak of war in 1939 were generally simple rhymed verses about nature and animals, though some were less conventional. As Fioretos observes, this early, highly conventional poetry with its "prim rhymes and bittersweet tones" (Fioretos 2011: 53) gives hints of what was to come, when, suddenly, "it is as if Sachs has plugged her poetry into the power circuit of her later works" (ibid.). Conversely, her later poems sometimes take up the themes and images of early ones: in her 1959 poem 'Kleiner Frieden' (Small Peace), for example, the music-box is remembered in the light of later knowledge (Sachs 1988: 284). But it was the opinion of German poet Hilde Domin, writing the 'Afterword' to a 1977 collection of Sachs' poetry, that we do not need to know anything written by Sachs before 1940 (Domin 1977: 111), and, indeed, this was Sachs' own view (Bahr 1995: 43). In May 1940, shortly before she was to be transported to a concentration camp (Fritsch-Vivié 1993: 76–7), she escaped to Sweden, a flight made possible with the help of Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf, whom she much admired, and with whom she had been corresponding since her teenage years (Fritsch-Vivié 1993: 32).

Sachs had first attempted publication of her prose and poems, unsuccessfully, in 1915. Her first work, *Legenden und Erzählungen* (Legends and Stories), had appeared in 1921, and consisted of prose tales that explore relationships, and questions of loyalty, love and death (Fritsch-Vivié 1993: 51–53). Before her escape to Sweden, a few single poems had appeared, but further publication was impossible for a Jewish writer (Dinesen 1995: 28;

Fioretos 2011: 98–99). Dinesen mentions a handwritten copy of poems about a "lost beloved", composed up to 1923 (Dinesen 1995: 25; see also Dinesen 1995: 38–9, FN 3). Sachs also read very widely at this time: Christian mysticism, such as Jakob Böhme and Meister Eckart, books by Romantic poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin and Novalis, and works of Jewish mysticism; all formed the basis for her later, more intense, interest in Jewish mysticism, according to Fritsch-Vivié (1993: 64–7; see also Holmqvist 1968: 30–4; Blau 2007). Later she read works in German by Gershom Scholem and German translations of Yiddish and Hebrew texts (see Domin 1977: 112–13; Blau 2007: 2). She must have been particularly fascinated by Scholem's work on the mystical Dönmeh sect, which originated, like Sachs' ancestors, among the Sephardic Jews (see Scholem 1971: 142–166).

On arrival in Sweden she contacted a number of Swedish poets and began to translate their work. One of the first she translated, Johannes Edfelt, also translated her poems into Swedish (Fioretos 2011: 122–3). Her first collection of German translations of Swedish poetry, *Von Welle und Granit* (Of Waves and Granite), appeared in East Berlin's Aufbau-Verlag in 1947, the same year that her own poetry book, *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (In the Habitations of Death), also appeared with Aufbau (Sachs 1988: 5–68). *Von Welle und Granit* (Sachs 1947) is subtitled '*Querschnitt durch die schwedische Lyrik des 20. Jahrhunderts*' (A Cross-Section of Swedish Lyric Poetry of the Twentieth Century); it focusses on Swedish poetry from 1920, that, according to Sachs, shows influences of "impressionism, expressionism, primitivism … surrealism and psychoanalysis" in a time when "the horrors of a never-before experienced human earthquake and violent dictatorship darken the horizon" (Sachs 1947: 7; my translation here and throughout, if not otherwise noted). Sachs describes modern Swedish poetry as being more attuned to the mind than to feeling; by this she appears to suggest that the Swedish poems are subtle and ambiguous, that their use of metaphor is not straightforward, that they encourage thought, rather than simple emotional reaction, and that they hint at the "mysterious, that casts doubt on clear borders" (Sachs 1947: 8).

Her translation of modern Swedish poetry contributed much to her development as a poet: a deeper concern with language, a concern for the workings of the mind, and a sense of unfolding nightmare. Besides Edfelt, the poets she translated include Edith Södergran, born in 1892 and Gunnar Ekelöf, born 1907. Sachs, who shows herself in this collection to be a sensitive and competent editor, as well as an excellent translator, with a particular aptitude for rhymed verse, includes notes on each poet to provide background for her German readers. According to Domin, Sachs' translation of Swedish poets

and the necessary engagement with a different language and a different way of writing changed her poetic language "von Grund auf" (fundamentally) (Domin 1977: 114). Thus her exile became an "artistic re-birth" (ibid.) She also now first began to realize where the nightmare in Germany was leading; she was only later to learn its full extent (Fioretos 2011: 151–4).

It has been demonstrated by many historians and critics (e.g. Friedländer 2000; Martin 2011: 9–27), that, in post-war divided Germany, West Germany, in particular, was unwilling to confront its Nazi past, so it is not surprising that Sachs' voice, persistently lamenting the fate of the victims, should not have been heard. In East Germany, where her first volume was published two years after the end of the war, there was at first more openness to discussion of the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jews. But this interest declined as the role of chief victims was transferred to the communists and others who had openly resisted Nazism (Martin 2011: 27–33). It was 10 years before Sachs' work appeared in West Germany, though she had been translated into Swedish and Norwegian by then (Martin 2011: 34). When her work did appear, in the 1957 collection *Und niemand weiß weiter* (And No-one Knows How to Go On) (Sachs 1988: 157–249), its publication was only possible because of cultural and political change in West Germany: becoming more conscious of the terrible effects of the Nazis' rule, people began to examine questions of guilt and complicity, and to question their own role in the catastrophe and that of those in authority. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 further helped raise awareness of what had really happened (cf. also Bahr 1995: 49; Martin 2011: 30).

But, as her work gained in popularity in West Germany, it came to be seen largely as poetry of reconciliation (Hoyer 2014: 2). She began to receive literary prizes, culminating in the Nobel Prize in 1966. As Martin puts it "a process of appropriation was gradually developing into one of misappropriation" (Martin 2011: 39), as her images of flight, loss, death and silence were ignored.

The critic Ehrhard Bahr points out that less was written about her work after 1970, the year that both Paul Celan and Sachs died (Bahr 1995: 49). Like Dinesen, he notes that her work had become less obviously centred around the Holocaust after 1950, when it began to be highly influenced by her developing interest in Jewish mysticism (Bahr 1995: 49; Dinesen 1995: 33–4). Other critics have argued that her work from this time on was less easily seen as conciliatory, and became more focussed on the possibility of redemption. Gisela Dischner notes that especially from the 1961 *Fahrt ins Staublose* (Journey into a Dustless Region) (Sachs 1988: 329–342), Sachs' work became particularly concerned with the possibility of redefining words

and concepts that had been misused and manipulated (Dischner 1968: 329). All these assessments of Sachs' work suggest a poetic development for which her early translations of Swedish poetry, so different from the poetry she had known before, had paved the way.

In the next section, against the background of publication and reception I have roughly sketched here, I shall narrow the focus to two particular poems, 'Wenn ich nur wüßte' (If I Only Knew), published in 1947 (Sachs 1988: 31), and 'Der Schlafwandler' (The Sleepwalker), published in 1959 (Sachs 1988: 309), considering what an examination of these poems together with their translations might tell us.

In contrast to a broad case study of Sachs' translations, from which we could expect to gain a better understanding of who translated her work, why, when and how, and how her work in translation is read, a small-scale case study that focusses on particular poems should give us insights of two types.

On the one hand, we see where the particular difficulties for translation lie, and how different translations allow us to infer different interpretations on the part of translators. It is important to bear in mind what Gideon Toury pointed out long ago: comparison is not done with a view to establishing how good or bad a translation is, but in order to establish what has happened (Toury 1995: 84–5). This has now become a commonplace of Translation Studies, but it is worth repeating.

On the other hand, we can hope that comparing the translations with their originals will increase our understanding of the original poetry. Tim Parks (1998: vii) noted that a translation often deviates from its original in particularly striking and interesting ways at stylistically important points in the original text. Parks was focussing on prose, but the same observation can be made about poetry (Boase-Beier 2011: 139–40; 2014, 2015: 78). This second type of insight, then, might be expected to lead to greater understanding of the work itself, and this could, in turn, affect future translations.

Translations of Two Poems by Sachs

Even a small-scale case study needs context, as emphasized by James Holmes when he was first setting out the characteristics of descriptive, as opposed to theoretical, Translation Studies (see Holmes 1988: 71; see also Susam-Sarajeva 2009: 41–4). When considering translations of Sachs' poetry, we note that her earliest poetry remains untranslated. Thomas Tranæus, translating Fioretos' 2010 critical study *Flucht und Verwandlung* (Flight and Metamorphosis) into English, has to provide his own prose translation of Sachs' poem 'Die Spieluhr'

(The Music-Box), published in 1937 (Fioretos 2011: 34). The work most likely to be read in English translation is that written in the first decade after her flight to Sweden. The 2007 *Columbia Granger's Index to Poetry in Anthologies* (Kale 2007), which lists the poems in English most often found in libraries, lists 21 poems by Sachs, of which 16 are from the 1940s and four from the 1950s, with only one poem from the 1961 collection *Fahrt ins Staublose* (Sachs 1988), and none from her later work, though it had appeared in German soon after her death. One of the dangers of this imbalance, which renders most visible those poems that are most obviously about the Holocaust, is that the English reader has little sense of Sachs' poetic development, and this could lead to a tendency for her to become reduced, in readers' minds, to a "Holocaust" poet (cf. Bahr 1995: 49–50; Hoyer 2014: 1).

Because translators have tended to concentrate on a small body of her work, the poems of the 1940s and 1950s are often available in several different English translations. This allows us to go beyond comparing Sachs' originals with one another, or those originals with their translations, and to gain further insight into her work by comparing the way different translators have recreated particular poems (see also Toury 1995: 72–4).

'Wenn ich nur wüßte' was published in 1947, and appeared in *In den Wohnungen des Todes*. This book has been reissued in various forms in German, including in Bengt Holmqvist's 1968 collection, in part in Domin's 1977 selection (Sachs 1977), and in a 1988 Suhrkamp edition that does not name an editor (Sachs 1988).

The poem questions the possibility of speaking from the perspective of someone walking to their death, presumably in a concentration camp. Presenting the view of a victim who will not survive is a common device in Holocaust poetry, used by Dan Pagis (see e.g. Stephen Mitchell's translation 'Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car'; Mitchell 1981: 23), by Celan (see his famous 'Death Fugue', translated by Hamburger; Hamburger 2007: 71), and by many others, and it illustrates one of the most important characteristics of poetry: it can speak for those who cannot (cf. West 1995: 78–9). A poetic insight into the mind of someone in this situation is the only one we have, and, as many critics have pointed out, Sachs makes it clear from titles of poems and poem-cycles, particularly those beginning "Chorus of …", that she is speaking with the voice of others (see Martin 2011: 98–105; West 1995: 79), a poetic device known as prosopopoeia. But in this poem Sachs does not in fact speak for the victim; indeed, she wishes she could enter that person's mind, but all she can do is ask questions. The poem 'Wenn ich nur wüßte' is also one of her most frequently translated works; it appears in several collections in a translation by Ruth and Matthew Mead (e.g. Hamburger et al. 1967: 23), and also in a translation by Eavan Boland (2004: 48), and in one by Teresa Iverson (2014: 82–3).

If we compare these three translations, we see there are two places in the poem where they vary substantially: the final four lines of the first stanza (example 1 below) and the last two lines of the poem (example 2). If it is indeed the case, as suggested above, that the translations of a poem deviate from the original at the point of most stylistic difference and interest (see especially Boase-Beier 2009), then we would expect these to be exactly the points at which different translations also vary most widely. Because a translation is always different from the original, it is sometimes hard to see where these differences arise from a difficulty of interpretation, an "enigmatic aspect" which is "what matters" (Enzensberger 1967: vi), and where they arise more automatically from the crossing of a language boundary, in a sense which perhaps matters less. By comparing the translations themselves we are comparing texts in the same language: deviations are both more obvious and more clearly a result of different interpretations. The possibility of different interpretations itself suggests that the poet chose to employ ambiguity at this point.

The poem begins by exclaiming (in my translation) "If I only knew what your final glance rested upon", going on to ask "was it a stone, that had drunk many, / Many final glances, until in blindness / They fell on the blind stone?" Here are the lines in German (Sachs 1988: 31), with a gloss in English:

1. War es ein Stein, der schon viele letzte Blicke
   was it a stone that already many last glances
   Getrunken hatte, bis sie in Blindheit
   drunk had until they in blindness
   Auf den Blinden fielen?
   on the blind-one fell

The point of deviation I am concerned with is in the third of these 3 lines. From the gloss we see that the imagined glances (of other condemned people, walking the path to their deaths) fell upon "den Blinden", literally "the blind one." But who or what is the blind one? The phrase appears to refer back to "a stone", which had drunk in many glances that eventually became blind, just as the stone was. This is indeed the way I have translated:

… until in blindness
They fell upon the blind stone?

Boland (2004: 48) and the Meads (Hamburger et al. 1967: 23) have "fell blindly on (upon) its blindness", Iverson (2014: 82) "fell in blindness on the blind."

One could argue that Iverson is simply wrong here, because the accusative singular "den Blinden" suggests that the blind one is either the stone or a single blind person, whereas "the blind" is a collective adjectival noun, referring to many people. The Meads and Boland have translated "den Blinden" more vaguely, as "blindness", thus avoiding the problem of reference. But such arguments would, in my view, be completely beside the point. What is much more interesting is the ambiguity. While one might argue that the German is syntactically unambiguous, by virtue of using a masculine singular form, this is not quite true. If Sachs meant "the blind stone", why call it "the blind one"? At the very least, it suggests that the stone is partly metaphorical, perhaps standing for a person who is, or was, blind, who could have seen what was happening, but chose not to. A stone is often, in Sachs' poetry, a metaphor for that which bears traces of the past (see e.g. 'In der Flucht' (In Flight); Sachs 1988: 262) and, in a wider sense, of a desire for renewal (cf. Dischner 1968: 316).

And there is another possibility. In a study of metaphor which predates the development of the now commonly-held view in literary stylistics and poetics that metaphors are cognitive rather than merely textual elements (see e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980), Samuel Levin argued that a metaphor such as "The stone died" would not, in a literary text, be construed linguistically so as to render it non-deviant, but, instead, "phenomenalistically" (Levin 1977: 137) so that a different world can be seen in which such an expression makes sense. In the world of Sachs' poem, then, the stone is partly animate, because it *really* bears traces of what has happened, even to the point of becoming blind rather than merely being by nature unseeing.

So what might be seen as a misreading in one of the translations, when taken together with the other translations, in fact draws attention to a particular type of ambiguity in the poem, which is not so much syntactic as conceptual. There is an ambiguity in the world in which the poem plays out, an ambiguity highlighted by a difference in interpretation amongst different translators. It is exactly this sort of ambiguity which critics such as Domin (1977: 117) have seen as typical of Sachs.

The other point of deviation between the translations is in the final two lines, which ask whether there was a "bird-sign" in those final moments, "To remind your soul, so it quivered / In its body ravaged by fire" (in my translation). The original German of these two lines (Sachs 1988: 31) reads:

2. Erinnernd deine Seele, dass sie zuckte
   reminding your soul that it quivered
   In ihrem qualverbrannten Leib?
   in its agony-burnt body

In my translation "remind" has no dependent "that"-phrase. The soul was simply *reminded*, and the result was that it quivered. Iverson (2014: 83) has interpreted similarly: "reminding your soul so that it flinched." Boland (2004: 48), however, has "reminding your soul that it flinched", and the Meads (Hamburger et al. 1967: 23), similarly, "reminding your soul that it quivered".

The difference is in the reading of "dass", which is ambiguous: "that" or "so that." The more immediately obvious interpretation is that the bird-sign reminds the soul *that* it quivered (or flinched), as Boland and the Meads have it. But, taking the other two translations into account, one wonders what this actually means in the world of the poem. How could the soul need reminding *that* it was quivering? If, on the other hand, the sign reminds the soul, *so that* it quivers, then what does it remind it of? How can you remind someone or something without reminding them *of* something? The answer seems to be that you return it to the mind: you re-mind the soul, make it part of a mind again. The German for "reminding" is "erinnernd": literally, "re-internalizing." If we take it in this sense it suggests that the soul is returned not just into the mind but also into the burnt body, where it quivers, because the body is in agony. If the body is collective, re-minding the soul means keeping its agony alive in memory.

The point again here is not to argue about different interpretations (and we can see that "remind" is in any case narrower in meaning than "erinnern" in its literal sense), but to ask how they arise, and what they suggest. Having seen how they arise, and what they suggest, we then ask why the original poet wrote such ambiguity into the poem. Another way of putting this is to say that the different interpretations of "dass" are not merely the result of the different ways the translators see the world, but that they result from the possibility, exploited by the poet, that a verb like "erinnern" can have a literal sense: "to re-internalize." That insight leads us to wonder about the religious and metaphorical connotations of returning a soul into a burned body, and whether to do so is also to return it to the mind. It leads us to consider both the inability of the soul ever to be free of bodily torment, and also the Christian and Jewish notion of resurrection, a common theme in Sachs' poems (Anderegg 1995: 61–5).

Let us turn now to two examples from a later poem. 'Der Schlafwandler' (The Sleepwalker) is not one of her very last poems; it was published in 1959 in *Flucht und Verwandlung* (Flight and Metamorphosis) (Sachs 1988: 251–327), the collection from which Fioretos took the title for his 2010 study (Fioretos 2011). However, it illustrates the huge stylistic change that had taken place between the more explicit earlier poems of the 1940s and the poems of the 1950s.

It has been translated by Hamburger (Hamburger et al. 1967: 173), and by Iverson (2014: 89), and I have also translated it. If we look at this poem (Sachs 1988: 309) with its translations in more detail, as before, we can see that there are three points at which the translations deviate from one another, lines 2, 3 and 4 (example 3 below), and line 5 (example 4). Lines 2, 3 and 4 depict the sleep-walker, "circling on his star/on the white feather of morning/ awakened—." The German reads:

3. kreisend auf seinem Stern
   circling on his star
   An der weißen Feder des Morgens
   on/by the white feather of-the morning
   erwacht
   awakes/awakened

Two ambiguities in these lines account for the differences: "an" could be understood as "on" (in the sense that the star is on the feather) or "by" (in the sense that the sleep-walker is awakened by the feather). Furthermore, "erwacht" could be the present tense of "to awake": the sleep-walker awakens. Or it could be the past participle, indicating the passive: "the sleep-walker, awakened by (or on) the white feather." This is Hamburger's interpretation; he has "is awakened by / the white feather of morning", though "an" is not usually used this way. Iverson has "in the white feather", suggesting perhaps the feathers in a bed-cover or mattress, a connotation which is certainly present in the poem, and she takes "erwacht" to be the present tense: "wakes up." I have translated it as "on the white feather of morning / awakened" so it could be read as either a simple past tense or as a past participle, indicating a passive with no obvious agent, with the "an" the location of the "star" of line 1. The white feather is thus a metaphor for morning in this reading.

These differences in themselves perhaps seem rather insignificant, but they affect the way another ambiguous passage is read. This is at the second point of deviation in the translations. It is similar to that in the earlier poem, and it comes in the next line, which reads in my translation "the blood-spot on it reminded him." Here is the original:

4. Der Blutfleck darauf erinnerte ihn
   the blood-spot on-it reminded him

All translations leave open the possibility that we are not told what the sleep-walker is reminded of, though there are differences in the tense used: Iverson and Hamburger have the present ("calls to mind"; "reminds him") whereas I

have the past ("reminded him"). In fact, the change of tense from "awakes", if one translated with the present there, to past "reminded" would be so striking that most translators avoid it. Iverson and Hamburger both keep to the present throughout: "The sleepwalker … wakes up … the spot of blood … calls it to mind" (Iverson), and "The sleepwalker … is awakened … the bloodstain … reminds him" (Hamburger). My translation avoids the tense change in a different way: by leaving open the possibility that the earlier form ("awakened") is either a past tense or a passive: "the sleepwalker … awakened … the blood-spot … reminded him." Similarly, in the original, though the tenses make the poem difficult to follow, there is not the same obvious change because the earlier "erwacht" is ambiguous.

In Hamburger's translation, and in mine, the blood-spot reminds (or reminded) the sleep-walker. But in Iverson's, "the spot of blood on it calls *it* to mind" (emphasis added). "It" could be the star, the white feather of morning, the fact of having been woken, and so on. Iverson has thus chosen to leave open all the options of the original, and possibly more.

A comparison of these different translations draws attention to Sachs' unusual stylistic choice of "erinnerte", which both embodies a possible change of time from present to past and, by its lack of an obvious object, leads the reader to question, as in example (2), whether in fact the verb means "reminded" *of* something at all, or perhaps something more akin to "sent him back in." This, together with the apparent tense change, suggests the sleepwalker has awakened before, has been returned "inside", that is, back to sleep, by the blood on the feather, to wake again and be shocked. Such an interpretation makes more sense of the word "kreisend" (circling).

The poems resist a clear interpretation, as Enzensberger (1967: xii) points out. What the comparison of translations does is to suggest how Sachs is using language to make it thus resistant.

From these brief comparisons we get a sense of the inordinate care with which Sachs chooses words so as to leave open several possible interpretations. Tenses and prepositions are structurally ambiguous, and images are not merely hard to pin down, but lead the reader to ask questions about the relationship of soul, body, mind and memory, as well as about the places where memory is held.

Insights such as these are crucial for the translator, as well as for the critic. We begin to get a sense of why words such as "erinnern" matter so much to Sachs, as we put these insights together with the facts of her background and circumstances. It might seem that the decisions to write "remind your soul, so it quivered", rather than "that it quivered", in translating Sachs, is an unimportant one; I would argue that such decisions affect the ability of the poem to engage the reader, and also affect how other poems are translated.

Conclusion

A translation case study, like any other case study, can be very broad, and may take in various different aspects. But a study of an individual case can also be fairly narrow, because, especially when space or time are limited, narrowness allows depth. I have here outlined the broader context of translations of Nelly Sachs' poetry in only a fairly superficial way, in order to focus in more depth on specific translations, including my own. This allows the more detailed study to be placed in the context of the larger overall picture, so that potential interactions between details of translation and background factors can be inferred. Using my own translation as one of those to be examined allows both an increase in the data that can be drawn on and access to translation processes that are otherwise less readily available (cf. Jones 2011: 113). It is clear that my own translation is already, to some extent, influenced by the sort of reflection here explored.

In fact, the case study I have outlined above is only a fragment of one: it illustrates what a case study that is both broader in scope and deeper in analysis might do, and how it might be useful for the critic and the translator. I suggested in Introduction that, by considering how Sachs' poetry has been translated and what challenges its translation poses, within the broader context of her poetry and its reception, we can hope to gain insights into how her work might be translated in future.

Though the discussion of her background, the context in which she was writing, her development as a poet, and the translations of her poetry, have necessarily been very brief, nevertheless a picture emerges which helps explain how Sachs' poetry is viewed in the English-speaking world. The earlier, more explicit poems, which Fioretos says will probably "make today's readers squirm" with their "[m]arching boots, crying children, and murdering hands" (Fioretos 2011: 147), are the most often translated, while the later poems, which critical and autobiographical research tells us were written after she had time to absorb what she had learned about modern Swedish poetry when translating it, after she had begun to read widely in Jewish and Christian mysticism, after she had started to assimilate some of the discussion around Holocaust writing then going on in Germany, and after she had experienced more severe mental health problems (Fioretos 2011: 212–66), are much less known and read. Sachs is thus inevitably seen as a Holocaust poet in what is possibly a rather reductive way.

Against this background we see that a close study of translations of particular poems suggests that, in her earlier, more explicit poetry after 1940, and even more in her later poetry, she was a poet who chose to use ambiguous

expressions and images. We see that the same verb "erinnern" (to remind) is used in both poems in a very individual and characteristic sense of "returning to the mind." This suggests that a translator must consider her whole *œuvre* in order not only to build up a sense of her use of metaphor and symbol, but also to discover the characteristic way she uses particular words and expressions. In fact "Erinnerung" (memory) could be understood as meaning "returning into the mind" in many other poems (see e.g. Sachs 1988: 58, 166, 194, 345). But this is something that poetry translators are generally aware of. In the specific case of Nelly Sachs' poetry, I would argue that there are two further conclusions we can draw.

The first is that Sachs' English readers need to be provided with context in order to appreciate her work, and to find it more appealing and relevant. The story of her life is an interesting one, and would today provide more useful context than, for example, Enzensberger's introductory essay of 1967, helpful though that undoubtedly was in her lifetime. The essay contains very insightful discussions of individual words and images in the poetry, but it needs to be understood now as an assessment that was made before more recent reception and criticism of Sachs' work. Yet it is simply reprinted without comment in the 2011 collection. Sachs' development as a poet, including the role that her translations of Swedish Modernist poets played, could provide part of the context for today's readers, and would allow the inclusion of her earlier poems, written and published in German before her flight to Sweden. The reader would thus get a better sense of Sachs as a poet who wrote about relationships and nature, and who saw her life turned upside down by the Holocaust in ways that changed her poetic expression radically, but did not destroy the traces of her earlier preoccupations.

The second conclusion we can draw from this brief account of translations of Sachs' poetry is that comparison of different translations of the same poem allows many insights both into the work of translators and into the original poems themselves. It is with the second of these insights that I have been most concerned here.

What a comparison such as this can tell us is not only that a particular poem is susceptible to several different interpretations, as one would expect, but what it is in the poet's choice of language that gives rise to the ambiguity. This, in turn, gives us a sense of Sachs' mental image of the world that lies behind these particular elements of style.

More than this—and we can say this with a reasonable degree of certainty on the basis of the small number of examples considered here—a comparison of several translations can direct us to points of particular moment in the poem, and to greater understanding of the poet's world-view or state of mind.

In the examples above, the comparison of translations points to the image of the stone, the use of the verb "erinnern" (to remind), and to an ambiguous use of prepositions and conjunctions, as particular points of interest. Further study of different translations of Sachs' poems might or might not bear out this impression. If it does, it could suggest several things: an interest in the way nature reflects or does not reflect human action and thought; a concern for the notion of remembering; a feeling for the uncertainty of cause and effect.

A question that has often plagued stylisticians (see Leech and Short 2007: 2–3) is this: how do we know what is important? Comparing translations shows us what is important. This suggests that such comparison is crucial to understanding literary texts. Gaining enhanced insights of these various types into the poetics of the poet in question can then be the basis not only for literary or stylistic studies, but for further translations.

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