

# The Residue and the Dust Nelly Sachs and Jacques Lacan

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In this paper, we aim to identify in the theme of «dust» – the discarded and unburned residue (though itself the result of a terrible combustion) – the «paradigm» – in the sense that Agamben speaks of it in *Signatura rerum: sul metodo* – that can hold together the otherwise distant figures of Nelly Sachs and Jacques Lacan. The problem they both face is imagining how to do something with what remains. The «dust» of a people for Nelly Sachs, the «mark» of a body for Jacques Lacan. What to do with the end? What to do with the mark that never stops causing pain? What to do with death? The traditional answer is to celebrate the memory of this end; it is to preserve the memory of the trauma so that the suffering of those who have been exterminated is not erased. From this imperative follows the idea that the only permissible use of language is that of re-enactment and remembrance. But then comes Nelly Sachs's poem, which calls instead for the use of language not to remember, but to pave the way for what is new, and thus to forget. Because death, incredibly, is not the end, but only «a whirling passage» from which new stars can be born.

KEYWORDS: *Nelly Sachs, Jacques Lacan, Giorgio Agamben, paradigm, dust*

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# The Residue and the Dust

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[...] Teresa Galì-Izard [...] [in] her Garden of Senan [...] in 2005 [...] digs a circular hole, about a metre deep, leaving the removed soil next to it in a heap. Then she waits. And waits. And waits even more. The months go by, and at last there is no longer any trace of the hole nor of the heap – due perhaps to the settling of dust and other soil, or to the cropping up of vegetation. But then one day, in late May, what should bloom but poppies – which, as we all know, love loose, disjointed ground<sup>1</sup>.

Where does our investigation get importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand<sup>2</sup>.

1. It shifts, it accumulates inexorably, and then shifts again. If dust possesses one particularly irritating trait, it is its refusal to stay still; mysteriously, it moves, it is always there, and never ceases to reproduce itself: «perhaps,» write Nieuwenhuis and Nassar. «Perhaps the most remarkable thing about dust is the way it moves». Si tratta del fatto che «the smallest fragments of materiality and embodiment are never going away. In its circular movement, dust engulfs, settles and is airborne again. Dust is the traveller *par excellence*. It swirls, picking up our shed skin, worn-out fabrics and the minute particles comprising what we like to imagine and perceive as intact: bricks,

1 Annalisa Metta, *Il paesaggio è un mostro. Città selvatiche e nature ibride*, DeriveApprodi, Rome 2022, p. 162.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen – Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., Blackwell, Oxford 1958 (1953<sup>1</sup>), I, § 118, p. 48e.

cement, cities, our bodies, territories and the *geo* of geographies»<sup>3</sup>. Dust moves; its motion is relentless. In truth, dust is the very *essence* of movement, the microscopic pulse of the world. It reminds us that everything crumbles, disintegrates and breaks apart<sup>4</sup>. And yet, precisely through this movement – and herein lies its mystery – dust does not merely announce the end and death; rather, it reveals the unstoppable *displacement* of the world, which is always elsewhere than where we thought – or wished – it to be. The world moves – this is dust's truth. As Gilles Deleuze writes in his commentary on Nietzsche's obscure doctrine of the «eternal return», «L'Eternel retour ne va pas sans une transmutation. Etre du devenir [...]»<sup>5</sup>. Dust, this ideal traveller, represents the movement of the world itself, the wind of matter, the brittle life of things. In truth, it is not that dust travels but, rather, that dust represents the *world's* journey.

So when the Lord cries out to humankind, banished from Paradise, that «*pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*» (*Genesis* 3:19), He may not be merely condemning them to death; rather, He may be pointing them towards a way of remaining in Paradise – of existing within the immobile and thus perfect time of timeless life – even, and perhaps above all, by leaving it. To become dust, in this sense, means to return to being part of the world, an infinitesimal particle of the eternal world which remains ever the same *through* its ceaseless transformation. After all, one who is born and lives solely within Paradise is unaware of living in Paradise, precisely because they have never left it (just as one who is born and raised in a prison cannot conceive of a different world). Thus, only by leaving could humankind, in retrospect, understand that they had lived in Paradise without knowing it. And so, dust ceases to signify an absolute end, the irreversible ruin of all things; rather, it is a transitory phase – but no phase is ever anything but transitory – of matter's unstoppable movement<sup>6</sup>.

But what *is* dust, exactly? Dust consists of tiny fragments produced by the disintegration of everything present in the world. In other words, dust is any microscopic particle of sand, soil, minute fragments of organic tissue or manufactured materials – light enough to be carried by the wind yet heavy enough to settle on a surface. In-

3 Marijn Nieuwenhuis – Aya Nassar, *Dust: Perfect Circularity*, in «Cultural Geographies», 25 (2018), 3, pp. 501-507: 502.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, Minuit, Paris 1993, p. 133.

6 This is valid for an open system, such as our world; entropy (after all, dust is one of its manifold incarnations) cannot decrease in a closed system, according to the general formula  $\geq 0$ .

dividual dust particles can be large enough to be seen with the naked eye, just as vast concentrations of windborne dust are often visible in the form of whirlwinds and full-fledged dust storms. The inorganic components of dust include tiny pieces of rock, salts and substances produced by human activity, while the organic components include pet dander, hair or fur, textile fibres and ash, along with microscopic living beings such as pollen, bacteria, mites and mould spores. Dust is, incredibly, teeming with life<sup>7</sup>.

Dust – as we all know – is ubiquitous in both natural *and* human environments. It lingers in the air and accumulates on virtually all surfaces: on plants, among the hairy structures of animals, on the ground in cultivated and uncultivated landscapes, as well as on furniture and other elements of human spaces. Suspended dust floating gently in the air can be almost imperceptible, unless a sunbeam reflects off its individual particles (in this sense, dust allows us to see the light – not what the light illuminates, but the light itself). By contrast, volcanic dust (which is ejected as part of a plume of larger particles during an eruption) and dust walls (such as those originating in the Sahara and carried thousands of kilometres across the Atlantic Ocean) are vast enough to be seen from space. On an interstellar scale, massive concentrations of dust particles form planetary rings – like those encircling Saturn – as well as interstellar dust clouds (likely produced by the explosion of supernovae<sup>8</sup>) from which nebulae and galaxies take shape (and, ultimately, planets). In the beginning, there is dust. So Kant asserts in the chapter of *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) devoted to explaining the formation of planets:

[...] dauert die allgemeine Ruhe nur einen Augenblick. Die Elemente haben wesentliche Kräfte, einander in Bewegung zu setzen, und sind sich selber eine Quelle des Lebens. Die Materie ist sofort in Bestrebung, sich zu bilden. Die zerstreuten Elemente dichter Art sammeln, vermittelt der Anziehung, aus einer Sphäre rund um sich alle Materie von minder specifischer Schwere; sie selber aber, zusammt der Materie, die sie mit sich vereinigt haben, sammeln sich in den Punkten, da die Theilchen von noch dichter Gattung befindlich sind, diese gleichergestalt zu noch dichteren und so fortan. Indem man also dieser sich bildenden Natur in Gedanken durch den ganzen Raum des Chaos nachgeheth, so wird man leichtlich inne: daß alle Folgen dieser Wirkung zuletzt in der Zusammensetzung verschiedener

7 Cf. Helena Rintala *et al.*, *Microbial Communities Associated with House Dust*, in «Advances in Applied Microbiology», 78 (2022), pp. 75-120.

8 Florian Kirchschrager *et al.*, *From Total Destruction to Complete Survival: Dust Processing at Different Evolutionary Stages in the Supernova Remnant Cassiopeia A*, in «Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society», 528 (2024), 3, pp. 5364-5376.

Klumpen bestehen würden, die nach Verrichtung ihrer Bildungen durch die Gleichheit der Anziehung ruhig und auf immer unbewegt sein würden<sup>9</sup>.

In this sense, dust does not represent an exceptional state of matter – something that a radical ‘cleansing’ (both physical and, above all, metaphysical) could eliminate once and for all. The world is made of dust, and dust, as we have seen, is teeming with microbial life<sup>10</sup>. Dust is not the end; dust is another beginning, just as it is not an end but rather an endless deferral of the end. In this essay, we propose to use dust as a «paradigm», as defined by Agamben – namely, «a singular case that is isolated from the context to which it belongs» because, by doing so, «it displays its singularity, rendering a new whole intelligible, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes»<sup>11</sup>. More specifically, we intend to use the case of dust to propose precisely «a new whole», one that includes the poetry of Nelly Sachs and the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. It is not that Nelly Sachs’ poetry – particularly the theme of dust (*Staub*) – and Jacques Lacan’s notion of the «*objet petit a*» inherently form a conceptual or historiographical whole. Rather, as Agamben writes, a paradigm «renders intelligible» a whole that exists *only because* that very paradigm has constituted it as such. In other words, the paradigm allows us to perceive analogies that we otherwise would not have noticed. The paradigm’s action is actually even more powerful, for it is the paradigm itself that ‘establishes’ the analogies it then discovers among the phenomena that constitute the «a new whole». In this sense, for Agamben, paradigmatic knowledge differs from historical knowledge; the aim here is not to reconstruct actual connections – assuming they exist – between Nelly Sachs and Jacques Lacan<sup>12</sup>, but rather to offer the possibility (which is thus strictly paradigmatic and not historiographical) of reading one in light of

9 Immanuel Kant, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels oder Versuch von der Verfassung und dem mechanischen Ursprunge des ganzen Weltgebäudes, nach Newtonischen Grundsätzen abgehandelt*, in *Kant’s Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 1, Abt. 1: *Werke: Vorkritische Schriften*, Reimer, Berlin 1910, pp. 217-368: 264.

10 Christina Kellogg – Dale Griffin, *Aerobiology and the Global Transport of Desert Dust*, in «TRENDS in Ecology and Evolution», 21 (2006), 11, pp. 638-644; Tina Šantl-Temkiv et al., *Microbial Ecology of the Atmosphere*, in «FEMS Microbiology Review», 46 (2022), 4, fuac009, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/femsre/fuac009>> (last accessed: 18 October 2024).

11 Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum. Sul metodo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2008, p. 20.

12 According to Henry Krutzen (*Jacques Lacan. Séminaire 1952-1980: Index référentiel*, Economica Anthropos, Paris 2009) Nelly Sachs’ name never appears in the *Séminaires* held by the French psychoanalyst between 1952 and 1980.

the other, and vice versa. The «paradigm» of dust, then, serves both to reveal a connection that might otherwise have eluded us and to imagine a connection that is created by the paradigm itself. That is, the paradigm simultaneously discovers and invents «a new whole».

2. Dust has always been a signifier of time and, as we have just seen, of the totality of temporal movement. Dust is thus the past, but also the new that inevitably emerges from dust itself – like the star that will form by self-aggregating from intergalactic dust. In the extraordinary poem *An euch, die das neue Haus bauen*, it is *time* – as a fetish of a past irretrievably lost – that is brought into focus and overturned:

WENN DU dir deine Wände neu aufrichdest –  
Deinen Herd, Schlafstatt, Tisch und Stuhl –  
Hänge nicht deine Tränen um sie, die dahingegangen,  
Die nicht mehr mit dir wohnen werden  
An den Stein  
Nicht an das Holz –  
Es weint sonst in deinen Schlaf hinein,  
Den kurzen, den du noch tun mußt.

Seufze nicht, wenn du dein Laken bettest,  
Es mischen sich sonst deine Träume  
Mit dem Schweiß der Toten.

Ach, es sind die Wände und die Geräte  
Wie die Windfahrten empfänglich  
Und wie ein Acker, darin dein Leid wächst,  
Und spüren das Staubverwandte in dir.

Baue, wenn die Stundenuhr rieselt,  
Aber weine nicht die Minuten fort  
Mit dem Staub zusammen,  
Der das Licht verdeckt<sup>13</sup>.

The house is new; it is a house to be built, not a house to be *re*-built. It is not the past that is being attempted to recover, because that past has ended up in ashes, carried away in the light dust that knows nothing of the violence and pain that pulverised the old house. This is why, if we want to build a new house, we must not

13 In Nelly Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose. Die Gedichte der Nelly Sachs*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1961, p. 9.

keep mourning the old one. This is the connection with the dust «where your pain grows», the very dust «that hides the light». But it does hide the light, and this could be called the second movement of dust, inseparable from the first, in order to *see* the light, because we must first pass through the dust. We do not see the light directly, just as humanity in its original state did not know it was living in Paradise until it was cast out because, paradoxically, only darkness that, by contrast, allows us to see the light itself. Indeed, to see the light means seeing not so much the individual, illuminated entities, but seeing what allows *us* to see *them*. Seeing the light not as reflected light, but seeing the very fact of light. If it were not for the dust of the past, and therefore the pain we feel for the past gone up in smoke, we could not even see the light, the wonder of *light as light*. This is what we can identify as the second movement of dust, which, in as much as it is what remains of the painful past, nevertheless allows, in backlighting, the experience of seeing the light itself indirectly. But to see the light means to see the wonder of the world – that is, to see that the world does not end with the dust; on the contrary, it only begins again with the movement of dust. Hans Magnus Enzensberger perfectly captures this double movement in *Die Verschwundenen*, the poem he dedicates to Nelly Sachs:

Nicht die Erde hat sie verschluckt. War es die Luft?  
Wie der Sand sind sie zahlreich, doch nicht zu Sand  
sind sie geworden, sondern zu nichte. In Scharen  
sind sie vergessen. Häufig und Hand in Hand,

wie die Minuten. Mehr als wir,  
doch ohne Andenken. Nicht verzeichnet,  
nicht abzulesen im Staub, sondern verschwunden  
sind ihre Namen, Löffel und Sohlen.

Sie reuen uns nicht. Es kann sich niemand  
auf sie besinnen: Sind sie geboren,  
geflohen, gestorben? Vermißt  
sind sie nicht worden. Lückenlos  
ist die Welt, doch zusammengehalten  
von dem was sie nicht behaust,  
von den Verschwundenen. Sie sind überall.

Ohne die Abwesenden wäre nichts da.  
Ohne die Flüchtigen wäre nichts fest.  
Ohne die Vergessenen nichts gewiß.

Die Verschwundenen sind gerecht.  
So verschallen wir auch<sup>14</sup>.

«Ohne die Abwesenden wäre nichts da» because the world would still be, and this is a terrible admission, cluttered by their presence, and there would be no room for what is new<sup>15</sup>. Thus, for the same reason, «Ohne die Flüchtigen wäre nichts fest» because the only solidity we can aspire to, in the world of dust and movement, is that which is equally mobile and fluctuating, that of the exiled, the stateless. And above all, «Ohne die Vergessenen nichts gewiß»; there could be no such poetry – that is, the attempt to measure and thus organize in words the experience of the world – if it did not have to incessantly confront the boundless field of the immeasurable and the uncertain, that is, the infinite field from which language has always been exiled. For this reason, finally, «Ohne die Vergessenen nichts gewiß». The only certainty, in the time of dust and thus of radical uncertainty, can only be to build a new house, as Sachs writes in another poem. A house that nevertheless makes of the lack of foundation (of sand – *Sand* – which becomes a void, as Enzensberger claims) its own paradoxical foundation: «An Stelle von Heimat / halte ich die Verwandlungen der Welt»<sup>16</sup>. For the same reason, as the first verses of the poem say, «In der Flucht / welch großer Empfang / unterwegs». Welcome is the other face of flight, not its opposite, just as light is inseparable from the shadow cast by the dust that darkens the sky, while still making it visible. To reach the paradox, in perhaps Nelly Sachs' most daring

14 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Die Gedichte*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1983, pp. 205-206.

15 It is difficult to resist the impression – albeit entirely paradigmatic and non-textual – of interpreting this relationship between becoming dust as the terrifying precondition for the creation of the new in light of the strikingly similar relationship established, according to the great Kabbalistic master Isaac ben Solomon Luria, between God's «concentration» and «contraction» before creation – designated by the term *tzimtzum* – as the condition of possibility for the formation of the world; «How can there be a world if God is everywhere? [...] According to Luria, God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which he withdrew [...]. The first act of *En-Sof*, the Infinite Being, is therefore not a step outside but a step inside, a movement of recoil, of falling back upon oneself, of withdrawing into oneself», Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, New York 1967 (1941<sup>1</sup>), pp. 260-261. On Nelly Sachs' widely researched relationship with Kabbalistic mysticism see, lastly, Daniel Pedersen, *The Zohar as Poetic Inspiration: Nelly Sachs's Reading of Gershom Scholem*, in *Scholar and Kabbalist: The Life and Work of Gershom Scholem*, ed. by Mirjam Zadoff – Noam Zadoff, Brill, Leiden 2019, pp. 114-133.

16 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, p. 262 [*In der Flucht*]



poem, where even the chimneys of the crematoria become «Freiheitswege für Jeremias und Hiobs Staub», that is, for the «Flüchtlinge aus Rauch»<sup>17</sup>. They are dust and smoke, but they are fleeing. It is dust of death, which, however, does not cease to also be dust of life.

3. Another case where we find the fundamental coexistence of shadow and light<sup>18</sup>, and thus of past and future, as well as memory and oblivion, which marks all of Nelly Sachs' poetry. But also the connection that binds together and at the same time separates the word and silence. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, another who tried to build a solid structure from rubble, writes: «At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded»<sup>19</sup>. Belief is unfounded because there is no reason to consider the belief on which our thoughts, actions and, above all, our words, rest as absolutely grounded: indeed, at Auschwitz, not only poetry perished, but semantics as well. As he writes just above, «I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house»<sup>20</sup>. It is not the wall that supports the house, the new house spoken of by Nelly Sachs; rather, it is the house that supports the master wall, which is, therefore not a master wall at all. It is not the past, memory and recollection that can lend solidity to the new house but, instead, the boundless drive of a structure's very construction that makes it solid, even though it is actually devoid of a wall to lean on.

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game<sup>21</sup>.

An action which, of course, is entirely unfounded, but not for that reason any less obstinate; indeed, perhaps it is even more determined precisely because nothing justifies it. An act of pure hope with no object

17 *Ibid.*, p. 8 [O die Schornsteine].

18 Ehrhard Bahr, *Flight and Metamorphosis: Nelly Sachs as a Poet of Exile*, in *Exile: The Writer's Experience*, ed. by John Spalek – Robert Bell, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1982, pp. 267-277; Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, *La poetica dei cori di Nelly Sachs*, in «Estetica. Studi e ricerche», 2 (2019), pp. 423-440; *Art from Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Langer, Oxford University Press, New York 1995; Margarita Pazi, *Staub und Sterne. Aufsätze zur deutsch-jüdischen Literatur*, hrsg. v. Sigrid Bauschinger – Paul Michael Lützel, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2001.

19 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, Blackwell, Oxford 1969, p. 255.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

in which to hope. The same, absurd, obstinacy that we find in the *Chor der Geretteten* – addressed to those who came after the tragedy – who, like the builders of the new house, are caught between the memory of horror and the indefinite expectation of beginning another life:

[...]  
Wir Geretteten,  
Bitten euch:  
Zeigt uns langsam eure Sonne.  
Führt uns von Stern zu Stern im Schritt.  
Laßt uns das Leben leise wieder lernen  
[...]<sup>22</sup>

The light reappears, as do the stars (which, as we know, are nothing but a temporary concentration of interstellar dust) that point the way so that the survivors (the dust) can once «das Leben leise wieder lernen». This is the challenge, «to learn life again» because, having become dust, we have forgotten how to *live*, for the life we once knew is not only gone but, as Wittgenstein says about language, the houses we lived in were actually «nothing but houses of cards», so destroying them «we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand»<sup>23</sup>. In fact, after the Holocaust it is impossible to continue speaking the same language, with the same meanings, used before, because that language not only failed to prevent the Holocaust, but actually made it possible. This is why «[t]he creation and recreation of language are related to the creation and recreation of theology and reality»<sup>24</sup>. In this sense, the double condition of dust, as both an end and a beginning, as memory and oblivion, as destruction and construction, takes on a very particular meaning: poetry is the ‘new’ dusty language that attempts to bring together what we cannot imagine could still be associated – death and life, language and the world:

[...]  
Wir bitten euch:  
Zeigt uns noch nicht einen beißenden Hund –

22 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, p. 50 [*Chor der Geretteten*]. Cfr. Sá Cavalcante Schuback Marcia, *Nelly Sachs' Chorus Poetics*, in *Words, Bodies, Memory: A Festschrift in Honor of Irina Sandomirskaja*, ed. by Lars Kleberg – Tora Lane – Sá Cavalcante Schuback Marcia, Södertörn University Press, Stockholm 2019, pp. 125-139.

23 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, *op. cit.*, p. 48e.

24 Ursula Rudnick, *RECONSTRUCTING GOD-LANGUAGE: The Poetry of Nelly Sachs*, in «European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe», 30 (1997), 2, pp. 131-150: 145.

Es könnte sein, es könnte sein  
 Daß wir zu Staub zerfallen –  
 Vor euren Augen zerfallen in Staub.  
 Was hält denn unsere Webe zusammen?  
 Wir odemlos gewordenem  
 Deren Seele zu Ihm floh aus der Mitternacht  
 Lange bevor man unseren Leib rettete  
 In die Arche des Augenblicks.  
 Wir Geretteten,  
 Wir drücken eure Hand,  
 Wir erkennen euer Auge –  
 Aber zusammen hält uns nur noch der Abschied,  
 Der Abschied im Staub  
 Hält uns mit euch zusammen<sup>25</sup>.

It is only «farewell that keeps us united» meaning that it is, in fact, the dust that holds together what the dust itself bears witness to – what was violently reduced to smoke. The space that opens up, after the dust has swept everything away, is a space that is finally inhabitable, as new as the house of those to whom the prayer *An euch, die das neue Haus bauen* is directed. A space in which, in the end, «alles namenlos wird wie im Anfang»<sup>26</sup>. The poetry of dust, then, is at once a poem – and therefore a language – but it is also paradoxically without names, since the name is a device of power<sup>27</sup>, whereas in the world of dust, there is no longer any imposition or subjugation. Through poetry that incredibly tries to transform horror into new life, it is about thinking in another way, inclusive and not exclusive – not dust *or* life, but dust *and* life – writing in another way, telling in another way. As it is written in the *Epitaph*:

WIEDER HAT EINER in der Marter  
 den weißen Eingang gefunden

Schweigen – Schweigen – Schweigen –

Die innere Sprache erlöst  
 welch ein Sieg –

Wir pflanzen hier Demut –<sup>28</sup>

25 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51 [*Chor der Geretteten*].

26 *Ibid.*, p. 137 [*Wenn der Tag leer wird*].

27 Cf. Felice Cimatti,  $\exists x(fx)$ . *Logica della decisione*, Cronopio, Napoli 2024.

28 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, p. 380 [*Grabschrift*].

And what is a «redeemed» language, if not a language – poetry being this very language – capable of expressing at once death and life, oblivion and memory, the agony of the old and the surprise of the new? An «inner language» (for it is the language in which we think), a language that must be able to hold together that which, by its very nature, *cannot* be held together – for life and death cannot coexist. It is this impossibility, which remains ever impossible – otherwise, these poems would be nothing more than cloying verbal (indeed, almost offensive) impressions – that Nelly Sachs persistently places before our eyes. Indeed, she never offers us a possible reconciliation between dust and life, for only if dust is truly and solely dust can it also, miraculously, become new life. It is in this sense that we must understand the call to silence – not as mere silence (a brutal cessation of speech) but, rather, in an act reminiscent in many ways of the closing/opening move of Wittgenstein<sup>29</sup>'s *Tractatus*, as an openness to listening to the silent voice of the world (for the world to 'speak', language must exile itself *within* itself). Silence, which is «martyrdom» precisely because there is no harmony or reconciliation of opposites in Nelly Sachs' world, is also, suddenly, a «white entrance» into the world of light, of full, wondrous light. For the same reason, where silence holds sway – where even the «inner language» has been «redeemed» – humility will have finally been planted. For only humility – understood as the stepping back from a violent subjectivity that knows no way of addressing the world other than by commanding it – allows the world itself to make give voice to its singularity:

WIE LEICHT  
wird die Erde sein  
nur eine Wolke Abendliebe  
wenn als Musik erlöst  
der Stein in Landsflucht zieht  
[...] <sup>30</sup>

Music should not properly be understood as a language, for unlike established languages, it does not impose its sovereign order<sup>31</sup> upon the world. Quite the opposite, music resonates with the world,

29 «Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber / muß man schweigen», Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, with an introduction by Bertrand Russel, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., London 1922, § 7.

30 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, p. 256 [*Wie leicht wird Erde sein*].

31 Cf. Felice Cimatti, *La vita estrinseca. Dopo il linguaggio*, Orthotes, Naples-Salerno 2018.

it accompanies and rearticulates the intrinsic sonority of the world (it is the world that sings; language merely attempts – without ever quite succeeding – to capture this original sonority). A world in which even stone<sup>32</sup> becomes musical, for there is no entity in the world that is not, in its own way, alive – gg that is to say, musical: «und der Stein seinen Staub / tanzend in Musik verwandelt»<sup>33</sup>. The stakes of Nelly Sachs' poetry are thus those of a «Sprache des enthüllten Staubes»<sup>34</sup> – a language, that is, a *voice* of dust, and thus of the past and of death, but a voice that also resonates in what is new, and thus a «rediscovered» voice (for it had been lost), one that holds together what has been with what is yet to be – what is new, precisely<sup>35</sup>. It is, then, a matter of taking dust seriously as dust – the most minimal volatile remnant of what has been destroyed, unrecognisable and oblivious – but also of taking dust as the innocent material with which to build the «new house», in which not so much the survivors but rather their impossible heirs will live: («O ihr Finger, / Die ihr den Sand aus Tetenschuen leertet, / Morgen schon werdet ihr Staub sein / In den Schuen Kommender!»<sup>36</sup>).

The agent of this metamorphosis, in which waste generates what is new – a new that could not exist without that very waste – is poetic language, the only one capable of holding together what cannot be reconciled. The theme of poetic language thus inextricably intertwines with that of dust and waste, for only poetry can give voice to that which is nameless – to the elusive dust, to the waste that is not merely unnameable but is itself *the* unnameable. Indeed, poetry had «nur einen Grashalm / voll der schhweigenden Sprache / die hier die Luft blitzen läßt →»<sup>37</sup>.

32 The case of the stone is especially interesting because, according to Western metaphysical tradition, the stone actually represents absolute otherness in relation to the physical world, the human world in particular. See, notably, the treatment given by Martin Heidegger to the stone as «worldless» – in contrast to humans as «world-forming» beings – in *Concetti fondametalì della metafisica. Mondo – Finitezza – Solitudine*, which collects the materials of the course held in the 1929/1930 winter semester (Il Melangolo, Genoa 1992); cf. Felice Cimatti, *Cose. Per una filosofia del reale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2018; Federico Luisetti, *Nonhuman Subjects: An Ecology of Earth-Beings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023.

33 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, p. 181 [*In der blauen Ferne*].

34 Nelly Sachs, *Späte Gedichte*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1978, p. 179 [*Gesichte aus Dämmerung*].

35 On the use of waste as a form of the new, the analogies between Sachs' poetry and the poetics of the Raffaello Sanzio theatre company are remarkable.; cf. Romeo Castellucci – Chiara Guidi – Claudia Castellucci, *Epopea della polvere. Il Teatro della Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Amleto, Masoch, Oresteia, Giulio Cesare, Genesi*, Ubulibri, Milan 2001.

36 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, p. 11 [*Wer aber leerte den Sand aus euren Schuen*].

37 Sachs, *Späte Gedichte*, *op. cit.*, p. 155 [*Wir winden einen Kranz*].

It is a matter of making «the air flash», that is, of glimpsing light through the dust, the new within the old, destroyed by fire. For this possibility to be realised, as Nelly Sachs writes in another enigmatic poem, «the veins of language» must open, drawing «blood from the stars» which, as we know, are nothing but condensed dust<sup>38</sup>. That is, old worlds pulverised and once again available for the formation of new worlds. The image that gathers this dual movement – of ending and beginning – is the butterfly: a true creature of dust (starting with the chromatic dust covering its wings without which, it is said to no longer be able to fly), to which Nelly Sachs dedicates a poem that we might also understand as a declaration of poetics:

WELCH schönes Jenseits  
Ist in deinen Staub gemalt.  
Durch den Flammenkern der Erde,  
durch ihre steinerne Schale  
wurdest du gereicht,  
Abschiedswebe in der Vergänglichkeiten Maß.

Schmetterling  
Aller Wesen gute Nacht!  
Die Gewichte von Leben und Tod  
senken sich mit den Flügeln  
auf die Rose nieder  
die mit dem heimwärts reifenden Licht welkt.

Welch schönes Jenseits  
Ist in deinen Staub gemalt.  
Welch Königszeichen  
Im Geheimnis der Luft<sup>39</sup>.

4. The decisive point lies in this line: «Welch schönes Jenseits / Ist in deinen Staub gemalt». As Nelly Sachs herself writes to Paul Celan in the first letter of their correspondence (10 May 1954 «Sie sehen viel von jener geistigen Landschaft die sich hinter allem verbirgt, und haben die Kraft des Ausdrucks für das leise sich öffnende Geheimnis»<sup>40</sup>). It is a matter of «giving voice» to a «secret that quietly unfolds». The problem is that it is very difficult, almost impossible, to see in the dust – that is, in what remains after destruction and

38 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, op. cit., p. 209 [*Da schrieb der Schreiber des Zohar*].

39 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, op. cit., p. 148 [*Schmetterling*].

40 Paul Celan – Nelly Sachs, *Briefwechsel*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1993, p. 9.

death – a «secret» about to «quietly» unfold. Language – as we have seen – fails to think in exclusively inclusive terms, it only sees and thinks either life or death, either the old or the new, either memory or forgetfulness. Instead, the task is to succeed – this is what poetic language consists of, which is so different from ordinary language that we might wonder if it is still language or a sort of music in words – in seeing an inclusive field which, however, contains the mutual and irreducible exclusion that continues (and *must* continue) to exist between dust and life.

It is within this unyielding tension that Jacques Lacan's thought on the *objet petit a* can, paradigmatically, help imagine a way of turning dust into a path toward new life. In Lacan's metapsychological apparatus, human subjectivity is not present from the outset; one *becomes* a subject, one is not *born* a subject. One becomes a subject when the body of the *infans* is captured by the symbolic and social device of language. Before that, the body of the *infans* is not, strictly speaking, a human body but, rather a generic primate body. Lacan refers to this capturing device with the impersonal term «Other». It is the Other that the *infans* thinks and speaks. Human subjectivity is the result of this capturing operation<sup>41</sup>. A subjectivity that will speak and think what the Other has deposited inside its (the Other's, of course) body. At the beginning, then, there is a radical and complete dispossession. The body is the body of the Other. As Rimbaud wrote, «je est un autre». The capture of the *infans* should not be understood in a metaphorical sense but, rather, as a true branding operation (the so-called 'proper name' is just the first of these identifying marks), which leaves a scar on the body, a symbolic mark, what Lacan calls the «one-way mark» in *Seminar XVI. From One Other to Another* (1968-1969), that is, the absolutely singular way in which the Other has marked the body of the *infans*. The *objet petit a* has to do with this mark, which is absolutely unique and specific to that particular body. In this sense, it is what remains, a remainder, indeed, of a branding operation. While the subject is entirely captured by the symbolic device, indeed, the subject is nothing other than this very subjugation, the «one-way mark» remains, instead, and paradoxically, unassimilable. In fact, while the subject, what Lacan has always called the «trait unaire»<sup>42</sup> (denoted by the symbol \$), coincides with and is exhausted

41 The device Agamben calls «anthropological machine»; cf. Giorgio Agamben, *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2002 and Felice Cimatti, *Filosofia dell'animalità*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2013.

42 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XVI. D'un Autre à l'autre* (1968-1969), Seuil, Paris 2006, p. 121; «Trait unaire» is the Lacanian translation

by the operation that produced it, the «one-way mark», on the contrary, is absolutely unnameable, as it is the residue produced by this same symbolic capturing operation. The «one-way mark» is what, by definition, escapes the grasp of the subject and of language. It is the remainder that language produces in its very functioning. It is the non-linguistic at the heart of language.

Because language speaks the body but, in doing so, fails to speak its own operation. The *objet petit a* is this unassimilable and unspeakable remainder. This particular object is immediately lost, precisely because there has never been a whole object; on the contrary, the human subject has always existed only as a barred subject, thus incomplete and uncompletable. For this reason, Lacan says, «la marque même introduit dans la jouissance la flétrissure d'où résulte la perte»<sup>43</sup>. The mark scars the body of the *infans*. Subjectivity, as singular and unas-similable, is not at all that of the barred subject, «a reçu le premier seing, *signum*, de la relation avec l'Autre»<sup>44</sup> – so «étant d'abord le désir de l'Autre»<sup>45</sup>. The barred subject 'desires' what the Other desires for them; the only unknown and unnameable desire that escapes the grasp of the Other is that of the *objet petit a*. For this reason, there is an inseparable connection, as Lacan mentioned earlier, between «enjoyment» and «loss». Enjoyment – which is different from the satisfaction of desires, precisely because desires always belong to the Other – on the one hand is already lost, because the subject enters the world as a barred subject (that is, cut off from the symbolic device). On the other hand, it does not lose the possibility of accessing enjoyment, that which we could call the enjoyment of the unspeakable singularity of the marked body: «Il se dessine donc un rapport entre l'effet de la perte, à savoir l'objet perdu en tant que nous le désignons par *a*, et ce lieu qui s'appelle l'Autre, sans lequel il ne saurait se produire, lieu encore non connu et non mesuré»<sup>46</sup>.

It is, then, a matter of finding a way to stay in this place «still unknown and yet to be measured», that is, a place that no word has ever profaned, a place that needs no words, but life. It is the place of dust, of what remains after the fire. We must learn to inhabit this place, a place to be lived not to make a monument to what no longer

of the Freudian expression «einziger Zug» (which can be found in *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, 1921).

43 *Ibidem*.

44 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre VI. Le désir et son interprétation (1958-1959)*, Édition de La Martinière, Paris 2013, p. 23.

45 *Ivi*, p. 25.

46 Lacan, *Livre XVI. D'un Autre à l'autre*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.



exists, but on the contrary, we must have the courage to make it a «new home», as Nelly Sachs continues to tell us. The body, for Lacan, not the body spoken of and desired by the Other, is this «unknown» place without words, and it must remain so. «Le point vif» Lacan says in *Seminar XIX*, «le point d'émergence de quelque chose dont tous ici nous croyons plus ou moins faire partie [...] c'est ce rapport dérangé à son propre corps qui s'appelle jouissance»<sup>47</sup>. Despite the disaster that has always been behind us, enjoyment is still possible for the body of the human animal, but for it to be enjoyment, it must not be the satisfaction of the «desire of the Other», it must be the unspeakable, 'disturbed' enjoyment of a body finally freed from the weight of the no longer as well as the not yet (the future, as an anticipation of the present, is only a past with a positive sign); inhabiting the dust, without regrets or expectations. Because «es kehrt auch niemand heil zu seinem Gott zurück»<sup>48</sup>. But indeed, the dust is divine, it is the new that begins, it is the end of the past. Only those who have encountered the abyss of dust can build the «new home» because, in the end, «das Unbekannte zieht ein wo eine Wunde ist»<sup>49</sup>.

Perhaps, then, we will understand why we seek in the «dust» – in the discarded and unburned remainder (although itself the result of a terrible burning) – the «paradigm» that can unite the otherwise distant figures of Nelly Sachs and Jacques Lacan. The problem both face is how to imagine what to do with what remains, because something always remains, and because «alle Spuren laufen außerhalb»<sup>50</sup>. The «dust» of a people, the «mark» of a body. What to do with the end? What to do with the mark that keeps provoking pain? What to do with death? The traditional answer, the only answer that is obsessively repeated, is to celebrate the memory of that end; we are told it is about remembering, the memory of the trauma so that the suffering of those annihilated is not erased. Hence the exclusive use of language as evocation and memory. And then comes the poetry of Nelly Sachs, who instead asks to use words not to remember, but to open the way for what is new, and thus to forget. Because death is, incredibly, not the end, but only «a turbulent passage» (like the very ones from which new stars are born).

47 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XIX. ...ou pire (1971-1972)*, Seuil, Paris 2011, p. 43.

48 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, p. 213 [*Und aus der dunklen Glut ward Jacob angeschlagen*].

49 Nelly Sachs, *Die Suchende*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1966, p. 102.

50 Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, *op. cit.*, p. 201 [*Dieses Land*].

[...]  
Gehst du unter die Katakomben der Zeit,  
die sich auftun denen, die nahe am Ende sind –  
dort wo die Herzkeime wachsen –  
in die dunkle Innerlichkeit hinab  
sinkst du –  
schon am Tode vorbei  
der nur ein windiger Durchgang ist –  
und schläfst frierend vom Ausgang  
deine Augen auf  
in denen schon ein neuer Stern  
seinen Abglanz gelassen hat —<sup>51</sup>

*Translation by Daniela Innocenti*

<sup>51</sup> *Ivi*, p. 137 [*Wenn der Tag leer wird*].