

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 41

Issue 2 *Writing 1914-1918: National Responses to the
Great War*

Article 25


6-15-2017

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Recommended Citation

Nyota, Lynda K. (2017) ""The Space of Words": Exile and Diaspora in the Works of Nelly Sachs. By Jennifer M. Hoyer. Rochester, NY: Camden House. 2014," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 25. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1938>

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Abstract

Review of "*The Space of Words: Exile and Diaspora in the Works of Nelly Sachs*". By Jennifer M. Hoyer. Rochester, NY: Camden House. 2014.

Keywords

Hoyer, Sachs, Jewish Authors, Trauma, Holocaust

Jennifer M Hoyer. *'The Space of Words': Exile and Diaspora in the Works of Nelly Sachs*. Rochester: Camden House, 2014. viii + 203 pp.

Jennifer Hoyer's monograph seeks to examine and bring to light the early works of poet and Nobel Laureate Nelly Sachs as a new way of interpreting the Holocaust poetry that established her reputation as a respected twentieth century writer. By looking critically at the multiple ways through which the notion of space manifests itself in Sachs's pre- and postwar oeuvre, Hoyer underscores the significance of Sachs's early works, which have for the most part been largely neglected by scholars. This is by no means an easy task, given that Sachs herself also sought to put these very texts at a distance for fear that they would undermine the importance of her postwar writing. Hoyer argues, however, that an analysis of these works provides us with a new lens through which we can reevaluate Sachs's later works.

The Space of Words is structured in such a way as to introduce Sachs's conception of text as a landscape. The first half of the book explores the motif of wandering in Sachs's early works, and the second half frames a discussion of her later works with common threads from her earlier writing. Hoyer begins with a brief description of Sachs's rise as an icon of Holocaust poetry, emphasizing from the onset a point that she raises throughout her book: that Sachs has always been an intentional writer and was not as passive as critics often present her in her early years as a poet. The chapter "Wandering through Words Wandering in Words" identifies a clear link between words and space in Sachs's early works, and it is here that the notion of text as a landscape navigated by the writer, characters, and the reader emerges. By examining three of Sachs's early prose texts, as well as the poem "Abschied du Nachtigallenwort" 'Parting, you Nightingaleword,' she shows how wandering as a motif is related to the power to create with words and to maintain a critical distance, while stasis on the other hand impedes expression (36-38). Hoyer regards Sachs herself as no less a wanderer in literature, with her works containing the imprints of German authors as early as Silesius and later writers of the Romantic era such as Kleist. While this has led to criticism that her early works mimic the Romantic tradition, Hoyer views Sachs as a writer who is highly aware of the power of a person who controls language by moving through it, creating "meaningful patchworks of past and present" (57). This becomes more evident in the subsequent chapter, "Sachs's Merlin the Sorcerer," where she identifies in Sachs's rendering of the Merlin myth both an exhortation to the reader to be aware of the constructedness of all narratives—even histories of nations—and also an underlying tension that suggests an engagement with rising German nationalism and pressures faced by German Jews at the turn of the century (75). This is particularly interesting given that Sachs's biographers contend that anti-Semitism was alien to her before the Nazi era (17).

The second half of Hoyer's book, introduced by the chapter "Poetic Space after the Abyss" indicates that we have arrived at a cataclysmic rupture, one that the reader can nonetheless traverse by creating connections to her earlier work. The chapter examines Sachs's assessment of her critical role as a writer in forging a new national narrative and identity in the context of Germany and the State of Israel, a role that she chose to problematize through her postwar poetics that resisted closure and memorialization. While this led to an initial rejection of Sachs's poetry by publishers in the aftermath of World War II, Hoyer sees a continuity from her early writing. She posits that Sachs was keenly aware of the deceptive power of language and also cognizant of the need to maintain a critical distance to it, given the ease with which it could be manipulated. Hoyer points to several examples of this, including the vocabulary of exclusion and obfuscation that emerged during the Nazi era, as well as Germany's desire to rely on writers who would forge a new national identity after World War II.

Hoyer takes a deeper look at Sachs's postwar poetic text as a space that destabilizes our previously held notions about language in her fifth chapter, "Israel is not only Land: Diasporic poetry." She reads Sachs's text as a treacherous landscape where words constantly fluctuate in meaning (99) and where the reader is compelled to map out their terrain from poem to poem, guided by the cartographical and astronomical imagery, searching for the intertextual references in order to get meaning. She suggests that diaspora, as opposed to exile, is the productive space for understanding Sachs's cyclical poetry and explains that Sachs's poem cycles mimic the Jewish notion of time, not linear but spiral, which keeps the past before one's eyes as a constant reminder of loss. Hoyer concludes the chapter by noting that in reading her cycles, Sachs encourages us to learn to see ourselves as more than just the land we inhabit or the geographic borders that enclose us (134). The final chapter rereads Sachs's first postwar poem cycle as a counter-memorial that resists the notion of healing, containment, and closure, in favor of a suffering through the words of the poem cycle. Once again, Hoyer refers us back to Sachs's earlier works as an orientation point for understanding how she reinscribes earlier metaphors in an effort to overcome the inadequacy of poetic tropes in representing extreme experience.

Hoyer makes a strong argument for the importance of taking into account Sachs's prewar writing when reading her better-known postwar poems. Hoyer convincingly demonstrates that even with the rupture that caused Sachs's sudden departure from Germany in 1940, themes and figurative language from her early writing wandered into her later works and gained new meaning. The monograph should encourage scholars of Sachs to consider her writings in their entirety and not simply focus on her later and better-known writing. Critics who have dismissed Sachs's early writing as naïve will no doubt be interested in the previously unexplored thematic parallels that Hoyer draws between Sachs's early and postwar

writing. With only two chapters out of six devoted to a close reading of Sachs's prewar writing, however, one would have hoped for a more extensive engagement with these early works, given that they form the core argument of the study. We nonetheless gain valuable insight in the remaining chapters about the impact of Sachs's earlier texts on her iconic postwar poetry.

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