

4. What is the poet saying about the function of art? What does he mean in lines 13–14:

“. . . for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.”?

◎ NELLY SACHS

Nelly Sachs (1891–1970) was one of the most poignant and eloquent poets writing of the Holocaust. Though Sachs wrote poetry prior to World War II, it was the persecution and suffering of the Jewish people that gave her her specific poetic voice. Having escaped with her Jewish mother from Germany to Sweden in 1940, Sachs began writing with a new vision when, as she said, “Death gave me my language.” Sachs wrote because poetry was the only means she had of expressing her anguish and sorrow at the Nazis’ atrocities. Initially, her verse testified to the horror and despair of the death camps. Her first volume was entitled In the Dwellings of Death (1947). Eventually, a transcendent spirit came to permeate Sachs’s poetry. In volumes such as And No One Knows Where to Go (1957) and Flight and Metamorphosis (1959), suffering was still attested to, but Sachs linked the fate of Jews with that of humanity in a continual process of death and rebirth. In 1966, she shared the Nobel Prize with S. Y. Agnon.

Chorus of the Rescued

We, the rescued,
From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his
flutes,
And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow—
Our bodies continue to lament
With their mutilated music.
We, the rescued,
The nooses wound for our necks still dangle
before us in the blue air—
Hourglasses still fill with our dripping blood.
We, the rescued,
The worms of fear still feed on us.
Our constellation is buried in dust.
We, the rescued,

5

10

Beg you: 15
 Show us your sun, but gradually.
 Lead us from star to star, step by step.
 Be gentle when you teach us to live again.
 Lest the song of a bird,
 Or a pail being filled at the well, 20
 Let our badly sealed pain burst forth again
 and carry us away—
 We beg you:
 Do not show us an angry dog, not yet—
 It could be, it could be 25
 That we will dissolve into dust—
 Dissolve into dust before your eyes.
 For what binds our fabric together?

Translated from the German by Michael Roloff

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Sachs define the situation of Holocaust survivors in “Chorus of the Rescued”? Which images in the poem best evoke their experience?
2. Does the poem offer a reprieve from suffering?

BERTOLT BRECHT

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a renowned German dramatist, poet, and theatrical director and producer whose creation of epic theater, a drama of loosely knit, episodic scenes, was a major twentieth-century innovation. A youthful participant in Weimar culture, Brecht was fascinated with the relationship of form and matter. A study of Marxism convinced him of the primacy of content in art. From the 1930s on, Brecht held that art should teach the reader/audience to see the human condition within the configuration of social, economic, and historical forces. To fulfill this didactic purpose and to create true art, Brecht developed the innovative techniques of epic theater. Breaking with the notion of theater as an imitation of reality in which the audience emotionally reacts to the protagonists, Brecht in his plays Galileo (1943), Mother Courage and Her Children (1941), The Good Woman of Setzuan (1943), and The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1948), aimed to