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Commentary on Translating Rose Ausländer, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Nelly Sachs

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Commentary

When I came to translate Ausländer's poem "Am Ende der Zeit," I felt that one of its key features was its ambiguity. The word *wenn* is ambiguous, meaning as it does both "when" and "if" in German. I tried to overcome this problem in the first stanza as follows: "Say the war is over / at the end of time / we shall," followed by "go walking again / down mussel shell alley" in the second stanza. "Say the war is over ... we shall / go walking again" incorporates the idea of "if," while "Say the war is over / at the end of time / we shall" incorporates the idea that, "at the end of time, we shall say the war is over." I chose to translate the title, which occurs twice in the body of the poem, as "At the end of time," since the phrase "the end of days" (aharit ha-yamim, אחרית הימים) appears several times in the Tanakh, and Ausländer's Jewish heritage was a focal point of her work.

"Dunkles zu sagen" was apparently written about Paul Celan, with whom Ingeborg Bachmann had a relationship. I enjoyed translating it because I found it moving. I tried to stay close to the source text while retaining the terseness of phrase. I also tried to reproduce style elements because they represent choices by the poet, and as such are important to me too as a reader. The alliteration of *Saite* and *Schweigens* in the third stanza was fairly straightforward to reproduce (with "string" and "silence"); the half-rhyme of *Locke/Flocken* and the alliteration of *Finsternis/Flocken* less so. I went for internal rhyme in "curls" and "turned," repetition of the "k" sound in "black flakes of darkness," and the alliteration of "flakes," "fell" and "face." I found it difficult to incorporate the "snowed" of *beschneiten*, but hoped that "flakes fell" went some way towards this. It was hard to capture the wordplay of *Saite* and *Seite*, but in the last stanza I went for "life strung on the side of death."

"Wenn ich nur wüßte" ("If Only I Knew") is a very sad poem. I found the opening line very moving and powerful. Nelly Sachs (1891–1970) was born in Berlin to Jewish parents. She fled to Sweden in 1940 with her mother one week before she was scheduled to report to a concentration camp. In 1960, she suffered a nervous breakdown accompanied by acute paranoia. In 1966, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Some critics attribute the lack of aestheticisation in Sachs' work to the inappropriateness of aestheticisation in any discussion of Auschwitz. For this reason, I avoided poetic devices such as rhyme. This also made it easier to stick to the original text. It is interesting that

each stanza is a question and ends with a question mark, thus reinforcing the sentiment of “not knowing” as expressed in the title.