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## The Wreck of Titanic: A Comedy

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A translation of  
Der Untergang der Titanic  
Eine Komödie  
by Hans Magnus Enzensberger

The Wreck of Titanic  
A Comedy

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College  
by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## A Note on Form

Time has not permitted me to complete this translation in full to the desired level of finish. The poems mentioned in my introduction, as well as a few others, exist as final drafts in the font Minion Pro. The rest are included in draft states and are distinguished by the font Courier. The reader is encouraged to read these as well, despite their somewhat ragged edges. Two poems from the original German work have not been translated at all, and thus do not appear in this translation.

## A Note on the Title

The title of this book – that is, the English title – is an example of ‘the best’ not being ‘the favorite’. The *best* title, so far as I’ve reckoned, is the one presently in front of you. But many months of revisiting the title time and time again, my *favorite* title is: *That Damned Titanic*.

*The Wreck of Titanic* refers at various points not only to the actual sinking of RMS *Titanic*, but also to itself as a poem. The German title, *Der Untergang der Titanic*, is the conventional German phrasing of the historical event. It is important to phrase an English title in a way that mimics this, such that merely with selective italicization the meaning can change between the title of the poem and the actual historical occurrence: the wreck of *Titanic* versus *The Wreck of Titanic*. Capitalization unfortunately complicates this in English, whereas in German it’s of no concern, since all nouns are capitalized in German. Nevertheless, the biggest trouble in translating the German title comes down to the word *Untergang*.

The noun *Untergang* is derived from the verb *untergehen*, which is a compound of the preposition *unter* (down, under, below) and the verb *gehen* (to go). The verb therefore could be atomically translated as ‘to go under’, which conveniently exists as a conventional expression in English. *Untergang* may be used in a variety contexts that, in English, would require a variety of related verbs to comply with conventions. In the context of *Der Untergang der Titanic*, the most logical translation of *Untergang* would be *sinking*, because that is, after all, what ships do, though not by design. Later in the book, in the poem “*The Postponement*”, we read of some Icelanders who have managed to prevent an erupting volcano’s lava from destroying their homes. In doing so, they delay the “[*Untergang*] of Western civilization”. In this context, a few choices might sound perfectly natural, such as *decline*, *collapse*, and even *end*, but certainly not *sinking*. And just

to throw in one more example, anyone familiar with the German film *Der Untergang*, a movie about the final days of the Third Reich, might know that its English translation is *Downfall*, as would be a conventional choice when talking about the demise of a political or societal structure.

*Untergang* and its lexical relatives are often repeated throughout the book, in contexts where a native English ear would expect to hear several different terms, as enumerated in the examples above. I therefore faced a choice in every one of these situations, including the very title of the piece. Should I preserve the repetition of a single word, and in doing so stretch the sense of certain English terms? Or rather, should each instance be rendered in its most native English equivalency, in hopes that the reader picks up on the pattern and receives approximately the same effect as in the German?

I have chosen the latter approach, and when the choice of the English title is filtered through the two criteria mentioned (that it be interchangeable with the phrasing of the historical event, and that it conform to conventional English usage), three titles become viable: *The Sinking of Titanic*, *The Fall of Titanic*, and *The Wreck of Titanic*. I disregarded the first option for two reasons: 1) the present participle struck me as inelegant and even feeble compared to *Untergang*, and 2) *The Sinking of the Titanic* is the title of the (out of print) English translation by Hans Magnus Enzensberger himself. The choice then came down to the latter two. *The Fall of Titanic* better encompasses the versatility of *Untergang*, but since I decided that I was going to translate each instance of *Untergang* contextually, that consideration lost some pertinence. *The Wreck of Titanic* better satisfies the interchangeability principle, but it lacks a critical quality of *Untergang*: it doesn't explicitly convey the active process of falling or sinking. For me, at least, *wreck* often implies the *wreckage* of a ship, i.e. the the corpse of the ship *after* it has sunk. But a dictionary will confirm that *wreck* is also the the act itself of being wrecked, such that a denotative justification



exists. In addition, I'm relying on the connotative force of *Titanic* – on the reader's immediate projections in this context – to compensate for this possible short-coming of *wreck*. I suspect that the majority of readers will imagine the classic image of *Titanic's* slanting descent when they read the title, regardless of what *wreck* initially means to them. And finally, while not a deciding factor, *The Wreck of Titanic* contains something of an easter egg: an allusion to the 1898 novella by Morgan Robertson, *Futility, or the Wreck of the Titan*, a book whose story is almost identical to *Titanic's*, yet was written fourteen years before *Titanic's* maiden voyage.

Finally, I wish to clarify that the omission of a definite article before *Titanic* in the title and throughout the poem is intentional for two reasons: first, it is the convention in writing, despite the tendency in spoken language to say “the *Titanic*”, and secondly, the omission of *the* better mimics the concision of the German genitive case, whereby the noun's article and the possessive preposition are expressed in one declined article.

An Introduction by the Translator:

Undergoing *Titanic*

I

*The Wreck of Titanic* is about a ship and not about a ship. It is about an iceberg and not about an iceberg. It is about socialism (and so, too, about capitalism) and not about socialism (nor capitalism). It is timeless and it is stuck in the past. It is a loss and a creation and a recreation. It is a prediction and a recollection. It is an augury and a red herring. It is a comedy and a tragedy. It is an allegory and not an allegory. It is at the tip of my tongue and still it escapes me. In any event, *The Wreck of Titanic* assumes the form of a poem, so let us start there.

In 1978, the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger published a long poem titled *Der Untergang der Titanic: Eine Komödie*. It comprises forty-nine poems averaging about two pages each. Of these poems, thirty-three are enumerated cantos (*Gesänge*). The other sixteen are interspersed throughout the cycle of cantos, and are distinguished by their individualized titles printed in italics. These sixteen poems are a mixed bag, whose subjects include descriptions of paintings, an Icelandic volcano, and being stuck in a box, to name a few. Neither the cantos nor this second class of poems, nor the interaction between the two abide by an obvious pattern. Diverse voices, nonlinear time, and elaborate metaphors obscure the overall cohesion of the work. But it should be made clear that the whole book is a single poem, wherein each *constituent* poem can be thought of as a chapter.

The cantos, both in name and number, call to mind *The Divine Comedy* of Dante. *The Wreck of Titanic's* subtitle (*A Comedy*) and the numerous instances of the name *Dante* in the course of the poem reinforce the association. But were the reader to further suppose that Enzensberger's cantos follow the same linear logic as Dante's, she might feel lost at sea once immersed in the text. *The Wreck of Titanic* is not so much a response to Dante, but it does on several occasions wink at the old master. In that spirit, my own references to *The Divine Comedy* are not ingredients of a thesis, but point to parallels and foils between the two poems for the purpose of setting a stage.

In *Inferno*, Dante envisions a hell immaculately ordered, a sort of amphitheater where the damned are grouped, arranged, and punished in accordance with their sins. For this reason, Dante's hell is logical. Dante guides the reader linearly from top to bottom. For this reason, Dante's poem is like painting, not just for its prodigious imagery, but for the elaborate geography that shapes the narrative itself. It is a poem for cartographers. Though paintings play their own role *The Wreck of Titanic*, it is rather a poem for time travelers, hopping between a multitude of temporalities and styles. Three such temporalities frame three primary arcs through the canto cycle: RMS *Titanic* in 1912, Cuba in the late 1960s, and Berlin in the late 1970s. The first of these locations is most often conveyed by an indeterminate speaker narrating events either on the ship itself or in the aftermath of the ship's famous descent. The latter two settings stage a metanarrative in which a speaker discusses the poem itself – how he wrote it first in Cuba in 1969, how the sole first manuscript was lost, and how he is writing it again now, that is, in 1977 in Berlin.

This is not a prescription for the whole canto cycle, but it does generally hold true for its first half. In Canto Seventeen, i.e. around the middle axis, *Titanic* finally succumbs to its injuries and

vanishes under the water. And indeed from this point on, the ship itself disappears from the poem and the *Titanic* narrative begins to dissolve. The reader is left with survivors, with rumors, with memorabilia, even, but the once somewhat cogent anatomy of the poem bleeds as ink on a wet page. The Cuba and Berlin threads endure by some measure, but slacken and occasionally fray into abstraction or admit interjections by the speaker.

Though it is modest in length compared to canonical epics like *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, Enzensberger's poem feels vast. And in spite of the precision of Enzensberger's language, its manners and its meanings seem to swirl around the reader as if a whirlpool. This holds true up to and beyond the end of the book. We can peek at the end to see if there is some great revelation that pulls the wool from our eyes – to borrow a line from the poem "*Cold Comfort*", some "balsam for our Reason." In the final canto, we get a knot of the various narrative threads, a whirlpool in miniature of the themes explored in the rest of the poem. We see survivors with their suitcases headed toward an abyss, a doomed passenger ship, a breakdown of communication, anachronistic figures like Dante, Marilyn Monroe, and dinosaurs. There is singing, sobbing, lurching, a mention of prophesy, a question of the scale of the event (is it just a few dozen people or is it the end of the world?), and a first-person narrator attempting to intervene in the whole affair.

The poem leaves us on the word *weilerschwimmen*, 'to swim on' or 'continue swimming'. The last few lines for context:

Everything, I sob, as a matter of course, everything lurches, everything  
under control, business as usual, the people presumably drowned  
in slanting rain, a pity, no matter, a sob story, just as well,  
unclear, hard to say, why, I sob and swim on.

The German verb, like the English, is ambiguous. There are at least three possibilities of meaning: the speaker is swimming away *from* something, leaving it behind, maybe hoping to find something new; the speaker is swimming *to* something, i.e. persevering, keeping at it, not allowing himself to be engulfed; or the speaker is simply drifting about, lost at sea, without any particular origin or destination.

Is this, then, our resolution, the clearing of the skies, the rending of the veil, which Enzensberger weaves with his metaphors? Maybe it would be too hopeful to expect anything more, to expect to be somehow saved or enlightened – a line from Canto Ten springs to mind: “Everybody would love to be saved, / you as well. But is that not too much / to ask?” And another, this time a teasing gesture from the Canto Twenty-Seven: “the Happy Ending / is a dear convention.”

For the time being, let this be our consolation, if also cold comfort: it seems the speaker is as lost as we are. Better yet, we’re on dry land as the speaker swims. Often the allure of an end is the hope of a new start. In that case, let’s take the opportunity to do just that, swimming either from the site of sinking, or else into it, but in any event away from the confusion and toward comprehension.

## II

*The Wreck of Titanic’s* plot is in the title. Even without knowledge the real *Titanic* story, the reader can soundly assume that the ship sinks. But since *The Wreck of Titanic* is in fact about very many things, the plot cannot truly be just about the ship. Indeed, not even the real *Titanic* story is just about a ship: it remains fascinating after a century for its perfection *as a story*. It is

mythic for all of the symbolism to which it lends itself; for the plentiful *what ifs* that could have evaded or allayed the disaster; for the literal stratification of social classes on board; for the hubristic verdict that “God himself could not sink this ship” – an arrogance already manifest in the ship’s name – and the tragic catharsis when the iceberg cuts the faith in tonnage down to size (Lord 50). *Titanic* functions as a grand allegory in this poem. But as the title of the poem suggests, it is not the ship itself that’s so provoking– it is the fact that it sank. In its downfall, *Titanic* attains its highest dramatic potency and finds meaning beyond the steel walls of its hull. Had it not sunk, it would have simply been a big boat.

The rest of this introduction will use the general theme of allegory as the guidepost of discussion. A primary consideration will be the dynamic between ‘the literal’ and ‘the figurative’: the two halves of a double-meaning, the essential ingredients of metaphor and allegory. I will tend to gesture rather than lecture, so as to cover topics relevant to the whole piece without sacrificing concision. In any event, I am not in possession of the ‘answers’ to the poem that would qualify me to teach in the first place. What I would like to do is invite the reader into my own questions and inklings as they arose in the course of my reading and my translation, so that I might supply a vocabulary for the reader’s own experience with the book. In the interest of order and clarity, explicit commentary on translation is reserved for the final section of this introduction.

Canto Two is a poem on *Titanic*. There is an impact, a distress call, the true-to-life gymnasium steward Thomas McCawley, and John Jacob Astor, the richest man aboard, who had in fact waited with his wife and others in the first class gymnasium after the collision. The canto juxtaposes scenes of incongruous calm among the first class passengers with close-ups of the lower parts of the ship, where the water is streaming into the gash torn by the iceberg:

No sirens, no alarm bells, only  
 a discreet knock at the cabin door  
 a slight cough in the smoking lounge. While below  
 the water is climbing[...]

.....  
 John Jacob Astor meanwhile slices into a lifebelt  
 with a nail file and shows his wife,  
 née Connaught, what's inside  
 (presumably cork), while in the hold ahead  
 water's streaming in arm-thick, loosing  
 icy bubbles under mailbags, seeping into  
 the galley[...]

Only at the end of the poem does the speaker explicitly moralize:

Yet far below, where they're always first to catch on,  
 bundles, babies, wine-red blankets  
 are hastily gathered up. The steerage  
 understands no English, no German,  
 but it doesn't need to be told  
 that the first class comes first,  
 that there is never enough milk and never enough shoes  
 and never enough lifeboats for all.

Elements of the actual *Titanic* story ground a larger social commentary – or at least the hint of one. The organization of *Titanic's* passengers into three classes literalizes our metaphors for social structures: the upper class is physically above the lower class in the spatial hierarchy of the ship, which placed first class both in the middle of the ship and generally closer to the topmost deck, with exclusive use of the ship's A Deck (Hutchings, Kerbrech 47-48). The introduction of social commentary in conjunction with the word *always* in the passage cited above allude to something larger than just this one event: *Titanic* is one instance of a general tendency, wherein the members of the lower class bear the worst of a disaster and are closer to its source. The literal ship is allegorized to represent social inequality in the way that the disaster affects different classes, and how those classes react to disaster: the first class passengers are aware of the impact,

but do not grasp the true gravity of it, whereas those in the ship's lower parts have wet socks from the rising water.

An explicit instance of another disaster is the poem "*The Postponement*". The speaker recounts an eruption of the Icelandic volcano Helgafell: townsfolk armed with garden hoses stem the tide of lava pouring toward their houses. In doing so, the speaker declares that they had, "for the time being, / postponed the Decline of western civilization." The poem doesn't only allude to class structure and strife, as in Canto Two, but rather, it invokes the downfall of a whole civilization, albeit with a tinge of satire. And if that weren't grand enough, we read about a representation of perhaps the largest disaster of all in the poem "*Apocalypse. Umbrian, circa 1490*," which describes a Renaissance painter's depiction of the Christian apocalypse: a totalizing event far grander than the decline of western civilization, for the Last Judgment affects not just a hemisphere, nor even just the whole living world, but every person who has ever lived.

*The Wreck of Titanic* is rife with allusions to disasters and downfalls of all sorts, which is to be expected given that the story of *Titanic* has long been read as an allegory or warning of other wrecks and downfalls. One often speaks of the sinking of *Titanic* as a symbol for the fallibility or demise of capitalism, as alluded to in Canto Two: an association conjured by the status of *Titanic* as the embodied belief in industry, wealth, technology, and human ingenuity, coupled with with class distinctions on board the ship. And it is not a far stretch to implicate the whole of western civilization by that logic – which itself can be a byword for capitalism, industry, and luxury – and thereby make some sense of the above mentioned lines from "*The Postponement*". Then, too, if we take *Titanic* as a crystallization of the age-old hubris of Man, as if the disaster were a Greek tragedy and the wreck divine punishment, a warning to the whole world, a reminder of our place beneath the heavens, and that final judgment will one day be at hand for all: "*Apocalypse*."



*Umbrian, circa 1490.*” This last poem includes a textual-visual cue linking these various demises: among the demons and horsemen, the fires and lightning, we see “ships descending plumb into the depths.”

Biographer Jörg Lau makes the point that Enzensberger, born in 1929, is something of an authority on downfalls, “not just by virtue of erudition, but as a survivor of the German catastrophe,” (Lau 307, my translation). Enzensberger wrote a short piece titled “Two Notes on the End of the World” published not long before *The Wreck*. The first of these “notes” is a brief musing on the meaning of apocalypse in the modern era. The second takes the form of a letter addressed to someone named Balthasar, and primarily concerns the relevance of the apocalypse in leftist ideology. The first note begins:

The apocalypse is part of our ideological baggage. It is an aphrodisiac. It is a nightmare. It is a commodity like any other. You can call it a metaphor for the collapse of capitalism, which as we all know has been imminent for more than a century... it is ever present, but never “actual”: a second reality... an incessant product of our fantasy, the catastrophe of the mind. (Enzensberger 233)

Enzensberger alludes to the many functions and forms of the apocalypse, and specifically cites the “collapse of capitalism” as one manifestation. He goes on to mention that apocalyptic fantasy is as common as utopian fantasy: “The idea of the apocalypse has accompanied utopian thought since its first beginnings... like a reverse side that cannot be left behind... The idea of the end of the world is simply a negative utopia...” (233). But despite its ancient origins, Enzensberger claims that the apocalypse has changed. No longer a “sacred idea”, the apocalypse now is “an entirely secularized phenomenon,” heralded by graffiti or computer printouts and embodied in the police state, terrorism, environmental destruction, and other crises of current world (234).

The mention of capitalism in the note's opening was hardly a passing remark. The first note paints this new apocalypse as not only secularized, but as commercialized: Enzensberger calls it a film – to which references in *The Wreck* abound – which we readily eat up in our theater seats while dismissing reality with a yawn. At the end, Enzensberger writes:

We have also lost another traditional aspect of the end of the world. Previously, it was generally agreed that the event would affect everyone simultaneously and without exception: the never satisfied demand for equality and justice found in this conception its last refuge. But as we see it today, doom is no longer a leveler; quite the opposite. It differs from country to country... while it is already overtaking some, others can watch it on television... Its African and Indian versions are overlooked with a shrug of the shoulders by those not directly affected... (235)

The allusion to a social critique in Canto Two, taken up elsewhere throughout *The Wreck*, is articulated in these notes, and provides a lucid glimpse into the author's mind, which he might otherwise veil to varying degrees in his poetry.

Given that there was a disparity in experiences of disaster on *Titanic*, where mere decks were the borders rather than oceans, the attraction of *Titanic* for a politically critical writer like Enzensberger is clear. He writes in Canto Twenty-Two: “We’re all in the same boat / yet: He who’s poor goes under quicker.” The canto includes a table with the number of passengers in each class, how many were saved, and how many were lost. According to these numbers, sixty-three percent of first class passengers were saved, followed by forty-one percent of second class passengers, and thirty-eight percent of steerage passengers. The numbers provided in the poem are almost all correct, except for the steerage passengers. Reality was grimmer, as only twenty-five percent of steerage passengers lived through *Titanic* (Mersey, 110-111).

A discussion of disaster – especially of allegorized disaster– is incomplete without mention of prophesy. The link between disaster and prophesy is evident in the etymology of the very word

*disaster* ('bad star'): a reminder of a long tradition of finding portents in celestial phenomena. Prophecy is an exercise in metaphor, interpreting an occurrence as a sign of something else: the physical event attains secondary meaning. A prophecy makes 'the literal' into 'the metaphoric': a comet is not merely a hunk of ice in orbit around the sun, but a telltale sign of impending doom. Likewise, *Titanic* is not merely a ship that sank, but a symbol for demises of all sorts.

*The Wreck of Titanic* makes many explicit references to the act of prophecy. The first several lines of the poem "*Stay Calm*" read:

At times, if not often, you see in the snow  
 during winter rabbit hunts or, shortly before Easter,  
 through the half-open window of the sleeping car  
 as day breaks outside, on barn roofs,  
 coal piles, Bismarck towers in mixed forests,  
 small swarms of black-clad people  
 led by a prophet, metal-rimmed glasses  
 atop flared nostrils, poised in steady  
 expectation of doomsday[...]

What follows is an example of the ebb and flow of apocalyptic belief. Many do not believe in the apocalypse, at least not in the sense of the Second Coming, and so they go on busying themselves with their "weighty trifles" and so on. Others, meanwhile, hearken to the prophet pointing to the End on the horizon. These people have "cancelled their cable service in good time, / cleaned out their refrigerators so nothing spoils, and readied their souls..." But when it fails to come, they begin dispersing, they go back home, they "reopen their checking account[s]", and life goes back to normal. But the prophet sticks to his guns, making the following appeal: "A few weeks or centuries here or there, / what difference is that compared to eternity?" He solaces himself at the end with the understanding that the apocalypse is to always to be cherished, no matter if it comes

later than expected. It is a “sort of calmativè, a sweet comfort / for bleak prospects, for hair loss, and for wet feet.”

The last lines allude to a tendency of apocalyptic fantasy mentioned by Enzensberger in his “Two Notes on the End of the World”, namely that “the fantasy of doom always suggests the desire for miraculous salvation” (238). Those who wish for the end of the world are most often those who suffer in the current one. That the pains of this world will later be rewarded is a seductive promise for the worldweary. Justice will at last be served, and it will be served perfectly and indiscriminately. But the world continues to turn, and so even those who follow the prophet grow impatient and must return to the “lowly day-to-day” (Canto Twenty-Two).

Prophecy for most of human history has been nothing but superstition, for these days we understand the composition and cosmic courses of the comets, and that the entrails of a slaughtered lamb are useful enough for biology and anatomy, but say nothing of the future. The countless examples of prophetic methods through the ages is testament to the willingness of humans to divine patterns and meanings where none exist. Still, it would be incorrect to assume that prophecy is a thing of the past. It has rather changed its name: it is now called ‘prediction’ or ‘forecast’ or simply ‘knowledge’. Its methods too have changed, relying no longer on comets and entrails, but on science and history. Enzensberger addresses the ‘new prophecy’ (my term, not his) in Canto Eight, which takes the form of a monologue by an engineer whose ironic musing offers a form of scientific prediction. He says at one point:

But let us suppose that the *Titanic* should in fact go under, which I personally hold to be impossible – I’m an engineer and my imagination is not all that robustly developed – so what? What comes of it? As a matter of pure statistics, there may at any given moment be a few dozen ships in distress, and no one gives two hoots about them, namely because they’re called *Rosalinda II* or *Splendid Prospect*, and not *Titanic*! Conversely: think on the tens

of thousands of vessels underway on all oceans of the world, who will, even if we drown, reach their destinations punctually and unaffected.

The engineer is clever, he covers all of his bases. He issues his statistical wager, but plans for the possibility that he could be incorrect. Should he be wrong, should *Titanic* in fact sink, would it be significant? He makes a difference between what we might call ‘objective prophecy’ and ‘subjective prophecy’. If *Titanic* were to sink, it would simply be another sunken ship: an event which is commonplace enough not to merit much attention – a headline, maybe, but not a legend. That the ship is called *Titanic* skews our view of the disaster. There is no objective quality to the name that should doom the ship, but our subjective associations with the name compel us to assign mountains of symbolic significance to the story. And let us not forget that, if *Titanic* had *not* sunk, we would be as indifferent to its story as if it *had* sunk but been named *Rosalinda II*. A prophecy often has more to do with the aftermath of an event than what comes before. Incorrect prophecies are forgotten, but the correct ones stick around.

Is the fact that he regards the sinking of *Titanic* to be an impossibility a hint at the fallibility of an overzealous faith in science? After all, it was engineering that built *Titanic* – that is, a sinking ship – and when the ship was thought unsinkable it was because of a belief in man’s ingenuity, which is to say, industry and science. I have no reason to think that Enzensberger is a luddite, so I do not suspect he would say that modern science is as superstitious as the ancient auguries. But it would seem that the subtext of this implicit critique is a suspicion of dogmatism of all forms.

In the second of his “Two Notes”, Enzensberger attacks the ideologists working on behalf of state censorship, who try to pacify our apocalyptic fantasies with maxims such as, “always think only with the head,” and “the unconscious mind must do what it is told” (239). He goes on to write:

The arrogance of these academic exorcists is surpassed only by their impotence. They fail to understand that myths cannot be refuted by seminar papers... Our ideologists can only raise a smile when they attempt to obliterate such ineffaceable images as flood and fire, earthquake and hurricane... Moreover, there are people in the ranks of natural scientists who are in a position to elaborate fantasies of this kind in their own fashion and make them productive instead of banning them: mathematicians drafting a topographical theory of catastrophe, or biochemists who have ideas about certain analogies between biological and social evolutions. We are still waiting in vain...(239-240)

The engineer's mention of his underdeveloped imagination and his purely statistical approach evoke Enzensberger's sketch of a fantasy-denying ideologue. He is aligned with mathematics and science, but "bans" fantasy by contradicting it with "pure statistics". That we know he is wrong inverts his calculated sensibility, such that it seems ultimately feeble as a means of understanding the world or predicting its future.

Canto Eight's engineer continues: "Apart from that, every innovation traces its roots to catastrophe: /new tools, theories, and sentiments – one calls it evolution." Now the engineer not only disregards the significance of the sinking should it occur, but goes so far as to moralize the affair in the interest of science: disaster and death are necessities for evolution, which is to say, for progress. This Darwinist axiom holds true not just for the natural world, but we might find in it an echo of Social Darwinism and of capitalist ideology in general: individuals must strive for their own success, and competition between individuals in the society breeds innovation and progress.

Conversely, we might find a resonance with Communism as well. History is a central theme in Marxist ideology: the history of civilizations needed to progress as it did in order for Communism to develop and replace capitalism. That is to say, Marxism doesn't hold feudalism and capitalism to have been errors in human history, but necessary stages of development which would provide the conditions necessary for communism's rise. One might call this, too,

‘evolution by catastrophes’: the ‘disasters’ of prior economic, social, and political systems needed to occur in order for the species to progress towards a higher state: communism.

A critique of ‘history’ as such – that is, a discernible, even predictable narrative – would be consistent with something Enzensberger says in the second of his “Two Notes”. He mentions toward the end that “there is no world spirit; that we do not know the laws of history... that social evolution, like natural evolution, has no subject and is therefore unpredictable...” (240). It would seem Enzensberger is not of the opinion that a knowable and rational progression of history exists. If we buy into a Hegelian system of history, we might fall into the trap of placing too much faith in predictions based in that system: history in this way functions like science. And like the critiques against a too-devout faith in science, Enzensberger warns us not to buy into this “world spirit” either: in fact, every bystander has “long since grasped... that there is no world spirit,” a fact that “our theorists... refuse to admit even today” (240).

We find a clue to the allure of prophecy – by which I mean of metaphor, or human-assigned significance – in the subtitle of this epic poem: *A Comedy*. A well-trodden technique of comedy is the literalization of metaphors and idiom – I think of a *Far Side* comic titled “Nature preserves” depicting an open field with various animals crammed into jars. This process is the reverse side of allegory: while one can *allegorize* an actual event, e.g. the sinking of *Titanic*, allegory can also literalize a concept, e.g. personifying freedom as *The Statue of Liberty*. It’s not just whole idioms that we literalize for amusement – we play on the countless individual words in our languages which carry multiple meanings, both literal and figurative. And it is a testament to the human predilection for metaphor that we surprise ourselves with the *literal* meanings of words – we get so caught up in our own symbology that we forget that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. And it is a consistent technique of Enzensberger to do the same. In *The Wreck*, he often plays with the

multiple meanings of words, both literal and figurative, and in doing so, opens up the poem itself and each constituent word as a metaphor.

### III

Canto Sixteen is a foil to Canto Two: whereas Canto Two provided an allegorical hint at its end while remaining within a literal *Titanic* setting, Canto Sixteen is an explicitly metaphorical treatment of *Titanic*. The free verse of Canto Two is now a list, where each line is a complete sentence beginning with the wreck of *Titanic* as its subject. The poem employs ironic juxtapositions to provide what is effectively a series of punchlines – a reminder of the role of comedy in the poem, here expressed in a formal parallel between the poem and a comic construction. Canto Sixteen opens:

The wreck of *Titanic* is on record.  
 It is a gift to poets.  
 It guarantees significant tax benefits from loss allocations.  
 It is further testimony to the veracity of the theses of Vladmir Illyich Lenin.  
 It airs during primetime.  
 It is priceless.  
 It is inevitable.

The first line establishes the literalness of the sinking of the ship, and second then offers the opposite side of the coin by explicitly referencing to the metaphoric quality of the *Titanic* story.

The sentiment is reiterated several lines later: “It is art.”

The speaker offers a few darkly positive spins on the sinking of *Titanic*: “It is environmentally friendly... It creates jobs.” And we are reminded of the hope of finding a new beginning in an end: “It paves the way to a brighter future.” We may also think of “*Apocalypse*”, a poem set



around 1490, when the plague in Europe was subsiding after the devastating outbreaks of the fourteenth century. In the Renaissance, we find a glorious new beginning: a rebirth from the ashes of disaster. Still, for all the ‘good’ the Black Death brought for Renaissance Europe (employment, higher wages, lower food prices, etc.), we might reasonably suspect that the poor suffered the worst of it, in their cramped and unsanitary conditions – a tendency of disasters, we remember, alluded to in Canto Two (Hause & Maltby 217).

The poem lays its card out on the table, so to speak. The metaphors that are built up elsewhere in *The Wreck* are stripped down and unveiled in Canto Sixteen. The allegorical quality of *Titanic* for, say, social critique, is now given clear expression: “It is further testimony to the veracity of the theses of Vladimir Illyich Lenin.” But the directness of Canto Sixteen belies the inherent complexity of the statements themselves: weighty ideas remain weighty even if expressed simply. The poem performs this very juxtaposition between meaning and conveyance in its form as a list. Lists are a form of writing for daily utility, for groceries, tasks, inventories, or, in our case, passengers, cargo, and death tolls. Here, though, the list’s quotidian form and origin are contrasted with the esotericism of allegorical poetry. Lists possess a dual nature all on their own, writes Robert Belknap in his book on literary lists:

This is to say that the list is simultaneously the sum of its parts and the individual parts themselves... like the conjunction *and*, the list joins and separates at the same time. Each unit in a list possesses an individual significance but also a specific meaning by virtue of its membership with the other units in the compilation... Because speech and writing are sequential, units heard or read in a list are comprehended first as having individual, discrete meanings, and then as having significance determined by relations to the preceding units... Relations among constituents give the list coherence. Interior elements can demonstrate new relations that may never have been considered except by their juxtaposition. (Belknap 15-16)

Each line in Canto Sixteen is a discrete statement that can be read on its own, but also functions within the whole of the list – the same principle can then be extended to Canto Sixteen as one part of the entire epic. The connections between each element in the list and each other element, as well as between each element and the whole list, are not explicit, even when each constituent line may be explicit on its own. The form invites the reader to draw her own conclusions. The dynamic between meanings of a word, between ‘the literal’ and ‘the metaphoric’, and between form and content, are all at work in Canto Sixteen. The literal layers of the list become a metaphor for the multi-layered nature of the work. Its location at the middle axis of the whole piece is not to be ignored.

Canto Sixteen pulls another trick: it obscures the line between itself as the poem and the event it allegorizes. The use of italics in the first line – only for the name *Titanic* – implies the historical wreck of *Titanic*. But this distinction fades during over the course of the poem, as every line after the first begins simply with “it”. What’s more, the typographical distinction would be irrelevant in the event that the poem were read aloud – a worthy consideration for all poetry, here particularly relevant in light of the literal meanings behind both the English *canto* and the German *Gesang*. A listener would not be able to tell the difference between ‘the wreck of *Titanic*’ and *The Wreck of Titanic*. The artwork and its subject – ‘the literal’ and ‘the metaphoric’, or the symbol and what it represents – become interchangeable.

Self-awareness in the text is not new at this point. Already in Canto Three, the poem introduces a metanarrative about the writing of the poem itself:

Back then in Havana the plaster flaked off  
 the houses, a foul stench hung unbudging  
 over the harbor, the Old withered lushly,  
 day and night the shortage gnawed longingly away

at the Ten Year plan, and I was  
working on *The Wreck of Titanic*.

The speaker goes on to write: “This I write in Berlin. Like Berlin / I smell of old shell casings, / of the East, of sulfur, of disinfection.” The metanarrative is then elaborated in Canto Four, in which the speaker explains that he had not simply begun the poem in Cuba, but that the whole first draft had been lost in transit to Paris:

Back then I was right.  
Back then nothing had wrecked,  
nothing but my poem  
about the wreck of *Titanic*.  
It was a poem without a carbon copy,  
written in pencil  
in a black notebook with a waxed cover,  
because in the whole of Cuba back then  
there was no carbon paper to be found.  
.....  
[...] In some mailbag,  
loaded in Havana  
never to arrive in Paris,  
it has faded away.

The metanarrative alleges that the poem was started in Cuba in 1969, lost, and then ‘rewritten’ eight years later in Berlin. To what extent the poem is a verbatim rewriting is somewhat unclear. Presumably any mentions of this metanarrative are exclusive to the new poem. This presumption takes the position that either, a) the poem we are reading now was written in 1977 in Berlin and is a recreation of an original text, or b) the poem we are reading now was written in 1977 in Berlin and contains a fictitious back story about an earlier poem. There are, however, two other possibilities: either the poem’s metanarrative is in fact contrived, but was written precisely in this way in 1969 in Cuba, or the poem was written in exactly this way in Cuba and prophesied its own future loss and recreation in Berlin eight years later. In any event, the metanarrative establishes a

parallel between the ship and the poem: like *Titanic*, the poem had its own ‘wreck’, and during a transatlantic voyage, no less, in the opposite direction of *Titanic*’s voyage.

For our purposes, let us stick to what the text gives us. In Canto Six, the speaker writes:

I entertain myself by reproducing a text  
 which perhaps never existed. I restore pictures,  
 I forge my own work. And I ask myself,  
 how did it really look in the Titanic’s smoking lounge, and whether  
 the surface of the card table was wood or covered with green cloth.  
 How did it look in reality? How did it look in my poem?  
 Was it in my poem?[...]

This ‘reproduction’ (*wiederherstellen* in German) implies a certain exactitude – that this new poem is more a copy of the original than a reworking or adaptation. Then again, the speaker says the text may never have existed in the first place – either no original existed at all, or the current poem is a new work entirely, such that *it* never did exist. And if we turn back to Canto Four, the speaker tells us of how the original poem began, and in doing so implies that a replication would be impossible:

I remember exactly how  
 it began, with a sound.  
 "A scraping," I wrote,  
 "a stuttering scraping" No,  
 that wasn't it. "A faint rattle,"  
 "The rattling of the silverware." Yes,  
 I believe that's how it started, just so  
 or somehow similar. I quote  
 from memory. How it went on,  
 I no longer know.

Here the speaker claims to not know how the poem continued after the first line. In fact, he is not even sure of *that*: within the span of a few lines, he goes from remembering “exactly how it began” to being unsure of whether it began with a scraping or a clinking.

The metanarrative transforms the poem into a sort of translation. But whereas I translate between languages, the poet-speaker is translating through time. If a translator struggles with what is lost in the process of carrying meaning between systems of expression, the poet-speaker stumbles through the degradation of his memory in the course of eight years. Or is the still greater complication that the poet-speaker has changed in the interim, complicating the task of recreating a product of an earlier self? In Canto Three, he says: “We were searching for something, had lost something / on this tropical island... We had been looking / for something else there... but we didn’t find it.” These lines in conjunction with the repetition of “back then” (*damals* in German) evokes a wistfulness colored either with regret or disappointment. Similar sentiments crop up in Canto Four, which begins, “In those days I believed every word / that I wrote...” and includes other indications of disillusionment or flattened ideals:

How pleasant it was, to be so innocent!  
I refused to accept  
that the tropical party was already over.  
(What party? It was just distress,  
you utter layman, and necessity.)

The allusions to something “lost” – a hope of some sort – are then redirected at the identity of the poet-speaker himself in Canto Six:

[...]And that thin man, underway  
in Havana, excited, distracted, tangled in quarrels,  
metaphors, endless love stories – was that really me?  
I couldn’t swear to it. And in ten years  
I won’t be able to swear that these words here  
are my words, written down where Europe  
is darkest, in Berlin, ten years ago, i.e. today[.]

Not only was a dream of some sort lost during this stay in Havana, but with it the identity of the writer. Any text that would have been written in Cuba would be the work of a past self, i.e. a different person. In attempting to recreate the lost text, the poet-speaker must not only contend

with his past, but also with the thought that his future self might think the same about the Berlin poem, that is, the one we the readers receive.

By referencing its own creation in the metanarrative, the poem simultaneously literalizes and allegorizes itself. It literalizes itself because its physical existence – the paper and ink – is internally established. It allegorizes itself in any number of ways: for example, in the process of creating and revealing metaphors – drawing attention to the literal and figurative meaning of words. The poem calls language itself into question, revealing the innate symbolic nature of a word: a word indicates something, a word is not the thing itself, but a word nonetheless gives a strong impression of equivalency the way any metaphor does. Once language is ‘outed’ in the text, the entire poem is only ever a metaphor for anything it describes: Cuba, Berlin, *Titanic*, and even itself. *The Wreck of Titanic* is a discrete work, one instance of a particular utterance, which alludes not only to significances beyond the literal images of allegory, but also alludes to itself and to a past version of itself.

Even the word *allegory* is literalized in the metanarrative. The crisis of identity alluded to in Canto Six – are we the same person as we were in the past or will be in the future? – is manifest in allegory’s etymology: Greek *allēgoria*, from *allos* ‘other’ + *-agoria* ‘speaking’. We find echoes of this in Canto One (“He who’s speaking, that is me”) and in “*Further Reasons Why Poets Lie*”, (“Because it’s someone else, / always someone else, / who is speaking”). The latter poem additionally severs words themselves from what they signify: “Because orgasm and *orgasm* / are incompatible with each other.” A similar sentiment is reflected in this passage from Canto Twenty-Nine:

To be sure, the image of a lifeboat  
 rescues no one, the difference  
 between a lifejacket and the word *lifejacket*  
 is like the difference between life and death.

The poet-speaker imperils his own position as mediator between a word and its significance by calling attention to the limits of language as a medium of meaning, of experience, and of influence. The title of “*Further Reasons Why Poets Lie*” admits the illusion of truth and equivalency in language – a problem compounded by the reliance of poets on metaphor, even when every word already is one. Is the poet-speaker, like the engineer from Canto Eight, warning us that poets ought not be too deeply trusted, much like prophets, scientists, or historians, and any other ideologues? Such a warning seems appropriate given the prophetic presumptions extended to poets – it is the poet’s task to reveal, or else to receive a revelation and be its scribe. But the paradox of the poet is that he often veils this very revelation with figurative language, if not by choice, then by the necessity issuing from our own modes of symbolic communication.

The untrustworthiness of the poet-speaker is hinted at in Canto Fifteen, in which the poet-speaker appears as a character, but not the actual speaker of the poem. The speaker is referred to only as a collective *we* engaged in a quarrel with the poet-speaker of the metanarrative. The first stanza includes lines such as: “we asked him whether it all didn’t bother him, / the inky black, sopping profundity of his metaphors,” and, “besides we don’t get / what Cuba has got to do with it, Cuba’s an *idée fixe*.” The characterization of Cuba as an obsession undermines the authority of the poet-speaker, if not his stability, especially given his raving antics in this canto. We might even think of the poet-speaker as something of an ideologue by virtue of his fixed ideas and combativeness in reaction to criticism. Particular attention should be paid to Canto Thirty-One, which is similar to Canto Fifteen in that it features characters talking *about* the poet-speaker,

generally in the form of ridicule and condemnation. If the entirety of *The Wreck of Titanic* is written by this poet-speaker, then surely he has also written the two above-mentioned cantos. In that case, the poet-speaker would be displacing himself into a character in his own poem, writing not as himself but as people talking *to* and *about* him: are they manifestation of an especially harsh super ego, or is there rather something more ridiculous about *them* than there is about the poet-speaker? The matter is yours to interpret.

I have thus far tended to avoid using Enzensberger interchangeably with the speaker of the metanarrative because the speaker never mentions any name for himself, and I would rather stay close to the text itself than risk straying into an autobiographical examination of the poem. Nevertheless, addressing parallels between Enzensberger to the poetic speaker is relevant to the present discussion. To explain why, I return to Dante. There are three meanings of the name *Dante* in common usage: there is Dante the historical figure, Dante the speaker of *The Divine Comedy*, and Dante as a metonym for his *Divine Comedy* – when we say we are ‘reading Dante’, what we mean is that we are reading his poetry. Given the similarities between Enzensberger and the speaker of the poem’s metanarrative – for example, the fact that he himself spent time in Cuba in 1969, and that he himself is the author of a poem titled *The Wreck of Titanic* – this same dynamic also exists in the case of *The Wreck*. The identity of the poet is translated from reality (the living author) into fiction (the poetic persona of the author). The poet’s name then undergoes an additional translation: it comes to mean not just the author, but becomes a metonym for the author’s work. The muddling of history and poetry, and of an artist and a work, compel the reader to question not just the truth of the poem’s content, but the identity of the poet. We see a conflation of an author with his work in the poem “*Cold Comfort*”: “Washable, wrapped in black plastic, / Kropotkin lies on display for study: / *System of Mutual Aid* / in



*Nature.*” Here, there is an ambiguity regarding exactly *what* is lying on display: is it Kropotkin’s corpse, or is it his book?

I’ll end this section with a group of poems that combine the themes of identity, of representation, and of translation by mingling forms of art. There are four ‘painting-poems’ in *The Wreck of Titanic*, one of which has already been mentioned: “*Apocalypse. Umbrian, circa 1490.*” Each of these poems describes a different painting, each of which are fictitious, as far as I can tell, but belong to common genres: one is a *Last Supper*, for example. These poems test not only the translatability of one form of art into another form, but also the ability of a given form of art to translate the senses (i.e. a literal reality or experiences) into representation.

In “*Apocalypse*”, for example, a group of lines reads, “Especially hard to paint are the sounds, / the tearing of the temple curtains, / the bellowing beasts, the thunder.” The inability of painting – a medium specialized for sight – to reproduce sound is articulated in language, whose aural advantages are evidenced in alliteration and in onomatopoeic words like “bellowing” above (*brüllen* in the German), or “scraping” and “rattling” as seen in Canto Four (*scharren* and *klirren*, respectively). The German word for onomatopoeia, *Lautmalerei* – literally ‘sound-painting’ – is amusing in light of the present discussion. The text, meanwhile, describes in words the images of the painting: language must now tread into the territory of the visual arts. No matter how potent a writer’s imagery may be, it is nonetheless limited to the imagined canvas in the mind, *suggesting* an image only, and not producing it in the image’s own medium.

These painting-poems also address the artist himself and the process of creation. “*Apocalypse*” presents a painter who struggles at first to start the painting. The question posed, “How does one begin / to paint the end of the world?” could just as easily be reformulated for the writer: how does one begin to poetize it? “*Last Supper. Venetian, 16th Century*” focuses still more

on the artist given that the speaker is the artist himself. The painter begins the poem by enumerating the “usual questions” that came up when he had finished his painting. Magistrates of the Inquisition question several of his choices, for instance the inclusion of “moors, drunkards, and clowns” and Saint Lucas with a toothpick in hand. The painter downplays the significance of these elements as merely being inventions for his own pleasure. Seemingly as an act of rebellion against censure, or else as a prank on excessive analysis, he paints an inexplicable turtle rolling its eyes. But the dread of hearing the “parasites” explaining to him what it means, he “sepulchers” the turtle by painting over it. The painter’s disdain for the viewers who will inevitably attempt to divine grander meanings in his painting is evident in the way he describes them: gabbling gallerists, tittering drawing teachers, and know-it-alls. We can reasonably assume that the poet-speaker of the metanarrative is displacing his identity in that of the painter, expressing the tedium of either conjuring or rooting through symbols.

Arguably the most convincing case of the poet-speaker disguising himself as a painter occurs in “*The Rape of Zuleika. Netherlandish, End of the 19th Century.*” In this poem, the speaker is a restorer of old paintings, and he describes the eponymous painting in detail. The parallel between the painter as a restorer of the past and the metanarrative’s poet-speaker as restorer of a past poem is undeniable. The connection is further strengthened by the common reference to forgery in both speakers’ language. The painter refers to himself as a “faithful forger” and says he “recreate[s] what never existed.” Similar phrases appear also in Canto Six, as mentioned earlier in this section: “I amuse myself by reproducing a text / that perhaps never existed. I restore pictures, / I forge my own work.” And like the painter, who attributes his trembling hand to “history / with its endless feints and arts,” so too must the poet-speaker contend with his myriad allusions

to and allegorizations of social, historical, and artistic phenomena and themes. Let it not escape our attention that forgery is an act of deception: it turns out that poets are not the only liars.

#### IV

In the first half of the nineteenth century, German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher posited an enduring dichotomy in translation theory – one that I find both subtler and more comprehensible than bi- or tripartite schema proposed by John Dryden among others (Dryden 17). Schleiermacher wrote that a translation does one of two things: it either “leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward writer, or it leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader” (Schleiermacher 42). The former mode doesn’t compromise the “foreignness” of the original text: the translator ‘normalizes’ the text as little as possible, inviting the *reader* to approach the text on the text’s own terms, i.e. encounter atypical constructions of the target language. The latter mode is the inverse: the original text is reconstructed within the preexisting conventions of the target language, meaning the reader encounters familiar uses of her language.

Schleiermacher favors the former approach, and I would say I generally agree with him. I find the prospect of introducing novel constructions by preserving a “foreign flavor” alluring, particularly when it might lead to a new stylistic paradigm in the target language – a phenomenon, as Hugo Friedrich explains, that occurred in French after Malherbe’s translations of Seneca (Humboldt 58, Friedrich 13). And I tend to agree with Humboldt that ambiguities in the original text – that is, intentional ambiguities by the author, not ambiguities stemming from the translator’s misunderstanding – should be preserved in a translation rather than interpreted

out of it (Humboldt 58). The rationale is that the poet's peculiar use of her own language should be reflected in the translation, such that the language of the translation is similarly inventive. If, however, the poet is not creating a "new" language – which is to say, is not obviously experimenting with the very form of her own language – then it would be misleading for a translation to experiment with the form of the target language. Doing so would imbue the translation with a foreign flavor, but this flavor would be contrived, the result of transliteration of foreign idiom, not a result of a foreignness innate to the original work. I do not want to disparage such an approach – it's an intriguing concept, and one which, if nothing else, should be welcomed into the pantheon of an often-translated work (e.g. *Don Quixote* or Baudelaire), so as to enrich the spectrum of translations. Nevertheless, I generally stick to matching the *effect* of the original, which is to say, being 'foreign' when the text is foreign, and being 'native' when the text is so.

Enzensberger's language is often rather straightforward, even conversational at times. To render the *effect* of Enzensberger's language, the English should therefore be lucid in proportion to the German – proportion being important since this straightforward quality of the language is only a broad generalization, and does not account for all 108 pages of the epic. The question of "moving the text" and of "foreignness" are not, therefore, points of continual fixation. Instead, a consistent consideration in the translation of *The Wreck* is the conveyance of *voice*: an aspect of particular importance given the multitude of poems narrated in the first-person, but by different speakers. Even within the realm of witty or sardonic voices, there are distinctions to be made.

Our favorite engineer from Canto Eight, for example: he is clearly articulate and even possesses a certain polemic flair despite his calculated mindset. Nonetheless, he is an engineer and not an artist, and certain phrases need to be translated with that in mind. An example: "I'm

and engineer / and my imagination is all that robustly developed.” Those last two words in German are *reich entwickelt*. It is important to mimic the redundancy of the phrase: someone’s imagination could be *reich* (‘rich’, most literally) or it could be *entwickelt* (‘developed’, ‘advanced’, etc.), and to combine the two is a bit verbose. But words here are not especially *flavorful* – the phrase even borders on being clinical – and the translator has to be wary not to spice up the phrasing. My biggest consideration was replicating the sense of progress contained in *entwickelt*, so I could use *evolved*, *developed*, *advanced* and so on: the importance of progression is that the engineer goes on to discuss evolution as a virtue.

We might expect the painter from “*Last Supper*” to have phrased things a bit differently. He, too, is an interesting and eloquent individual, but *his* brand of wit is better evidenced in the comparatively piquant diction: “gabbling” (*Gebrabbel*), “tittering” (*Zischeln*), “parasites” to describe people he finds disagreeable (*Schmarotzer*), and so on. It should also be mentioned that formal considerations can further complicate the conveyance of voice. The first two examples from “*Last Supper*”, for example, are also alliterative within their respective lines.

When asked to generalize my approach to this translation, I’ve gotten in the habit of calling it “atomic”. This means a few things. First, as has been already addressed, *The Wreck of Titanic* is not constant: it is a dynamic poem composed in varied voices and styles. It would not be appropriate to find one translation theory and stick dogmatically to it given this diversity. Rather, the translator ought to ‘atomize’ the whole work into each constituent poem, since each might require their own specialized approach. Where “*Apocalypse*” requires the translator to sometimes convey archaic usages, a poem like Canto Eight demands attention to voice. Canto Seventeen is meanwhile an exercise in onomatopoeia, and I owe an acquaintance with filmmaking terminology to Canto Twenty-Seven. Finally, both “*Lost*” and “*Further Reasons Why Poets Lie*”

are almost entirely idiomatic, requiring yet another approach. The last two poems mentioned are good examples of where, even within a single poem, a translator might vary his methods.

The poem “*Lost*” consists for the most part of idioms using the German word *verlieren* (to lose) or its derivatives: the noun *Verlust* (loss), for example, or the past participle *verloren* (lost) which also functions as an adjective like in English. The expectation is that idioms are precisely the reason why literalism is inappropriate for translation, since idioms, by definition, are figurative expressions, i.e. do not mean what they literally say. It would be contrary to the effect of a phrase to translate the German *reinen Tisch machen* word-for-word as ‘to make a clean table.’ Instead, one finds an idiom in English whose *meaning* is equivalent to the German: ‘to clear the air’ (as after some quarrel). Interestingly enough, almost every expression in “*Lost*” is virtually identical in both German and English, such that the poem can largely be transliterated. Only a couple of instances pose any resistance to this trend, and they are discussed in the translation’s endnotes. The colloquial interjections were actually more difficult than the idioms, requiring an approach more imitative than literal: *versteht ihr* becomes “are you all following” rather than the more literal “do you all understand”; *auch das noch* becomes “that’s all I need” instead of “still that, too”; and I chose to translate the two instances of *unterbrecht mich nicht* first as “don’t interrupt” and later as “don’t cut me off”. It is clear that my choice contradicts the repetition of the German – arguably a crucial contradiction given that repetition is a dominant motif of the poem, but one which I am prepared to explain.

The motif of repetition in “*Lost*” draws attention to the language itself. We can imagine the infinitive phrase ‘to lose’ as a picture frame in which each completing noun is the variable photograph in the frame. The scheme of the poem at its most reduced would be: ‘to lose’ + X. The atomic process of inserting various values for X (hair, your nerve, altitude, etc.) one after the

other highlights the variations on the meaning of ‘to lose’. One might imagine each instance of the verb to lie along a literal-figurative spectrum. To lose one’s hair, to lose one’s house keys, and to lose a war are all different kinds of losing: a further example of the play on multiple meanings of a given word. The significance of this for *unterbrecht mich nicht* is that the repetition of that phrase may also draw attention to its own literal-figurative dynamic, specifically, the use of *brechen* (literally, ‘to break’, etc.) to figuratively refer to the interruption of speech. *Interrupt* (deriving from *rupture*, ‘to break’) and *unterbrechen* don’t share the same etymology, but their respective roots carry analogous literal meaning. The English reader, however, might not intuit that *rupture* is contained within *interrupt* as readily as a German reader might see *brechen* in *unterbrechen*. The reason likely owes itself to two simple answers: first, *brechen* is more commonly used in German than *rupture* is in English, and second, the word *brechen* is not altered in any way in the compound *unterbrechen*, whereas *rupture* becomes *rupt* in *interrupt*. And so I chose instead to render the second instance of *unterbrechen* as “don’t cut me off,” where the literalness of the phrase is obvious enough that the literal meaning of *interrupt* – a semantic synonym – is implicated by association.

Even within this one poem I was compelled to vary my method from phrase to phrase: an act of atomization more minute still than taking each poem as its own case. In the second poem mentioned above, “*Further Reasons Why Poets Lie*”, two lines in particular were less readily translatable compared to the idioms in “*Lost*”. The first handful of lines follow:

Because the moment  
 in which the word *happy*  
 is pronounced  
 is never the happy moment.  
 Because he who’s dying of thirst cannot  
 bring his thirst to pass his lips.

Because in the mouths of the *proletariat*  
the word *proletariat* doesn't appear.

The lines beginning, “Because he who’s dying of thirst...” are of particular interest. The German reads: “Weil der Verdurstende seinen Durst / nicht über die Lippen bringt.” The German idiom used here is *etwas über die Lippen bringen*, which might more frequently be translated as ‘to not dare to say something.’ The tangibility of the German comes from the mention of lips, and I wanted to preserve the concrete image. Again, a play on literal and figurative meanings is at work here. We can imagine that this person cannot bear to even utter the word *thirst* given his dire condition – a condition that, appropriately, would impair the ability to speak. But given that *thirst* in German, like in English, can be figurative (a thirst for knowledge, e.g.), then we can also take these lines to mean that this person is thirsting for something that cannot be sated by water, nor is it a thirst that can even be readily explicated. I phrased my lines as such so as to preserve this ambiguity while preserving the idiomatic nature of the language.

There exists a parallel between this pervasive play on literal and figurative meanings – a trope through the entire work –and the process of translation. The translator is always choosing between modes of rendering meaning. Call these modes what you like – literalism, paraphrasing, interpretation, imitation, etc. – but the fundamental questions are the same: what is being said? how is it being said? is what is meant the same as what is being said? In my experience, navigating these questions rarely entails finding a straight line and sticking to it, but more often entails tacking back and forth, altering my approach from poem to poem, line to line, or even word to word: atomization. But it would be short-sighted to only see an atomic structure for its discrete units while ignoring the fact that these units form a cohesive whole. To this end, it is



important to see that the constituent elements are also harmonious with the overall construction – we are reminded of this same quality of lists cited in the previous section.

I would like to return now to something I wrote about Schleiermacher's dichotomy of moving the text versus moving the reader. I said that I found his binary to be more useful than that of theorists like Dryden. The reason for this is that I'm not sure that such thing as literal translation can even exist. I suspect that if I were to say the word *elm* in a room of people who were born and raised in my own home town, it would mean – or at least connote – different things for each person. If the premise of literalism can break down within one vernacular, then surely literalism cannot exist between two distinct languages. As evidence of how tenuous literalism between languages is, I submit the present tense.

German has one present tense. This single present tense can be expressed in two different English tenses: the simple present ('I eat') and the present progressive ('I am eating'). These two English tenses are semantically different: the first example is a general remark that means the subject has a habit of eating; the second example means that the subject is eating *at this very moment*. In German, both of these meanings would be rendered with the same form of the verb: *ich esse*. Specificity could be provided with an adverb or a prepositional phrase: *ich esse jetzt* (I am eating *now*) or *in diesem Moment esse ich* (I am eating at the moment). The German verb is identical in both forms, though. I should mention that there is a third English present tense of sorts: that which is constructed with *to do* as an auxiliary verb. This form is used most often in negations ('I do not like ham') or in questions ('do you like ham?'): German simply uses the word *nicht* for negations, and a specific syntax for asking questions. The *do* formation also is used as an intensifier or to contradict a statement ('I *do* love ham'): German would use the particle *doch* in the latter context. In light of these fundamental differences between German and English, one

could argue that each instance of translating the present tense into English is a choice, and as such, cannot be literal, since I would go so far as to say that literalism allows very little room for choice – the choice is already ‘there’, somewhere inherent to the languages; the translator merely needs to commit it to ink.

We are used to asking the question: what is lost in translation? The supposition, particularly in regards to poetry, is that the language and the content of a work are so bound to one another as to render a divorce between them impossible – that poetry is where language is greater than the sum of its parts (the parts being a word and its meaning) – that translation can only ever hope to be an approximation of the original work, wherein some a dimension of the original is necessarily lost, like a photo of a sculpture (Friedrich 15). What is less often considered is what translation can *bring* to the original text: what qualities of the target language might benefit a text? Let us indulge in some optimism.

If English effectively has more present tenses than German, the translator may be able to take advantage of this to some stylistic end. This is not always possible, since, I’ll admit, the choice is often intuitive (though intuition, I should say, is closer to interpretation than to literalism). But Canto Two is an instance where the tenses can indeed be manipulated for poetic reasons. As stated earlier in this introduction, Canto Two juxtaposes scenes of calm among *Titanic’s* first class passenger with reminders of the water breaching the hull several decks below:

[...] While below  
 the water is climbing, on D Deck a steward helps  
 a groaning old man[...]  
 [...] tie the laces of his shoes.  
 Don’t be afraid! Look lively, ladies!  
 Gallop! hollers the gymnasium steward Mr. McCawley,  
 shipshape as ever in his beige flannel suit...  
 .....  
 John Jacob Astor meanwhile slices into a lifebelt

with a nail file and shows his wife,  
 née Connaught, what's inside  
 (presumably cork), while in the hold ahead  
 water's streaming in arm-thick, loosing  
 icy bubbles under mailbags, seeping into the  
 galley. *Wiggle waggle walk*, plays the band  
 in snow-white uniforms, *my monkey*:  
 a potpourri from *The Dollar Princess*.

The two English present tenses are well-suited to this juxtaposition. Using the present progressive for the water performs the urgency of the crisis occurring beneath the passengers' feet. By comparison, the simple present aptly mimics the ignorance of the passengers for the pressing reality – they are suspended in time, resistant to change.

I maintain that this atomic theory is necessary for a work as diverse as *The Wreck of Titanic*. A plurality of approaches to translation might be all the more appropriate given the poem's critiques of dogmatism of any sort. But I also feel no shame in saying that I've also enjoyed varying my techniques for the practice of it: translation – indeed, creative writing of any kind – is still new to me. The theory I've read is always there when I need it and has undoubtedly influenced me no matter how conscious I am of it, but most of all I've been learning by doing. If nothing else, then perhaps this translation is valuable as a document in progress, wherein the reader can glimpse a process itself by virtue of the coexistence of finished and unfinished sections. The project may not have turned out as I originally envisioned, but then again, I am not sure I've seen the last of this poem. To return to the beginning of this introduction – by which I mean the end of *The Wreck of Titanic* – the word *weilerschwimmen* is apt for the occasion. There are a few ways to read this “swimming on” in the poem itself, but for my own purposes, I opt for the optimistic route: the project is less a crushing end, and more a new beginning.

– Christopher Shea, April 2014

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The Wreck of Titanic  
A Comedy

for Gastón\*

*\*Enzensberger's dedication*

## CANTO ONE

Someone listens. He waits. He holds  
his breath, very near,  
here. He says: He who's speaking, that is me.

Never again, he says,  
will it be so calm,  
so dry and warm as now.

He hears himself  
in his hissing head.  
There is no one there but he

who says: That must be me.  
I wait, hold my breath,  
listen closely. The distant noise

in my ears, these antennas  
of soft flesh, it means nothing.  
It is just the blood

that beats in the vein.  
I have waited long,  
with bated breath.

White noise in the headphones  
of my time machine.  
Silent cosmic din.

No knock. No cry for help.  
Radio silence.  
Either it is over,

I say to myself, or it has

not yet begun.

But now! Now:

A grinding. A scraping. A rip.  
That's it. An icy fingernail  
that scratches at the door and snags.

Something rips.  
An endless bolt of sailcloth,  
a snow-white strip of canvas

that first slowly,  
then faster and ever faster  
and hissing rips in two.

That is the beginning.  
Do you hear it? Don't you hear it?  
Hold on tight!

Then once more it's still.  
Just a rattle in the walls  
from something cut thin,

a crystal tremble,  
which becomes fainter  
and passes.

That was it.  
Was that it? Yes,  
that must have been it.

That was the beginning.  
The beginning of the end  
is always discreet.

It's eleven-forty  
on board. The steel skin



gapes below the waterline,

two hundred meters long,  
slashed  
by an unimaginable knife.

The water shoots into the bulkheads.  
Gliding past the shining hull,  
thirty meters high

above the sea, black  
and soundless, is the iceberg.  
It remains behind in the darkness.

## CANTO TWO

The impact was featherlight. The first wireless message:  
*00:15. Mayday. Calling all ships. Position 41°46' North  
 50°14' West.* Fabulous, this Marconi!  
 A ticking in your head, in an earpiece, wireless  
 and far, so far – farther than half a century!  
 No sirens, no alarm bells, only  
 a discreet knock at the cabin door  
 a slight cough in the smoking lounge. While below  
 the water is climbing, on D Deck a steward helps  
 a groaning old man, machine tools  
 and metallurgy, tie the laces of his shoes.  
 Don't be afraid! Love lively, ladies,  
 Gallop! hollers the gymnasium steward Mr. McCawley,  
 shipshape as ever in his beige flannel suit,  
 voice ringing through the paneled gym. The mechanical  
 dromedaries swing up and down without a sound.  
 No one suspects that the indefatigable man is sick to his stomach,  
 that he can't swim, that he is scared.  
 John Jacob Astor meanwhile slices into a lifebelt  
 with a nail file and shows his wife,  
 née Connaught, what's inside  
 (presumably cork), while in the hold ahead  
 water's streaming in arm-thick, loosing  
 icy bubbles under mailbags, seeping into  
 the galley. *Wiggle waggle walk*, plays the band  
 in snow-white uniforms, *my monkey*:  
 a potpourri from *The Dollar Princess*.  
 To the Metropol! Berlin, as it lives and laughs!  
 Yet far below, where they're always first to catch on,  
 bundles, babies, wine-red blankets  
 are hastily gathered up. The steerage  
 understands no English, no German,  
 but it doesn't need to be told

that the first class comes first,  
that there is never enough milk and never enough shoes  
and never enough lifeboats for all.

*Apocalypse. Umbrian, circa 1490*

He's getting on a bit, he sighs,  
he carries out a large canvas, he broods,  
doggedly negotiates with the buyer,  
a miserly Carmelite from Abruzzo,  
a prior or canon. It will soon be winter,  
the joints in his fingers crack, the kindling  
cracks in the fire. He sighs, primes  
the canvas, lets it dry, and primes again,  
impatiently scribbles his figures on pieces  
of pasteboard, wraithlike, accents them with opaque white.  
He hems and haws, mixes colors, fritters away  
several weeks. Then one day, it has  
since become Ash Wednesday  
or Candelmas, he dips his brush, bright and early,  
into the burnt umber and paints:  
It will be a gloomy scene. How does one begin  
to paint the end of the world? The conflagrations,  
the islands set adrift, the lightning, the curiously  
slow-crumbling walls, ramparts, and towers:  
technical matters, questions of composition.  
To raze the world is no easy feat.  
Especially hard to paint are the sounds,  
the tearing of the temple veil,  
the bellowing beasts, the thunder. Everything  
should rend, be rent,  
just not the canvas. And the deadline  
is fixed: All Souls' Day at the very latest.  
By then the raging sea in the background  
must be varnished, a thousand times, with green,  
foamy lights, pierced by masts,  
ships descending plumb into the depths,  
wreckages, while outside, the middle of July,  
not a even dog stirs in the dusty square.

Deserted by women, students, servants.  
the painter alone remains in the city.  
He looks tired, who would've thought,  
dead tired. All is ocher, shadowless,  
frozen, holding still in a sort  
of wicked eternity; just not the image. The image  
grows, slowly clouds over, fills  
with shadows, steel blue, earth grey, turbid violet,  
caput mortuum; fills with devils, horsemen,  
butcheries; until the apocalypse is  
happily concluded and the painter  
sighs in relief, for a brief moment;  
giddy as a child, as if granted new life,  
he invites women, children, friends,  
and foes to wine that very evening,  
to fresh truffles and snipe,  
while outside rush the first fall rains.

## CANTO THREE

Back then in Havana the plaster flaked off  
the houses, a foul stench hung unbudging  
over the harbor, the Old withered lushly,  
day and night the shortage gnawed longingly away  
at the Ten Year plan, and I was  
working on *The Wreck of Titanic*.  
There weren't any shoes and no toys  
and no lightbulbs and no calm,  
calm long gone, and the rumors  
were like mosquitos. Back then we all thought:  
tomorrow will be better, and if not tomorrow,  
then the day after. Well –  
perhaps not necessarily better,  
but different, anyway, perfectly different,  
in any case. Everything will be different.  
A wonderful feeling. I remember.

This I write in Berlin. Like Berlin  
I smell of old shell casings,  
of the East, of sulfur, of disinfection.  
Slowly it's getting cold again.  
Slowly I read through the regulations.  
Far off, behind plentiful movie theaters,  
stands the wall unnoticed, behind which,  
far from one another, there stand some scattered theaters.  
I see a scatter of foreigners  
in brand new shoes deserting through the snow.  
I'm freezing. I remember, hard  
to believe it wasn't even ten years ago,  
those strange, easy days of euphoria.

Back then hardly anyone thought about the fall,  
not even in Berlin, whose own had

long since passed. The island of Cuba  
wasn't shaking under our feet.  
It seemed to us as if something were lying ahead,  
something for us to invent.  
We didn't know that the party was long over  
and that whatever was left was the business  
of the World Bank president  
and the comrades from the Stasi,  
just like back home and everywhere else.

We were searching for something, had lost something  
on this tropical island. The grass grew  
over the scrapped Cadillacs. Where had the rum gone,  
where were the bananas? We had been looking  
for something else there – hard to say  
what it actually was –  
but we didn't find it  
in that tiny New World,  
where everything spoke of sugar,  
of the liberation, of a future rich  
with lightbulbs, dairy cows, brand new machines.

There, where the young mulattas  
with submachine guns under their arms  
smiled at me from the street corner,  
at me or some other, I worked  
and I worked on *The Wreck of Titanic*.  
Nights were so warm I couldn't sleep.  
I was not young – what does *young* mean?  
I lived by the sea – well-nigh ten years  
younger than now and pale with zeal.

That must have been in June, no,  
early April, it was just before Easter,  
we walked along the Rampa,  
it was after 1 a.m., Maria Alexandrovna  
watched me from wrathfully glistening eyes,

Heberto Padilla was smoking, he wasn't yet  
in prison – but who this Padilla was,  
no one knows anymore because he is lost, a friend,  
a lost man – and some German  
deserter laughed clumsily – he, too,  
landed in prison, but not until later,  
and today he lives here in the area, drinking  
and conducting his patriotic studies,  
and it's funny that I haven't forgotten  
him, no, I've forgotten very little.

We spoke in pidgin  
Spanish, Russian, and German,  
about the terrible sugar harvest  
of ten million tons, today naturally  
nobody speaks of it anymore. What's  
sugar got to do with me, I'm a tourist!  
screamed the deserter, then he cited  
Horkheimer, of all people, Horkheimer  
in Havana! We also spoke of Stalin  
and Dante, I no longer know why,  
what did Dante have to do with sugar.

And I was lost in thought and gazed beyond  
the harbor wall onto the Caribbean Sea,  
and there I saw it, much much larger  
and whiter than any white, far out,  
I alone saw it and no one else,  
in the dark bay, the night was cloudless  
and the sea was black and smooth as mirror glass,  
there I saw the iceberg, tremendously high  
and cold, like a cold mirage,  
it floated slowly, irrevocably,  
white, toward me.



*Lost*

To lose your hair, to lose your nerve,  
are you all following, precious time,  
altitude, lost cause,  
to lose luster, I'm sorry,  
doesn't matter, to lose on points,  
don't interrupt,  
to lose blood, your mother and father,  
to once more lose the heart you lost in Heidelberg,  
without batting an eyelash,  
to lose the charm  
of novelty, water under the bridge,  
to lose your rights, aha,  
your head, in God's name, your head,  
if it absolutely has to be,  
paradise lost, fine with me,  
to lose your job, the Lost Son,  
to lose face, that's all I need,  
a tooth, two World Wars,  
a few pounds,  
losing, only ever losing, and  
long lost illusions,  
yeah so what, not a word  
about love's labor lost,  
of course not, to lose sight  
of your sight, your innocence,  
a pity, to lose your house key,  
a pity, to get lost, lost in thought,  
in the crowd,  
don't cut me off,  
to lose your mind, your last penny,  
be that as it may, I'm almost done,  
to lose your composure, all hope,

losing everything all at once,  
woe is me, losing even the thread,  
driver's license, and all interest.

## CANTO FOUR

Back then I believed every word  
 that I wrote, and I was writing  
*The Wreck of Titanic.*  
 It was a good poem.  
 I remember exactly how  
 it began, with a sound.  
 "A scraping," I wrote,  
 "a stuttering scraping" No,  
 that wasn't it. "A faint rattle,"  
 "The rattling of the silverware." Yes,  
 I believe that's how it started, just so  
 or somehow similar. I quote  
 from memory. How it went on,  
 I no longer know.

How pleasant it was, being so innocent!  
 I refused to accept  
 that the tropical party was already over.  
 (What party? It was just distress,  
 you utter layman, and necessity.)  
 A few miserable years later,  
 now, it's all over,  
 it teems with shoes,  
 lightbulbs, the jobless,  
 brand new regulations and machines.  
 I feel the chill in my bones,  
 an anachronism  
 in the middle of an anachronism.

It smells of briquettes.  
 Where Europe is ugliest,  
 I preside at the throne among cast-iron  
 and slowly rotting Hohenzollerns

and members of the Central Committee,  
in the bitter, fearful, patriotic sordidness  
and remember, and remember  
my memory. Yes,  
back then I told myself it's only  
a mirage, in reality,  
I told myself, the island of Cuba  
isn't shaking beneath our feet.

Back then I was right.  
Back then nothing had wrecked,  
nothing but my poem  
about the wreck of *Titanic*.  
It was a poem without a carbon copy,  
written in pencil  
in a black notebook with a waxed cover,  
because in the whole of Cuba back then  
there was no carbon paper to be found.  
Do you like it? I asked  
Maria Alexandrovna, and  
packed it in a brown manila  
envelope. In some mailbag,  
loaded in Havana  
never to arrive in Paris,  
it has faded away.

How it went on, we all know.  
Outside it's snowing. I'm searching for the thread  
that I lost, and sometimes,  
now for instance, it's as if  
I've found it.  
Then I rip. The curtain rips  
hissing in two, light streams in,  
I recognize them all:  
the mulattas, the captain  
with the white muttonchops, Dante  
(1265-1321), the stoker Jerome,

first name unknown (1888?-1912),  
 the old painter from Umbria  
 with his stained fingernails,  
 born now and then  
 and died at times,  
 Maria Alexandrovna (1943- ) –

All these drowned and frozen faces,  
 1,217 in all, some say,  
 1,500 say others, fight each other,  
 woodworms, fight each other, maggots!  
 I recognize them, each  
 and every one, even the Chinese,  
 the five Chinese men, they're  
 lying there like sacks of flour  
 on the lifeboat's floor. I believe  
 it is them, I believe they're alive,  
 but I don't want to swear to it.

And so I sit here, wrapped in blankets,  
 as outside it snows and snows,  
 and amuse myself with the wreck,  
 with the wreck of *Titanic*.  
 I have nothing better to do.  
 I have time like a god.  
 I don't miss a thing. I see  
 to the wireless messages, to the menu,  
 to the drowning victims. I gather them up,  
 the drowned, out of the black,  
 icy stream of passing time.

Debris, rubble of sentences,  
 empty fruit crates, heavy manila envelopes,  
 brown, sodden, eaten by salt,  
 I draw verses from the tide,  
 from the dark, warm tide  
 of the Caribbean Sea,

teeming with sharks,  
shattered verses, life preservers,  
swirling souvenirs.

## CANTO FIVE

Steal what had been robbed from you,  
 take back at last what belongs to you, he yelled,  
 freezing, his jacket was too small for him,  
 his hair flickered under the cranes,  
 he shouted: I am one of you,  
 what are you waiting for? Now  
 is the time, tear down the barriers,  
 hurl the vermin overboard  
 along with their trunks, dogs, lackeys,  
 the women, too, and even the children,  
 with force, with knives, with bare hands!  
 And he showed them the knife,  
 he showed them his bare hand.

But the people from steerage,  
 emigrants they were, stood there  
 in the darkness, calmly took off  
 their caps and listened to him.

When will you finally take revenge  
 if you don't act now?  
 Or are you blind to all blood  
 but your children's and your own?  
 And he clawed his face  
 and sliced his hand  
 and showed them his blood.

But the people from steerage  
 listened to him and remained silent.  
 Not because he spoke no Lithuanian  
 (he spoke no Lithuanian);  
 not because they would have been drunk  
 (their antique flasks  
 wrapped in course cloth  
 were long drunk dry);  
 not because they were hungry  
 (and were indeed hungry):

None of that was it. It was  
 not so easy to explain.  
 They understood well what he said,  
 but they did not understand him.  
 His words were not their words.  
 They were consumed with other fears  
 than he, and with other hopes.

They stood there patiently  
with their knapsacks, their rosaries,  
their rachitic children  
at the barriers, they made room,  
they listened to him, respectfully,  
and waited, until they had sunk.



## CANTO SIX

Unmoved I examine this bare room in Germany,  
the high ceiling, which a few years ago was all white,  
the soot that floats in tiny flakes down onto the table,  
and as the city on all sides grows darker with each minute,  
I entertain myself by reproducing a text  
that perhaps never existed. I restore images,  
I forge my own work. And I ask myself,  
how did it really look in *Titanic's* smoking lounge, and whether  
the surface of the card table was wood or covered with green felt.  
What was it like in reality? What was it like in my poem?  
*Was* it in my poem? And that thin man, underway  
in Havana, excited, distracted, tangled in quarrels,  
metaphors, endless love stories – was that really me?  
I couldn't swear to it. And in ten years  
I won't be able to swear that these words here  
are my words, written down where Europe  
is darkest, in Berlin, ten years ago, i.e. today,  
in order to distract myself from the evening news, from the many  
endless minutes, endlessly impending and extending,  
the nearer any end approaches, all the more endless. Three degrees  
below freezing, beyond the window everything is black, the snow, too.  
I am overcome, I don't know why, by a great peace.  
I look out, like a god. There is no iceberg in sight.

*The Iceberg*

The iceberg closes in on us  
inexorably.

Look, it looses itself  
from the glacier's brow,  
from the glacier's foot.  
Yes, it is white,  
it is moving,  
yes, it is bigger  
than everything that moves  
on the sea,  
in the air,  
or on Earth.

Mortal dreams,  
through which drifts  
a caravan of icebergs:  
"Rising more than two hundred and fifty feet  
above the water's surface,  
the fresh fissures reflecting  
the very same colors,  
colors that are wonderful  
and wholly translucent."  
"You think you're seeing  
flames of sun mirrored  
in the panes  
of a hundred palaces."

It's no good  
to think  
of the iceberg's weight.  
He who's met it once  
won't easily shake the sight,  
no matter how long he lives.

"This spectacle  
lifts the imagination,  
but also pierces the heart  
with a shiver,  
an involuntary tremor."

The iceberg has no future.  
It lets itself drift.  
We could do without  
the iceberg.

It is beyond doubt.  
It is worth nothing.  
Coziness  
is not it's strong suit.  
It is larger than we are.  
We only ever see  
its tip.

It is transient.  
It doesn't give that much thought.  
It makes no progress,  
and yet, "when it,  
like a tremendous,  
white,  
blue-veined  
marble slab,  
topples and plummets,  
then the sea will quake."

It has nothing to do with us,  
drifts reservedly by,  
needs nothing,  
doesn't spread,  
melts.  
It leaves behind nothing.  
It perfectly disappears.  
Yes, so it is:  
Perfect.

## CANTO SEVEN

To proceed with our tour, we are now arriving  
 at the Palm Court, where we stage the smaller balls.  
 The splendid murals behind me are custom-made for *Titanic*  
 in the oriental style by a prominent salon painter.

*Dinner First Class*  
 14th April 1912  
 Caviar Beluga  
 Hors d'œuvres variés  
 Turtle Soup

The double doors you see here lead to the Turkish baths,  
 watch your step, where massage and spa therapy  
 are at your disposal at all hours under medical supervision.  
 Please note the columns of red Carrara marble.

Consommé Tapioca  
 Lobster American Style  
 Baked Salmon with Horseradish Sauce  
 Curried Chicken  
 Almond Rice Tropical Fruit

The two bronze nymphs at the entrance of the Grand Foyer  
 are executed in classical Renaissance manner.  
 The one depicts peace, the other progress.  
 At this time we kindly request that our fine guests be seated for dinner.

*Last Supper. Venetian, 16th Century*

I

When I had finished my *Last Supper*,  
 five-and-a-half by nearly thirteen meters,  
 an ungodly load of work, but decently paying,  
 the usual questions cropped up.  
 What is the meaning of these foreigners  
 with their halberds? They're dressed  
 like heretics, or like Germans.  
 Do you really find it proper  
 for Saint Lucas  
 to be holding a toothpick?  
 Who put you up to this,  
 inviting Moors, drunkards, and clowns  
 to the table of our Lord?  
 What's the purpose of this dwarf with the parrot,  
 what is the point of the snuffling dog,  
 and why is the mameluke bleeding from his nose?  
 Gentlemen, I said, all of this  
 I've freely invented for my own pleasure.  
 But the seven magistrates of the Holy Inquisition  
 rustled their red robes  
 and muttered: We're not convinced.

II

Oh, I've painted better pictures;  
 but that sky displays colors  
 that you won't find in any skies  
 but those I've painted;  
 and I like them, these cooks  
 with their gigantic butcher knives,  
 these people here with their diadems and aigrettes,  
 their fur-trimmed mantled bonnets  
 and pearl-embroidered turbans;

those shrouded figures also belong here,  
 who've clambered up the farthest roofs  
 of my alabaster palaces,  
 bending over the highest balustrades.  
 What they're watching for,  
 I don't know. But neither you  
 nor the the saints do they cast a glance.

### III

How many times must I tell you!  
 There is no art without pleasure.  
 That's also true for the endless Crucifixions,  
 Deluges, and Slaughters of the Innocents  
 that you, I don't know why,  
 commission from me.  
 When the sighs of the critics,  
 the quibbling of the Inquisitors,  
 and the snoopery of the scholars  
 finally got to be too inane,  
 I rechristened the *Last Supper*  
 and named it  
*A Dîner at Herr Levi's.*

### IV

We'll see who can hold out longer.  
 For example my *St. Anne with Virgin and Child*.  
 Not an amusing subject.  
 Nevertheless, under the throne,  
 on the splendidly figured marble floor,  
 in sand rose, black, and malachite  
 I painted, to rescue the whole,  
 a green sea turtle with rolling eyes,  
 delicate feet, a back  
 of half-transparent tortoiseshell:  
 a wonderful idea.  
 Like a giant, artfully arched comb,  
 topaz-hued, gleaming in the sun.

V

When I saw it crawling,  
my enemies crossed my mind.  
I heard the gabbling of the gallerists,  
the tittering of the drawing teachers,  
and the belching of the know-it-alls.  
I took my brush in hand  
and sepulchered the creature,  
before the parasites could start  
explaining to me what it means,  
under meticulously painted tiles  
of black, green, and rose marble.  
The *St. Anne* is not my most famous,  
but perhaps my best piece.  
No one but me knows why.

## CANTO EIGHT

Salt water in the tennis courts! Why yes, that is irritating,  
 but wet feet are a far cry from doomsday.  
 People always crow too soon about a downfall,  
 like suicides who seek an alibi, and thereby  
 lose sight of the details, lose their nerve.  
 Who likes drowning, and in three degrees below freezing at that?  
 If the passengers' judgment in the moment of crisis  
 turns out to be less restrained than would be desirable,  
 oh well! After all, I myself am sitting here, shivering  
 on this godforsaken steamer, albeit in first class  
 and over a vintage port which, incidentally, is remarkable.

But let us suppose that the *Titanic* should in fact go under,  
 which I personally hold to be impossible – I'm an engineer  
 and my imagination is not all that robustly developed –  
 so what? What comes of it? As a matter of pure statistics,  
 there may at any given moment be a few dozen ships in distress,  
 and no one gives two hoots about them, namely because they're called *Rosalinda II*  
 or *Splendid Prospect*, and not *Titanic*! Conversely: think on the tens  
 of thousands of vessels underway on all oceans of the world, who will,  
 even if *we* drown, reach their destinations punctually and unaffected.

Apart from that, every innovation traces its roots to catastrophe:  
 new tools, theories, and sentiments – one calls it evolution.  
 And so I say: Even if we presume, for the fun of it,  
 that all ships were to sink on one and the same day,  
 then we would have to dream up something else:  
 enormous sky yachts, trained whales, iron clouds.  
 Or live stationary lives. The trees have done that for some time,  
 evidently with success. And should we come up with nothing –  
 whole other lifeforms have, after all, died out,  
 I daresay to our advantage. Where would we be today  
 if the flying lizards and mighty dinosaurs had not at some point



bumped into certain problems that their brains couldn't readily sort out. Do you see?

I thereby deduce that it's fruitless to observe each and every incident that one happens to encounter, such as, for example, one's own death, from too narrow a point of view. With that I tell you, as port-wine-drinker and engineer, naturally nothing new, and so I'll go down.

## CANTO NINE

These foreigners, who had their pictures taken  
 on the sugar fields of the Orient, knives raised  
 high, hair matted, cotton shirts stiff  
 with syrup and sweat: superfluous people!  
 In the bowels of the capital the old miseries  
 were rotting calmly on, it stunk of  
 old urine and old servitude, the tap  
 was already dry in the early afternoon,  
 the flame died out on the stove, the walls  
 crumbled, there was no fresh milk, "the People"  
 stood evenings patiently in line for a pizza,  
 while in the Hotel Nacional, terrace to the sea,  
 where earlier gangsters had dined, the senators,  
 with blue-feathered striptease dancers  
 on their plump knees, haggled over their baksheesh:  
 now there sat a pair of old Parisian Trotskyists  
 tossing around bread rolls and quotes  
 from Engels and Freud, "comfortably subversive".

*Cena 14 de abril 1969*  
 (Año del Guerrillero Heróico)  
 Cóctel de langostinos  
 Consomé Tapioca  
 Lomo a la parrilla  
 Ensalada de berro  
 Helados

Later there appeared in black and white on the promenade deck  
 a few gamblers in tuxedos from the salon, the ladies  
 in pearled robes, one saw others in bathrobes, brought out  
 by curiosity, throwing around chunks of ice shortly before midnight  
 in an old Hollywood film. It was hot and sticky.  
 The suburban movie theater on the Calzada de San Miguel  
 teemed with half-naked children who snickered as they  
 somersaulted over the grimy seats. The picture was murky,  
 rainy, the audio scratchy: a brittle copy.  
 Over the snow-white deck hopped Barbara Stanwyck  
 with Clifton Webb, the frames danced, and punctually  
 as ever, out of necessity, chaos ensued.  
 Don't forget the revolver, remember the emeralds,  
 the bread and butter, the manuscript. You take the bible  
 and you the little tin pig  
 that plays *Maxixe* when you wind its tail,  
 your little pig of colored tin, don't forget it.

Delegations. Mulattas. Commandants. In the dining hall  
as ever, the hungry poets from Paraguay  
bickering with the Trotskyists in a cloud of cigar smoke,  
and out on the fire escape, humming quiet rumbas,  
the police informants and the nondescript Czechs  
with their slimy watches and exchanges.

The noise hits you like a fist, then comes  
the terror. Your assailed ear doesn't catch it,  
you feel it with your feet: the hull roars,  
the steam bellows from the funnels,  
the boilers are doused. Then the water-tight compartments  
are sealed, all machines stopped. How still it is now,  
all at once, so still, like a hotel room  
at four in the morning, when you leap suddenly out of sleep  
and listen. No sign of life. Even the refrigerator  
is silent. You would even welcome a break-in,  
a search of your home, a cracking in the radiator.  
Never again will it be so dry and still as now.

*Internal Security*

I'm trying to lift the lid,  
logically, the lid  
that seals my box.  
It isn't a coffin, no not that,  
it's just a package, a cabin,  
in a word, a box.

Oh you all know exactly what I mean,  
when I say *box*,  
don't play dumb,  
I mean only  
a completely ordinary box,  
not a bit darker than yours.

Well I want out, I knock,  
I hammer against the lid,  
I cry *More light*, I struggle  
for breath, logically,  
I thunder against the hatch. Good.

But in the interest of security,  
my box, it doesn't open,  
my shoebox has a lid,  
the lid is, however, rather heavy,  
for reasons of security,  
because we are dealing with  
a container here, with an Ark of the Covenant,  
with a safe. I can't do it.

The liberation can, logically,  
only come off with collective effort.  
But in the interest of security, I am  
in my box all by myself,  
in my very own box.

To each his due! In order to escape  
with collective effort from the box,  
I would, logically, already have to be  
out of my own box,  
and that holds true, logically, for everyone.

So I brace myself against the lid  
with my own neck. Now!  
A crack splits! Ah! Outside,  
glorious, the vast landscape,

covered with bushes, canisters,  
in short, with boxes, behind it  
the eager, rolling green tides,  
furrowed with seafaring suitcases,  
the tremendously high clouds above,  
and everywhere, everywhere air!

*Let me out, I cry,*  
flagging, against my better judgment,  
tongue dry, covered in sweat.  
To cross myself, out of the question.  
To wave, won't work, no free hand.  
To ball my fist, impossible.

And so I shout, *I express*  
*my deep regret, woe is me!,*  
*my own regret,*  
while with a dull *thud*  
the lid, once again,  
as a security measure,  
closes over me.

## CANTO TEN

That, then, is the table where they sat.  
 You see from outside, through the porthole, B.  
 in the smoking lounge, a Russian emigrant,  
 as he, gesticulating, shrouded  
 in blue clouds from fine cigars,  
 Cuban, Partagas brand, handmade,  
 perfectly happy, lost in thought,  
 at the green table, with no regard at all  
 for icebergs shipwrecks deluges,  
 preaches to a small flock of hairdressers,  
 gamblers, telegraphers  
 about the revolution. You see all this,  
 but you cannot hear it,  
 because the thick curved glass,  
 in which brass is reflected,  
 seals out all sound. You hear  
 nothing, and yet you understand  
 what he is getting at, and you understand  
 that he is right, even if it is perhaps  
 too late to be right.

But now you notice at the next table  
 another gentleman, who rises full  
 of ire. A textile magnate  
 from Manchester, who has to restrain himself  
 when he hears this nonsense. Stridently  
 he expounds the merits of strict discipline,  
 the necessity of authority.  
 It must be absolute, he says  
 with trembling mustache, it must be ironclad,  
 especially on board a ship.  
 Naturally you cannot follow  
 his reasoning, because you cannot hear.  
 But just look at how they crane their necks,  
 those gamblers and telegraphers,  
 as if watching a tennis match!

Everybody would love to be saved,  
 you as well. But is that not too much  
 to ask? The match  
 remains undecided. No one  
 spotted the two men  
 in any of the lifeboats, no one

ever heard from them again.  
Only the table, the empty table,  
still drifts about the Atlantic.

*The Postponement*

During the famous eruption of Helgafell, a volcano on the island of Heimaey, broadcast live by a dozen coughing TV crews, I saw, under the sulfur rain, an old man in suspenders, shrugging and paying no mind to storm winds, heat, cameramen, ash, spectators (I among them, in front of the blue glare from the screen on my rug), garden hose in hand, thin but plainly visible, advancing on the lava, until finally neighbors, soldiers, schoolchildren, yes even firemen, all with hoses, more and more hoses, erected a wall against the hot, relentlessly progressing lava, piling up wet congealed cold lava higher and higher, and so, admittedly ashgray and not for good, but for the time being, postponed the decline of Western civilization in such a way that, provided they're not dead, the people of Heimaey, an island not far from Iceland, still to this day wake up mornings in their colorful little wooden houses, and afternoons, unobserved by cameras, water their garden lettuce, lava-manured and huge-headed, only temporarily, of course, yet without panic.



## CANTO ELEVEN

Let us out  
We're choking in here  
The cattle car is rolling  
The shelves are shaking  
The coffin's gurgling  
We're fighting on the stairs  
We're drumming on the wood  
We're pushing in the doors  
Let us out  
There are too many  
Our numbers only grow  
the longer we fight  
over some foot-wide floor  
over a plank a board  
We're too close to one another  
to delouse to nurse  
to club each other  
The pickpocket drops  
his squished hand  
the murderer his knife  
We're choking each other  
The pressurized rage  
is shredding its own flesh  
and collapses  
There are too many of us  
horribly many  
We're trampling  
the trampled  
one mushy mass  
A panic pudding  
that smells of fear

acrid and verminous  
we're swelling and sinking  
and plummet like sacks.

## CANTO TWELVE

From this point on everything proceeds as planned.  
The steel hull ceases to vibrate, the machines  
lie still, the fires are long since doused.  
What's going on? Why aren't we moving? They listen.  
Out in the corridor rosaries are murmured.  
The sea is sleek, black, glassy, the night moonless.  
Oh it's nothing! Nothing is broken on board,  
not a vase nor champagne glass. They wait  
in small groups, wordless, pace up and down  
in furs, in dressing gowns, in overalls, they comply.  
Now ropes are unfurled, tarps pulled  
off lifeboats, davits swung out. It is  
as if the passengers have swallowed pills. This man for example,  
dragging his cello behind him over the endless deck,  
you can hear the spike scratch along the planks,  
incessantly scratching, scratching, and you wonder: but  
just how is it possible? – Oh! look! a flare!  
But it's only a frail hiss, already fizzled out  
against the sky, reflecting in faces bluish and blank.  
Elevator operators, masseuses, and bakers standing still in rows.  
On the *California*, an old skiff twelve miles away,  
the wireless operator rolls over in bed and falls asleep.  
Attention attention! Women and children first! – And why exactly?  
Answer: We are prepared to go down like gentlemen. –  
Just as well. – Sixteen hundred stay behind. The quiet on board  
is inconceivable. – The captain is speaking. It is exactly  
two o'clock, and I order: every man for himself! – Music!  
Cuing the last number, the bandleader raises his baton.

## CANTO THIRTEEN

The gale force winds blow cold and hard,  
 the ship rocks back and forth;  
     Angels, so fair and bright,  
     beckon from holy heights  
             We cannot see a single star,  
             the wild sea aroar!

I sank so deep in grief and woe,  
 and all at once my pride deceased  
     Then I always think:  
     It is all over  
     I am so alone..  
                     drowned as in the Flood of old,  
                     my weary soul seeks for its peace.

Yes but then  
 I got used to it  
 And I realized:  
     Should I be chased by agony,  
     should one threaten me,  
     e'en though it be a cross that raiseth me  
     still my song shall be:  
             Not even that can shake  
             a seaman,  
             have no fear, have no fear,  
             Rosmarie!

Though like the wanderer,  
 the sun gone down,  
 Darkness be over me,  
 my rest a stone:  
     That is not the end of the world  
     although it may at times be doom and gloom  
             Is the path to You  
             veiled to me,  
 one day the colors will return,  
 one day the sky will again be blue!  
     my wish will be fulfilled:  
     nearer to Thee!  
             It has its ups and has its downs  
             and so, too, our skulls do smoke,  
 and when the earth will heave and quake,  
 and the world is set aflame..  
     then the night has passed,  
     the sun will shine,  
     out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise,

with my waking thoughts bright with Thy praise:  
 We won't let life  
 get us down,  
 have no fear, have no fear,  
 Rosemarie!

So will end my pilgriming,  
 cleaving the sky on joyful wing, :  
 That is not the end of the world,  
 for it we still have need,  
 for it we still,  
 for it we still,  
 for it we still,  
 for it we still,  
 for it we still,  
 have need.

"Nearer, My God, to Thee" by Sarah Flower Adams (ca. 1840)  
 "God of Mercy and Compassion" by Edmund Vaughan (ca. 1880)  
 "Autumn" by H. F. Lyte (ca. 1910)  
 "Dass kann doch einen Seemann nicht erschüttern" by Bruno Balz (1939)  
 "Davon geht die Welt nicht unter" by Bruno Balz (1942)

## CANTO FOURTEEN

It's not like a slaughter or like a bomb;  
 Sure, no one is bleeding, no one is torn to pieces;  
 it's only that there's more and more,  
 that it's spreading to every corner, everything swells and curls;  
 it's forming tiny beads, runnels; it's such  
 that it soaks your shoe soles, that it's  
 seeping into your cuffs, making your collar  
 damp against your neck; it's licking at your glasses,  
 rilling into the safes, forming musty flakes  
 on the stucco ceiling rosettes; it is namely,

that everything smells of its scentless scent;  
 that it trickles, spurts, streams, sprays,  
 not one after the other, but blindly all over,  
 that it's making the zwieback soggy, the felt hat, the underwear,  
 that it's rubbing sweaty and shallow on the rims of the wheelchair,  
 that it's standing in the urinals, brackish, and brooding in the  
 ovens; then it just lies there again, wet, dark,  
 quiet, unmoving, and simply climbs, slowly, slow,  
 lifting up small items, playthings, valuables,  
 bottles full of revolting fluids,  
 floating them off, thoughtlessly, washing them trundling away,  
 rubber things, dead, broken things; keeps going

until you yourself feel it, in your ribcage,  
 how it, pressing and salty, patiently butts in,  
 how it, cold and nonviolent, first meets  
 the back of your knees, then your hips, your nipples,  
 your collarbone; until you're up to your neck in it,  
 until you're drinking it, until you feel it seeking innards,  
 windpipe, womb, how the water  
 is searching thirstily for the mouth;  
 how it wants to fill everything,  
 to be swallowed, and to swallow.

## CANTO FIFTEEN

Over dessert we asked him whether it all didn't bother him,  
 the inky black, sopping profundity of his metaphors,  
 these manners and meanings are passé,  
 the vogue, we said, is uncompromising, in art as well,  
 too much is too much, and besides, we don't get  
 what Cuba has got to do with it, Cuba's an *idée fixe*.  
 And where – literally – are you going with these fairy tales  
 about painting, about Gordon Pym, Bakunin, and Dante?

You're the ones, he screamed and threw around meat and bread,  
 who scoop up every whiff, who mash everything down, who grind out  
 meanings with your carving knives –  
 but not I, he fumed, I paint myself into a corner,  
 I stutter, I mangle, I mix, I contaminate,  
 but I swear to you: this ship is a ship! –  
 now he was beside himself – and the torn canvas –  
 nearly singing this now – symbolizes the torn canvas,  
 I say! nothing more and nothing less, and so you all know:  
 I'm just like it, I'm just like that scrap of cloth  
 stretched to the breaking point. And he tore the cloth from our table.

But you've gone overboard, we contended, overboard  
 and mad! At that he stood up. I don't discuss, he said low,  
 I teach. He stood up and composed himself to go.  
 We would have loved to plunge the breadknife out of anger  
 into his back. But he turned around in the doorway  
 and started in once again: you forget (with a note of contempt),  
 I, too, have eaten human flesh, just like you  
 and like Gordon Pym! I've heard the old anarchist rattle  
 next door on his filthy pillow while I embraced  
 his wife, smiling. You can't fool me! You lot  
 least of all. And besides (he'd go and not go),  
 how am I to blame? I wasn't the one to spin this tale

of the Sinking Ship, which is both a ship and not a ship;  
the madman who thinks he's Dante is in fact Dante himself;  
surely there is always a passenger of that name on board;  
there are no metaphors. You do not know what you're talking about.

That's mad! we screamed (mad) in a jumble,  
that's not a poem! that's a pastiche! Then at last he went  
and left for good, and we looked each other and looked at our paring knives  
and wondered whether there are metaphors with such keen edges.  
Then we picked at our Kaiser pears and apricots.



## CANTO SIXTEEN

The wreck of *Titanic* is on record.

It is a gift to poets.

It guarantees significant tax benefits from loss allocations.

It is further testimony to the veracity of the theses of Vladimir Illyich Lenin.

It airs during primetime.

It is priceless.

It is inevitable.

It is better than nothing.

It is closed on Mondays.

It is environmentally friendly.

It paves the way to a brighter future.

It is art.

It creates jobs.

It gets on our nerves bit by bit.

It is protected by law.

It is anchored in the masses.

It comes right on cue.

It works.

It is a spectacle of breathtaking beauty.

It should give those responsible pause.

It is not what it used to be.

## CANTO SEVENTEEN

We're sinking silently. The water is still as bathwater,  
standing in the resplendent Palm Courts,  
tennis courts, foyers, and is mirrored in the mirrors.  
Inky black minutes, frozen as in gelatin.  
No fighting, no quarrels. Hushed dialogues.  
Please, after you. Say hello to the kids for me. Don't catch a cold.  
In the boats you can even hear the creaking of the ropes  
and see the phosphorescent droplets on the rudder blade,  
which in slow-motion emerges from the sea, falling back into the sea.  
Only at the very end – the dark bow upheaved itself,  
jutting plumb from the soundless depths as an absurd tower,  
the lights extinguished in the hull, no one checks the time –  
an unspeakable sound shatters through the glassy calm:  
"It was a groaning, no, a clattering, a roaring,  
a rolling suite of blows, as if many tons of matter  
were pitched down into a pit inside a vaulted space,  
these unthinkably heavy things falling and dashing  
everything to bits. It was a sound that had never before  
been heard by human ears, and which none of us, so long as we live,  
wish to ever hear again." From this moment on,  
there was no longer a ship. What followed were the screams.

*Cold Comfort*

The struggle of all against all is,  
 as reported by circles  
 close to the Interior Ministry,  
 soon to be nationalized,  
 down to the very last blood stain.  
 Best regards from Hobbes.

Civil war with uneven weaponry:  
 one man's tax return  
 is another's bicycle chain.  
 The poisoner and the arsonist  
 will have to form a union  
 to protect their jobs.

The correctional institutions accept it all  
 with open arms and minds.  
 Washable, wrapped in black plastic,  
 Kropotkin lies on display for study:  
*System of Mutual Aid*  
*in Nature*. Cold comfort.

Much to our regret, we've learned  
 that there is no justice,  
 and to still deeper regret  
 that, as the mindful circles ensure  
 rubbing their hands, nothing of the sort  
 neither can, nor should, nor will ever again exist.

Now as ever it's debatable who or what  
 is to blame. Is it original sin  
 or genetics? upbringing?  
 a lack of emotional development?

bad diet? the Father of Lies?  
the patriarchy? capital?

That we unfortunately cannot stop  
defiling one another,  
nailing one another to the first available crossroads  
and eating the remains, it would be nice  
to find an explanation for it all,  
balsam for our Reason.

To be sure, the day-to-day atrocity does disturb us,  
but nevertheless comes as little surprise.  
What *does* strike us as puzzling is  
the tacit helping hand,  
the groundless good nature,  
so, too, the sweet English temper.

Well then, high time for our fiery tongues  
to praise the server who listens  
for hours on end to the tirades of the impotent;  
to praise the compassion of the biscuit salesman  
who, shortly before the mortal blow,  
tosses out the payment summons;

as well as the priggish woman, who,  
startlingly, hides away the breathless  
deserter pounding at her door;  
and the kidnapper, who suddenly gives up  
his wild work with a dull,  
contented smile, ready to drop;

and we lay aside the newspaper  
and shrug our shoulders, glad  
as when the tear-jerker is happily over,  
when the lights come on in the theater, and outside  
the rain has stopped, then at last  
the first drag blooms from our cigarette.

## CANTO EIGHTEEN

Thereupon they rowed, said the white voice,  
just as fast as they could row, away  
from the sleek and inscrutable spot  
where *Titanic* dove below, yet  
they could not escape the screams. Among  
these screams, each was distinct  
from the other, the shrill shriek of fear  
from the hoarse bellow, the piercing pleas  
clearly distinct from the choking sobs,  
and so on, the voice went steadily on,  
and so forth, and they were not few,  
the screams, but a thousand. Consider, too,  
that the sea was calm, there was no wind,  
the voices, said the voice, carried very far,  
they were very clear, and so it was said  
in the boat, we must turn back, there is still room,  
said some, under no circumstances, they will  
cling to every plank, said others,  
and drown us all screaming with them, and so  
they fought on and onward rowed, until finally  
after a very long hour, said the voice  
tonelessly, the voices died down, only a stray,  
weak cough now and then,  
a barely audible, animal wheeze, which  
readily sank into the dark.

*Further Reasons Why Poets Lie*

Because the moment  
in which the word *happy*  
is pronounced  
is never the happy moment.  
Because he who's dying of thirst cannot  
bring his thirst to pass his lips.  
Because in the mouths of the proletariat  
the word *proletariat* doesn't appear.  
Because he who despairs  
doesn't feel like saying:  
"I am one who despairs."  
Because orgasm and *orgasm*  
are incompatible with each other.  
Because he who's dying, rather than claiming:  
"I am dying now,"  
only lets out a dim sound,  
which we do not understand.  
Because it is the living  
who hound the dead  
with their ghastly news.  
Because the words come too late  
or too early.  
Because it someone else,  
always someone else,  
who is speaking,  
and because he,  
of whom we speak,  
is silent.

## CANTO NINETEEN

A man lay in the water on a plank,  
on a wooden board, on a table,  
no, it was a door to which he hung,  
swaying up and down, and now and then  
something icy broke over him,  
but did not devour him. He saw nothing,  
no one saw his eyes, he lay there, small,  
his small face pressed against the plank,  
stretched out, as if a larger hand  
had nailed him to the door. Truly, only the dead  
look so small. Something was shouted to him  
from a boat passing by at that moment, but  
he gave no answer. Because he is dead, said some,  
nonetheless there were others who wanted to help him.  
It was the old fight. Past him  
they rowed, fought, and turned back.  
They dragged him overboard and loosened the knots  
of hinges and handles with which he had  
crucified himself. It's a child!  
shouted some and laid him on his back  
and rubbed his hands, but he was  
Japanese. He opened his eyes  
and began to speak in his language,  
and only a few minutes had passed  
before he sprang up, stretched his arms high,  
hopped, stomped, teetered, grabbed the oars,  
and rowed till daybreak, stroke  
after stroke, chirping without cease.  
He was neither dead, nor the Messiah,  
and no one understood a word of what he said.

## CANTO TWENTY-ONE

Afterwards, naturally, everyone had seen it coming,  
just not we, the dead. Afterwards, it teemed  
with clues, screen adaptations, and rumors.  
Dog racing, it was suddenly now said, would have  
been arranged on C-Deck, against all  
customs; iron rabbits, brightly painted  
and propelled by a clever contraption,  
would have illicitly spurred on black  
and white piebald greyhounds; and many a passenger  
of lesser means would have squandered his  
last guinea on this dreary sport; to say nothing  
of the cracked ship's bell, of the Bordeaux  
at the christening, Château Larose eighty-eight,  
rotten in the bottle, of the puzzling  
behavior of the rats in Queenstown, the last harbor,  
and of the hushed up rampage in the ship's chapel.  
Every coincidence is ominous, every vice ineffable.  
Only: What could we have done? What did we know about any of it,  
about the whipped duchesses under the card table,  
about the corrupted ship boys, about the cries for help  
of underage girls through the vents,  
and about the hermaphrodites, exhibiting their orifices  
in the Turkish baths? Sure, now, when it's too late!  
Now everyone claims to have heard an organ,  
untouched by any mortal hand, playing unholy  
ditties for nights on end, a last warning  
to us all. Simply put: divine Nemesis!  
The penultimate words of a portly gentleman,  
for instance, opposite a portly gentleman,  
unwittingly pronounced shortly after departure:  
Not even God himself could sink  
this ship – we didn't hear them. We  
are dead. We knew nothing at all.



*Stay Calm*

At times, if not often, you see in the snow  
during winter rabbit hunts or, shortly before Easter,  
through the half-open window of the sleeping car  
as day breaks outside, on barn roofs,  
coal piles, Bismarck towers in mixed forests,  
small swarms of black-clad people  
led by a prophet, metal-rimmed glasses  
atop flared nostrils, poised in steady  
expectation of doomsday. While the rest of us,  
engrossed in our weighty trifles,  
presume the Deluge in the furthest perfect tense  
or else regard it as a venerable hoax,  
they know, lurking on their perch, down to the very minute  
When. They have cancelled their cable service in good time,  
cleaned out their refrigerators so nothing spoils,  
and readied their souls. Their little voices  
drift into our ears, jarringly thin, over reallocated lands,  
congested freeways, the cool meadows ripe for development:  
Nearer, my God, to Thee. Of course in the long run  
it will be tough to avoid that this or that  
person will check the time and halt;  
that the prophet's high and admonishing arm will fall limp;  
and that while the sky clears the express train will rattle by,  
the stockpiles and slag heaps will dwindle, the snow will melt,  
and the rabbits will roam into the oven. One  
after another they will rappel down into the lowly day-to-day  
amid the mocking applause of society,  
reopen their checking accounts, buy a watering can,  
brace themselves for the inevitable vacation.  
In light of the general terms and conditions  
and the dirty wash, even the prophet  
must make certain concessions, but he remains steadfast  
on the matter. His voice weak yet fixed, he says:

Those are all just formalities. Have patience!  
A few weeks or centuries here or there,  
what difference is that compared to eternity?  
As for him, he will, should it some day come to pass,  
be perfectly unsurprised. All along  
he had taken the position: It cannot  
go on like this! Serves us right!  
We brought it on ourselves! Had we only listened to him earlier!  
And so up on his barn roof, crowing undaunted,  
he feels that the end of the world is to be savored  
again and again like manna, and, no matter how delayed,  
that it is a sort of calmative, a sweet comfort  
for bleak prospects, for hair loss, and for wet feet.

## CANTO TWENTY-TWO

Far out in the gulf, in the velvety darkness,  
I saw the spotlights of a destroyer play across the water.  
It's snowing in my head. The old Havana  
breathed heavy and went without shame to the dogs.  
The nights were tender. Back then I went  
to the suburban cinemas, to the posadas,  
to the gangster cafés with their empty bars.  
Behind the graveyard wall, in the scrawny shrubs,  
rustled groping couples. I was not  
a good comrade. Instead of writing about the sugar,  
about the socialism on an island,  
I fished dead survivors and the dead dead,  
nonpartisan and half a century too late,  
out of the black water. I looked them in their eyes  
and recognized them all: Gordon Pym,  
the wordless stoker Jerome, Miss Taussig,  
Guggenheim (copper and tin), Engels (textiles),  
Ilmari Alhomaki, Dante – I was freezing, I was afraid,  
but nonetheless I knew them them, by their fingernails,  
their secrets, their hats, their desires –  
I made out their cries of fear  
in the tropical night, in the moonlight I saw  
what they clutched in clammy fists: wax paper  
roses, wrought-iron keys, an empty page.  
With my back to the future I read  
floor plans and statistics, and everywhere  
it read the same: We're all in the same boat,  
yet: He who's poor goes under quicker.

	1st Class	2nd Class	Steerage	Crew	Total
Embarked	325	285	1,316	885	2,201
Rescued	203	118	499	212	711
Lost	122	167	817	673	1,490

The slight sound, with which it all began,  
was not hard to describe.

Nonetheless, how it went on, I didn't know.

Berlin sank imperceptibly in snow, in isolation.

The sea rested gently before the Malecón, oily and nowhere.

*Epistemological Model*

Here you have  
a big box  
labeled  
box.  
When you open it,  
you find inside  
a box  
labeled  
box  
from a box  
labeled  
box.  
When you open it –  
I mean this  
box now,  
not that one –  
you find inside  
a box  
labeled  
and so on,  
and when you  
go on in this way,  
you find  
after infinite efforts  
an infinitely small  
box  
with so small  
a label,  
that it evaporates,  
as it were,  
before your eyes.  
It is a box

that only exists in your  
imagination.

A perfectly empty  
box.

## CANTO TWENTY-THREE

Inconsistencies! he cried, versions! Uncertainty!  
 The death toll, for instance: 1,635?  
 1,715? 1,490? He had pushed his way forward,  
 he had grabbed hold of the microphone,  
 he had asked: But just what, dear audience,  
 ladies and gentlemen, what are we to believe?  
 He was a poet, he was muscular, he shoved  
 the others aside, who were likewise poets,  
 more or less, and he roared: O empiricism!  
 I'm losing my mind! O eternal quarrel  
 of the specialists! Woe are the expert witnesses!  
 Alas! Bibliographers, how your wails do wake my pity!  
 You, too, will go under, yet none  
 of you will ever merit any serious research,  
 and so without glory you will sink, amen! – No way!  
 howled another from the pack. Believe me,  
 he cried and tugged at the cord  
 until the other let the microphone go, they all  
 believed only what had been in the papers  
 the other day, even the witnesses, the victims  
 didn't trust their own senses, and we, too,  
 tell ourselves: it must have been like in the movies!  
 Now a couple of very strong poets occupied  
 the stage as a collective, hooked together arm in arm,  
 their elbows jutting out –  
 So welcome, then, rumors, legends,  
 lies as well! they sang in chorus, the more brazen  
 the better, give it here! Order in the court! Prithee,  
 a round of applause for Edward J. Smith, our captain,  
 white-bearded, thirty-eight years in service,  
 disregarding all wireless warnings,  
 holding full speed ahead, straight into the iceberg,  
 bribed by greedy shipowners in order to arrive

in record time, and now: Be British! he bellows  
 before sticking the barrel in his mouth!  
 Bravo! What's a poet worth who doesn't gulp  
 the salty broth, who doesn't lick  
 the beads of water from the iron wall,  
 who isn't pierced to the core by the clammy sweat,  
 by the drizzling sog of history?  
 Verily verily I say unto you: Order in the court!  
 Fanfare! For the Countess of Rothes in her nightgown,  
 fanfare! For the witch, the suffragette,  
 the unbridled tribade in the lifeboat  
 she has commandeered, fanfare!  
 proclaiming matriarchal rule! Fanfare  
 for the officers, uselessly drunk,  
 staggering down the gangway, emptying  
 their pistols into the mob that's welling  
 up from steerage: Ithacans, Jews, camel drivers,  
 and Polacks! All will heed my command!  
 A horde of stokers black in the face  
 are driven back into the engine room,  
 flooded long before by the inky, sloshing water,  
 while some mere four miles away  
 aboard his floating death trap, Captain Lord,  
 leaning nonchalantly on the railing, beside shut down  
 machinery, sends the radioman to his cabin  
 so he can relish the distress signals undisturbed,  
 and the death cries. Fanfare! My lovelies,  
 there is always someone who simply stands back  
 with the famous twitch at the corner of his mouth,  
 someone who doesn't act, who has his own thoughts on the matter.  
 The poets clamored, demanded, conceded:  
 a horde which could no longer be contained.  
 Stop him, they shouted, stop the millionaire  
 disguised as a woman, shrouded in a giant turban,  
 stealing into the last lifeboat  
 before the ship bursts into a thousand shards.  
*Nearer, my God, to whom, plays the band,*



no, they're playing ragtime, "Was ich noch  
zu sagen hätte, dauert eine Zigarette," no,  
*God of Mercy and Compassion*, they played  
nothing of the sort, there was no band,  
there was nothing to hear, not a word,  
there was no one there to play just one fanfare,  
one single fanfare, ladies and gentlemen,  
for you, for the poets, for us.

*Booking*

This is not Dante.

This is a photograph of Dante.

This is a film in which an actor appears who pretends to be Dante.

This is a film in which Dante plays Dante.

This is a man who dreams of Dante.

This is a man who's name is Dante but is not Dante.

This is a man who apes Dante.

This is a man who is posing as Dante.

This is a man who dreams he is Dante.

This is a man who is a carbon copy of Dante.

This is a wax figure of Dante.

This is a changeling of Dante, a twin, a doppelgänger.

This is a man who considers himself Dante.

This is a man whom all but Dante consider to be Dante.

This is a man whom all consider to be Dante, except for he himself.

This is a man whom all but Dante consider to be Dante.

This is Dante.

## CANTO TWENTY-FOUR

In the early morning of the journey's second day, the guards  
 found tents on the promenade deck. What sort of tents are these?  
 Who pitched them? Where did these people come from?  
 Faces of light olive, of dark ochre,  
 many even allege that they were painted like barbarians.  
 Sailors armed with boarding axes chased them off in a hurry,  
 but they came again overnight and in greater numbers.  
 A muttoney stench issued through the hatches, white smoke  
 born of charcoal fires, ash everywhere, women  
 with coiled gold armlets emerged  
 in motley patches and with little mirrors on their breasts,  
 naked children somersaulted over the bannisters,  
 ramparts, barriers, old men in white pants  
 attired in big turbans sat in silence  
 gathered around waterpipes behind the radio room  
 with sabers on their belts, or rather silver daggers  
 and crooked knives. On the sun deck you could see,  
 between the boats, veiled ladies promenading  
 dressed all in white, and gentlemen in burnouses. Suddenly  
 the sound of cymbals in the air. I beg your pardon?  
 Yes, cymbals! In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean,  
 not far from the great banks of Newfoundland, the cymbals resounded.

The purser couldn't account for a shred  
 of these appearances. Ah but I,  
 shouted Salomon P., the salon painter, I know them!  
 I recognize them! They are nomads,  
 they're coming from my painting in the palm hall,  
 the images are spilling over. I drink too much,  
 you see, my hand is trembling. Still, the nomads  
 call after me: My picture, that is me! – Never again  
 will I paint. Don't turn around, ladies  
 and gentlemen. I am scared of their knives.

Yes, said John Jacob Astor, I see them, too.  
Then they swarmed over the whole ship. They lit  
torches. There was incomprehensible screaming.  
They had camels with them, whose swaying shadows  
eclipsed the brass sheen of the fittings.  
Then suddenly, on the morning of April the fourteenth,  
they had all disappeared. They left behind nothing  
but a desert odor and the dung of their beasts.

*The Rape of Zuleika. Netherlandish, End of the 19th Century*

There he stands, small, gray, and crooked, glass in hand,  
 shortly before Easter, leaned against the iron railing  
 with his back to the street as if it were a sea,  
 in front of his house on the Prinsengracht  
 – above the stairs, which are small, gray, and crooked,  
 there waves a flag of old genever,  
 for he drinks more than is good for his hand –  
 and drinking, he cracks jokes about growing old  
 and looks past the very young Muslim girl  
 whose eyes he needs, whom he, Solomon Pollack,  
 tells of his picture, of which he never,  
 not even when drunk, loses sight.

To the left, he says, you see the Rape of Zuleika.  
 Here, behind the high wall, in the garden,  
 under mimosa trees and palms, at the fountain,  
 where gigantic lilies – inconceivable,  
 how high these flowers have grown! –  
 exude their aroma, innocent, white,  
 narcotic, lascivious; here, my beauty, here lies  
 the daughter of the sultan, adorned  
 with all the attributes of pomp and sensuality,  
 pearls and dates. The dark hand  
 of a eunuch fans her with a frond.  
 Until at last he steps out from the shade of the plants,  
 the dusty bearer,  
 and reveals himself to be a prince  
 by his talisman of leek green jasper  
 and the tamed falcon accompanying him.

Believe me, there are no old masters.  
 This I know. For thirty years I was one  
 of those who could do it all:

half alchemist and half carpenter,  
 the best among the restorers.  
 With painstaking scruple and the aid  
 of resin, wax, and spittle  
 I “depicted” Lost Paradise for the people,  
 I reproduced virgins, shipwrecks, Last Judgements,  
 whether Persian, Flemish, or Florentine,  
 recreating what never existed  
 with spatula, scalpel, and sponge:  
 a faithful forger, whose daily bread  
 was the past, there exists no better.  
 It is my work, the apple of my eye,  
 exhibited in the Rijksmuseum, a swindle,  
 sublime and touching, a world wonder,  
 a holy botchery.

Then in the middle, the celebration of the Bedouins.  
 The night, the desert, glisten with lances  
 and shotguns, with the lurid frippery  
 of the dancers, with clinking gold  
 earrings, and with the cymbals,  
 the droning cymbals and drums.  
 The rider there on the dappled gray,  
 in the torchlight, that is the emir’s son.  
 In his arm, the woman, half-veiled,  
 in zinc-white muslin relief,  
 she’s the plunder. Her teeth, it’s said,  
 shimmer like hailstones, her lips  
 like carnelians, she was redolent of spikenard,  
 of ambergris, aloe, cinnamon. So it is said.  
 The horses whinny. Among the cries of warriors,  
 they hold a wedding.

With eyes closed I could see,  
 groping around the wood of the frame, the varnish,  
 scraping at the brittle canvas  
 with my x-ray fingers: I was infallible.

When you are shown the picture at long last,  
 rejuvenated and rectified, this gleaming patchwork  
 – after abrasion, caulking, retouch, my angel,  
 all by my hand – then you'll find  
 in the corner a small square, left open, spared,  
 where you behold the soil and soot  
 of centuries, the turbidity,  
 the rue of posterity, imperfect  
 and unredeemed.

In this murky vestige,  
 which betrays me and my maneuvers,  
 I have often sunken myself.

And finally the revenge, on the right.  
 See the long shadows of the riders  
 in the early light, outside the city ramparts,  
 the tent of the grand vizier trimmed  
 with sequins glittering in the sun.  
 See the vultures high in the thin air,  
 the muskrats in the thicket, and the camels  
 on the trail, ruminating, serene.  
 See the hangman in black turban,  
 how he sticks his sword in its scabbard,  
 and there on the wooden stake:  
 the severed head! Do you not see it?  
 Do you see the sultan in his palanquin?  
 Do you not see how distracted he is,  
 how he is smiling, how he unwittingly  
 cracks open the poisoned book?

So I resolved, rather than disguise my hand,  
 I would paint "myself". Do you know what that means?  
 Sometimes I don't know it "myself".  
 That which I paint is awful.  
 My hand trembles. It isn't the brandy.  
 It isn't the fame. It is history,  
 with its endless feints and arts.

An eternal to and fro:  
It forges me, I forge it.  
Yes I, Salomon Pollock, who graces the walls  
with an Orient pulled out of thin air.  
A painter of drawing rooms. Yes, my odalisque,  
surely you're aware how eloquent I am  
with my lies. The truth,  
that dark window there in the corner,  
the truth is speechless.



## CANTO TWENTY-FIVE

The last boat, number C, type Engelhardt,  
 launched to starboard,  
 exact time: one forty-seven,  
 six-man crew.

Quartermaster G.T. Rowe  
 is in command, in addition to  
 pantryman Pearce, Weikman, a barber,  
 and three stokers. Passengers:  
 Gordon Pym, ghost by trade,  
 J.B. Ismay, Esq., KBE, FRGS,  
 owner of the steamship *Titanic*,  
 president of the White Star Line  
 of America, Inc., coward,  
 eyes like glass marbles,  
 pomade in hair. The rest,  
 women and children.  
 Total occupants: 35,  
 Special occurrences: none.

Only when day began to break,  
 when all around the icebergs surfaced  
 from the dawn, pink,  
 only when they believed to have seen  
 in the face of certain salvation  
 "flames of sun mirrored  
 in the panes of a hundred palaces" –  
 there awoke under the feet  
 of the thirty-five,  
 on the damp floor of the boat,  
 a bundle of slack stuff,  
 somethings stirring  
 in the dirty canvas,  
 something wet, ragged,  
 it came alive and spoke.  
 It was five Chinese,  
 five unknown Chinese.

And to this day no one knows  
 how they, without names, without money,  
 without papers, without a single word  
 of English, had gotten  
 on board *Titanic*,

when and how they had  
boarded the lifeboat,  
and what ever became of them.

*Research Association*

Oh prophets with your backs to the sea,  
 with your backs to the present, oh conjurers,  
 serene of soul, peering into the future,  
 oh shamans ever-leaning on the railing –  
 to leaf once through a paperback  
 is enough to grasp you!

Reading bones, stars, shards,  
 for the common good, reading entrails  
 for what has been and what will come –  
 Oh science! Blessed art thou,  
 blessed are thy rays of hope,  
 half-bluff and half-statistic: manners of death,  
 money supply targets, waxing entropy...

Carry on! These sulfur-yellow illuminations  
 are better than nothing, they amuse us  
 on steamy summer evenings:  
 bales of paper fresh from the computer,  
 samples, excavations, pointers  
 per the Delphi Method – bravo!

Blessed is the temporary!  
 Temporarily there is still enough water,  
 temporarily your skin breathes and listens closely,  
 your skin, my skin, – even yours,  
 you wooden medicine men, is still breathing,  
 irrespective of negotiations,  
 footnotes, and occupational hierarchy –  
 temporarily the end (“an incessant,  
 finely dispersed natural catastrophe”)  
 is not yet finalized – that’s just lovely!

And so on the weekend, dear confidant,  
– icebergs scattered before Newfoundland,  
summer storms over Europe,  
sulfurous on the steamy horizon –  
let's get the hell out of the institutes!  
A bit of living on the weekend,  
whatever that may mean, temporarily  
only, of course, and without prognostic worth.

Oh you eternal thirsters after insight,  
you draw my sympathy, how you then serenely  
uncouple your brains on the dacha,  
in the Irish farmhouse, on Korčula,  
with your backs to the sea – lest, of course,  
your torches go out during ping-pong!  
Just carry on! I bless you.

## CANTO TWENTY-SIX

178. *Exterior. Open sea.*

Scenic reproduction of the famous painting  
by Scott, from the London Academy  
(model). Broad, blue body of water.

Extreme long shot.

A half circle of icebergs  
in every imaginable color,  
radiant sunrise beyond.

Music.

Long shot.

The sea from iceberg's point of view.

Rear projection.

In the distance a small fleet  
of lifeboats becomes visible (models).

Slow approach.

Narrator (off camera):

The fifteenth of April 1912  
was a marvelous spring day.

Cut. Medium shot.

A lifeboat.

Camera at water level.

Pan up.

Narrator (off camera):

The first gulls  
from the banks of Newfoundland!

Heralds of salvation,  
of life!

Music swells (violins).

Fade.

On the darkening screen  
appears the word

END

## CANTO TWENTY-SEVEN

"In reality, nothing has happened."  
 The sinking of *Titanic* did not take place:  
 It was only a film, an omen, a hallucination.  
 "In reality" whist will be played after just as before,  
 and if not whist, then backgammon; in the smoking lounge  
 the cigar boxes, handmade in Cuba,  
 are still streaked by gold medallions;  
 over the entrance of the grand foyer, floating forever and ever,  
 Peace and Progress in bronze, refractory  
 and allegorical; the rich have remained the rich,  
 and Comandantes Comandantes; in the Turkish baths  
 Mrs. Maud Slocombe discharges her duties,  
 the first ship's masseuse in the world, inexhaustible;  
 everywhere chandeliers, palms, mirrors, and velvet drapes,  
 Louis XV, Louis XIV, until it makes you sick.  
 Naturally the personnel today have thirteenth month salary  
 and color TVs in their cabins; the steward's a Turk;  
 the nurse has a psychology degree; but otherwise?  
 The menus are still too long;  
 The newest thing is the Finish sauna on F-Deck,  
 where the Central Committee sweats and takes sweetener instead of  
 sugar in their tea.  
 The glaciologists have brought along a microcomputer,  
 which, under plexiglass and during the grand colloquium  
 on climate research, prints out iceberg simulations  
 for the next two hundred and fifty years.  
 The boutiques are, as usual, running a roaring trade  
 with *Titanic* ashtrays and *Titanic* T-shirts;  
 they're running *A Night to Remember* in the theater; the Happy Ending  
 is a dear convention, like bank heists,  
 like panel discussions about pension adjustments  
 and about socialism on one steamship.  
 Now and again there are the punctually progressing rolling strikes;  
 then the waiters lower the champagne bucket  
 and the pianist pauses in the middle of *Fantasia* in C minor.  
 Then, too, the gangsters and publishers halt;  
 the salon painters are annoyed; the military attachés  
 want to pay suddenly; everyone's laughing, they're all delighted.  
 "So," thinks the clever whore, "so ends the world,  
 amid the cheers of its wittiest minds, who'll think  
 it's all a joke." — Poets, too, will still be there!  
 In the Café Astor they sit, with self-service,  
 readily identifiable by their seasick looks;  
 they slurp cola with a shot out of plastic cups  
 and recall, as is proper, the guest workers,

the eskimos, and the Palestinians in steerage.  
The false poet nods to the steerage poet,  
the steerage poet to the real poet.  
Then each one finds their cabin, each one  
seats themself on their dry stool and writes,  
as if nothing had happened, on the dry sheet:  
"In reality, nothing has happened."

*Philosophy Department*

That we are sensible is true. But far  
from changing the world, we stand at the podium  
and pull rabbits from our brains, rabbits and doves,  
swarms of snow white doves crapping  
steadily on the books. That reason is reason  
and not reason; to understand this,  
you don't need to be Hegel, a glance  
in a pocket mirror suffices to that end. It shows us  
in little flowing blue coats embroidered  
with silver stars and a pointed hat  
on our heads. We assemble for the Hegel-Congress  
in the basement where the nominal members lie,  
unpack our crystal balls and horoscopes,  
and set to work. We brandish  
expert opinions, pendulums, research papers,  
we let the tables move, we ask:  
How real is that which is real? Hegel smiles  
with schadenfreude. We paint a mustache on him.  
He already looks like Stalin. The Congress  
dances. Far and wide no volcano. Inconspicuously  
the guards stand guard. Taking its time,  
cudgel in the sack, our psychic apparatus  
casts apt sentences, and we say to ourselves:  
In every brutal cop there is yet  
a sympathetic helper and friend,  
in which there is a brutal cop. Presto!  
We unfold the theory like an enormous  
handkerchief, while the gentlemen stand modestly  
in trench coats before the bunkered seminar and wait.  
They smoke, make little use of their service weapons,  
and guard the post, the paper flowers,  
and the pigeon dirt that coats everything snow white.





## CANTO TWENTY-NINE

But to come back to the end:

Back then we still believed in it (who: “we”?) –  
 as if there were something that would completely sink, bones and all,  
 that would vanish without a trace, without shade,  
 could be abolished once and for all  
 without leaving behind the usual remains  
 (the all too well-known  
 “remnants of the past”) –

Another variety of confidence!

We still believed in an end, back then  
 (when: “back then”? 1912? 18? 45? 68?),  
 and that is: in a beginning.

But by now we know:  
 the dinner goes on.

Roast Turkey, Cranberry Sauce  
 Boiled Rice  
 Prime Roast Beef  
 Baked Potatoes with Cream  
 Watercress Salad  
 Champagne Jelly    Cocoanut Sandwich  
 Viennese Ice Cake  
 Assorted Nuts Fresh Fruit  
 Cheese    Biscuits  
 Coffee

So then, the eight hundred crates of shelled walnuts,  
 the five concert grands, the thirty drums  
 of golf clubs and tennis rackets for Mr. Spaulding,  
 last sighted at 42 degrees 3 minutes north,  
 49 degrees 9 minutes west,  
 are not lost for all time:

Here, before our eyes, they are resurfacing  
(where: “here”?), delayed by 65 years –

Messages in bottles and no end to the end!  
Best wishes, scribbled down  
on a cardboard box before drowning,  
menus fished out of the sea,  
postcards in faded ink,  
soggy from the wine, the tears, the ocean,  
signs of life, hard to decipher, hard to get rid of –

To say nothing of the final report  
from the competent authorities,  
of surveys polemics memoirs,  
and of the logs of the maritime court hearing,  
twenty-five thousand pages  
that no one read –

Relics, souvenirs for catastrophe-philes,  
fodder for collectors, who skulk around auctions  
and snoop through attics.  
The menu from back then  
appears as a facsimile,  
every month comes the new *Titanic Commutator*,  
the official newsletter  
of the Society for Research of the Sinking –

Plans for the recovery of the wreck with the help of divers,  
the help of gas balloons, the help of submarines,  
original *Titanic* model kit,  
plastic, washable, a meter in length,  
Copyright Entex Industries, Inc.,  
\$29.80 postage free on advance payment to Edward Kamuda,  
285 Oak Street, Indian Orchard, Massachusetts,  
satisfaction guaranteed or your money back –

To be sure, the image of a lifeboat

rescues no one, the difference  
between a lifejacket and the word *lifejacket*  
is like the difference between life and death.

But the dinner goes on, the text  
goes on, the gulls follow the ship  
as far as the end. Will we finally stop  
reckoning on the end? Who on earth believes  
they must believe in it?

Something always remains behind –  
bottles, planks, deck chairs, crutches,  
splintered masts:  
It is driftwood, that which remains behind,  
a maelstrom of words.  
Cantos, lies, relicts: it's junk,  
that which dances, which staggers  
after us on the water like cork.

*Rest on the Flight. Flemish, 1521*

I see the playing child in the corn,  
 who doesn't see the bear.  
 The bear embraces or strikes a farmer.  
 It sees the farmer,  
 but it doesn't see the knife  
 that's stuck in its back;  
 namely, in the back of the bear.

On the hill beyond lie the remains  
 of someone put to the wheel; the minstrel  
 passing by nevertheless knows nothing of it.  
 Also, the two armies  
 advancing toward each other  
 on the bright illumined plain –  
 their lances glisten and blind me –,  
 do not notice the circling sparrowhawk,  
 who fixes its cold eye on them.

I distinctly see the threads of mold  
 moving through the roof beams  
 in the foreground, and farther back  
 the courier galloping past.  
 He must have emerged from a ravine.  
 Never will I know  
 how this ravine looks from inside;  
 But I imagine  
 that it is moist, shady and moist.

The swans on the pond in the middle of the picture  
 take no notice of me.  
 I observe the temple at the precipice,  
 the black elephant – odd,  
 a black elephant in open field! –  
 and the statues, whose white eyes  
 watch the fowlers in the wood,  
 the ferryman, the conflagration.  
 How silent it all is!

On very remote, very high towers  
 with unfamiliar embrasures,  
 I see the owls winking. Yes,  
 this all I saw well,  
 though what it all mean, I don't know.  
 How should I guess,  
 seeing as how everything I see

is so distinct, so essential,  
and so impenetrable?

Unaware, immersed in my affairs  
as in their town there,  
or in those far off  
far bluer towns  
sfumato in other guises,  
other clouds, armies, and immensities,  
I live on. I walk off.  
I had seen all of this, only  
not the knife that sticks in my back.

## CANTO THIRTY

We're still alive, said one of us  
who sat in half darkness:  
We know better.

After these words  
arose a long pause.

In the rearmost corner of the room  
someone coughed, it was in winter,  
it was in Central Europe,  
it was one of those afternoons  
when the survivors  
warily and by degrees  
realize that they are survivors,  
when they gather  
in abandoned train stations and in bunkers,  
in sukkahs, and in other places.

Tied-up suitcases full of heavy mementos  
are opened. There was tableware  
made of tin. There were some diapers,  
some matches, scraps  
of sea biscuit, and tobacco crumbs.  
Outside in the sky there still  
burned a faint radiance.

Strange, how the bigger part  
of all that came before,  
vanished without leaving any gap,  
like a stone in water.

A steamy smell,  
as if someone were ironing,  
spread out over the whole room.  
It was the pale breath of the girl  
who stood with her back to the window.  
She took the last light from us.

Now, where the helicopters are off,  
where nothing smolders nor sobs any longer,  
now, where the worst part's over,  
where we want none of it,  
everything can start over.

Protestations in foreign languages,

hubbub, broken words, humming.

First everything must be disinfected,  
splinted, patched, and buried.  
Then vengeance has its turn,  
and after vengeance, repetition.

The stove is smoking. There was something  
on the big table in the middle  
of the room. What it a heap  
of rolled up coats,  
was it flysheets, sandbags,  
rolls of brown manila paper?  
No one bothered with it.

For years we've amused ourselves  
with the visitations  
that were in store for us.  
Residual risk, it was called at the time, leakage,  
it was called, maximum credible accident.  
Pretty steep, we said. Those were the days!

Two sewing needles were exchanged  
for a small bar of soap.  
An emaciated cat was sniffing  
around the mortar that ran out from the wall.  
Gauze bandages were changed.

The eyes of the deserter,  
who suffered from bad glands, were bright  
behind his thick lenses,  
like the eyes of a drowning victim.

Everything that we did was wrong.  
And that's why everything we thought  
was wrong. I am a witness!  
No one is consoling me! Not me!  
I was present. Here,  
these scars! Look  
if you don't believe me!  
These scars are the proof!  
And he showed us his arm  
all bitten and gnawed away.

There now stood a large puddle  
in front of the door,  
and everyone who entered  
left behind a wet trail.



In the end we would have done better  
to fight back. What then?  
How then? Simply put, earlier!  
Earlier, but that was no life.  
We had no choice. Now, though,  
poverty reigns, and a sort of peace.

The denounced inspected one another.  
One, who was wearing a turban,  
turned away shrugging his shoulders.  
The stoker with the sluggish voice  
had the last word.

Outside it began to fiercely snow.  
The centuries-old parquet  
had long since cracked.  
Small puddles formed  
around our shoes.  
An old man wearing a sable  
began to tenderly pray.

One pound of Périgord truffles,  
washed, brushed,  
peeled with great care,  
sliced into knife-thin slivers,  
furnished with clarified butter,  
brandished over the fire, served  
with sautéed filets of pheasant breast –  
I've forgotten the sauce.

We waved it off, let him talk.  
One called out: All right.  
Let's begin at last.

No one budged.  
From somewhere came a buzzing,  
ever finer, more seething, shriller,  
perhaps from the stove.

## CANTO THIRTY-ONE

The Berlin room filled  
with smoke, with survivors.  
Breathless and shrouded,  
they hammered on the door  
or pushed open the windows,  
sprang inside, shook  
the snow from their hair,  
and settled  
around the hissing stove.

The stoker held up a carbide lamp  
and showed us the marks on the wall  
from earlier floods, dark streaks, knee-high,  
hip-high, head-high,  
in the hissing light.

The worst is behind us!  
Clamor, whispers, sighs  
of fright and of joy.  
The worst is never over!  
The Flood still lies ahead!  
Hold on tight!  
Suddenly it was a singsong,  
a wading coming and going,  
a speaking in tongues!  
The room lurched.  
The survivors didn't grow tired  
of fabling about survival  
until they grew tired of it.

Then for a long time nothing happened.  
No one turned on the lights,  
even though it had become very dark.

The snow outside the window  
climbed and climbed. This night  
wouldn't end so easy.

The bouncer brought hot tea  
in a pail. There was even sugar.  
You could hear the rattle of the spoons  
it was so still  
in the winding room,  
which seemed ever more rapidly aging.

Several sat in a circle, on mailbags,  
recited lines  
they knew by heart,  
and spoke of one of the dead.

It's good he's dead.  
Now we, his bereaved  
enemies and lovers,  
can strike out from these  
famous cantos what doesn't suit us.

We can erase.  
Without us he is nothing.  
We're the ones who speak through his hide,  
and we can do with him  
what we wish.

Do you all remember how he'd sit there, naked,  
how he would lament and claim,  
flailing his arms around,  
that he had lost the thread?  
What good were they, these drowned corpses?  
What did we get out of the blubbering  
that refused to die down  
although the tub had long since overflowed?

Prodigal, secret-monger, pedant!  
Old predator, disloyal,  
niggardly, cold. Yes, it's true,  
we had fed him back then,  
warmed him, this mighty charlatan,  
had nursed his yearnings and slaked his desire –  
but his dinosaur heart, his greed,  
his leathery skin that smelled like yeast,  
of mud, of mold –

Blurry, in the expansive  
room filled with the mutterings  
of the enemies and of widows,  
there lay something dark on the table  
like a giant loaf of bread.

Now and then, as in a waiting room,  
someone came or went without a word.

If I may, I, for one,  
would like to set the record straight, once and for all,  
that he was never in Havana,  
this fake, and moreover  
that there are no icebergs there.  
All of it pulled from thin air!  
All of it pinched.

It was someone no one knew,  
some fat little man with a hat.  
K., he was called, or something like that,  
at one time he sold biscuits,  
whole boatloads,  
biscuits and crispbread.

The old bouncer shuffled up and down  
and listened to us. Then he paused,  
stuck his thumbs in his red

threadbare hussar jacket,  
and solemnly pronounced:  
a hundred years' pardon to the thief  
who robs a thief!

All right, all right. Some laughed,  
although we didn't feel like laughing.  
Forgiveness? Never! The real McCoy,  
sanctimonious, rolling his eyes,  
had been waiting for this very moment.  
I! I am the real poet!  
(He of all people! This disadvantaged man.)  
I am the real McCoy! I am the gospel! I warn you all!  
He flubbed his words, stumbling  
over envy, jealousy, fear.  
One saw from his opaline junkie eyes  
that he wouldn't live long.  
He choked, got stuck,  
the stoker smacked him on the back.

A woman in archaic garb appeared,  
a Russian, in name only.  
She was crying. One of us  
helped her inside across the planks  
that led to the door. The loamy water  
bubbled beneath her steps.  
She was very young, she was the cleverest  
among the widows, and her eyes  
glistened like wet cherries.

No, I am not mistaken.  
He was a fossil, a flabby,  
doleful ogre,  
like those whales that someone long ago  
would show in a tent at a fair,  
where it reeked of formalin and rot.  
I loved him. I prayed him dead,

then reported him dead,  
and then swept him under the rug.

Now that we have our peace,  
what do we do with it?  
Is it not pretty and pleasant  
to sit here by the shallow water?  
No. Shall we be off?  
No. Carry on?  
Anything but that.

The deserter, who was always for  
stuffing the mouth of the dead man,  
groaned in his sleep.  
Friends and enemies embraced one another,  
washed up, relaxed.  
The cat was there as ever.

A few got seasick.  
Others made love sobbing in the dark.  
Sometimes we ate. Many languished.  
We held on tight.  
Friend or foe,  
here it was all the same.  
No one checked the time.

It was a beautiful night,  
the sort you only experience in the tropics.  
With eyes closed, we lay  
there on our deck chairs.  
The water at our ankles  
lapping softly.

We were left, we breathed.  
Fortune, some fluke  
drove us on this course.  
We were all in the same boat.

## CANTO THIRTY-TWO

Later, when the immeasurable room  
had fallen completely dark,  
no one was there any longer,  
except for the dead man  
and an unfamiliar woman.

Friend and foe  
were melted together  
into another.

The stranger heard his peaceful breaths,  
bent over him in the darkness,  
closed his mouth, kissed him,  
and took him with her, with her one mouth.

## CANTO THIRTY-THREE

I make out, soaked to the skin, people with soaking luggage.  
 I see them standing on the inclined plane, leaning into the wind  
 in slanting rain, unclear, at the brink of the abyss.  
 No, it is not second sight. The weather's to blame  
 that they're so pale. I'm warning them, I cry e.g. The path is crooked,  
 ladies and gentlemen, you're standing at the brink of the abyss. They, of course,  
 only faintly laugh and call bravely back: Thanks, same to you.

I wonder, is it really just a few dozen people,  
 or is the whole of humankind hanging there,  
 as if on any old cruise liner that's fit for scrap  
 and consecrated now to just one end, the Wreck?  
 I don't know. I'm dripping wet and listening. Hard to say  
 who those people are, each clinging to a suitcase,  
 to a leek-green talisman, a dinosaur, a laurel wreath.

I hear them laughing and shout to them incomprehensibly.  
 I suspect that stranger with the wet newspapers over his head  
 is K., a traveling biscuit salesman by trade;  
 no idea who the one with the beard is; the man with the maulstick  
 is named Salomon P.; the lady who's sneezing and sneezing must be Marilyn Monroe;  
 the one dressed in white, though, with the manuscript  
 bound in black wax cloth, he is surely Dante.

These people are full of hope, full of criminal abandon!  
 In the streaming rain they're walking their dinosaurs on leashes,  
 opening their suitcases and closing them again  
 and singing in chorus: "The doomsday will come on the 13th of May,  
 we'll die any day, we'll die any day."  
 Hard to say who's laughing, who's paying attention to me, who's not,  
 in this steam room, and how wide and how deep the chasm is.

I see how they're slowly sinking, those people, and I shout



the following words: I see how you're slowly sinking.  
No response. On faraway liners, faint and brave,  
the orchestras play. It fills me with regret, I don't approve,  
how they're all dying, soaked through, in this drizzle,  
it's a pity, I could sob, I sob: "But no one knows,"  
I sob, "in which year, so let us, so let us, raise another beer."

But the dinosaurs, where have they all the gone? And where did all these  
thousands and thousands on thousands of sopping suitcases come from,  
drifting stray and empty on the water? I swim and sob.  
Everything, I sob, as a matter of course, everything lurches, everything  
under control, business as usual, the people presumably drowned  
in slanting rain, a pity, no matter, a sob story, just as well,  
unclear, hard to say, why, I sob and swim on.

*La Habana 1969 –  
Berlin 1977*

## Notes

*Notes are only provided for the finalized poems, and otherwise appear in order.*

*Definitions, etymologies, and usages provided by the Duden dictionary of German, the Oxford English Dictionary, the dict.cc German-English dictionary, redensarten-index.de, and Wikipedia.*

### CANTO ONE

***hissing head***: the German is *rauschend[er] Kopf*, where *rauschend* is a present participle functioning as an attributive adjective, just like *hissing* in the English. *Rauschen* can describe the sound of a sea, wind through branches, etc. It can also describe white noise or static, and indeed, *weißes Rauschen* is the equivalent of *white noise*, which is explicitly mentioned later on: *Weißes Rauschen im Kopfhörer / meiner Zeitmaschine* (White noise in the headphones / of my time machine). I chose *hissing* to follow the grammar of the German (otherwise I would have had to use a prepositional phrase, e.g. *in the white noise of my head*), while replicating actual sound of [white] noise, even if *hissing* isn't used to describe wind, etc.

***snags***: the German verb is *stocken*, which can mean *to halt, stop, or cease* (particularly in the sense of halted production, traffic, or a conversation); *to freeze* (in the figurative sense of blood freezing from fear); *to stutter in speech* (though seemingly less as a result of a speech impediment and more as a symptom of nervousness or fear); *to congeal, thicken, or curdle*; or *to mold* (as a book). It's a word without a clear or satisfying equivalent, particularly in this context. See Canto Four for another instance.

***hissing***: *fauchend* in the German – a different word from *rauschend* above, despite the repetition in the English. *Fauchen* is the 'actual' German word for *hiss*, as in the sound a cat makes, etc., but also can mean *to spit* in the sense of saying something in a bitter or hostile manner.

## CANTO TWO

**a steward helps... metallurgy:** the German construction of these lines makes it rather explicit that the steward is only interacting with the old man, whereas the English grammar could be read as if the steward were somehow helping an old man *and* machinery. The only German verb present in these lines is *zubinden* (to tie, as shoelaces), and we can reasonably suspect that the machine tools don't need their shoelaces tied. The function then of *machine tools* and *metallurgy* read like a brief shot of the underbelly of the ship woven into the action described on D Deck. *Help* is therefore an addition on my part: an attempt to replicate the German construction without making the English too obscure.

**indefatigable man:** *der Unermüdliche* in the German, it is an instance of the German capacity to substantivize adjectives. This happens occasionally in English (e.g. *the good, the poor, the unemployed, the dead*, etc.) but otherwise, in a strict construction, would require the addition of *one, person*, or some other designation (*the happy one, the shorter of the two, the older daughter*). German only requires that the adjective be capitalized (like all nouns) and that it be appropriately declined as if it were an attributive adjective. As such, it is less masculine implies that it is Mr. McCawley, but the parallel with the ship (which is also "sick to its stomach", i.e. torn in its belly) is not to be ignored, and is accentuated in the relative ambiguity of the German.

**as it lives and laughs:** the German here is *wie es lebt und lacht*, an idiom more commonly phrased as *wie es lebt und lebt*. The expression is often used in reference to a person, meaning *doing what she does*, or *doing what is typical for her*. In the poem, therefore, the sense is, *Berlin, doing what is typical for it, which is being joyful*. Several English idioms are tangentially similar, such as *in the flesh; doing its thing; in its element; at its best; that's him all over*, and so on, but no single conventional phrase quite matches the German. My translation plays on the expression *as it lives and breathes*.

*Apocalypse. Umbrian, circa 1490*

**He's getting on a bit:** the completion of the idiom (... *in years*) is implied. The German idiom (*er ist nicht mehr der Jüngste*) literally means *he is no longer the youngest*. Another, more literal option: *He's not as young as he used to be*, which I find a bit clumsy and less euphemistic than the German.

**end of the world:** an instance of *Untergang*, here in the form of the compound *Weltuntergang* (*world-downfall*). It's repeated towards the end of this poem, where I use *apocalypse*.

**plumb:** the German *lotrecht* (vertical, upright) references the orientation of a *Lot*, the German word for a *plumb* [*bob*]. *Lotrecht* is perhaps not dated, but it is less common than *senkrecht*.

**butcheries:** *Gemetzel* in German. A German-English dictionary will turn up *slaughter*, *carnage*, and other such words, all effectively synonymous with the others. Etymology might therefore be helpful in culling the proper echo. *Gemetzel* is related to the verb *metzeln* which is to kill, murder, etc., which itself is recognizable for its similarity to *Metzger* (*butcher*). So there's an association with butchering, and conveniently, *butchery* is a perfectly acceptable synonym for *carnage*, *slaughter*, and *massacre*, and now we can justify it on etymological grounds. But then, *metzeln* comes from Latin *macellum* (*food market, especially a meat market*) and ultimately from Hebrew for *enclosure* or *pen*. Is there an English etymological cousin? How about, *massacre*! It certainly looks and sounds promising, but its etymology is ultimately indefinite. It seems, though, that we can at least trace it back to several Old French words for *slaughterhouse/butcher's shop*. So now *massacre*, too, is justifiable! And speaking of slaughterhouses, *slaughter* obviously connotes meat production and consumption: another contender. Well, at least there isn't yet another meat-related synonym. Then again, there's *carnage*...

### CANTO THREE

**perfectly different:** the German *vollkommen* can also be rendered as *completely*, *utterly*, *consummately*, *entirely*, and so on. Here, I choose *perfectly* for ironic effect, backed up by a denotative meaning (if not necessarily connotative) in line with *completely* (e.g., *a perfect stranger*).

**the fall:** *Untergang* in the German.

**mulattas:** the German *Mulatinnen* is similarly outdated and increasingly derogatory, and I have preserved this (though I'm unsure of the status of the term in 1977). The German is also explicitly feminine, hence my use of the uncommon, though not unprecedented, English feminine form.

**laughed clumsily:** the German adverb is *unförmig*, literally meaning *without form* or *shapeless*, but also *bulky* or *cumbersome*. In any event, it is not a word typically paired with *lachen* (*to laugh*).

**mirror glass:** *Spiegelglas* in the German, a compound of *mirror* and *glass*. I only want to note that the German *Meeresspiegel* (*sea-mirror*) is the word both for the surface of a body of water and for *sea level*.

### Lost

**the Lost Son:** an alternate, if less common, term for *prodigal son*, as in the biblical parable.

**love's labor lost:** the German idiom *verlorene Liebesmüh* is closer in meaning to *wasted effort* or if something is equated to *verlorene Liebesmüh* it can be said to be futile. Neither of these English expressions include the word *lost* or any derivatives. The German idiom is, however, a common translation of Shakespeare's play *Love's Labor Lost*: a wonderful coincidence that I'm happy to capitalize on.

### CANTO FOUR

**stuttering:** see note on *snags* in Canto One.

**wrecked:** *untergegangen* in German: the past participle of *untergehen*.

**faded away:** the German is *verschollen*, and can also be translated as *disappeared*, *vanished*, etc., but also *missing* or *lost*, as in the context of a soldier who is missing in action. The verb *verschallen* more literally deals with sound, namely, the fading of a sound. I've chosen *faded* for sense of the written text of the poem having faded (in water) and likewise the "sound" of original poem fading in the memory of the speaker.

**drowned and frozen faces:** see the note on *indefatigable man* in Canto Two. This is another instance of a substantivized adjective in German, where I have to add a noun in the English.

**wreck:** *Untergang*

## CANTO SIX

**Unmoved:** the German likewise has both senses of *not moving* and *emotionally unaffected*.

**Three degrees below freezing:** the German is *zwei Grad unter Null* (*two degrees below zero*). It's safe to presume that *zero* refers to zero degrees Celsius. The equivalent Fahrenheit temperature is 28.4 degrees, or about four degrees below freezing. I've chosen to avoid the issue of different units altogether with my phrasing.

*Last Supper. Venetian, 16th Century*

**ungodly load of work:** *Heidenarbeit* in German, literally *pagan-work*, meaning *a lot of work*, *hard work*, etc.

**A Dîner:** the German uses the French noun with a German article.

**who can hold out longer:** the German is *wer den längeren Atem hat* (literally, *who has the longer breath*), an idiom effectively meaning [*we'll see*] *who wins*, as if in a physical competition of some sort.

## CANTO EIGHT

**doomsday:** *Untergang*

**three degrees below freezing:** see note of same name in Canto Six.

**the Titanic:** contrary to the title, I include the article with *Titanic* here, since doing so is common in speech, and this is, after all, a monologue.

**Splendid Prospect:** the German is *Schöne Aussicht*. *Aussicht* can mean both *view* (from a room, e.g.) and also *prospect* (a particular expectation, hope, etc.). Duden lists *schöne Aussicht* as an example for the former meaning, but the word play here is almost certain. That *prospect* does denotatively have the secondary meaning of a *view* lends itself well to the situation. *Vista* could also work, but the repetition elsewhere in the piece of words like *spectator* and *spectacle* favors *prospect*.

**go down:** *untergehen*

### *The Postponement*

**decline:** *Untergang*

### CANTO FIFTEEN

**and where – literally – are you going:** the precise play on the word *literally* (*wörtlich* in German) is not clear in the German, either. The rest of the line in German uses the verb *hinauswollen*, meaning literally *to want to go out[side]*, but can be used idiomatically with the preposition *mit* (*with*) to mean *to be getting at [something]* (to imply, hint at, aim at, etc.)

**grind out:** the German verb is *raspeln*, which can mean *to file* or *to rasp* (as metal or wood) and *to grate* (as cheese or vegetables). *Grate* would work nicely here for the consistency of culinary-based language, but my understanding is that the juxtaposition between *raspeln* and a carving knife is less dramatic in the German than *grate* and carving knife are in English. Grinding carries effectively the same meaning (reducing something into smaller bits) while slightly closing the associative gap between the verb and tool performing the verb.

**I paint myself into a corner:** the German expression here is *ich verwickle mich*, which carries the image of being wrapped up or tangled.

**rattle:** the German *röcheln* describes raspy, unhealthy breathing, as if sick or dying.

**he'd go and not go:** the play in the German is on the verb *gehen*, which, like the English *go* can mean both to simply move or to leave.

**Sinking Ship:** the German *Untergehende[s] Schiff* capitalizes the attributive present participle, contrary to convention, hence my own capitalizations.

## CANTO SIXTEEN

**gift to poets:** the German is *er ist etwas für Dichter* (*it is something for poets*).

**primetime:** the German (*er läuft im Fernsehen gleich nach der Sportschau*) is a cultural reference ultimately implying a television slot that will be seen by a lot of people.

**protected by law:** a fairly literal rendition of the German *gesetzlich geschützt*. I was tempted to translate it as *copyrighted* or *trademarked*, which would employ a similar phrasing, but ultimately the German here is as ambiguous as my translation.

## *Cold Comfort*

**Father of Lies:** the German *der Gottseibeiuns* is a euphemistic name for Satan, meaning *God-be-with-us*. Since no English title for Satan exists with the same literal meaning, I chose *Father of Lies* for the sake of the work's repeated theme of lying.

**defiling:** the German *notzüchtigen* an archaic word for *rape*.

**payment summons:** Duden lists the usage of the German *Zahlungsbefehl* as “*österreichisch, schweizerisch, sonst Rechtssprache veraltet*” (Austrian, Swiss, otherwise dated legal language). Their definition is *Mahnbescheid*, or *summons*. I've stuck to the legal/official tone, but a casual translation would be *bill* or *invoice*.



*Stay Calm*

**doomsday:** *[Welt-]Untergang*

**furthest perfect tense:** the German (*im fernsten Perfekt*) is similarly ambiguous: is it the present perfect, or the future perfect?

**reallocated lands:** *bereinigte Fluren* in German. Look into *Flurbereinigung* for more information.

**end of the world:** *[Welt-]Untergang*

## CANTO TWENTY-TWO

**goes under quicker:** *untergehen*

**sog:** the German is *Nässe*, which means *wetness*, but no suitably concise noun exists in English, so I made one up.

## CANTO TWENTY-THREE

**go under:** *untergehen*

*The Rape of Zuleika*

**apple of my eye:** the German *Augapfel* (*eye-apple*) has both the figurative meaning of my translation, but also the literal meaning of the eye's pupil.

**zinc-white muslin relief:** the German describes the muslin as *Zinkweiß geschummer[t]*. The adjective *geschummert* is derived from the verb *schummern*, which describes the shading done specifically for a topographical map. The image, it seems, is that the 'elevations' of her face showing through the diaphanous white fabric look like such a map. Since no such verb in English exists, I use sculptural language.

## CANTO TWENTY-NINE

**sink:** *untergehen*

**Sinking:** *Untergang*

## CANTO THIRTY-ONE

**stove:** the German *Ofen* is a cognate with the English *oven*, but *Ofen* doesn't only mean a cooking oven, but also can be a device for heating a room, hence *stove* corresponds better.

**I am the real McCoy. I am the gospel:** the latter of these phrases does not exist in the German at all. The reason I added it has to do with the German idiom *der wahre Jakob* (*the real Jacob/James*). The origin of the German idiom is not confirmed, but the most common explanation is based in religion: it was allegedly common long ago for churches to claim they possessed the remains of Saint James (Jakob in German), and as such, the idiom *the real James* came to mean *the real deal*, etc. Worried that the English *real McCoy* lacked some of this 'religiosity', I added in *I am the gospel* (*gospel* meant here by its meaning *truth*), since it makes sense in the context, anyway.

## CANTO THIRTY-THREE

**the path is crooked:** the German *die Bahn ist schief* makes implicit reference to the idiom *auf die schiefe Bahn geraten*, meaning, *to go astray* (in the moral sense).

**the Wreck:** *Untergang*. The German here actually adds the so-called "dative -e" to *Untergang* (*Untergange*), which is increasingly rare in German, and so has an elevating effect, hence my capitalization.

**steam room:** the German *Waschküche* (*washroom, laundry room*) is a figurative expression for describing thick fog.