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# Kaschnitz, Enzensberger, and Sandig: The Ecopoetics of Water Pollution

## **Abstract**

This ecocritical reading of Marie Luise Kaschnitz's poetic cycle "Rückkehr nach Frankfurt" 'Return to Frankfurt' (1945/46), Hans Magnus Enzensberger's epic poem *Der Untergang der Titanic* 'The Sinking of the Titanic' (1978), and a 21<sup>st</sup>-century poem by Ulrike Almut Sandig analyzes key shifts in poetic representations of water pollution. The essay explores underlying cultural and political attitudes about water that define literary depictions of its pollution. It argues that these texts register a conceptual turn away from aesthetic appreciation of water in terms of its culturally rich, purifying properties and toward scientific understanding that emphasizes the social and legal dimensions of water pollution. Ecocritical interpretation of such works, thus, enables deeper understanding of ongoing transformations in the lyric genre. The concluding interpretation of Sandig's text points to the increasing presence of unnatural elements in representations of the environment as symptomatic of broader literary changes. It argues that developments in German nature poetry since 1945 have increasingly led poets to experiment with expressive possibilities for lyric poetry that foreground cathartic responses to human and environmental history.

## **Keywords**

German poetry, ecocriticism, water

Kaschnitz, Enzensberger, and Sandig: The Eco-poetics of Water Pollution

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In Marie Luise Kaschnitz's poetic cycle "Rückkehr nach Frankfurt" 'Return to Frankfurt,' the penultimate section opens with meditatively rhythmical lines in which the poet views the war-ravaged city during a walk along its riverbank:

Gefahr ist der Fluß geworden  
Seine Wasser führen den Rest  
Von Sengen und Brennen und Morden,  
Krieg und Leichenpest,  
Giftige Keime in Schwaden,  
Absud von Jammer und Not,  
Darf niemand schwimmen und baden,  
Er tränke sich den Tod. (*Totentanz und Gedichte zur Zeit* 75)

Dangerous the river has become  
Its waters carry along the remains  
Of scorching and burning and murdering,  
War and corpse pestilence  
Poisonous seeds in clouds  
Distillation of misery and need,  
No one may swim or bathe,  
Lest he would drink death.<sup>1</sup>

Written in the immediate aftermath of World War II, "Rückkehr nach Frankfurt" describes this toxic environment from the perspective of an eyewitness.<sup>2</sup> Some three decades later, Hans Magnus Enzensberger's epic poem *Der Untergang der Titanic* 'The Sinking of the Titanic' concludes with a strangely parallel scene in which the poet, surrounded by flotsam from the sinking ship, becomes a survivor calling out from the chilly waters. As the music from the *Titanic* fades away, he begins to reflect on the dead:

Aber die Dinosaurier, wo sind sie geblieben? Und woher rühren  
diese Tausende und Abertausende von klatschnassen Koffern,

die da leer und herrenlos auf dem Wasser treiben? Ich schwimme  
und heule. (*Der Untergang der Titanic* 115)

But where have the dinosaurs gone? And where do all these  
sodden trunks  
come from, thousands and thousands of them drifting by,  
utterly empty and abandoned to the waves? I wail and I swim. (*The  
Sinking of the Titanic* 98)

His voice thick with irony, the protagonist speaks on behalf of the victims, yet we know from the outset that he was not among them. By 1978 when this work appeared, Enzensberger, an early commentator on ecological matters, was deeply preoccupied with the social disparities the *Titanic* epitomized.<sup>3</sup> Like Kaschnitz's meditation on the destruction of war, *Der Untergang der Titanic* echoes the concerns of its times—post-1968 disillusionment, Third World conflicts, and rapid cultural change. Often read by contemporary commentators as an allegory about the collapse of leftist political agitation (with this scene taken as emblematic of those sentiments), *Der Untergang der Titanic* marks the beginning of Enzensberger's turn to larger environmental concerns. This recasting of his intellectual agenda is made clear in an essay published at the same time as the epic, "Zwei Randbemerkungen zum Weltuntergang" 'Two Notes on the End of the World,' which grapples with the challenge of apocalyptic thinking and acknowledges that the vast forces of nature dwarf human political squabbling (*Der Fliegende Robert*).

Readers of poetry will surely find striking how these images both resonate and clash with one another, yet notice that they inflect the language of discourse about water differently from the long tradition of poetic representations as well.<sup>4</sup> These subtle differences are not trivial, for they reflect profound change in environmental attitudes and the lyric genre itself. In Romantic poetry, water often figures as part of an idealized landscape of pristine nature (see further Rigby). The sounds of water and folkloric elements in Clemens Brentano's poetry enhance evocation of the pastoral, for example, while the emotional responses to nature that surface in Friedrich Hölderlin's river poems convey a sense of awe before the sublime. When Hölderlin ecstatically declares in "Der Neckar" 'The Neckar' that "In deinen Tälern wacht mein Herz mir auf" (Hölderlin 229) 'In your valleys my heart awakens,' a deep connection between landscape and the divine is invoked.

Knowledgeable about this long German tradition of river poems, Kaschnitz and Enzensberger connect with that heritage through their ability to echo the cadences and content of earlier lyric genre works. Influenced by Hölderlin's sense of mythological dimensions and flowing use of line, Kaschnitz develops an evocative style that emphasizes physical perceptions of the

environment and strong visual imagery. As in poems by Hölderlin where rivers flowing through panoramic landscapes offer the poet a means for contemplation of geographic, historical, and aesthetic dimensions, Kaschnitz's attention to water works toward a mythopoetical conception of water circulation. Attuned to poetry's rhetorical capacities and the representational challenges of ekphrasis, Enzensberger shifts register in every canto of *Der Untergang der Titanic* to emphasize the power of poetic voice itself. Thus the epic's passages describe everything from barely perceptible liquid infiltration to the final waterscape expanse in startlingly divergent language drawn from a range of sources. In addition to German models (he had, in fact, written his dissertation on Brentano's poetry), Enzensberger draws on a poetic repertoire that includes American poetry, notably *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams, which centers on the Passaic River.

In reading this tradition of river and water poems, however, the evolution that occurs in social and political discourse about water becomes important, since it has bearing on the fluctuation in the prestige given aesthetic representations of nature. Historian Thomas Lekan forcefully argues that there is a shift away from "aesthetic and nationalistic forms of nature conservation (*Naturschutz*), homeland protection (*Heimatschutz*) and landscape protection (*Landschaftspflege*) that predominated in Germany before 1945" and toward a "scientifically grounded, systems-oriented concept of environmentalism" (112). This historical background brings us face to face with the perplexing question of what it means to create works and speak about the environment in the age of the Anthropocene, the designation now used to mark the current epoch as distinct from the Holocene through an acknowledgment of our human influence on the environment.<sup>5</sup>

The two salient representations of water contamination we encounter here intensify our response to the poems and compel us to contemplate the link between callous attitudes toward nature and human consumption, but they also remind us that the lyric genre as a medium has traditionally responded to the natural environment, often defining that sphere in terms of places of refuge and beauty protected from human interference. It has long been recognized that after 1945, German environmental thinking evolved in complex ways as a response to unique historical conditions (compare Goodbody, *Nature, Technology and Cultural Change*; Heise). Indeed, we see those factors at play in these examples—the one the product of the *Stunde Null*, the other of the advanced Cold War.<sup>6</sup> Close examination of these two poems reveals that they engage with much larger social and cultural discourses about societal values that go beyond the discussion of water pollution that concerns Lekan. Kaschnitz and Enzensberger, as eyewitness and chronicler after-the-fact, work through the images of water to envision roles for the lyric genre that involve it immediately in public sphere environmental debates, albeit with different senses of agency.

To lay the groundwork for this ecocritical analysis, let us turn first to two works that help establish a context for the poems—one by the Austrian philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich, *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, and the other Enzensberger's 1984 essay "Brunnenvergiftung: Eine ungehaltene Rede über das Wasserrecht und über verwandte Gegenstände" (*Mittelmaß und Wahn* 195-206) 'Well Poisoning: An Undelivered Speech on Water Law and Related Matters.'<sup>7</sup> Because these essays appeared in the 1980s, they capture shifts in attitudes about water pollution that we encounter in emergent form in the earlier poetic texts. Following my discussion of the poems, then, I want to take up Timothy Morton's notion of hyperobjects to consider how it may prove helpful in interpreting the way in which water imagery becomes transformed in these examples from the lyric genre and more recent cultural representations.

#### Water or H<sub>2</sub>O and the Legalities of Pollution: Illich and Enzensberger

In *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (an expansion of a 1984 lecture given at the Dallas Institute of Humanities), Ivan Illich argues that the ancient association of water with purity and cleanliness underwent a decisive transformation through the creation of urban space.<sup>8</sup> Drawing inspiration from Gaston Bachelard's analysis of spatial imagination (6), Illich traces the social and cultural functions of urban water from Roman city architecture through William Harvey's medical description of systemic circulation, to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century images of hygienic beauty (38-9, 1). This history leads him to observe that the "modern idea of 'stuff' that follows its destined path, streaming forever back to its source, remained foreign even to Renaissance thought" (39). Accordingly, Illich contends that circulation was a concept whose impact proved as radical as the Copernican scientific revolution. The consequence of this paradigmatic shift, he concludes, is that

H<sub>2</sub>O and water have become opposites: H<sub>2</sub>O is a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and that calls for technical management. It is an observed fluid that has lost the ability to mirror the water of dreams. The city child has no opportunities to come in touch with living water. Water can no more be observed; it can only be imagined, by reflecting on an occasional drop or a humble puddle. (76)

The replacement of water with the chemical formula H<sub>2</sub>O defines our relationship to nature in Anthropogenic terms. With controlled water flow and the reduction of elements to "stuff," a culture of consumption follows: H<sub>2</sub>O water becomes the material that enables circulation, yet the world it helps construct devalues imagination. Maintaining H<sub>2</sub>O purity depends not on an existential appreciation of

its religious, philosophical, and imaginative value, but merely on logistics—constant, circulating, resource-dependent flow.

Enzensberger's essay on *Brunnenvergiftung* 'well poisoning,' on the other hand, takes as its starting point legal definitions pertinent to water pollution, though it ultimately calls into question human hubris and notions of justice alike.<sup>9</sup> Rhetorically, the text is written as a political address on environmental protection issues (it originally appeared in the journal *Natur* 'Nature'). This genre gives Enzensberger license to dramatize the case he makes, allowing him to chastise his audience with the reminder that "Jede Generation bildet sich ein, die Probleme, mit denen sie zu kämpfen hat, seien historisch unvergleichlich, unerhört neu, radikal verschieden von allem, was früher die Menschheit bedrohte" (*Mittelmaß und Wahn* 197) 'Every generation imagines that the problems it has to cope with are historically unparalleled, new and unprecedented, radically different from everything which previously threatened mankind' ("Well Poisoning" 111). He attributes this tendency to the pathos of modernism and unexamined notions of progress. Elaborating on this critique, he reminds his readers that these early conceptions of ecology derived from a sense of the common good and social responsibility to others, while early laws against pollution (notably the one forbidding well poisoning) reflected superstitions and, indeed, anti-Semitism (*Mittelmaß und Wahn* 200). The point he makes is that in a highly industrialized society, the mechanisms to resolve ecological disputes are mismatched with conventional definitions that frame accountability in terms of individual perpetrators and victims. His conclusion is accordingly pessimistic:

Aus all diesen Gründen wird die Industrie, von der wir leben, weiterhin ungestraft unsere Erde, unsere Luft und unser Wasser vergiften. Ich gebe auch zu, daß sich das ökologische Gleichgewicht zwischen der Natur und dem Menschengeschlecht nicht dadurch erreichen läßt, daß man ein paar Dutzend leitende Herren hinter Schloß und Riegel bringt. (*Mittelmaß und Wahn* 205)

For all these reasons, the industry on which we depend will continue to poison our soil, our air and our water and go unpunished. I also admit that the ecological balance between man and nature cannot be achieved by putting a couple of dozen of company chairmen behind lock and key. ("Well Poisoning" 117)

What Enzensberger anticipates with this explanation is the precautionary principle incorporated in the 1992 United Nations Rio Declaration, which proscribes actions that threaten the environment, even when scientific proof cannot with full certainty determine that such damage will occur. His remarks align with Lekan's conclusion that members of various groups (conservationists, engineers, and state officials) "imagined water purification as a stepping stone to social

reconstruction, thus adding a moral urgency to West Germany's environmental debate well into the 1980s" (Lekan 114).

### Dangerous Waters: Kaschnitz and Enzensberger

Turning now to the poems by Kaschnitz (1901-1974) and Enzensberger (born in 1929), we should remember that both were Büchner Prize recipients (1960 and 1963, respectively) and admired each other's work, despite obvious differences in age and approach. Kaschnitz was among the translators who contributed to Enzensberger's influential *Museum der modernen Poesie* ('Museum of Modern Poetry') of 1960 (*Museum*). While clearly the affinities between "Rückkehr nach Frankfurt" and *Der Untergang der Titanic* arise from a common experiential and poetic repertoire on the part of the authors, they go beyond surface similarities because Enzensberger practices the craft of poetry through creative engagement with the writings of others.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Enzensberger honored Kaschnitz by echoing the title of her 1950 poetry collection *Zukunftsmusik* (*Music of the Future*) with his 1991 book by the same name, writing in ways that evoked her contributions to the lyric genre (see Melin 155-56; Kaschnitz *Zukunftsmusik*; Enzensberger *Zukunftsmusik*).

"Rückkehr nach Frankfurt" begins with an imperative, which provides the motivation for the poet to recount a terrible history, and most of all to answer questions about what happened to the river. A sense of mourning pervades its descriptions:

Sage, wie es begann.  
Wie sah sie dich an  
Aus ihren erloschenen Augen,  
Die Stadt? (Kaschnitz, *Totentanz und Gedichte zur Zeit* 66)

Tell, how it began.  
How did it look at you  
From its extinguished eyes,  
The city?

In the sections that precede this poem, Kaschnitz recalls the city through the eyes of children, imagines Goethe standing by the ruins of the *Goethe Haus* 'Goethe House,' and mourns lost beauty at the *Opernplatz* 'Opera Square.' The poetic cycle laments these losses and yet moves listeners (who are also readers) past grief. Describing the circumstances under which the poem was composed, Kaschnitz calls it "vielleicht ein typisches Beispiel der sogenannten Trümmerliteratur," adding, "Aber es kommt doch etwas anderes darin zu Wort:



Frankfurt ist da gewissermaßen ein Urwald, eine Urlandschaft, in der erst alles beginnen muß und auch neu beginnt” (Bienek 40) ‘perhaps a typical example of the so-called rubble literature. But something else is also articulated: there Frankfurt is to a certain extent a primeval forest, a primal landscape, in which everything had to begin, and also begins anew.’

This commitment to a new beginning—however painful—powerfully shapes the narrative trajectory in the cycle’s thirteenth section.<sup>11</sup> The second stanza reformulates the poem’s opening line, announcing that “Leer ist der Fluß geworden” ‘Empty the river has become,’ while the third stanza recalls images from another time along the river when things appeared cheerful “Als er den Lichtschein der Zimmer / Trug wie ein flackerndes Kleid” (*Totentanz und Gedichte zur Zeit* 75-6) ‘When it wore the reflecting light of rooms / like a flickering gown.’ The fourth stanza moves from Frankfurt to the source of the river—“Doch die Wasser kommen von weit her, / Von Tannen und duftendem Heu” (76) ‘Yet waters come from afar, / From fir trees and sweet-smelling hay’—reminding us that the cycle of water is continuous, even in the midst of horror signified by the Medusa head. The fifth and final stanza completes the movement from past through present:

Und tragen noch lange schwer hin  
 Der Ufer vergängliches Los,  
 Und singen es dann in den Meerwind  
 Und betten es in den Schoß. (*Totentanz und Gedichte zur Zeit* 76)

And carry it heavily on  
 The mortal lot of the banks  
 And sing it then into the sea wind  
 And lay it down in its lap.

As the river flows into the sea, it seems to become purified, a process that sets the stage for the final section of the poem cycle in which the poet urges her audience to make a new beginning that points toward the future. Thus we recognize in Kaschnitz’s imagery an instantiation of the kind of the metaphorical use of water and space that Illich identifies: circulation and the flow of water are essential to purity. The passage of water from remote sources through the destroyed city and into the sea becomes a passage from the past through the present to the future. Such a process enables catharsis. It washes away the pollution, debris, and the *Gefahr* ‘danger’ of the present. Yet as the characterization of these waters through the oxymoron *schrecklich neu* ‘dreadfully new’ in the same stanza hints, purity is a problematical concept. The water channels through past events so horrific they

must surely leave an indelible trace, while pollution (as contemporary readers recognize) relentlessly accumulates in the sea.

In *Der Untergang der Titanic*, water has a quite different function. It pervades every moment of the epic poem, from the very opening canto that registers the collision of iceberg and ship:

Das Wasser schießt in die Schotten  
An dem leuchtenden Rumpf  
gleitet, dreißig Meter hoch

über dem Meeresspiegel, schwarz  
und lautlos der Eisberg vorbei  
und bleibt zurück in der Dunkelheit. (Enzensberger, *Der Untergang der Titanic* 9)

The water is rushing  
into the bulkheads.  
Thirty yards above sea level

the iceberg, black and silent, passes,  
glides by the glittering ship,  
and disappears in the dark. (*The Sinking of the Titanic* 3)

Here water appears in multiple forms (liquid, frozen solid, and steam), frequently in ominous darkness. The third canto, which oscillates among locations, recalls the heady optimism of the Cuban revolution combined with the disillusionment of the 1970s in Berlin, “in jener winzigen Neuen Welt, / wo alles vom Zucker sprach, / von der Befreiung, von einer Zukunft, reich / an Glühbirnen, Milchkühen, nagelneuen Maschinen” (*Der Untergang der Titanic* 15) ‘in this tiny New World / eagerly discussing sugar, / liberation, and a future abounding / in light bulbs, milk cows, brand-new machines’ (*The Sinking of the Titanic* 9). When the poet looks up from his work imagining water littered with the debris of moribund consumerism, he sees the iceberg:

Und ich war zerstreut und blickte hinaus  
über die Hafenummauer auf die Karibische See,  
und da sah ich ihn, sehr viel größer  
und weißer als alles Weiße, weit draußen,  
ich allein sah ihn und niemand sonst,  
in der dunklen Bucht, die Nacht war wolkenlos  
und das Meer schwarz und glatt wie Spiegelglas, (*Der Untergang der Titanic* 17)

And I looked out with an absent mind  
over the quay at the Caribbean Sea,  
and there I saw it, very much greater  
and whiter than all things white, far away,  
and I was the only one to see it out there  
in the dark bay, the night was cloudless  
and the sea black and smooth like mirror plate (*The Sinking of the  
Titanic* 10)

These descriptions resurrect the response Enzensberger had to the sultry and polluted environment he found on the Gulf Coast during a first visit to the U.S. (“Louisiana Story”), though with fresh concern about humanity’s fate as a whole. By the epic’s close, the poet finds himself surrounded by material possessions that have now become meaningless to those drowning. Like this wreckage itself, even the words he finds to describe his predicament are fragmented into formulaic phrases:

Alles, heule ich, wie gehabt, alles schlingert, alles  
unter Kontrolle, alles läuft, die Personen vermutlich ertrunken  
im schrägen Regen, schade, macht nichts, zum Heulen, auch gut,  
undeutlich, schwer zu sagen, warum, heule und schwimme ich  
weiter. (*Der Untergang der Titanic* 115)

Business, I wail, as usual, everything lurching, everything  
under control, everything O.K., my fellow beings probably  
drowned  
in the drizzle, a pity, never mind, I bewail them, so what?  
Dimly, hard to say why, I continue to wail, and to swim. (*The  
Sinking of the Titanic* 98)

Meanwhile, we as readers of these lines mentally replay the chaos of this scene in the cold Atlantic, its details, gleaned from survivor’s accounts of the 1912 disaster, now standard stock for literary and cinematic recreations. Here there is no release through catharsis, because the tragedy seems to repeat itself over and over in the memory of subsequent generations. As Enzensberger argues in the essay on well poisoning, we understand that the parties responsible for such a disaster are not likely to be held accountable, yet the paradox of global environmental catastrophes is that we are all affected—and when water is involved, no boundaries can contain pollution.

## Poetry and Morton's Hyperobjects

Differences aside, many commonalities run through these depictions of water. For Kaschnitz (as in Illich's historical account), water functions metaphorically as a circulating medium that ultimately purifies and accomplishes the anguished mental processing of coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Accordingly, the poet as eyewitness survivor evokes this form of water to perform the task of creating a consoling work of art that memorializes loss. We, the readers, respond to her water images by viewing them as spectators and experiencing a sense of catharsis. By contrast, Enzensberger speaking as the poet reports, looking back into the past with far greater agency and detachment, though minus emotional release. We encounter his protagonist surrounded by chaos and like him question our thirst for dubious progress. In *Der Untergang der Titanic*, water becomes H<sub>2</sub>O as the icy waves suspend an ever more concentrated flotsam of consumer waste, much like the dead zones that grow in the oceans today.<sup>12</sup> Through these works, we begin to confront our altered relationship to nature in the Anthropocene when, in the words of Timothy Morton, "geotrauma and human history" intersect (*Hyperobjects* 195).

In suggesting that we think about these poems in terms of catharsis and agency, both dependent on an understanding of texts that foregrounds performative instantiation of poet and audience involvement, it is not my intention to dispense with literary interpretation that relies on raising awareness about conventions of representation and imagery. As Wendy Skinner points out in a far-ranging discussion of contemporary poetry about the Elbe River, the images present in these works challenge and change traditional notions of subject-object relations by showing "daß der Mensch niemals als souveränes Subjekt dem Stoff Wasser gegenübertritt" (Skinner 235) 'that the human never confronts water as a sovereign subject.' Likewise, such an interpretive intervention should complement the kind of examination Dora Osborne undertakes of Durs Grünbein's long poem *Porzellan* 'Porcelain' about the destruction of Dresden, which reads it as a provocation that juxtaposes destruction and desire, in part by mapping the text against photographic images of the Elbe River and city that quite literally frame it as pages of the book (Grünbein; Osborne). What I propose is that we look beyond discrete images to consider the systemic complexity that shapes them. Consequently, this mode of interpretation must consider not only the historical progression from aesthetic to scientific understandings of water pollution we encountered in Lekan or the poetic responses that draw on human capacities for catharsis and agency found in the poems by Kaschnitz and Enzensberger, but also a third position—one that uncomfortably situates the imagination in an estranged position of arguably post-human perspective.

Morton, I suspect, would encourage us in that project to read these images of water pollution in terms of *hyperobjects*.<sup>13</sup> Elaborating this concept in his eponymous book *Hyperobjects* (2013), Morton argues that we inhabit a world of invisible and visible hyperobjects—ranging in scale from radioactivity to styrofoam particles—that will outlive human kind, asserting:

With their towering temporality, their phasing in and out of human time and space, their massive distribution, their viscosity, the way they include thousands of other beings, hyperobjects vividly demonstrate how things do not coincide with their appearance. They bring to an end the idea that Nature is something ‘over yonder’ behind the glass window of an aesthetic screen. Indeed, this very concept of Nature is itself a product of the Romantic phase. (174)

One of hyperobjects’ defining properties is viscosity, by which Morton means that “they ‘stick’ to beings that are involved with them” in unpredictable ways (1). Under this conception, the water imagery we encounter in these poems is important not only due to its fluidity, but also because it is ontologically inseparable from the legacies of past history, human consumption in the present, and the future impact of climate change. To the extent that water occupies a pivotal position in poetic discourses for postwar German writers like Kaschnitz and Enzensberger, we are called upon to read them in terms of what is now emerging as an environmental paradigm that has changed the very conditions for nature poetry.

Evidence of this shift appears in works like “[vom reden]” ‘[from talk],’ a poem from the collection *Streumen* (2007) by Ulrike Almut Sandig that meditates on the significance of human conversation.<sup>14</sup> Through a description in the middle stanza that juxtaposes images of nature and pollution, the poet reaches a conclusion in the final two lines of the poem that emphasizes the importance of dialogue and listening:

MITTE, ural, und von dem, was danach kommt,  
diesem flugziel der vögel, wo man hütten baut  
aus wellblech und teer, styropor, wo die ratten  
im halbschlaf geschichten verzehren und flüsse  
verdreckt sind von blumen und fleisch, wo man  
spricht und viel tee trinkt, wo man grüßt und  
verstirbt das eine ist immer das eine: hör zu (Sandig)

CENTER, urals, and about what follows,  
this bird destination, where huts are built  
from corrugated tin and tar, styrofoam, where semi-  
somnolent rats devour stories, and rivers

are filthy with flowers and flesh, where they  
speak and constantly drink tea, where they greet and  
die the one is always the one: listen<sup>15</sup>

This unpristine landscape inhabited equally by birds and corrugated metal leads the poet to appreciate life and mortality more deeply. Comparing the translation with the original, tension inherent in human relationships to nature becomes all the more apparent. Sandig's compressed language and frequent use of compounds (suggestive of the viscosity identified by Morton) and choice of the pronoun *man* 'one' in the fifth line (which inserts distance between the human subject and nature) prove impossible to render in the English version, which nonetheless adequately captures other aspects of the poem. The water pollution (*flüsse verdreckt*) forces sensory distance from the scene, refocusing attention on what really counts: the possibility of genuine contact in an increasingly estranged world. Water in its purest form is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Polluted by whatever means, it accrues new properties in these poems by Kaschnitz, Enzensberger, and Sandig that challenge readers, moving our conception of the lyric genre beyond pastoral consolation and toward a deeper understanding of vital poetry's capacity to engage with environmental quandaries.

#### Notes

1. The translations of passages from this poem are my own; no attempt has been made to reproduce the rhyme scheme. Other translations are attributed to the English publication sources.
2. Bibliographic records at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach indicate its first publication as Marie Luise Kaschnitz, "Rückkehr nach Frankfurt," *Die Wandlung* 1 (1945/46).
3. For discussion of postwar German nature poetry, see Jürgen Egyptien, Axel Goodbody, Arthur Williams, Jost Hermand, Wendy Anne Kopisch, Hyun Jeong Park, and Wolfgang Wiesmüller.
4. Taking work by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as a starting point, Simon Richter examines the meaning of water. For further examples from all periods, see Heinz Czechowski and Anton Leitner. A particularly salient example from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is found in the lines from Bertolt Brecht's poem "An die Nachgeborenen," 'To Posterity,' which speaks to those who come after the flood as, "Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut" (724-25). Similarly, there is a representation of the diaspora as a vast sea (*Weltmeer*) blooming with coffins and urns in Paul Celan, "Die Silbe Schmerz" (92-93).

5. A term coined by Paul J. Crutzen, the Anthropocene is defined as the current epoch, in which humans have become a geological force; see further discussion in Dipesh Chakrabarty.
6. Engagement with water pollution issues, in fact, marked the starting point for Michael Braungart's interests in *Cradle to Cradle* design. It also shapes urban planning of "blue space" today (e.g., the work of Atelier Dreiseitl, Web <http://www.dreiseitl.com/index.php?lang=en>, 10 October 2015) and motivates water conservation practices in Germany. It powerfully informs as well our understanding of the concept "virtual water," which recognizes that consumer goods use precious water resources.
7. Compare the argument that concepts of pollution were frequently creative acts used to enforce particular moral codes, maintain cultural or political hierarchies, or atone for past sins in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.
8. Illich argues that there is an important distinction between thinking of water resources in terms of a discrete entity versus as an element in the larger ecology that needs to be interpreted from a systems perspective.
9. Like Illich, Enzensberger understands that early conceptions of water rested on a notion of its existence as a discrete element: an individual well could become contaminated, but that was not recognized as a potential pollution hazard for all drinking water.
10. For discussion of Enzensberger's environmental interests, see in particular Reinhold Grimm, Rainer Barbey, and Alan J. Clayton.
11. Among the sections of this fourteen-part poem, the penultimate text, is one of the most frequently anthologized. Its intense imagery of a war-torn waterscape of the river eerily anticipates conceptions of environmental disasters.
12. Here we should keep in mind the "dead zones" that have developed in the oceans, even in the most remote parts. The film "Plastic Planet" by Werner Boote explored this issue; see further Gerhard Pretting and Werner Boote.
13. Morton concludes in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) that we should be aware that "...capitalism creates things that are more solid than things ever were. Alongside global warming, 'hyperobjects' will be our lasting legacy. Materials from humble Styrofoam to terrifying plutonium will far outlast current social and biological forms" (130).

14. For further examples of contemporary works, see the special issue of *Kafka: Zeitschrift für Mitteleuropa* 9 (2003) on writing on water.

15. Retrieved 12 February 2015 from <http://www.lyrikline.org/de/gedichte/vom-reden-5649#.VNvWj-eyy3g>, translated by Bradley Schmidt. Note that the translator has joined the final two lines with the preceding stanza.

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