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Ekstasen: Love Poetry by Felix Hausdorff

Cover Page Footnote

I am a poet and novelist whose work can be seen at <https://www.tandetabooks.com>. I am grateful to Walter Purkert, Ben Elkins, and Akihiro Kanamori for valuable discussions of Hausdorff.

Ekstasen: Love Poetry by Felix Hausdorff

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Synopsis

Four poems by the mathematician Felix Hausdorff are presented in English translation, together with their German originals and commentary about Hausdorff's multidisciplinary achievements.

1. Introduction

Felix Hausdorff (1868-1942) is renowned for his work in topology, set theory, and other areas of mathematics, where his eponyms abound.¹ But Hausdorff was also a highly successful dramatist, as well as an accomplished poet, cultural critic, and philosopher, often writing under the pseudonym of Paul Mongré (a pun on “à mon gré,” French for “at my discretion” or “as I choose”). His high level of achievement in both the humanities and the quantitative sciences makes Hausdorff a highly unusual, and perhaps unique, figure in intellectual history.²

¹Eponyms are an interesting phenomenon throughout the “hard” sciences. Historians of ideas (or psychoanalytically-minded investigators of mass psychology) might be rewarded by dwelling on the fact that a man whose name, in his native tongue, is a homonym for “house-village” made seminal contributions to the mathematical concept of “neighborhood.”

²Akihiro Kanamori, to whom I am indebted for many stimulating conversations about Hausdorff, has noted that the Islamic polymath Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) might at first seem to be another example of a poet-mathematician, but is not a parallel to Hausdorff. The Rubaiyatt associated with Khayyam's name is a collection of quatrains traditionally attributed to him, not a collection known to have been written by him personally, like Hausdorff's *Ekstasen*. (Personal communication.)

Hausdorff's diverse output has been made available in German by the nine-volume edition of his collected works, produced by a team coordinated by Walter Purkert at the University of Bonn. The resulting Hausdorff Edition makes clear that Hausdorff's contributions to mathematical modernity took place in the context of a deep engagement with literary and cultural modernism. It thus provides a potentially valuable window into the interdisciplinary cross-currents that shaped European thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, given the increasing dominance of English as a *lingua franca* for academic work in most disciplines, the paucity of English translations of Hausdorff's literary and philosophical writings has been a hindrance to scholarship.

During Hausdorff's lifetime, only a single poem from his 1900 poetry collection, *Ekstasen*, was published in English, and his drama, *Der Arzt seiner Ehre*, was translated into English only in 2021, under the aegis of the Hausdorff Center for Mathematics.³ I have published eight translations of poems from *Ekstasen* on the website KindOverMatter,⁴ and in July 2021, Benjamin Elkins' translation [1] of the first poem in *Ekstasen*, "Den Ungeflügelten," appeared in this journal.⁵ In 2022, in my online *Tandeta Books* journal, I made a first English-language translation of excerpts from Hausdorff's 1898 philosophical exploration of space and time, *Chaos in Cosmic Selection*.⁶

The current article is intended as another contribution to scholarly understanding of Hausdorff's work in the humanities, including its potential relationships with his mathematical thinking. It is structured as follows. The first section explains the genesis of my interest in Hausdorff and the rationale for the selection of the material presented here (four formal poems from the *Ekstasen* collection, along with its table of contents). A second section discusses and presents the four poems in both my English translations and

³The poem was "Dem Genius des Augenblicks," whose English translation appeared in 1910 and is included in Volume VIII of the collected works. (Personal communication from Walter Purkert.)

⁴I am a poet and novelist whose work can be seen at <https://www.tandetabooks.com>.

⁵Elkins has completed, but not yet published, a translation of the entire *Ekstasen* collection. (Personal communication.)

⁶The excerpts were those chosen by Walter Purkert for inclusion in his short biography of Hausdorff, which has appeared in German and is being translated into English by David Rowe. (Personal communication from Walter Purkert.)

their German originals. A third section concludes by offering some conjectures and suggestions for further exploration of Hausdorff's work. Finally, an appendix contains the full list of titles of poems included in *Ekstasen*, in German and in my English translation.

2. Discovering Hausdorff

I first became aware of Hausdorff through the physicist Freeman Dyson (1923–2020), with whom I corresponded in the last few years of his life. In response to a question from me about what mathematicians really meant when they used the word “dimension,” Freeman wrote that his favorite formal definition of the concept was the one that bore Hausdorff's name. This led me to read about Hausdorff on [Wikipedia](#), become fascinated by his life and work, and ultimately to obtain a copy of the first edition of *Ekstasen* from an online antiquarian bookseller. Intriguingly, the copy I purchased bears a handwritten inscription that the vendor speculated could have been penned by Hausdorff himself; see [Figure 1](#). It reads, in German: “Dedicated to you with the deepest admiration, from you-know-who.” (“Widmet Ihnen in tiefster Verehrung — Sie wissen wer”). It was delightful to imagine Hausdorff inscribing this book to someone, perhaps at a festive gathering to mark the book's publication, and even more delightful to find that the poems themselves are highly interesting.

While the title *Ekstasen* is sometimes translated by commentators as “Ecstasy,” the original's plural form conveys the sense of ecstatic transports of thought and emotion. Each poem can thus be thought of as one of these “transports.” Strikingly, however, the majority of these flights of imagination take place in highly structured forms. The book contains 157 poems in total, 55 of which are in free verse: 30 in the book's opening section, “Falterflüge” (Flights of the Butterfly) and 25 in its final section, “Vermischte Gedichte” (Mixed Poems). The remaining 102 poems are formal ones, which take up the two intermediate sections of the collection. There are 70 “Sonette” (Sonnets) followed by 32 “Rondels” (Rondels).

The precision and grace with which Hausdorff employs the sonnet and rondel in *Ekstasen* make clear that he brought to his poetic work both a quasi-mathematical concern with formal rigor, and a great capacity for emotional expressiveness. This combination of attributes is perhaps best seen in Hausdorff's formal poems on the topic of romantic love (which as the list of titles

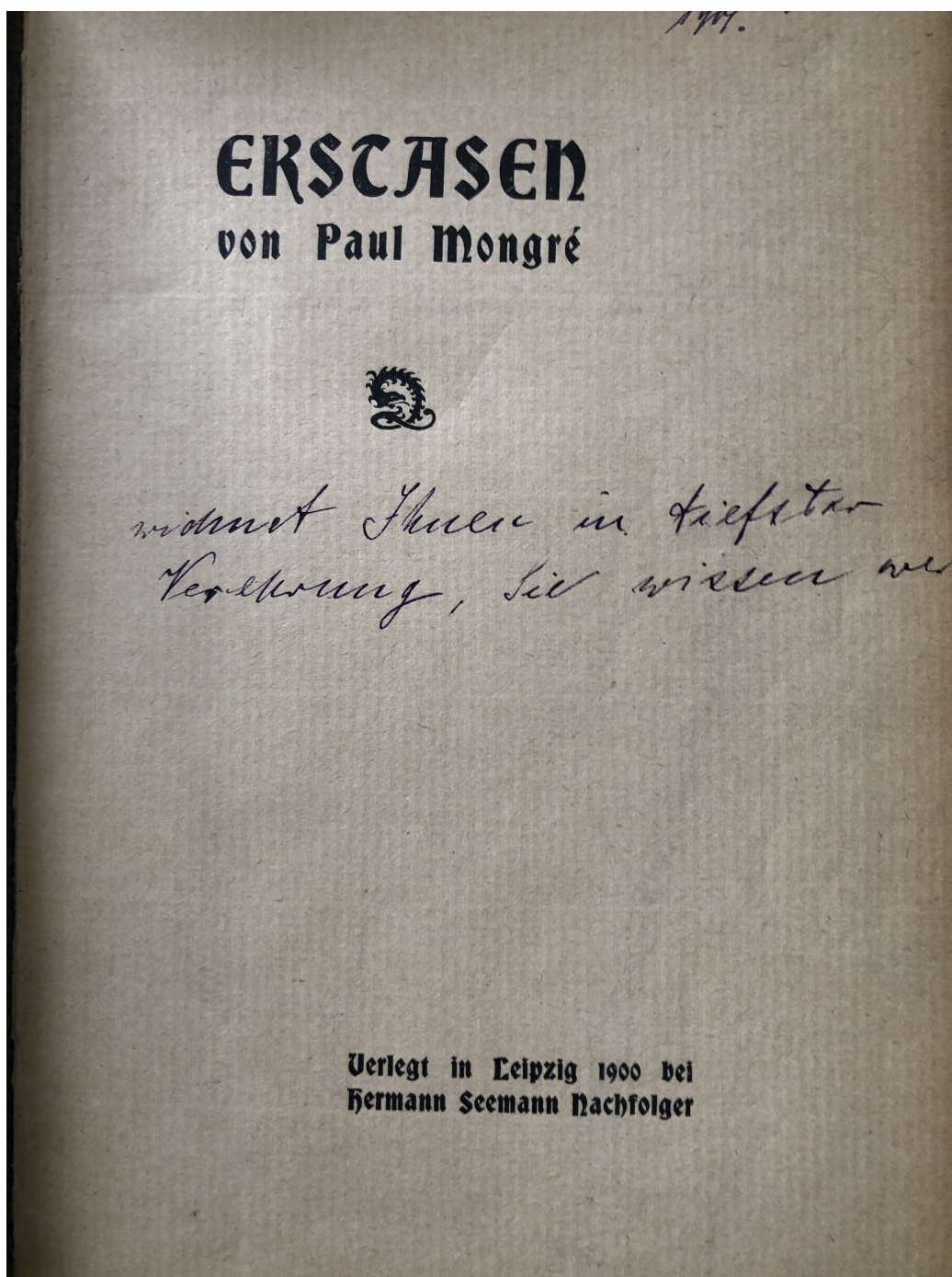


Figure 1: A handwritten inscription inside my copy of the *Ekstasen*.

in Appendix A indicates, was one of his most frequent subjects). I have therefore chosen to focus on four of his formal love poems in the section that follows.

Because of its extreme focus on the formal properties of language, including meter and rhyme, poetry is in some sense impossible to translate. Any “translation” of a poem created in one language is in fact a re-creation in a new tongue of what the translator considers the most salient aspects of the original. Inevitably, judgments must be made about whether to emphasize the conveyance of the literal meaning of individual words, or to focus on creating formally and sonorously felicitous approximations of ideas. My choice has been to prioritize the latter, out of the conviction that Hausdorff himself was striving in these texts for a successful use of form. I believe he often chose certain words less for their precise shades of meaning than for their formal suitability, and if writing in English would have chosen from among a suite of related terms whose sound and scansion facilitate construction of the same form in English.

Most importantly, I have sought to share with English-speaking audiences what I consider to be the emotional and aesthetic impact of the German originals. This means that while I have made great effort to maintain the scansion and rhyme scheme of the original works, slant (or inexact) rhyme has occasionally been employed when no exact rhyme with the appropriate semantic resonance could be found.

In order to allow the English-language reader to enjoy the poems most easily, I am providing a brief introduction to each poem, then presenting it in my English translation, and finally sharing the German original.

3. Translating Hausdorff

Turning / Wandlung

“Turning,” the first sonnet in Ekstasen, portrays the pain of a love relationship’s ending. The original contains an innovative coinage of a new, poetic noun, “Dein-Begehren,” which I have translated as “you-lust.” I also adopted this technique to create a new noun of my own, “joy-mirage,” to translate the “Gluecksgebild” or “image of joy” that Hausdorff shows us drifting in the mist.

Turning

They grumble softly that their time is through
The blue dreams and pale thoughts you put to flight
Your deadly dazzling rays of shining light
Dissolved them and they vanished, cursing you

A deep grief was the love you sent my way
And tender melancholy made me weak
Through mists I glimpsed the joy-mirage I seek
Till it took fright at you and turned away

You came too close to me: your love's strong force
Has drawn my heart outside its peaceful course
The pain at first was sweet, but now grows worse.

And longing — mix of anguish and delight
Now dwells where it hurts most and tries to fight
While you-lust cuts my heart, sharp as a knife

German Original: **Wandlung**

Still klagen sie, dass ihre Frist geendet
Die blauen Träume, bläßlichen Gedanken.
Sie klagen wider dich, vor der sie sanken,
Die tödtlich strahlend sie hinweggeblendet.

Ein scharfter Gram ward Liebe mir gesendet
An zarter Schwermut soll ich nicht mehr kränken
Auf Nebeln sah ein Glücksgebild ich schwanken
Von dir gescheucht hat sich's mir abgewendet.

Zu nah mir tratest du: dein starkes Lieben
Hat mich aus weiter Herzenruh' getrieben
Süß litt ich einst, nun soll ich bitter leiden.

Die Sehnsucht, sonst ein wonnig banges Fühlen
Weiß dort jetzt, wo's am wehsten thut, zu wühlen
Mit Dein-Begehren mir ins Herz zu schneiden.

The Look in Your Eyes / Dein Blick

The title of the second sonnet in the collection, "Dein Blick," literally means "your look" or "your gaze," but I have rendered it more idiomatically as "The Look in Your Eyes." It describes the uncanny feeling of recognition and attraction that can ignite a love affair.

The Look in Your Eyes

This pair of eyes, whose darkly melting gleam
 Binds me to you in love so shockingly
 That I wither like a lightning-blasted tree
 What dwells within them, and what do they mean?

It's no mere greeting to one's fellow man
 But rather something private, tender, fond
 A look that rests upon a secret bond
 A sign you know we're part of the same clan

Perhaps in earlier lifetimes, I had kin
 Is it thus that you to me were given
 And does your glance wake memories grown dim?

Or does it shine with my distant tomorrow
 And is it an unborn child's drive for living
 That haunts me from your eyes with lover's sorrow?

German Original: **Dein Blick**

Dies Augenpaar, von dunklem Glanz betaut
 Zu dem mich Liebe so erschütternd faßte
 Daß ich verdorrt, gleich blitzgetroffenem Aste
 Was ist's, das mir aus ihm entgegenschaut?

Das war kein Gruß, wie Gast ihn beut dem Gaste
 So glühend innerlich, so tief vertraut
 Ein Blick der auf geheimstes Bündnis baut
 Erkennungszeichen der verwandten Kaste.

Eh' denn ich lebte, hatt' ich Brüder, Schwestern:
 Wärst deren Eine du mir beigegeben
 Und weckt dein Blick mir ein verschollnes Gestern?

Ach, oder strahlt aus ihm ein fernes Morgen
 Und eines Ungeborenen Drang zu leben
 Quält mich aus deinem Aug' mit Liebessorgen?

On Waking and Dreams / Traum und Erwachen

“On Waking and Dreams” captures the experience of imagining one’s absent lover in dreams, only to experience the pain of loss upon awakening.

On Waking and Dreams

You came to me in dreams, invisibly
 You glowed as warmth, all hidden from the light
 More present, though, than anything I see
 Much closer to my heart all through the night

Filled up with you, I yielded, swept away
 Commanded not to look upon your face
 Thus too the formless God meets those who pray
 As their souls approach the darkness of the grave

I lay in you as if in the womb of Eve
 My body stretching like a cloth you weave
 And felt myself through endless space unspool

Then the dawn broke! As it lit up the world
 Of objects, much was seen and much obscured —
 Including you, by sun-rays sharp and cruel.

German Original: **Traum und Erwachen**

Ich hab’ von dir geträumt, doch sah dich nicht
 Als Wärme warst du ohne Licht entglommen
 Viel Gegenwärt’ger als dem Angesicht
 Viel näher warst dem Fühlen du gekommen

Von dir erfüllt, bemeistert, hingenommen:
 Kein Dich-Erkennen, seliger Verzicht!
 So dämmert wohl gestaltlos Gott dem Frommen
 Wenn Dunkel Ihm der Erde Saum umflieht.

Ich lag in dir, im Schoß des ersten Weibes;
 Mich endlos dehnend, fühlt' ich meines Leibes
 Geheimste Faser noch von dir benetzt.

Aufsprüht der Tag! der läßt in hundert Spitzen
 Der Dinge sichtbar Einzelnes erblitzen
 Ach! Auch das Dein'ge, das mich schwer verletzt!

Orgy / Orgie

Finally, the rondel "Orgy" describes not a literal orgy involving more than two sexual partners, but rather the orgiastic joy of the sexual union between a pair of new lovers, which is likened to a state of intoxication or frenzy. The "bacchante" in the last stanza refers to the mythical Bacchae, famously passionate female followers of Dionysus, the god of wine.

Orgy

My frenzy builds like madness, more and more
 With all the veils between us torn apart
 Just hours ago you faced me, calm, demure
 Now your bare skin glows to light the dark

Your nakedness is no transgression, for
 The crime is that clothes ever hid your heart
 My frenzy builds like madness, more and more
 With all the veils between us torn apart

I first drank in the outlines of your form
 But now my soul's deep in your every part
 Oh you. . . where are we? From your bacchante pores
 Waft scents of linens drenched with our desire
 My frenzy builds like madness, more and more

German Original: **Orgie**

Und immer toller wird des Rausches Flug
 Und aller Fremdheit Schleier sind zerrissen
 Vor Stunden noch, da warst du spröd und klug
 Nun gluehst du huellenlos aus Finsternissen

Nicht deiner Nachtkehit schaem dich: dein Gewissen
Verklag' dich, dass dein Leib je huellen trug!
Und immer wilder wird des Rausches Flug
Und aller Fremdheit Schleier sind zerrissen

Erst schauend trank ich deiner Linien Bug
Nun bin ich wuehlend ganz in dich verbissen.
O du. . . wo sind wir? ein Bacchantenzug
Schwärmt wirbelnd aus den wollustschwülen Kissen
Und immer toller wird des Rausches Flug

4. Exploring Hausdorff

I hope that as scholars become more aware of Hausdorff's multidisciplinary writings, connections will be drawn not only from his mathematical ideas to his philosophical work, but among all his areas of linguistic and mathematical endeavor. It is conceivable that making these connections may shed new light on his known achievements and their potential relevance for today.

For example, Hausdorff's famous 1914 *Set Theory* contains extensive commentary on mathematical terminology, as well as descriptions that employ literary devices such as simile and storytelling to help readers overcome their bafflement at the "paradoxes of infinity." Might his attentiveness to these features of language have played a role in his ability to reconceive "distance" metaphorically, with such important consequences for topology?

References

- [1] Benjamin Elkins, "Felix Hausdorff's Poem "Den Ungeflügelten"," *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, Volume 11 Issue 2 (July 2021), pages 405–408. doi:[10.5642/jhummath.202102.23](https://doi.org/10.5642/jhummath.202102.23)
- [2] Felix Hausdorff, *Ekstasen*, Hermann Seemann, Leipzig, 1900.

A. *Ekstasen* Sections and Poem Titles

Falterflüge/Flights of the Butterfly

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Den Ungeflügelten/To Those Without Wings | 16. Abschied/Farewell |
| 2. Psyche/Psyche | 17. Welt-Tod/The Death of the World |
| 3. Mein Leid/My Song | 18. Flatterrätsel/Fluttering Riddle |
| 4. Den Nachtfaltern/To the Night Moths | 19. Geburt/Birth |
| 5. Im Walde/In the Woods | 20. Heimkehr/Homecoming |
| 6. Paradies/Paradise | 21. Wiederkunft/Return |
| 7. Freundschaft und Gesellschaft/
Friendship and Society | 22. In Mitten der Welt/In the Middle of the World |
| 8. Sonntag/Sunday | 23. Mittag/Midday |
| 9. Den höheren Menschen/The Evolved | 24. Bethörung/Condemnation |
| 10. Wille und Zukunft/Will and Future | 25. Vergessenheit/On Being Forgotten |
| 11. Vorsommer/Pre-summer | 26. Zuviel/Too Much |
| 12. Narrenglück/Fool's Fortune | 27. Tiefste Stille/Deepest Quiet |
| 13. Gespenster/Ghosts | 28. Traum und Leben/Dream and Life |
| 14. Klage des Narren/The Fool's Lament | 29. Die guten Dinge/The Good Things |
| 15. Wolken/Clouds | 30. Dem Geist der Schwere/To the Spirit of Gravity |

Sonette/Sonnets

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Wandlung/Turning | 3. Der Liebe Wehen/The Pains of Love |
| 2. Dein Blick/Your Eyes | |

4. Tödliche Liebe/Fatal Love
5. Zu Grunde/At the Root
6. Traum und Erwachen/On Waking and Dreams
7. Die Kerze/The Candle
8. Bildnerliebe/The Painter's Love
9. Gewißheit/Certainty
10. Harter Trost/Cold Comfort
11. Der Blitz/Lightning
12. Unterwegs/The Journey
13. Gesetz der Liebe/The Law of Love
14. Die Krone/The Crown
15. Unverhofft/More than I Hoped
16. Schlimmstenfalls/Worst-Case Scenario
17. Gebranntes Kind/Once Bitten
18. Beschränkung/Limits
19. Musik/Music
20. Thränen/Tears
21. Nach Sonnenuntergang/Twilight
22. Zweierlei Liebe/Dual Love
23. Vergiß mein nicht/Don't Forget Mine
24. Die Fessell/Fetters
25. Herbst/Autumn
26. Unter Loos/Our Fate
27. Sehnsucht/Longing
28. Usurpatrix/Usurping Woman
29. Unrettbar/Lost
30. Wider mich selbst/At odds with myself
31. Aufruhr/Upheaval
32. Letzte Hilfe/Last Chance
33. Desperation/Desperation
34. Jugend/Youth
35. Abschied/Farewell
36. Verfrühtes Dichten/A Poem too Soon
37. Zähmung/Domestication
38. Sonne und Liebe/Sun and Love
39. Der längste Weg/The Longest Path
40. Anbetung/Supplication
41. Wunsch und Verzicht/Denial and Desire
42. Rückfall/Regression
43. Trotz/Solace
44. Götterneid/The Envy of the Gods
45. Kühl und Klug/Calm and Collected
46. Lethe/Lethe

- | | |
|--|---|
| 47. Vorbei/Past | 59. Der Fischer/The Fisherman |
| 48. Drei Seen/Three Lakes | 60. Das Vorgebirge von Portofino/The Foothills of Portofino |
| 49. Rancune/Rancor | 61. Sant Ilario/Sant' Ilario |
| 50. Wille zur Mühsal/The Will to Toil | 62. Eza/Eza |
| 51. An ein schönes Weib/To a Beautiful Woman | 63. In der Medicäerkapelle/In the Medici Chapel: Lorenzo |
| 52. Eleonora Duse/Eleonora Duse | 64. In der Medicäerkapelle/In the Medici Chapel: Giuliano |
| 53. Der Mönch/The Monk | 65. Der Obelisk/The Obelisk |
| 54. Der Soldat/The Soldier | 66. Einer Todten/To a Dead Man |
| 55. Waldschreck/Fear of the Forest | 67. Ostern/Easter |
| 56. In den Felsen/Among the Rocks | 68. Michelangelos Pietà/ Michelangelo's Pietà |
| 57. Schauen and Schaffen/Show and Tell | 69. Certosa/Certosa |
| 58. Schwindel/Vertigo | 70. Das Sonett an den Dichter/The Poets' Sonnet |

Rondels

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Aus dem Pierrot Lunaire/From the Pierre Lunaire of Albert Giraud: Heimat Duft/The Fragrance of Home | 4. Columbine/Columbine |
| 2. Aus dem Pierrot Lunaire/From the Pierre Lunaire of Albert Giraud: Ein Elend/A Misery | 5. Bergzauber/Mountain Magic |
| 3. Aus dem Pierrot Lunaire/From the Pierre Lunaire of Albert Giraud: Pierrot Dandy/Pierrot Dandy | 6. Fiasco/Fiasco |
| | 7. Selbstmord/Suicide |
| | 8. Sonnenbad/Sunbathing |
| | 9. Gegen die Liebe/Against Love |
| | 10. Schwarz und Weiß/Black and White |

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|--|--|
| 11. Besinnung/Reflection | 22. Begegnung/Encounter |
| 12. Einer Unberührten/To the Untouched | 23. Der Schlüssel/The Key |
| 13. Toilette/Toilette | 24. Carmen/Carmen |
| 14. Erkenntnis/Recognition | 25. Am Kamin/By the Hearthside |
| 15. Zuchtwahl/Pick Your Poison | 26. Edler Verzicht/Noble Forbearance |
| 16. Bei den Skythen/Among the Scythians | 27. Orgie/Orgy |
| 17. Sündheim/Sin | 28. Dem Genius des Augenblicks/To the Genius of the Moment |
| 18. Seliges Verstummen/In Blissful Silence | 29. Demeter/Demeter |
| 19. Die Hexe/The Witch 1 | 30. Katastrophe/Catastrophe |
| 20. Die Hexe/The Witch 2 | 31. Drei Blätter/Three Leaves |
| 21. Anders/Different | 32. Notturmo/Nocturne |

Vermischte Gedichte/Assorted Poems

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Verzaubert/Bewitched | 10. Zu Ende/Finished |
| 2. Grausame Liebe/Viscous Love | 11. Erfrorene Liebe/The Love that Froze to Death |
| 3. Zu lange stumm/Too Long Silent | 12. Letzter Dank/Final Thanks |
| 4. Kein Friede/No Peace | 13. Götzendienst/Idol Worship |
| 5. Der Kelch/The Chalice | 14. Mittagschrecken/Noontime Fright |
| 6. Böses Spiel/The Wicked Game | 15. Liebestod/Liebestod |
| 7. Meine Rache/My Revenge | 16. Weltbrand/Conflagration |
| 8. Schimpf am Schimpf/Scolding | 17. Wer zuerst lacht?/Who laughs first? |
| 9. An meiner Feindin/To My Lady Enemy | |

- | | |
|---|--|
| 18. Die Gräberstraße/Cemetery Street | 22. Zarathustras Liebeslied/Zarathustras Love Song |
| 19. Der Rabe/The Raven | 23. Auf dem Grat/On the Heights |
| 20. Die Sterbekammer/The Chamber of Death | 24. Herbstwunsch/Autumn Hope |
| 21. Zwei Wiederkauer/Chewing their Cud | 25. Die drei Ultäre/The Three Ultars |