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.

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Ekstasen: Love Poetry by Felix Hausdorff

Kimberly Gladman

Newton, Massachusetts, USA
kgladman@gmail.com

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. 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 Montré (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.

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 Rubaiyat 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. I have published eight translations of poems from *Ekstasen* on the website KindOverMatter, and in July 2021, Benjamin Elkins’ translation [1] of the first poem in *Ekstasen*, “Den Ungeflügelten,” appeared in this journal. 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*.

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

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3 The 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.)

4 I am a poet and novelist whose work can be seen at [https://www.tandetabooks.com](https://www.tandetabooks.com).

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

6 The 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.)
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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 kranken
Auf Nebeln sah ein Glückgebild 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 wählen
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 betaub
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 umflicht.
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 glühst 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


A. *Ekstasen* Sections and Poem Titles

Falterflüge/Flights of the Butterfly

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

Sonette/Sonnets

1. Wandlung/Turning
2. Dein Blick/Your Eyes
3. Der Liebe Wehen/The Pains of Love
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
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 Hülfe/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
48. Drei Seen/Three Lakes
49. Rancuné/Rancor
50. Wille zur Mühsal/The Will to Toil
51. An ein schönes Weib/To a Beautiful Woman
52. Eleonora Duse/Eleonora Duse
53. Der Mönch/The Monk
54. Der Soldat/The Soldier
55. Waldschreck/Fear of the Forest
56. In den Felsen/Among the Rocks
57. Schauen and Schaffen/Show and Tell
58. Schwindel/Vertigo
59. Der Fischer/The Fisherman
60. Das Vorgebirge von Portofino/The Foothills of Portofino
61. Sant Ilario/Sant’ Ilario
62. Eza/Eza
63. In der Medicäerkapelle/In the Medici Chapel: Lorenzo
64. In der Medicäerkapelle/In the Medici Chapel: Giuliano
65. Der Obelisk/The Obelisk
66. Einer Todten/To a Dead Man
67. Ostern/Easter
68. Michelangelos Pietà/ Michelangelo’s Pietà
69. Certosa/Certosa
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
2. Aus dem Pierrot Lunaire/From the Pierre Lunaire of Albert Giraud: Ein Elend/A Misery
3. Aus dem Pierrot Lunaire/From the Pierre Lunaire of Albert Giraud: Pierrot Dandy/Pierrot Dandy
4. Columbine/Columbine
5. Bergzauber/Mountain Magic
6. Fiasco/Fiasco
7. Selbstmord/Suicide
8. Sonnenbad/Sunbathing
9. Gegen die Liebe/Against Love
10. Schwarz und Weiß/Black and White
11. Besinnung/Reflection
12. Einer Unberührten/To the Un-touched
13. Toilette/Toilette
14. Erkenntnis/Recognition
15. Zuchtwahl/Pick Your Poison
16. Bei den Skythen/Among the Scythians
17. Sündheim/Sin
18. Seliges Verstummen/In Blissful Silence
19. Die Hexe/The Witch 1
20. Die Hexe/The Witch 2
21. Anders/Different

Vermischte Gedichte/Assorted Poems

1. Verzaubert/Bewitched
2. Grausame Liebe/Viscous Love
3. Zu lange stumm/Too Long Silent
4. Kein Friede/No Peace
5. Der Kelch/The Chalice
6. Böses Spiel/The Wicked Game
7. Meine Rache/My Revenge
8. Schimpf am Schimpf/Scolding
9. An meiner Feindin/To My Lady Enemy

10. Zu Ende/Finished
11. Erfrorene Liebe/The Love that Froze to Death
12. Letzter Dank/Final Thanks
13. Götzendienst/Idol Worship
14. Mittagschrecken/Noontime Fright
15. Liebestod/Liebestod
16. Weltbrand/Conflagration
17. Wer zuerst lacht?/Who laughs first?
18. Die Gräberstraße/Cemetery Street
19. Der Rabe/The Raven
20. Die Sterbekammer/The Chamber of Death
21. Zwei Wiederkauer/Chewing their Cud
22. Zarathustras Liebeslied/Zarathustras Love Song
23. Auf dem Grat/On the Heights
24. Herbstwunsch/Autumn Hope
25. Die drei Ultäre/The Three Ultars