

# CURRENT BOOKS

## FELLOWS' CHOICE

*Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center*

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### THE SINKING OF THE

### TITANIC: A Poem

by Hans Magnus  
Enzensberger  
Houghton, 1980  
98 pp. \$11.95

To many writers today, *commitment* means joining the ranks of capitalism or socialism. If a writer is smart, he knows, whatever his ideology, that he has simply picked a lesser evil. If he is dumb, he denies that his side admits any wrongs at all. West German poet Enzensberger is living proof that there is another choice. His book-length, beautiful, Dantesque poem, with 33 cantos and 16 separate poems interspersed like parentheses, has been translated from the German by the author himself. It centers around the Titanic's mid-ocean catastrophe on April 14, 1912. Enzensberger describes the songs the ship's orchestra played, the last dinner menu, the radio messages for help. Serious themes rub elbows with happy ones; the style changes from lyric to epic to elegiac to dramatic. The disaster is a metaphor for civilization, in danger, too. Politically, it is a poem about lost illusions. The poet remembers writing the first verses years ago in Havana. There, he thought: *Tomorrow things will be better, and if not/ tomorrow, then the day after. O.K.—/ perhaps not much better really,/ but different, anyway . . . / A marvelous feeling. Oh, I remember it.* In reality, the party had ended even then. *And all that was left was matter/ to be dealt with by the man from the World Bank/ and the comrade from State Security,/ exactly like back home in any other place.* Despite the melancholy and bitterness of these lines, Enzensberger does not indulge in hopeless laments or cynicism. Who said that no good poem has a moral? This is a good poem, and it has a moral: If our ship is going to sink, we'd better learn to swim.

—Mario Vargas Llosa ('80)