

To the Reader

THIS EXCHANGE—“writes” of passage, if you will—began during the summer of 2013. Consider it a log from two immigrant writers, a poet and an essayist, marooned in the doldrums between the Old and New Worlds. For years, we sailed under the flag of phantom allegiances, pretending that our home ports (Romania and Italy) still existed. Without the illusion of safe harbor, mariners go mad at sea. Even Odysseus, the wiliest of wanderers, needed the fiction of Ithaca.

Hope filled our sails. We traveled ever westward to the New Atlantis of America. One day, however, like the crew in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

We stuck, nor breath or motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Forced to abandon ship, we found shelter and supplies on a nearby deserted island. Ever since, we have been studying out-of-date maps to chart a new course to God knows where. No luck, so far, but perhaps our notes will become a survival manual for fellow castaways like you.

Please pardon our accents. English is not our first language, but it is the language that we are compelled to write in. It baffles us, but as

Sicilian American scholar and writer Edvige Giunta observes, “Living in another culture and writing in another language sometimes offer an intellectual and creative freedom that living in your own culture and writing in your own language do not.” Perhaps we need to maintain our foreignness to access and jot these thoughts.



Dead Reckoning, the title of our book, is a nautical term. When instruments fail or when astronomical observation is impossible, navigators calculate a ship's position using the distance and direction traveled. This computation is based on compass readings, known speed, and figures culled from charts, logs, and almanacs. What seems an exact science is actually desperate guesswork. Navigators must make allowances for drift from the wind and currents, but these factors remain unpredictable and ultimately unknowable. In this sense, dead reckoning can function as an analogy for postmodernism, Europe's and America's collective groping in the dark because the West has lost or destroyed its bearings.

For those still recovering from the atrocities of the twentieth century, however, whether under Fascism or Communism, dead reckoning has an even grimmer meaning: toting up the butcher's bill of war and genocide. This is another, less frequently discussed side of postmodernism. The dead always have exacted guilt from the living, just as the living always have denied their complicity in past evil. Our generation, however, is the first to deny the meaning or even the possibility of history. This is foolish and arrogant. Despite the distractions of technology and commerce, nothing will spare us from a day of reckoning. The Furies always settle their accounts, whether or not they use Microsoft spreadsheets.



These concerns inspired the following poems and essays. It has been a harrowing odyssey—less a circumnavigation of the globe than a salvage

expedition in a naval graveyard. Significantly, our collaboration fell between the centennials of two maritime disasters: the wreck of the *Titanic* (April 14, 1912) and the sinking of the *Lusitania* (May 7, 1915). Both foreshadowed the greater shipwreck of Western civilization, from which Europe and America, we believe, are still floundering in shark-infested waters.

Thank you for allowing two amateur navigators the leeway to chart these tangents. We recognize, however, that in the wide Sargasso Sea of Internet culture, any book must be a message in a bottle. But this is the writer's perennial dilemma. "We work in the dark," said Henry James. "We do what we can. We give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."

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