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The Study of Two Related Polarities in Thomas Mann's Der Tog In Venedig

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A Study of Two Related
/
Sets of Polarities in

Thomas Mann's

Der Tod In Venedig

By Kenneth R. Olson

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Introduction

In commenting on Thomas Mann's Goethe and Tolstoi, Henry Hatfield¹ calls that essay "an extreme example of Mann's practice, which at times seems almost an obsession, of thinking in antitheses." He goes on to state that Mann "must occasionally distort his terms to fit them into a neat symmetrical system of polarities." This same tendency is present, too, in Mann's fiction, though there, due to the differing natures of art and criticism, any consequent distortion of terms is no vice. Der Tod in Venedig, in particular, suggests many such sets of dualities.

"Death in Venice is the setting for a dialectical formula Mann drives almost to Gnostic extremes through his maturest work. Out of the shameful, beauty; out of darkness, light. From sickness, health; from corruption, life. Out of the pit, resurrection."²

There are also such philosophical and critical dualities as the Schopenhauerian. Will and Idea, Aschenbach's own Mind and Art, the naïve and sentimental of Schiller, which Mann introduces early in the Novelle, myth and psychology, by which Mann himself has described his literary technique, and this list is by no means meant to be exhaustive.

It is this writer's intention to explore two such sets of polarities: Romanticism and Classicism on the one hand and the

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1. Thomas Mann, An Introduction to His Fiction (London, 1951), p. 154.
 2. Joseph Gerard Brennan, Three Philosophical Novelists (New York, 1964), p.133.

Apollonian and the Dionysian on the other. Certainly these are very closely related, but to equate them would be to run the danger of distorting the terms, for the two sets carry somewhat different associations. For this reason they will be treated separately in this paper which will aspire to show the very great importance of both to the content and structure of Der Tod in Venedig.

The Classic and the Romantic

"Romanticism bears in its heart the germ of morbidity, as the rose bears the worm; its innermost character is seduction, seduction to death." Thomas Mann.

The terms "classic" and "romantic" are both somewhat nebulous. Each generation has successively reinterpreted them for itself, and within each they have been a source of disagreement. Thus the "classicism" of Corneille and Racine is not that of Aeschylus or Sophocles, whereas the works of such a figure as Euripides have been claimed as classical by some, by others as romantic, and as jealously by both sides. Nor are the terms necessarily mutually exclusive, for the qualities of both seem to have coexisted harmoniously in Goethe whose "classical" works, moreover, provided inspiration for the English romanticists. Yet, though hard to define satisfactorily, the terms nevertheless have certain broad meanings, and are commonly recognized as somehow antithetical.

"Classic" refers, by and large, to the qualities of balance, form, objectivity, and restraint associated with the greatest works of art of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and to the culture of those peoples. German classicism flourished in the early nineteenth century, and had its center in Weimar. Including mainly Goethe and Schiller, it was yet rooted in a long tradition.

"On its formal side German Classicism is in the direct line of descent from the pseudo-classical doctrines of Opitz. Its models were, above all, the Ancients, and its laws the theories

of Aristotle. For Goethe and Schiller, as for Lessing and Winckelmann, the Greeks represented man in his highest perfection in an idyllic state of dignity and repose; the Greek gods they imagined as dwelling in a timeless world as symbols of the Golden Age, with Apollo, the serene Sun God, as the leader."³

"Romantic," somewhat characteristically, is the vaguer term. In the sense of adventurous, strange, odd, or fantastic, it was first made popular in England by Addison. Thence it made its way into Germany, where it acquired very definite associations:

"For whatever the significance of Romanticism for other countries, to the German mind it suggests a very definite school of thought; it evokes especially the remembrance of the little group of critics and poets whose leaders were the brothers Schleier and their wives, the philosopher Schelling, the theologian Schleiermacher, and the poets Tieck, Novalis, and Wackenroder, and which from time to time possessed local centres in Jena or Berlin."⁴

Their philosophers were Herder and Fichte, who taught feeling over intellect and the subjective self over the objective world. The ideas of sickness and death, cited in the foregoing quotation from Thomas Mann, were present almost from the beginning:

Interest in illness as creative, in suffering as redemptive, in death as a powerful stimulus to art and life, is a mark of

3. Leonard Ashley Willoughby, The Romantic Movement in Germany (London, 1930), p. 7.

4. Ibid., p. 3.

German romanticism from the romantic-biological rhapsodies of Novalis to Wozzeck's poet in love with death. Himself tubercular, Novalis believed that sickness of the flesh may be rooted in spirit, that life itself is a disease. Long before Dr. Krokowski ('I have never in my life come across a perfectly healthy human being') and Nietzsche ('Man is the sick animal') the poet of Hymns to the Night had declared that 'The idea of perfect health is interesting only from a scientific point of view. Sickness is necessary to individualization. How much Franz Schubert owed his morbid fancies to a literary fashion that pushed Symphonie mit dem Tode to the point of sentimentality, how much to anxiety over his terrible disease is hard to determine. At least we have the D minor ('Death and the Maiden') quartet and the great C minor quintet to point to, as well as Hans Castorp's favorite death-ditty 'Der Lindenbaum.'⁵

This morbid side of romanticism is of critical importance, especially if we are to credit Mann's statement of the "innermost Character" of romanticism as "seduction to death." In completing this picture, it is necessary to consider three later figures in the German romantic tradition, if only because of their dominant influence in shaping Mann's thought--Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche.

"Mann has repeatedly stated that these three romantics formed the constellation which long dominated the intellectual sky of his youth. He has testified to the intensity of his first

5. Brennan, p. 118.

experience of their works, and especially to the vividness of his 'discovery' of Schopenhauer. 'Only once does a person read in that way.' It is Mann's earlier fiction which best records his reaction to the three figures who stood, in his view, at the very summit of human culture."6

The similarities in spirit and ideology of these three to the Ältere Romantik are striking. All are subjective and emotional. Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy is decidedly death-oriented. Nietzsche, himself sickly, made illness a prominent motif in his writings. Wagner, afflicted with a skin disease which rendered him unable to wear next to his skin anything coarser than silk, and a virtual hypochondriac, recognized an almost erotic quality in death, and gave it immortal form in the Liebeströde. In this he also prefigured the work of Freud, whom Mann regarded as the psychologist. The "germ of morbidity," then, is indeed present in the heart of romanticism, and we shall perhaps find no more perfect example of the "seduction to death" than in the fate of Gustav von Aschenbach.

The death motif makes its appearance almost immediately in the opening of the Novelle to Aschenbach taking an "extended walk";

"Zufällig fand er den Halteplatz und seine Umgebung von Menschen leer. Weder auf der gepflasterten Ungererstrasse,

6. Hatfield, p. 155.

deren Schienengeleise sich einsam gleissend gegen Schwabing erstreckten, noch auf der Föhringer Chausee war ein Fuhrwerk zu sehen; hinter den Zäunen der Steinmetzereien, wo zu Kauf stehende Kreuze, Gedächtnistafeln und Monumente ein zweites, unbehaustes Gräberfeld bilden, regte sich nichts, und das byzantinische Bauwerk der Aussegnungshalle gegenüber lag schweigend im Abglanz des scheidenden Tages. Ihre Stirnseite, mit griechischen Kreuzen und hieratischen Schildereien im lichten Farben geschmückt, weist überdies symmetrisch angeordnete Inschriften in Goldlettern auf, ausgewählte, das jenseitige Leben betreffende Schriftworte, wie etwa: "Sie gehen ein in die Wohnung Gottes" oder: "Das ewige Licht leuchte ihnen"; und der Wartende hatte während einiger Minuten eine ernste Zerstreuung darin gefunden, die Fromeln abzulesen und sein geistiges Auge in ihrer durchscheinenden Mystik sich verlieren zu lassen, als er, aus seinen Träumereien zurückkehrend, im Portikus, oberhalb der beiden apokalyptischen Tiere, welche die Freitreppe bewachen, einen Mann bemerkte, dessen nicht ganz gewöhnliche Erscheinung seinen Gedanken eine völlig andere Richtung gab. (8) 7

7. He found the neighbourhood quite empty. Not a wagon in sight, either on the paved Ungererstrasse, with its gleaming tramlines stretching off towards Schwabing, nor on the Föhring highway. Nothing stirred behind the hedge in the stone-mason's yard, where crosses, monuments, and commemorative tablets made a supernumerary and untenanted graveyard opposite the real one.

(con't.)

In almost every sentence a memento mori! Erich Heller⁸ finds in the first pages of Der Tod in Venedig "an overture which contains in nuce the whole drama and is yet the beginning of the story proper." In the paragraph quoted above, not just death, but Venice also appears symbolically for the first time in the Novelle, "for it is, of course, already Venice which is present in the glistening desertion, the gleam of the departing day, the Byzantine structure, the ornate façade, the hieratic

The mortuary chapel, a structure in Byzantine style, stood facing it, silent in the gleam of the ebbing day. Its façade was adorned with Greek crosses and tinted hieratic designs, and displayed a symmetrically arranged selection of scriptural texts in gilded letters, all of them with a bearing upon the future life, such as: 'They are entering into the House of the Lord' and 'May the Sight Everlasting shine upon them.' Aschenbach beguiled some minutes of his waiting with reading these formulas and letting his mind's eye lose itself in their mystical meaning. He was brought back to reality by the sight of a man standing in the portico, above the two apocalyptic beasts that guarded the staircase, and something not quite usual in this man's appearance gave his thought

In this, as in all other English quotations from Death in Venice, the writer has used the H. T. Lowe-Porter translation (New York, 1964).

8. The Ironic German, A Study of Thomas Mann (Boston, 1958), p. 102.

designs, and the apocalyptic beasts!" 9

By far the most important death symbol in the Novelle is the stranger, who appears first on the steps of the mortuary chapel, and later, in various guises, throughout the narrative:

"Mässig hochgewachsen, mager, bartlos und auffallend stumpfnesig, gehörte der Mann zum rothaarigen Typ und besass dessen milchige und sommersprossige Haut. Offenbar war er durchaus nicht bajuwarischen Schlages: wie denn wenigstens der breit und gerade gerandete Basthut, der ihm den Kopf bedeckte, seinem Aussehen ein Gepräge des Fremdländischen und Weitherkommenden verlieh. Freilich trug er dazu den landesüblichen Rucksack um die Schultern geschnallt, einen gelblichen Gurtanzug aus Lodenstoff, wie es schien, einen grauen Wetterkragen über dem linken Unterarm, den er in die Weiche gestützt hielt, und in der Rechten einen mit eiserner Spitze versehenen Stock, welchen er schräg gegen den Boden stemmte und auf dessen Krücke er, bei gekreuzten Füßen, die Hüfte lehnte. Erhobenen Hauptes, so dass an seinem hager dem losen Sporthemd entwachsenden Halse der Adamsapfel stark und nackt herforttrat, blickte er mit farblosen, rotbewimperten Augen, zwischen denen, sonderbar genug zu seiner kurz aufgeworfenen Nase passend, zwei senkrechte, energische Furchen standen, scharf spähend ins Weite. So-und vielleicht trug sein erhöhter und erhöhender Standart zu diesem Eindruck bei--hatte seine

9. Ibid., p. 103.

Haltung etwas herrisch Überschauendes, Kühnes oder selbst Wildes; denn sei es, dass er, geblendet, gegen die untergehende Sonne grimassierte oder dass es sich um eine dauernde physiognomische Entstellung handelte; seine Lippen schienen zu kurz, sie waren völlig von den Zähnen zurückgezogen, dergestalt, dass diese, bis zum Zahnfleisch blossgelegt, weiss und lang dazwischen hervorableckten." (8) 10

10. "He was of medium height, thin, beardless, and strikingly snubnosed; he belonged to the redhaired type and possessed its milky, freckled skin. He was obviously not Bavarian; and the broad, straight-brimmed straw hat he had on even made him look distinctly exotic. True, he had the indigenous rucksack buckled on his back, wore a belted suit of yellowish woollen stuff, apparently frieze, and carried a grey mackintosh cape across his left forearm, which was propped against his waist. In his right hand, slantwise to the ground, he held an iron-shod stick, and braced himself against its crook, with his legs crossed. His chin was up, so that the Adam's apple looked very bald in the lean neck rising from the loose shirt; and he stood there sharply peering up into space out of colourless, red-lashed eyes, while two pronounced perpendicular furrows showed on his forehead in curious contrast to his little turned-up nose. Perhaps his heightened and heightening position helped out the impression Aschenbach received. At any rate, standing there as though at survey, the man had a bold and domineering, even a ruthless air, and his lips completed the picture by seeming to curl back, either

The stranger's face, with its snub-nose and bared long white teeth suggests a death's-head. His stance and his iron-shod stick are reminiscent of a Dürer image of Death with his scythe.¹¹ But the figure is composite, for

"...the stranger's long, scrawny neck with its starkly protruding Adam's apple, red eyelashes over pale eyes, would amply identify the Lord of Hell even if it were not for the two 'vertical, energetic furrows' etched on his forehead and drawn down between his eyes, which--ever since Dante's day--have served to symbolize the devil's mythical horns." ¹²

The association with Dürer is especially fruitful in ties with the romantic past. In The Birth of Tragedy¹³, Nietzsche recommends Dürer's "The Knight, Death, and the Devil" as a symbol, and identifies the knight with Schopenhauer.

The stranger appears again several times in the course of the action. The exact number of his appearances is a matter of disagreement among critics, for not only is the stranger himself

by reason of some deformity or else because he grimaced, being blinded by the sun in his face; they laid bare the long white, glistening teeth to the gums.

11. Heller, p. 104.

12. André von Gronicka, "Myth Plus Psychology: A Stylistic Analysis of Death in Venice," in: Henry Hatfield, ed., Thomas Mann, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964), p. 52.

13. translated by Francis Golffing (New York, 1956), p. 123.

a composite figure, but certain of his attributes occur singly or by suggestion in other characters of the Novelle. Certainly he reappears more or less intact in the gondolier, who may also be identified with Charon. The snub-nose, the appearance of being "non-Italian," as the original stranger was non-Bavarian, the bared white teeth--all are present. He wields his gondolier's oar as his precursor did the iron-shod stick. The "malevolent street-singer" is even more strikingly a repetition of the original. Red-haired, snub-nosed, he was "scarcely a Venetian type." He has the prominent Adam's apple, and the deep furrows between his brows. André von Grenicka¹⁴ finds the stranger reappearing also in "the lewd and lascivious old fop" and "the goatee'd captain of the ship from Pola." He sees the latter, while on the realistic level selling Aschenbach a first-class ticket to Venice, drawing up "a first-rate devil's pact":

"...er schrieb grosse Krahnenfüsse, streute aus einer Büchse blauen Sand auf die Schrift, liess ihn in eine tönernerne Schale ablaufen, faltete das Papier mit gelben und knochigen Fingern und schrieb aufs neue. (20)¹⁵

Erich Heller¹⁶ includes Tadzio also among the images of death, because "Mann makes him stand at the balustrade of the

14. p. 53.

15. "He made some scrawls on the paper, strewed bluish sand on it out of a box, thereafter letting the sand run off into an earthen vessel, folded the paper with bony yellow fingers, and wrote on the outside."

16. p. 112.

terrace in a position reminiscent of the stranger in Munich: 'with his legs crossed' and one of his arms 'propped against his waist.'"

All these examples illustrate Mann's expanded technique of the leitmotif, itself a Wagnerian device, which encompasses the repetition not merely of phrases but of whole actions, situations and characters. This technique was to reach its fullest development in The Magic Mountain and the Joseph tetralogy.¹⁷ It is used again, to great effect, in Der Tod in Venedig, when Aschenbach, at the nadir of his degradation, becomes the image of the old fop who had so disgusted him in the beginning of the story.

The early German romantics, such as the Schlegels, sought to achieve a Gesamtkunstwerk, a "total work of art," which should comprise music, literature, drama, and the fine arts all in one form. It was a goal achieved in large part by Richard Wagner in his music dramas. In describing the techniques employed in Der Tod in Venedig, as we have already seen, critics have resorted to such musical terms as "overture" and "leitmotif." The evocation of Dürer's works has also been alluded to. It may not be too tenuous a hypothesis, therefore, that in his Novelle, Thomas Mann has resorted to this characteristic technical approach of romanticism, which, coupled with the overall classical style of the story, led Erich Heller to call it "a parody of the classical manner achieved with Wagnerian methods."¹⁸

17. Hatfield, op. cit., p. 95.

18. p. 107.

In A Sketch of My Life,¹⁹ Thomas Mann wrote that his own trip to the Lido in the spring of 1911 provided him with "all the materials for his novella":

"The wanderer by the North Cemetery in Munich, the gloomy ship from Pola, the old fop, the ambiguous gondolier, Tadzio and his family, the departure frustrated by missending the baggage, the cholera, the honest clerk in the travel bureau, the malevolent street singer, and whatever other element might be mentioned--everything was given," and "showed its interpretability and usefulness as an element of composition in the most astonishing way."

Whereas this information is useful in explaining the source, in a purely naturalistic sense, of the important details of the action of Der Tod in Venedig, only the peculiar nature of the artist's imagination can explain the astonishing "interpretability and usefulness" of these details as elements of composition. For clues, however, it may be useful to look to the locale both of Thomas Mann's excursion and of the Novelle, the city of Venice itself.

To the German romanticists of the preceding century, Venice was a name to conjure with. It had long been regarded as the outpost of the East, with its trade with the Levant and its Byzantine architecture. The city possesses long-standing and often intermingled historical and artistic traditions, especially to the German mind. In reference to Der Tod in Venedig, Mann

¹⁹ Quoted by Gronicka, p. 48.

himself frequently quoted the opening lines of the Tristan sonnet of Platen's:

Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen,
Ist dem Tode schon anheimgegeben,
Wird für keinen Dienst der Erde taugen.²⁰

The title Tristan reminds us that Richard Wagner is also associated with Venice; his own Tristan was written there, and he himself died there in what Nietzsche called the "hallowed hour." In the Liebestod, Wagner echoes and at the same time gives a new and perfect form to the ideas of death and beauty contained in Platen's poem and, later, in Mann's Novelle.

Nietzsche has already been mentioned several times in the course of this study, and the philosopher's own experience with Venice may, as Roger A. Nicholls²¹ suggests, have played an important role in Mann's formulation of the action of his story. In May 1886, Nietzsche was, as Aschenbach had once been, forced to leave Venice because of the climate. Three weeks later he wrote to his sister that he had left the city just in time, because a cholera epidemic had meanwhile come into the open and Venice was quarantined.

On another level, the symbolic associations of Venice make it a natural location for the story:

20 "Whoever has beheld beauty with his eyes is already submitted to death, is good for no earthly service."

21. Nietzsche in the Early Work of Thomas Mann (Berkeley, 1955) p. 90.

"If Gustav Aschenbach had no choice, neither had Thomas Mann. He could not have chosen another scene for Aschenbach's doom. Venice is its inevitable location. For it seems a city built by the very Will to Power in honour of Death. Teeming with Life, it is yet entirely Art, the residence of Eros Thanatos, the Liebestod, the music of which it has inspired just as it has inspired Nietzsche's one almost perfect lyrical poem."²²

The whole atmosphere of the city is unwholesome. There is always "the faintly rotten scent of swamp and sea." Beneath all else lurks the cholera, like the crouching tiger Mann uses as a recurrent motif, kept a secret by the city officials out of love of gain. There are more symbols of death: the gondolas are "coffin-black and dully black-upholstered." Frederick J. Hoffman²³ sees the limitless sea, connoting eternity and oblivion as a pre-eminent death symbol:

"Perhaps the most elaborate use of the sea symbol is found in Mann's Death in Venice,... Venice and the sea are at the beginning of Aschenbach's decline (before he knows of it) framed neatly, though even then there are omens of disaster; as he falls in love with Tadzio, the sea acts as background of the 'perfect form' of his beloved; eventually we see the terrifying conflict between Aschenbach's notion of 'perfect form', which itself is empty, and the chaos described both in the sea and in the pestilential

22. Heller, p. 106.

23. The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination (Princeton, 1964), p. 11.

streets of Venice."

Aschenbach's "Seduction to death" begins when the sight of the stranger awakens in him the desire to travel. It is a seduction which is carried on by the ship's captain, who produces a devil's contract, by the Charon-figure of the gondolier, and finally by Tadzio, who appears first as the perfect form of beauty, then as an object of unnatural passion, and finally as an image of death itself. It is in this seduction that the romantic primarily manifests itself in the Novelle. There are, moreover, references, stated and implied, which tie the work in with the literary and historical traditions of German romanticism. Finally, there is the employment of characteristically romantic techniques, such as the Wagnerian leitmotif.

The classic manifests itself in Der Tod in Venedig both in form and in content: in form, by its influence on structure and style; in content, through an abundance of allusions to classical mythology, history, and art.

Structure, ^{ally} in accordance with the Novelle form, the story is strikingly unified. Every part contributes to the whole--there is nothing extraneous.

"In Death in Venice there is indeed hardly a detail which is not 'telling', which does not tell in its miniature way the entire story. Yet the total effect is not one of overloading but of complete lucidity. In fact, what stays in the mind and absorbs every detail is a truly monumental vision: a man meeting
his fate

in beauty, a man on his own, whom we never see in the company of other people, and of whose past life we know next to nothing. ...Death in Venice, alone among all the works of extreme psychological realism, achieves in all seriousness the parodistic semblance of mythic innocence. It is a triumph of deliberation and intuition, helped not a little by the limited scope of the chosen form. 24

Der Tod in Venedig is in Aristotelian terms, the imitation of a single action, the destruction of Gustav von Aschenbach. This unity of action is the foremost of the three traditional "unities" of action, time, and place, and the only one mentioned explicitly in Aristotle's Poetics. Mann's Novelle also maintains a certain unity of time, not the twenty-four hour limit commonly held to by Greek drama, but a span appropriate to a short narrative. All the action of the story takes place in the course of a few weeks. Except for the very beginning of the Novelle, moreover, everything takes place in Venice, and even Aeschylus made a change of scene from Delphi to Athens in the Eumenides. The distinctly non-classical elements of the structure, such as the use of the leitmotif, serve nevertheless, as was implied above, the classical aim of unity.

The style exhibits the classical elements of balance and restraint. Even in the delineation of Aschenbach's passion, a distance of narrative approach is maintained which culminates

in the description of his death:

"Minuten vergingen bis man dem seitlich im Stuhle Hinabgesunkenen zu Hilfe eilte. Man brachte ihn auf sein Zimmer. Und noch desselben Tages empfing eine respektvoll erschütterte Welt die Nachricht von seinem Tode." (82)²⁵

It is a parody of Aschenbach's own style of which we are told:

"Etwas Amtlich-Erzieherisches trat mit der Zeit in Gustav Aschenbachs Vorführungen ein, sein Stil entriet in späteren Jahren der unmittelbaren Kühnheiten, der subtilen und neuen Abschwächungen, er wandelte sich ins Mustergültig-Feststehende, Geschliffen-Herkömmliche, Erhaltende, Formelle, selbst Formelhafte, und wie die Überlieferung es von Ludwig XIV wissen will, so verbannte der Alternde aus seiner Sprachweise jedes gemeine Wort." (18)²⁶

In describing Tadzio, Mann even employs classical dac-

25. "Some minutes passed before anyone hastened to of the elderly man sitting there collapsed in his chair. They bore him to his room. And before nightfall a shocked and respectful world received the news of his decease.

26. "With time, an official note, something almost expository, crept into Gustave Aschenbach's method. His later style gave up the old sheer audacities, the fresh and subtle nuances-- it became fixed and exemplary, conservative, formal, even formulated. Like Louis XIV--or as tradition has it of him--Aschenbach, as he went on in years, banished from his style every common word."

tylic hexameters²⁷: "...ruhte die Blüte des Hauptes in unvergleichlichem Liebreiz." (34) The juxtaposition of classical style with romantic subject matter inevitably results in an extreme irony: "Tristan in hexameters--the obvious absurdity of the suggestion is the measure of the startling success of Death in Venice."²⁸

The classical content of the story is well represented by the numerous mutations of the boy Tadzio in Aschenbach's mind. At his first appearance, for example, he is compared to a Greek statue:

"Sein Antlitz, bleich und anmutig verschlossen, von honigfarbenem Haar umringelt, mit der gerade abfallenden Nase, dem lieblichen Munde, dem Ausdruck von holdem und göttlichem Ernst, erinnerte an griechische Bildwerke aus edelster Zeit." (30)²⁹

When next we see him he is a Phaeax, favored of the gods. Almost immediately, he is a statue of Eros, the god of love:

"...das Haupt des Eros, vom gelblichen Schmelze par-

27. Heller, p. 108.

28. Ibid., p. 107.

29. "His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture--pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity."

ischen Marmors, in feinem und ernsten Brauen, Schläfen und Ohr vom rechtwinklig einspringenden Geringle des Haares dunkel und weich bedeckt." (34)³⁰

Now he appears as an angry young god, now as youthful Alcibiades, wooed and sought after by the other children, now as Venus, emerging from the spray:

"...zu sehen, wie die lebendige Gestalt, vormännlich hold und herb, mit triefenden Locken und schön wie ein Gott, herkommend aus den Tiefen von Himmel und Meer, dem Elemente entstieg und entrann! dieser Anblick gab mythische Vorstellungen ein, er war wie Dichterkunde von anfänglichen Zeiten, vom Ursprung der Form und von der Geburt der Götten." (38)³¹

Tadzio, who will never live to grow old, is linked with Achilles. Like Narcissus, he admires his own reflection in the water. Aschenbach imagines himself as Socrates, holding forth to Tadzio's Phaedrus, as Zeus in the form of an eagle bearing Tadzio aloft like Ganymede, as Zephyr with Tadzio as Hyacinthus. All these associations serve on the one hand to

30. "It was the head of Eros, with the yellowish bloom of Parian marble, with fine serious brows, and dusky clustering ringlets standing out in soft plenteousness over temples and ears

31. "The sight of this living figure, virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky, outrunning the element- it conjured up mythologies, it was like a primeval legend, handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form, of the origin of the gods."

intensify the irony created by the disparity between the real situation and its elevated treatment, between the romantic content and the classical form, and on the other hand to produce a quality of depth through the combination of "myth plus psychology."

The Apollonian and the Dionysian

"Much will have been gained for esthetics once we have succeeded in apprehending directly--rather than merely ascertaining--that art owes its continuous evolution to the Apollonian-Dionysian duality, even as the propagation of the species depends on the duality of the sexes, their constant conflicts and periodic acts of reconciliation." Friedrich Nietzsche.

In The Birth of Tragedy, from which the preceding quotation is taken, Friedrich Nietzsche distinguishes between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in art. In this he anticipates Frazer and Gilbert Murray in establishing the ritual origin of Greek tragedy. Apollo, the god of the plastic arts, stands for form, order, limitation and freedom from extremes. Dionysus is the god of music, whose cult originated in the barbaric East, and whose mysteries, celebrated by the frenzied maenads, were accompanied by a kind of ritual madness, the mania. Dionysus represents whatever is passionate, wild, Asiatic in art. According to Nietzsche, the greatest art can be produced only by a combination of the two forces.

In Der Tod in Venedig, Aschenbach has, increasingly throughout his artistic career, exalted the Apollonian at the expense of the Dionysian. In so doing, however, he has moved even further away from the primitive passions which supply the stuff of art. As a result, his work has begun

to stagnate, as is evidenced early in the story by the "Stelle, an der er sie auch heute wieder, wie gestern schon, hatte verlassen müssen und die weder geduldiger Pflege noch einem raschen Handstreich sich fügen zu wollen schien." (11) ³² Aschenbach himself has some inkling, at least, of the cause of this stagnation:

"Ungenügsamkeit freilich hatte schon dem Jüngling als Wesen und innerste Natur des Talents geolten, und um ihretwillen hatter er das Gefühl gezügelt und erkältet, weil er wusste, dass es geneigt ist sich mit einem fröhlichen Ungefähr und mit einer halben Vollkommenheit zu begnügen. Rächte sich nun also die geknechtete Empfindung, indem sie ihn verliess, indem sie seine Kunst fürder zu tragen und zu beflügeln sich weigerte und alle Lust, alles Entzücken an der Form und am Ausdruck mit sich hinwegnahm?" (11)³³

The Dionysian is symbolized in the monstrous landscape

32. "...place where yesterday and again today he had been forced to lay it down, since it would not yield either to patient effort, or a swift coup de main."

33. "In his youth, indeed, the nature and inmost essence of the literary gift had been, to him, this very scrupulosity; for it he had bridled and tempered his sensibilities, knowing full well that feeling is prone to be content with easy gains and blithe half-perfection. So now, perhaps, feeling, thus tyrannized, avenged itself by leaving him, refusing from now on to carry and wing his art and taking away all the ecstasy he had known in form and expression."

which Aschenbach concocts for himself, a primeval wilderness where fantastic vegetation grows unchecked, and where violence lurks in the figure of the crouching tiger.

"Closely involved in all the symbols that seem to foreshadow Aschenbach's death is a frightening consciousness of unrestrainable forces that had so long been denied. The Dionysian is the rebirth of the primitive and savage; it is the power of nature suppressed by the tyrannical need for self-control and social adjustment." 34

It is because he has so tyrannically suppressed the Dionysian in himself and in his art, that Aschenbach feels so strongly the need to travel. On a realistic level, Aschenbach is simply a man who has pushed himself too hard, mentally and physically:

"Als er um sein fünfunddreissigstes Jahr in Wien erkrankte, äusserte ein feiner Beobachter über ihn in Gesellschaft: 'Sehen Sie, Aschenbach hat von jeher so gelebt'--und der Sprecher schloss die Finger seiner Linken fest zur Faust--; 'niemals so'--und er liess die geöffnete Hand bequem von der Lehne des Sessels hängen." (13)35

34. Nicholls, p. 85.

35. "A nice observer once said of him in company--it was at the time when he fell ill in Vienna in his thirty-fifth year: 'You see, Aschenbach closed the fingers of his left hand into a fist--'never like this'--and he let his open hand hang relaxed from the back of his chair.'"

The author of a "prose epic" on the life of Frederick of Prussia, Aschenbach has taken as his motto that of the old hero himself, "Durchhalten," ("Hold fast.") This association of art with the military suggests a statement of Nietzsche's:

"The only way I am able to view Doric art and the Doric state is as a perpetual military encampment of the Apollonian forces. An art so defiantly austere, so ringed about with fortifications--an education so military and cruel--could endure only in a continual state of resistance against the titanic and barbaric menace of Dionysos."³⁶

The similarities between Lacedaemon and the Prussian state have been drawn many times. Every morning, Aschenbach performed a Spartan-Prussian ritual beginning with a cold shower, and commenced with two or three hours of unceasing work. By sacrificing the best hours of his life to his Apollonian ideal Aschenbach has succeeded in counterfeiting the spontaneity that is not his by nature. Aschenbach patterned the heroes of his works after himself:

"Über den neuen, in mannigfach individuellen Erscheinungen wiederkehrenden Heldentyp, den dieser Schriftsteller bevorzugte, hatte schon frühzeitig ein kluger Zergliederer geschrieben: dass er die Konzeption 'einer intellektuellen und junglinghaften Männlichkeit' sei 'die in stolzer, Scham die Zähne aufeinanderbeisst und ruhig dasteht, während ihr

36. The Birth of Tragedy, translated by Francis Golffing (New York, 1956), p. 35.

die Schwerter und Speere durch den Leib gehen.'"(15)37

Saint Sebastian was thus Aschenbach's favorite symbol for his art, a symbol for all who like himself labored on the brink of exhaustion to achieve greatness despite scanty resources.

Aschenbach shrinks back from going "all the way to the tigers," but he does finally make his way to Venice. Erected as it is upon fetid swamps, and crisscrossed by canals, Venice is the nearest equivalent of the "Urweltwildnis aus Inseln, Morästen und Schamm ("...primeval wilderness-world of islands, morasses, and alluvial channels.") The Asiatic cholera that finally kills him, moreover, has its source in just such a primeval wilderness--"den warmen Morästen des Ganges-Deltas, aufgestiegen mit dem mephitischen, von Menschen gemiedenen Urwelt--und--insel wildnis, in deren Bambus--dickichten der Tiger kauert..." (70) 38 The similarity in wording of this passage to the previous one, especially in the recurrent motif

37. "The new type of hero favored by Aschenbach, and recurring many times in his works, had early been analysed by a shrewd critic: 'The conception of an intellectual and virginal manliness, which clenches its teeth and stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side.'"

38. "...the hot, moist swamps of the delta of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of that primeval island-jungle among whose bamboo thickets the tiger crouches, where life of every sort flourishes in rankest abundance, and only man avoids the spot."

of the tiger which appears here for the third time in the Novelle, serves to link the cause of Aschenbach's death with the primeval wilderness, which we have already encountered as a symbol of the Dionysian.

Other such symbols are placed throughout the story. Thus there is the captain of the ship from Pola who had "a beard like a goat's." The "stranger" who, as we have seen, reappears several times in various disguises, is also a symbol for Dionysus, for one of his characteristics is that he never appears indigenous to the locale where he is seen, whereas Dionysus, in Aschenbach's climactic dream of a bacchanalian orgy is called "der fremde Gott," perhaps because to the ancient Greek worshippers of Apollo, he was *ὁ βάρβαρος*, "the foreigner." Prefiguring that dream, Aschenbach sees one morning the following scene in the heavens:

"Weisse Federwölkchen standen im verbreiteten Scharen am Himmel gleich weidenden Herden der Götter. Stärkerer Wind erhob sich, und die Rosse Poseidens liefen, sich bäumend, daher, Stiere auch wohl, dem Bläulichgelockten gehörig, welche mit Brüllen anrennend die Hörner senkten. Zwischen dem Felsengeröll des entfernteren Strandes jedoch hüpfen die Wellen empor als springende Ziegen. Eine heilig entstellte Welt voll panischen Lebens schloss den Berückten ein, und sein Herz träumte zarte Fabeln." (55)³⁹

39. "Troops of small feathery white clouds ranged over the
(cont.)

This passage with its reference to Pan, the companion of Dionysus, and to goats, animals which are identified with the god, sets the stage for Aschenbach's dream.⁴⁰ It is this dream, a vision, of a Dionysian revel, which is really the climax of the Novelle. It contains all the elements attributed to these celebrations by Nietzsche: the wild frenzy, the manifestations of bestiality, the uninhibited display of sexuality. At first Aschenbach is not present in it, but finally he too is sucked down into the vortex of the hourglass:

"Aber mit ihnen, in ihnen war der Träumende nun und dem fremden Gotte gehörig. Ja, sie waren er selbst, als sie reissend und mordend sich auf die Tiere hinwarfen und dampfende Fetzen verschlangen, als auf zerwühltem Mossgrund grenzenlose Vermischung begann, dem Gotte zum Opfer. Und seine Seele kostete Unzucht und Raserei des Unterganges." (74) 41

39. (con't) sky, like grazing herds of the gods. A stronger wind arose, and Poseidon's horses ran up, arching their manes, among them too the steers of him of the purpled locks, who lowered their horns and bellowed as they came on; while like prancing goats the waves on the farther strand leaped among the craggy rocks. It was a world possessed, peopled by Pan that closed round the spell-bound man, and his doting heart conceived the most delicate fancies."

40. Nicholls, p. 86.

41. "But now the dreamer was in them and of them, the stranger god was his own, Yes, it was he who was flinging himself upon
(con't.)

Aschenbach is now "der Enthusiasmierte," the possessed of the god. He is infected with the holy madness, which the screaming notaries call *ἄγος*, and "which an Italian (or Pole) might well pronounce as 'zwei melodische Silber wie Adgio oder öfter noch Adgiu mit rufend gedehntem u-laut am Ende. '" 42 Thus Tadzio is brought into the picture and we realize that the episode in which the children call his name on the beach early in the story prefigures the Dionysian orgy to come. Tadzio is thus revealed in his most important guise, that of Dionysus.

In a number of ways, Aschenbach's fate parallels that of another character in literature, Pentheus, in the Bacchae of Euripides. He too has sought to suppress Dionysus; he too is seduced by him first to degradation and then to death. To gain access to the rites of Dionysus, Pentheus dons a woman's garb, urged on by the god himself. Aschenbach, debased by his unnatural passion for Tadzio allows the barber

41 (con't) the animals, who bit and tore and swallowed smoking gobbets of flesh--while on the trampled moss there now began the rites in honour of the god--an orgy of promiscuous embraces--and in his very soul he tasted the bestial degradation of his fall." (68).

42. Lee Stavenhagen. "The Name Tadzio in Der Tod in Venedig," The German Quarterly, XXXV (January, 1962), 20-23. "...two musical syllables, something like Adgio--or, oftener Adgiu, with a long-drawn-out u at the end." (32)

to paint his cheeks. Pentheus is preceded in degradation by two old men, Cadmus and Tereisias, Aschenbach by one, the old fop on the ship from Pola, whose image he now becomes.

Aschenbach's *Überwindung*, then, like Pentheus', is in trying to completely deny the dark and passionate forces of the Dionysian--in both cases, those forces took their revenge. Mann like Nietzsche believed that both Apollonian and Dionysian elements are necessary in a work of art: the latter to supply the raw material of passion; the former to give order to the whole. When Aschenbach ignores this fact, the first thing to suffer is his art. But, he has exalted the Apollonian over the Dionysian also in his life. On a psychological level, Aschenbach's own passionate nature, so long suppressed, finally comes to the surface, and its force is now so strong that it takes complete hold and leads him to degradation and destruction. The cholera which causes his death, is related, on a symbolic level, to the Dionysian primeval wilderness motif, thus linking the naturalistic with the mythical cause of his doom.

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