

## From the Sublime to the Subliminal: The Decline and Fall of Gustav von Aschenbach in *Der Tod in Venedig*

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How far Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* was directly influenced by Freud remains controversial. One cause of the controversy concerns different interpretations based on a statement from an interview with Thomas Mann given in the magazine *La Stampa* in 1925, which is quoted in full in Dierks (1990):

Was mich betrifft, so ist mindestens eine meiner Arbeiten, die Novelle *Der Tod in Venedig*, unter dem unmittelbaren Einfluß von Freud entstanden. Ich hätte ohne Freud niemals daran gedacht, dieses erotische Motiv zu behandeln, oder hätte es gewiß anders gestaltet. (Dierks 1990: 285)

As far as I am concerned, at least one of my works, the novella *Death in Venice*, was written under the direct influence of Freud. Without Freud I would never have considered dealing with this erotic theme, or at least I would have handled it differently.<sup>1</sup>

Beharriell (1962: 150) quotes this statement as “definite evidence” that *Der Tod in Venedig* was written very much under the influence of Freud whereas Anz (1997: 377-413) doubts the veracity of Thomas Mann's assertion:

Mit guten Gründen hat die Forschung dem Autor diese Aussage nicht geglaubt. Intensiv hat er sich mit der Psychoanalyse erst 1925/26 auseinandergesetzt. Die erste Erwähnung Freuds findet sich in einer Notiz von 1916. (Anz 1997: 380)

There are good reasons in the literature for not believing the author's statement [on Freud's influence]. It was not until 1925/26 that he [Thomas Mann] became intensively involved with psycho-analysis. The first time Freud is referred to is a note he wrote in 1916.

However, Dierks (1990: 284) argues convincingly that Thomas Mann had read Freud's *Wiederkehr des Verdrängten* ("Return of the Repressed") as early as 1911. Dierks's article is significantly subtitled *Erste Freud-Lektüre 1911 und allgemeine Rezeptions-Voraussetzungen*: ([Thomas Mann's] “First Reading of Freud in 1911 and the General Preconditions for its Reception” [with regard to *Death in Venice*]).

1911, zum *Tod in Venedig*, hat Thomas Mann - wohl erstmals – eine Schrift Freuds [*Wiederkehr des Verdrängten*] gelesen. [. . .] Der Eindruck ist rekonstruierbar: Thomas Mann lernt das psychoanalytische Konzept der *Wiederkehr des Verdrängten* kennen, das ihm eine schwierige Lebenssituation klären hilft – diese Freud-Lektüre mag die Form einer Selbstanalyse gehabt haben. (Dierks 1990: 284. Dierk's brackets)

In 1911, concerning *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann had read – probably for the first time – one of Freud's papers entitled the *Return of the Repressed*. [. . .] A scenario can be easily re-constructed:

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all the translations in this essay are my translations.

Thomas Mann became acquainted with the psychoanalytical concept of the *Return of the Repressed*, which helped him to clear up a difficult personal problem – this study of Freud may well have taken the form of self-analysis. (Dierks's brackets)

Furthermore, Dierks (1990: 284-285) goes on to argue that Thomas Mann had read Freud's first literary essay first published in 1907 on a novel entitled *Gradiva* by Wilhelm Jensen (first published in 1903) and that this novel had had a major influence on *Der Tod in Venedig*<sup>2</sup>. One of the themes in Jensen's novel is the destruction of Pompeii, which, according to Dierks (1990: 285) played a role for the naming of Aschenbach based on Jensen's references to "Aschenfall" and "Aschenregen"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Like Thomas Mann and his brother Heinrich, Wilhelm Jensen had also been an alumnus of the 'Katharineum' (Grammar School) in Lübeck, which, based on curiosity alone, would argue for the probability that Thomas Mann would have read a work by one of his former fellow pupils.

<sup>3</sup>There are so many other parallels in *Death in Venice* with *Gradiva* that a whole article could easily be devoted to this theme, but here it will be confined to an extended footnote. Like Aschenbach, in *Gradiva*, Norbert Hanold, who is an archaeologist, feels trapped in his life situation and undertakes a trip to Italy. Based on a dream (c.f. Aschenbach's vision of the Ganges), Hanold goes to Pompeii (after several false starts as in *Death in Venice*) to escape from his narrow prison of being an academic archaeologist cut off from everyday life. Hanold is fascinated by beauty and, in his case, it takes the form of an obsession with an ancient relief of a beautiful young woman whom he names Gradiva (Latin: The Walking Woman) on account of the figure's unusual lightness of foot and the remarkable vertical angle of her toe and heel to the ground. (The relief does actually exist and is photographed in Freud (1998: Illustration facing page 96)). Hanold, like Aschenbach, is profoundly influenced by vivid dreams such as his dream before his journey to Italy when he believed he actually encountered 'Gradiva' face-to-face during the volcanic destruction of Pompeii on 24<sup>th</sup> August, AD 79. As with Aschenbach's fascination with Tadzio, Hanold becomes so obsessed with his idol that he breaks away totally from his former values, which, in Hanold's case, is his breach from his life as a passionate archaeologist, when up to the appearance of Gradiva in his life, he had no room for other people or for his external circumstances: ". . . even though he knew it was a contradiction, he felt that the whole field of classical studies was the most useless and indifferent activity in the world." (Jensen 2008: 50. My translation.) As with Aschenbach's *Rausch* (intoxication), Hanold's obsession results in madness (*Wahn*) as he actually believes he is able to talk to this fictitious beauty whom he had assumed to have died almost two thousand years previously in a particular house in Pompeii (the *Meleaga*). It is unclear at this point whether she is a ghost, a figment of his imagination or a real person. The anti-climactic resolution turns out to be the last of the three possibilities. Unlike Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, the resolution of *Gradiva* is banal. The 'Gradiva' Hanold had been talking to in the ruins of Pompeii is his childhood sweetheart called Zoë (Life!), who had been playing along with his delusion by pretending to be 'Gradiva' as Zoë had always been in love with Hanold, who had, however, rejected her in his adolescence as his passion was archaeology rather than for the opposite sex and the external world. (Freud rightly notes a motivational lacuna here in that archaeology is his *means* of escape from any form of sexual involvement, but the reason for his extreme repression with regard to sexuality is not given (Freud 1998: 85)). Hanold realizes that Zoë was the Gradiva he had always (unconsciously) loved and whose existence he (according to Freud) had denied (repression) until that time, but now that he has been awoken from his madness, he intends to marry Zoë and share the normality of the loving couples he had despised on his travels. He had quoted their banalities with total contempt on several occasions such as "my one and only August" and "my sweet little Greta" (mein einziger August / meine süße Grete) (Jensen 2008: 28). It is easy to see how this novella is an interesting case study for Freud as the 'patient' is fully cured in the end, but from a literary point of view, particularly from the perspective of Mann's works (such as *Tonio Kröger*), it is aesthetically unpleasing as it ultimately represents the triumph of bourgeois philistinism over 'artistic' madness. (The reverse would also be equally disappointing because it is the very balance between the two worlds that creates the intellectually

Close analysis of the text will reveal that Dierks's view that Thomas Mann's statement about Freud's influence on *Der Tod in Venedig* is justified<sup>4</sup>, but here it is only of secondary importance to ascertain exactly how far Mann was influenced by the man Freud himself. Certainly, Thomas Mann was very much aware of the unconscious motivation in the figure of Aschenbach, but, ultimately, the analysis is Thomas Mann's own. This is borne out by Beharriell (1962: 152), who shows that Thomas Mann is capable even of anticipating Freudian theories as in Beharriell's analysis of the short story *Auf dem Weg zum Friedhof*:

This story is the study of the causes of a breakdown. The precipitating cause, an altercation with a cyclist, is set against the actual hidden cause, which latter Mann perceives to be a long-suppressed guilt feeling stemming from the wife's death in childbirth. *This is a striking anticipation of Freudian theory*, and it is paralleled in the same work – in 1900, before any Freudian influence – by Mann's bold and unambiguous attribution of the hero's drunkenness to suppressed feelings of inadequacy and guilt. (Beharriell 1962: 152. My emphasis.)

Aschenbach is not only subjected to what might be regarded to be Freudian psycho-analysis but also to a much broader examination with psycho-philosophical and literary aspects. It will be seen that the 'hyperconsciousness' of Thomas Mann in contrast to the relative obliviousness of the fictional protagonist is one of the main differentiating factors between author and subject.<sup>5</sup> It could even be argued that Aschenbach's lack of self-awareness lead to

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fascinating and aesthetically pleasing tension that is held throughout Mann's oeuvre.) As in *Death in Venice*, one of the main psychological motifs in *Gradiva* is repression and its connection with madness. This is made explicit in Freud's essay, which no doubt may well have strongly influenced Mann's approach to *Death in Venice*. Even though these influences may have begun partly from this mediocre novella (despite the encomia in the world of psychiatry at that time, referred to in Freud's letter of 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1902, addressed to the author (Freud 1998: 17)) and partly from Freud's purely psychological analysis of Norbert Hanold, Mann's novella is a literary masterpiece, which works not only at the psychological level but is also revealing in its literary and philosophical dimensions. Jensen, like Thomas Mann, writes in an extremely high literary style, which, however, lacks Mann's complexity, musicality and subtlety. For any serious student of *Death in Venice*, however, it is well worth reading both the novella and Freud's essay to appreciate how Mann produced a highly sophisticated psychological, literary and philosophical masterpiece from an entertaining but highly eccentric novella and from the novella's brilliant but one-dimensional Freudian interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> Berlin's (1992) balanced discussion of this theme deserves to be quoted in full:

Of course in the text of Dierks the whole argument rests on "structured identities and above all the unequivocal adoption of content and formulations" (264). Dierks has no evidence that in 1911 Mann actually read either *Gradiva* or Freud's interpretation thereof; he admits that Mann's *Notizen* have no reference to them at all but says, "that need not worry us, there isn't anything on Euripides either" (247). Nevertheless, the argument by Dierks is certainly persuasive, from the similarities between *Death in Venice* and *Gradiva* as well as from the theme of *Verdrängung* ("repression"). (Berlin 1992: 112)

<sup>5</sup>There are so many psychological studies on *Death in Venice* that it is an impossible task to refer to them all within the scope of what is fundamentally a literary analysis with psychological aspects. Again as in footnote 4, Berlin (1992) gives an effective and balanced summary of the situation from the point of view of university teacher analyzing *Death in Venice*:

his downfall as in chapter IV when the protagonist chooses to ignore the fact that his obsession with Tadzio is taking over his mind:

Aschenbach war zur Selbstkritik nicht mehr aufgelegt; der Geschmack, die geistige Verfassung seiner Jahre, Selbstachtung, Reife und späte Einfachheit machten ihn nicht geneigt, Beweggründe zu zergliedern und zu entscheiden, ob er aus Gewissen, ob aus Liederlichkeit und Schwäche sein Vorhaben nicht ausgeführt habe. (Mann 2003: 89)

Aschenbach was no longer in a state to be able to take a critical view of himself; his tastes, his mind-set shaped by his age, his self-esteem, his maturity and his new simplicity acquired later on in life did not incline him to dissect his motives for his failure to carry out his plans as to whether it was his conscience speaking, or whether it was for degenerate motives, or whether it was just a case of mere moral cowardice.

In contrast, Thomas Mann constantly analyses Aschenbach's motivations throughout the novella. Even the detailed description of Aschenbach's physical environment and his casual encounters have psychological significance for Aschenbach, as will be shown at a later stage in this study.

When considering the basic psychological make-up of the figure of Aschenbach, it has often been argued in the literature<sup>6</sup> on *Der Tod in Venedig* that there is a very close parallel between Thomas Mann and his protagonist as does, for example, Koopmann (1975: 32-35):

*Der Tod in Venedig* ist, noch weit über die *Buddenbrooks* hinaus, das wohl am stärksten persönlich geprägte Werk Thomas Manns. (Koopmann 1975: 32)

Far more than is the case with *Buddenbrooks*, for example, *Death in Venice* is the one work of Thomas Mann which is most strongly influenced by his personal life.

There is sometimes a danger of almost equating the two figures as interchangeable as was the case with the immediate reviews on *Der Tod in Venedig*:

In his response to early reviews which assumed *the straight equation Aschenbach-Thomas Mann*, and which he criticized as presumptuous, Mann stressed the element of parody in the writing, and this view has become popular among scholars. (Reed 1994: 174. My emphasis.)

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Next we consider aspects of *Death in Venice* itself. Indeed, after we examine Hanns Sachs's 1914 article in the important Viennese literary psychoanalytic journal *Imago* (begun in 1912), 'we study five other psychological or psychoanalytic analyses of *Death in Venice*: by Leah Davidson, Jean Jofen, Heinz Kohut, Harry Slochower, and Raymond Tarbox, all of which are assigned reading. Though all are instructive and some are better than others, their "perceptive" observations still sometimes make students skeptical. Nevertheless, this discussion enlightens students about the mechanics (and mistakes!) of such approaches and, equally important, suggests several key ideas and elements in *Death in Venice*. (Berlin 1992: 110)

<sup>6</sup> The literature on *Der Tod in Venedig* even in German and English is so enormous as to have become unwieldy. In this essay, the scope will be confined to the quoted references.

The parodistic aspect was also stressed by Thomas Mann in his letter to Paul Amann from Bad Tölz, September 10, 1915, when Mann expressed his irritation about the assumption that he and the protagonist were virtually identical:

As far as *Death in Venice* is concerned, I am hardly a competent interpreter today, I have almost forgotten the composition. But one thing I do know is that I have been misunderstood almost from the very beginning *in the crudest manner*. The embarrassing thing was that the “hieratic atmosphere” was interpreted as a personal claim, when it was nothing more than mimicry. (Koelb 1994: 95. My emphasis.)

This critical distance is seen by many commentators as an essential feature of Thomas Mann’s style as is the case with Schweizer (1971):

Alle Dichtung, alle Kunst überhaupt, ist schlechthin Ironie, die Ironie bedeutet jenen Abstand, den die Kunst vom Objekt nimmt, . . . (Schweizer 1971: 30)

Every kind of literary creation or even any form of art is pure irony; irony implies that distance art takes from its object.

The key difference between Aschenbach and Mann in this context is that Thomas Mann did not follow Tadzio (who was based on Władysław Moes) around as did the fictional hero Aschenbach. This is confirmed by Katja Mann in her memoirs as translated by Tobin (1994):

He [Thomas Mann] immediately had a weakness for this youth, he liked him inordinately, and he always watched him on the beach with his friends. *He did not follow him through all of Venice*, but the youth did fascinate him, and he thought about him often. (Tobin 1994: 214. My emphasis.)

It is the difference between from admiring harmlessly from afar and becoming what would now be regarded as a pederastic stalker. Even Reed (2008), at times, seems to equate Thomas Mann with his protagonist too closely as in the case when he treats Mann’s and Aschenbach’s homo-erotic drives as identical:

Ist es bloß so, dass Aschenbach (*und sein Autor*) nicht Griechen genug sind, um nach der Lehre Platons zu leben beziehungsweise eine solche Lebensführung zu verherrlichen? (Reed 2008: 53. My emphasis.)

Is it really the case that Aschenbach (*and his author*) are not Greek enough either to live according to Plato’s doctrines or at least to celebrate this way of life? (Reed 2008: 53. My emphasis.)

Koopmann, however, avoids the fallacy of equating the two figures as identical and sees Aschenbach as an idealized version of Thomas Mann himself:

Aber wie dem auch sei: Aschenbach fungiert im *Tod in Venedig* als Ersatzfigur für Thomas Mann, im gewissen Sinne *als positives Gegenbild* zu einem offenbar eher negativ verstandenen Selbstbildnis; dort wurde Wirklichkeit, was bei Thomas Mann selbst nur Plan blieb. (Koopmann 1975: 35. My emphasis.)

Whatever the case may be: in *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach acts as an alternative version of Thomas Mann, but in the sense of being a *positive counterpart* in contrast to his own rather negatively perceived self-image; what here [in the novella] is reality, remained to be nothing but plans for Thomas Mann.

The identity between Aschenbach's oeuvre and Thomas Mann's failed projects referred to indirectly in the above quotation is well known and well summarized by Koopmann:

Aschenbach hat noch andere Werke [als *Geist und Kunst*] verfasst, die eigentlich Werke Thomas Manns sind: den *Friedrich-Roman* - er bringt Aschenbach den persönlichen Adel ein -, aber auch die Erzählung *Ein Elender*, „Ausbruch des Ekels gegen den unanständigen Psychologismus der Zeit“ und Schließlich den *Maja-Roman*, den „den figurenreichen, so vielerlei Menschenschicksal im Schatten einer Idee versammelnden Romanteppich“. *Alle Pläne finden sich bei Thomas Mann*. . . [Koopmann's references are all taken from the opening paragraphs in chapter II of *Der Tod in Venedig*.] (Koopmann 1975: 33. My emphasis.)

Aschenbach had written other works [besides *Intellect and Art*], which were actually projects [begun] by Thomas Mann: the novel based on the life of Frederick the Great - for which Aschenbach was ennobled - but also the story entitled *A Vile Wretch*, “an attack of nausea in reaction to the modern decadent tendency of explaining everything away by psychology”, and, finally, the novel entitled *Maya*, “a vast novelistic tapestry uniting the multifarious strands of human destinies and characters beneath the shadow of one unifying idea”. *All these titles are based on Thomas Mann's own plans*.

The treatise “Geist und Kunst” (Intellect and Art), which was, according to Seidlin (1963: 153) to be the crowning glory of Aschenbach's oeuvre, has the same title as an essay Thomas Mann had actually begun writing, but had not completed. In his letter to Hans Wysling as quoted in Koopmann (1975: 32), Thomas Mann admits to a lack of “essayistische Disziplin” (self-discipline for writing essays) to explain his inability to finish this work. In *Der Tod in Venedig*, the *raisonnement* “Geist und Kunst” (Intellect and Art), was Aschenbach's final and greatest work on his road to spirituality as explicated by Seidlin:

Es sind die Elemente des schöpferischen Werkes, die hier [i. e. in the second paragraph of chapter II] umschrieben werden, es ist gleichzeitig die Bezeichnung von Aschenbachs literarischer Entwicklung, die in vier Stufen verläuft: Stoff - Gestaltung - Ethos - Philosophie. Eine Pyramide nannten wir es; es ist der allmähliche Aufstieg von der reinen Materie zum reinen Geist, ein Prozeß progressiver Spiritualisierung. (Seidlin 1963: 153)

All these are elements of his oeuvre that are listed here [i.e. in the second paragraph of chapter II], but at the same time it is a description of Aschenbach's literary development, which progresses in four stages: content - form - ethos - philosophy. We have already referred to this as a pyramid; it is a gradual ascent from pure matter to pure spirit, a process of progressive spiritualization.

According to Koopmann (1975: 32-35), Thomas Mann had undertaken all the ‘Aschenbach’ projects, but had abandoned them, and so Aschenbach's immense achievements would seem to be a counter-example to Mann's own perceived lack of discipline.<sup>7</sup> Aschenbach's career embodied many of Thomas Mann's aspirations and his success as a writer could rightly at one

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<sup>7</sup> In many of his letters written after *Buddenbrooks* but before *Death in Venice* to his brother Heinrich, Thomas Mann decries his lack of creativity as in his letter of 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1906 as quoted by Reed (1983) “. . . aber man verzehrt sich in Plänen und verzagt am Anfangen.” (Reed 1983: 148) (“. . . but you burn yourself out with all kinds of plans and dry up as soon as you put pen to paper.”)

level be regarded as a role model for himself. Thus Koopmann's interpretation is convincing.<sup>8</sup> However, the opposite will be argued in this essay – to the effect that, ultimately, Aschenbach is Mann's negative counter-example, 'ein *negatives* Gegenbild'. Yet these two apparently contrary viewpoints can be resolved and this is explained by a closer look at the sixteen-line opening sentence of chapter II in the novella. One of the major themes in Thomas Mann's early works is that a choice has to be made between being a great or good human being or being a great artist, but that it is impossible to be both. This is one of the leitmotifs in *Tonio Kröger*:

[...] es ist aus mit dem Künstler, sobald er ein Mensch wird und zu empfinden beginnt. (Mann: 1997: 290)

[...] an artist is finished as soon as he becomes a human being and begins to have human feelings.

The same applies to Aschenbach, who pays the price of achieving greatness in art by becoming an impoverished human being. (Gledhill 2001: 69).

Seidlin (1963: 148-161) demonstrates how the structure of the sixteen-line sentence in chapter II illustrates this theme. Seidlin (1963: 149) sets out the sentence in blank verse to show that the sentence has all the density and rhythmic dexterity associated with great poetry.<sup>9</sup> The 'sentence' consists of five sections, with the first four sections representing the

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<sup>8</sup> Another aspect which supports the notion of Aschenbach as an idealized version of Thomas Mann is the oft-quoted resemblance of the protagonist to the composer Gustav Mahler whom Thomas Mann greatly admired. Reed rightly argues that the photograph reproduced in Reed (1983: 111) fits the physical description in chapter II in *Der Tod in Venedig*: "Zur Schilderung von A.'s äußerer Erscheinung [. . .] vgl. das Bild Gustav Mahlers (Abbildung S. 111), das den Arbeitsnotizen [Thomas Manns] als Blatt 23 beigelegt ist." (For a depiction of Aschenbach's external appearance c.f. the photograph of Gustav Mahler (Illustration on page 111), which is classified in [Thomas Mann's] notes as page 23.)

<sup>9</sup> The rhythms become very obvious if the sentence is read aloud (Seidlin 1963: 160), as set out below:

- 1 Der Autor der klaren und mächtigen Prosa-Epopöe vom Leben
- 2 Friedrichs von Preußen; der geduldige Künstler, der in langem
- 3 Fleiß den figurenreichen, so vielerlei Menschenschicksal
- 4 im Schatten einer Idee versammelnden Romanteppich, Maja
- 5 mit Namen, wob; der Schöpfer jener starken Erzählung, die
- 6 'Ein Elender' überschrieben ist und einer ganzen dankbaren
- 7 Jugend die Möglichkeit sittlicher Entschlossenheit jenseits
- 8 der tiefsten Erkenntnis zeigte; der Verfasser endlich (und
- 9 damit sind die Werke seiner Reifezeit kurz bezeichnet) der

great works of art Aschenbach created as already cited by Koopmann above whereas only *one* section is devoted to Aschenbach the man himself. It will be seen that this structure is deliberate. In this sentence, the spiritual progression in Aschenbach's oeuvre is represented by the various words for 'writer' so that the protagonist firstly progresses from *Autor* (author) where quantity (content) precedes quality - to *Künstler* (artist) where the reverse is the case (form); the third stage is *Schöpfer* (creator) where originality and creativity are dominant until the final stage - *Verfasser* (writer, here: 'universal' writer) - is reached. The *Verfasser* ('uomo universale') is a culmination of the previous three stages and is reflected in Aschenbach's final great work - the dissertation entitled *Geist und Kunst* (Intellect and Art). However, the final section in the 'sentence poem' provides an anti-climax - the man himself - an extremely unimpressive human being in contrast to his great works. Furthermore, Seidlin (1963: 158) shows how these themes are reflected in the rhythms of this sentence as there is a steady increase in metrical 'speed' represented by the proportion of iambs to dactyls for the five blocks roughly corresponding to musical tempos *andante*, *allegretto*, *allegro*, *allegro con brio* and *andante maestoso*. There is, in other words, a gradual increase in pace (and thus excitement), which is defused by the final section of the sentence where the pace suddenly slows down, causing a humorously ironical bathetic effect, which reflects the puniness of Aschenbach as an individual and which anticipates the whole outcome of the novella. Gledhill's summary (Gledhill 2001: 73) of Seidlin's metrical analysis in a bar graph supports

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10 leidenschaftlichen Abhandlung über 'Geist und Kunst', deren  
11 ordnende Kraft und antithetische Beredsamkeit ernste Beur-  
12 teiler vermochte, sie unmittelbar neben Schillers Raisonne-  
13 ment über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung zu stellen:  
14 Gustav Aschenbach also war zu L., einer Kreisstadt der  
15 Provinz Schlesien, als Sohn eines höheren Justizbeamten  
16 geboren. (Seidlin 1963: 149)

The author of the lucid and massive prose epos on the life of Frederick of Prussia, - the long-suffering artist who had patiently and painstakingly woven together so great a variety of human character and destiny into a vast tapestry unified beneath the shadow of one great idea in his novel entitled *Maya* - the creator of that most disturbing story, *A Vile Wretch*, which revealed to the new young and grateful generation that it was still possible to have an ethical commitment which transcends even the deepest of philosophical insights - and finally to characterise the works of his later years, the writer whose mature period was exemplified by a passionate treatise entitled *Intellect and Art*, ranked equally by some serious critics with Schiller's famous 'raisonnement' on naïve and sophisticated poetry because of its creative sense of order and its eloquent use of antithesis - Gustav Aschenbach was born in the town of L., a district capital in the province of Silesia, as the son of a high-ranking official in the judiciary. [End of sentence]

the perspicacity of Seidlin's interpretation. Seidlin's somewhat effusive summing up of the brilliant construction of this sentence is justified:

Der Schlußstein, auf den der ganze Satz hinausläuft, ist kurz: zwei Zeilen nur - und dem gegenüber steht eine Stauung von dreizehn Zeilen. Die Balance, so könnte man sagen, ist schlecht. Aber sie wird sofort für uns Sinn und tiefe Berechtigung bekommen, wenn wir in Erwägung ziehen, was hier balanciert wird. Dreizehn Zeilen sind ausgefüllt mit der Aufzählung und Charakterisierung von Gustav Aschenbachs Werken, dann folgen zwei Zeilen über den Menschen Gustav Aschenbach. Und diese Verteilung scheint mir eine der genialen stilistischen Symbolgebungen, die wir in der modernen deutschen Literatur finden. (Seidlin 1963: 149)

The keystone on which the whole sentence is constructed is short: just two lines - in contrast to the thirteen-lined build-up. You could go so far as to claim that the balance is poor. However, there is a clear purpose behind it which makes perfect sense and is entirely justified as soon as we examine what actually is being balanced here. Thirteen lines are taken up with the list and description of Gustav Aschenbach's works, followed by a mere two-lined description of the man himself - Gustav Aschenbach. And this [deliberate] imbalance seems to me to be one of the most striking strokes of genius with regard to symbolic stylistic devices to be found in the whole of modern German literature. (Seidlin 1963: 149)

Thus, Thomas Mann's psychological analysis is so well integrated within the text, so embedded within his stylistic devices that an interpretation is taking place, which can even have a subliminal effect on the reader. Many other instances can be found within the novella, some of which emerge at a later stage in this essay.

As argued in Seidlin's analysis, Aschenbach the man represents the negative counter-example to Thomas Mann as a human being. Aschenbach strives after *Würde* (dignity) as his highest goal (Mann 2003: 25), but he rapidly sinks into embarrassing disgrace. In chapter III of the novella, Aschenbach is horrified by the sight of an elderly man on the boat, "der greise Geck" (the old goat), on account of his endeavor to make himself more attractive to young men such as his youthful companions who accompany him on the crossing, by crude measures such as his use of cosmetics (rouge) and his wearing a wig. Yet less than a month later, Aschenbach finds himself voluntarily succumbing to similar indignities when he uses perfume, has his face made up (also with rouge) and his hair colored in order to appear to be more pleasing to the object of his worship (Mann 2003: 130-131). His descent continues to such an extent that he begins to abandon all caution so that others begin to notice his interest in Tadzio:

Im Grund der Terrasse saßen die Frauen, die Tadzio behüteten, und es war dahin gekommen, daß der Verliebte fürchten mußte, *auffällig geworden und beargwöhnt zu sein*. Ja, mit einer Art von Erstarrung hatte er mehrmals, am Strande, in der Hotelhalle und auf der Piazza San Marco, zu bemerken gehabt, *daß man Tadzio aus seiner Nähe zurückrief, ihn von ihm fernzuhalten bedacht war* — . . . (Mann 2003: 111. My emphasis.)

The ladies who looked after Tadzio were sitting at the back of the terrace, but matters had come to a head with the result that the man besotted with love had begun to attract *so much attention as to become an object of suspicion*. Indeed, struck by a kind of momentary paralysis, he had noticed several times on

the beach, in the hotel foyer and in St Mark's Square that they summoned Tazio back if he were to be found in his immediate vicinity and *that they were trying to keep Tazio away from him*.

As with Hanlon in *Gradiva*, Aschenbach is descending into madness because of his now flagrant pursuit of Tazio. He is referred as the "Betörte" (Mann 2003: 101/106) (the man who was besotted), the "Verwirrte" (Mann 2003: 89/104) (the confused man) and the "Verirrte" (Mann 2003: 110) (the man who has gone off the rails), the "Berrückte" (Mann 2003: 131) (the man who was crazed with love) and being in a state of "völliger Trunkenheit" (Mann 2003: 110) (complete drunkenness). If this were not enough, he almost becomes a criminal by joining in the conspiracy of silence in the city to suppress the fact that cholera has started to break out in Venice. The German newspapers had already warned the tourists of the situation, but it would seem that the 'Russian' guests know nothing about this dangerous state of affairs. It is Aschenbach's obvious duty to warn the guests of the danger, but instead he prefers to become part of the conspiracy of silence: "Man soll das verschweigen!" (One should keep quiet about this!)<sup>10</sup> With the noun *Verbrechen* (crime), immediately after the decision to suppress the news about the cholera outbreak, Aschenbach takes a perverse delight ("dunkle Zufriedenheit" (Mann 2003: 100)) in his criminal complicity even though it could lead to his being indirectly responsible for the possible death of the Russian family and, of course, of Tazio himself:

Aber zugleich füllte sein Herz sich mit Genugtuung über das Abenteuer, in welches die Außenwelt geraten wollte. Denn der Leidenschaft ist, *wie dem Verbrechen*, die gesicherte Ordnung und Wohlfahrt des Alltags nicht gemäß, . . . (Mann 2003: 100)

But at the same time his heart took delight in the adventure the outside world was about to be plunged into. For passion, *like crime*, is out of kilter with the general security and welfare of the everyday world.

The ultimate outcome of his descent is expressed in the final sentence when Aschenbach gets up to follow his idol, but instead, falls back into chair and soon after dies – thus, an

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<sup>10</sup> Chase (1999: 195) misleadingly translates this as "It's being kept quiet!", which misses the point of Aschenbach's complicity. It is interesting that at first Aschenbach uses the impersonal pronoun *man* (one), presumably to hide his guilt from himself. At a later stage in his descent, he no longer does this, but instead embraces his crime of omission wholeheartedly in a state of madness:

„Man soll schweigen!“ flüsterte er heftig. Und: „*Ich* werde schweigen!“ Das Bewußtsein seiner Mitwisserschaft, seiner Mitschuld berauschte ihn, wie geringe Mengen Weines ein müdes Hirn berauschen. (Mann 2003: 124. My emphasis.)

"One should keep quiet about this!", he whispered vehemently to himself. And: "*I* shall keep quiet about it!" The awareness of his complicity in the conspiracy of silence intoxicated him in the same way a small quantity of wine can go straight to the head of a tired man.

‘unnecessary’ death of a great artist who, despite repeated cholera warnings, stayed in Venice because of his infatuation with an adolescent with whom he never exchanged a word. Here, there is a tragic bathos which could be missed if the reader is dazzled by the greatness of the protagonist as artist.

From Aschenbach’s perspective, his death could also be seen as the salvation of his dignity (because he was thus not able to continue down the scandalous path he had chosen) and Aschenbach regarded his demise and death as inevitable because of the fatal formulaic concatenation of themes produced in his dream sequences of Socrates and Phaidros beginning with the artist’s and, here Aschenbach’s, pursuit of beauty leading to the following descent: *art* → *beauty* → *sense* → *eros* → *decadence* → *disease* → *death*. This is the theme of Socrates’s dialogue with Phaidros in chapter V:

Siehst du nun wohl, daß wir Dichter nicht weise noch würdig sein können? Daß wir *notwendig* in die Irre gehen, notwendig liederlich und Abenteurer des Gefühles bleiben? (Mann 2003: 134. My emphasis.)

Now do you see that we poets cannot be either wise or worthy - that we *inevitably* go astray, remain dissolute and mere adventurers in the world of emotions?

The theme that the artist’s path inevitably leads to immorality and impoverishment of the artist’s humanity is present in the whole of Mann’s oeuvre and is certainly one of the main motifs in *Tonio Kröger* as has already been illustrated in this essay. It is, however, a common fallacy to equate the Socratic dialogues in *Der Tod in Venedig* with Mann’s own views. The supposed inevitability of the ‘formula’ can be interpreted as Aschenbach’s excuse for the continuation of his self-destructive pursuit. Even though Mann may have had some sympathy with these views, here it can be seen as a case of Aschenbach’s rationalizing away his true guilt.

The main difference in this area between Aschenbach and Thomas Mann is that Aschenbach is *vaguely* aware of the self-destructive (Dionysian) dangers at the unconscious level such as in the form of his disturbed dreams whereas Thomas Mann is *consciously* aware of the danger of following the path to wisdom via beauty. It is in this sense that the novella can be said to be Mann’s preventive measure from falling prey to these obsessions and so this is how Aschenbach plays the role of negative counter-example to himself (Mann) as a human being whilst at the same time acting as an inspiration as a great writer.

The ‘hyper’-awareness of Mann as opposed to the relative psychological vagueness of his protagonist is evident from the first few pages of the first chapter. On the second page of

chapter I (Mann 2003: 11), Aschenbach encounters a rather terrifying stranger emerging from a funeral parlor without at first thinking too much about it:

Ob er nun aus dem Innern der Halle durch das bronzene Tor hervorgetreten oder von außen unversehens heran und hinauf gelangt war, blieb ungewiß. Aschenbach, *ohne sich sonderlich in die Frage zu vertiefen*, neigte zur ersteren Annahme. (Mann 2003: 11. My emphasis.)

The question as to whether he [the stranger] had stepped out from the inside of the mausoleum and had come via the bronze entrance or whether he had suddenly appeared out of nowhere to be standing there above him, remained unclear. *Even though he had not devoted much thought to this question*, his inclination favored the former hypothesis.

Despite the phrase *ohne sich sonderlich in die Frage zu vertiefen*, (even though he had not devoted much thought to this question), we receive a detailed and highly symbolic description of the stranger, who is reminiscent of the “Grim Reaper”<sup>11</sup>, but also with some satanic

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<sup>11</sup> As this passage has been analyzed so many times as in the case of the very detailed study by Frizen (1993: 24-26), in which satanic and Dionysian elements are convincingly highlighted, it is here confined to a footnote for reference:

Mäßig *hochgewachsen, mager, bartlos* und auffallend *stumpfnäsiger*, 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 hervortrat*, blickte er *mit farblosen, rot bewimperten 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 Standort* zu diesem Eindruck bei - hatte seine 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 hervorbleckten*. (Mann 2003: 11-12. My italics to highlight significant details.)

Moderately *tall, thin, clean-shaven, and strikingly snub-nosed*, the man belonged to the red-haired type and possessed a redhead's milky and freckled complexion. He was clearly not of Bavarian stock, and in any case the wide and straight-brimmed straw hat that covered his head lent him the appearance of a *foreigner, of a traveler from afar*. To be sure, he also wore the familiar native rucksack strapped to his shoulders and a yellowish Norfolk suit apparently of loden cloth. He had a gray mackintosh over his left forearm, which he held supported against his side, and in his right hand *he held a stick with an iron tip*, which he propped obliquely against the ground, leaning his hip against his handle and crossing his ankles. *With his head held up*, so that his *Adam's apple protruded nakedly from the thin neck* that emerged from his loose sport shirt, he gazed intently into the distance *with colorless, red-lashed eyes*, between which stood two stark vertical furrows that went rather oddly *with his short, turned-up nose*. It may be that *his elevated and elevating location* had something to do with it, but his posture conveyed an *impression of imperious surveillance, fortitude, even wildness*. His lips seemed insufficient, perhaps because he was squinting, blinded, toward the setting sun or maybe because he was afflicted by a facial deformity—in any case *they were retracted to such an extent that his teeth, revealed as far as the gums, menacingly displayed their entire white length*. (Koelb 1994: 4)

Here the point of the analysis is to contrast the amount of significant detail observed from the author's perspective with the usual corresponding lack of awareness of the protagonist.

overtone: the fact that he is very thin (mager), shaven and has a snub-nose (Stumpfnase), makes his head seem to be slightly skull-like and his thin body skeletal in appearance. He is not only a stranger, but there is something alien about him as shown by the emphasis and repetition in ‘ein Gepräge des Fremdländischen und Weitherkommenden’, which can be explicated in a phrase to the effect: ‘something alien about him as of a stranger who had emerged from some far-flung part of the planet’. His iron-pointed stick is redolent of Death’s scythe<sup>12</sup>. The magnificent genitive construction “Erhobenen Hauptes” (with head held high) reflects the imperiousness of the Reaper figure - “etwas herrisch Überschauendes, Kühnes oder selbst Wildes” (of an imperious figure surveying the scene from above, in a fearless or even savage stance [explicating translation]) whereas the stranger’s grimace (*grimassierte*) revealing his teeth predominating over his thin lips expresses something of Death’s malicious delight in his task, and, at the same time, horror to the beholder.

At the symbolical level, this passage can be seen as a premonition of Aschenbach’s impending, but (from before the time of the appearance of the stranger) totally unexpected death. The detailed analysis of the stranger is literary rather than Freudian because it is on the surface a purely physical description whereas the symbolism as quoted above is full of literary and mythological references. Aschenbach perceives the figure of the stranger only at the subliminal level “bei seiner *halb* zerstreuten, *halb* inquisitiven Musterung des Fremden . . .” (during his *half* distracted and his *half* inquisitive perusal of the stranger). Aschenbach is, however, somewhat disturbed and startled by the stranger, whose insistent stare causes him to beat a hasty retreat:

. . . denn plötzlich ward er gewahr, daß jener seinen Blick erwiderte und zwar so kriegerisch, so gerade ins Auge hinein, so offenkundig gesonnen, die Sache aufs Äußerste zu treiben und den Blick des andern zum Abzug zu zwingen, daß Aschenbach, peinlich berührt, sich abwandte und einen Gang die Zäune entlang begann, mit dem beiläufigen Entschluß, *des Menschen nicht weiter achtzuhaben*. (Mann 2003: 12-13. My emphasis.)

. . . for he suddenly realized that his gaze was being returned, and indeed returned so belligerently, so directly eye to eye, with such a clear intent to bring matters to a head and force the other to avert his eyes, that Aschenbach, with an awkward sense of embarrassment, turned away and began to walk along the fence, intending for the time being *to pay no more attention to the fellow*. (Koelb 1994: 4. My emphasis.)

From the literary, analytical standpoint of Thomas Mann, this encounter is extremely important as is evidenced by the enormous amount of significant detail in the description of what was actually a very brief and, on the surface, inconsequential encounter. In contrast, Aschenbach is totally unaware at the conscious level of the significance of this event: “Er

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<sup>12</sup>Also of Hermes’s or Mercury’s staff when driving souls to Hades (Bahr 1991: 12).

hatte ihn in der nächsten Minute vergessen” (The next moment he had [completely] forgotten him). Even though the stranger had made some impression on Aschenbach expressed as “eine Art schweifender Unruhe” (a restless urge to roam), he did not wish to acknowledge what was happening subliminally and instead, at the conscious normal rational everyday level, he dismissed the complexity of his feelings as a mere need to have a holiday: “Es war Reiselust, nichts weiter” (It was an urge to travel and nothing more).

That it was something far more than mere “Reiselust” is confirmed in the immediate continuation of his inner dialogue:

. . . aber [die Reiselust] wahrhaft als Anfall auftretend und ins Leidenschaftliche, ja bis zur Sinnestäuschung gesteigert. (Mann 2003: 13)

. . . but it was an urge to travel that hit him almost like a physical attack and then the desire so overwhelmed him that it became a sudden passion causing him to become temporarily deranged. (Interpretive translation)

This need is not only a passion, but it is also so strong and powerful that it is like an attack on his senses, almost causing him to hallucinate.

The hallucination in the form of a detailed vision immediately follows with a similar highly symbolic description by Thomas Mann, which reflects the unconscious swirl of drives churning around in Aschenbach’s mind, though at the unconscious level. This oft-quoted passage needs to be re-examined as it is so full of psychologically significant details:

Seine *Begierde* ward sehend, seine Einbildungskraft, noch nicht zur Ruhe gekommen seit den Stunden der Arbeit, schuf sich ein Beispiel für alle *Wunder und Schrecken* der mannigfaltigen Erde, die sie auf einmal sich vorzustellen bestrebt war: er sah, sah eine Landschaft, *ein tropisches Sumpfbgebiet unter dickdunstigem Himmel, feucht, üppig und ungeheuer*, eine Art *Urweltwildnis aus Inseln, Morästen und Schlamm führenden Wasserarmen*, - sah *aus geilem Farrengewucher*, aus Gründen von *fettem, gequollenem und abenteuerlich blühendem Pflanzenwerk haarige Palmenschäfte* nah und ferne *emporstreben*, sah *wunderlich ungestalte Bäume*, ihre Wurzeln durch die Luft in den Boden, in stockende, grünschattig spiegelnde Fluten versenken, wo zwischen schwimmenden Blumen, die milchweiß und groß wie Schüsseln waren, Vögel *von fremder Art*, hochschultrig, mit *unförmigen Schnäbeln*, im Seichten standen und unbeweglich zur Seite blickten, sah zwischen den knotigen Rohrstämmen des Bambusdickichts *die Lichter eines kauernenden Tigers funkeln* - und fühlte sein Herz *pochen vor Entsetzen und rätselhaftem Verlangen*. (My italics to highlight significant details.)

His *passionate desire* transformed itself into a vision; his imagination, which was still active after working for hours on end, created an image that contained all the *wonders and horrors of this earth in their infinite variety*, and it strove to present them before his eyes at one stroke: he continued to gaze and he beheld a landscape, a tropical swamp with a sky obscured by a dense fog, *steamly, luxuriant and eerie, a kind of primeval wilderness with islands, swamps and a patchwork of murky rivers* – he watched the *hairy trunks of palm trees striving to thrust out from the ground*, which was rank with *luxuriant fern-like plants*, and the trunks grew upwards from patches of land overgrown in a network of exotic plants *swollen to bursting point* and blooming with *odd and alien flowers*; he saw *strangely misshapen trees* with their roots exposed to the air before they were thrust into the ground and into the waters eddying irregularly, reflecting the shadowy green of surrounding vegetation - *where unknown species of birds with shapeless beaks* stared askance, with their shoulders held erect, without any movement and stood in the shallows among large floating blossoms, milk-white and shaped like fruit bowls; he saw *the eyes of a tiger glitter* while calmly chewing its prey among the gnarled stems of

bamboo trees - and he felt his heart pounding away, aroused by *mixed feelings of horror and inexplicable desire*. Then the vision disappeared; and with a shake of his head, Aschenbach continued his stroll past the fences surrounding the tombstone masons' yard.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Mann's analysis of the unconscious does not only have Freudian elements but it is also embedded in philosophical motifs such as the Nietzschean distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian art<sup>14</sup>: the Apollonian elements in Aschenbach concern his love of form, order, creation, beauty and discipline and these relate to his conscious motivation whereas he is only dimly aware of his opposite Dionysian impulses which bring about his downfall and which are dark, irrational, passionate, sexual, exotic, exciting and ultimately destructive. It is already clear from the sentence quoted in chapter II that the Apollonian instincts came from the paternal side of Aschenbach's family whereas the darker more sensual impulses stem from his fiery mother:

Die Vermählung dienstlich nüchterner Gewissenhaftigkeit mit dunkleren, feurigeren Impulsen ließ einen Künstler und diesen besonderen Künstler erstehen. (Mann 2003: 19)

The union of a scrupulous, sober dedication to duty with darker, fiery impulses produced an artist, and indeed, combined to produce this particular artist.

At the conscious level, it would have been normal for a highly cultivated writer to think of places such as Greece or Rome for a vacation rather than the fetid swamps of an Indian jungle, but this is where the unconscious Dionysian elements are breaking through the Apollonian surface reality. In the above-quoted passage, the opening sentence "seine Begierde ward sehend", the noun *Begierde* can be translated as 'lust' and would normally be far too strong a lexical choice for selecting a holiday, but, here, it is only about a holiday on the surface whereas underneath, the Dionysian urges are already asserting themselves and produce elements of surprise ("Wunder") and horror ("Schrecken") in Aschenbach's unconscious mind, represented by the tropical swamp ("tropisches Sumpfgebiet"). Aschenbach's literary style is classical and controlled, but his vision is of landscapes that are

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<sup>13</sup> Shookmann (2004: 50-63) subjects the eight published translations of this passage to a very stringent critical analysis, but he does not unfortunately offer his own version. Had he done so, he may well have experienced the impossibility of a perfect translation of Thomas Mann. The impossibility of producing a single 'perfect' translation has been argued in Gledhill (2007: 81-128). (It is an unfortunate trick of fate that the German publisher gave this book the embarrassing title *How to Translate Thomas Mann's Works* as a *fait accompli* even though the author's argumentation throughout the book was directly contrary to a prescriptive approach.) In the translation here, I have allowed myself a certain freedom to highlight aspects relevant to the interpretation in the article (i.e. a domesticating translation), which I would argue are clearly implicit in the text, but it is by no means intended as model translation. A comparative study of the various translations could well be a useful comparison exercise both for literature students of Thomas Mann and for students of literary translation theory.

<sup>14</sup>This passage has been analyzed so many times that to quote references is of no avail. Again, the stress here is the contrast between the depth of Mann's observation with the obliviousness of his protagonist.

“feucht, üppig und ungeheuer” (wet, luxuriant and monstrous). In contrast to Aschenbach’s love of strict form and order, Mann chooses adjectives to describe amorphousness, the breakdown of form, the subliminal Dionysian triumph of chaos over conscious Apollonian order: “*ungestalte* Bäume, *verworrene* Waldungen” (he saw strangely *misshapen* trees, *chaotic* outcrops of woodland), “Vögel von fremder Art mit *unförmigen* Schnäbeln” (unknown species of birds with *shapeless* beaks). This landscape of mud and bogs is clearly sexual in nature as in phrases such as “aus geilem<sup>15</sup> Farrengewucher” (rank with luxuriant fern-like plants) and as in blatantly obvious phallic references: “haarige Palmenschäfte nah und ferne emporstreben” (he watched the hairy trunks of palm trees striving to thrust out from the ground). The ‘evil’ is not necessarily evil in the Christian or Judaic sense, but it is more a case of the ‘dark god’ or ‘foreign god’ of Dionysus and so, the vision at the same time horrifies Aschenbach and yet fills him with an ‘enigmatic desire’ (“rätselhaftem Verlangen”). The desire is puzzling from Aschenbach’s perspective because the vision represents everything that the conscious Apollonian Aschenbach abhors whereas from the perspective of Thomas Mann’s analysis, the Dionysian vision reflects Aschenbach’s unconscious rebellion against his own chosen, hyper-disciplined life.

Yet, again as with the encounter with the stranger, at the surface level, the vision had little effect on Aschenbach, who quickly returns to everyday reality:

Dann wich das Gesicht; und *mit einem Kopfschütteln* nahm Aschenbach seine Promenade an den Zäunen der Grabsteinmetzereien wieder auf. (Mann 2003: 14. My emphasis.)

Then the vision disappeared; and, *with a shake of his head*, Aschenbach continued his stroll past the fences surrounding the masons’ yard.

As with his encounter with the stranger at the graveyard, Aschenbach suppresses his feelings, ignores them and calmly carries on with his surface existence even though both these experiences are premonitions of his downfall and could even be seen as warning signs. Aschenbach’s crime is his insistent refusal to take any notice of what is really happening in his mind – now perhaps, more a case of suppression than repression.

The theme of fear, horror and delight with regard to Dionysian forces is continued in chapter V when Aschenbach dreams of a Dionysian orgy of desire and destruction:

Angst war der Anfang, Angst und Lust und eine entsetzte Neugier nach dem, was kommen wollte. (Mann 2003: 125)

It all began with fear and desire and a horrified curiosity to see what was going to happen next.

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<sup>15</sup> The adjective *geil* also has sexual connotations.

The themes which are implicit in the vision of the primeval landscape become explicit in the dream of a Dionysian ceremony, which involves the dismemberment and sacrifice of animals, phallic worship and the drinking of blood caused by the wounds. At first Aschenbach's feelings are mixed as he feels a strong temptation to join in the orgy, but there is still some resistance:

Lockte er nicht auch ihn, den widerstrebend Erlebenden, schamlos beharrlich zum Fest und Unmaß des äußersten Opfers? Groß war sein Abscheu, groß seine Furcht, redlich sein Wille, bis zuletzt das Seine zu schützen gegen den Fremden, den Feind des gefaßten und würdigen Geistes. (Mann 2003: 126)

Were not [the haunting tones of the flutes] enticing him – the man who was resisting everything he was experiencing – luring him with shameless insistence to the feast to experience the outrageous, final offering? Great was his disgust, great his fear, but his will was ready to defend all that was his - against the strange god, against the enemy of a controlled and dignified mind.

As already analyzed there is a clear Apollonian/Dionysian conflict, but, as Tadzio is also present at the orgy as “der Träumende” (the Dreamer), Aschenbach succumbs to temptation and metaphorically joins the feast:

Und seine Seele kostete Unzucht und Raserei des Unterganges. (Mann 2003: 127)

And his soul savored the shameless immorality and raving madness of the final downfall.

The final scene of the orgy involves a threefold union with the “fremde Gott” (Dionysus), with Tadzio and with the orgiastic revelers. This is the point at which Aschenbach joins the feast. There are religious (perhaps, partially blasphemous) overtones: “Aber *mit ihnen, in ihnen* war der Träumende nun und dem fremden Gotte gehörig,” (But *with them and in them*, the dreamer was now one with them and the strange god), possibly reflecting the final words of the priest (or pastor) reciting the concluding prayer in a communion service: “Durch Ihn und mit Ihm und in Ihm ist Dir, Gott” (Through him and with Him and in Him is to You, O God). Certainly a communion is taking place, so much so, that the rules of grammar are broken to express the unity of Tadzio, Dionysus and orgiasts in the phrase, “sie waren er selbst” (they were he himself):

Ja, *sie waren er selbst*, als sie reißend und mordend sich auf die Tiere hinwarfen und dampfende Fetzen verschlangen, als auf zerwühltem Moosgrund grenzenlose Vermischung begann, dem Gotte zum Opfer. (Mann 2003: 127. My emphasis.)

Yes, *they were he himself* as they threw themselves at the animals in a murderous rapture while tearing them to pieces and devouring the steaming shreds of flesh and *he was they* as the unbounded intermingling took place on the mossy earth already torn to shreds with everything being sacrificed to this god. (Interpretative translation.)

At this point, Aschenbach's fate is sealed. The forces of Dionysus have triumphed over a life dedicated to Apollo. His extreme discipline has led to his equally extreme downfall, but more because he was not fully aware of what was happening unlike his creator who, despite

many similarities, avoided this fate. In a sense, *Der Tod in Venedig* has much in common with Mann's earlier stories such as *Tobias Mindernickel* and *Der kleine Herr Friedeman*, in which the protagonists turn out to be deeply dysfunctional human beings as they both retreat from 'life' and build up secure but sick worlds for themselves. Gustav Aschenbach has overcome these difficulties as is expressly stated in chapter II:

Aschenbach hatte es einmal an wenig sichtbarer Stelle unmittelbar ausgesprochen, daß beinahe alles Große, was dastehe, als ein Trotzdem dastehe, trotz Kummer und Qual, Armut, Verlassenheit, Körperschwäche, Laster, Leidenschaft und tausend Hemmnissen zustande gekommen sei. (Mann 2003: 23)

Aschenbach had once baldly stated in a little known passage that almost any form of greatness that exists is a form of defiance that has come about despite tribulation and torments, despite poverty, despite desolation, physical weakness, vices, obsessions and countless obstacles.

Aschenbach embodies a Nietzschean affirmation of life ("Jasager") as opposed to a Schopenhauerian retreat as is the case with the former two protagonists Tobias Mindernickel and Herr Friedeman and in this sense, he is highly successful even to the point of being knighted for his services to literature. Yet, in his success is his downfall. His self-discipline to achieve this success is so extreme that only an image of a tightly clenched fist can convey the tension which accompanied his daily work:

Als er um sein fünfunddreißigstes Jahr in Wien erkrankte, äußerte ein feiner Beobachter über ihn in Gesellschaft: »Sehen Sie, Aschenbach hat von jeher nur 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. Das traf zu; und das Tapfer-Sittliche daran war, daß seine Natur von nichts weniger als robuster Verfassung und zur ständigen Anspannung nur berufen, nicht eigentlich geboren war. (Mann 2003: 20-21)

When, at the age of thirty-five, he became ill in Vienna, a rather sophisticated observer of Aschenbach's career at a soirée once described the author in the following way: "Just watch this - this is how Aschenbach has lived up till now"- and the speaker clenched his left hand into a fist - ; "never like this" - and he relaxed his hand and let it droop comfortably on the armrest of his chair. That hit the nail on the head; and his heroic virtue came about because, even though by nature he had anything but a robust constitution, he was, nevertheless, called, rather than born to a life of perpetual exertion.

Unlike Aschenbach, who, ultimately though invisibly fell into disgrace, Thomas Mann did achieve "Würde" (dignity, respect), which, despite controversy, remains to this day. If there is a moral to the story (and Thomas Mann was certainly no moralizer in the conventional sense), then it is that we should be more aware of what is happening subliminally in our psyche and that this awareness can save us from the fate of an Aschenbach or whatever might be relevant to our particular situation. Not only in the academic interpretations already quoted<sup>16</sup>, but even

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<sup>16</sup>A fairly recent account of the homosexual aspects in *Der Tod in Venedig* is well summarized in Tobin (1994: 207-232) where he makes it clear that these aspects are also an important feature of what is now referred to as Queer Studies and that the acceptance of the novella into this genre took place almost as soon as the novella was published: "Aschenbach's infatuation with the youth Tadzio allowed the story to move into the canon of homosexual literature immediately." Tobin (1994: 219)

more so in the popular mind, possibly influenced by films such as Visconti's *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach has become an admired tragic hero to such an extent that *Der Tod in Venedig* has been taken up as a *cause célèbre* for academic areas such as Queer Studies.<sup>17</sup> In Mann's dealing with this delicate field (as was certainly the case at the time of his writing the novella) with such subtlety, this approach is to a certain extent justified, but this essay has also shown that Thomas Mann's perspective in this novella is that of a moralist with empathy, irony and to a certain extent disgust towards his subject. Thus, *Der Tod in Venedig* is a highly moral work, though not in the conventional sense of reflecting a well-known maxim, but in the sense that awareness of the subliminal, as was the case with Thomas Mann in writing this work, can help us to be more aware of Dionysian drives at the subliminal level, which can affect us all in various guises.

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<sup>17</sup> It is relevant here to point out that Mann's original project was to describe a descent into indignity and shame without any homo-erotic elements and was to be based on Goethe's infatuation at the age of seventy with Ulrike von Levetzow as he confided in his letter to Carl Maria Weber (1890 – 1953) on the 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1920:

Leidenschaft als Verwirrung und Entwürdigung war eigentlich der Gegenstand meiner Fabel, - was ich ursprünglich erzählen wollte, war überhaupt nichts Homo-Erotisches, es war die – grotesk gesehene – Geschichte des Greises Goethe zu jenem kleinen Mädchen in Marienbad, [. . .] Der Titel des Novellenplanes lautete: *Goethe in Marienbad*. (Mann 2004: 349)

Passion as disorientation and degradation was the actual theme of my tale, - what I originally wanted to write about had nothing to do with homo-erotic motifs; it was what is from one point of view the absurd episode of Goethe as an old man falling in love with a young girl in Marienbad [. . .] The title of the novella at the planning stage was to be: *Goethe in Marienbad*. (See also Koopmann (2010: 5-11)).

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