

# Eros and Logos in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*

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Thomas Mann's novelle "Death in Venice" is a thoroughly modern work of literature which only discovers its unique voice through the classical tradition. It is almost as if Mann's readers need to have had Gustav von Aschenbach's own classical education, if they are to comprehend the stages of his dissolution, all the stages of which play themselves off against classical Antiquity. The bewildering flurry of classical allusions begins in Mann's opening paragraph and informs the novelle right up to von Aschenbach's dying vision. At the heart of a vast series of references to ancient epic, mythology and tragedy, there lies a wholesale appropriation of Plato, which an unfriendly critic might label "pastiche," but which will be analyzed here as "montage." In trying to untie the knot of *eros* and self-control, Mann's use of Plato will be the interpretative key.

## MOTUS ANIMI CONTINUUS

"Death in Venice" was written ninety years ago and published initially in 1912. The first three sentences (the introductory paragraph) of this masterpiece of concision treat the whole of the subject matter.<sup>1</sup> The opening sentence sets the scene in the instability of Europe prior to the outbreak of the Great War: Mann is already placing us in "The Europe That Was,"<sup>2</sup> prophetically prior to the events themselves. The conventions of Greek tragedy are going to be respected in this novelle, the very title of which suggests an inevitable and foregone conclusion. Mann, the narrator, is adopting the familiar role of that blind seer Teiresias, who ensures that this drama will run its course within the context of the millennial backdrop of European literature and philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992) 9. The handiest and most scholarly English translations are provided by David Luke, *Death in Venice and Other Stories* (New York, 1988); Clayton Koelb (New York, 1994); and Stanley Appelbaum (New York, 1995). All the English quotations are from the Appelbaum translation unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase (a title) comes from Geoffrey Household.

The novelle's second sentence is equally suggestive: Mann makes the extraordinary claim that the work of the writer is not only difficult but "dangerous" (*gefährlich*), and that in everything the author produces there must be "extreme circumspection, discretion, forcefulness and exactitude of the will" (1)—to all of which the unfurling bud of this novelle will put paid. Cicero, whose style was the glory of classical Latin, is then alleged to be the advocate of a *motus animi continuus*—a continuous motion of the spirit (*Geist*). There is indeed inertia in Mann's novelle, but it will tend towards rest rather than motion. Mann's understanding of the "geometry of tragedy, the inevitable intersecting of lines,"<sup>3</sup> will bring Gustav von Aschenbach, the tragic hero, to a foreordained conclusion.

The third and concluding sentence of the introductory paragraph immediately "pushes out the boat" for von Aschenbach's journey towards the "isles of the dead." The exhausted author seeks the revival of spirit and energy in "fresh air and exercise"—in the abandonment of the writer's desk, where he must pursue his craft under the yoke of steely self-discipline. The gloomy microcosm of the writer's study must yield to the sunlit macrocosm of the Adriatic, specifically Venice, the European gateway to the Orient, the land of spices.

*Der Tod in Venedig*, "Death in Venice" does not suggest much subtlety of plot, no great promise of suspense; as in Greek tragedy, the story is already known, everything depends upon the tragedian's ability to probe the unity of divine and human action in its fateful consequence. Mann's very title is itself like some echo of a Theban chorus: in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the play ends with the admonition to examine "that last day always."<sup>4</sup> No mortal life can be proclaimed as happy until we know the character of an individual's demise. Aeschylus makes the same point in his injunction to call no one "blest" unless the end of life is achieved in "sweet tranquility."<sup>5</sup> The death mask of von Aschenbach will not be permitted to represent some calm moment of final repose: it will barely conceal the foul smell of corruption and putrefaction, which lies underneath this cover. All the beauty and majesty of Venice cannot obliterate the noxious odours rising from the canals of this Adriatic "sunken" and fallen Queen (29; Luke, 226). This submission to Eros will not, for von Aschenbach, issue in any calm, last words in the com-

<sup>3</sup> This is taken from Igor Stravinsky's account of his "waxworks opera" *Oedipus Rex*—which is at one and same time both faithful and entirely unclassical in its representation of Oedipus' "fateful development." See Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (London, 1968) esp. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Oedipus the King* in *Greek Tragedies*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1991) l. 1529.

<sup>5</sup> *Agamemnon* in *Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1. ll. 928–29.

pany of family and friends: he will be made to undergo the squalid, fevered soiling of his spirit in a cholera-infested Venetian lagoon.

Von Aschenbach concludes his afternoon walk at the tram stop by Munich's Northern Cemetery and it is there that he waits for "a streetcar named desire." The tram journey will transport him inexorably towards a climactic encounter with his Oriental destiny in the birthplace of Mediterranean light: his visa for admission to the necropolis is about to be validated. Waiting at the stop, his eye is caught, in the dying light, by two distinct cities of departed souls: one, the cemetery populated, the other empty, that is, the stone-masons' yard where only the accessories of death are found to be resting. The "Byzantine" architecture of the nearby mausoleum, its Greek crosses and "hieratic paintings" are all premonitions of St Mark's in Venice and the Oriental world to which its harbour gave access. The "hieratic" (priestly) decorations of the mausoleum which he spies are at once an invitation to mystery and a potent reminder of Egypt's hieroglyphic inscriptions on the Pharaonic tombs, the greatest monuments to death ever conceived.

Now the classical allusions start furiously to multiply: a figure appears between two "apocalyptic beasts"—like the lions of St Mark's—this mysterious apparition is a satyr, no, more precisely Dionysus, or perhaps Pan or even Thanatos himself, but whatever this figure represents, he encourages von Aschenbach's fantasy to transport him into a tropical swamp: "damp, luxuriant and uncanny" with exotic birds and another hint of Dionysus in the appearance of a tiger. Again we are, with von Aschenbach, being dragged towards the Orient, the home of perfumes, with the heavy, cloying fragrance of jasmine and hyacinth. The first impression that a perfume makes is the "high note," but abiding underneath—more complex, and only gradually making its presence felt, is the base note, a far more sinister sensuality, with its essence of musk, damp leaves, corruption and decay. The shimmering brightness of Venice is the high note, but von Aschenbach's "Dionysiac" will draw him closer to the ground, to these sensual and damp expressions of decay. Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* was first published in Vienna in 1900. Here, a decade later, is a premonition of that fatal marriage of Eros and Thanatos, the *Liebestod*, which is the leitmotif of Mann's novelle "Death in Venice."

Von Aschenbach's career is directed by the requirements of the "European soul," what T.S. Eliot will call "the mind of Europe,"<sup>6</sup> which manifests itself as "a rigid, cold and passionate servitude," with its attendant "curbed and chilled" emotions (4–5). Now the narcotic of the Dionysiac is enticing

<sup>6</sup> "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London, 1951) 16.

von Aschenbach away with its promise of novelty and a distant freedom for forgetting. Improbable as it seems, this writer, the very incarnation of discipline, decides to devote himself to a period of aimless existence and give himself over to the unaccustomed pleasure of passing time (*Tagedieberei*).

#### DURCHHALTEN

The whole second section of Thomas Mann's novelle is dedicated to the life and achievements of an author whose celebrated accomplishments include not only fiction, but also a prose "epic" on the life of Friedrich the Great, and even a theoretical analysis which is regarded as not less influential than Friedrich Schiller's epoch-making distinction between "naive and sentimental" poetry. This locates Gustav von Aschenbach in the very highest echelons of German literary culture. But Mann provides his "portrait of the artist" with one further most remarkable distinction: von Aschenbach actually manages to complete all the works that Mann had undertaken since the publication of his debut novel, *Buddenbrooks*, and then for one reason or another abandoned. Familiar Thomas Mann themes are also here in evidence: for instance, von Aschenbach is the son of a civil servant from a family of bureaucrats, but his mother added the necessary balance as the more exotic daughter of a "Bohemian" concert master. The rest of the novelle is an attempt to understand both the repression and emancipation of this side of von Aschenbach's character and destiny.

We are informed that von Aschenbach's private motto is *Durchhalten*. This imperative form may be variously translated as "see it through," "endure" but best, in my opinion, as "complete the course" (as in the Latin tag, *perficio cursum*). At this point, we also learn that von Aschenbach desperately wants to live to see a distinguished old age, so that his artistry might, in the end, be comprehensive of all the stages of human existence. His inability to cling to his personal motto is why we must heed the chorus' advice to "look upon that last day always." This hope of mastering all the ages of artistic endeavour is not to be realized.

It is equally revealing that von Aschenbach's profoundest conviction is that all artistry, all achievement, all nobility of purpose is achieved only *als ein Trotzdem*. This phrase-bending German can only be rendered "despite" or "in spite of"; every worthwhile human undertaking in this life is only achieved "in spite of" circumstance, hardship, time, all of which manifest themselves in the guise of a "thousand obstructions." Discipline is nature's only gift to the artist, unflagging rigour is the artist's only response to nature. In von Aschenbach's plan of life there is to be no occasion for or encouragement of "spendthrift daydreams" if the artist is ever "to rise to dominance in the realm of beauty" (*sich zur Herrschaft im Reiche der Schönheit*

*aufzuschwingen*, 8). And here we smell the first trace of the *hubris* that will spell the end of a lifelong devotion to discipline, self-control, dedication, enterprise and achievement. Those qualities represent a perseverance which could carry the writer into old age and his final domination over, and domestication of, beauty. But then it seems that beauty will appear like "a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5: 2), in a vision, in a dream, where illusions of discipline and self-control are ineffectual, and intentions of "staying the course" become the subject of comic interjections and ridicule.

#### MÄRCHENTEMPEL

And so von Aschenbach makes his way to Venice. His journey towards the Mediterranean has to be understood as a fuller recovery of the wisdom of Antiquity. In our whole history there is nothing that can match the precision of Aeschylus in his formula for tragedy: "knowledge comes from what happens to you."<sup>7</sup> The march towards Antiquity in Mann's novelle is undertaken in "double time": on the first foot we make our way towards the geography of the classical world and on the other foot, with equal rapidity, we make our approach to its literature. The classical allusions in Mann's poetically constructed text now begin to multiply and proliferate. In quick succession von Aschenbach is confronted with a variety of boatmen, all of whom have the task of ferrying him across the river Acheron to the House of Hades: the hunchbacked purser, the drunken aging satyr, the ominous arrival of the medical launch to check for contagion, and the gondolier without official papers, who must abscond without payment lest he fall into the hands of the authorities.

Again and again, we are told that Venice is the most amazing, extraordinary and "improbable" of cities. Repeatedly, we are reminded that Venice needs to be associated with what is *märchenhaft*. The English translation of this word, *Märchen*, as "fairy tale" does this German literary concept great violence. It is representative of the fantastical and the fabulous, and our category of "folk tale" is a kinder translation and more appropriate. But, in German Romanticism, especially in the poet Novalis, the concept of what is *märchenhaft*, of what belongs to fable and to "the fabulous" is the expression of something outside all time and therefore timeless. Venice is "fabulous" in its Byzantine quotation of the Oriental riches, and it will indeed beckon von Aschenbach into a realm of timelessness. In the first instance, this journey to Venice is the invitation to a stuffy, eviscerated, dusty northern European to enter into the legendary realm of the 1001 Nights, with its promise of exotic

<sup>7</sup> *Agamemnon* ll. 178–79: "wisdom comes alone through suffering"; here I wish to emphasize the passive quality of our English word "suffering."



sensuality and voluptuousness. Hence the description of St Mark's as a *Märchentempel* (a temple with all the promise of earthly delights).

At this stage there is a remarkable change in the character of Mann's writing. From time to time, the younger author (Mann) allows his older protagonist (von Aschenbach) to slip into the present tense. It is done without fanfare and the author reverts to the past tense almost immediately, but it is as if Mann is taking hold of Novalis' assertion of the timeless quality of all *Märchen*. What von Aschenbach is experiencing just now in this novelle is not some quaint remembrance at the very end of the long Nineteenth Century, rather it is the timeless suffering of Thomas Mann, von Aschenbach, and of the reader also, in the unresolved war between "the flesh and the spirit," as all of us are driven to grasp the essence of beauty. The reader is told, in the present tense, that von Aschenbach "is hindered," that "he finds it impossible," and later that he "is attended to" (15 and 18). All of this present tense is offered with respect to von Aschenbach's transportation by the unlicensed gondolier: "You had a free ride, Sir," von Aschenbach is told. This is the ancient and tragic employment of irony: both the audience and Mann's reader know better. Even von Aschenbach himself recognizes that the gondolier has the power and skill to transport him "to the house of Aides" (or Hades, 18), if that were his intention.

Images of Tadzio, the beloved boy, now also begin to proliferate, all of them allusions to Antiquity. Tadzio is the very embodiment of a Greek statue, the famous image of "The Boy with a Thorn" is even named explicitly. Von Aschenbach never tires of returning to this theme: Tadzio is the embodiment of *Schönheit*, beauty, the beautiful. How can von Aschenbach give content to this vision of the beautiful itself without recourse to Antiquity, without employing the classical languages and mythology? Tadzio, in his "incomparable loveliness" has the very head of Eros (23). Metrical quotations from Homer suddenly begin to appear, Tadzio is identified as a "happy-go-lucky Phaeacian," a member of those privileged beings under the protection of Poseidon (god of the sea) far removed from all human unhappiness and suffering. A casual allusion is dropped reminding us of Socrates' affection for the handsome Alcibiades, and how the very personification of reason itself might fall into this potent mixing of the rationally disciplined with the divinely alluring, youthful and beautiful. We discover that Tadzio has just one small imperfection: his teeth are unhealthy (27), but then even this is a sign of his divine favour. It confirms von Aschenbach's suspicion that the youth will not remain for long excluded from the dwelling of the gods: he is "sickly," and is therefore destined to die young. The Olympian gods must be impatient that this Ganymede, this embodiment of beauty itself return to their presence.

And what is essential to this vision of the beautiful in itself, this adolescent "masterpiece," is that it be on the very threshold of maturity, but only and forever on the threshold: neither child nor man, neither ebb nor flood, neither waxing nor waning, but caught timelessly on the crystallizing boundary between liquid and solid. Beauty must be self-aware, but bashful (27) and lacking in mature self-confidence. What von Aschenbach is seeking to freeze in time is the foretaste, the promise of masculinity, but without its ever arriving. This is why von Aschenbach must now enter the "timeless" Venetian world of the 1001 Nights. The content of his lascivious dream requires the object of his devotion to retain an immortal aperture between ebb and flood, between waxing and waning, between inhalation and exhalation: one more breath, one more drop, one more hour, one more day and this manifestation of beauty will be destroyed by the exigencies of human life and the juggernaut of time.

This "piling on" of classical allusions is not so very different from the English poetic handiwork of T.S. Eliot, even if his most famous poems are post rather than pre-Great War. In "Burbank with a Baedeker" (1920), there are endless allusions to the Venice of literature, with pride of place going to Shakespeare's Venetian Moor, Othello, and to the Venetian Merchant, Shylock. But Eliot never ignores the world of classical mythology, in this instance referring us to the persons of Niobe and Hercules. Nor can we overlook Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) with its almost uncanny description of Thomas Mann's protagonist, von Aschenbach, on the Lido beach:

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

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Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

This world of allusion, whether classical or contemporary, is a unifying theme of this age of European literature. T.S. Eliot explains it in this way:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists ... you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead ....<sup>8</sup>

But the other quality which these two Nobel Prize winners share is that both produced "a literature of fastidiousness" (see page 4), a literature of

<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, 15.

squeamishness, so to speak. Eliot provides the most telling examples of this "literature" in the concluding section of his poem, *The Waste Land* (1922):

The awful daring of a moment's surrender  
Which an age of prudence can never retract  
By this, and this only, we have existed ...<sup>9</sup>

And Eliot brings this scrap of his poem to a kind of fulfilment in his agonizingly precise, conditional formula: "your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited ...."<sup>10</sup> This would serve convincingly as an epigraph for Mann's novelle, just as von Aschenbach's fastidiousness is the perfect embodiment of the great Eliot manifestoes of an enervated, pusillanimous Europe: "Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, and "The Hollow Men" (1925).

But the most striking and telling of these shared allusions "from across the Channel" is that which refers us to the world of Dracula and the realm of Nosferatu, "the undead" ("I had not thought death had undone so many").<sup>11</sup> In *The Waste Land* the reference to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is explicit ("bats with baby faces").<sup>12</sup> In Thomas Mann, as we might well expect, the reference is more subtle, and therefore more chilling. A vampire cannot cross the threshold of your home unless he be invited. In Mann's novelle, the first time von Aschenbach lays eyes on Tadzio, in the lounge waiting for dinner, we are told: "for some reason [*aus irgendeinem Grunde*]" Tadzio "turned around before crossing the threshold" into the dining hall and "his peculiarly hazy-gray eyes met those of Aschenbach ..." (21). Here is a moment of recognition, on the threshold, so to speak. This is the tragic *anagnorisis*, the moment of recognition, which is also the reversal of fortune. We are poised in this glance between the ebb and the flow, between the waxing and the waning. Just now, in a heartbeat, this unearthly embodiment of beauty itself beckons von Aschenbach to cross the threshold and join him in the only realm where this beauty may be maintained: in those ancient Egyptian tombs covered with hieratic writing.

#### "EROS DWELLS IN THE WORD"

Under the influence of von Aschenbach's heightening delirium (36), the dignified Socrates and the handsome Alcibiades are transformed into the ugly Socrates and the beautiful Phaedrus. Central to the instruction of the younger by the older is a reference to Semele (36) incinerated when Zeus grants her request to see his undisguised divinity. The similarity to von

<sup>9</sup> *The Waste Land* II. 403–05.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* II. 420–21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* I. 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* I. 379.



Aschenbach's own fate in this instruction does not depend upon any great scholarly insight into classical mythology. Indeed, this part of the novelle is the most telling: it is made up of equal parts classical allusion and modern psychology. Even the Freudian word "hysteria" (41) is not neglected in the description of von Aschenbach's ever more complete intoxication and dissolution.

It is entirely consistent with this decline that von Aschenbach easily, readily gives up a lifetime's servitude to "routine" in exchange for "blissful idleness" in Elysium (34). As Tadzio spends his days in "sauntering, wading, digging, playing tag" (35), so von Aschenbach succumbs to daydreams (39), fully occupied in the passing of time, in the idleness of Eros (37), in the adoration of Phaedrus, Ganymede, Pan, Hyacinth and Narcissus. Now follows besotted speculation as to the character of the "relationship" between two persons, who recognize each other by sight, but who—through social convention—must appear to be indifferent to one another. Is von Aschenbach right in assuming the boy has altered his daily routine in order to accommodate this mature writer's fascination? Does the younger seek the wisdom and advice (and adoration) of the older?

A subtle degeneration (the text suggests metamorphosis [40]) is now becoming evident. Work is cast aside, a return to youthful education and learning (the classics) occupies his mind, and a whimsical languor fills all his days. Affection is crystallizing into obsession. Intelligence as to the length of Tadzio's stay in Venice can be had from the hotel barber. Then the beloved misses one evening meal which engenders apprehension and concern, the agitation of infatuation. Work is set aside except for a small essay of a page and a half in praise of Tadzio. Posterity, we are told (38), will appreciate this paeon to Tadzio's beauty all the more for *not* knowing anything of its human subject.

This is the spiral into madness which is the necessary partner to von Aschenbach's obsession. In it there lies a subtle, or is it even a wicked, tinkering with the Platonic inheritance. The dialogues named *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are collapsed under von Aschenbach's delirium into one and the same text. What Phaedrus himself suggests in the *Symposium* (180b) becomes, under the pressure of intoxicating desire, an expression of Socrates' cunning in *his* pursuit of Phaedrus. However unscholarly the appropriation and fusion of different Platonic dialogues, Thomas Mann's description of this delirium has lost none of its circumspection and discretion. The wording here is masterful and compelling:

And then the crafty wooer [*der verschlagene Hofnacher*] made his subtlest pronouncement: that the lover is more divine than the beloved, because the god dwells in the former but not in the latter—perhaps the most delicate and ironical thought that has ever occurred to man ....<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Death in Venice* 37; cf. Luke, 235; Koelb, 38.

We need to emphasize the three essential points that emerge from this extraordinary modern appropriation of Plato. First, we have here precisely that union of *eros* and *logos* which is the central subject matter of this delicate, even fastidious, literary treatment of a most unsavoury topic. We are in the presence of what is crafty and sly indeed. In the hands of the greatest masters, the rhetoric of seduction can be transformed into the philosophical necessity of Platonic ascent. Phaedrus/Tadzio is only a lowly rung on that great Platonic "ladder of beauty"<sup>14</sup> in which the lover shows his appropriation of divinity precisely by first seducing *and then* discarding this mere instance of beauty. As "Socrates" explains, "Thus Beauty is the lover's path to the spirit [*der Weg des Fühlenden zum Geiste*]*—only the path, only a means, little Phaedrus ...*" (Luke, 235) The divine lover uses the beloved to begin the ascent, but in then abandoning the object of his sensuous obsession, his feeling (this aspect is suppressed in Luke's translation above) is then perfected in discarding the beloved, as the object of affection is only a temporary resting place or refreshment on the philosophical journey. It is when von Aschenbach stops to consider the beautiful Ganymede—snatched up into the heavens—that the "spiritual" character of *eros* can be made fully manifest. The novelle is precisely in itself what it simultaneously describes: "Eros dwells in language" (Luke, 236), "*daß Eros im Worte sei*" (87), "that Eros dwells in the word" (38). It is this "arranged marriage" of *eros* and *logos* which moves the novelle rapidly through the final stages of putrefaction and decomposition, rendered in the novelle as an epidemic of cholera.

The second point is the Platonic teaching concerning instances of beauty. Every great lover from Molière's Don Juan through Mozart's Don Giovanni to Venice's own Casanova has known that no single instance of beauty can bear the full weight of the search for beauty itself. The lover must constantly renew his search for beauty after beauty, only so does the lover stay true to his vision, his youthful ideal. The lover cannot rest in the possession of this incomplete instance or that slightly marred copy, but must continue the struggle, the agony of his pilgrimage to discover not copies, or indeed copies of copies, but beauty in itself, perfect and without substitute. The instances of conquest, Leperello's "catalogue,"<sup>15</sup> are just rungs on the "ladder of beauty," which is itself the divine quest.

The third point, and the most important for understanding Thomas Mann, is this extraordinary literary device Mann employs in his appropriation of Plato. In German, the technique here in evidence is referred to as

<sup>14</sup> See Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, Volume 4: *The Schools of the Imperial Age*. Tr. John R. Catan (Albany, 1990) 385.

<sup>15</sup> Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Act One: "but in Spain already a thousand and three ...."

*Textmontage*, and shows to what depth of unity the artistic expression of an age may aspire. We need to analyze this phenomenon under three headings: collage, pastiche and montage.

The simplest artistic device is the style known as collage, derived from the French word meaning "to stick" or "to glue." It is a remarkable fact that the first artistic use of collage is dated very precisely to Picasso in the Spring of 1912,<sup>16</sup> while Thomas Mann himself was completing the manuscript for his novelle. This sticking of various bric-à-brac onto canvas is not yet the refined technique which we associate with Thomas Mann, but it bears a family resemblance. Pastiche, normally defined as a work of art "composed of things borrowed," brings us more nearly into the subtlety of Mann's genius. Clearly, in von Aschenbach's Platonic delirium, there are great swathes of ancient exchange simply appropriated and incorporated into the very text of the novelle, without apology, without clarification, and certainly without footnotes. This again puts Mann very much in T.S. Eliot's orbit. *The Waste Land* in particular is thought by many critics to be nothing more coherent than a collage, even though it is at the same time a self-conscious pastiche. There are footnotes appended to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but they were only added after the original publication of the poem, and again many find these notes about as arch and misleading as anything ever provided in English literature. It has often been remarked that the notes conceal just as much or even more than they reveal. There is this union between these contemporaneous artists, Mann, Eliot and Stravinsky; all could be said to have adopted the tag: "a hack imitates, a great artist steals."

But more significant than collage and pastiche, for Mann the intended effect is *montage*—which places Mann also at the very beginning of the art form peculiar to the twentieth century, viz. film.<sup>17</sup> What montage means in the world of cinema is the superimposition of one image on top of another, and here we have a real entry into Mann's prescience and significance for modern literature. Even before film directors were making the first experimental forays into the layering of shots on top of one another, we have before us the most skilful literary expression of this technique imaginable. Mann in this central section of the novelle superimposes, interleaves passages from the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, so as to achieve the desired literary effect. His purpose is no true account of the Platonic philosophy, but rather to show how someone deeply formed by a classical education (von

<sup>16</sup> See "Collage" by Lewis Kachur in *The Dictionary of Art*, vol 7, ed. Jane Turner (New York, 1998) 557–58.

<sup>17</sup> See "Montage" by G. Kramer in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol 5, ed. Gert Ueding (Tübingen, 2001) cols. 1476–84.

Aschenbach) might in his delirium dredge out of his consciousness snippets and suggestions of the god-like quality of this boy, Tadzio. Mann then shows the deterioration of character which goes along with seeing the lover as more divine than the beloved, so that in von Aschenbach's delusion even his corruption might be understood as spiritual, as representing some classical ideal. Sadly, there is no Platonic text ready to hand, but that will not deter the artist: since he is no "hack," Mann just makes one up. Two Platonic dialogues are seamlessly woven together to render the desired result.

Mann's genius is to grasp this possibility right at the beginning of the century. One of the greatest German novels of the whole following half century explains exactly how this might work; Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (first published in 1930) describes the protagonist's house in this way: the original structure is seventeenth-century, the garden and upper story are eighteenth, and the façade is nineteenth, so that the overall effect of the house is like that "of a superimposed photograph."<sup>18</sup> It is this technique of the "double negative" that Mann employs with such flair in *Death in Venice*, and our enjoyment of the novelle is heightened by its use at the very theoretical centre of this masterpiece.

#### "ART WAS A WAR"

Mann has so perfectly set the stage for the tragic dissolution of von Aschenbach, there is little that the commentator needs to add to the exquisitely painful exposition of the hero's decline. I shall only highlight three points. First, the consuming dilemma of the days in which von Aschenbach's life is ebbing away is the question: can this Eros be liberated without the deadening hand of routine? Can the dangerous intuitions of language be captured without the exhausting requirements of discipline and labour? Just now, Mann would say, the writing must exhibit "extreme circumspection" and discretion. Mann, the craftsman, can, indeed, provide the discretion, but von Aschenbach, the lover, no longer wishes to embrace it. We are to be introduced to the furtive, calculating, obsessive behaviour engendered by addiction. And so we move from *eros* in the word, to words which can praise but never reproduce beauty. We move from the loss of art to the triumph of life. "Exactitude of the will" is replaced by the surrender of will to intoxication and obsession. A lifetime's discipline devoted to the complexity of language is dissolved in the simple (and for the aging von Aschenbach) absurd formula: "Ich liebe dich!", which is the turning point of the novelle.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, vol 1, ed. Adolf Frisé (Hamburg, 1978) 12: "so wie übereinander photographierte Bilder ...." English translation by E. Wilkins and E. Kaiser, vol 1 (London, 1979) 7.

From the perspective of the aging lover, "art was a war, an exhausting struggle" (46), and the "abstemious life" which it required was now going to be exchanged for the liberating delirium and intoxication of love. Here we adopt another great principle of Greek tragedy, "the doer suffers," a notion supported by what Orestes tells his mother: you did what you ought not, "now suffer what you ought not."<sup>19</sup> The reader must, in turn, "suffer" the description of von Aschenbach's final degradation at the skilled and hypocritical hands of the hotel barber. The incapacity of age will by the cosmetic art be transformed into "a youngster in his prime" (58)—or so delusion informs von Aschenbach. The tragedy is that through his obsession, the writer turns himself into that very figure of the drunken aging satyr which filled him with such disgust and horror on the steamer which brought them both to Venice. In one of those moments where Mann employs the present tense (15–16), von Aschenbach is made to endure "the bleatings" of intoxication of this "old fop," with his nauseating (and prescient) references to "your pretty sweetheart" (Luke, 210).

As usual, all of this has been explored with great perspicacity in Greek tragedy. There is nothing more appalling, discouraging, revolting than the seduction of Pentheus in *The Bacchae*. The ruler of Thebes sets his face against "that effeminate stranger,"<sup>20</sup> whom the audience know to be the god Dionysus. With what horror do we, the audience, in turn, see the seduction of Pentheus, by which he is transformed, under the divine influence, into the very thing he hates and fears. He puts on women's clothing in order "to gather intelligence," but then in the course of things is attentive to all details of his costume, the more completely to enjoy his experience as voyeur. Thus do we adopt the customs, which to begin with we found noxious.

As Mann's extraordinary use of *Textmontage* points us well forwards into the twentieth century, and that century's own unique artistic achievement in film, it seems appropriate to close with a word concerning Luchino Visconti's extraordinary film adaptation of 1971. It retains a remarkable degree of fidelity to Mann's novelle, even transforming Gustav von Aschenbach into Gustav Mahler, in truth Mann's model for this character. It is of great interest, also, that Dirk Bogarde, the actor who played von Aschenbach, found the actual filming the most desolating experience of his entire life—such is the power of Mann's insight and circumspection. But it is in the film's conclusion that Visconti does the greatest justice to Mann's vision and his use of montage; here film can do homage to literature.

<sup>19</sup> I follow the suggestive translations provided by Simon Goldhill in *The Oresteia* (Cambridge, 1992) 27–30.

<sup>20</sup> *The Bacchae in Greek Tragedies Greek*, 2nd ed., vol 3, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1991) I. 353.

In Visconti's incomparable allegiance to Thomas Mann, the dying von Aschenbach is offered a final vision of the beloved. Tazio adopts a pose best described as *contrapposto* (62)—he is now truly an embodiment of the divine—like Donatello's statue of the youthful David—alluring and cheeky at once. Tazio lifts his arm, he is pointing outward, pointing away from himself into that vast expanse of sea and sky, towards the horizon, where the two hemispheres of ocean and heaven will meet. In homage to Plato and Thomas Mann simultaneously, Visconti's image reminds us that the beauty of Tazio is only an instance of the true beauty that we seek: that this young boy cannot bear the weight of all our aspirations, that we cannot crush him with all the burden of the beautiful. This flower of boyhood must surrender to the demands of manhood, and we must continue our dedication to beauty in the only way available to us here: we must ascend its Platonic ladder.

Mann's novelle is anything but a pastiche. The author has not just "glued" whole pages from Plato onto his literary canvas. He has adapted aspects of the Platonic dialogues to enhance the climax of his drama. In the quotation (and deliberate misquotation) of Plato, Thomas Mann affirms the fragility of youth and the passing character of its beauty. He affirms the Platonic teaching that no instance of the beautiful can bear the whole weight of the burden of beauty on its slight shoulders, and that the beautiful we seek will only be discovered in the beyond. The novelle's sense of urgency is provided by the tragic tension between von Aschenbach's servitude to art and his pursuit of beauty. The unbridled sensibility, Mann's novelle suggests, is in danger of losing both the art it renders and the beauty it seeks to grasp.