

Travel and Disease in Thomas Mann's Death in Venice

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Abstract

Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*, 1912), presents a story of an artist, Gustav von Aschenbach, suffering from the writer's block who travels to Venice to look for inspiration and where he eventually finds his death. In the meantime, he suffers from depression strengthened by feasts of febrile listlessness, pressure in the temples, heaviness of the eyelids that make discontent befall him. The putrid smell of the lagoon hastens his departure, but a strange coincidence makes him change his mind. He returns to the hotel drawn by the enthrallment for the young lad, Tadzio, he had spotted there. Wandering through the streets of Venice, he ignores the health notices in the city, only later learning that there is a serious cholera epidemic in Venice. But he does not escape, nor does he warn the boy's family of the fatal danger. He dies in his beach chair, looking at the boy on the beach. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore the relationship between travel and disease as juxtaposed with a growing passion for a youth, unmistakably, a sign of life affirmation in a sickly body and burnt-out mind. Thomas Mann's novella has been a subject of extensive commentaries and criticisms for over a century since it was published in Germany, first, in serial form in 1912 and 1913 and, then when it was translated into the French and English in the 1920s, thus introducing it to the rest of the world. The peak of critical interest in Mann's oeuvre may be pinpointed to the 1970s when Luchino Visconti's film, *Morte a Venezia* (1971), was released and Benjamin Britten's opera composed and first staged (1973).

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Introduction

The early criticism, however, concentrated on biographical elements alongside psychological theories as a background. Interestingly, homoerotic elements were either completely ignored, repressed or at least largely marginalized until the mid-1970s, and the novella's reception was conditioned on the reviewers' views on homosexuality (Shookman 2003: 5).

Nicklas and later Ritter propose to divide the approaches to *Death in Venice* into several categories, the most often applied would include, among others, individualistic readings of Aschenbach's psyche, ontological interpretations that regard him as an artist doomed to death, sociological approach that view him as a typical product of the German bourgeoisie after Bismarck, or formal readings that stress stylistic and structural elements. On top of these, there are the obvious late twentieth-century ideas of reading this text as a symbol of decadence, moral dilemmas, Eros, seduction, pedophilia, mid-life crises, the image of a foreign city, etc. As a rule, however, they lack a serious literary refinement and, to a considerable degree, misinterpret Freudian psychoanalysis in taking Mann's fiction for facts or misunderstanding his elaborated irony and purposeful ambiguity. Further, Visconti's cinematic or Britten's operatic interpretations are often taken as if they were Mann's original ideas, while it is self-evident that Mann did not write what Visconti showed or Britten produced on stage.

In more recent scholarship of the last two decades of the 21st century, however, the attention has been refocused on the idea of travel in the context of a growing interest in illness as narration. Of particular interest for us is here Ann Jurecic's *Illness as Narrative* (2012), where the stress is meaningfully and remarkably laid on the intersection of literature and literacies, the aesthetic and the rhetorical. In treating illness as a continuous story (or stories), Jurecic endeavours to connect the usually disconnected two parts of oneself: the professional as a writer and the narrative of the ill as a patient, with an aim to find and develop practices that would allow for a critical and compassionate analysis of both the patient's psychic states and the ways of their textual articulation. As a result, these narratives are supposed to produce meaning of what constitutes human fragility and mortality, and what makes sense of human pain and suffering.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to explore Mann's text in the context of the above and to uncover the stylistic and aesthetic complexities of his discourse that make *Death in Venice* so remarkable as the voice of decaying, sick Europe at the brink of the Great War.

The Nietzschean traces in Thomas Mann's famous novella are obviously conspicuous and virtually impossible not to be recognised, even bearing in mind Mann's masterly handling of free indirect discourse, but the atmosphere he is able to create in his prose reflect the existential and artistic worries of his great predecessor philosopher and philologist, Friedrich Nietzsche.

The novella starts with the protagonist's "another solitary walk," the walk so characteristic of Nietzsche's quiet and thoughtful contemplation he contained in his various philosophical writings:

Gustav Aschenbach, or *von Aschenbach*, as his official surname had been since his fiftieth birthday, had taken another solitary walk from his apartment in Munich's Prinzregentenstrasse on a spring afternoon of the year 19... which had shown the continent such a menacing grimace for a few months. Overexcited by the dangerous and difficult work of that morning that demanded a maximum of caution, discretion, of forcefulness and exactitude of will, the writer had been unable, even after lunch, to stop the continued revolution of that innermost productive drive of his, that *motus animi continuus*, which after Cicero is the heart of eloquence, and had been thwarted trying to find that **soothing slumber** which he, in view of his **declining resistance**, needed so dearly. Therefore he had gone outside soon after tea, hoping that fresh air and exertion would regenerate him and reward him with a productive evening. (Ch. 1)

The atmosphere of excitement mingled with danger of the work, which demands from von Aschenbach "forcefulness and exactitude of will" further reinforces the Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean voluntarism present in the opening passage. The focus on power of the will (the Nietzschean *Wille zur Macht*) is the *modus vivendi* of a productive and creative life the protagonist wishes to continue ("that innermost productive drive" – *drive* – a Freudian term, most likely a sex drive leading to death drive). A recipe for a regeneration of the mind and body in both Nietzsche and Mann is fresh air, which is what Aschenbach needs for a productive evening.

What strikes as odd in the above opening passage is an immediate reference to the factual developments in Europe ahead of the outbreak of the bloodiest military conflict in human history that took over 30 million lives (WWII – around three million less), which Mann contained in a phrase "the year 19...", which had shown the continent such a menacing grimace," suggesting the presence of immediate danger – ominous, sinister and alarming. According to the *Norton Anthology of Western Literature*, Mann wrote *Death in Venice* during the 1911 Moroccan Crisis, which caused Germany and France to negotiate. As it seems, Mann purposefully included the hint of the date to demonstrate the beginning of the collapse of Europe as a whole and, from our perspective, the start of the process of disintegration of the body – the community – and its gradual decay leading to death and annihilation, its total spiritual and physical destruction.

Chapter 1 also inaugurates the motif of travel in the novella, which basically has its beginnings at home, in Munich, in a cemetery, where he spotted a bizarre-looking foreigner:

Not very tall, thin, beardless and strikingly round-nosed, the man belonged to the red-headed type and had its milk-like and freckled skin. Obviously he was not Bavarian: the broad and straight-rimmed bast hat which covered his head gave him the air of the foreign and far-traveled. Of course he wore the common kind of rucksack strapped on his shoulders, a yellowish suit of loden fabric, as it appeared, a gray coat over the left underarm, which he had stemmed into his side, and in the right hand a stick with an iron tip, which he had pushed diagonally into the ground and on which he, feet crossed, leaned with his hip. With raised head, so that on his scrawny neck which stuck out from his sport shirt the Adam's apple projected forcefully and well-defined, he looked into the distance, with colorless, red-lashed eyes between which there were two vertical, definite furrows, which strangely complemented his short and stubby nose. His demeanor—and perhaps his elevated and elevating standpoint contributed to this impression—was that of cool survey, audacious, even wild; because, be it that he was grimacing against the brightness of the setting Sun or that it was a more permanent physiognomic disfigurement, his lips seemed too short, the teeth were entirely uncovered, so that they, quite long and bare to the gums, gleamed white between his lips. (Ch. 1)

The stranger's role in the above passage is at least two-fold: first, his figure is supposed to be an odd-out one in the background of the homely Bavaria – an "unhomely" one, uncanny, a red-haired type regarded as evil. Secondly, the fact that he had "the air of the foreign and far-traveled" invoked in Aschenbach a strong desire (again a psychoanalytical term) to travel, the urge that completely overpowered him and his thoughts:

If it was the wayfarer-like air of the foreigner working on his imagination or some other corporeal or mental influence that caused it: a strange distention of his soul unexpectedly made itself known, a sort of roving unrest, a juvenile thirst for the distant, a feeling, so novel and yet so long-forgotten that he, hands on his back and his eyes fixed at the ground, stood

transfixed to probe that emotion and its nature and aim. It was wanderlust, nothing more; but verily coming in the form of a fit and ardently intensified, even to the point of an illusion. (Ch. 1)

This kind of a mental fit leading to an illusion has been well documented in psychoanalytical literature, going far beyond the rational in the direction of the primeval, original, preconscious – a modernist yearning for the genuine, embryonic source of the human. All this demands a radical change of the setting, the environment, the scenery. And in a hallucination,

he saw, as a sample of all those wonders and horrors of the diversity on Earth which his desire was suddenly able to imagine, an enormous landscape, a tropical swamp under a moist and heavy sky, wet, lush, and **unhealthy**, a primordial wilderness of islands and **mud-bearing** backwaters that men avoid. The shallow islands, the soil of which was covered with leaves as thick as hands, with enormous ferns, with juicy, macerated and wonderfully flowering plants, ejected upwards hairy palm trunks, and strangely formless trees, whose roots sprung from the trunks and connected to the water or the ground through the air, formed disorienting arrangements. On the brackish, glaucously-reflecting stream milk-white, bowl-sized flowers were floating; high-shouldered birds of all kinds with shapeless beaks were standing on tall legs in the shallow water and looked askance unmoving, while through vast reed fields there sounded a clattering grinding and whirring, as if by soldiers in their armaments; the onlooker thought he felt the tepid and mephitic odor of that unrestrained and unfit wasteland, which seemed to hover in a limbo between creation and decay, between the knotty trunks of a bamboo thicket he for a moment believed to perceive the phosphorescent eyes of the tiger—and felt his heart beating with horror and mysterious yearning. Finally the hallucination vanished, and Aschenbach, shaking his head, resumed his promenade along the fences of the stonecutters.

The tropical landscape Mann presents is, as the narrator admits, “unhealthy” but, at the same time, “a primordial wilderness of islands and *mud-bearing* [emphasis added] backwaters” that are supposed to be *life-bearing*, the source of human life. What is, then, the sense of travel? Aschenbach answers it promptly:

He had, as far as he had possessed the means to enjoy the benefits of sojourn to far-off countries, regarded travel as a *hygienic necessity* [emphasis added] which had to be observed *against will and inclination* [emphasis added]. Too much occupied with the duties imposed by his ego and the **European soul**, too overburdened with the duty of production, too little interested in distracting himself to be a faithful lover of that gay outside world, he had contended himself wholly with that knowledge of the Earth’s surface that can be gained by anyone without ever having to abandon his circle and was never even tempted to leave Europe. (Ch. 1)

Unexpectedly to himself, feeling an approaching end of his life and prompted by the sight of the stranger, Aschenbach decides to travel in order to find himself, to discover the heart of his being:

The more so since his life was approaching its conclusion, since his artist’s fright of **not being able to finish his work**, that fret that **his time had run out**, could no longer be called purely a delusion, so that his life had mostly been limited to the beautiful city, which had become a home to him, and the spartan country house, which he had erected in the mountains and where he spent rain-soaked summers. It was **a desire to flee**, he had to admit to himself, this yearning for the distant and the novel, this **desire for liberty**, for being free of burden, for being able to forget—the desire to escape his work, the commonplace location of a rigorous, frigid, and ardent duty. (Ch. 1)

Since Being [Sein] is always in time with time it terminates. Thus, what counted for Aschenbach was the precious time: he wanted to live the time of his life in order to uncover his genuine self. So he chooses Venice, which is symbolical here in that it is a sinking, decaying city built upon a small lagoon with swampy surroundings. There is very little structural support, so the city is slowly sinking and crumbling. The same can be said of Aschenbach. He is decaying in morals, mental focus and health, particularly in this hot and humid environment.

Death is also symbolized in the story several times in the story, such as the “coffin black” gondola. There is also more Greek mythology referenced by the gondola and gondolier to Charon and the River Styx, the Greek entrance to the Underworld. According to Ignace Feuerlicht, Tadzio can be seen as the Greek god Hermes, who helps leads souls to death. At first, Aschenbach interest in Tadzio is first from an artistic appreciation, and then later he argues that Tadzio could be inspirational. As the story progresses, Aschenbach becomes more and more obsessed with Tadzio. There are signs that Aschenbach’s morals are sinking into decay. In the later chapters, though not specifically stated, there is a certain homosexual overtone that is displayed for the boy by Aschenbach (Meyers, 183)(Shookman, 98-101).

Finally, when Aschenbach dresses up and allows the barber to change his hair color and apply make-up to his face he then becomes the very image of the old man he saw in chapter three on the boat that he was disgusted by. The barber's remark to Aschenbach raised the question of truth vs. artifice. This represented the vain and deceitful side of art, art was used to conceal the truth and seduce others. This is just like the disinfectant the authorities used to cover the odour of the disease in Venice while its atmosphere seduce its tourist. The scene where he loses his way in the city streets represents the state of his soul, the garbage and the overgrown weeds symbolize decay. While the berries symbolize the "forbidden fruit" like the sinful love Aschenbach had for Tadzio in which he takes in order to please his dying thirst.

The disease symbolizes the obsession and sickness that has taken over him for the young boy Tadzio. The Italians go on to deny the rumors of the disease and the denial of the rumors stand for Venice being a place of artifice, deceit, and corruption. The pomegranate juice he drinks during the performance in the terrace of the hotel is symbolic for: its red color, that is the standard color of passion which is tied to the strawberries he eats closer to his death, so, too are the red-haired devil like figure disguised as the musician that gets close to him and the red tie that Aschenbach wears when he dresses up for Tadzio at the end of the novella. The red in the story also symbolizes depravity. The pomegranate also represents a mythical significance; in Greek mythology, Persephone is abducted by the god of the underworld. While in the underworld not thinking she goes to eat a seed of a pomegranate that is known as the food of the dead, and it binds her to spend almost half a year in Hades. Aschenbach being in Venice and following the young boy in the soldering heat can signify him being in the underworld (hell). The cholera becomes significant because it has an Asian origin with this information the jungle and his dream becomes a triply loaded motif. It was a jungle landscape that he pictured when he first felt the impulse to travel and enjoy the warmer climate. This symbolizes where the disease originated from. India is also symbolic to the dream he has because myth logically Aschenbach first worships Tadzio as an Apollonian symbol of intellectual beauty and art, but now he worships him as a god. Tadzio is progressed and seen as gone from Apollonian to Dionysus in the mind of Aschenbach.

The fundamental error people commit is that they imagine that humans are born harmonious, well constructed, orderly, with their minds functioning correctly according to a set pattern, and only later do they start to decay due to external conditions and/or hostile environment, forgetting that illness is very much a health condition like any other condition. All human are basically ill, the difference being the degree of sickness and its intensity. What really counts are the defensive mechanisms our body is able to produce and develop. Aggression, in most cases, is not the problem of aggressive environment but rather a certain inability to produce something instead, some other kinds of behaviour that would overcome aggression. Aggressive behaviour, as it seems, is to a large extent form of illness, a health condition, a sickness of the mind to satisfy its needs otherwise, also due to specific diet deficiencies or excess of some foods, hence the problems with food processing by specific bacteria with which our body is abundant. We are all mad, as Michel Foucault wisely observed in *Madness and Civilization*, which basically means we are all ill, so illness is very much a normal, standard human condition resulting in eventual death sooner or later.

And this "soothing slumber" of which the narrator speaks in the opening passage and of which the protagonist dreams is only to be found in the deck chair on the beach, but it is an everlasting sleep from which he will never wake up. The illness really started at home, in Munich, in familiar surroundings, in a very "homely" (*Heimliche*) setting and then the travel to Venice, to an "unhomely" (*Unheimlich*), exotic surroundings, developed it, strengthened it, acting, as if it were, on the will (*der Wille*) of the protagonist, assuming a form of a voluntary death, an honourable, ancient-style suicide.

From a postmodernist and poststructuralist point of view, we may speak here of the Derridean gift of death, the notorious "donner la mort" (Derrida 1999, 2008). As he puts it, "se donner la mort [one gives oneself death] also means to interpret death, to give oneself a representation of it, a figure, a signification or destruction of it" (12), and this representation of death in Mann's novella is an illness-turn-plague.

THE OLD MAN AND DEATH. One may well ask why, aside from the demands of religion, it is more praiseworthy for a man grown old, who feels his powers decrease, to await his slow exhaustion and disintegration, rather than to put a term to his life with complete consciousness? In this case, suicide is quite natural, obvious, and should by rights awaken respect for the triumph of reason. This it did in those times when the leading Greek philosophers and the toughest [toughest] Roman patriots used to die by suicide. Conversely, the compulsion to prolong life from day to day, anxiously consulting doctors and accepting the most painful, humiliating conditions, without strength to come nearer the actual goal of one's life: this is far less worthy of respect. Religions provide abundant excuses to escape the need to kill oneself: this is how they insinuate themselves with those who are in love with life. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, #80

Prevention of suicide. There is a justice according to which we take a man's life, but no justice according to which we take his death: that is nothing but cruelty. #88

Relatives of a suicide. The relatives of a suicide resent him for not having stayed alive out of consideration for their reputation.

#322

The value of illness. The man who lies ill in bed sometimes perceives that it is usually his office, business, or society that has made him ill and caused him to lose all clear-mindedness about himself; he gains this wisdom from the leisure forced upon him by his illness.

#289

Advisor to the ill. Whoever gives an ill man advice gains a feeling of superiority over him, whether the advice is accepted or rejected. For that reason, irritable and proud ill people hate advisors even more than their illness.

#299

There is certain non-German elitism both in Nietzsche and Mann in regards to class structure of pre-First World War German society. Both were admirers of then non-existent – at least formally – Polish nobility: Nietzsche – falsely – claimed that he was a descendent from the von Nietzsche kinfolk, and Mann has chosen the boy from the Polish aristocratic family for a model of Tadzio (Władysław Moes), which may be indicative of their low assessment of the native nobility, also in terms of poor, meagre health.

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