



AN ANALYSIS OF ART REPRESENTED IN CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN MANN'S *DEATH IN VENICE*

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This paper examines the references to classical Greek and Roman mythology as the foundation for the artistic conflict in Mann's *Death in Venice*. The early chapters establish the conflict between the skillful, dedicated Apollonian artist—represented by Aschenbach—and the sensual, arousing appeal of Dionysian art—represented by Tadzio and the Venice surroundings. Mann's inspiration for this conflict is Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which establishes the Apollonian and Dionysian models of art, proposes how they must be balanced in order to produce art of the highest degree and how its failure to become balanced among Germanic artists will lead them to their art's corruption and their artistic self-destruction.

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To the reader acquainted with classical Greek and Roman mythology, one would find in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* not only that there are many allusions to classical mythology, but that those allusions are serving a purpose. One would further comprehend that there are elements of two gods in the characters of the protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach, an author vacationing in Venice, and Tadzio, a teenager boy lodging in Aschenbach's hotel and who has become an obsession to the author. Aschenbach can be seen as an artist in the Apollonian model, while Tadzio serves as the work of art inspired by the Dionysian model. These allusions to the two gods are not accidental, for Mann was influenced by Nietzsche's works on aesthetics. An internal conflict ensues in the otherwise stoic and disciplined Aschenbach, as he is tempted to give in to his repressed Dionysian urges of impulse and fantasy. At the end of the novel, Aschenbach has given in to the temptation and suffers the consequences with his life. However, in spite of his indulgent actions, Aschenbach remains to the world an artist in the Apollonian model, as the world will never know of his final thoughts and actions.

In the second chapter of *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach is introduced to the reader as a disciplined man who triumphed over carnal desires and achieved his accomplishments by the absolute power of his own will. He was born into a family whose men were "officers, judges, and civil servants, men who led disciplined, decently austere lives serving king and state" and his father was "a senior official in the judiciary." However, he also had a "strain of more impetuous, sensual blood" from his "mother, the daughter of a Bohemian bandmaster" and, from her, he inherited "the foreign racial features in his appearance" (Mann 12). Hence, Aschenbach is heritably a conflicted character; he possesses both the potential for either the discipline of a Germanic and the licentious nature of a Bohemian. As he was destined for renown—"his entire being was bent on fame"—he chose to model himself on his fraternal nature and nurtured a "resolute and precise persona" that was "ready for life in the world before his time" (Mann 12). This choice of a self-controlled prodigy, however, was not an independent choice: "Since boyhood he had been pressed from all sides to achieve—and to achieve the extraordinary and thus had

never known leisure, the carefree idleness of youth" (Mann 13). Private tutoring over a formal education caused him to be "solitary and friendless", yet it instilled in him the idea that "he belonged to a species for which talent was less a rarity than physical strength . . . [and] that tended to make the most of its powers early, seldom developing them into old age" (Mann 14)—that is, he was a person who needed to rely on the energy of his intellect to endure the condensed life he anticipated: ". . . what made Aschenbach all the more heroic and noble was that he was not robust by nature, that he was merely called to constant industry, not born to it" (Mann, 13). In this chapter, we see the Aschenbach who has abided by his discipline, mastered his instincts, and achieved his goals as an artist—a writer well known for his novels where his characters overcome obstacles by owe their existence to a "defiant ascent to dignity" and who writes for those who strive for that same ascent—but is approaching the end of his artistic and physical life with trepidation.

Aschenbach's stoic persona of an artist committed to his craft is one that is indicative to the persona of the Greek god Apollo. Apollo was a god that was attributed to many disciplined arts: music, primarily associated with the cithara or lyre, he was also the director of the choir of the Muses, the goddesses of the arts and sciences; archery, particularly its skillful use rather than an instrument of war or hunting; form or light, that which shapes efforts and natures into precision and order; medicine; poetry; dance; and intellectual inquiry, among others (Lead better Web).

As Aschenbach lived his life creating a persona of a disciplined artist, he also lived without ever acknowledging his more impulsive side. This side first appears when Aschenbach, who takes a walk through Munich one morning after struggling with a writer's block, passes a mortuary chapel. There, he encounters a figure of a fair-skinned, red-haired tourist "in the portico above the two apocalyptic beasts guarding the staircase." The tourist has an expression that displays his long white teeth and gums, and Aschenbach understands that the tourist is staring back at him belligerently. Though this meeting results in nothing, the encounter stirs in Aschenbach an impulsive desire to travel (Mann, 4-6). This will be the first of many compromises that Aschenbach will make that will break down his Apollonian persona and lead to his demise. The tourist, in his wide-brimmed straw hat and walking stick, alludes to Hermes, the god of changes and limitations, thieves, travelers, sports, athletes, and border crossings, among other things; known as a patron of literature and poetry; and a cunning trickster who moves freely between the mortal and godly worlds and a guide to the Underworld (Koelb 97, Wikipedia Web).

Aschenbach travels to his country house in Pola, a port in southern Austria-Hungary (now Pula, Croatia), but rain sours his mood and the atmosphere is not liking to his exotic palate. He planned to leave for another place, but "[w]here did one go when one wished to travel overnight to a unique, fairy-tale-like location?" (Mann 26) He decides on Venice, but, like the visit to the mortuary field, this choice is full of ominous warnings about the collapse of Aschenbach's disciplined composure. He begins his journey on an Italian steamer described as "outdated, sooty, and drab" with a gruff, condescending crew (Mann 26), who make such a show for welcoming passengers, that their intentions are questioned as deceptive. The gray sky throughout the trip produces a dismal atmosphere. An old passenger, in the company of much younger ones, is wearing makeup, dye, a wig and gaudy clothing, making Aschenbach uncomfortable:

Did they not know, could they not see that he was old, that he had no right to be wearing their foppish, gaudy clothes, no right to be carrying on as if he were one of them? They seemed to be used to him and take him for granted, tolerating his presence and treating him as an equal, returning his pokes in the ribs without malice. How could they? (Mann 29)

This display not only suggests deceit from both parties but, even more so after he encounters the inebriated old passenger as he leaves the steamer, also embodies Aschenbach's fears about himself—this pursuit of relaxation may transform him into a similar humiliating display of lust and immorality, a loss of all dignity in his old age. The gondola that Aschenbach takes from the steamer to Venice is the clearest representation of classical mythology, as it suggests the voyage to the Underworld, (Koeb 101) which the red-haired tourist at the mortuary chapel ominously and unwittingly welcomed—Hermes was the divinity charged with the duty of conducting dead souls into the underworld (Koeb 97). This trip through the

realm of the dead by crossing the River Styx at the hands of the skeletal boatman Charonis, in this scene, represented by a gondolier with:

. . . a disobliging, even brutal physiognomy . . . [wearing] a shapeless straw hat that was beginning to unravel perched jauntily on his head . . . [and a] curly blond mustache under the small snub nose made him look anything but Italian (Mann 38).

Aschenbach notices that the gondolier is not taking him to his stop. He argues with him, but the gondolier doesn't change course and mutters under his breath instead. Aschenbach, at first, chooses to accept this trip, as it was "highly pleasant" with its "spellbinding indolence" from the "low armchair upholstered in black, so gently rocked by the oar strokes" (Mann 39). Realizing that he could be taken advantage of, Aschenbach becomes filled with a "sense of duty or pride" when he asks what the trip will cost:

Looking straight past him, the gondolier answered, "You will pay"

The response called for was clear. "I shall not pay a thing," Aschenbach answered mechanically, "not a thing if you take me where I do not want to go."

"You want to go to the Lido."

"But not with you."

"I am rowing you well."

Fair enough, thought Aschenbach, relaxing. Fair enough. You are rowing me well. Even if you are after my purse and send me to the House of Hades with a bash of the oar from behind, you will have rowed me well (Mann 40).

Aschenbach recognizes the parallel, but his trip is a parody of the Styx crossing. While the classical heroes' proved their strength and determination during the crossing, Aschenbach's crossing is marked by a weak surrender—and the persona of a disciplined artist begins to unravel, as this is only the first in what will become a pattern for Aschenbach of apathy and surrender to mindlessness and physical comfort.

Once at the hotel, Aschenbach settles into his room, changes into evening clothes and waits for dinner in the parlor with several international guests. He spots a group of Polish children and their governess and becomes intrigued by the "long-haired boy" in the group:

Aschenbach noted with astonishment that the boy was of a consummate beauty: his face—pale and charmingly reticent, ringed by honey-colored hair, with a straight nose, lovely mouth, and an expression of gravity sweet and divine recalled Greek statuary of the noblest period, yet its purest formal perfection notwithstanding it conveyed a unique personal charm such that whoever might gaze upon it would believe he had never beheld anything so accomplished, be it in nature or in art (Mann 45).

This boy, Tadzio, fascinates Aschenbach, who sees him as an embodiment of wholesome artistic beauty, even though he doesn't understand the reason for his fascination. He continues to be fascinated, even after dinner is served, and he lingers with the Polish group until they leave for the dining room. Tadzio leaves last and looks "back before crossing the threshold, and . . . his eyes, of an unusual twilight gray, met those of Aschenbach [who was] absorbed in watching the group make its exit" (Mann 48). At dinner, he reasons that he can admire this beauty impassively, from a decently rational, aesthetic perspective, as he has already compared him to *Boy with Thorn*, a bronze sculpture from the Greco-Roman Hellenistic period (Mann 46).

The next day, Aschenbach, who is considering leaving due to the weather, is having breakfast when Tadzio enters the room. Aschenbach, who is "startled by the truly godlike beauty of this mortal being," notes the relatively casual clothes that the boy wears and how it:

. . . showed off the boy's fair, blossoming head in its consummate charm, the head of an Eros with the creamy glaze of Parian marble, eyebrows serious and finely traced, temples and ear covered darkly and softly at right angles by encroaching ringlets (Mann 52).

Tadzio represents artistic beauty to Aschenbach, but the artist's fascination is not of the Apollonian model that he has spent his life striving to achieve, as he has compared him to Eros, the god of love and sexual desire (Leadbetter Web). Up to this point, Aschenbach has given in to the slovenly yet alluring surroundings of Venice, a city known for its pacifying luxury, the beauty of its setting, its architecture and its artworks, despite its locale on a coastal lagoon, a shallow body of water created by sediments from inflowing rivers, runoff from the lagoon shores, and sediment carried in by the tide—hence, a place of beauty with an unstable foundation and slowly sinking into its murky waters. The signs that were given to Aschenbach before and during his journey to this place—the Hermes-esque traveller at the mortuary chapel; the tough, disfigured sailors taking him to his destination; the appearance and behavior of the old passenger; the hellish journey on the gondola—are, at best, dismissed by the artist as he leisurely continues to surrender to this exotic beauty of Venice and, eventually, his ideas about Tadzio.

These surrenders are an indicator that another artistic force is emerging and the cerebral and proud art of the Apollonian is giving way to the sensual and stimulated art of the Dionysian. Dionysus was the god of wine, agriculture, prolific nature, spring, regeneration, music and the patron god of the Greek theater. He is also a god that is not of Greek origin, that he is a combination of a Greek god of nature and a Turkish god of potency. He also embodies the exceptional features of secret religions: ecstasy, personal delivery from the daily world through physical or spiritual intoxication, and initiation into secret rites (Gross & Grote Web). The forces of Dionysus are in control of Venice and are in the process of overpowering the disciplined artist Aschenbach. As he spends his morning observing the variety of guests on the hotel beach, he decides to remain in Venice, for:

“[h]e loved the sea [for] the hardworking artist's need for repose, the desire to take shelter from the demanding diversity of phenomena in the bosom of boundless simplicity, a propensity [that is] diametrically opposed to his mission in life and for that very reason seductive . . . for the unarticulated, the immoderate, the eternal, for nothingness. To repose in perfection is the desire of all those who strive for excellence . . .” (Mann 55)

After this text, Tadzio immediately appears on the beach “barefoot in preparation for wading, his slender legs exposed to above the knee, and while his gait was slow it was as light and proud . . .” (Mann 55). Aschenbach finds it impossible to concentrate on his writing and chooses to concentrate on Tadzio cavorting with his companions while he dines on strawberries (Mann 57-59). When taking a walk in the streets later that day, he encounters the sirocco, a balmy wind that comes from the Sahara and reaches high speeds in the Mediterranean:

A repellent sultriness permeated the narrow streets, the air so thick that the odors emanating from houses, shops, and food stalls—the vapor of oil, the clouds of perfume, and more- hovered like fumes without dispersing (Mann 62).

Aschenbach is made nauseous by the sirocco and decides to leave Venice for a Trieste resort. The next day, though, complications with his transportation to the train station and the loss of his luggage aggravate him. Amid the confusion of leaving the hotel, however, he was met with Tadzio's gaze as he left the hotel. The circumstances have given him an opportunity to rethink his decision to leave, but not in a disagreeable way: “A reckless joy, an unbelievable glee took almost convulsive hold of his breast” (Mann 70). The ill wind that blows through Venice makes Aschenbach, the vanishing Apollonian artist, reconsider his choice to stay, but providence permits Aschenbach, the emerging Dionysian reveler, to once more give in to the allure of Venice.

Chapter Four opens with a passionate description of the sunrise as embodied by the god Helios, “the god with the flaming cheeks soared upward naked, driving his team of four fire-breathing horses through heaven's acres, his yellow ringlets fluttering wild in the gale of the east wind” (Mann, 75). Aschenbach, now taken over by Dionysian passion and “charmed by the soft, resplendent benignancy of it all” (Mann 76), now actively watches for Tadzio as much as he can, particularly on the beach every morning. As he admires the boy, the artist has an epiphany about his craft:

What discipline, what precision of thought was conveyed by that tall, youthfully perfect physique! Yet the austere and pure will laboring in obscurity to bring the godlike statue to light—was it not known to him, familiar to him as an artist? Was it not at work in him when, chiseling with sober passion at the marble block of language, he released the slender form he had beheld in his mind and would present to the world as an effigy and mirror of spiritual beauty? (Mann 81)

He questions his Apollonian discipline, for it made him unconscious of beauty. He has a visualization of Socrates seducing Phaedrus while teaching him about love, virtue, and how beauty is perceived by the senses over the intellect. Aschenbach decides to “model his writing on the boy's physique, to let his style follow the lines of that body; which he saw as godlike, and bear its beauty to the realm of the intellect” and composes an essay “of sublime prosebased on Tadzio's beauty—the purity, nobility, and quivering emotional tension of which would soon win the admiration of many.” Aschenbach, no longer capable of self-discipline, now attempts to create art out of passion—with Tadzio as his muse—by writing an essay about “the conditions under which [beauty] comes into being, for if [his audience] had knowledge of the sources from which the artist derives his inspiration they would oftentimes be confused and alarmed and thus vitiate the effects the artist had achieved.” After this corruptexercise, an exhausted Aschenbach reflects on the fruitful “intercourse of mind with body,” but, as he packed up his work, he also had a sense of shame, “as if his conscience were reproaching him after a debauch” (Mann 85-86). Further surrender occurs when he agrees to a barber's suggestion to undergo a makeover to make him self more youthful.

These allusions to Greek mythology found in *Death in Venice* are a result of the profoundly influenced on Mann by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's primary aesthetic treatise, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872), hypothesized the existence of two separate and opposing artistic propensities, which Nietzsche associated with two different ancient gods, Apollo and Dionysus:

We will have achieved much for scientific study of aesthetics when we come . . . to a logical understanding . . . that the further development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian . . . (Nietzsche 11)

Nietzsche claims that the creation of art always involves a struggle between these two elements, each battling for control over the existence of humanity. In Nietzsche's words:

With those two gods of art, Apollo and Dionysus, we establish . . . that in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast . . . between the visual arts, the Apollonian, and the non-visual art of music, the Dionysian. These two very different drives go hand in hand, for the most part in open conflict with each other and simultaneously provoking each other all the time to new and more powerful offspring, in order to perpetuate . . . the contest of that opposition, which . . . “Art” only seems to bridge, until at last, through . . . “will,” they appear paired up with each other and, as this pair, finally produce . . . tragedy, as much a Dionysian as an Apollonian work of art. (Nietzsche 11)

Classical tragedy, Nietzsche proposed, operates through the synthesis of these two principles. He believed that the Greek classics had to be produced by a people that were not only highly civilized and cultured but also passionate; they have found equilibrium of these forces could art arising. He believed that the Germans were too "Apollonian," too stiff, too restrained, too cerebral to create truly great art. He had foreseen a period where the Dionysian forces would soon erupt if suppressed too long and that the result could be devastating. It was this idea that Mann wrote in his novella to effect a balance between the cerebral and the passionate.

The circumstance that Aschenbach finds himself is also based on Mann's actual experiences. Mann traveled to Venice from 26 May to 2 June 1911, accompanied by his wife Katia and his brother Heinrich. Before leaving for Venice, he received news of the death of the great Austrian composer Gustav Mahler on 18 May. During his trip, he was also fascinated by a handsome Polish boy whom he watched playing on the beach. This "personal and lyrical experience", as Mann later described it in a much quoted confessional letter, prompted the story *Death in Venice*. (Robertson 95). It was also on this trip that Mann wrote "Debate with Richard Wagner," which marked a shift in Mann's attitude away from his earlier enthusiasm for the composer toward a far less positive, far more critical position (Nietzsche himself had an idolized friendship with Wagner, which he dissolved famously in an essay, "Nietzsche *contra* Wagner", where he criticizes Wagner's music as having no pleasing rhythm or melody, a mere means to enhance theatrical posing and gesturing). Many of the elements of the novella, including the bad weather, the cholera episode, and the gondolier are also based on the actual experiences of this trip (Gray Web).

Towards the end of the novel, Aschenbach has given in to the Dionysian corruption of Venice—a city that has defied its natural setting to become a place of beauty and art, but also a place of decadence, as it is a vacation spot, and decay, as it is built on lagoon and sinking slowly. Tadzio has, for Aschenbach, gone from being an object of Apollonian perfection to an object of Dionysian lust. Resultantly, the unbridled lust in which Aschenbach indulged has made him a victim that must pay reparation. There is, however, a consolation for Aschenbach's reputation: he dies as, for the world in the novella's setting, a still revered artist in the Apollonian model: "And that very day a respectfully stunned world received word of his death" (Mann 142). There is almost no immediate indication—save the manuscript and the makeup and dye that adorned him—that Aschenbach spent his last days obsessed with a young boy.

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