

READING THE NOVEL



Reading the Modern
European Novel
since 1900

*A Critical Study of Major Fiction from Proust's Swann's
Way to Ferrante's Neapolitan Tetralogy*

Daniel R. Schwarz

WILEY Blackwell

Reading the Modern European Novel Since 1900

READING THE NOVEL

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from Proust's *Swann's Way* to
Ferrante's Neapolitan Tetralogy

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This edition first published 2018
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Editorial Office

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schwarz, Daniel R. author.

Title: Reading the modern European novel since 1900 : a critical study of major fiction from

Proust's Swann's way to Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy / by Daniel R. Schwarz,
Cornell University.

Description: First edition. | Hoboken, NJ : John Wiley & Sons, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017056768 (print) | LCCN 2017059380 (ebook) | ISBN 9781118680667 (pdf) | ISBN 9781118693414 (epub) | ISBN 9781118680681 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: European fiction--20th century--History and criticism. |

European fiction--21st century--History and criticism.

Classification: LCC PN3503 (ebook) | LCC PN3503 .S33 2018 (print) | DDC 809.3/04--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017056768>

Cover image: © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Cover design by Wiley

Set in 10/12.5pt Minion by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

With love for my wife Marcia Jacobson, with whom I share my life; with appreciation and respect for my Cornell students, who have been teaching me the past fifty years.

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Acknowledgments

Teaching Cornell students at every level from freshmen to graduate students over the past 50 years has helped me to refine my understanding of how novels work and what they say. Much of the credit for whatever I accomplish as a scholar-critic goes to the intellectual stimulation provided by my students as well as my Cornell colleagues, most notably my close friend Laura Brown.

My wife, Marcia Jacobson, to whom I owe my greatest debt, has read every page of the manuscript at least three times and given me countless valuable insights about the novels I discuss and the words I have written. It is impossible to overstate my debt to her.

My longtime Cornell friend and colleague Brett de Bary helped me understand translation theory and recommended the texts I should read on that subject.

It gives me great pleasure to thank Pauline Shongov, a gifted Cornell Presidential Research Scholar with whom I have worked for five years as she pursued her ambitious dual degree program. She has strongly contributed to the research as well as played an important role in editing, proofreading, and indexing.

I am grateful for the strong support of Wiley-Blackwell, with whom I have had a productive professional relationship for many years. I am grateful for the current leadership of Catriona King and the past leadership of Emma Bennett and Rebecca Harkin, the editorial assistance of Joanna Pyke and Brigitte Lee Messenger, and the supervisory roles of Manish Luthra and Anandan Bommen.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the continued support of the Cornell English Department leadership and staff, and in particular Roger Gilbert and Vicky Brevetti.

Daniel R. Schwarz
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Dec. 15, 2017

Also by Daniel R. Schwarz

- How to Succeed in College and Beyond* (2016)
Reading the European Novel to 1900 (2014)
Endtimes: Crises and Turmoil at the New York Times (2012; new revised paperback edition 2014)
In Defense of Reading: Teaching Literature in the Twenty-First Century (2008)
Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel 1890–1930 (2005)
Broadway Boogie Woogie: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture (2003)
Rereading Conrad (2001)
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Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature (1997)
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Reading Joyce’s “Ulysses” (1987; centenary edition 2004)
The Humanistic Heritage: Critical Theories of the English Novel from James to Hillis Miller (1986; revised edition 1989)
Conrad: The Later Fiction (1982)
Conrad: “Almayer’s Folly” to “Under Western Eyes” (1980)
Disraeli’s Fiction (1979)

Also by Daniel R. Schwarz

As Editor

Damon Runyon: Guys and Dolls and Other Writings (2008)

The Early Novels of Benjamin Disraeli, 6 volumes (consulting editor, 2004)

Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" (Bedford Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism, 1997)

Joyce's "The Dead" (Bedford Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism, 1994)

Narrative and Culture (with Janice Carlisle, 1994)

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Novel After 1900

“What we write about fiction is never an objective response to a text; it is always part of a bigger mythmaking – the story we are telling ourselves about ourselves.”

Jeanette Winterson¹

Basic Premises

As with my past books about literature, I am writing this book to share the joy of reading the texts I have chosen. I have chosen works that demand my attention and create a desire – indeed, a need – for me to understand them, sometimes because of their thematic focus, sometimes for their experimental techniques, and usually for a combination of both. All of the works I discuss demonstrate how a particular historical moment shaped the behavior and direction of a nation or significant community, although some of the works are more historically inflected than others. Among my criteria for inclusion in this volume: (1) I revel in rereading and rereading the text; (2) when I am not reading that text, I am thinking about my reading experience; when I awake, the issues generated by the text sometimes displace the more urgent issues of life; (3) I sometimes dream about the text’s characters and events; (4) on each rereading and rethinking, I discover new aspects of the text’s complexity, subtlety, and originality.

While any inclusive generalizations risk the danger of being reductive, we can say that the novel after 1900 is often experimental in form and challenges our expectations of continuity and consistency. These novels ask the reader to play a significant role in perceiving formal unity and in interpreting idiosyncratic, irrational, and seemingly inexplicable behavior. David Lodge has argued that

Reading the Modern European Novel Since 1900: A Critical Study of Major Fiction from Proust’s Swann’s Way to Ferrante’s Neapolitan Tetralogy, First Edition. Daniel R. Schwarz.

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“The modernist novel is generally characterized by a radical rearrangement of the spatial-temporal unity of the narrative line” (Lodge, “Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism,” 141).² What he means is that the narrative of what happened next has given way to radical rearrangements of time and space, unexpected fissures, surprising returns to events in the past, inexplicable accidents, deviations from realism, and radical metaphors. More often than in the past the telling (discourse) of the story is as much or more the author’s focal point as the events of the story; hence, in many cases, the telling becomes the center of the reader’s experience. What I will be stressing is that readers must respond to the uncanny and unimaginable in both form and content.

What is Modernism?

I am using the term Modernism to refer to the period beginning in the late nineteenth century. Modernism is a response to cultural crisis. By the 1880s we have Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* (1882–1887) with his contention that God is Dead as well as Krafft-Ebing’s revolutionary texts on sexuality; we also have the beginnings of modern physics in the work of J. J. Thomson. All challenged absolutist theories of truth.

Let us recall that Darwin’s *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859 and *Essays and Reviews* (edited by John William Parker) which in 1860 questioned the Bible as revealed history; in the period from 1865 to 1870, Karl Marx began to publish *Das Kapital*, Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, and Freud opened the doors of psychopathology in the 1880s. Otto von Bismarck and Benjamin Disraeli dominated Europe, and colonialism expanded its reach.

In its response to difficult circumstances Modernism is an ideology of *possibility* and *hope*. But paradoxically Modernism is also an ideology of *despair* in its response to excessive faith in industrialism, urbanization, so-called technological progress, and to the Great War of 1914 to 1918 which was believed to be the War to End All Wars.

As we shall see, Modernism goes beyond previous cultures in engaging otherness and questioning Western values. As James Clifford notes, in 1900 “‘Culture’ referred to a single evolutionary process.” He articulates an important aspect of Modernism:

.....
The European bourgeois ideal of autonomous individuality was widely believed to be the natural outcome of a long development, a process that, although threatened by various disruptions, was assumed to be the basic, progressive movement of humanity. By the turn of the century, however, evolutionist confidence began

to falter, and a new ethnographic conception of culture became possible. The word began to be used in the plural, suggesting a world of separate, distinctive, and equally meaningful ways of life. The ideal of an autonomous, cultivated subject could appear as a local project, not a *telos* for all humankind. (Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 92–93)³

.....

Modernism contains the aspirations and idealism of nineteenth-century high culture and the prosaic world of nineteenth-century city life; both are colored by an ironic and self-conscious awareness of limitation. Often convictions are framed by an ironic stand indicating an awareness of the difficulty of fulfilling possibility. Prior to modernist questioning, the possibility of a homogeneous European culture existed. As John Elderfield puts it, “history was not always thought to be quite possibly a species of fiction but once comprised a form of order” (Elderfield, *Henri Matisse*, 203).⁴

We must not look for reductive consistency in our narrative of Modernism but for pluralistic and even contradictory explanations. Modernism depends on the interpretive intelligence of a reader’s perspective. We need to not only look at assumptions from a modern point of view that is open to destabilizing shibboleths, but we also need to try to understand the world of modern authors and painters from a perspective that takes account of how they intervene, intersect, transform, and qualify the culture of which they are a part.

Modernism emphasizes that we lack a coherent identity and seeks techniques to express this idea. Stressing how each of us is changing every moment, Henri Bergson wrote in *Creative Evolution*:

.....

Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. ... The piling up of the past upon the past goes on without relaxation. In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought, and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside. (Ellmann and Feidelson, Jr., *The Modern Tradition*, 725)⁵

.....

Bergson continues: “What are we in fact, what is our character, if not the condensation of the history we have lived from our birth?” (ibid., 725). Note the parallel to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept that when each of us speaks or writes, our prior systems of language voluntarily and involuntarily manifest themselves in a heteroglossic voice.

We now accept that, given the ever-changing nature of self, each of us has multiple selves and points of view. That shared understanding that we lack one coherent self is a cause of the complex dramatized consciousness of the narrators in Proust's *Swann's Way*, Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy as well as the multiple narrative perspectives of Pamuk in *My Name is Red* and Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Is there not a continuity between Oscar Wilde's concept of transcending the self by lying and Henri Bergson's of duration? Both seek to transform the tick-tock of daily life's passing time – what the Greeks called *chronos* – into significant time or *kairos*.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot affirmed that literary tradition meant writing with an historical sense which

.....
compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. ... 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 cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. (Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 4)⁶
.....

Modernism is inclusive, containing both the aestheticism and complexity of high culture, the straightforwardness and earthiness of working-class culture, and, like its successor Post-Modernism, an ironic awareness of its own self-consciousness. Just as writers like Zola and Grass not only include the urban working class, agrarian workers, and miners but also focus on the lives and aspirations of these people, modernist painters focus on the vernacular in painting – Cézanne's card players, Degas's laundresses, and Picasso's prostitutes, café life, and circus performers. Yet writers such as Pamuk and Kundera also believed in the power of art and in the artist as visionary prophet.

The Role of History in Shaping Fiction

Although I was trained as a formalist focusing on the fictional ontology of literary works, I have become more and more interested in how art, and specifically literature, is a function of culture. The common thread in my work from my early books on Disraeli, Conrad, and Joyce to my studies of New York City between the wars (*Broadway Boogie Woogie: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture*) and the *New York Times* (*Endtimes? Crises and Turmoil at the*

New York Times) is an effort to balance formal analyses with historical knowledge, expressed by my mantra: "Always the text; always historicize."

Fictional texts are windows not only into the minds of authors but also into the period in which they were written. I have come to think history is always present whether an author is aware of it or not. Thus the historical dimension of a literary text is not always volitional on the part of an author. Certainly *Swann's Way*, once considered the paradigmatic novel of manners with a strong personal inflection, reflects an historical and cultural moment in France and Europe. The same can be said of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, once considered the ultimate hermetic novels of manners, but which on closer inspection make us realize that World War I hovers over both texts.

I begin with two texts published before World War I, *Death in Venice* (1912) and *Swann's Way* (1913). I include one written during World War I, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), and one written during World War II, Camus's *The Stranger* (1942). Most of my selected novels appeared after World War II: Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (1958), Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959), Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1962), Kertész's *Fatelessness* (1975), and a few on the cusp of the twenty-first century – Saramago's *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989), Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (1998) – with Müller's *The Hunger Angel* (2009) and Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy (2012–2015) appearing in the twenty-first century.

Certainly several of our novels, notably Saramago's *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, and Müller's *The Hunger Angel*, have Post-Modernist components. To be sure, many other of our texts also have aspects of the skepticism, irony, resistance to orderly and logical explanations, doubts about the efficacy of language, and structural and thematic discontinuity which we associate with Post-Modernism. This is another way of saying that Modernism not only set the stage for Post-Modernism but also that they have vast similarities and that a dotted rather than a straight line divides them.

The two World Wars and the Holocaust as well as the Cold War between the West and the USSR and the threat of nuclear war loom large in any study of the fiction of this period. My readings will place the texts in the context of what we know about authors' personal experiences and the world to which they are responding. Bassani, Kertész, Grass, and Müller focus on World War II and its effects, with Bassani and Kertész explicitly addressing the Holocaust. We cannot read Camus without knowing about his life in colonial Algeria and his role in the French Resistance. Even novels which seem to focus on remote periods such as Saramago's *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* and Pamuk's *My Name is Red* address major historical transitions and severe cultural clashes, especially between Western Eurocentric and Islamic values.

Not every reader notices the same historical nuances and contexts, in part because we bring different degrees of historical knowledge to our reading, but we cannot ignore the strong historical pressure of twentieth-century European history on events in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *The Leopard*, *The Tin Drum*, *Fatelessness*, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, *The Hunger Angel*, and Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy, and indeed on most of the novels I discuss in this study.

The problem is when and how much to focus on historical contexts without straying too far from texts. To take an extreme example, the meaning of Holocaust texts such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* or Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* depends far more on historical knowledge than the poems of Wallace Stevens or the fiction of Proust, although for Proust, knowledge of his biography is more essential than for Stevens. Our knowing something about Joyce's life and Irish history from 1880 to 1922 is far more important in reading *Portrait of an Artist* and *Ulysses* than our knowing about Stevens's life when reading his collected poems, although even there knowledge of his biography and some sense of American history help.

Claire Messud has insightfully described the balance in major fiction between form and ideas:

.....
The novel form, capacious and elastic as it is, nevertheless requires that ideas and emotions – all abstractions, really – be pressed and transformed, passed through the fine sieve of the material world and made manifest in action, conversation, and concrete detail. Fiction is created out of T-shirts and tomato plants, oven fries, chalk dust and rainfall, out of snarky exchanges and subtle glances. Constructing a world out of these apparently random bits – “the nearest thing to life,” as George Eliot put it – is a matter of meticulous imagining and careful craft. Making this fictional world come alive is a matter, as Martha Graham put it, of the life force. ... [F]iction is like dance (or jazz music) in its tension between freedom and constraint: eventually, choreography must assert control to effectuate a satisfying conclusion. (Messud, “The Dancer & the Dance,” 6, 8)⁷
.....

What is missing from Messud's observation is the role of history which is much messier to discuss than form but nevertheless essential to our understanding. In this study, I am going to show the relevance of historical contexts to close reading and how close reading, rather than conflicting with historicism, actually complements it. This is not to argue that we should all read similarly; for some readers, historical contexts and biographical knowledge will be less important than for others. How we respond to a literary text is a function of who we are at the time we read and reread.

The inventiveness and originality of the novels I discuss in this volume speak to the importance of both individual imagination and historical context. These novelists understand the role of historical forces as well as the decisions humans need to make to respond to conditions they did not create. Often existential decisions required by specific historical conditions – in the case of Kertész's *Fatelessness* and much of Bassani's Ferrara fiction, the Holocaust – determine an individual's fate. Historiography, albeit fictional, shapes the existential decisions made by characters in Camus's *The Plague* and Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. In these novels, the narrative drama and thematic focus are on how characters respond to events beyond their control. Even in a text which once was thought to barely evoke historical forces like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, we realize that Gregor is the victim of a capitalistic system where money undermines family and community life. Notwithstanding striking examples in post-1900 Europe of autocracy and its effects, individual lives lived do not conform to the plans and rules of one person and his cohorts. That resistance – in deeds and imagination – is very much part of the fiction I will be discussing.

Another strand of historicism is the interaction between art and literature. Developing strategies presented in depth in my *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature*, I will be discussing influences, parallels, and formal experiments shared by visual artists, especially painters, and novelists. I shall relate Cubism and Futurism, among other movements, to the novels I discuss.

Human Choices

We need to be wary of what Isaiah Berlin calls historical inevitability – in a 1953 lecture of that title – namely the idea that forces rather than humans shape and determine history. This was of course Marx's idea. The alternative that human choices – with all their inconsistencies, obsessions, and irrationality – play an important role need not be restricted to the Great Man or Woman but can take the form of a group of individuals (perhaps anonymous, perhaps known) determining historical direction. In modern times, the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising was such an event.

As I have mentioned, by the end of the nineteenth century, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, among many others, were challenging accepted truths about history, nature, and humankind. In response to new ways of thinking, twenty- and twenty-first-century writers often use their fiction to explore and define their own values, psyches, and ideas about the purpose of literature. The result is a polyphonic response in which authors struggle to find meaning in an amoral cosmos and foreground that quest in their narratives. In the novels

I will be discussing, a recurring theme is how do we respond to a world in historical turmoil and bereft of sustaining political and religious certainties in which we can believe? How do we find personal order in such a world? For our authors, as for many of us, the only alternative is existential commitment to a set of values, even while knowing that these values are a tentative arrangement of positions that makes one's own life work rather than moral absolutes.

Thus many of the works I discuss in this volume have a strong autobiographical aspect even while they respond to historical context: Müller's *The Hunger Angel*, Kertész's *Fatelessness*, Bassani's Ferrara stories and novels, Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy, and Proust's *Swann's Way*. Indeed, the novels in my study of *Reading the Modern European Novel Since 1900* have far more examples of a strong autobiographical presence than the novels discussed in my earlier *Reading the European Novel to 1900*.

All fiction, indeed all criticism, has an element of autobiography no matter how hard the writers try to efface themselves from texts. But the personal does not mean authors cannot invent characters and events. For authors can and do imagine other genders and ethnicities as well as experiences that they never had and even places they never visited. Yet the protagonists of many of the novels I discuss are often clearly surrogates for the authors. Such is the case of Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, Gregor in *Metamorphosis*, Georg in *Fatelessness*, the Prince in *The Leopard*, Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*, and Elena in Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy. If I may cite an example from a European exile writing in English and well known to most of the aforementioned authors, Conrad's Marlow plays the role of his surrogate in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in *Lord Jim* (1900). Conrad's 1896–1898 letters as well as his Congo Diary show that Marlow is struggling with the same issues – loneliness, anxiety, doubt about the pretenses of imperialism – in *Heart of Darkness* as Conrad struggled with in his life.

A recurring pattern in post-1900 fiction is authors feeling a sense of otherness, that is psychological, political, and/or ethnic separation from the dominant group, usually as a result of historical forces beyond their control. Many of our texts dramatize that marginalization within the narrative about fictional characters. Kertész, Bassani – victims of the Holocaust – and Müller are examples where racial and ethnic reasons are central to estrangement. In Proust, Mann, and Müller, the reasons for marginalization are sexual, while in Kundera they are political and psychological. In Pamuk's *My Name is Red* the miniaturists feel aesthetically and ideologically under siege because their basic assumptions are being challenged by Western realism. Lampedusa's Prince is historically and politically displaced by what he feels is a materialistic order that is replacing the one he knew and which was based on inherited privilege. In a number of our texts, notably those by Kafka and Saramago, economic marginalization within a capitalist economy plays a role.

Saramago's bachelor is psychologically marginalized by shyness and a sense of his inferiority. Kafka's Gregor has become a slave to his office because his family depends on him to pay off debts.

In a world increasingly devoid of certainties, metaphysical or historical or personal, the novel after 1900 also tests the limits of language. A major recurring pattern in these novels is the dramatization of their narrators' and characters' Sisyphean quest to overcome those limits. Or as Müller puts it, "[W]ords have their own truth, and that comes from how they sound. But they aren't the same as the things themselves, there's never a perfect match. ... Even language doesn't reach the deepest places we have inside us" (Müller, "The Art of Fiction No. 225").⁸ Nevertheless, the writer must keep trying: "Language is so different from life. How am I supposed to fit the one into the other? How can I bring them together? There's no such thing as one-to-one correspondence" (ibid.). The human choice of language defines the author as well as narrators and characters. As Wittgenstein observed, the limits of one's language are the limits to one's world.

The Complexity of Modernist Texts

As we shall see, reading modernist texts keeps readers off balance and undermines the possibility of monologic responses. Even authorial readings, that is the readings generated by the author's choices, insist on polyphonic readings. Kertész does not permit his reader to become complacent about "knowing" what happens in the camps. Nor will Camus allow us to take a one-dimensional view of human conduct in *The Plague* or *The Stranger*, although he comes closer than many of our writers in subscribing to an ethical if existential code.

Ferrante reminds us that Elena makes mistakes and bad choices; even as Ferrante evokes both her readers' sympathy and empathy for women finding their voices, she does not let them forget that repulsive violence remains a fact of life in Naples. Kafka does not allow readers to impose simple allegories of reading on *Metamorphosis* without pushing them to inquire about what it is to be human and what they would have done if confronted with a transformed loved one, whether by Alzheimer's or physical deterioration.

Authorial readings are supplemented by resistant readings which call attention to what is missing in an author's vision. Thus we see in Mann a tendency to patronize the feelings of the less advantaged. Grass does not seem aware of how he understates the Holocaust. But sometimes readers simply miss the implications of what an author writes. Each generation, indeed each reader, responds to a text differently, and the interpretive history of canonical texts shows this. Texts change not only as individual readers change, but also as cultural assumptions change. A paradigmatic example of how readers change

is Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* where Leggatt and the Captain have a homosocial relationship that earlier critics didn't notice. When I studied *Swann's Way* in college in the somewhat repressive 1950s much less was made of Swann's sexual proclivities and those of his cohorts than when I teach Proust's texts now.

Principles of Selection

I need to acknowledge that for *Reading the Modern European Novel Since 1900*, I found it more difficult to select novels on which to focus than it was to select the novels for *Reading the European Novel to 1900*, and my choices are more arbitrary. Only a handful (if that) stand out as giants the way *Don Quixote*, *War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Madame Bovary* do. I have thought deeply about what should be included in this volume and have asked for input from colleagues teaching twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. In surveying the novels after 1900, I have tried to be more inclusive of different nationalities than in the first volume where I included mostly Russian and French authors with one Spanish author. I include four relatively recent Nobel Prize winners from different countries: Müller (Romania), Saramago (Portugal), Pamuk (Turkey), and Kertész (Hungary) as well as two from an earlier era: Mann (Germany) and Camus (France). Proust and Kafka did not win Nobel prizes, surprising as that might be to our generation of readers.

Since my two volumes are really one, namely the story of the evolution of the European novel, I will on occasion refer back to the novels I discussed in the first volume. The novels I discuss in Volume II are influenced by those in Volume I and are responding to them in what Harold Bloom has called the Anxiety of Influence. Many of the texts in the second volume are in part strong misreadings of novels I discussed in the first. It can be instructive to imagine all our novels in both volumes sitting around a table responding to one another. Indeed, we might think of the novelists in the second volume as taking a class from the writers in the first.

I have tried to include works that I consider masterworks. What makes a literary masterwork? While in some cases I regard my selections as suggestions rather than the results of a full consensus, I am sure future generations will sort out the canonical figures. Yet I am interested in what makes a novel a literary masterwork. Masterworks, whether in literature, the visual arts, or music, demand our attention and create a desire – indeed, a need – to understand them in terms of their value system even while aware that we might not share all their values. Indeed, the novels I am discussing represent radically different value systems, including, in the case of Pamuk and Saramago, non-Western ones.

Translations

As with Volume I, I will be dealing with translations of the original texts and I will be discussing the transformed English text rather than the original. Translations need to be regarded as self-contained ontologies, not versions of something else as if they were workshop copies of original works of art or even second-rate alterations. Translating is at best a kind of artistry, perhaps akin to making tapestries from cartoons.

Adam Gopnik nicely puts it: "Citizens of our language, we act as citizens do, participating, reforming, accepting the rituals and celebrating their alteration, occasionally even voting for new rules and rulers. No words are entirely untranslatable; none are entirely transparent" (Gopnik, "Word Magic," 59).⁹ When we read and listen in our own language, we are translating words into our own penumbra of understanding. Or, as David Bellos observes, "despite the endless insistence that the real thing is always lost in translation, we readily translate everything and all the time" (quoted in Gopnik, 59).

Each translator finds his or her own meaning in a text and that shapes the translation just as much as or more than unpacking each work sentence by sentence. Claire Messud observes, "Translation is inevitably to a degree subjective. The quality of a translator will depend, then, not merely on her understanding of the mechanics of a language, or on her facility as a writer of prose, but also on her capacities as a reader of texts, her sense of subtext, of connotation, of allusion – of the invisible textures that give a narrative its density and, ultimately, shape its significance" (Messud, "A New 'L'Etranger,'" 6).¹⁰

Lydia Davis, who produced a fine translation of *Swann's Way*, has written:

.....

In translating, then, you are at the same time always solving a problem. It is a word problem, an ingenious, complicated word problem that requires not only a good deal of craft but some art or artfulness in its solution. ... You are also thoroughly entering another culture for longer or shorter periods of time. ... You not only enter that other culture, but remain to some extent inside it as you return to your own. (Davis, "Eleven Pleasures of Translating," 22–23)¹¹

.....

Davis, one of our best translators, is very much aware of the challenges posed by translation:

.....

One frustration in translating is the restraint you need to show, having to remain faithful to this text and solve this problem, having to refrain from shifting into your own style or, worse, expressing your own ideas. And there is usually not an exact equivalent of the original, or if there is, it is awkward, or unnatural, and

can't be used; translation is, eternally, a compromise. You settle for the best you can do rather than achieving perfection, though there is the occasional perfect solution. Even something so simple as a single word will never find its perfect equivalent; the French *maison*, with all its myriad associations, is really not the same as the English "house," with its own associations. (Ibid., 23–24)

.....

Conclusion

In the following pages I shall discuss major European novels written after 1900 and I shall be using English translations. I shall bring to this project my lifetime of reading and writing about literature, including some expertise about the form of the novel and the unfolding experience presented by the words on the page. While I acknowledge previous scholarship on each writer, I do not claim to be a world-class authority on either the individual novels or novelists that I discuss.

With each chapter I have included study questions to guide teachers and readers towards what I feel are the most salient issues in my chosen texts. I invite you to join me as I celebrate the experience of reading some of the major works of European literature that were written after 1900.

Notes

1. "A Classic Passes 50," *New York Times* (Jan. 29, 2012).
2. David Lodge, "Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism," in *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera*, ed. Peter Petro (New York: G. K. Hall, 1999), 137–150; see 141.
3. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 92–93.
4. John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 203.
5. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 725.
6. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), 4.
7. Claire Messud, "The Dancer & the Dance," *NYR* 63:19 (Dec. 8, 2017) [on Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*], 6, 8; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/12/08/zadie-smith-dancer-and-dance/>
8. Herta Müller, "The Art of Fiction No. 225" Interview by Philip Boehm. *Paris Review* (Fall 2014), 210; <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6328/herta-muller-the-art-of-fiction-no-225-herta-muller>
9. Adam Gopnik, "Word Magic," *The New Yorker* (May 26, 2014), 56–59; see 59; <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/26/word-magic>
10. Claire Messud, "A New 'L'Etranger,'" *NYR* 61:10 (June 5, 2014), 6.
11. Lydia Davis, "Eleven Pleasures of Translating," *NYR* 63:19 (Dec. 8, 2017), 22–23; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/12/08/eleven-pleasures-of-translating/>

Chapter 2

Cultural Crisis: Decadence and Desire in Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912)

"It can never be satisfied, the mind, never."

Stevens, "The Well-Dressed Man with a Beard"

The Author in the Text: Mann and Aschenbach

Describing the process of writing *Death in Venice* (1912), Thomas Mann (1875–1955) recalled,

.....
Originally the tale was to be brief and modest. But things or whatever better word there may be for the conception *organic* have a will of their own, and shape themselves accordingly. ... The truth is that every piece of work is a realization, fragmentary but complete in itself, of our individuality; and this kind of realization is the sole and painful way we have of getting the particular experience – no wonder, then, that the process is attended by surprises. (Mann, *A Sketch of My Life*, 43–44)¹
.....

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the ways our authors use their fiction to define values is an important part of the novel since 1900, and Mann is a notable example. Hence we need not be embarrassed to speak about the relationship between authors and their characters or narrators. Works of fiction often derive from actual experience, even when the triggering events are not so obvious. Many writers and especially modern writers use their fiction to explore and

Reading the Modern European Novel Since 1900: A Critical Study of Major Fiction from Proust's Swann's Way to Ferrante's Neapolitan Tetralogy, First Edition. Daniel R. Schwarz.
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define their own psychic and artistic needs. Using fiction to define one's values and to probe one's psyche becomes a feature of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century novel. Yet even while we are aware of the creative transaction by which life becomes art within authors' imaginations, we need to differentiate between what happens within a text and the actual biography outside the imagined ontology of the text.

For many in the German-speaking world, Mann was the epitome of the "educated burgher," a man of the upper middle class whose comfortable economic status allowed him to acquire not only possessions but also cultural education, refinement, and good taste. Indeed, his works and his interests reflect such a status. Many of his stories and novels – for example, *Buddenbrooks* (1901) – depict an upper-middle-class milieu and the concerns of family life.

Yet Mann rejected identification with bourgeois society. Indeed, he believed that the source of much of his artistic inspiration derived from a realm antithetical to the bourgeois one in which he lived, namely from the realm of the erotic, the sexual, and, in particular, homosexual desire.² We do know from Mann's diaries which became public in 1975 that Mann struggled with his own homosexual impulses.

Death in Venice lives on the borderland between Aestheticism and Decadence. It takes its place among texts that open up the subject of homoeroticism with Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* (1884), and, most blatantly, Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). With its discovery of another darker self lurking beneath a respectable exterior, *Death in Venice* also suggests Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

As Joyce does with Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead" – completed in 1907, only a few years before Mann wrote *Death in Venice* – Mann creates in Aschenbach the man he feared becoming, namely an uninspired artistic icon of a mediocre culture. Mann also creates a narrator who is a surrogate for exploring these fears. The preposition "von" in Gustav von Aschenbach's name indicates that he has been made a member of the nobility for his life of achievement. The narrator renders Aschenbach's consciousness, but never quite stops holding Aschenbach's perspective at an ironic distance.

Leo Carey notes, "*Death in Venice* is one of those works, like [Proust's] *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where the genesis – the process by which life became literature – is almost as fruitful a topic as the finished work itself" (Carey, "Love in Venice," 56).³ In fact Aschenbach's fame rests on projects – including a novel about Frederick the Great – that Mann abandoned. In May 1911, while on vacation, Mann was fixated on a young Polish boy in Venice at the Hôtel des Bains on the Lido, and much of *Death in Venice* derives from

that.⁴ As Mann wrote: "[E]verything was given, and really only needed to be fitted in, proving in the most astonishing manner how it could be interpreted within my composition" (quoted in Carey, 56). Mann knew Munich, Aschenbach's home, since it was his home from 1891 until 1933 when he fled Germany after Hitler came to power.

Yet there are limits to the parallel between Aschenbach and Mann, who was a young man when he wrote *Death in Venice*. As Leo Carey observes, "One of the ironies of the work is that, as time went on, Mann, who was in his mid-thirties when he wrote [*Death in Venice*] became more and more like Aschenbach" (Carey, 58). While we know that Mann struggled with homosexual impulses, before we completely equate Mann with Aschenbach, we need to remember that Mann was married and had six children; while attracted to males, we do not know if he had homosexual relationships.⁵ Furthermore, Aschenbach is also based on the composer Gustav Mahler, who died in May 1911 shortly before Mann wrote *Death in Venice*. Mahler's facial appearance is one source of Mann's description of Aschenbach's face. Yet notwithstanding the physical resemblance between Aschenbach and Mahler, I believe Mann had a much greater investment in Aschenbach as a way of dealing with artistic and sexual issues in his own life.

In *Death in Venice* Mann creates a series of "what if" assumptions about the relationship between art and life. For example, within the novel he tests the hypothesis that "[A]rt heightens life. She gives deeper joy, she consumes more swiftly. She engraves adventures of the spirit and the mind in the faces of her votaries; let them lead outwardly a life of the most cloistered calm, she will in the end produce in them a fastidiousness, an over-refinement, nervous fever and exhaustion, such as a career of extravagant pleasures can hardly show" (15).⁶

Formally, *Death in Venice* depends on a duet between the omniscient narrator's presentation of Aschenbach and Aschenbach's own perspective. The narrator's ironic analysis holds Aschenbach at a fluctuating distance, even as he sympathetically renders the tale Aschenbach tells himself through indirect discourse. Mann not only presents the cognitive dissonance between the stories Aschenbach tells himself and his actual behavior, but also the inconsistencies between Aschenbach's rationalizations and what is actually occurring as well as the conflict within Aschenbach's mind between the Apollonian values he holds dear and the Dionysian emotions that manifest themselves.

Death in Venice begins in May of an unspecified year in the early twentieth century, a time when "Europe sat upon the anxious seat beneath a menace that hung over its head for months," a menace that found actuality in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in June 1914 in Sarajevo, Bosnia (3).

Mann is also prescient about the breakdown of international order and the onset of World War I. But the immediate crisis was international tension created by the deployment of a German gunship to the Moroccan port of Agadir on July 1, 1911 after a rebellion broke out and the French were threatening to intervene. (My late colleague Edgar Rosenberg, who taught me a great deal about *Death in Venice*, thought that the crisis might refer to a prior Moroccan crisis in 1906 when Germany tried to prevent France from establishing a protectorate in Morocco.)

For Aschenbach writing is a kind of minor triumph befitting the work of a middle-level official; in suggesting that parallel between an author and an official doing the work required of him, Mann not only emphasizes mediocre art as drone work, but also suggests that it serves the political goals of the state. When we meet Aschenbach in Munich, art is service, depending less on imagination and creative energy than upon "sustained concentration, conscientiousness, and tact" that produced "wear and tear" upon his system (3). Toiling to the point of exhaustion, Aschenbach in his own mind has transformed his writing into cultural service as if he held a civil service position within government. He puts in his time each day as if he were punching a clock.

Aschenbach seeks fame rather than truth, and sacrifices inspiration on the altar of pleasing the public whose values echo his own: "[H]is genius was *calculated* to win at once the adhesion of the general public and the admiration, both sympathetic and stimulating, of the connoisseur" (9; emphasis mine). Attributing who Aschenbach is to genetics (although here we might question Mann's science) as well as culture, Mann's narrator tells us that Aschenbach is the descendant of a parental "union of dry, conscientious officialdom and ardent, obscure impulse" (8). In a great image, the narrator quotes an observer who claims that Aschenbach always has held himself like a closed fist (9). Aschenbach's favorite motto is "Durchhalten" or "Hold Fast" and his ambition is simply "to live to a good old age, for it was his conviction that only the artist to whom it has been granted to be fruitful on all stages of our human scene can be truly great, or universal, or worthy of honour" (9–10). While Aschenbach's ambition in Munich is to grow old and maintain his position, the narrator ironically begins tracing the alternative trajectory of Aschenbach's letting go and dying before reaching old age.

Mann regarded Aschenbach as a second- or even third-rate artist, in part because of the limits of the latter's imagination and in part because Aschenbach wore blinders when thinking about historical process and saw history only in terms of his own values and psychic needs. To put it in other terms, Aschenbach lacks what John Keats has called the negative capability to imagine a world beyond himself. At a time when the first years of the twentieth century, especially in Central Europe, were defined by intellectual ferment in art and

literature – when the ideas of Nietzsche, Freud, Kandinsky, and Schoenberg were being foregrounded and replacing older concepts of representation – Mann presents Aschenbach as a highly intellectual mannerist for whom artistic technique is more important than powerful emotion.

Aschenbach's art in part is about art and style for the sake of art and style. Aschenbach combines what Peter Schjeldahl, speaking of the mannerist Agnolo Bronzino, calls "the most contrived degree of fantasy, the most candid of appetites" (Schjeldahl, "Then and Now").⁷ Like Bronzino, Aschenbach exudes "aristocratic hauteur" and is drawn in his admiration of Greek statues and Tazio by "erotic glamour" (ibid.).

In the art of Aschenbach, Mann is exploring not only the triumph of the aesthetic as an exercise of willful control, but also the consequences of an ordering form that stifles content, ignores difficult and complex issues, and eschews ambiguity. Not for Aschenbach the messiness of Dostoevsky or Tolstoy. No, Aschenbach has turned art into exacting service, and he needs to flee the bondage to which he has submitted. For him writing has become joyless, "the daily theatre of a rigid, cold, and passionate service" (7). His passion has gone into "scrupulosity" that has "bridled and tempered his sensibilities" (7).

Aschenbach is an aging artist, whose overly fastidious art has become bereft of feeling: "So now, perhaps, feeling thus tyrannized, [the nature and inmost essence of the literary gift] avenged itself by leaving him, refusing from now on to carry and wing his art and taking away with it all the ecstasy he had known in form and expression" (3, 7). Seemingly, having banished disorder, passions, and unruly sentiments, Aschenbach rediscovers these aspects of a repressed Dionysian self in weird, warped, and uncontrollable obsessions, fixations, and unacknowledged needs. Or, put another way, his repressed Dionysian, libidinous self emerges to undermine his Apollonian reason and control.

Mann's narrator uses the Germanic master style – something he does not use in other works – to parody Aschenbach's artistic goals. With their Germanic periods, series of appositions that qualify until they often undermine what precedes, subtle redefinitions of such terms as "passion" and "heroism," and a rhetorical evasion that often fails to locate exactly what is happening, Mann mimes the caution and claustrophobia of Aschenbach's imagination. Yet underneath the seemingly convoluted sentences – sentences which resonate with rich irony even in the English translations I am quoting – are dichotomies: the Apollonian ordered life of Munich and the Dionysian chaotic libidinous world of Venice, work and sloth, service and laxity, boredom and excitement, age and youth, intellect and imagination, commitment to conscience and pursuit of fame. These dichotomies are underlined by the contrast between the jungle imaged by uncontrollable fecundity and the presence of the tiger with the neat routines of German bourgeois life.

Cultural Decadence and Enervation

As Leo Carey nicely puts it, "Aschenbach's story came to embody two kinds of humiliation – that of age in love with youth, and that of an artist whose reputation outweighs his achievement" (Carey, 56).

Now past fifty, Aschenbach, who formerly "could hold out for years under the strain of the same piece of work, with an endurance and a tenacity of purpose like that which had conquered his native province of Silesia," is honored by a culture that values such qualities (10). Lauding "heroism born of weakness" – a heroism paralleling the creative process that leads to his own artistic achievements – Aschenbach speaks to "the spirit of the times" (12). These times are not exactly identified but seem to refer to the period a few years prior to World War I and after the fin de siècle when Decadence and Aestheticism – the world of ivory towers and sacred fonts – were still strongly influential.

Not only did unconventional behavior introduced in the 1890s Decadent period still flourish in the first decade of the twentieth century but homosexuality, in the wake of Oscar Wilde's public behavior and trials, was no longer the hidden subject. Indeed, Frederick the Great, the subject of Aschenbach's prose epic, was reputed to have been gay.

It is worth remembering, too, that Aschenbach – who on the outside is confident, seemingly knowing and disciplined, but on the inside is soft, narcissistic, lacking self-awareness – can be read as a metaphor for Germany and indeed Europe as it is on the threshold of World War I. While in conservative Munich, Aschenbach does not flaunt his emotions or flout community standards. But it is in permissive Venice that his homosexual and pederast impulses overcome repression and he begins to act out those impulses as blatantly as Wilde's Dorian Gray.

Death in Venice stands as an inquiry about what makes great fiction. Mann invites the reader to think about what makes great art and whether greatness is culturally determined. His short novel implies that the dialogue between imagination and formal control – between what and how – is necessary for creating great art. That dialogue informs the paradigm Mann creates in *Death in Venice*, a paradigm that the narrator presents not merely as an alternative to Aschenbach's own creations but also as a judgment.

Mann believed that each generation gets the major artistic spokesman it deserves, and the generation about which he wrote in *Death in Venice* deserves Aschenbach. Its version of heroism is a passive one "which clenches its teeth and stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side" (11). The Christian martyr Saint Sebastian "is the most beautiful symbol if not of art as a whole, yet certainly of the art of which we speak of here" (11). Note that the narrator speaks in the first person plural as if he were very much part of the culture he observes, even as Mann expects the reader to take an ironic perspective.

Within Aschenbach's heroes, as within himself, beneath the unimpressive exterior looms the possibility of a fiery spirit. But in the case of his heroes, and one could say in the case of Aschenbach even in Venice, the ardor within takes a self-flagellating turn into self-sacrifice and enervation.

.....

Within that world of Aschenbach's creation were exhibited many phases of the same theme: there was the aristocratic self-command that is eaten out within and for as long as it can conceals its biologic decline from the eyes of the world; the sere and ugly outside, hiding the embers of smouldering fire – and having power to fan them to so pure a flame as to challenge supremacy in the domain of beauty itself; the pallid languors of the flesh, contrasted with the fiery ardours of the spirit within, which can fling a whole proud people down at the foot of the Cross, at the feet of its own sheer self-abnegation; the gracious bearing preserved in the stern, stark service of form; the unreal, precarious existence of the born intrigant with its swiftly enervating alternation of schemes and desires – all these human fates and many more of their like one read in Aschenbach's pages. Reading them, one might doubt the existence of any other kind of heroism than the heroism born of weakness. (11–12)

.....

Being honored within one's own culture hardly matters, Mann implies, if the culture itself is mediocre. Aschenbach is recognized as distinguished by a culture steeped in timidity. Aschenbach's conception of heroism lacks the qualities – physical and moral courage, commitment to ideals and to the common good, willingness to fight for the rights of others – that we associate with heroism:

.....

Gustav Aschenbach was the poet-spokesman of all those who labour at the edge of exhaustion, of the overburdened, of those who are already worn out but still hold themselves upright; of all our modern moralizers of accomplishment, with stunted growth and scanty resources, who yet contrive by skillful husbanding and prodigious spasms of will to produce, at least for a while, the effect of greatness. There are many such, they are the heroes of the age. And in Aschenbach's pages they saw themselves; he justified, he exalted them, he sang their praise – and they, they were grateful, they heralded his fame. (12)

.....

What Mann's narrator describes is heroism manqué for a Europe whose concept of greatness has shrunk. Coming on his father's side from a family of "men who lived their strict, decent, sparing lives in the service of king and state," Aschenbach creates by small acts of will rather than by the idealism and passion that motivated the great European Romantics from Goethe and E. T. A. Hoffmann

to Wordsworth and Byron (8). German Romanticism, in particular, valued heroic action, passion, and imagination, and was skeptical of the French Enlightenment's stress on reason and scientific methods requiring careful mustering of empirical evidence. Writing with a view of accolades and recognition, Aschenbach conquers pages like a minor potentate conquers ground, but never examines – as the great Romantics aspire to do – the depths and intricacies of self: “Yes, one might put it that his whole career had been one conscious and overweening ascent to honour, which left in the rear all the misgivings or self-derogation which might have hampered him” (12).

I am stressing that *Death in Venice* needs to be read as a political and historical novel. With noir irony, Mann presents a culture whose values he despises. He defines heroism in terms which are antithetical to the very concept of heroism, and in fact describe a combination of self-sacrifice and adjustment to circumstances. Mann excoriates the German culture of his day which responds to passive figures as heroic as much as his Irish contemporary James Joyce in *Dubliners* (1914) and *Ulysses* (1922) critiques what he felt was an enervated and paralyzed Irish culture.

Mann is not only talking about Aschenbach but also using him as an image of a narcissistic, eviscerated, and enervated European culture. And his vision extends beyond Aschenbach to include the enervated anomie of Munich and by implication, Germany as well as the decadence of Venice, and by implication, Italy. As in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), beneath the surface manners and customs, European civilization is revealed as a sham. The lurking tiger represents not only all that civilization pretends to ignore, including basic animal emotions, but also lies, hypocrisy, and everything that sticks its tongue out at human pretensions.

The Death Motif

Death in Venice is about the process of dying, and that process has begun for Aschenbach long before he visits Venice. Mann wants us to recognize that Aschenbach is dying prematurely in his early fifties and has become an old man well before his time.

In several of the novels in this study, illness is a metaphor for moral and spiritual inadequacy. Aschenbach, like Gregor Samsa and the speaker from *Notes from Underground*, is ill. When in Munich Aschenbach first feels the impulse to travel, it comes “upon him with such suddenness and passion as to resemble a seizure, almost a hallucination” (5). His desire to travel is called “the unexpected contagion” (6). The narrator inflects Aschenbach's health issues, his “enervating daily struggle between a proud, tenacious, well-tried will and this growing fatigue” (7).

As in Joyce's *The Dead* and his "Hades" chapter in *Ulysses*, Death is everywhere, pervading the structure and texture of *Death in Venice*. Beginning with Aschenbach's sighting of a mortuary chapel in the cemetery and continuing with the boat – "an ancient hulk belonging to an Italian line, obsolete, dingy, grimed with soot" – that transports him to Italy, the structure and texture are imbued with suggestions of aging, obsolescence, mortality, and death (16). When he arrives in Venice, the gondola is described as "black as nothing else on earth except a coffin. ... [W]hat visions of death itself [it calls up], the bier and solemn rites and last soundless voyage! And has anyone remarked that the seat in such a bark, the armchair lacquered in coffin-black and dully black-upholstered, is the softest most luxurious, most relaxing seat in the world?" (21).

We need to note that the narrator engages in hyperbole as if to underline that Aschenbach, for all his supposed temperate nature, actually experiences the world – whether in his writing or in his judgmental or emotional responses to people he meets or in his pursuit of Tadzio – in extreme and reductive ways. Indeed, we see indications of Aschenbach's exaggerated responses in his disgust with old man on the boat and his fear of the physicality of the man he sees at the cemetery. Recused from the world, he cannot put any experience within the normal ken of understanding.

Mann understands that death is often a process of gradual loss of energy, mental capacity, and physical function. Even as the boat voyage to Venice begins, Aschenbach's consciousness is undergoing a transformation that takes the shape of diminished focus and control: "He felt not quite canny, as though the world were suffering a dreamlike distortion of perspective which he might arrest by shutting it all out for a few minutes and then looking at it afresh. But instead he felt a floating sensation" (17–18). Looking disgustedly at the now intoxicated "young-old man" who repulses him, "once more [he had] a dazed sense as though things about him were just slightly losing their ordinary perspective, beginning to show a distortion that might merge into the grotesque" (19).

Death hovers over every episode and informs every passage. Although only in his early fifties, Aschenbach continues losing control and having frequent lapses in focus as if he were an older man. The narrator no sooner describes Aschenbach's looking at the ocean – "[H]e let his eyes swim in the wideness of the sea, his gaze lose focus, blur, and grow vague in the misty immensity of space" – than Tadzio appears (30–31). This episode foreshadows the ending when Aschenbach's death while he is sitting by the sea and watching Tadzio cavort in the ocean.

Juxtaposed to Aschenbach's zeal for control over his art and his own emotional life is the immensity of the ocean which to a rereader becomes associated with death. The narrator stresses how the ocean becomes for Aschenbach an image of the nullification of all that Aschenbach valued: "[The vast ocean is] opposed to

his art, and perhaps for that very reason a lure for the unorganized, the immeasurable, the eternal – in short for nothingness. He whose preoccupation is with excellence longs fervently to find rest in perfection; and is not nothingness a form of perfection?" (31).

Aschenbach's Doubles: The Repressed Self Plays Back

Discussing *Crime and Punishment*, R. P. Blackmur remarked that coincidental and fatal encounters are "the artist's way of representing those forces in us not ourselves" (Blackmur, *Eleven Essays in the European Novel*).⁸ Such encounters create "our sense of that other self within us that we can neither quite escape nor quite meet up with" (Blackmur, 126). But that other self, I would stress – and, more importantly, so would Mann – is really another version of our self brought out by a confluence of personality and character at a specific time and place. In German *Doppelgänger* means "double walker," and in German culture the doubles are often darkly sinister, even ghostly, and represent evil or misfortune.

These doubles mock Aschenbach and remind us not only of his mortality, but also of the instinctive and sexual aspects of his humanity that he would deny in the spurious existence in which he has been living in Munich. By having Aschenbach see these various mysterious doubles, Mann creates a parallel to Ulysses's physical descent into Hades to meet ghostly figures who have died. To evoke a related classical metaphor, these doubles are like shades crossing over the River Styx – the river that formed the boundary between earth and the underworld – to haunt Aschenbach.

Aschenbach encounters male doubles – or shadow selves – that suggest aspects of himself. These figures fit into three overlapping categories: (1) older men trying to be young, often quite ludicrously, and trying to put their back to the future and live fully in the present; (2) intimidating younger men, who celebrate their physicality and awareness of their bodies; (3) an attractive and seductive adolescent – namely Tadzio – living a decadent Dionysian life seemingly completely opposite from the Apollonian life that Aschenbach had lived, but no less self-immersed and narcissistic than Aschenbach.

Aschenbach's first encounter is with a figure of indeterminate age from the second category. While taking a walk in Munich, Aschenbach sees a man standing in the portico of the cemetery mortuary chapel. To Aschenbach's eyes, he is not a native Bavarian and seems quite threatening; with a rakish appearance and wearing a straw hat, the man has "a bold and domineering, even a ruthless air" (5). The man's intimidating stare causes a transformation within Aschenbach's psyche: "[H]e felt the most surprising consciousness of a widening of inward

barriers, a kind of vaulting unrest, a youthfully ardent thirst for distant scenes – a feeling so lively and so new, or at least so long ago outgrown and forgot, that he stood there rooted to the spot, his eyes on the ground and his hands clasped behind him, exploring these sentiments of his, their bearing and scope” (5). Clearly Aschenbach, “hands clasped behind him” as if to signify his rigorous self-control, is challenged and threatened by this libidinous figure who intrudes on his detachment and his enervated ironic perspective.

This figure is the first of various doubles who represent a libidinous, instinctive self that Aschenbach has formerly repressed and brought under control by force of will. Here his tumultuous feelings take the form of a longing to travel, but in a sexualized form of an imagined place antithetical to Munich and to the life he is leading there with its exacting routines: “Desire projected itself visually. ... He beheld a landscape, a tropical marshland, beneath a reeking sky, steaming, monstrous, rank – a kind of primeval wilderness-world of islands, morasses, and alluvial channels. Hairy palm-trunks rose near and far out of lush brakes of fern, out of bottoms of crass vegetation, fat, swollen, thick with incredible bloom. ... Among the knotted joints of a bamboo thicket the eyes of a crouching tiger gleamed – and he felt his heart throb with terror, yet with a longing inexplicable” (5–6). His response here anticipates his orgiastic dream of “the stranger god” not long before his death.

Aschenbach's next encounters are with two doubles who suggest his repressed Dionysian self. The first is an aged, infirm, and dissipated figure who gets on board the steamship that will take Aschenbach to Venice: “A dirty hunchbacked sailor, smirkingly polite, conducted him at once below-ships to a cavernous, lamplit cabin” (16). That man takes us to a dissolute figure of indeterminate age: “There behind a table sat a man with a beard like a goat's; he had his hat on the back of his head, a cigar-stump in the corner of his mouth; he reminded Aschenbach of an old-fashioned circus-director” (16).

The next double is an elderly passenger on the boat; pretending to be part of a group of younger cohorts, he wears a “rakish” Panama hat and a red cravat (17). If we recall that Panama hats are made of straw, we can see that these straw hats, associated with lower-class disreputable males that Aschenbach patronizes, evolve in Aschenbach's mind into a metonymy for that libidinous self that he has been repressing. Aschenbach perceives this passenger as an “old man ... with wrinkles and crow's feet round eyes and mouth” and rouged cheeks pathetically trying to look like the group of young passengers of which he was trying to be a part (17).

Mann's narrator despises this figure as much as Aschenbach, but perhaps is more understanding and sympathetic about how an aging man fights to keep his hold on life and desperately, poignantly, and ultimately pathetically seeks to arrest time. This figure, more than any other, is both a double and a parody of what Aschenbach becomes when he becomes obsessed with Tadzio.

Before they leave the boat, Aschenbach "was forced to endure the importunities of the ghastly young old-man, whose drunken state obscurely urged him to pay the stranger the honour of a formal farewell. ... He drooled, he blinked, he licked the corner of his mouth" (20). Aschenbach is disgusted with this passenger's garish and even decadent behavior; yet the passenger represents the impulsiveness and sexuality that Aschenbach has been denying. The rereader understands that if the old passenger is inebriated, Aschenbach is later intoxicated with obsessive passion. Aschenbach meets another version of an older man trying to be young in the bathing-master at his Lido hotel who is a "bare-foot old man in linen trousers and sailor blouse with a straw hat" (29–30).

The rakish figure in the Munich cemetery anticipates – and has much in common with – the Venice street performer who performs in the garden of Aschenbach's hotel. The street performer is a man of indeterminate age who looks unhealthy but has red hair and an "impudent swaggering posture": "He was a man of slight build, with a thin, undernourished face; his shabby felt hat rested on the back of his neck, a great mop of red hair sticking out in front. ... [V]ice sat on [his face], it was furrowed with grimacing, and two deep wrinkles of defiance and self-will, almost of desperation, stood oddly between the red brows" (which the Munich figure also has); he gave off a "suspicious odour ... a strong smell of carbolic" indicating that he was ill, probably with cholera (59–60).

Within the text red becomes the color of decadence and disease. While watching the street performer Aschenbach is drinking "pomegranate-juice and soda-water sparkling ruby-red" (59); Tadzio's "red breast-knot" (32) had fascinated Aschenbach. Thus Mann creates the underlying link between Aschenbach's obsession with Tadzio – an emotional illness – and the physical disease ravaging Venice. Of Tadzio Aschenbach thinks, while in the presence of the street performer: "He is sickly, he will never live to grow up" (62). After obsequiously soliciting money, the performer "threw off his buffoon's mask" and stuck out his (red) tongue "impudently" (62). He knows Venice's secret, namely that the city's officials are hiding the cholera plague so as not to affect the tourist industry. But even after knowing Venice's secret, Aschenbach buys the overripe strawberries which may be the source of what we assume is the cholera that kills him.

Seductive Beauty, Corrupting Pleasure: Venice and Aschenbach's Illicit Love

Venice is equated with corruption and decadence and that is where Aschenbach discovers his attraction for the adolescent boy Tadzio. Mann stresses how Venice has devolved into a playland for visitors from other countries. Venice is