Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*

A Novella and Its Critics

Ellis Shookman

Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*:
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This study surveys and analyzes the reception of one of the most famous and most widely read stories in all of modern literature. It treats over seven hundred books, articles, and other reactions to Mann's *Death in Venice* thematically yet within five chronological categories. This comprehensive chronological approach helps put the extensive criticism and scholarship on Mann's story into literary and historical perspective. Issues raised in the interpretations discussed include art and artists, myths, sources, symbols, style, and narrative structure. Those issues also include politics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, homoeroticism, music, and translations. Comparisons of *Death in Venice* to Mann's other writings are considered, as are comparisons to works by authors such as Euripides, Plato, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Platen, Nietzsche, Gide, Conrad, D'Annunzio, and Mishima. Among the critics, scholars, and reviewers cited are Heinrich Mann, Hermann Broch, D. H. Lawrence, Georg Lukács, Lionel Trilling, Wolfgang Koeppen, Susan Sontag, Allan Bloom, Camille Paglia, and Mario Vargas Llosa. Special attention is paid to Luchino Visconti's film *Morte a Venezia*, to Benjamin Britten's opera *Death in Venice*, and to other artistic adaptations of Mann's story.

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Literary Criticism in Perspective

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CAMDEN HOUSE

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“You were going to have Thomas Mann and Leverkühn in scenes together, weren’t you? And put that Gustav Aschenbach in with Leverkühn as one of his contemporaries. You call that research?”

“Who’s Gustav Aschenbach?” said Hacker.

“A dead man in Venice, Warren.”

Joseph Heller, *Closing Time* (1994)

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E. S.
June 2002

Introduction

In English, the name of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912) seems to have become almost a household word. That is what one might think, at least, after finding the phrase "Death in Venice" in the headlines of sixteen relatively recent British and American magazine articles, not to mention the titles of two English mystery novels. The articles appeared in a broad range of magazines, and they treat topics as varied as film, art, architecture, and air pollution in Italy; crime, cocaine, and ailing ducks in Venice, California; and European views on capital punishment. Two of the articles, in *Film Comment* and *The Economist,* are about the Venice Film Festival and are themselves entitled "Death in Venice."[1] In *Sight & Sound,* "Life and Death in Venice" reports on that same event.[2] Two other articles called "Death in Venice," in *Art & Antiques* and *Art Monthly,* are about the Biennale di Venezia, a recurring art exhibition.[3] In *Blueprint,* "Mega Death in Venice" comments on this same exhibition, as does "British Suffer Death in Venice," in *Architects' Journal.*[4] An article on both the Biennale and Titian in *The New Yorker* and one in *Apollo* on a painting by Giovanni Bellini likewise cite Mann's title in their own.[5] "Death in Venice," in *Architectural Design,* moreover, and "Chipperfield takes on Death in Venice," in *Architects' Journal,* describe a plan to extend the historic cemetery on the Venetian island of San Michele.[6] An article in *Discover* about the erosion of marble angels adorning the churches in Venice, Italy, is entitled "A Grimy and Watery Death in Venice."[7] Articles in *Rolling Stone* and *The New Republic* that tell of gangs, crack, and social conditions in Venice, California, again bear Mann's title, as does one in *The Economist* that reports on objections by citizens of that city to their officials' killing of ducks that carry a contagious disease.[8] A further article, "Death in Venice" in *The New Republic,* notes Europeans' support for the death penalty.[9] Finally, two recent mystery novels are named *Another Death in Venice*. Reginald Hill's novel (1976) has far more to do with Luchino Visconti's film *Morte a Venezia* (1971) than with Mann's novella, Visconti's primary source. The surname of Mann's protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach, though, is fused in Anthony Appiah's (1995) with that of the heiress and art collector Peggy Guggenheim to yield a character called "Peggy Aschenheim." All these allusions to the title of *Death in Venice* might well lead one to conclude that Mann's story is very widely known.

One could draw this same conclusion after learning how many works by other authors have been compared to *Death in Venice,* as well as how often it has inspired further literary and artistic efforts. The list of these authors is long. As studies cited in the following chapters show, it includes ancient as well as modern names that come from many countries and from the fields of psychoanalysis, sociology, philosophy, and history, as well as from belles lettres. Among the names are Alfred Adler, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Maurice Barrès, Charles Baudelaire, Hermann Broch, Anton Chekhov, Cicero, Joseph Conrad, Robert Coover, Euripides, Gustave Flaubert, Sigmund Freud, Jean Genet, Stefan George, André Gide, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Gerhart Hauptmann, Martin Heidegger, Ernest Hemingway, Hermann Hesse, Friedrich Hölderlin, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Homer, Henrik Ibsen, Henry James, James Joyce, Carl Gustav Jung, Franz Kafka, Yasunari Kawabata, Heinrich von Kleist, Wolfgang Koeppen, Alfred Kubin, D. H. Lawrence, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Malcolm Lowry, Samuel Lublinski, Georg Lukács, Heinrich Mann, F. T. Marinetti, Daphne du Maurier, Ian McEwan, Yukio Mishima, Robert Musil, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Pater, August von Platen, Plato, Plutarch, Marcel Proust, Georges Rodenbach, Erwin Rohde, Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schnitzler, Arthur Schopenhauer, Georg Simmel, Oswald Spengler, Leo Tolstoy, Virgil, Max Weber, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf, and Xenophon. This imposing list suggests how important Mann's novella has seemed in academic circles. The work has also inspired a poem and two short stories written by Jürgen Theobaldy, Alan Catlin, and Winston Weathers, respectively. It is set to music in Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice* (1973), an opera with dance sequences choreographed by Frederick Ashton, and it has been interpreted twice in a full-length ballet, first by Norbert Vesak, whose *Death in Venice* was given in Munich in 1986, then by Flemming Flindt in Verona in 1991, with Rudolf Nureyev creating the role of Aschenbach. One staged version of Mann's story premiered in New York in 1980, moreover, another was given in London in 1993, and as I write, the Citizens' Theatre of Glasgow is performing a third at the Manhattan Ensemble Theater. That story is also the ancestor of a film more recent than Visconti's adaptation, namely Richard Kwietniowski's *Love & Death on Long Island* (1997). Finally, many artists have illustrated editions of the novella and portrayed its scenes and characters in paintings, in drawings, and even on medallions. In comparative and creative endeavors alike, then, *Death in Venice* has been highly influential.

Given such popularity and such pervasiveness, one should not be surprised to find that the secondary literature on *Death in Venice* is extensive. The bibliography at the end of this book contains over seven hundred titles, in fact, starting with reviews that appeared in early 1913 and ending with articles published in 2002. To organize so many secondary sources and analyze the major issues they raise, I have divided my account of them into five chapters:

1. *Initial Reactions, 1913–14:* These reactions consist of reviews written either immediately upon or soon after the publication of *Death in Venice.* The novella first appeared in serial form, then as a book, in late 1912 and early 1913. Almost all of the reviews included here are in German.

2. *Increasing Acceptance, 1915–55:* This chapter surveys scholarly remarks on *Death in Venice* made during the First World War, during the Weimar Republic, in the period prior to and including the Second World War, and in the further decade that ended with Mann's death. Among these sources are reviews of the initial translations of the novella into English and French in the 1920s.

3. *Posthumous Praise, 1956–75:* This chapter considers books and articles that appeared over the next twenty years as scholars began to take stock of Mann's entire life and work, in part by exploring his archives and evaluating his correspondence. Visconti's film and Britten's opera sparked wider interest in the novella near the end of this twenty-year period, and scholarly books and articles comparing them to it are included here, as well as in the following two chapters.

4. *Further Developments, 1976–95:* These developments reflect critical and scholarly efforts made during the next two decades, after the centenary of Mann's birth was celebrated in 1975. Such efforts coincided with the publication of his extant diaries and his notebooks, and they ended with the appearance of three major biographies.

5. *Recent Trends, 1996–2001:* Recent scholarship on the novella is surveyed here, to the extent that it has been cited, catalogued, or otherwise made known and available to date. (Four articles from 2002 are mentioned in the conclusion.)

In dividing the vast secondary literature on *Death in Venice* into these five chapters, I have followed the general guidelines that govern Camden House's series *Literary Criticism in Perspective.* Those guidelines stipulate a chronological treatment. Within each chapter, though, I group together studies that discuss similar topics or that take related approaches. The resulting categories are indicated by boldfaced headings. Readers can thus find discussed in one place, for example, all the psychoanalytical studies of *Death in Venice* given between 1956 and 1975, while such readers can also situate these studies in the larger critical climate defined by the other approaches to Mann's story that were taken during this same period. To compare all the interpretations that any single topic or kind of approach has yielded — all the psychoanalytical, all the political, or all the stylistic interpretations, for example — one needs to consult the headings in each chapter and the index. Most of those headings recur in every chapter, but they sometimes vary, a fact that reflects how the evidence supplied and the emphasis lent by the secondary literature have changed over time. The index includes names of persons, titles of works, and keywords that help trace specific issues and

themes. It also includes the names of the critics, scholars, and other authors whose works are listed in the bibliography. Finally, each chapter starts with an introduction to the approaches and themes discussed in it. Each of the following sections, in turn, begins with a paragraph that outlines the issues raised by the works treated in that section. A brief summation concludes each chapter except the last. The scope and structure of the chapters in this book thus help divide the reception of *Death in Venice* into manageable, logical, and coherent phases.

Like the five main chapters that precede it, the bibliography is in chronological order. Its entries are listed according to their year of publication, starting with 1913. For any single year, though, the entries are in alphabetical order, according to their authors' last names. The first entry for 1913 is by Wilhelm Alberts, for example, and the last is by Paul Zifferer. Next come the entries for 1914, again listed alphabetically by author, then the entries for 1915, and so on. The text proper seldom mentions titles of secondary works, but it does give their authors' names and their dates of publication. This information will point readers to the appropriate location in the bibliography. The sentence in chapter 3 beginning with "In 1965, Werner Hoffmeister remarked on Mann's skilled use of free indirect discourse . . .," for example, refers to the entry from that year and by that author: Hoffmeister, Werner. *Studien zur erlebten Rede bei Thomas Mann und Robert Musil.* The Hague: Mouton, 1965. In the rare case of an author who published more than one book or article on *Death in Venice* in a single year — for example, Herbert Lehnert in 1964 — both the context of the discussion and references in the text clearly indicate which entry is meant. Page numbers of all quotations are given in parentheses in the body of the text. Thanks to this system of citation, the text is not cluttered with notes or extended parenthetical references. All references to Mann's own works state the volume and page number of his *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1974).

My main bibliographical sources are Harry Matter's *Die Literatur über Thomas Mann: Eine Bibliographie 1898–1969* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1972) and Klaus W. Jonas's *Die Thomas-Mann-Literatur:* Volume 1, *Bibliographie der Kritik 1896–1955* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1972); Volume 2, *Bibliographie der Kritik 1956–1975* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1979); and Volume 3, *Bibliographie der Kritik 1976–1994* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1997). Georg Potempa's *Thomas Mann-Bibliographie:* Volume 1, *Das Werk* (Morsum/Sylt: Cicero, 1992) and Volume 2, *Übersetzungen-Interviews* (Morsum/Sylt: Cicero, 1997) has likewise been helpful. I have also consulted *Germanistik, Bibliographie der deutschen Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft,* the Modern Language Association Bibliography, and six databases maintained by the H. W. Wilson Co.: Art Index, Essay and General Literature Index, Humanities Index, Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, Social Science Index, and Wilson Combined Indexes. Such online databases

include titles that scholars and students of literature might otherwise miss. The titles cited in the American Psychological Association's PsycINFO, for example, can help one find the many interpretations of *Death in Venice* given by psychologists and psychoanalysts. Other references come from the notes and bibliographies of the books and articles that I cite, as well as from the catalogues of the libraries mentioned in the acknowledgments. Most of those sources are in German or English. A few are in French. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from works in German or French are my own. I have relied on published translations from all other languages.

In addition to using these several bibliographical sources, I have profited from prior remarks on the reception of *Death in Venice*. Most of these remarks are in German, but some are in English, and each of the authors who makes them presents that reception in a particular way. The first extensive remarks in German date from 1968, when Hans Nicklas summarized the major studies written before 1960. Nicklas warned against the tendency to paraphrase Mann's own statements about the novella and to believe Aschenbach's self-justifications. Nicklas included only two reviews from 1913, however, and the total volume of criticism has tripled since his study was published. In 1969, Herbert Lehnert commented on numerous studies of *Death in Venice* in his report about the state of research on all Mann's works. In 1977, Hermann Kurzke's similar report about the research on Mann published between 1969 and 1976 mentioned selected interpretations of *Death in Venice*. In 1979, Gabriele Seitz analyzed over half the reviews published between 1913 and 1915, noting a harshly nationalistic tone in those that were unfavorable. She also observed how Mann tried to influence, manipulate, or "channel" the initial reception of the novella in order to restore both his reputation and his finances. Hans Rudolf Vaget similarly considered roughly half of the initial reviews in 1984, observing how revealing the negative ones can be. He also selectively summarized more recent studies. John Luijs's Dutch thesis of 1987 detailed the reception of the homoerotic element in *Death in Venice*. The early reviewers perceived and judged that element, Luijs argues, but most scholars ignored, avoided, repressed, disguised, or marginalized it until the mid-1970s. Karl Werner Böhm took a similar tack in 1991. Böhm refers to almost fifty early reviews, and he discusses fourteen of them, writing that *Death in Venice* was accepted or rejected according to their authors' views on homosexuality. The more repulsed early critics were by this sexual propensity, he claims, the less favorably they wrote, though respect for Mann's style could make them willing to ignore his homosexual theme or to consider it merely symbolic. Böhm takes this same cogent but narrow approach to subsequent studies. Erhard Bahr, likewise in 1991, excerpted thirty such reviews and studies. In English, T. J. Reed has briefly remarked on the novella's reception, drawing in 1994 on his own copious scholarship. Reed also provided an annotated bibliogra-

phy. In 1998, again in English, Naomi Ritter explained that reception in greater detail. Ritter's remarks contain many errors of bibliographical fact and are sometimes inaccurate. It is not true, for example, that the most significant criticism of *Death in Venice* before the First World War discusses Mann's implicit foreshadowing of that conflict. In 1999, Susanne Widmaier-Haag surveyed almost three quarters of the psychoanalytical readings of Mann's story, noting how those readings have changed along with psychoanalysis itself. She rightly observed both how loosely some literary scholars apply Freudian concepts and how inadequately some psychoanalysts read fiction. Most of the studies she did not include are in English, but she also drew the mistaken conclusion that none were written in German between 1915 and 1965. Finally, in 2000, Thomas Goll linked the reception of Mann's works to the political culture prevalent in Germany during his career. Early reactions to the novella were generally positive, Goll wrote, and Mann's story was largely judged literarily rather than politically.

As noted above, my own approach must be chronological. I also make thematic distinctions, however, that resemble the ones drawn by Nicklas and Ritter. Nicklas divides studies prior to his own into six main categories. Those categories comprise differing methods of interpretation and diverse objects: (1) individualistic readings that focus on Aschenbach's psyche, (2) ontological ones that regard him as an artist doomed to death, (3) sociological ones that find him typical of the German bourgeoisie after Bismarck, (4) formal readings that stress stylistic and structural elements, (5) generic ones that take the history of the German novella into account, (6) all other approaches. Ritter proposes seven such general categories: (1) Greek mythology and culture, (2) historical/political aspects, (3) literary and other influences, (4) narrative style, (5) major themes, (6) comparison to the work of other authors, (7) psychology and psychoanalysis. Headings such as these can be helpful when trying to comprehend the many topics discussed by scholars and critics of *Death in Venice*. Within the broad categories suggested by Nicklas and Ritter and used in the following chapters, those topics include death and Venice, of course, as well as decadence and moral dilemmas; eros, seduction, and pedophilia; mid-life crises and love in old age; families and foreigners; music and photography; irony and creativity; the image of the tiger and the image of the city; and the histories of the phallus and the literary symbol. Many other such topics have also been raised.

I not only survey and summarize those topics, but also analyze and evaluate them. My analysis and evaluation take several forms. Analytical judgment is implicit in the very arrangement of my chapters, sections, and paragraphs. Such judgment also accounts for the discussion of any given secondary work in one place rather than in another. My remarks on any such work show what I think is most important, most incisive, or most inept about it. They are meant to be as synthetic, comprehensive, and impartial as

possible and to reveal the long-term parallels and patterns that connect such works in currents deeper than their authors often knew. I report fewer details about recent research than about earlier work. This is because recent authors often go over the same ground that earlier ones covered and repeat, often unwittingly, what was already known or written. As a whole, moreover, the reception of *Death in Venice* is evaluated in the conclusion at the end of this book.

With the help of such analysis and evaluation, one can see how interpretations of Mann's story have changed along with all the academic fashions and the critical trends that have come into vogue and gone out of style in the ninety years since he wrote it. Readings inspired by Freud, to take one example of such shifting paradigms, also teach their reader other things about its reception. In their sober and sometimes ridiculous diagnoses of Aschenbach and his author, such psychoanalytic interpretations often lack literary refinement. Interpretations given by actual analysts, though, at least seem more professional than remarks by literary scholars who dabble in Freud, and those interpretations attest to the fame that *Death in Venice* enjoys beyond the field of literary studies. Exceptions to the rule of aesthetic incompetence among psychoanalysts who interpret the novella also prove what is true of all ways of reading it: any method of interpretation is only as good as the critic or the scholar who uses it.

This fact becomes especially clear when one considers all the mistakes that critics and scholars have made in their readings of *Death in Venice*. These mistakes are noted in the following chapters, and in the conclusion they are combined in a wildly and intentionally inaccurate retelling of Mann's tale. They are not the stuff of learned disagreement. Instead, they concern names, places, characters, and events that do not exist, do not act, or do not happen in the way that Mann himself describes them. More than a few commentators have thus garbled what Mann wrote, and they often do so for reasons that are highly instructive. Some scholars are so enamored of a pet theory or an interpretive concept, for example, that they ignore or inadvertently twist the fictional facts of his plot. This kind of mistake occurs in many varieties of criticism, but it is especially common in political, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic studies. Further errors result from misunderstandings of Mann's celebrated irony or of passages in his story that are ambiguous. These mistakes, too, are made by critics and scholars of every stripe, but they are particularly common among those who read *Death in Venice* in English translation. H. T. Lowe-Porter's deficient translation of 1928, for example, has been used in North America and Britain for over seven decades, and the reception of the novella reflects her inaccuracies. Fortunately, there are now five more recent, more accurate English renderings — by David Luke (1988), Clayton Koelb (1994), Stanley Appelbaum (1995), Joachim Neugroschel (1998), and Jefferson S. Chase (1999). Read-

ers who do not know German and who want to avoid mistakes of their own should compare these translations. Such readers will thereby get a better idea of the many things that Mann's story can — and cannot — mean than if they rely on only one English translation. With the help of such comparisons, they may also get an inkling of what they are missing by reading *Death in Venice* instead of *Der Tod in Venedig.*

Differences between the reading and reception of Mann's novella in English on the one hand and in German on the other constitute a major theme, then, of the present study. Indeed, I hope not only that this study will raise its readers' awareness of how widely the nature and the quality of comments on Mann's story have varied, and how deeply that story has engaged critics and scholars for many years; I also hope that it will help bridge the growing gap between those who write about *Death in Venice* in German and those who do so English. The distinction between these critics and scholars is not always clear since some of them write in both languages, and it does not always hold even for those who write exclusively in one or the other. Still, the following chapters suggest a difference that is becoming more noticeable every year. Much of the research in German on Mann's story is superb, but some of it is extremely academic and abstract, and it would be enlivened by the creative and comparative approaches taken by some scholars working in English. By contrast, some of these English-speaking scholars seem blissfully ignorant of the German language and thus of both Mann's stylistic complexity and the enormous amount of work in German on his novella. This is the case not only with those who consider the novella alone, but also with those who link it to Visconti's film. The latter scholars' problems are compounded by the many differences between that famous film and Mann's text, and in their comments they sometimes mistake Visconti's images for Mann's words; that is, such scholars sometimes assume that Mann wrote what Visconti shows, and even that he did so in the same way. He did not. I consider secondary literature on both Visconti's film and Britten's opera, by the way, more selectively than the reception of Mann's story itself. I generally do not include accounts of the film or the opera that are published in newspapers or magazines, but treat only those published in scholarly books or articles. I include remarks on technical matters of cinematic or musical composition, moreover, only when such remarks shed light on the meaning of Mann's prose. Both the film and the opera belong to the reception of his text, however, and critics' and scholars' comments on these two adaptations can illuminate aspects of that text that are neglected in traditional literary studies. May this book, then, help whoever reads or writes about *Death in Venice* — be it Mann's, Britten's, Visconti's, or someone else's — in English, German, or any other language.

Before starting this study and becoming immersed in particular details of *Death in Venice,* such readers or writers may wish to recall the general outline

of Mann's plot. His fictional events unfold in the course of five chapters. The initial three constitute the first half of his story. In chapter 1, the author Gustav von Aschenbach, Mann's protagonist, goes for a walk at home in Munich. He is at least fifty years old, and though he is successful in his career, his strength is waning and he is enervated by the writing he tried to do earlier in the day. It is May of the year "19..," a year that poses some unspecified danger to Europe. It is also unseasonably muggy. Waiting for a streetcar at the North Cemetery, Aschenbach sees a Byzantine mortuary chapel and a man standing in its portico. This man's appearance is foreign, and his stare is aggressive. The sight of him prompts Aschenbach to envision a tropical landscape and decide to take a vacation, a trip somewhere south. In chapter 2, Mann tells of Aschenbach's life, works, and career. Those works include a prose epic, a novel, a story, and an aesthetic treatise. Their author was born in Silesia, and he inherited both the sober conscientiousness of his father's side of the family and the more sensual blood of his mother's side. He is famous, disciplined, tense, and tired. His watchword is *Durchhalten* (Persevere), and both his own art and the heroism of his fictional characters are best described by the word *Trotzdem* (Despite). After making artistic mistakes early in his career, Aschenbach has achieved dignity. Denying knowledge, he now cultivates beauty, displaying a moral resolution that raises profound questions about the morality of form. Aschenbach is widowed and has a married daughter. His face shows the strain caused by his art. In chapter 3, he travels to Venice via Trieste, Pola, and an unnamed island off the Adriatic coast. One of the passengers on the boat that carries him from Pola to Venice is an old man made up to look young. As Aschenbach gets off the boat, this old man drunkenly pesters and teases him. The gondolier who ferries Aschenbach to the Lido is likewise unusual. He does not obey Aschenbach's orders, and he disappears at the end of their ride. Among the guests at Aschenbach's hotel is a beautiful Polish boy. Aschenbach admires him, observes him at the beach, and decides that his name is "Tadzio." The hot, thick air soon makes Aschenbach feel ill, and he decides to leave Venice. He delays departing, however, and his luggage is sent to the wrong destination, so he has to stay. He is secretly delighted and returns to his hotel, where he admits that Tadzio's presence made it hard for him to go.

Mann's fourth and fifth chapters constitute the second half of his story. In chapter 4, Aschenbach feels and then understands that he is in love with Tadzio. He thinks of both his surroundings and the boy in terms borrowed from Greek mythology. He watches Tadzio at the beach every day and muses about the link between human beauty and intellectual forms, recalling passages from Plato's *Phaedrus* and other ancient Greek texts. Inspired by Tadzio's beauty, he writes a short treatise on some unnamed topic. He tries but fails to talk to the boy and is ever more intoxicated and transported. After their eyes meet at the end of the chapter, he rushes away and whispers, "I love you." In chapter 5, Aschenbach learns that cholera has come to Venice. Tourists are

leaving and the city is being disinfected, but Aschenbach says nothing, hoping that his passion will profit from the attendant disorder. He pursues Tadzio through the streets and canals of Venice. He sometimes stops to consider where his emotions are taking him, but decides that Eros is honorable. Many people lie to him about the epidemic, including the leader of a troupe of street singers who perform one night at his hotel. An English clerk tells him the truth: how cholera came to Europe from India and how the corrupt Venetian authorities have tried to conceal the many deaths it has caused. Aschenbach considers sharing this news with Tadzio's mother, but he is sickened by the idea of going home, and he remains silent. He then has an orgiastic dream about celebrating Dionysus, a dream that terrifies, disgusts, arouses, and destroys him. The barber at his hotel dyes Aschenbach's hair and makes up his face so that he appears younger. Following Tadzio one afternoon, Aschenbach loses his way, then eats soft, overripe strawberries. Again, he recalls bits of Plato's *Phaedrus,* adding that artists, who approach intellect via the senses, cannot attain genuine wisdom and dignity. At the beach a few days later, he sees Tadzio roughly wrestled to the ground by another boy. Tadzio then wades out to a sandbar, where he looks outward, then back at the beach. It seems to Aschenbach as if Tadzio is smiling at him, and he gets up to follow the boy but collapses. He is carried to his room, and the world soon receives the news that he has died. This sketch of Mann's plot is only a crude summary, of course, of a subtle literary text. Many details not mentioned here are cited in the pages that follow this introduction.

Notes

[1] Harlan Kennedy, "Death in Venice," *Film Comment,* November/December 1986, 34–37; "Death in Venice," *Economist,* 24 September 1988, 120.

[2] David Robinson, "Life and Death in Venice," *Sight & Sound,* November 1998, 6.

[3] Geraldine Norman, "Death in Venice: Older Artists Vanquish Younger Ones at the Biennale," *Art & Antiques,* November 1993, 34–35; Patricia Bickers, "Death in Venice," *Art Monthly,* April 1995, 18.

[4] Simon Grant, "Mega Death in Venice," *Blueprint,* July/August 1999, 72; David Taylor, "British Suffer Death in Venice," *Architects' Journal,* 2 March 2000, 4.

[5] Adam Gopnik, "Death in Venice," *New Yorker,* 2 August 1993, 66–73; Jennifer Fletcher and David Skipsey, "Death in Venice: Giovanni Bellini and the Assassination of St Peter Martyr," *Apollo,* January 1991, 4–9.

[6] Helen Castle, "Death in Venice: The Spectre of the Tragic in David Chipperfield's New Extension to San Michele Cemetery," *Architectural Design,* October 2000,: 44–51; David Taylor, "Chipperfield Takes on *Death in Venice,*" *Architects' Journal,* 6–13 August 1998, 10.

[7] "A Grimy and Watery Death in Venice," *Discover,* February 1986, 8.

[8] Mike Sager, "Death in Venice: The Effect of Crack on Gangs in Venice, California," *Rolling Stone,* 22 September 1988, 64–68; Jennifer Allen, "A Death in Venice," *New Republic,* 5 September 1994, 27; "Californian Ducks: Death in Venice," *Economist,* 12 June 1993, 33.

[9] Joshua Micah Marshall, "Death in Venice: Europe's Death Penalty Elitism," *New Republic,* 31 July 2000, 12–14.

1: Initial Reactions, 1913–14

Introduction

OVER FORTY REVIEWS of *Death in Venice* were written in the two years that followed its initial publication. That publication itself took three separate forms. First, in October and November of 1912, the novella appeared serially in a literary journal, *Die neue Rundschau*. Second, a prior and slightly different version of Mann's text was published in a limited luxury edition by Hans von Weber in Munich. Third, the revised version that, oddly enough, had appeared first, in *Die neue Rundschau,* came out as a book published by Samuel Fischer in Berlin. Von Weber's small edition is dated 1912; Fischer's 1913. Some authors of the earliest reviews read the novella in its serial form. Most referred to the same text in the trade edition published by Fischer. In this chapter, those authors' remarks are divided into five categories. Each reflects a different way in which Mann's story was discussed or understood. First, some critics engaged in literary disputes, disagreeing with each others' interpretations of that story and often attacking or defending its hero or its author. Second, some raised the issue of homoeroticism when writing about Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio, the adolescent Polish boy whom he admires on the Lido. Third, many focused on the style and structure of Mann's narration. Fourth, some regarded aesthetic and biographical aspects of his portrayal of art and artists. Finally, a few concentrated on other themes or combined those already noted here. Many early reviews mention disagreements, of course, and most address more than one theme. Arranging them according to their main emphases, though, and assigning each of them to one of these five categories best reveals their basic similarities and differences. In the conclusion at the end of this first chapter, those similarities and differences are briefly summarized. Unless cited as being from 1914, all the reviews included here are from 1913.

Literary Disputes

Three notable literary disputes surrounded *Death in Venice* in 1913–14. These disputes arose when one critic or reviewer attacked or supported the novella, then another replied by taking an opposing and often a polemical

stance. The first dispute involved the Austrian novelist Hermann Broch, who defended Mann against the charge of philistinism. The second stemmed from favorable reviews written by two of Mann's relatives: Hedwig Dohm, who was the maternal grandmother of his wife Katia, and his older brother Heinrich. The third dispute occurred after a pamphlet by Bernd Isemann rejected *Death in Venice* in no uncertain terms. Many other reviewers and critics openly disagreed with each other, but their remarks are much more limited and are therefore addressed in subsequent sections of this chapter. The three disputes recounted here are more substantial and more sustained. They also suggest both the aesthetic climate and the personal and partisan motives that affected the early reception of Mann's story.

The first disagreement about *Death in Venice* involved the charge of philistinism leveled at Mann by the critic Carl Dallago. It also involved Hermann Broch's rebuttal of that charge. Dallago criticized the traces of philistinism that he found in Mann's essay on the German romantic author Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838). That essay appeared in late 1911, and in it Mann prefers bourgeois solidity to merely interesting bohemianism. Dallago objected, contrasting creative artists with their opposite — the uncultured philistine. Broch objected in turn. His argument is complex. He does not know whether Mann has read Dallago's critique, but *Death in Venice* strikes him as a protest against it, as a rebuttal meant to prove Mann's own artistry. Mann, he argues, not only avoids all traces of philistinism, but does so in a polemic that touches on profound questions of aesthetics. This polemic comes in the second chapter of the novella, Broch writes, the one that recapitulates Aschenbach's career and thereby addresses the phenomenon of creativity, an artist's most profound experience. Mann's novella is an extraordinary exertion of artistic will, moreover, and this is the reason for its high degree of perfection. To show how its story contradicts Dallago's concept of the artist, Broch compares Dallago's definitions of a philistine with Mann's descriptions of Aschenbach. Juxtaposing Dallago's conclusion to his own, Broch sums up this comparison: "'Philister!' — Nein, ein Künstler" ("Philistine!" — No, an artist) (402). In his response to Broch, Dallago agreed that *Death in Venice* is a work of art, one very different from the essay on Chamisso, and concluded that it brings Mann back to the realm of art. Both Broch and Dallago seem to have thought that Mann's remarks on Aschenbach applied to himself.

Broch also gave his own opinion of realism and idealism in art. He cites Schopenhauer's aesthetic principle that artists should see the Platonic idea, the Kantian "thing-in-itself," inherent in actual objects, then manifest that vision in their work. Artistic creativity should therefore result in realism, or even naturalism, that forms around an idealistic core. Mann is accordingly wrong, he adds, to oppose art to philosophy. Broch derives from Plato a principle of equilibrium that he posits in nature as well as in works of art and that he finds realized with

rare beauty and clarity in *Death in Venice.* The equilibrium of its plot, excepting the polemic second chapter, he thinks, is connected to that of its mood, its feeling, its style. All of its lines converge, rounding it off in unity yet coming to a point. Aschenbach's destiny follows seamlessly from his character, moreover, intellectual conditions thus translating into apparently coincidental necessities of corporeal life. Broch's argumentation is theoretical, but he notes that music is the purest expression of his principle of equilibrium, and he describes the progress of Mann's narrative in musical terms. Mann starts with a main theme in the form of the wanderer who appears at the cemetery in Munich, for example, and he varies that theme when he describes the old man who poses as a young one on the ship to Venice. After Tadzio appears as a counter-theme, Mann's introduction is complete. The essay that Aschenbach composes at the beach, Broch continues, an essay inspired by Tadzio's pleasing proportions, is a high point but not a hasty allegro. At this point, "das Orchester ist hell gestimmt, im Einklang wird das lichte, schlanke Motiv unisono gebracht" (the orchestra is brightly tuned, the light, slender theme is harmoniously played unisono) (413). As Aschenbach admits to himself that he loves Tadzio, a demonic scherzo begins, and his dramatic pursuit of the boy resembles the plot of an opera. Mann's tempo rushes forward and is allegro furioso in Aschenbach's Dionysian dream, which is followed by a coda and the finale of his death. "Uns aber wäre es nicht seltsam und lächerlich," Broch concludes, "wenn Musik hinter der Szene ertönte und in leisem Rhythmus das Thema übernehmen und langsam verklingen lassen möchte" (We would not find it strange or ridiculous, if music intoned behind the scenes and picked up the theme and, in a quiet rhythm, slowly let it die away) (415). Broch's use of these musical terms conveys the first and most sustained of the many analogies that critics have drawn between Mann's novella and music. Since Mann himself may be casting doubt on Platonic concepts of beauty when he has snippets of Plato's *Phaedrus* occur to the smitten Aschenbach, Broch's Platonic concept of equilibrium might seem unsuitable to interpreting *Death in Venice.* In any case, expressing that concept in musical terms helps him make a strong case for the novella's formal cohesion.

The second literary dispute sparked by *Death in Venice* did not occur on the aesthetic high ground occupied by Broch and Dallago. Instead, it involved a sarcastic charge of nepotism. This charge was made by the critic Alfred Kerr, who objected to two reviews of the novella, reviews that had been written by Mann's relatives. The first was by Hedwig Dohm, his wife Katia's grandmother. It appeared in a Berlin newspaper on 23 February 1913. Dohm calls *Death in Venice* the confessions of an artist and a psychological study, describing its hero as a "Dichterfürst" (poet-prince). The characteristic trait of the novella, she maintains, is how it contrasts Aschenbach's realistic observation of his surroundings with his inner vision, with the procession of his thoughts into the tabernacle of his soul. In her view, he becomes erotically enflamed in the *morbidezza* of Venice and succumbs to hypnosis and halluci-

nations. He also allows himself to be barbarically tattooed, as she describes his being made up by the barber, and he does not resist the perversion of his feelings. His terrible dream, with its chorus of horror and satanic orgy, she adds, shows him his soul naked. Finally, he dies in beauty as his eyes kiss the sea and Tadzio's pulchritude. According to Dohm, Mann's novella, however, lives as the work of an author to whom art is a religion. Its language lends every sentence and every expression a classic character. Indeed, Dohm calls that language "eine auf Denkensgrund erblühte Rhetorik von vornehmster Exklusivität" (rhetoric of most noble exclusivity, blooming on the soil of thought). Dohm thus praised Mann's style and his psychological insights. His older brother Heinrich, who wrote the other review, hinted at the social and political import of *Death in Venice.* Poetry can precede reality, Heinrich begins, as it does in Zola's novels about the corruption and collapse of bourgeois culture, novels that preceded and willed the actual downfall of the Second Empire in France. Aschenbach's fate is similarly tied to that of Venice, he says, his psychological adventures calling forth an outbreak of related adventures in the external world. Heinrich's logic, or at least the way he expresses it here, seems vague. He adds that Aschenbach's psyche and the city of Venice combine to produce events of great depth and significance, but he never fully explains the relationship he posits between the individual and the collective. He implies, however, that Aschenbach's Germany, like Zola's France, is ripe for radical change. Although they applied different literary criteria, then, both Dohm and Heinrich welcomed *Death in Venice.* Heinrich's remarks sound tortuous and tepid, though, compared to Dohm's effusive praise.

Responding to these reviews in April 1913, Alfred Kerr faulted Mann for having made the reception of his novella such a family affair. Kerr does not dwell on Heinrich's, which he calls an example of brotherly love, noting its restraint. He also only briefly mocks Dohm for being biased, saving his real ammunition for Mann himself. He recounts an imaginary dream, for example, in which Mann, in a servile letter, thanks Dohm for her review. Two of its sentences suffice to convey the sarcastic tone of that fictional letter. In them, Kerr puts the following words into Mann's mouth:

> Großmama, wir wollen an die Stelle der schon fatal angeschriebenen Freundschaftskritik die schlichtere Verwandtschaftsrezension setzen.
>
> Großmama ist mein Hirte; mir wird nichts mangeln; Du bereitest mir einen Tisch gegen meine Feinde; Großmamas Stecken und Stab trösten mich.
>
> [Grandma, let's replace our friends' wholly discredited critiques of our books with simpler reviews by relations.
>
> Grandma is my shepherd; I shall not want; thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Grandma's rod and staff comfort me.] (637)

The latter of these sentences parodies the Twenty-third Psalm. Kerr also dismisses Mann as an anemic author of kitsch who writes about a poet without being one himself. Mann's German is weak, Kerr thinks, and his pseudo-elevated style is banal compared to the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). Kerr concludes by paying Mann a dubious compliment: "Jedenfalls ist hier Päderastie annehmbar für den gebildeten Mittelstand gemacht" (In any case, pederasty is here made acceptable for the educated middle class) (640). In addition to panning the reviews by Mann's relatives and to dismissing Mann as well as his prose, Kerr here takes a final swipe at the homoeroticism that figures so prominently in Mann's story. In this second literary dispute, then, remarks about that story were often highly personal.

The tone taken in the third dispute about *Death in Venice* was even nastier than Kerr's. That dispute began with a pamphlet by Bernd Isemann subtitled *Eine kritische Abwehr* (A Critical Rebuff). Ostensibly, Isemann was loath to write about the novella at all. His only reason for doing so, he explains, is to show that Mann's theory of art is ridiculous, thoughtless, and disrespectful. Aschenbach's burned-out fragility does not make him a hero or a genius, Isemann writes, and artistic creativity is more than sucking the marrow from one's bones. Mann proposes such a theory to justify himself, he adds, and is ignorant of the fact that true artists must possess supreme moral will and great religious sensibility. What Mann praises as Aschenbach's self-discipline is really ignoble fear of losing the few thoughts he entertains. The priestly mustiness of his study is suffocating, moreover, and the accumulation of his many days' work does not add up to greatness. Isemann makes particular fun of this last idea: "Ja, durch Schichtung von zweitausend holländischen Käsen, glaube ich, wird die Größe des Eiffelturms erreicht. Wie neckisch, daß durch Schichtung Größe entsteht" (Sure, I suppose stacking two thousand Dutch cheeses attains the height of the Eiffel Tower. How droll it is to think that stacking results in greatness) (9). Instead of eliciting our sympathy, Isemann also observes, Mann's hero is weak and egocentric. He lacks both all conscience and any sense of humor. His feelings are unclean; his sensuality is crude. The final item on this list especially irked Isemann, who later asks, "Was soll ich denn mit diesem Rezeptbuch, dieser Hausapotheke für geschwächte Geister und Körper anfangen, mit dieser Kosmetik für ein Prischen wertloser Sinnlichkeit?" (So what am I supposed to do with this prescription book, this home pharmacy for weakened minds and bodies, with this cosmetic for a pinch of worthless sensuality?) (12). Isemann also wonders how Aschenbach, in his unclean adventure with Tadzio, can forget the happiness he enjoyed with his wife. Since he can, Isemann argues, he is utterly disgusting, a hollow scarecrow and debauchee of weakness. Mann's fundamental error, Isemann claims, lies in thinking that the imbalance of sensitivity and strength — in other words, hysteria — constitutes the essence of artists and is typical of them. Isemann thus attacked Aschenbach for being an erotically perverse embodiment of Mann's wrong-headed concept of the artist.

Isemann did not stop at finding fault with Aschenbach. He also criticized Mann for writing poorly and producing a useless and an immoral book. Like Kerr, Isemann addresses what he calls the problem of pederasty. Although he is willing to accept this sexual inclination in artists' private lives, he insists that they be real men in their work. Besides, he adds, Mann has written about this problem badly. Homoeroticism can be natural in one's youth, Isemann says, but it becomes unnatural, repulsive, and unfitting in old age. Aschenbach, a "Wrack des Intellektualismus" (wreck of intellectualism) (21), has no inkling of its unseemliness. Mann's whole theory of art is libertine, in fact, since Mann concludes that artists are morally indifferent, even immoral. Isemann presents the corresponding lack of high moral purpose in *Death in Venice* as a matter of national pride: "Wie kommt es, daß eine Nation wie die deutsche sich ohne Widerspruch ein so faules Ei in die Brut ihrer größten Dichter und Denker legen läßt? . . . Ja, all dies ist ein Schlag ins Angesicht des deutschen Geistes" (How can it be that a nation like the German one, without objection, lets such a rotten egg be laid in the brood of its greatest poets and thinkers? . . . Yes, all this is a slap in the face of the German mind) (22). Isemann cannot understand why some critics have not admitted that *Death in Venice* is worthless, much less how others can review it favorably. Kerr, he thinks, is the only one who has taken the proper attitude toward it. Besides applying a moral yardstick to Mann's story as a whole, Isemann objects to particular passages in it. He demonstrates his ignorance when he fails to see what the details of the scene at the cemetery in Munich have to do with the rest of the events in that story. Worse still, he suggests that the book begin differently, even proposing a new opening line: "Gustav Aschenbach bekam Lust zu einer Reise" (Gustav Aschenbach felt like taking a trip) (25). He criticizes the structure of the novella as well as Mann's descriptions of peripheral details that are meant to make its setting seem probable and to disguise the improbability of its psychological plot. Isemann also finds Mann's mode of expression repulsive. Mann's pseudo-classical style is no longer German, he writes, but an unnatural, unappetizing disgrace to literature. The description of the wanderer's naked Adam's apple is especially tasteless, and the passage in which the flirtatious old man on the boat licks the corners of his mouth "auf abscheulich zweideutige Art" (in a disgustingly ambiguous way), as Mann puts it, is both an affront to readers and a blemish on the entire book. This passage is brazen and crude, Isemann concludes, and the book in which it occurs is immoral.

Isemann's vehement tirade did not go unanswered. At least three critics, not to mention Mann himself, quickly replied to it. In August 1913, Friedrich Markus Huebner dismissed Isemann as a provincial poetaster and philistine, calling him a typical dilettante and a wisecracking busybody. Another such response, by Oswald Brüll, appeared in December and in a periodical whose editors had reservations about its strident tone. The motto

of that journal, *Der Merker,* proclaims that neither love nor hate should color the judgment it passes. A footnote on the first page of Brüll's article, however, says that those editors were willing to make an exception in this case. An unusual provocation, that note explains, excuses an unusual answer. This suspension of the editors' rules is plain from Brüll's strong words. He lashes out at what he calls Isemann's rabble-rousing attack on Mann, and he decries the anti-Semitism audible when Isemann alludes to Mann as "little Moritz." Brüll also exclaims that critics like Isemann, whose name Brüll makes plural in German, cannot be tolerated: "Nein, kein Mitleid — mit den Isemännern!" (No, no sympathy — with the Isemen!) (946). In his zeal to expose Isemann's ignorance, Brüll sometimes misunderstands *Death in Venice*. He thinks that Aschenbach's earlier rejection of knowledge, for example, and his consequent moral decisiveness are a clear victory of ethics over doubt and intellectualism. He fails to observe that this apparent triumph is only temporary and that it later results in Aschenbach's demise. When he writes that the novella proclaims Mann's own artistry to be a matter of willpower and discipline, moreover, Brüll does not distinguish Mann from Aschenbach. More generally, though he admits that *Death in Venice* lacks the graphic vivacity of Mann's first novel, *Buddenbrooks* (The Buddenbrooks, 1901), he praises its author as one of Germany's most moral writers. Brüll also says that Isemann's innuendo occasioned by the fop's licking his tongue in a "disgustingly ambiguous" way reveals that Isemann, not Mann, has a dirty mind. In defending *Death in Venice,* then, neither Huebner nor Brüll always rose above the low level of Isemann's harangue.

Others, including Mann himself, reacted to Isemann with more restraint, at least in print. Tempers seem to have cooled by August 1914, when Alexander Pache reviewed Isemann's pamphlet. Pache explains that it confirms that authors — Isemann was a minor one — seldom make good critics. Isemann's frightening lack of logic, Pache writes, his transparent bias, his inability to treat a difficult problem objectively, and his almost comical, hair-raising misunderstandings make his failed scribbling unworthy of serious discussion. Referring to what Isemann called the problem of pederasty, Pache praises the courage it took to cast the fundamental idea of the novella in such daring and Hellenistic garb. According to him, Mann has handled this ticklish problem tastefully and chastely. Mann's main subject is not Aschenbach's erotic adventure, he adds, but the mysterious and tender relationship between art and beauty. Indeed, Pache thinks *Death in Venice* is a major development in Mann's career, a turning away from his earlier realism and satire toward a deeper conception of art and life, that is, toward beauty.

These remarks in response to Isemann sound much like Mann's own. In an interview with Ödön Halasi Fischer conducted at Mann's summer home in the Bavarian spa town Bad Tölz in August 1913, the author shrugged off Isemann's attack. In another interview, one given to an anonymous author

on 14 September 1913 and published, as Fischer's was, in a Hungarian journal, Mann dismisses Isemann's pamphlet as being so philistine and *ad hominem* as not to deserve an answer. In this second interview, Mann admits that the novella conveys his own skepticism towards art, but he argues that it is not primarily a pathological love story, as his critics contend. Instead, he says, he wanted to describe a fall from aesthetic grace that involves homoeroticism only for greater effect:

> Im "Tod in Venedig" wollte ich einen Mann vorstellen, der auf dem Gipfel des Ruhmes, der Ehrung, der Berühmtheit und des Glücks keine Zuflucht in der Kunst findet, sondern an einer unüberwindlichen Leidenschaft körperlich und seelisch zugrunde geht . . . Nur um den Sturz vom Gipfel in die Tiefe möglichst verhängnisvoll erscheinen zu lassen, wählte ich für meinen Helden die homosexuelle Liebe.
>
> [In *Death in Venice* I wanted to present a man who at the summit of success, honor, fame, and fortune finds no refuge in art but instead runs aground, physically and psychologically, on an insurmountable passion. . . . Only to make the plunge from the summit into the depths appear as fateful as possible did I choose for my hero homosexual love.] (37)

Mann adds that his source for this story of lapsed greatness was an episode from the life of Goethe. At the age of seventy, he explains, the poet had fallen in love with a sixteen-year-old girl who rejected his proposal of marriage. Once, as the two were playing tag, Goethe stumbled, fell, and was unable to get up — a world-conquering genius reduced to a helpless old man. Mann thus describes Aschenbach as a substitute for Goethe, about whom Mann claims he did not yet want to write. This second interview was translated into German and reprinted three weeks later in a Frankfurt newspaper. Two days after that, on 7 October 1913, a letter to the editor of that same paper, the *Frankfurter Zeitung,* observed that Mann had mistakenly conflated two young women and two separate episodes in Goethe's life. The poet fell while chasing one Fräulein Lade in Wiesbaden, the author of that letter writes, not Ulrike von Levetzow in Marienbad, whom he loved. In any case, Mann gave this explanation of his hero's fall as his answer to Isemann. On 7 December 1913, he gave an anonymous interviewer in Budapest another such account of Aschenbach's similarity to Goethe. Mann added that *Death in Venice* is also a stylistic experiment, an attempt to create a new prose style, and that he had read Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (Elective Affinities, 1809) three times while writing it.

Homoeroticism

The issue of homoeroticism in *Death in Venice* has already been noted in Kerr's remark about Mann's making pederasty acceptable to the middle classes and in Isemann's objection to both Aschenbach's passion and Mann's portrayal of it.

This issue also figures in Pache's subordination of Mann's sexual theme to his prose style and in Mann's own explanation that homosexual love simply made Aschenbach's downfall seem steeper. Other reviewers addressed it more extensively. Some regarded Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio as symbolic or otherwise respectable, but others found this attraction repulsive, offensive, or dangerous. Many thought it less important than the language Mann used to describe it. All of these reviewers' remarks help put Aschenbach's eroticism into the perspective from which it was seen when the novella appeared. Still other reviewers mention his homoeroticism more or less in passing. Their remarks on it are accordingly included in the later sections of this chapter.

To some early reviewers, that homoeroticism was symbolic in the extreme. In July 1913, for example, Franz Herwig gave *Death in Venice* his sentimental approval, showing the high-mindedness connoted by the elevation named in the title of the journal that carried his review, *Hochland*. Herwig praises Mann as a sublime poet, and he senses in *Death in Venice* an indescribable urge toward the divine, an urge alive in all great works of art. Other critics, he says, have missed its simplest and most human point. Greek love is its main theme, but Tadzio is a symbol of something greater by far: "Ein Gleichnis, ja; hinter diesem Gleichnis steht die Gottheit, die absolute Vollkommenheit, die Heimat und die Sehnsucht geht *dahin,* durch das holde Gleichnis *hindurch*" (Yes, a symbol; behind this symbol stands divinity, absolute perfection, home, and *that* is where the yearning goes, *through* the precious symbol) (490–91). This is the core of the novella, Herwig adds, and here we have the yearning that is the best part of humanity, a passionate pressing forward to the eternal. Herwig considers Aschenbach's death, too, symbolic. In beauty reside both the divine and the demonic, he explains, and Aschenbach incurs emotional guilt when he succumbs to the latter. Like Tadzio, his contraction of cholera is a symbol, and he has to die because he has sinned, if only in thought. He also dies, however, of an untamable yearning for perfection and for home. Herwig goes on to note that Aschenbach experiences the insufficiency of even the highest artistic endeavor, and he extols Mann's own "berauschende Steigerung des Ausdrucks" (intoxicating heightening of expression) (491). His focus, however, is on the symbolic nature of Mann's story and its supposed suggestion of all the refuge and rootedness conveyed by *Heimat,* the German word for "home."

Other reviewers similarly described Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio as highly symbolic. Hermann Joelsohn, for one, interpreted *Death in Venice* according to idealistic concepts of eros, sexuality, and love. Joelsohn contrasts eros and desire in their relationship to artists, and he explains this contrast using the example of *Death in Venice*. The foreign god who appears in Aschenbach's Dionysian dream is the enemy of eros, Joelsohn writes, but also its constant companion at the side of artists, whose mode of knowledge is sensual. Unlike eros, moreover, which begins with the senses and is stimulated

by corporeal forms, love lies between the extremes of physical lust and intellectual admiration or respect, and love is what Aschenbach feels for Tadzio. Joelsohn thus subscribes to the Platonic conception of beauty that Mann attributes, but not without irony, to Aschenbach himself. According to Joelsohn, on whom Mann's irony seems lost, Aschenbach's love for Tadzio is not even just erotic, much less merely lustful. E. M. Hamann similarly maintained that *Death in Venice* is a symbolic elegy. The description of Aschenbach's passion for Tadzio is the apex of Mann's art, Hamann maintains, and that description does not seem meant to elicit ugly, impure sensations in his readers. In fact, one follows his plot, after it introduces Tadzio, as if it were the gripping story of some noble, incurable patient. The beauty of Mann's prose is what redeems the novella for Hamann, who thus seems less than keen about its hero's passion. At any rate, he suggests that Mann was writing about a deeply divided type of artist, one who fatally succumbs to the beauty of art that is imperfect because it is immature or unmanly.

Aschenbach's feelings seemed less sublime to two reviewers writing in the Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*. On 8 June 1913, "p. z." (whom Matter, in his bibliography of 1972, identifies as Paul Zifferer) wrote that the hero of *Death in Venice* is neither Aschenbach nor Tadzio. The boy is more a symbol than a real being, he says, and the hero is Venice, a site of death that recalls Boccaccio's Florence. Dying in Venice is what justifies the dangerous subject of Mann's book, in fact, the somewhat repulsive relationship of Tadzio and the aging Aschenbach. Zifferer is not reassured by the purity of that relationship. It seems to him that Aschenbach lacks not the will to sin, but only the courage and the strength. Aschenbach, he adds, is also terribly serious, melancholy, and almost conscientious about his erotic vice, practicing it as if it were a virtue. His "blond[e] Sinnesart" (blond way of thinking) (31), with its unconvincing guile and this misplaced probity, prompt Zifferer — writing in an Austrian newspaper — to call *Death in Venice* a thoroughly German book. To him, the value of the book lies not in its plot but in its refined art of narration. Zifferer especially likes its style: "Welche Kraft, welchen Reichtum die deutsche Sprache in sich birgt, dies muß man hier staunend wie etwas Neues und Wunderbares erkennen" (One must recognize here with astonishment, as something new and miraculous, what force, what wealth the German language contains) (31–32). Mann's sentences, Zifferer writes, are connected like the arches of a tall bridge. They carry one over abysses, and one never loses a feeling of reassuring safety. Like the sight of a beautiful landscape, moreover, his prose fills one with indescribable joy. His story is seamless and flows so calmly, in fact, that one seems to hear its smooth breathing. Its strength, however, is also its weakness. It derives from art, not life, and thus is a vision, not reality or actual experience. It astonishes us and we admire it, Zifferer concludes, but we are never touched or transported. Just as he rejects Aschenbach's urge for Tadzio and mocks the

typically German way in which that urge plays itself out, Zifferer thus expresses mixed feelings about Mann's style.

Writing in the same Viennese paper two weeks later, on 22 June 1913, a reviewer who signed his or her name only as "r." compared *Death in Venice* to Arthur Schnitzler's *Frau Beate und ihr Sohn* (Mrs. Beate and Her Son, 1913). Schnitzler relates the parallel love affairs conducted by a forty-year-old widow and by her son. Both of these stories are novellas written in broadly flowing prose, "r." observes, both recount a curious incident, both are "sündhaft schillernd" (sinfully glittering) (31), and both are often embarrassing and at the limit of what art can do. Mann and Schnitzler, "r." adds, may have been attracted by the unusualness of the events they describe, events that could be conceived easily and playfully enough but that then become "frivol und kichernd und anstößig" (frivolous and giggling and offensive) (31). Many critics after "r." have agreed that *Death in Venice* is offensive, but no one else has ever drawn this conclusion that the events it recounts seem silly and tittering. In any case, "r." thinks both novellas tell of guilt that must be atoned. Like Zifferer, "r." prefers Mann's style to his plot and finds that plot dangerous.

While these two reviews were appearing in Vienna, the first of another pair was published in Budapest. The second corrected this first one in point of fictional fact and took a less literal approach to the theme of homoeroticism and its implications. On 15 June 1913, the Hungarian author and dramatist Sándor Bródy described what had happened when he bought a copy of *Death in Venice* and went home to read it. His reaction was unpleasant. He felt more revulsion than pity for Aschenbach, he says, and was horrified by the novella's success. He cannot understand how what he calls its ugly theme has met with such general interest in Germany. Perhaps this is because Mann lent "einer elenden Schweinerei" (a miserable swinery) (273) a Goethean form. In any case, Bródy thinks that the Germans should share his dislike of it:

> Die Deutschen sollten erschrecken und daraus lernen. Besonders dann, wenn sie es im Zusammenhang mit der neuesten Bevölkerungsstatistik betrachten, die besagt, daß die Bevölkerungszunahme in Deutschland noch ungünstiger ist als in Frankreich, noch trostloser als im ganzen übrigen Europa.
>
> [The Germans should be horrified and learn from it. Especially when they consider it together with the latest demographical statistics, which show that [the prospect of] a population increase is even more unfavorable in Germany than in France, even bleaker than in all the rest of Europe.] (274)

Bródy thus suggests that Aschenbach's homoerotic emotions are harmful because they diminish the Germans' ability to reproduce. He does not seem to have read *Death in Venice* very carefully, however, for he cites at least two details that are nowhere to be found in it. He claims that Aschenbach dyes his beard and hair while still in Munich, for example, and he explains that as

an artist and author, before becoming exhausted and deviant, Aschenbach had both tried to please and been inspired by the feminine sex. He also says that Aschenbach commits suicide. Two of these three details were noted in a letter to the editor of a Hungarian journal other than the one that carried Bródy's article, a letter that appeared two weeks later, on 1 July 1913. Vanda Tóth, its author, writes that Bródy must have perused Mann's novella over dinner, maybe in a bad mood. She observes that it says nothing at all about women being the source or the audience of Aschenbach's art, and she says that Bródy's memory deceived him when he called Aschenbach's death suicide. One could disagree with Tóth about the latter point. Aschenbach has often been said to commit suicide, even if he does not do so explicitly. Tóth might also have objected that Aschenbach's hair is not dyed until he visits the hotel barber in Venice and that Mann expressly describes his face as clean-shaven. In any event, her interpretation is much more incisive than Bródy's. She argues that Mann works consciously and calculatedly, in a way that enables his story to become symbolic and otherworldly. She also considers its sexual theme daring and embarrassing, but expects that most readers will hardly notice it and that the novella expresses something much deeper and more bitter. She thus praises Mann's style and thinks sexuality less important than other issues raised in *Death in Venice*.

Another review published in Budapest, in German, praised both Mann's style and the way he discusses his homoerotic theme. In this review, which appeared in the newspaper *Pester Lloyd*, Ernst Goth welcomes the novella as a masterpiece that no other contemporary German author could write, if only because no one but Mann dares broach its subject matter. In doing so, Goth adds, Mann has shown understanding, tolerance, and tact:

> Denn hier wird ein Thema, das bestenfalls in medizinischen Kreisen mit Ernst und Verständnis behandelt, sonst aber verächtlich unter die widerlichsten menschlichen Aberrationen verwiesen oder gar mit lüsterner Geheimtuerei betastet wird, zum Gegenstand einer rein geistigen, tiefen Tragödie, in der nichts Pathologisches mehr mitschwingt.
>
> [For here a theme that is treated seriously and sympathetically at best in medical circles, but that is otherwise contemptuously relegated to the most repulsive human aberrations, or even touched upon with lewd secretiveness, becomes the object of a purely intellectual, profound tragedy, in which there is no longer anything pathological.] (28)

Goth goes on to praise Mann's epic mastery, singling out the subtleties of his plot and the power of his language. That power is especially apparent, he adds, when Mann's prose shifts, along with Aschenbach, from being strictly disciplined to indulging in freer rhythms. Goth's main point, though, is that Mann's noble and decent handling of his homosexual subject matter is the most admirable quality of *Death in Venice*. Only Mann's artistry, he explains,

could cast things called perverse as forces threatening humanity in general. Goth liked both that Mann treats homoeroticism fairly, then, and that he makes it seem universally relevant.

Other critics shared Bródy's sentiment that homoeroticism was an empty exercise, but they did so in more refined ways. Julius Bab, for one, maintained that the novella addresses the same problem as Mann's unsuccessful drama *Fiorenza* (1905), that is, the opposition of ethical action to aesthetic enjoyment. He also hails *Death in Venice* as a masterpiece of recent German narrative art, praising the epic mastery of its subtle and seemingly effortless telling; the linguistic mastery evident in the contrast between the correct, dry style of its first part and the effusive rhythms that stream forth as Aschenbach's sense of duty dissolves; and, finally, the human mastery thanks to which a so-called perversion is described objectively yet becomes symbolic of a psychological tragedy. Bab, like many other critics cited in this section, thus pays tribute to Mann's prose while considering Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio important mainly as a symbol. He goes further than most, though, in rejecting the suggestion that the story told in *Death in Venice* is homoerotic:

> Nur die allerhoffnungslosesten Geister werden hier etwas von einem pikanten Stoff verspüren können. Und wenn die sogenannten Führer der sogenannten homosexuellen Bewegung weniger hoffnungslose Geister wären, so könnten sie an diesem Kunstwerk viel über die letzte tragische Bedeutung ihres Themas innerhalb der Geisteswelt erfahren.
>
> [Only the most hopeless souls will be able to discern any trace of a piquant subject matter here. And if the so-called leaders of the so-called homosexual movement were less hopeless souls, they could learn from this work of art much about the final tragic significance of their theme within the intellectual world.] (170)

The "tragic significance" cited here has to do with the opposition of ethics and aesthetics that Bab finds in both *Fiorenza* and *Death in Venice*. In all heterosexual relations, he explains, there is a will to act as well as the natural will to be fruitful. In delight with one's own sex, by contrast, the soul absolves itself of its ultimate duty, the enjoyment of beauty revolves around itself, and intoxication makes us passive. This purely aesthetic and passive condition, he acknowledges, was valued by the Greeks for inspiring pure intuition, but for Aschenbach, whose life was built on will, work, and deeds, such voluptuous passivity has to mean death. Bab does not imply here that Aschenbach must be punished, but rather that he can live only by his own, active volition.

One brief but telling comment published in July 1914 shows what "the so-called leaders of the so-called homosexual movement," as Bab called them, may have thought about *Death in Venice*. In a yearbook edited by the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld and devoted to the study of "sexuelle Zwischenstufen" (intermediate sexual stages), Kurt Hiller regretted that the