Leif Frenzel

Unreality and Prefiguration of Death (in Venice)

Summary

Thomas Mann's "Der Tod in Venedig" ends with Aschenbach's, the protagonist's, death; but that death isn't simply the conclusion of the story, it rather is its central topic: it gives the work its title, it is what all the plot lines have as their vanishing points, and above all, it's alluded to and symbolized by characters and events all the time. These prefigurations in the story are the focus of this essay.

In addition to structural allusions to later passages in earlier ones and characters whose description suggests reading them as death personalized, there are more aspects to the prefiguration technique. Most importantly, they connect several tendencies in the story which all contribute to Aschenbach's fate: mental and physical fatigue, an increasing inability to withstand temptations and weaknesses, and a feeling of drifting towards unreality. By prominently employing prefiguration to bring out all these tendencies, Mann not only achieves a high coherence between earlier and later parts of the story, but also highlights the interconnectedness of these tendencies.

Aschenbach's development (or decline) over the course of the story reflects a growing willingness, albeit one which always had been rooted in his personality, to accept and even actively engage in deception along with other (including more artistic) deviations from reality: in the service of beauty, that shimmer of unreality.

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Prefiguration is a writing technique in which a later episode of the story (typically one with a heavy importance for the characters) is symbolically invoked in an earlier passage. Or, put differently, something happens to the characters early in the text that can be interpreted as somehow symbolizing the later episode.

Some of the most haunting uses of prefiguration I know of are made by Thomas Mann in *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*)[1]. The story in short: The successful but tired writer Aschenbach travels to Venice, where he is stricken with the beauty of a young boy who stays at the same hotel with his family; he gets obsessed with the youth, and unreasonably staying on in unhealthful weather and in the middle of the outbreak of an epidemy, he sees his firmness and strength drain away; he attempts to make himself look younger and more attractive by various cosmetic means; eventually he dies.

1. The first, and one of the most eminent, examples of the prefiguration technique can be found directly at the beginning, in a scene in which Aschenbach, in his home town of Munich, is gripped by an intense desire to travel, accompanied by a daydream vision of a tropical landscape:

> "er sah, sah eine Landschaft, ein tropisches Sumpfgebiet unter dickdunstigem Himmel, feucht, üppig und ungeheuer, eine Art Urweltwildnis aus Inseln, Morästen und Schlamm führenden Wasserarmen [. . .] — und fühlte sein Herz pochen vor Entsetzen und rätselhaftem Verlangen." (504)

In view of how the story will develop, it's not difficult to see the allusions, in this passage, to Aschenbach's later stay in Venice, with its water channels and illness bearing climate conditions.

Even more plain, however, are the parallels in this passage to another one, in which Aschenbach (and we, as the readers) learn the truth about what's going on around him in the town of Venice: namely, an outbreak of cholera. Aschenbach receives this information from an English clerk at a Venetian travel bureau, and he is given a comprehensive account of the spreading

[1] Thomas Mann,"Der Tod in Venedig", in: *Frühe Erzählungen 1893–1912*. Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe, Band 2.1. Ed. Terence J. Reed. Frankfurt a.M: Fischer 2004, 501–592. Quoted with page numbers in the text.

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of the epidemic, with all its medical and political background, and in both precise detail and colorful language. Especially interesting is the choice of words at the beginning of this account, which relates the Indian origins of the disease:

> "Seit mehreren Jahren schon hatte die indische Cholera eine verstärkte Neigung zur Ausbreitung und Wanderung an den Tag gelegt. Erzeugt aus den warmen Morästen des Ganges-Deltas, aufgestiegen mit dem memphitischen Odem jener üppig-untauglichen, von Menschen gemiedenen Urwelt- und Inselwildnis [. . .] hatte die Seuche in ganz Hindustan andauernd und ungewöhnlich heftig gewütet" (578).

Not only evoke these two passages the same motifs and moods, but Mann signals his intention to suggest a connection here even at the level of choice of single words and phrases, viz. 'üppig', 'von Menschen gemieden' and 'Urweltwildnis aus Inseln' vs. 'Urwelt- und Inselwildnis'. This creates a strong cohesion which ties the two passages together.

The forceful state of desire in Aschenbach is triggered by the sight of a strange-looking man who seems to appear out of nowhere. The description of this stranger combines a physiognomy that is reminiscent of allegorical depictions of death (lean figure, pallid skin, furrowed brow, a row of long, bared teeth; 502–503) with an appearance that evokes exotic and far-away countries and a sense of wandering around ("das Wanderhafte in der Erscheinung des Fremden", 504).

Commentators have seen a prefiguration of death in this scene, both on the experiential level (that is, the vision of the tropical landscape symbolizes the realm of death that is soon to draw Aschenbach in) and in a more tangible way as a personalization in the stranger. Both share a quality that exerts a strong pull on Aschenbach and kick off the journey that ends with his actual, physical death (not without a slide down a degrading slope in mind and spirit beforehand, too).

2. When he takes the boat from the location of an an intermediate stop to Venice as his final destination, Aschenbach is in the company of a group of young people; among them is an old man vainly trying to look young, a fake and foppish person, for whom Aschenbach takes an immediate dislike, disgusted and even somewhat indignant about the indecorous spectacle. ("Wußten, bemerkten sie nicht, daß er alt war, daß er zu Unrecht ihre stutzerhafte und bunte Kleidung trug, zu Unrecht einen der ihren spielte?", 519) His sharp sense of a lack of appropriateness is in contrast to the behavior of

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the young people, who tolerate the fake youth in their circle — and not just tolerate him, but actually sustain his illusion by treating him as if he really was of their own age and taste.

Now the interesting thing about Mann's presentation is that every time this character of the false youth appears there is a shift in Aschenbach's response towards his surroundings. The first two times, this takes the form of feeling as though he were drifting into unreality.

Directly after noticing the fake youth, it seems to Aschenbach "als lasse nicht alles sich ganz gewöhnlich an, als beginne eine träumerische Entfremdung, eine Entstellung der Welt ins Sonderbare um sich zu greifen" (519). He is startled out of this brooding, however, by the movement of the boat which at that moment takes off to Venice.

Again, at a stop of the boat, directly before docking in Venice, when the fake youth looks even more indecent after drinking too heavily: "Aschenbach sah ihm mit finsteren Brauen zu, und wiederum kam ein Gefühl von Benommenheit ihn an, so, als zeige die Welt eine leichte, doch nicht zu hemmende Neigung, sich ins Sonderbare und Fratzenhafte zu entstellen" (522). Once more, however, Aschenbach is kept from getting deeper into this mood by the boat which restarts its machines and continues towards the town of Venice.

There is a third episode of contact between Aschenbach and the fake youth; and this time the pattern changes. Not only is it more than just Aschenbach watching now — the old man talks to him, and alludes to a lover he seems to imagine ("'unsere Komplimente dem Liebchen, dem allerliebsten, dem schönsten Liebchen..."', 523); but also there is no direct follow-up of a dreamy mode this time. Instead, a passage follows in which Aschenbach's impressions during a ride in a gondola are at the center. This ride in the gondola itself is another interesting case of prefiguration in the text, but before we turn to discussing it, let us look more closely into the fake youth episodes.

It's rather easy to see the parallels between the appearance of the fake youth and Aschenbach's own later attempts to make himself look younger and more attractive: "Wie irgendein Liebender wünschte er, zu gefallen und empfand bittere Angst, daß es nicht möglich sein möchte. [...] Angesichts der süßen Jugend, die es ihm angetan, ekelte ihn sein alternder Leib, der Anblick seines grauen Haares, seiner scharfen Gesichtszüge stürzte ihn in Scham und Hoffnungslosigkeit. Es trieb ihn, sich körperlich zu erquicken und wiederherzustellen" (584–585). Cosmetics succeeds in restoring at least the appearance of what he wishes for, if not the thing itself. The drift away from the reality of his true person is unmistakable. (The vocabulary that Mann uses here is revealing, too: bitter fear, hopelessness and loathing are

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rather strong terms for an attitude one would have with respect to one's physical appearance. They express vividly how far Aschenbach's actions are now driven by uncontrollable emotional forces — he's lost his grip on what's appropriate at various levels.)

The similarities in Mann's descriptions of the fake youth and the dandified Aschenbach go deep, extending to special mention of certain details of clothing: a red necktie, a straw hat with colored ribbons (compare 518–519, 586). And just as in the encounters with the fake youth, after the physical change has been brought about, there is a resolute shift in Aschenbach away from the realistic toward the dreamy, unreality-laden: "Der Berückte ging, traumglücklich, verwirrt und furchtsam." (586)

The fake youth motif, then, is a second example for Mann's use of the prefiguration technique. What is symbolically invoked here is not death, this time, but degradation: unreasonable and inappropriate demeanor which is born out of a desire to appear as something one actually isn't, and which, while failing to make its desired effect, results in a generally bad impression on others. Let's now turn to a third one.

3. At his arrival in Venice Aschenbach takes a gondola to the hotel; the gondolier who steers the vehicle is described in detail, and again there are notable similarities with traditional depictions of personalized death figures: "Er war ein Mann von ungefälliger, ja brutaler Physiognomie [. . .] kurz aufgeworfene[r] Nase [. . .] eher schmächtig von Leibesbeschaffenheit [. . .]. Ein paarmal zog er vor Anstrengung die Lippen zurück und entblößte seine weißen Zähne." (524–525) Many of the details in his physiology (including, apart from the quoted details, the red eyebrows), posture (looming from a heightened position) and some in his clothing (namely, the straw hat, which he wears in an audacious-looking manner) are vaguely recurrent from the earlier description of the traveling stranger, the one who was seen by Aschenbach in the beginning of the story (compare 502–503), and who aroused his desire to travel, to escape from the life of his daily routines. (And as we will see in a moment, this is again a character that has the power to easily overcome resistance from good reason in Aschenbach and let him yield to his desires for comfortable relaxation.)

In addition to these parallels, Mann makes the gondolier sequence even more suggestive by beginning it with a meditation (given from the ironical distance of the narrator) about the death symbolism in Venetian gondolas. This passage is so masterfully crafted that it deserves to be quoted at some length:

> "Das seltsame Fahrzeug, aus balladesken Zeiten ganz unverändert

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> überkommen und so eigentümlich schwarz, wie sonst unter allen Dingen nur Särge es sind, — es erinnert an lautlose und verbrecherische Abenteuer in plätschernder Nacht, es erinnert noch mehr an den Tod selbst, an Bahre und düsteres Begängnis und letzte, schweigsame Fahrt. Und hat man bemerkt, daß der Sitz einer solchen Barke, dieser sargschwarz lackierte, mattschwarz gepolsterte Armstuhl, der weichste, üppigste, der erschlaffendste Sitz von der Welt ist? [. . .] auf dem nachgiebigen Element in Kissen gelehnt, schloß der Reisende [i.e., Aschenbach] die Augen im Genusse einer so ungewohnten als süßen Lässigkeit. Die Fahrt wird kurz sein, dachte er; möchte sie immer währen!" (523–524)

Mann expressly connects here the themes of Aschenbach's tired yielding to pleasurable idleness and his drifting towards his eventual death. (And has one noticed the synaesthetic beauty of the imagery here? "plätschernde Nacht". . .)

Ample interconnections can be found between the gondolier passage and others I have already looked at. Not only is there a correspondence between the description of the gondolier and that of the wanderer at the beginning of the novella. There is also the later episode of the Venetian musician at the hotel, whose depiction bears the same sort of similarities (esp. 572–573), and who can be taken as well as the other two figures as a personalization of death. Moreover, embedded into the gondola sequence itself is a short episode in which Aschenbach's boat is accompanied by a gang of musicians, with an explicit mention of the guitar and the mandolin (both are instruments which recur in the later scene, in particular the guitar, which is played by the death-prefiguring musician; 526–527). Also, Aschenbach's giving in to pleasure, and his deliberately seeking Venice for its allure in this respect, can be found many more times in the text (most expressly at 550: "Nur dieser Ort verzauberte ihn, entspannte sein Wollen, machte ihn glücklich."; compare also 517). Further, both the wanderer and the gondolier seem to vanish immediately once they've made their impression on Aschenbach, at the first moment he looks elsewhere (507, 527). And finally, the death-personalization figures (i.e. the wanderer, the gondolier and the musician) seem to have a certain power over Aschenbach which is well worth exploring:

When Aschenbach notices that the gondolier is taking him all the way to the hotel, and not just, as ordered, to the *vaporetto* (water bus) station, he makes an unsuccessful attempt at asserting his will; the gondolier easily out-talks him, and Aschenbach yields. It's clear, however, that it is not the powerlessness of his situation that makes him yield (he is, after all, alone on the water with the gondolier and would certainly be at the losing end of

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a physical struggle); his resistance doesn't seem full-blooded to begin with, and what mutes it comes to shine through quickly enough: "Wie weich er übrigens ruhen durfte, wenn er sich nicht empörte. Hatte er nicht gewünscht, daß die Fahrt lange, daß sie immer dauern möge? Es war das Klügste, den Dingen ihren Lauf zu lassen, und es war hauptsächlich höchst angenehm." (525–526) He seems to be under a spell ("Bann der Trägheit", 526), and once more it's not fully clear whether that is caused by forces in the external world of the novel or by something from within the constellation of Aschenbach's personality traits, his personal history and physical fatigue.

4. The strange-looking traveler at the beginning of the story, the Venetian musician, the gondolier and the fake youth are all instances of prefiguration: they point, by analogy and by symbolizing, to later elements in the story.

We can see that prefiguration is at work here not just from the parallels themselves; it's not only the similarities in words, phrases and motifs between, for instance, the appearance of the fake youth and Aschenbach's tampering with his own looks; it's also the extra pointers that Mann lets follow immediately on these instances of prefiguration: the perception that the world drifts towards unreality, the feeling of an estrangement, the advent of an atmosphere of dreamy dizziness. Furthermore, death symbolism abounds whenever we see one of the personalized death figures: in the description of the cemetery building before the wanderer appears (502); in the references to coffin-blackness and soft indolence during the gondolier sequence (523–524, 525–526); and in the hourglass imagery after the musician episode (577). In addition, both the wanderer and the gondolier strangely disappear, vanish in a rationally explainable, yet slightly unsettling manner, which gives them an air of eerie unreality (507, 527). Finally, there's the power they exert on Aschenbach's mind, which shows itself externally in the challenging, irreverent posture and behavior of all three death-prefiguration figures and on the psychological level in the inability of the protagonist to resist the harmful influences which corrode his attitude and self-respect.

With the fake youth and the gondolier, Mann makes their function in his narrative plan even more plain by having Aschenbach himself reflect on these two figures, after his arrival at his hotel room: "So beunruhigten die Erscheinungen der Herreise, der gräßliche alte Stutzer mit seinem Gefasel vom Liebchen, der verpönte, um seinen Lohn geprellte Gondolier, noch jetzt das Gemüt des Reisenden." (528) Why should these episodes make Aschenbach unduly concerned? Without sensing some momentous meaning for himself in their appearance, his disquiet would not be explainable. We are meant to understand Aschenbach as reading a sign of what's to come into these episodes.

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We might ask ourselves, of course, whether this sort of veridical premonition is something that *really* takes place in the world of the novella (that is, whether in Mann's fictional world such things as veridical premonitions happen), or whether, as in the real world, there is no such thing as knowing the future, but a person might be *under the impression* that his feelings tell him something about what's in store for him, and perhaps even unconsciously make it happen, in a self-fulfilling prophecy pattern. In other words, is Mann having Aschenbach *know* his fate, and perceiving it in the prefiguration characters, or does he portray a mentally tired and overly sensitive old man seeing ghosts?

Unfortunately, he doesn't tell: “Ohne der Vernunft Schwierigkeiten zu bieten, ohne eigentlich Stoff zum Nachdenken zu geben, waren sie dennoch grundsonderbar von Natur, wie es ihm schien, und beunruhigend wohl eben durch diesen Widerspruch.” (528) Thus although Aschenbach finds on reflection that there is nothing about them which couldn't be rationally explained, still they seem deeply strange to him (“grundsonderbar”); yet he cannot account for that strangeness, and *that's* what makes him nervous. This is understandable enough, but it leaves open the question (and thus, I'd say, *the author* deliberately leaves open the question) whether the grounds of the strangeness then are in Aschenbach's psychological constitution or whether the (fictional) world itself has a structure that includes such things as death appearing as person and a mirroring of people's later fates in the faces and behavior of others they encounter (that is, prefiguration). Again: has Mann written the story of someone who lives (and dies) in such a world, or has he written a story of someone who lives in the real world, but more and more sinks into a deadly imaginary unreality?

The reflection on the prefiguration character of the fake youth and the gondolier happens relatively close to their appearance in the story; there is another such reflection; this one, however, comes very much later: already close to the end of the text, Aschenbach remembers the cemetery building and the wanderer figure from the scene in the very beginning; and most revealingly, this happens in a moment that might, just might, have been a turning-point: he has now learned the truth about the cholera epidemic, and he ponders for a second the idea of leaving, and above all, warning the Polish family and giving them a chance to leave in time as well. He dismisses the thought, and the memory of the earlier scene seems to play a role in the dismissal (though once more it remains unclear what is cause and what consequence — is the recollection what causes his rejection of the idea, or merely an expression that brings it into the light, in form of a more observable behavior?): “Er erinnerte sich eines weißen Bauwerks, geschmückt mit abendlich gleißenden Inschriften, in deren durchscheinender Mystik das Auge

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seines Geistes sich verloren hatte" (581). (The phrases here, "in deren durchscheinender Mystik das Auge seines Geistes sich verloren hatte" are again near-precise quotes of the earlier passage, compare 502: "sein geistiges Auge in ihrer durchscheinenden Mystik sich verlieren zu lassen".) Also, there is a more obliquely made connection here to the fake youth-prefiguration: the sentence: "[Er erinnerte sich] jener seltsamen Wanderergestalt sodann, die dem Alternden schweifende Jünglingssehnsucht [. . .] erweckt hatte" (581) refers to the wanderer, but it also uses the old man vs. youth contrast that is played out in the figure of the fake youth, and later in the cosmetically 'rejuvenated' Aschenbach himself. Again, both allusions strengthen the coherence in the text between these episodes of recurring motifs immensely.

These two reflection passages, then, confirm and underline the prefiguration character of the episodes I have discussed. I think we're now well set up to launch into some deeper analysis of the borders and connections between reality and unreality within fiction that are so artfully drawn here.

5. As we've seen, Mann uses prefiguration to point us, prefiguratively, to two different elements of the story: death, and decline of a sense of the appropriate. The strange traveler in the opening scene (at the Munich cemetery), and later the gondolier and the Venetian musician all can be seen as personalized appearances of death, while the fake youth is an anticipation of Aschenbach himself.

Of all the characters in the novella, these four are most clearly the symbol-bearers, a characteristic which a careful interpretation should take into account. If the author uses them all in a roughly similar way, then he'll probably have intended to express something with that common use. (It's worth a speculation whether Tadzio, the Polish boy, also belongs in that category. Just as the death figures, he has a part in leading Aschenbach to give in to the fatal attraction of the place and conditions which will kill him, and as they do, he may be taken to both symbolize an abstract concept, namely that of beauty, and to trigger an episode of Aschenbach's late life, in which he starts giving in to pleasure wherever he goes.[2] However, compared to the other prefiguration figures, the boy is much more continuously and coherently present in the plot, and seems decidedly more tangible as a character than they are.

[2]At the end of the novella, of course, he is directly referred to as "der [. . .] liebliche Psychagog" (592), i.e. the *hermes psychopompos* of antiquity, the god in charge of leading the souls of the dead to the underworld. And that's a fitting association for the dying Aschenbach to make. But then, again, does that mean that the world of this novella is one where mythical figures actually appear, or is it rather like the real world, where normal people trod the ground and only the sensitive mind of a poet such as Aschenbach would make such connections?

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At any rate, he is more multi-dimensional compared to them.)

Let us make a distinction, then, between two kinds of prefiguration: the death personalizations on the one hand and the fake youth on the other. Both sorts represent an episode that is still in Aschenbach's future when they occur: the former his death, the latter his vain attempt to appear youthful and interesting to someone who's much younger. Both have an association with unreality, both carry a strong sense of giving in, of Aschenbach losing grip. Only the fake youth, however, is connected with his obsession with the boy (by the "Liebchen" talk, and perhaps by the overall allusion in it to physical beauty). The fake youth sequence is also the passage with the most explicit references to a drift away into unreality. The death figures exert their influence differently, mostly by attraction (most clearly the wanderer), or at least by attracting attention, and by refusing to comply. (Most strongly the gondolier, in his direct disobedience, 524–526, but it's also a characteristic of the wanderer, returning very determinedly Aschenbach's gaze, 503–504, and the musician, defiantly insisting on the official account of the sickness outbreak, 574.)

But the main distinguishing aspect between these types of prefiguration seems to be that they operate on somewhat different levels. Wouldn't we say that one's death is something different from one's behavior (even more when what we're talking about is behavior only in a particular respect). Symbolizing death is on a different order than symbolizing a specific foolishness. Or is it?

We may take the specific instance of foolishness here as standing in for a *tendency* in Aschenbach: that of yielding to the attraction of pleasure, the *dolce far niente*, and generally everything that helps him escape the strict regime of his life; but since that's an order he himself has imposed on it (often characterized by terms invoking reason, worth and discipline), this tendency is at the same time one of trying to escape from himself, and his own life plan and values. It is also connected to (and perhaps in a way deeply entangled with) another one: that of drifting into unreality, of getting besotted, intoxicated, infatuated, and with it more and more losing grip on reality as the plot develops.

This, I want to suggest, is why there are two different kinds of prefiguration in *Death in Venice*. They connect the various strands in the story: the theme of Aschenbach's continuous yielding, his drift into unreality, and the inevitable moving toward his death. By being prefigurations, they tie together earlier and later passages, thus they are in part what *constitutes* these strands in the first place. But by being all instances of the same literary technique, they also make it clear that the strands themselves are not there coincidentally, that they are interconnected. And finally, all strands

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run together in the single, final and defining end point of the story: the protagonist's eventual death. (Which, in addition, is what gives the work its title.)

To put it as a somewhat broad and sweeping thesis, then: the different uses of prefiguration in Mann's novella all illustrate a single, common theme that runs through it: yielding to all sorts of influences, drifting away from reality, and dying finally come to the same thing — and so they're all presented using the same technique. Use of prefiguration creates coherence and the general feel of a thoroughly crafted text; it creates an intense impression of closed and coherent world of fiction. It's one of the main qualities (apart from the masterful use of language, style and imagery) that make *Death in Venice* a great work of art.

6. So far I have listed Mann's uses of prefiguration in *Death in Venice*; and I noted that instances of this technique, at the points where they occur in the story, not only signify some later elements for us (the readers), but that also each time Aschenbach (the protagonist) notices something strange going on, he's got a feeling that the world shifts towards the dreamy, away from the real.

Two interesting questions arise at this point: first, since Mann makes some effort to arrange these repeated invocations of a drift into unreality, there must be some idea behind it. What is going on? As the plot develops, Aschenbach gradually loses touch with reality, and it is at least suggested that this is a factor in his eventual death. (Without his delusions, he wouldn't have stayed on in Venice despite his knowledge of a cholera outbreak, 581–582; he wouldn't have exhausted himself in the streets and then bought and eaten over-ripe strawberries, 587; and so on.) Still it isn't fully clear what the driving force behind this development is. Possibly what we observe are the *effects* of a decline in health, both physical and mental, and the description of Aschenbach's losing grip is just to express this, to make the symptoms visible. On the other hand, most of what happens in the plot has at least some external causes. The stranger at the cemetery isn't merely imagined, and the fake youth and the gondolier are real enough, though we are meant, in the overtones of what we are told about them, to perceive a significance in their appearance which transcends the mere physical and social goings-on. And although Aschenbach is portrayed to actively seek the seductiveness of Venice in its otherness and magic ("Wenn man über Nacht das Unvergleichliche, das märchenhaft Abweichende zu erreichen wünschte, wohin ging man?" 517), the fact is that this quality of the place isn't merely in his imagination, but actually inheres in it. (And one might add that this

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is not only so in the world of the novella, but even in reality, too.)

Related to this question (whether the forces driving the development of the plot are external or integral to Aschenbach's person) is a second one: how are we to understand the underlying valuation?

This is not the only story by Thomas Mann in which a well-working life philosophy based on a fundamentally sound strategy is narratively reduced *ad absurdum.* Viz. "Der kleine Herr Friedemann",[3] where an Epicurean philosophy of life finally fails the protagonist in the face of strong passion. Similarly, Aschenbach's strict and ascetic, and determinedly kept, attitude is demonstratively displayed as working for a while, and deceptively successful at first, but eventually unmaintainable. One might try and look for a pattern or even a strategy here.

So does Mann want to show us that a focused, determined and controlled, a strict and ascetic life like Aschenbach's is in the end not sustainable? Are we told, poetically, that admiration for it is based on an illusion, that we might be disenchanted once we cease to look only from the outside? Or is it the weaker point that even though it might work for a while, it can't be fully taken to the end? Moreover, the forces that are shown, in his opinion, to be really at the base of what we do, seem to be partly aesthetical forces. Captivated by an instance of beauty, Aschenbach subordinates all other concerns. Are we to welcome or to fear the power of the aesthetic; are we to take it as good or bad for us?

In Aschenbach's life as an artist, there is also an element of careerism and a will to produce; he is described to painstakingly ration his energy and mental focus in order to enable the creation of his literary works. (Which, it is made clear, requires patience and a long, persistent will, 509–510.) But at the time at which the events of the story take place, this overriding motive is trumped by the impact of the aesthetic. Reasoned organization of one's life, then, is overcome in the end by the more powerful eros of beauty.[4]

Let us examine this more closely. Aschenbach has centered his life around his being a successful writer of literary works. This focus of his life was strong enough not just to make him diligent and thorough when crafting his texts, but also to help him methodically overcome a weak constitution

[3]Thomas Mann,"Der kleine Herr Friedemann", in: *Frühe Erzählungen 1893–1912.* Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe, Band 2.1. Ed. Terence J. Reed. Frankfurt a.M: Fischer 2004, 87–119.

[4]Shortly before the end, an exhausted and delirious Aschenbach states this insight in terms that allude to Plato's *Phaedrus*, 588–589; the passage is a reprise of another one, at 554–555, where the *Phaedrus* scenario features prominently already; this invocation of the theory of beauty and its relation to the artist's mind and spirit I'd very much like to comment on more extensively, but not now.

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(509–510) and master the huge amount of work (such as correspondence) that comes with fame and a network of intellectual connections (508). What for others might be the principal content of a life, like romantic and other personal relationships, family life or simply enjoyment of lifestyle was merely a peripheral presence for Aschenbach: his brief marriage is mentioned only in passing (515), and at one point it is reported of him that "'Sehen Sie, Aschenbach hat von jeher nur *so* gelebt' — und der Sprecher schloß die Finger seiner Linken fest zur Faust —; 'niemals *so*' — und er ließ die geöffnete Hand bequem von der Lehne des Sessels hängen." (509)

All this life-long consequence and determination, however, is no match for what directs Aschenbach's actions as the story unfolds. It is precisely not his work and stature as an artist that is the topmost relevant consideration; something else replaces his grounding concern. And it is really a change in the very foundation of his entire life philosophy. It's not as if Aschenbach would see it as appropriate to relax and enjoy the good things of life at his advanced age (he's over fifty when the story begins); it is not as if he'd see the central occupation with literature, fame and discipline which has dominated both his youth and his adult live rightfully give way to a more indulgent lifestyle. Quite the contrary: "Auch wünschte er sehnlichst, alt zu werden, denn er hatte von jeher dafür gehalten, daß wahrhaft groß, umfassend, ja wahrhaft ehrenwert nur das Künstlertum zu nennen sei, dem es beschieden war, auf allen Stufen des Menschlichen charakteristisch fruchtbar zu sein." (509)

The fulfillment of this desire, as the story will insistently and mercilessly bring out, isn't to be granted.[5] Something else takes over and prescribes a new direction. Down that path there is only weakness, disease, and destruction; yet this is where Aschenbach decides to go. So the grounding idea of his life has been replaced by a new one, on the lines of blindly following an instance of beauty wherever it leads, and whatever the consequences may be.

This is aestheticism, the idea that only an aesthetic life (with its worship of beauty and the unquestioning observance to its incarnations) is worth living: and with it the corresponding idea that an ethical life, a life based

[5]Perhaps this claim should be counterbalanced with the observation that Aschenbach does write a short piece of prose under the influence of his new infatuation, which is highly inspired and beautiful, described in the text as "erlesene Prosa" (556). Still, this happens at an early point of his decline, whereas he isn't exactly productive later on in the story; and even so, after creating these two-and-a-half pages he feels deeply exhausted: "Als Aschenbach seine Arbeit verwahrte und vom Strande aufbrach, fühlte er sich erschöpft, ja zerrüttet, und ihm war, als ob sein Gewissen nach einer Ausschweifung Klage führe." (ibd.). If anything, I think this episode shows the end, the last dying breath of his artistic mastery rather than the beginnings of a new and different phase of his literary career.

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on character and its improvement, has to fail in the end. Or, more precisely, what fails is the synthesis that Aschenbach attempts between discipline, hard work and dedication on the one hand and the service of beauty on the other. But how are we to understand the fact that in Mann's narrative strategy, this realization corresponds to a gradual loss of sense of reality?

So the two questions are, in short: first, what is the cause of, and second, what's the reason for, Aschenbach's losing touch with reality?

7. I have argued that Aschenbach's all-overriding infatuation with the boy Tadzio becomes the dominant factor in his losing touch with reality. But this influence only sets in *after* he arrives in Venice, and thus cannot be what sets off the development in the first place. Furthermore, what *does* lead Aschenbach astray is, even though triggered externally, something in his own psychological condition: his desire to escape the tough work regime he has imposed on himself ("Fluchtdrang war sie, daß er es sich eingestand, diese Sehnsucht ins Ferne und Neue, diese Begierde nach Befreiung, Entbürdung und Vergessen, — der Drang hinweg vom Werke, von der Alltagsstätte eines starren, kalten und leidenschaftlichen Dienstes", 509–510); his longing for the exotic and magical (which lets him end up in Venice, out of all the possible vacation spots; most expressly at 517); and perhaps a certain morbid relaxation in the face of death allusions (think of his contemplation of death mysticism at the Munich cemetery, 502, and his willingness to give in to the coffinesque comfort of the Venetian gondola, 523–524 and 525–526).

So the question isn't just, as I wrote, why Aschenbach's realization that his attempted synthesis between discipline, hard work, and dedication on the one hand and the service of beauty on the other fails — it's also why the drives that set off the development which exposes that failure start earlier (and why, indeed, they start at all). They're not triggered by the lure of beauty and the force of eros. Once the development has started, however, these aesthetic elements provide the most powerful of all imaginable amplifiers. Is therefore the trap into which Aschenbach falls a multi-staged one? Is it only after fertile ground has been prepared by fatigue and escape fantasies that corrosive aestheticism can complete its destructive work?

But if that's so, then why is there an external trigger (in all those prefiguration characters) every time to bring these psychological states to the front and enable them to control Aschenbach's decisions? Mann's whole carefully crafted framework of symbols and allusions, parallels and consequences, seems to have the singular purpose of producing a strongly coherent, compulsively unwinding plot which at closer examination leaves not the minutest detail to chance — everything's in the scheme, so to speak. (And that's what

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primarily constitutes the high literary quality and artistic value of the novella, after all.) The function of the prefiguration characters is to drive Aschenbach towards the fateful setup in Venice. And thus, psychological state alone can't account for what sets the events of the story in motion.

8. There is another level of fictionality in the novella which we haven't considered yet: Aschenbach is a writer of fictional works, and thus in addition to the fictional world of the story, we have the respective worlds of those fictions-within-fiction.

When we theorize about the relationship between fiction and reality, what we have in mind is usually that between what belongs to the story and what belongs to the real world: for instance, there is Venice, with its characteristic layout, its canals and gondolas, in both worlds, but there's a famous author named Aschenbach only in the fictional world of the novel, not in the real world; a string of encounters with death-symbolizing figures which drive a life towards its end can occur in fiction, but not in reality; there's typically a strong sense of purpose and meaning in every single episode that happens in the fictional world (because the author's put it there expressly to fulfill a purpose in his narrative, and to have meaning in his overall artistic plan) — but when we attempt to find something even closely as coherent, single-stranded and interconnected in what goes on in our own world, it's always only partial, and generally feels as if we're reading it *into* what's happening, not out of it.

A parallel distinction can be made, however, between the fictional world of the novella and the fictional worlds inside it, that is, between Aschenbach's world and the worlds of his own literary works. When we read reflections in Aschenbach's voice, or from his point of view, it's *that* relationship about which they are, not the relationship between his world and ours.

And to be very strict and precise here: the interaction between reality and fiction does not necessarily have to be the same on all levels. A different set of laws and rules and characteristics may hold with respect to the relationship between the real world and a fictional world on the one hand compared to the relationship between that same fictional world and the world of a fiction within that fiction. Thus, when Aschenbach reflects about the nature of art, about reality and unreality, the contrast he is looking at can only be the contrast between his world (the fictional world of the story) and the worlds of his works, such as the world of the Maya in which one of his main works is set.

It's much more difficult to decide what to make of reflections of the same sort when they're made by the narrator of the story: are they provided by the

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author, Thomas Mann, to guide (or detract) our interpretation, or are they made as if from the point of view of Aschenbach, illuminating the innermost thoughts and motives of that character, which are nonetheless constituted and formed by the world of that character? In other words, when we read reflections about the relationship of art and life, or reality and unreality, do they refer to the contrast between our world and that of *Death in Venice*, or to the contrast between the latter and the fictions it contains? (And it's not at all clear that the author wants us to be able to decide: he may be keeping it systematically ambiguous; perhaps the narrator's views are even intended to *connect* both contrasts, suggesting that they're really one and the same.)

When Aschenbach thinks about his own motives and decisions, he uses pieces of aesthetical theory, allusions to literature and philosophy, just as we would expect from an educated and intellectually-minded person of his stature. At the same time, however, we're given clear signals from the narration that his thoughts are self-deceptive (sometimes ironically: "[s]o dachte der Enthusiasmierte; so vermochte er zu empfinden", 554; or more direct: "[s]o war des Betörten Denkweise bestimmt, so suchte er sich zu stützen, seine Würde zu wahren", 569). Can we take Aschenbach's reflections at face value then, as clues towards an understanding of what's going on in him during that final stage of his life? Or are we to read them as expressions of his dangerous drift away from everything that's grounded in reality, his unstoppable slide into unreality?

Not all invocations of theoretical background and the psychology of the artist as such are given directly in the voice of Aschenbach; some are comments on on the artist's state of mind, made by the narrator: "Fast jedem Künstlernaturell ist ein üppiger und verräterischer Hang eingeboren, Schönheit schaffende Ungerechtigkeit anzuerkennen und aristokratischer Bevorzugung Teilnahme und Huldigung entgegenzubringen" (531); "es war wohl an dem, daß der Alternde [i.e. Aschenbach] die Ernüchterung nicht wollte, daß der Rausch ihm zu teuer war. Wer enträtselt Wesen und Gepräge des Künstlertums! Wer begreift die tiefe Instinktverschmelzung von Zucht und Zügellosigkeit, worin es beruht! Denn heilsame Ernüchterung nicht wollen zu können, ist Zügellosigkeit." (557) Especially the almost journalistic-sounding second chapter is clearly detached and distanced from any immediate closeness with Aschenbach's psychological interior; it's written in biographical style, almost, in parts, as if it were an anticipation of his obituary. Some of these literate comments from the narrator are consistent and continous with the views later expressed by Aschenbach; others, however, clearly display a general tendency in Aschenbach to both tolerate and seek a certain sort of deception (and self-deception). Most revealingly, it is a tendency which is presented not only as a pecularity in the *aging* Aschenbach who travels to

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Venice — the biographical sketch makes it quite clear that it had been a characteristic of *all* his life and work.

To understand the deeper sources of his collapse, which both connect his last episode with the whole of his life *and* motivate both the integral, psychological forces and the external, plot-mechanical elements (such as the prefiguration characters), we must get to terms with this tendency.

9. When we admire, say, the performance of a musician, part of what appeals to us is the apparent ease and facility of their doing something which we know is hard and requires an enormous amount of practice and self-control. What applies to artistic performance seems to apply to natural beauty also (think of the proverbial lightness and grace of a gazelle, or the elegance of a black kite's flight). Perhaps, then, a certain careful concealment is a necessary ingredient in the generation of beauty.

This might look at first a pleasing thought; for we all like the pleasure we can take in beauty, preferably without being reminded of the pains that had to be taken to produce it. At the same time, however, this means turning a blind eye to the excellences needed to withstand those pains, ignoring, that is, personal qualities such as patience and sensibility, thoroughness and will in those who bring instances of beauty into our lives. There is an element of injustice in our admiration of beauty; a deflection of appreciation from qualities of a person towards the attractions of what is a rather impersonal presence in our world (i.e., instances of beauty).

Sometimes injustice of that kind is taken even further when attention is not just averted from an artist's personal qualities to the aesthetic attributes of his own work, but moved from respecting worthy people to admiring much less deserving, but aesthetically more appealing personalities, in an attitude such as that attributed to both Aschenbach in particular and artistic-minded people in general: "Fast jedem Künstlernaturell ist ein üppiger und verräterischer Hang eingeboren, Schönheit schaffende Ungerechtigkeit anzuerkennen und aristokratischer Bevorzugung Teilnahme und Huldigung entgegenzubringen." (531) The injustice expressed in this stance is precisely this: that considerations of personal respect and fair dealing are of second importance when it comes to producing a bit of beauty. And although it hides behind worship for an abstract and universal ideal (that of beauty), it is in essence a selfish and mean attitude. In the passage quoted above, it's employed to account for Aschenbach's approval of privileging, even spoiling a beautiful child ("ein verzärteltes Vorzugskind, von parteilicher und launischer Liebe getragen", ibd.); it's much more marked and appalling when he decides to keep his knowledge about the cholera outbreak for himself in order not to

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risk departure of Tadzio's family (thereby severely endangering the life and health of someone whom, curiously, he professes to love). The narrator draws immediately a strong parallel between that secrecy and crime, indeed: "'Man soll schweigen!' dachte Aschenbach erregt [...] 'Man soll das verschweigen!' [...] Denn der Leidenschaft ist, wie dem Verbrechen, die gesicherte Ordnung und Wohlfahrt des Alltags nicht gemäß, und [...] jede Verwirrung und Heimsuchung der Welt muß ihr willkommen sein." He welcomes "dieses schlimme Geheimnis der Stadt, das mit seinem eigensten Geheimnis verschmolz, und an dessen Bewahrung auch ihm so sehr gelegen war. Denn der Verliebte besorgte nichts, als daß Tadzio abreisen könnte" (564–565). This self-serving participation in a dangerous cover-up is repeatedly mentioned, e.g. on 570, and again, paralleling the exact wording of the earlier passage, on 580–582. There, Aschenbach has just heard confirmation of the ugly truth about the disease's outbreak and received a strong recommendation of immediate departure from the English clerk; he even for a second considers warning Tadzio's mother; yet then he once more gets carried away by his fateful passion: "'Man soll schweigen!' flüsterte er heftig. Und: 'Ich werde schweigen!' Das Bewußtsein seiner Mitwisserschaft, seiner Mitschuld berauschte ihn" (581).

Irresponsible secrecy in the name of a passion which burns him up is something only found during the final stages of decline in Aschenbach. However, a tendency to conceal and (if necessary) suppress, even unjustly, whatever needs to be blanketed and hidden in the name of art and beauty — *that* tendency was present with him for all his life. It's not (to begin answering a question I have repeatedly posed) merely a mental decline we're witnessing here, not just the weakness of an aging spirit. Here we have something that's been latent in him, in his life and work, all along. The second chapter, with its almost academic account of Aschenbach's character and his artistic profile, serves proof and confirmation for this, giving insight in his background and thus bringing out those propensities which sharpen into visible decline during the later chapters of the novella.

Aschenbach, we are told, was born with talent, but a weak constitution, a constellation that characterizes many of his family; "[er] hatte doch zeitig erkennen müssen, daß er einem Geschlecht angehörte, in dem nicht das Talent, wohl aber die physische Basis eine Seltenheit war, deren das Talent zu seiner Erfüllung bedarf, — einem Geschlechte, das früh sein Bestes zu geben pflegt und in dem das Können es selten zu Jahren bringt" (509) — an oblique reference to either early death or quick capitulation before the task of creation, both of them preventing great gift from coming to fruition.

Admirable will and determination, however, have in his own case enabled Aschenbach to produce the works he's gained a reputation for. Working on them has also shaped his life philosophy, in which all achievement is one of

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having overcome obstacles and resistance, where "beinahe alles Große, was dasteh[t], als ein Trotzdem dasteh[t], trotz Kummer und Qual, Armut, Verlassenheit, Körperschwäche, Laster, Leidenschaft und tausend Hemmnissen zustande gekommen [ist]. [... D]as war [...] eine Erfahrung, war geradezu die Formel seines Lebens und Ruhmes, der Schlüssel zu seinem Werk" (511).

It's not at all accidental that his life and work are mentioned in the same breath here: it can't be overstated how important it is to see Aschenbach's way of leading his life and the particular character of his literary work as intertwined. The idea I've just quoted isn't just his guiding thought in life but also what shapes all the characters in his writings. He's formed them after his image, both their inner worlds and their outward actions: "was Wunder also, wenn es auch der sittliche Charakter, die äußere Gebärde seiner eigentümlichsten Figuren war?" (ibd.) And in a sense, the deepest goals (or shall we say: the deepest purpose, for as a fictional character, your ultimate goal is something assigned to you by a creator) of both Aschenbach himself and his characters are identical: Aschenbach's is to produce works of art, and that of his figures is to *be* works of art. Thus, just as Aschenbach's maxim is to persist and produce faultless beauty, whatever outstanding things mark his characters (good things achieved or bad things committed) has come to existence by their persisting and prevailing over resistance and obstacles to finally become something improbable, something one wouldn't have expected them to become, and moreover something *shining*, where the efforts and struggles of the path towards it don't show through any more.

> "Blickte man hinein in diese erzählte Welt, sah man: die elegante Selbstbeherrschung, die bis zum letzten Augenblick eine innere Unterhöhlung, den biologischen Verfall vor den Augen der Welt verbirgt; die gelbe, sinnlich benachteiligte Häßlichkeit, die es vermag, ihre schwelende Brust zur reinen Flamme zu entfachen, ja, sich zur Herrschaft im Reiche der Schönheit aufzuschwingen; die bleiche Ohnmacht, welche aus den glühenden Tiefen des Geistes die Kraft holt, ein ganzes übermütiges Volk zu Füßen des Kreuzes, zu *ihren* Füßen niederzuwerfen; die liebenswürdige Haltung im leeren und strengen Dienste der Form; das falsche, gefährliche Leben, die rasch entnervende Sehnsucht und Kunst des geborenen Betrügers" (511–512).

(I hasten to throw in a word of caution already here: that we can see *both* admirable and repulsive traits being transformed into something shimmering is not an accident, and not only is there no unconditional approval here from the narrator, but also, as we will see, it's precisely the dangers of making this

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transformation into one's central task which will drive the fatal developments in Aschenbach's late life.)

The flip side of bringing something shining into existence is that something else has to be concealed, even suppressed, and there is a common thread of references to concealment and suppression that runs through what we learn about Aschenbach. At the very beginning of the story there is a mention of a growing fatique the effects of which he thinks must be hidden at all cost: "dieser wachsenden Müdigkeit, von der niemand wissen und die das Produkt auf keine Weise, durch kein Anzeichen des Versagens und der Laßheit verraten durfte" (506). The second chapter reveals that this is in general a deep-seated and long-standing urge in Aschenbach's creative process: in his work, any weakness and imperfection is always welded out, to the point of being fully hidden. "Es war verzeihlich, ja, es bedeutete recht eigentlich den Sieg seiner Moralität, wenn Unkundige die Maja-Welt oder die epischen Massen, in denen sich Friedrichs Heldenleben entrollte, für das Erzeugnis gedrungener Kraft und eines langen Atems hielten, während sie vielmehr in kleinen Tagwerken aus aberhundert Einzelinspirationen zur Größe emporgeschichtet [waren]" (510). We find the same attitude in the description of the kind of hero that he typically creates in his literary works (in the already quoted passage on 511–512): the same constant element of not just aiming at success in whatever they do, but also of concealing and suppressing any trace of what had to be overcome to make that success possible, the hiding away of all struggle against resistance and obstruction from the visible results and perceivable outcomes of their lives and actions.[6] And it is emphasized that this is itself by no means a small achievement: "Denn Haltung im Schicksal, Anmut in der Qual bedeutet nicht nur ein Dulden; sie ist eine aktive Leistung, ein positiver Triumph" (511).

And yet built into this excellence (for an excellence it is without doubt) are the causes of his later getting adrift, precisely in the form of that element of concealment which is an indispensable ingredient within it, and which grows more dominant in the later stages of his life that make up the rest of

[6]This is a very one-dimensional characterization I've given of these heros in Aschenbach's works; it might be objected that reducing them to exemplifying a single tendency is too narrow a view to take on any work of literature, and we certainly have to assume that Aschenbach's works are that. And yet, what I have quoted is nearly all we know about them from the text; barring speculation there is nothing else that we could say about them, and I don't think that's by accident either. They are the characters of fictional works within fiction — they merely serve the purpose of illustrating a trait of Aschenbach's personality, and show how it is reflected in his work, the most elaborate expression a person such as him could give of his views and character. Aschenbach's work have merely the status of sketches, with the single purpose of showing that. One level of fiction here exemplifies what is stated *about* fiction on the surrounding one.

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the story. That it is an ambivalent ingredient is already clear from the fake youth episode. Not being too far down the path of decline yet, he strongly disapproves of the old man's attempt to make himself seem young and belonging to that group of youths he's traveling with. (Although it's not clear whether Aschenbach's disapproval would be quite as vehement had the concealment be done more competently, i.e. had the deception which the fake youth intended been more total, and successful.) But then, of course, a short time later he does the exact same thing which had triggered his disgust earlier, and certainly there is a continuity between the impulse to suppress any signs of imperfection in his artistic creation and the corresponding desire to be attractive and retouch the outward signs of his age away from his physical appearance.

I have noted earlier that the encounter with the prefiguration figures is frequently accompanied by a feeling of a drift into unreality on Aschenbach's part. From the above, the function of this feeling in the novella becomes now clear: it identifies an element in his personality that has been there always, employed in his artistic perfectionism, but which has started now to grow disproportionately strong and inappropriate. Along with the forward-pointing reference to his eventual death, the narration identifies the driving force behind the events, both the protagonist's mental decline and the chain of actions and interactions in the plot, in his continuous habit of producing unreality in creating instances of beauty by concealing weakness. When the world around him sinks into inexplicable strangeness (519, 522) after the encounter with an anticipation of his own later self, the story connects the foolish efforts of the fake youth, the vain exertions of the later Aschenbach, and his general and primary drive to exclude ugly reality from his aesthetic vision. It's just that now a process over which he used to have control has taken over, and has thereby made a plaything of its former master (if only for a short moment, at least at this stage of the story).

10. Beauty is nothing else but the shimmer of unreality; Aschenbach has dedicated all his life to producing it — now it consumes him.

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