

Der Tod in Venedig

Th.Mann

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For the literary critic Thomas Mann must be 'gefundenes gefressen'. His works abound in symbolisms to be unearthed and he looks upon such interpretative decodings appreciatively. Maybe the ultimate purpose of a work is to be interpreted and result in an interpretation, ultimately a definitive one. This is of course a terribly reductive view of literature, but one, as noted above apparently not entirely alien to him¹

The short tale of 'Death in Venice' is a classical and transparent exercise. The plot can summarily be condensed in a few lines. A respectable and successful writer (incidentally by name of Aschenbach) takes a vacation in Lido. While there he becomes enthralled in the beauty of a young boy (referred to as 'Tadzio'). This enthrallment, originally seen as a pure disinterested appreciation of abstract beauty, gradually turns into an obsession, and in so doing the protagonist is forced to realize that it contains a strong erotic element, maybe it is nothing but erotic desire. The obsession, although kept in sufficient control not to result in any definite act of seduction, or even interaction (although obvious enough for the family to make sure that the boy does not come too close to him, or is that only what he imagines?), is nevertheless so strong as to make the protagonist lose his bearings. He stalks the boy and his family among the canals in the city. The city itself is sick not to say mortal harboring a cholera epidemics, which is hushed down by the authorities. The obsession leads to reckless behavior, be it of desperate vanity (dying his hair, putting color to his cheeks) or the ingestion of local produce. In one last almost hallucinatory vision, the protagonist believes he sees the boy beckoning to him out in the sea, and tries to run to him, only to collapse in his chair and expire a victim of cholera.

Those are the bare facts and by filling them out into a story it is easy to fall into the melodramatic trap, but Mann evades it. Why does he do that? Because he is a master story-teller? An unparalleled expert of German prose? Or maybe more to the point because the story is auto-biographical? I would tend to believe the last, almost trivial explanation. Supposedly Mann vacationed in Lido with his family some time before the inception of the story. While there he become struck with the beauty of some eleven year old boy of a Polish aristocratic family, incidentally with the very same name -Tadzio². The beauty of the boy became a preoccupation with Mann, and it and the boy were often in his thoughts. While he did nothing, not even stalking the family as in the book, his obsession could not be hidden from his family, and provoked disgust in its wider circles (such as that of an uncle of his wife). The conflict between disinterested appreciation and

¹ I was once told by a woman in Germanic studies at Harvard, that Mann had referred to one particular interpretation as the definitive one. She was rather upset by it, and predictably she dropped out and subsequently enrolled in Harvard Business School.

² This boy was many years later identified as the original of the story, and a book was written on it in the aftermath of the Visconti movie, that brought the book to a general audience

erotic desire must have become painful to him, and probably the source of much brooding and anguish interspersed with feelings of shame, as it touched on tabu. His story can thus be seen as an exorcism of his obsession. Thus the main impression of the book being one of constraint. The constraint that goes with any kind of sincere self-revelation. Can beauty of a human be separated from sexual desire? This is the main philosophical quandary for Mann. Being educated such a question can be suitably phrased in impressive garb, lifting it up from a sordid personal level to an elevated universal. There is nothing wrong with that, on the contrary that is what culture and art is all about. In particular in the mind of Mann it becomes a conflict between Apollo and Dionysis³. The stage is now set for a story. A good story sticks very close to the facts, while imaginatively transcending them at crucial junctions. That is what imagination really amounts to, not the formless confabulation, but the strategic intervention.

Thus the protagonist is very much like Mann himself, a writer. Maybe simplified as to character, stressing those features of his own most relevant to the conflict. That the protagonist bears a certain likeness to Mahler may be seen partly as playfulness (as the choice of the name 'Aschenbach') partly as an obvious effort of depersonalization, of distancing himself from the protagonist. As such both harmless as well as essential stratagems. By extending his obsessions by adding the stalking elements in the city and by excising the presence of a family, the conflict is brought into sharper relief. Manns visit to Venice at the time must of course made an impression on him, an impression probably infused with his insistent brooding at the time and the beauty of the boy. By contrasting the innocent beauty of the boy with the deadly decadence of the city under the spell of a hushed-up cholera epidemics, he makes this fusion in his mind explicit to the readers as well, if not necessarily so much in content as to mood. The connection between Venice and Death must have been at least subconsciously obvious to many travelers at the time. In fact this special Venetian sensitivity can no doubt be traced back to Ruskin, and further elaborated by Proust, whose evocation of Venice may be profitably compared to that of Mann⁴. The city abounds in funeral attributes, in particular the presence of the black gondolas, charoning their charges across styxian waters. That he kills the protagonist in the end, is of course as inevitable as conventional. But of course being conventional does not necessarily make it trivial or anti-climactic, on the contrary it can be very fitting indeed, and in fact it is very hard to think of any other ending, that would not have been anti-climactic or in other ways unsatisfactory and lacking in closure. There is a basic difference between Art and Life, the former is shaped the latter just happens. Perverse indeed are the efforts to confuse life and its conduct with art itself. Art is necessarily a representation, the perfection of which is one of its laudable yet elusive goals. Perfection in life inevitably spells death.

The basic unfolding of the story is, except for a few elaborations, given already by Manns own personal experience. To add drama to the plot, the conflict between Apollo and Dyonisis is brought in. It does not have to be made explicit, it is enough to make a

³ one highlighted by Nietzsche in his debut 'Die Geburt der Tragedie', a work with which Mann (and his readers) must have been very familiar

⁴ Prousts evocation of Venice as death incarnate is far more powerful than that of Mann in my opinion, but of course it would have been over-kill in the context of Manns story.

few points. The reference to Aschenbach being a closed fist and not an open hand, being one; the fateful dream at the end, and of course Aschenbach's unexpected enjoyment of the vulgar serenade with the grotesque laughing sequence being other examples⁵. Then when a story has been basically written, final touches, like dabs of color on a canvas, can be added, weaving threads into the narrative and filling up gaps. The stranger outside 'der Englische Garten' in Munich, the pathetic old man parading as a youngster on the boat to Venice, and maybe even the guitarist of the serenade, are all parts of a common thread⁶. And the reference to Aschenbach recklessly sampling the over-ripe fruits from a stand, the intention was not only to illustrate his desperation but to give a casual explanation of why he contracted cholera (and as such it is not really necessary to the story, except to those who prefer to read a story on the factual level.).

As can be seen the temptation to read a Mann story as a technical construction, not unlike that of a watch, to be taken to pieces, is as irresistible as it is rewarding. Yet if pursued to enthusiastically it becomes a parody of literary criticism. There are of course other aspects of the story that transcends such an analysis, or at least lie beyond it. An obvious one is that of the language of Mann. German prose come in many versions. Some are extremely simple and transparent, such as that of Stefan Zweig, the reading of whom makes you forget that you are reading German. Then there are more difficult writers such as Musil and Kleist, whose complicated syntax provides a challenge to the neophyte. Mann happens to fall somewhere in the middle of that spectrum. His language is basically lucid and straightforward, the way good supple prose should be, but of a quality the present reader is not fully equipped to treasure to the hilt.

The story is written from life, and as such it contains snapshots as unintentional as the mindless snappings tourists to this day indulge in with their outstretched digitals. To the modern reader, almost a hundred years after the novel was published, the atmosphere it evokes is one of a charming edge-of-the-war paradise. Incidentally a modern reader is more able to appreciate and recognize the presence of the Russian tourists of the story than people were able to say at the time when the movie was made some forty years ago. This is of course part of an incidental aspect of the novel, yet not the less enjoyable for that. A novel can be read from very many points of view, and as an historical document in particular.

So what about Mann (and Aschenbach's) basic question? Can beauty be separated from mere erotic desire? The appreciation of the former obviously belong to the Platonic realm and as such it transcends our biological nature, just as our quest for knowledge; while the latter is obviously base and biologically contingent (and in this particular case of Mann and Aschenbach, without any evolutionary advantage, a mere perverted cul de sac). Mann does not think in those modern terms, as noted above he seeks instruction from the classics, in particularly as interpreted by Nietzsche. The answer seems to be that the latter,

⁵ Whether the dream was made up without any precedent or based on a true dream is something we will only be able to speculate about, while the serenade probably had taken place in some form or another. A writer like Mann, one suspects, made up very little and made optimal use of all the fragments of his personal experience.

⁶ Supposedly when the Britten operatic version was put on stage, all those characters, as well as the portier and some others, were played by the same actor.

the purely erotic desire should be accepted and embraced, just as we embrace our biological and materialistic nature. Does that mean that Aschenbach is a simple sex-tourist, whose constraint is not so much moral and principled as one of deep social inhibition, but who in our day having fully appropriated the Dionysian drive would be roaming the beeches of Thailand in search of tender flesh? Action apart, is the sensitivity to beauty of a homo-erotic pederastic nature a perversion, which if not strictly illegal (as long as not actively indulged in) ought to be treated by means fair or unfair? Is our tolerance towards such deviance less now than it used to be? A somewhat ironic fact in view of the conviction that moral progress since the time of the Victorian has to a large extent consisted of increased tolerance, especially in matters sexual. Manns attitude to his own homo-eroticism was I guess one of ambivalence. Occasionally engaged in, but always I suspect above the age of consent, but no doubt regretted and a source of shame and anxiety. To kill the protagonist was not only convenient but necessary.

One suspects what has made the story endure in the popular imagination (one suspects that it is the most common encounter most people ever had had with Mann) has been exactly this ambiguity, this flirting with a tabu. As such it probably resides in the same compartment as Nabokovs 'Lolita' in the popular imagination.

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