

## Wilde and the Model of Homosexuality in Mann's *Tod in Venedig*

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**James P. Wilper,**  
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**Abstract:** In his article "Wilde and the Model of Homosexuality in Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*" James P. Wilper examines the influence of Oscar Wilde and the effeminate homosexual identity which cohered as a result of Wilde's trials for act of "gross indecency" in 1895, in Mann's classic homoerotic short novel. Drawing on Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century* (1994) and recent scholarship into the impact of Wilde on German-language writers, as well as German homosexual communities of the early twentieth century, Wilper explores Mann's ambivalent response to Wilde's homosexual legacy. Later in his career, Mann writes of Wilde with Nietzsche as "rebels in the name of beauty" against the hypocrisy of Victorian middle-class morality and that Mann's view is prefigured, although ambivalently, in his treatment of aestheticism, dandyism, effeminacy, and same-sex desire in *Der Tod in Venedig*.

## James P. WILPER

### Wilde and the Model of Homosexuality in Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*

In Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, Gustav von Aschenbach, nationally acclaimed and recently ennobled author, is swept away by a sudden pang of *Wanderlust* sparked by a homoerotically charged exchange of stares with an unknown man in a park. He departs for the South, eventually arriving in Venice, where he is captivated by the unearthly beauty of a Polish teenage boy named Tadzio. Aschenbach forces himself to see the boy's beauty in artistic terms, feigning the interest of an artist confronted with a masterpiece. Ritchie Robertson writes that in *Der Tod in Venedig* Mann comments on the unstable relation between art and desire through the protagonist. Robertson poses the question at what point does appreciation of the nude, often male, statue become desire for the living human body: "appreciation of sculpture can let men express covertly the homosexual desire that is officially prohibited. Does art sublimate desire, or release it?" (97). Initially, this strategy seems to depersonalize this desire so that it poses no threat to the protagonist's gender and sexual identity. The more Aschenbach watches the boy, the more his attraction grows and his culture provides him not only the language to voice his desire, but also offers the models for relations between men. He imagines a Greek-love mentorship, he fantasizes that he is Socrates and Tadzio is Phaedrus: "And a delightful vision came to him, spun from the sea's murmur and the glittering sunlight. It was the old plane tree not far from the walls of Athens ... But on the grass, which sloped down gently so that one could hold up one's head as one lay, there reclined two men, sheltered here from the heat of the noonday: one elderly and one young, one ugly and one beautiful, the wise beside the desirable. And Socrates, wooing him with witty compliments and jests, was instructing Phaedrus on desire and virtue" (238). Tadzio promises to be a source of rejuvenation for Aschenbach's art; he longs to work in the presence of his beloved boy, to "spiritually beget" with him, as Diotima describes to Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* (58; see also Reed 55-56). He produces a "brief essay," a "page and a half of exquisite prose," the writing thereof seems nearly "some kind of debauch" (240) to the author after the intoxication wears off. "It is as well that the world knows only a fine piece of work and not also its origins" (239). At the close of the fourth chapter the protagonist admits to himself what has become increasingly clear to the reader: he admits that the emotion he feels for Tadzio is not impersonal appreciation for beauty or a desire to mentor the boy, but love (244). The protagonist never has any contact with his object of desire except for exchanges of glances between the two and the mentorship plays out only in the fantasy of the protagonist. His desire leads although not to Socratic ideals, but to intoxication and lust: he becomes gripped by his passion and is unhinged by it: "His head and his heart were drunk, and his steps followed the dictates of that dark god whose pleasure it is to trample man's reason and dignity underfoot" (247). As Venice is overrun by a cholera epidemic, he stalks the boy and his family through the narrow, dirty alleyways and along the diseased canals of the city. Aschenbach contracts the disease and dies a few days later while watching his beloved on the deserted beach. This sketch of the plot of Mann's masterpiece of homoerotic *Sehnsucht* hardly leads the reader to expect an affirmative portrayal of same-sex desire. And yet, as Andrew Webber writes, the novella "has identified Mann, however ambivalently, as a pioneering modern gay writer" (68). Neither unequivocally condemnatory nor unequivocally affirmative, many scholars have noted the (homoerotic) ambivalence of Mann's treatment of Aschenbach's passion for Tadzio (see, e.g., Boa; Dollimore; Mundt; Reed; Tobin; for an overview see Shookman).

In the study at hand I explore the effect of Oscar Wilde's trials for acts of "gross indecency" — which according to Alan Sinfield assisted in shaping an effeminate homosexual image — on Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, by examining how ambivalence, elusive perception, and unreliable narration allow the reader to reevaluate the role of the Wildean dandy-aesthete figures in the novella. My study is not the first to approach the influence of Wilde on Mann. For example, Patrick Bridgwater and Robert Vilain discuss the importance of Wilde for German-language writers of the early twentieth century including Mann (see also Popp). Bridgwater points out that Mann's notebooks demonstrate the impact of Wilde and his aestheticism and he writes that Mann certainly "had Wilde/Dorian Gray in mind when he produced the "criminal" artist/aesthete figures of whom Aschenbach is in a number of ways closest to Wilde among them the fact that he illustrates Lord Henry's *mot* "The only ways to get rid of a

temptation is to yield to it" (237). Vilain suggests that "Mann's homosexuality, largely suppressed throughout his life, may have been a factor in the fascination that Wilde exercised over him; he may have seen and admired a degree of courage in the face of public approbation that he could not himself muster" (187).

Until Wilde's trials in 1895, "it is unsafe to interpret effeminacy as defining of, or as a signal of, same-sex passions" (Sinfield 27). The trials brought tenuously related cultural phenomena together under Wilde's public persona. Sinfield writes that an important impact on the public imagination "helped to produce a major shift in perceptions of the scope of same-sex passion" and the solidification of a queer image: "the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image" (3). This effect, along with Wilde's appeal, was not limited to Britain or the English-speaking world. In Germany, following the scandal, Wilde experienced a literary renaissance. Although his aesthetic theories enunciated in writings such as "The Decay of Lying" (1891) and "The Critic as Artist" (1891) found some favorable responses in the German-speaking world, primarily in Vienna where they blended with Francophile decadence of the *fin de siècle*, it was not until after the scandal that Germany's fascination with Wilde truly began (see, e.g., Bridgwater 237; Kohlmayer and Krämer 189). Yvonne Ivory points out that "Oscar Wilde was not a household name in Germany when the scandal broke," and therefore most of the journalists who reported on it in the German press "found they needed to clarify who Wilde was" ("The Oscar" 223). This quickly changed. Between 1900 and 1934, there were more than 250 translations of Wilde's works published, more than any other British writer except Shakespeare (see Gilman; Ivory, "The Trouble"; Vilain). The Wilde estate became solvent and put in credit largely on account of "the royalties from German translations of his books and the receipts from productions of his plays in Germany" (Hyde 380).

Not only were the theater going and reading public enthralled in Wilde, but many German-speaking writers were influenced by Wilde's aesthetic theories: "Wilde came to be seen in Germany and Austria as the very embodiment of one of the most fascinating aspects of the intellectual and aesthetic temper of his age, the aesthetic movement" (Vilain 174). These writers, including Mann, saw Wilde as an "apostle of beauty" and individualism challenging Victorian Philistinism (Vilain 187). Bridgwater writes that for Mann the dandy was an artist and both roles are necessarily egocentric and like the artist, the dandy likes to relate to the public, but prefers his own company. Mann was particularly fascinated by Wilde's dandyism: the idea that the artist/aesthete is not suited for ordinary life because the artistic temperament involves such a high degree of alienating self-awareness and narcissism extends throughout Mann's oeuvre and is particularly important with regard to the portrayal of Aschenbach (Bridgwater 238). In his 1947 essay "Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Recent History," Mann articulates his thoughts on aestheticism and dandyism where he compares Wilde to Nietzsche and characterizes these two figures as leading voices in "the first head-on assault of the European intelligentsia upon the hypocritical morality of the middle-class Victorian age" (157). In a section of this essay, Mann charts the parallels in thought between the Wilde and Nietzsche as follows: "When Wilde declares: 'For, try as we may, we cannot get behind the appearance of things to reality. And the terrible reason may be that there is no reality in things apart from their appearances'; when he speaks of the 'truth of masks' and the 'decay of the lie'; when he bursts out: 'To me beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible'; when he calls truth something so personal that the same truth can never be recognized by two different minds; when he says: 'Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the minds and poisons us ... The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it'; and: 'Don't be led astray into paths into the paths of virtue!' — we cannot help seeing that all these quotations might have come from Nietzsche" (157–58). Further, Mann wrote that many of Nietzsche's philosophical tenets could have appeared in Wilde's comedies and have earned laughter and applause in West End theaters ("Nietzsche's" 158). Aestheticism for Mann is a protest against nineteenth-century moral hypocrisy: "It is curious, although comprehensible, that aestheticism was the first manifestation of the European mind's rebellion against the whole morality of the bourgeois age. Not for nothing have I coupled the names of Nietzsche and Wilde — they belong together as rebels, rebels in the name of beauty" (172). The essay, although published thirty-five years after the

novella, may shed some retrospective light on the impulses which gave rise to his portrayal of Aschenbach in *Der Tod in Venedig*. I argue that the concept of the "Revoltierend im Namen der Schönheit" figures into the novella in two manifestations of Wildean homosexuality and that it is in this motif that Wilde's legacy impacts the text most profoundly. The first of these dandy-aesthete rebel characters is the old dandy whom Aschenbach encounters on the ship en route to Venice. The second is Aschenbach himself after he loses himself to his de-sublimated passion. The former figure is identified generally as a foreshadowing device which signals the protagonist's coming downfall. However, this judgment takes for granted that the ferocity of Aschenbach's repugnance to the dandy figure was an objective response and not biased by the protagonist's/narrator's perception. I suggest that Aschenbach's reaction to the dandy reflects more on his gender and sexual identity, its potential to be undone than as an objective characterization of this figure. In turn — considered in light of Mann's later discussion of aestheticism as rebellion — Aschenbach's final transformation, rather than indicating his final disgrace before his death, could enact a will to freedom that challenges contemporary bourgeois value systems. Death in this case is not Aschenbach's punishment for violating bourgeois norms, but his release from them. *Der Tod in Venedig* is undoubtedly an ambivalent response to Wilde's legacy, yet the equivocalness of the portrayals of the queer characters permits an affirmative reading of the themes of same-sex desire, decadence, aestheticism, rebellion, effeminacy, and death.

Before Aschenbach arrives at his destination, he is accosted by a nemesis figure, an old queer, a character that embodies the countertype to his gender identity. But why is this character presented as Aschenbach seen through a glass darkly? Throughout much of the novella, the narrative style is *erlebte Rede* (free indirect discourse), with the narrator reporting immediately from Aschenbach's experience (see Reed 28). With regard to the depictions of Wildean homosexuals, the narrative style causes perception to be skewed to the extent that the reader can never fully ascertain an unbiased sense of these characters. In the first instance, the reader experiences the aging dandy only through Aschenbach's perception and thus partakes in Aschenbach's disgust. In the second instance, the protagonist, the narrator, and the barber assess Aschenbach's transformation to be a successful one and yet the image persists that he has become a garishly made-up old fop. His transformation, however, can be read as Aschenbach's triumph over the denigration of the "feminine" elements within himself. The first encounter occurs on the ship which takes him from Pula to Venice where Aschenbach feels a spasm of horror when he beholds that one of a group of young Italian men is not young at all, but instead that "the man's youth was false" (211): "He was old, there was no mistaking it. There were wrinkles round his eyes and mouth. His cheek's faint carmine was rouge, the brown hair under his straw hat with its coloured ribbon was a wig, his neck was flaccid and scrawny, his small stuck-on moustache and the little imperial on his chin were dyed, his yellowish full complement of teeth, displayed when he laughed, were a cheap artificial set, and his hands, with signet rings on both index fingers, were those of an old man" (211).

The protagonist's strong emotional repulsion indicates a reaction to a countertype to the form of manly austerity he has fashioned for himself. Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, sex, and sexuality can assist in elucidating Aschenbach's reaction. In the course of the narrative, the reader learns that the protagonist has never been able to live up to the ideals of masculinity and heterosexuality which his society has set for him. Butler argues that no one fully realizes their gender because it is unrealizable: "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" ("Performative" 903). The performance of gender acts lends an "appearance of substance" to these cultural constructs which "the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (901). The relations between these acts, though, are arbitrary. Butler argues that "a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests" (905). A queer identity, like that of the character who confronts Aschenbach, disrupts naturalized heterosexuality which declares itself "the original, the true, the authentic" form of sexual attraction: "the parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and *panicked* imitation

of its own naturalized idealization. That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it 'knows' its own possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat which is at once a foreclosure of that which threatens its coherence" (Butler, "Imitation" 22-3). The text shows this character to be Aschenbach inverted: the old dandy wears an extravagantly cut yellow suit, a scarlet tie, cosmetics, and a wig which all are in contrast to Aschenbach's sober accoutrements. His shrill hilarity, drunkenness, and "wretched exuberance" (213) are contrasted to the protagonist's dignified reserve. His unbounded sexuality — suggested by the way in which he lasciviously licks the corners of his lips (214) — contrasts with Aschenbach's repression. The character haunts Aschenbach's dreams as he naps on his deck chair (212), at two points he causes Aschenbach to feel a growing estrangement from the world (211, 213), and he accosts the protagonist as he disembarks onto the quay with a suggestive sign (214). But this character only seems to affect Aschenbach: that the old man's companions tolerate him and seem to accept his presence and that he causes no major concern for other passengers hints that the character is not as horrifying as Aschenbach perceives. His intense reaction is telling as it indicates the threat this character poses to the protagonist. The dandified old man in his embodiment of anti-bourgeois sentiment, behaviors, and values is Aschenbach's antithesis. The protagonist attempts to define himself against such a figure, but the figure undermines his manly reserve. Aschenbach has formed his identity in relation to his reverence for masculine virtues of self-sacrificing heroism, austerity, civic mindedness, and discipline. The old dandy represents the reverse image of these values. Aschenbach recognizes, perhaps only subconsciously, the hidden potential the character represents and the repugnance he experiences is a reaction to being confronted with the repressed elements of himself projected upon the figure (see Webber 74-75).

Aschenbach's reaction to the dandy figure suggests his insecurity in his gender role and this is further evident in his attitudes towards his calling as an artist. The defining struggle of Aschenbach's life is that between his paternal and maternal legacies, between the Apollonian intellect embodied by his father and the Dionysian emotion embodied by his mother, and integral to this struggle is his effort to transform the production of art into a manly, proactive, and civic minded undertaking by conquering its effeminate, egocentric, and asocial aspects. In this struggle, his crowning achievement is his *A Study in Abjection*: "The forthright words of condemnation which here weighed vileness in the balance and found it wanting — they proclaimed their writer's renunciation of all moral scepticism, of every kind of sympathy with the abyss; they declared his repudiation of the laxity of that compassionate principle which holds that to understand all is to forgive all" (207). Yet, as he pursues Tadzio through the labyrinth of Venice, Aschenbach is confronted with the conflict between his artistic nature and his paternal legacy. He gauges his life against his forebears' sobriety and manliness: they were "men who had spent their disciplined, decently austere life in the service of the King and the state" (202). To Aschenbach, his ancestors represent the embodiment of moral and civic manliness: "And [Aschenbach] thought of them even here and now, entangled as he was in so impermissible an experience, involved in such exotic extravagances of feeling; he thought, with a sad smile, of their dignified austerity, their decent manliness of character. What would they say? But for that matter, what would they have said about his entire life, a life that had deviated from theirs to the point of degeneracy, this life of his in the compulsive service of art" (249). He not only falls short against this ideal of bourgeois masculinity after surrendering himself to his emotion, but it is a conception to which he has never been able to live up. The protagonist feels an intense guilt not merely for the exotic extravagances of feelings in which he has currently lost himself, but for the life he has led in the service of art. He attempts to justify this life, calling art "war, an exhausting struggle ... A life of self-conquest and defiant resolve, an astringent, steadfast and frugal life ... surely he might call this manly, might call it courageous?" (249). In the shadow of these Olympian figures of manly virtue, Aschenbach produces art which possesses moral weight and its balanced classicism is held up as a model for German school boys: his is a civic minded oeuvre.

Aschenbach's art has brought him national acclaim and a title of nobility, but, as the reader learns in the second chapter, it brings him neither joy nor pleasure. His art is an exhausting struggle, a battle which in the course of the narrative he loses. The protagonist believes his writing lacks the quality that can delight readers, "that element of sparkling and joyful improvisation, that quality which surpasses any intellectual substance in its power to delight the receptive world" (201). Now he fears that the

emotion he enslaved to reach the heights of honor and respectability is now avenging itself: "Could it be that the enslaved emotion was now avenging itself by deserting him, by refusing from now on to bear up his art on its wings, by taking with it all his joy in words, all his appetite for the beauty of form?" (201). That Aschenbach feels the need to clothe the production of art in notions of manliness and heroism indicates that he does not truly believe art to be an inherently masculine pursuit. If he did, then there would be no angst. The struggle has been in vain. If Aschenbach is punished, it is not for his transgression of bourgeois norms, but for enslaving his emotions which take their revenge upon their master.

Not long after he gives voice to his love, Aschenbach has a dream which is at the same time more than a dream, "a bodily and mental experience" (259) in which he witnesses an orgy in honor of "the stranger god," Dionysus. Mann based this dream sequence on descriptions of Dionysian rites by the classicist Erwin Rohde (see Lehnert 297-79). Aschenbach feels loathing and fear of what he sees and hears: bare-breasted women entwined by snakes, hairy men with horns on their brows, smooth-skinned boys leading goats, chanting, shrieking, and drums beating a tattoo: "Great was his loathing, great his fear, honourable his effort of will to defend to the last what was his and protect it against the Stranger, against the enemy of the composed and dignified intellect" (260). In this dream the struggle between reason and emotion is narrated between intellect and intuition, between repression and sensuality that has raged for Aschenbach his entire life. At first merely an observer, he begins to lose his grip: "his heart throbbed to the drumbeats, his brain whirled, a fury seized him, a blindness, a dizzying lust, and his soul craved to join the round-dance of the god" (260). And finally he releases the reins of self-control: "The dreamer now was with them and in them, he belonged to the stranger-god ... and his very soul savoured the lascivious delirium of annihilation" (261). At this point in the narrative, Aschenbach forsakes the last pretences to the Apollonian intellect which had heretofore ordered his life; he abandons the *Zucht* (discipline) and *Haltung* (composure) which have structured his existence, and gives himself over to his darker, fierier urges.

The effects of this dream-world *Untergang* reverberate in the waking world as Aschenbach becomes the second Wildean homosexual after his metamorphosis at the hands of the hotel barber. To make himself worthy of Tadzio's love, he embellishes his appearance: "Like any other lover, he desired to please and bitterly dreaded that he might fail to do so. He added brightening and rejuvenating touches to his clothes, he wore jewelry and used scent, he devoted long sessions to his toilet several times a day, arriving at table elaborately attired and full of excited expectation. As he beheld the sweet youthful creature who had so entranced him he felt disgust at his own ageing body, the sight of his grey hair and sharp features filled him with a sense of shame and hopelessness. He felt a compulsive need to refresh and restore himself physically; he paid frequent visits to the hotel barber" (261). The barber dyes Aschenbach's hair a youthful black and applies cosmetics to his leathery skin. His wrinkles vanish under face cream as he recaptures an aura of youth (262). The barber declares that "'Now the signore can fall in love as soon as he pleases'" (263). How the protagonist's/narrator's perception comes into play in regard to this transformation is left equivocal. It is difficult, especially for those influenced by the cinematic images of Luchino Visconti's 1971 film *Death in Venice* not to be tempted to take Aschenbach's disgust projected at the dandified old man at face value and in turn interpret this physical transformation as a fulfillment of the prophecy embodied in that character. Visconti's vision is, however, only one interpretation. The question needs to be asked if the old queer was really so awful to behold and whether Aschenbach's transformation in the same way represents a horrid masquerade of youth. The equivocalness in the characterization of both Wildean dandy figures makes these questions impossible to answer definitively.

The role of decadence in the novella is ambivalent: "On the one hand ... it was linked to asocial aestheticism, irresponsibility towards life, and the embrace of death. On the other, it was associated with liberation, a justified rebellion against and withdrawal from a stifling, banal bourgeois world, a dissolution of rigid bourgeois morality" (Mundt 89). Both the negative and positive meanings of decadence, as well as of dandyism and aestheticism, are key to "understanding of Aschenbach's departure from his bourgeois existence" (Mundt 89). As these positive aspects are often overlooked by readers, I focus on them here. Charles Baudelaire's 1863 *The Painter of Modern Life* can assist in interpreting Aschenbach's final transformation. Baudelaire characterizes dandyism as heroic, "the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages" and writes positively of the use of cosmetics (39). Therefore,

Aschenbach's use of this art form succeeds (as far as the protagonist, the narrator, and the barber are concerned) in transcending nature, in "hid[ing] all the blemishes that nature has so outrageously scatter over the complexion" (Baudelaire 46). He has "received at birth a spark of that sacred fire [he] would feign use to light up [his] whole being" (Baudelaire 47) and in doing so he hopes to win the love of the divine Tadzio. In the final episodes of the narrative, Aschenbach inhabits the dandy role; he has made his life a work of art. It is possible to view Aschenbach's embrace of his sensual side and his resultant cosmetic self-reinvention as a positive, liberating experience. No longer does he fear societal opprobrium invoked by strangers' piercing glances: "He no longer feared the observant eyes of other people; whether he was exposing himself to their suspicions he no longer cared" (261). He at least briefly in life attempts to overcome the shame he associates with his maternal inheritance — his emotion, his intuition, his ability to love homosexually — the aspects of himself that he has worked his lifelong to conquer, repress, and conceal from his conscious self and the world (on queer studies and German-language literatures, see, e.g., Lorey and Plews; on queer theory in general, see, e.g., Vasvári <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1290>>). At one level death is indeed a judgment upon Aschenbach, but on another level it is his liberator: "The death scene is ambivalent ... because it could be an apotheosis of Aschenbach just as well as the conclusion of a moral criticism" (Reed 44). And if this is liberation, it may be one that he welcomes because for Baudelaire "suicide is the supreme sacrament of dandyism" (Hiddleston 67; Sartre 140).

Exhausted after his final foray through Venice in pursuit of Tadzio, when Aschenbach eats over-ripe strawberries to quench his "no longer endurable thirst" (264), he consummates symbolically his love for Tadzio and as these fruit are tainted, this act could also indicate an intentional self-infection with cholera representing a *Liebestod* (see Binion 139). To the world, Aschenbach dies in a deckchair and is found once he falls sideways, but to him he is united with his beloved: "But to him it was as if the pale and lovely soul-summoner out there were smiling to him, beckoning to him" (157), whom Aschenbach follows "into an immensity rich with unutterable expectation" (157). The death in Venice is Aschenbach partaking of this final sacrament of the religion of dandyism. I posit that *Death in Venice* can be read as a queer text and a celebration (albeit an ambivalent one) of rebellion. However, the narrator, ever assuming a critical and ironic tone toward the narrator, becomes by the final Socratic monologue the voice of conventional bourgeois morality: "There he sat, the master, the artist who had achieved dignity, the author of *A Study in Abjection*, he who in such paradigmatically pure form had repudiated intellectual vagrancy and the murky depths, who had proclaimed his renunciation of all sympathy with the abyss, who had weighed vileness in the balance and found it wanting ... there he sat, with his eyelids closed, with only an occasional mocking and rueful sideways glance from under them which he hid again at once; and his drooping, cosmetically brightened lips shaped an occasional word of the discourse his brain was delivering, his half-asleep brain with its tissue of strange dream-logic" (264).

Does Aschenbach's revelation spring merely from a "strange dream-logic" or does he see clearly for the first time? The narrator sets up the monologue — with his scornfully ironic depiction of the protagonist — to be discounted. And yet it is at this point that Aschenbach achieves catharsis. He repudiates the role of artist as worthy citizen: "For I must tell you that we artists cannot tread the path of Beauty without Eros keeping company with us and appointing himself as our guide. ... Do you see now perhaps why we writers can be neither wise nor dignified? That we necessarily go astray, necessarily remain dissolute emotional adventurers?" (265). He spurns the use of art to educate the nation and its youth, characterizing it as "a reprehensible undertaking which should be forbidden by law ... For how can one be fit to be an educator when one has been born with an incorrigible and natural tendency towards the abyss?" (265). Here he repudiates the exalted educator function in the Platonic mentorship which Aschenbach imagines between himself and Tadzio. Moreover, his statement is important for how Mann envisions the role of art and the artist in society: he claims that art serves no moral or educative function, art is amoral. The artist must follow where *eros* leads. The implication is that art is autotellic and divorced from utilitarianism or didacticism and that it is *l'art pour l'art* and herein lies the influence upon Mann's fiction of not only Wilde, but also the aesthetic and decadent movements in general. In particular, the impact of Wilde's thought and art on *Death in Venice* can be located in the portrayals of the two manifestations of Wildean homosexuality which embody an aesthetist rebellion against nineteenth-century moral hypocrisy. The equivocal nature of Mann's

treatment of the aesthetic homosexual model invites the reader to reinterpret Aschenbach's supposed downfall and death to view this death not as a condemnation for his transgressing of bourgeois morality, but as a will to freedom.

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