Prologue to the Great War: Encounters with Apollo and Dionysus in *Death in Venice*

Although its literary antecedents may be traced back to an earlier time, the artist as hero theme surfaced as a major area of concern in literature in the first decades of the Twentieth Century. James, Kafka, Joyce, Proust, and Gide are all familiar names that made significant contributions in this genre, but perhaps no author has mined this territory with the obsessive intensity of Thomas Mann. From the early stories, especially "Tristan" and "Tonio Kroger," until the late novels, namely *Doctor Faustus* and *Felix Krull*, the solitary and often tragic heroism of the artist has been a trademark of Mann's fiction. In this area, perhaps *Death in Venice* has been his consummate masterpiece. By weaving a counterpoint of diverse sources—mythology, literary autobiography, and historical perspective—Mann summed up the tragic destiny of the artist-hero in the context of turbulent world events soon to be unfolded on the twentieth-century stage. This stage was to become World War I.

Regarding the thematic sources for *Death in Venice*, how does Mann develop and blend them? First, on a mythic level, the author dramatized the artist-hero's crisis as one of polarities in which the protagonist is crushed between the rival claims of Apollo and Dionysus. Second, viewed from the author's personal perspective, the story is presented as an allegory of the artist in relation to his materials and, as such, underscores parallels between Mann and his fictional counterpart, Gustav von Aschenbach. Third, Mann foreshadows momentous historical events in *Death in Venice*. From the opening paragraph, the reader is immediately made aware of Aschenbach and Europe under the menace of a sinister outer world. This outer world, though not the primary focus of the narrative, is nevertheless underscored in mythic terms by the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian principles. What ensues pits the artist-hero against the relentless pressures from within—the direction of human life towards discipline and order on the one hand (Apollo) and the movement towards dissolution and the release of pent-up energy and tensions on the other (Dionysus). In all of this, there is a larger historical perspective. The artist-hero (Aschenbach) is caught up in a dilemma that can be seen as a fatal foreshadowing—a prologue to the Great War.

> I still feel as if I'm dreaming and yet I suppose I should be ashamed that I didn't think it possible and didn't see the catastrophe was bound to come. What a visitation! What will Europe look like, inwardly and outwardly, when it is over? (Winston 66)

So writes Thomas Mann to his brother Heinrich Mann on August 7, 1914, regarding the outbreak of World War I. As for not foreseeing the "catastrophe," can we take Mann at his word? Only three short years before, in the summer of 1911, he began *Death in Venice*. Indeed, in the opening paragraph, the following passage reflects the events of the time:

> On a spring afternoon in 19—, the year in which for months on end so grave a threat seemed to hang over the peace of Europe, Gustav Aschenbach, or von Aschenbach as he had been officially known since his fiftieth birthday, had set out from his apartment on the Prinzregenstrasse in Munich to take a walk of some length by himself. (Mann 195)

Mann himself took this very same walk in the English Gardens on many occasions prior to and following the onset of the Great War. No doubt, it is not by accident that this and several other salient passages throughout the novella signal events of the time. Perhaps, then, in a less overt and apparent manner than in *The Magic Mountain*, the impact of world history is not overlooked by Mann in *Death in Venice*.

And what of inner psychic pressures? Again, in the opening paragraph of *Death in Venice*, Mann establishes a close correspondence between the inner and outer aspects:

> The morning's writing had overstimulated him; his work had now reached a difficult and dangerous point which demanded the utmost care and circumspection, the most insistent and precise effort of will, and the productive mechanism in his mind—that *motus anima continuus* which according to Cicero is the essence of eloquence—had so pursued its reverberating rhythm that he had been unable to halt it even after lunch, and had missed the refreshing daily siesta which was now so necessary to him as he became increasingly subject to fatigue. (Mann 195)

Under similar circumstances Mann had dropped his plans to expand *Felix Krull* from a short story, just before he took up *Death in Venice*, into a novel. It was not until 1954, more than forty years later, that Mann put the finishing touches to *Felix Krull* and his life-long obsession with the artist theme.

Important to note as well is the Latin phrase—*motus anima continuus* (continuing movement of the soul)—a direct quotation from one of Flaubert's

letters. For Aschenbach (Mann's persona) and Flaubert, the uninterrupted motion of thought was the ideal and elusive condition sought after by the Apollonian artist in the throes of the creative process. Flaubert's five years of labor with *Madame Bovary*, as well as Mann's over forty year hiatus between his two versions of *Felix Krull*, is eloquent testimony to the austere reality that is often nothing more than sheer drudgery to the writer as he struggles to shape new forms in the creative process.

Not without reason does Mann state in "Tonio Kroger," his less tragic companion piece to *Death in Venice*, that for the serious artist, "good work is brought forth only under the pressure of a bad life, that living and working are incompatible and that one must have died if one is to be wholly a creator" (Mann, "Kroger" 152). Literature is death, Mann might have explained—a not so distant literary sentiment expressed before. Perhaps this is the connecting link with Flaubert's correspondence suggested by Mann's use of the Latin phrase.

If one must die to life to be a serious creative artist, a point eloquently expressed in "Tonio Kroger," is not the reverse also true? Cannot life itself, not in a figurative but in a literal sense, become a death experience for the artist once he divorces himself from his work and returns to living "life in its seductive banality." (Mann, Kroger 161) Here again the first chapter of *Death in Venice* is instructive, though this time the visitation of death is set forth not solely as an outcome of the Apollonian principle carried to its extreme, resulting, for the artist-hero, in a lethal rigidity and sterility stemming from the drying up of inspiration. Rather, it is clearly represented in symbolic terms as both a decline in the Apollonian aspect and an upsurge of the Dionysian element.

Just as the introductory paragraph shows us Aschenbach and Europe under the menace of the outer world, what follows is the literary equivalent of an overture to an opera in which the major leitmotifs of *Death in Venice* are employed as signposts of a disturbing inner world. In addition to allusions to Flaubert, we have, then, another nineteenth-century connection—with Richard Wagner, the originator of the leitmotif technique in his monumental music dramas.

Inner and outer worlds now come together in the narrative. Is it a mere accident that Aschenbach's walk to escape the pressures of work leads him directly to a cemetery and that here he has his first glimpse of a mysterious stranger? Is this encounter real or imagined? Quite significantly, it could be either. What strikes one immediately is the setting and then the appearance of the stranger. Seemingly out of nowhere he emerges before Aschenbach at the entrance to a mortuary chapel. In keeping with the Eastern origins of Dionysus, the facade of the building is distinctly Byzantine. The eerie aspect of this graveyard apparition is reinforced by the description of the stranger:

> The man was moderately tall, thin, beardless and remarkably snub-nosed: he belonged to the red-haired type and had its characteristic milky, freckled complexion. He was quite evidently not of Bavarian origin; at all events he wore a straw hat with a broad straight brim which gave him an exotic air, as of someone who had come from distant parts. (Mann, *Venice*, 103)

In the same paragraph we read that the stranger's "Adam's apple stood out stark and bare on his lean neck" and that "His lips seemed to be too short and were completely retracted from his teeth, so that the latter showed white and long between them, bared to the gums." An astute critic of Thomas Mann, Erich Heller, has pointed out that these characteristics of the mysterious stranger match up with a Durer image of Death. (Heller 103) This image, some might call it the first announcement of the death messenger, is to recur at critical transition points later in the story.

The stranger's backpack stirs in Aschenbach something he has long repressed—a desire to travel. Later in the narrative, all points in the Apollonian and Dionysian counterpoint come together, reinforced by the geographical situation as well. For is not Venice the obvious meeting point between East (Dionysus) and West (Apollo)? And yet Mann does not keep the reader waiting until this critical moment to register the collision of mighty currents pulling Aschenbach in opposite directions.

As Chapter One moves towards its climax, Aschenbach, already responding to the strange visitation in the cemetery, experiences the hallucinatory effects of Dionysus as a subconscious phantasm :

> He saw it, saw a landscape, a tropical swampland under a cloud-swollen sky, moist and lush and monstrous, a kind of primeval wilderness of islands, morasses and muddy alluvial channels; far and wide around him he saw hairy palm-trunks thrusting upward from rank jungles of fern, from among thick fleshy plants in exuberant flower; saw strangely misshapen trees with roots that arched through the air before sinking into the ground or into stagnant shadowy-green glassy waters where milk-white blossoms floated as big as plates, and wamong them exotic birds with grotesque beaks stood hunched in the shallows, their heads tilted motionless sideways; saw between the knotted stems of the bamboo thicket the glinting eye of a crouching tiger, and his heart throbbed with terror and mysterious longing. (Mann, Death 197)

Here in one potent jungle image, Mann registers a warning signal from Aschenbach's unconscious. The tension within Aschenbach causes him to distort and project a sinister outer world. Myth and psychology blend together at this point in the narrative. The image of the tiger can be seen as an invasion of Aschenbach's conscious world—an ominous invasion in which the mind is only too willing to submit to chaos and destruction when it cannot assimilate what the unconscious world has to offer. Already, at this early stage in *Death in Venice*, the enriching possibilities that the realm of Dionysus offers the creative artist are projected as a negative image of destructive force. A fatal pattern in the creative artist's temperament is now exposed, for the demands of self-discipline exacted by the work of the classical artist (Apollo's realm) reflect a weariness that stems from the exhausting effort to create new forms:

> Nevertheless, he knew the reason for the unexpected temptation only too well. This longing for the distant and the new, this craving for liberation, relaxation and forgetfulness—it had been, he was bound to admit, an urge to escape, to run away from the humdrum scene of his cold, inflexible, passionate duty. (Mann, *Death* 198)

Against the surging appeal of primal, instinctual life (Dionysus' realm) suggested by the jungle image, a signal foreshadowing the dangerous potential for chaos, Aschenbach's usually dependable predisposition for work abandons him. The warning is clear and unmistakable, it would seem—but not to Aschenbach. However, this brief glimpse of the jungle with the tiger at its center is more serious than an innocent daylight hallucination. It foreshadows the fatal sequence of events that will soon overtake Aschenbach in Venice. The attractions of travel, and with it the tempting balm of release and forgetfulness, are only the surface image of the Dionysian reality. Beyond this, biding his time in the narrative, the tiger episode, and all the menacing forces of the jungle it represents, will return to claim Aschenbach as something more than a figment of his distorted imagination. In the end, the rewards of travel are not what the artist-hero anticipates. More sinister forces lie in wait for Aschenbach. The benevolent gifts of Dionysus—release from exhausting work and voluptuous forgetfulness in an idyllic landscape—give way to chaos, dissolution, and, ultimately, death.

Is Mann's story only about the perils of the artist's journey? The author himself shied away from a definitive interpretation of this work. In a letter to the future wife of art critic Heinrich Jocobi, Mann writes as follows to Elizabeth Zimmer:

> Today I am scarcely a competent interpreter of *Death in Venice*; I have almost forgotten the

> writing of it. Certainly, it is in the main a story of death, death as a seductive antimoral power—a story of the voluptuousness of doom. But the problem I especially had in mind was that of the artist's dignity—I wanted to show something like the tragedy of supreme achievement. (Winston 72)

Significantly, this letter was written in September 1915, while the Great War was still in progress. It is not surprising, then, that Mann should write of the "voluptuousness of doom" and "death as a destructive antimoral force." Here, it seems to me, we return to an earlier point—the masterful manner in which Mann blends mythology, literary autobiography, and the historical perspective in his narrative. As myth, the story may be summed up in terms of the Apollo-Dionysus conflict—a conflict, moreover, that bears directly on the problem of the creative artist as Mann perceived it: To achieve form and balance, one risks sterility; on the other hand, within the Dionysian framework, one achieves fecundity and dance—yet without meaning. Apollo must come first, then Dionysus. Regarding literary autobiography, we may simply say that the tragic fate of Aschenbach could have been Mann's as well. Indeed, this almost happened well over three decades later during World War II when he was at work on his other tragic presentation of the artist theme in *Doctor Faustus*. Throughout all this, laboring on the threshold of nervous exhaustion similar to Aschenbach's, Mann strove valiantly to keep his aesthetic perspective—"the artist's dignity." Also, like Aschenbach, Mann was fascinated by the relationship between perfection of form and the nothingness of death, a corrosive relationship that poses a critical equation: the higher the point of awareness, the lower the pulse of vitality. The draining of the pulse of vitality was more than a metaphorical encounter with death as he labored on *Doctor Faustus*. It was an existential reality that landed him in the hospital where his illness was diagnosed as life-threatening.

But is this all? Isn't there also the historical perspective implicit in the narrative of *Death in Venice*? In the first chapter, we accompany Aschenbach on his walk to the English Gardens in Munich. It is an extended walk that leads ultimately to the cemetery—a walk that foreshadows labyrinthian walks in a decaying, decadent Venice. Here the final, cataclysmic encounter with death is played out in the center of Europe where East (Dionysus) and West (Apollo) come together. For both the creative artist-hero in his inner world and everyone else in the outer world, it is a mighty prologue to the Great War.

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Herbert O. Smith
University of Maryland
European Division
Bremerhaven, Germany