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Some Psychoanalytic Reflections on Thomas Mann's
Death in Venice

This enigmatic yet engrossing short story could be studied from many perspectives. The following study will attempt to present some psychoanalytic reflections on the work which appear significant to the writer. The limited scope of this report prohibits a more detailed study.

Some literary commentaries and many conversational comments on the work indicate that Death in Venice is a study of or is concerned with the question of homosexuality. To deny this would seem to be naive; yet to approach the work simply or primarily from this angle could result in too limited a view. That is, it seems to this reader that although the content of Aschenbach's phantasy life reflects homosexual themes, the structure of the story, the lack of any overt homosexual acts, the breakdown in personal communications (object relations) evidence a much more serious diagnosis than that of a neurotic disorder. As a tentative description schizophrenia would seem to be more in evidence. We may note, however, that diagnostic categories are always tentative; psychoanalysis, although offering a comprehensive theory of the mind, is primarily directed at and for living persons. One must always, to a certain extent, "play it by ear" -

hopefully an educated and sensitive ear - when proceeding with psychoanalytic analysis. It should be evident that any analysis of literary themes or works is always partial, obviously limited, and valuable insofar as it aids one in better appreciating the reality and the problems of living men.

What this tale depicts is the breakdown of Aschenbach's rational ego (secondary process thinking) and a gradual return or re-emergence of his archaic ego (primary process thinking). I think the first sign of this can be seen from the following considerations. Basic to man's capacity to establish control and contact with reality is his ability to talk. Conversely, the lack of rationally recognizable talk can be an indication of a serious disturbance. In Death in Venice Aschenbach never speaks with Tadzio. Speaking helps delineate the rational ego, and unless one has a case of extreme psychosis, speaking can be a powerful tool in enabling the patient to approach perceiving the difference between one's phantasy world and his experiences with the objective surrounding world. I think we may perceive two moments in Aschenbach's withdrawal. First is his accidental meeting with and attempt to speak with Tadzio and the consequent anxiety that the situation provokes. Note the following:

The lonely youth moved at a loitering pace - he might easily be overtaken; and Aschenbach hastened his own step. He reached him on the board walk that ran behind the bathing cabins, and all but put out his hand to lay it on shoulder or head, while his lips parted to utter a friendly salutation in French He hesitated, sought after self-control, was

suddenly panic-stricken lest the boy notice him hanging there behind him and look around. Then he gave up, abandoned his plan, and passed him with bent head and hurried step.

"Too late! Too late!" he thought as he went by.

The failure to establish any external communication is soon followed by an ambiguous and phantasy provoking communication - namely, through the meeting of the eyes. Note the following:

Tadzio walked behind the others, he let them pass ahead in the narrow alleys, and as he sauntered slowly after, he would turn his head and assure himself with a glance of his strange, twilight grey eyes that his lover was still following. He saw him - and he did not betray him. The knowledge enraptured Aschenbach. Lured by those eyes, led on the leading-string of his own passion and folly, utterly lovesick, he stole upon the footsteps of his unseemly hope

The story is told exclusively from Aschenbach's perspective, and although the above passage seems to reflect Tadzio's objective judgment, I think the total context would indicate that this passage reflects Aschenbach's judgment perceptions. Again we may note here that no psychoanalytic judgment is made simply from analyzing one symptom. Actually to attempt to apodictically establish the schizophrenic regression evident in this novel, we would need to present a laboriously prolonged study. What is often presented in case histories or analytic studies of literary characters is an intuitive understanding of the situation. Intuition should be understood here not as a type of guess or understanding based on unaccountable feeling, but as reflecting an intellectual and emotional synthesis of a variety of important as well as apparently trivial factors.

A second indication evidencing Aschenbach's failure of communication and predominance of primary process thought patterns is his refusal to inform Tadzio's mother of the fact that Venice has a plague and that thus the best thing for her and her family would be to leave. The full import of this negligence will be noted shortly.

Tonight, after dinner, he might approach the lady of the pearls and address her in words which he precisely formulated in his mind ... "Leave here at once, without delay, with Tadzio and your daughters. Venice is in the grip of pestilence." Then might he lay his hand in farewell upon the head of that instrument of a mocking deity; and thereafter flee the accursed morass. But he knew that he was far indeed from any serious desire to take such a step. It would restore him, would give him back himself once more: but he who is beside himself revolts at the idea of self-possession.

Now this refusal to respond realistically to the demands of the situation - his apparent incapacity to appreciate the question of life and death - certainly evidences a delusional phenomena. In conjunction with this refusal/incapacity to warn Tadzio's mother, there are present to Aschenbach pleasant phantasies both of Tadzio's imminent death (although not from the plague) and of the sole existence of Tadzio and himself after the plague eliminated everyone else in Venice.

"He is delicate, he is sickly," Aschenbach thought. "He will most likely not live to grow old." He did not try to account for the pleasure the idea gave him.

... But the lady of the pearls stopped on with her family; whether because the rumours had not reached her or because she was too proud and fearless to heed them. Tadzio remained; and it seemed at times to Aschenbach, in his obsessed state, that death and fear together might clear the island of all other souls and leave him there along with him he coveted.

We know that in dreams and in the disintegration of the rational ego where we see the fruits of primary process patterns emerging, there is an incapacity on the part of the subject to conceive of his own death (incapacity to perceive negation); there is lack of critical faculty enabling the perception of contradiction and consequent presence of extreme ambivalence; and there is an incapacity to perceive the difference between phantasy life and objective-verifiable reality (reality principle). We see all these factors evidenced in the above plague and death situation in the story. Since, throughout the story, Mann uses the word "love" we might note the following. One of the critical criteria of love would seem to be the desire for the good of the other; a self-dedication for the loved object's welfare, which does not exclude the note of personal enjoyment. As such this is not evidenced in the work at all.

Although we see some of Aschenbach's restitutive mechanisms, for example, the writing of the essay on art, the philosophical discourses on beauty, the critical and evaluative memory of significant passages from Plato, nevertheless, I believe that, in view of his breakdown in communication discussed above, this incapacity to appreciate the import of the plague and the high degree of ambivalence, love and death wishes for Tadzio, love and death wishes for himself, indicate a clear schizoid disorder. This last point needs a little more clarification. We have alluded to his death phantasies of Tadzio

as well as his fleeting phantasy of his omnipresence with Tadzio after everyone was gone. Aschenbach's ambivalence toward himself may not be as evident. Thus the story does relate how Aschenbach took progressively more care of his body (his appearance) - normally something of a healthy sign - yet in the particular setting this positive indication is not borne out. For what we have here is a delusional attempt to recapture lost youth coupled with self-destruction as the prospect of losing his "love object" approached. The following passage reflects Aschenbach's losing Tadzio on a particular walk, yet in the context of the story Aschenbach could have easily concluded that Tadzio was about to leave permanently.

... The Polish family crossed a small vaulted bridge, the height of whose archway hid them from his sight, and when he climbed it himself they were nowhere to be seen. ... Worn quite out and unnerved, he had to give over the search.

His head buried, his body was wet with clammy sweat, he was plagued by intolerable thirst. He looked about for refreshment, of whatever sort, and found a little fruit-shope where he bought some strawberries. They were overripe and soft; he ate them as he went.

We can conclude that for a European traveler of Aschenbach's experience and knowledge his buying and eating the overripe fruit in time of plague can hardly be considered accidental in the sense of ignorance. I think we have here a relatively clear case of self-destruction, not the case of overt premeditated suicide, but certainly the result of unconscious/preconscious choice. A self-destruction brought about through a definitive failure of the rational ego to

respond to and accept a reality demand, and thus concomitantly an overpowering of the subject by conscious and unconscious guilt and punishment. (The story gives many indications of Aschenbach's ambivalent relations to his parents which would certainly have to be investigated if we wished to study the genesis of his homosexual phantasies and his eventual destruction. This is beyond the intention of the present study.)

The story ends with Aschenbach's sitting on the beach, gazing for the last time at Tadzio - Tadzio who has become the condensation of myth heros and the object of core instincts. As Aschenbach's death comes upon him, Tadzio waves and Aschenbach responds to this as a summons to return to the fecundity of Mother sea, the protectiveness and seclusion of the womb, to the omnipotence of Mother's love:

He rested his head against the chair-back and followed the movements of the figure out there, then lifted it, as it were in answer to Tadzio's gaze. It sank on his breast, the eyes looked out beneath their lids, while his whole face took on the relaxed and brooding expression of deep slumber. It seemed to him the pale and lovely Summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned; as though, with the hand he lifted from his hip, he pointed outward as he hovered on before into an immensity of richest expectation.

SUMMARY

What this short and obviously incomplete presentation has highlighted is the gradual disintegration of a personality. A person who gradually loses the ability to communicate with the world around him, who therefore loses the capacity to interpret the world around him; a person who has regressed

to the ambivalence and omnipotence of primary process thought structures. A person who, returned to this primal state, succumbs to its power. In the text this drama is done within the framework of rational acts; however, this is at best a framework. To see in this story another instance of Mann's contrasting the Germanic rationality with southern Mediterranean exuberance would seem to this writer a mistake. Aschenbach is no example of rationality; he is a person in schizophrenic decay. For this reason I do not think we could even extend the prototypes and make the conflict one between pure reason and artistic-instinctual sensibility. Again by the very structure of the story and the presentation of Aschenbach's disintegrating personality, to consider the work a study in homosexuality or as primarily directed to this theme would seem, in this writer's opinion, to limit the psychoanalytic understanding of the work. What the above analysis has attempted to do is to provide a general framework by which to understand more particular symptoms. *

*Cf. Heinz Kohut, "Death in Venice by Thomas Mann: A Story About the Disintegration of Artistic Sublimation," in Psychoanalysis and Literature, ed. Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek (Dutton Paperback, 1964).