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"Thomas Mann, ‘Expressionism,’ and Death in Venice” for “Death in Venice: Warrington Colescott and Thomas Mann”

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Thomas Mann, “Expressionism,” and *Death in Venice*

Introduction to Session on Death in Venice: Warrington Colescott and Thomas Mann, exhibited at Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA)
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**OPENING**

[1 TITLE PAGE]

Thanks to
Sheri Castelnuova (Curator of Education),
Stephen Fleischman (Director),
the staff of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art,
my dad,
and of course Warrington himself—who unfortunately couldn’t be here today.

**BACKGROUND ON EXPRESSIONISM**

Begin at Realist/Impressionist stage—German incorporates then responds

After the emergence of politically motivated Social Realist art in France as well as German lands, [2 REALIST COLLAGE] and ...

then the refinement of efforts to capture “reality,” as immediately and scientifically accurately as possible via the Impressionist revolution in representative techniques [3 IMPRESSIONIST COLLAGE], Germany and Austria were the sites of increasingly important moves toward modernist aesthetics.

Most famously, it is in Germany and Austria that Expressionism and, ultimately, Abstract Expressionism, developed as an intensification of the “inward” turn that took place at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century.

**Shift toward Symbolism**

Although rooted in what can be understood as “Romantic” concepts that German cultural figures had contrived in response to the earliest phases of the modern age, according to the standard survey of these developments, this move toward a
“deeper” representation of reality that included the subjective as well as the objective dimensions can be seen as having commenced in France as triggered by the “Symbolist” critic and poet, Charles Baudelaire. [4 BAUDELAIRE IMAGE]

Influenced by him, writers, composers, and painters began to blend increasingly complex combinations of imagery to symbolize not just what was occurring in their fast modernizing lives, but also what the “felt” about those experiences. [5 SYMBOLIST COLLAGE]

Move to Post-Impressionism [6 POST-IMPRESSIONIST COLLAGE]

Evolving along these lines Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Toulouse-Lautrec, under the broad rubric of “Post-Impressionism”—or better, “Impressionism Plus”—ruptured color schemes, systems of perspective, and notions of “photographic” accuracy to convey their inner feelings about external experience.

Similar developments east of France

Though perhaps a step later--since Impressionism took slightly longer to take hold in places like Berlin, Munich, Vienna, and Oslo--similar trends were taking place in regions east of Arles and Paris.

German “Symbolists” . [7 GERMAN SYMBOLIST COLLAGE]

Like the first French Symbolists Boecklin, Klinger, and Stuck moved to representation of inner states with reference to traditional culture. [8 NIETZSCHE FREUD IMAGE]

Shift to Expressionism  [9 EXPRESSIONIST COLLAGE A]

Secessionists such as Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele in Vienna emerged parallel to the increasing importance of Nietzsche and Freud, who was working precisely in their world.

Contemporary trends in Munich, Berlin, even Oslo constituted parts of an “Expressionist” movement as a whole  [[10 EXPRESSIONIST COLLAGE B]

Muenter, Marc, Kandinsky, Kirchner, Nolde, and of course Edvard Munch [he painted multiple versions of The Scream between 1898 and 1910] all developed explicit combinations of “primitive” technique and psychological symbolism in order to use their arts as part of a deep inquiry into the modern soul.

Shift to Abstract Expressionism [11 ABSTRACT COLLAGE]

Ultimately, these trends lead to the break through most importantly manifested in the works of Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian who was living in Munich when he transitioned into
non-representational REPRESENTATION of the inner life—in the most immediate sense.


Expressionism in music

Parallel to these developments in the visual arts, we should also recognize that there was a progression through what we can call Expressionism in Music as well.

Debussy [12] actually considered himself a “Symbolist,” rejecting label of Impressionist composer as an insult to the spiritualistic, psychological nature of his compositions.

Claire de lune (1890)
La Mer (1903)
Preludes (1910)

Ravel [Shéhérazade (1898), Satie [Gymnopédies [3] (1888)], Saint-Saens [The Carnival of the Animals (1887)] all intensified the introspective implications of musical expression.

Whatever you may think now, Richard Wagner [13] was widely considered as a Modernist (as well as a Romantic, Revolutionary, Nationalist and Anti-Semitic) creator

Leitmotiven systematically traced fleeting concepts and feelings.

Sensuality - Tristan und Isolde [1865]; Parsifal [1882]

Richard Strauss [14]

Loved Nietzsche and conveyed this in his “tone poem” - Also sprach Zarathustra (1896)

Put deep psychology and sensuality explicitly on the stage- Salome (1905)

Arnold Schoenberg [15] - Verklärte Nacht (1899) in his earlier “expressionist” stage

Gustav Mahler [16]

Psychology (Freud)

Symphony 1 (1896)

Symphony 5 [Used in Visconti film] (1902)

Kindertotenlieder (1901-1904)

Ultimately, in close awareness of what Kandinsky was doing simultaneously in art, Schoenberg [17] breaks through to “pan-
tonal” or what comes to be known as atonal compositions.

Five Orchestral Pieces (1908)
Pierrot Lunaire (1912)

BACKGROUND ON THOMAS MANN

Born in 1875 [18]
Came of age while all of the above developments were taking place.

We must situate his early works, especially Death in Venice within this amazing framework of Turn of the Century culture in Europe in general, and Germany/Austria in particular.

His literary work must be correlated—though not equated—with the great works above.

Mann is not officially considered a member of the Expressionist movement. He is not part of the

One thing that differs is his highly refined style. The exquisite structure of his stories and longer narratives. He is not represented of the more “stream of consciousness” style that was emerging. His works are incredibly disciplined and ordered, though there are moments when he cuts loose and symbolizes the most intense emotional states.

This is the tension that exists in almost all of his stories: between his emotional, Dionysian, artistic nature, exploring passions, instincts, drives that Freud and Nietzsche were saying we are driven by, and the disciplined, scientific, Apollonian nature necessary to capture, study, and present it. He is always discussing and representing the two sides of the Western nature (with all their complex permutations) in this sense.

Mann’s “homosexuality,” bisexuality, or homo-erotic nature was eating at him at all times. He was not “out.” This is the real tension within him. But he draws from that symbols of anyone dealing with drives that are “not to be named” and the effort to manage and channel them in some constructive rather than self-destructive way.

This makes him distinct from the Expressionist movement as a whole: he doesn’t “jump into” it, but looks at it, studies it, trying to keep things in check with a wife and family of 6 children. It is that effort that comes through.

Therefore, his works may be more immediately representative of the trends as they manifested direct applications of ideas formulated by writers such as Nietzsche and Freud at the time.
Youth in Lubeck [19]

Son of a trading family in “northern” world of discipline and commerce. Luebeck a port city in the Hanseatic League. Very “bourgeois,” protestant culture. [20]

“Double” nature: Father a scion of the multi-generational “bourgeois” success of the family. [21]

But he did something “strange,” for that world, in marrying a woman of German and Portuguese ancestry who emigrated to Germany from Brazil when she was seven years old. [22] He brought this vivacious, artistic spirit into this world.

For Mann this is symbolic of his dual nature—understood in literally biological terms (increasingly common at the time).

Moreover, the father made a unique move that marked a decadent end to this proper, upright mentality of the north German business man. When he came to retirement and writing his will, he decided to dissolve the trading firm. He did not consider his sons capable of continuing it. It was over.

So, when he died in 1891, the mother moves the family to “southern” Munich.

Mann saw this as an “endpoint” that the “Liberal” age of the period had come to an end and was entering a decadent stage—embodied in his own being!

Heinrich and Thomas Mann brothers [23]

The brothers study and become writers instead of business men. Heinrich, the elder, begins writing - Socialist, Realist, novelist in the tradition of Zola. [24]

Thomas more conservative - immersed in “Romantic” culture. [25]

He said that the “stars in his constellation” were not Zola, Marx, and the French Socialists, but Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche - and increasingly, I would add, Freud. That’s a very potent combination!

Bi-sexuality [26]

Mann was repressed for his whole life.

Married Katia Pringsheim (wealthy Jewish heiress). Six children. [27]

Writes Buddenbrooks (1901) at age of 24-26. [28]

Here he wrote the history of his family and all these elements,
including the “decline” of the father, the marriage to the Latinate outsider, and the end of this business house.

Magnificent novel—maybe his best.

Used Schopenhauer and Wagner references to symbolize notion that father was trending away from the needs of the business and slipping toward this new age of asceticism and decadence.

But short stories and short novels are equally important:

"Little Herr Friedemann" (1897)
"The Joker" (1897)
"Tristan" (1903)
"Tonio Kroeger" (1903)

They include references to his own life, his family’s life, Freud, Nietzsche, Wagner—but not just those. He weaves together tapestries of references to the whole of the Western tradition of which he had total command in order to create symbols of this sense of personal turmoil.

This is a sign of the technical, stylistic influence that Wagner has on him. He develops “Leading Motives” like Wagner does: references to the parents, boyhood memories, feelings toward his own children, passing thought—these keep cropping up in all the stories, in different guises—sometimes altering their apparent significance, just as Wagner does with the “Leitmotiven” of his music dramas.

Overall, each of these characters are symbols of his own self doubt. They are all about the inner turmoil as people come to consciousness of their divide natures. In them he seems to articulate, in subtle ways, his concern about whether he will be able to face the truth of his nature—to be honest and open about it; then, having done so, to channel it in some constructive way.

This is what Nietzsche had called for: know your nature, become your self, and go your own way in a creative sense. On the other hand, Freud recognizes similar “psychological” issues, but then tried to guide people to manage them in a way that would return them to “normalcy.” In this sense, every character is split. Every time you think you are sure what a scene, image, or even character’s development means, it seems to slip away from you. Reading him is similar to trying to control quicksilver or mercury. As soon as you think you have grasped it, another reading renders it more complicated, and the search continues. Though written in a structured way, these stories leave things “open,” given this Nietzschean, Expressionist awareness that we are a
complicated conglery of things and no simple explanation will suffice.

I don’t want to take away the ending, but the stories generally do not end well. Mann is signifying doubt about whether most people are going to be able to do what Nietzsche calls for. They may come to question the Liberal, materialistic, superficial side of things, and delve into their true nature. But when they see that, they may not have the strength to “overcome” and move to the new phase of creative wholeness (the Superman, or next man).

Mann does. Because he is able to write it. But he peoples his stories with many others who aren’t able to do that. This seems to indicate a general lack of confidence. They may expose themselves, but it could be dangerous for them, or for society as a whole—if they end up seeking ways to cover this over.

Thus, Mann’s stories all constitute a deep inquiry into the psychological state of German upper middle class at turn of the century. [29]

But, they also stand as masterpieces of the Western inquiry into the soul that are universally valid, and perhaps the greatest among them is Death in Venice.

INTRODUCTION TO DEATH IN VENICE

Published in Die neue Rundschau in 1912. [30]

Mann was only 37 years old.

But, amazingly, he set forth to capture the profound stages of a “mid-life crisis” experienced by man at least twenty years older.

The extent to which he was able to imagine and capture this in a way that is considered universally valid give you a sense of the power of such a thinker, and indeed all of those we are considering in this framework.

BACKGROUND TO COLESCOTT’S WORKS

I will go through story and give you a close reading of some of the most famous quotations from the text.

My goal is not to explain Warrington’s representations of them, but to give you sense of the original source of these ideas and images.

For Thomas Mann’s was indeed a world of letters and I believe you need to immerse yourself in the text in which he wrought the exquisite concepts that touched Warrington so deeply before
we can really consider how he synthesized them with his own life and work.

SPECIFIC PASSAGES OF DEATH IN VENICE CORRELATED WITH WARRINGTON’S IMAGES

The story is initially set in Munich, and if you are familiar with it you will recognize the sites he depicts—drawing from the “realist” side of the tradition he is building on.

The story is about his life: the life of a great writer, whom he gives the name Gustav Aschenbach. In doing so, Mann was taking material from the “actual” world—just as Baudelaire and Van Gogh, Lautrec, and the others of this era were doing—and then aestheticizing it to represent much more.

After his usual, puritanical, start of the day, “The morning’s writing had overstimulated him” and he needs a break, so he goes for a walk in the Englischer Garten of Munich.

[31]

As he moves through this world his inner feelings are narrated.

The sight of a strange man in the cemetary, dressed in volkisch outfit, triggers an emotional shift in Aschenbach—an involuntary thought or feeling just pops up without clear explanation. {196}

“Whether some other physical or psychological influence was at work...” [32]
So, here he’s explicitly talking about subconscious influences... something unconscious became conscious...trying to figure out what might have caused it.

But also, at the turn of the twentieth century, the extension of the early *nineteenth* century concept of “restlessness” or “Sehnsucht”—yearning for something else, somewhere else, green grass elsewhere. So Mann is still writing in that Romantic idiom, but updated for the new era with more nuance.

[33]

So he analyzes it more...recognizing it as powerful.

That’s a Thomas Mann sentence. A luxurious, Wagnerian line of expression. Putting together pictures of what the Expressionists are yearning for, in nature somewhere, somewhere else—in the tropics, in primitive worlds other than the city.

Yearning to get away from discipline, order, high strung world that he represents. He manages passion, but now is starting to subsume himself within it. So the jungle imagery could also be a sign of the ID as Freud was starting to explain Westerners needed to recognize.

That’s what comes out in the next section.

Westerners too caught up in the culture of materialism, work, people are not opening themselves to life and inner experience. Mann’s “type” is too repressed. He has never left “Europe”—been holed up. It was time for the “enslaved emotion” to “take revenge on him.” “This longing for the distant and the new, this craving for liberation, relaxation, and forgetfulness” [Baudelaire had same desire.]—“it had been, he was bound to admit, an urge to escape, to run away fro his writing, away from the humdrum of his cold, inflexible, passionate duty.” [198]
So he decides to finally act on it.

[35]

He compromises, but will go “South”: drawing on another common “German” theme of the “Drang nach Suden” that arguably began with Duerer and other Renaissance era figures, but culminated (until this story) with Goethe’s Italian Travels—where Germans escape from “Germaness” for a while and breath the Mediterranean spirit—before they start longing to go back home.

Then comes more on his background, he is the author of very serious histories and literary theory--actually works that Mann had considered undertaking himself: including the life of Frederick of Prussia, etc. {200} [36]

Then we learn of his “serious” Germanic patrimony: [Leitmotiv] {200} [37]

“His ancestors...

So there is the background of north German, Prussian, iron discipline and austerity. Which Mann would have considered his
own bloodline.

But then came “a strain.... [SAME SLIDE]

So there is this Leitmotiv of a duality, which was his personal dichotomy, but which he transforms into a symbol for the state of Western civilization at the time, waiting to see which side would be victorious. Up to this point, he seems to be saying, this austerity and rationalism has been victorious. You could say that the new Reich has been operating in these terms as Germany rose to industrial prominence. But underneath it all, these other elements were seething and could come out in either positive or negative ways. So painters, musicians, and authors are saying that they had to be careful to see what would happen if these things emerged, or blew up after being so long repressed. The goal is a Nietzschean effort to release them in creative ways... but that is not yet certain.

Then comes an incredible metaphor that I remember in my life often. The description of a friend who remarked. Great image: “‘You see...”

OK, back to the theme of Wanderlust: “He was haunted by an innner impulse that still had no clear direction.” It is still nebulous, not clear.

If one wanted to travel overnight to somewhere incomparable, to a fantastic mutation of normal reality, where did one go? [...] Venice.” [Discuss Venice.] {207} [39]
Venice is the compromise: something that is exotic but not too far. And that was Venice’s reputation ever since the 18th century. A lugubrious “Las Vegas.” What happened in Venice, stayed in Venice—and may have happened under the remarkable masks and costumes of Carnevale. Moreover, Venice was for Mann a symbol of coming to an end, as Wagner had died there. Everything in a Mann story has such personal, cultural, historical significance.

So, off to exotic Venice.

Now, on the ship. Aschenbach, at midlife, approaching a crisis, observes people (as the writer always does—gathering/stealing material from any situation. (Anything is legitimately grist for Mann’s mill: family trips to Venice, but also his sister’s suicide, recognizing desire for his own son, etc.”

Here he sees a man about his own age dressed up and trying to hang out with younger guys, which he considers ridiculous.

“But as soon as...
He considers this pathetic, but it actually foreshadows his own end... It is a physical symbol of the decline and crisis that is coming.

Then things shift from this external observation into internal musings. This happens throughout the book, whether it is a dream, or a daydream, or a subtle recognition of feelings that we are usually in too much of a hurry to notice. But Mann, Nietzsche, Wagner, and Freud are saying that we need to pay attention to them. And Aschenbach does

“He had a feeling that...
Let’s say he has a “dizzy” moment—which then continues as he wavers between wakefulness and sleep. [43]

From the Romantics, like William Wordsworth, this moment where you drift off into sleep is pivotal—an intersection between the conscious and the subconscious. Here Mann puts it in very direct words. I would say that the same is at work in the images of the Expressionist artists—registering the fleeting interactions between what is going on and what you feel about it.

Here, of course, is Warrington’s reflection on all that was going on as Aschenbach traveled south.

01 Aschenbach Aboard [44]
Moving along, as I see the sequence of Warrington’s imagery, we have the positive arrival in Venice [45], namely, at Saint Mark’s Square:

Thus it was that he saw it once more, that most astonishing of all landing places, that dazzling composition of fantastic architecture which the Republic presented to the admiring gaze of approaching seafarers: the unburdened splendor of the Ducal Palace; the Bridge of Sighs, the lion and the saint on their two columns at the water’s edge, the magnificently projecting side wing of the fabulous basilica, the vista beyond it of the gate tower and the Giants’ Clock; and as he contemplated it all, he reflected that to arrive in Venice by land, at the station, was like entering a palace by a back door: that only as he was now doing, only by ship, over the high sea, should one come to this most extraordinary of cities.

02 Piazza San Marco [46]
But, immediately thereafter, he shifts to an image of foreboding:

[47]

"CAN THERE BE ANYONE WHO HAS NOT HAD TO OVERCOME A 
FLEETING...

Another image to get under the surface—reminding us of the darker side of Venice, associated with Wagner’s death, etc.

05 Dark Gondola [48]
In hotel, he immerses himself in the crowd, a la Baudelaire. “The observations and encounters of a devotee of solitude and silence are at once less distinct and more penetrating than those of the sociable man; his thoughts are weightier, stranger, and never without a tinge of sadness [...] The fruit of solitude is originality, something daringly and disconcertingly beautiful, the poetic creation. But the fruit of solitude can also be the perverse, the disproportionate, the absurd and the forbidden [...] It was no doubt this very paradox that made them disturbing.” {215}

In this mood, he first sees Tadzio.

Tadzio is 14: so was Gretchen, in Goethe’s Faust!! {216}

But at first the associations he makes are Classical, and Apollonian, not Romantic and Dionysian. This will change through the story.

More of this weaving together of interactions between what is
happening externally with what is being felt internally. Like Nietzsche, Freud, Klimt, all Western intellectuals, he taps into Classical references to set forth his views.

Intricate details—impressionistic accuracy, almost like a photograph, combined with Classical symbolism. All of the direct intimate detail is combined, symbolically with the inclusion of the “head of Eros.” Like Freud using references to Eros, Thanatos, Oedipus, etc., Mann was weaving together real feelings felt in the present time with high cultural references.

Remember too that it is true that Mann went to Venice (with his family), saw the man on the boat, lost his luggage, and saw this boy. He drew from his real experiences to produce all of this!
And here is Warrington’s image of the “moment”—directly from Aschenbach’s perspective!!

Now, Mann does not go as far as others of this era in capturing pure stream of consciousness—like James Joyce and Marcel Proust. But he does provide an ongoing sense of the fluidity of thought. Aschenbach floats from desire to desire, changing his mindset constantly through time. This is almost an example of literary stream of consciousness, but Mann presented it within his
"shell" of realism.

Below: Romantic thoughts of the sea, "a longing for the unarticulated and immeasurable, for eternity, for nothingness," then shift back to "the beautiful boy." {221}

[54]

"There were profound reasons...

The next major section covers Aschenbach’s effort to “escape” from the feelings he is beginning to sense. He decides that he needs to leave, and even packs up and sets out. But through it, he is conflicted...wondering, “Should I stay or should I go?” Clearly, in this, we get the sense of confusion within a soul split between "multiple personalities."

But in the end, on the way out, his baggage is misdirected: "A wild joy, and unbelievable feeling of hilarity, shook him almost convulsively from the depths of his heart. [...] How unbelievably strange an experience it was, how shaming, how like a dream in its bizarre comedy [...]

Once again, then, he experiences a process of negotiation within himself. After his return, he "shakes his head with displeasure at his irresolution, his ignorance of his own wishes." So, he is AWARE of Nietzsche’s point that we are always fighting within our selves—and usually can’t come to realization about what we really want...

But in this case, he does:

Eventually, seeing Tadzio again, he
“felt the casual greeting die on his lips...

So, he has taken a further step toward self-awareness. I am attracted to him and that’s why I didn’t want to go. He is allowing himself to think things he couldn’t think: moving from subconscious, to semi-conscious, to conscious.

This is not clear but it seems to be an image of the joy becoming more intense, the passionate arising. Apollo, the sun god, is turning toward his more decadent rather than “structured” form.

Now he is becoming enchanted: “a delightful vision came to him, spun from the seas murmur and the glittering sunlight. . .”

But he continues to use Athenian imagery, referring back to Socrates and Phaedrus: classical symbols of what Oscar Wilde called the "love that hath no name"—Platonic relationships between older and younger men. {235}

“It was the old plane tree not far from the walls of Athens...
And then, he “suddenly desired to write.”

[58]

So, his next move is to try to sublimate this passion, to channel it in the direction of creative work.

“Eros indeed...

Then “what he craved..”

This is a Nietzschean notion. You don’t know where the drive to create comes from. It may come from “Dangerous” non-“bourgeois” sources of inspiration. Mann is expressing this even more clearly. His writing is coming out of his erotic desire for Tadzio—unspeakable motivation.

[59]

“It is well...
That is almost a quotation from Nietzsche—that the impulse to create may be even “criminal,” though readers may never know it.

On the following morning, he finds himself passing by Tadzio and attempts to act on his desires.

[60]

“he was just about...
So... all the things that “respectable” society would have said of the feeling he was experiencing... But...

He can’t act on it, but it is powerful

I’m not going to go extensively to the issue of the cholera outbreak that is happening in the background. But it is symbolic of his breakdown. He becomes alert that this illness is starting to infect Venice, but he doesn’t say anything and he doesn’t leave. It is a kind of suicide pact with Tadzio...similar to the concept of “Liebestod,” with images of couples, such as Romeo and Juliet and Tristan and Isolde, passing into the beyond...together.

News of the actually cholera excites him at first—because it will shake the world as his soul was being shaken! [Actually, Nietzsche responded similarly to thoughts of a devastating earthquake striking Nice!]

[62]
But his worry that Tadzio might leave, and hesitation to warn anyone, constitutes a form of “Liebestod” 242}

08 I Feel Sick [63]

Now the madness, or desire, or breakdown, is starting to overtake him. He is just following the boy around, aware of the danger surrounding them, the impending crisis and sense of death... and the classical imagery begins to shift from Apollo to Dionysus:

[64]

"His head and 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."

Losing control: "He could no longer think of anything or want anything except this ceaseless pursuit of the object that so inflamed him."

Amid his pursuits, Tadzio and his family occasionally get into Gondolas, he follows them in those too.

Here, the imagery that Warrington created, linking the gondola to psychological malaise and even coffin like death brings the two
The yearning was becoming too great: “Where is this leading me? He would reflect in consternation at such moments.” {245}
He realizes that this is all a complete breakdown of his ancestral, "bourgeois" background, that he was indeed becoming "degenerate," which is the word that would have been used at the time for his nature.

[68]

Almost as a moment of "comic relief" in all of this--[Believe it or not, one can find oneself laughing hysterically at certain moments of Mann’s stories!!--some strolling musicians perform in front of his hotel. He would normally have rejected the "popular" songs, but he immerses himself in it—another sign of "decline": "His nervous system greedily drank in the jangling tones, for passion paralyzes discrimination and responds in all seriousness to stimuli which the sober senses would either treat with humorous tolerance or impatiently reject." {248}

Then, the musician laughs at him (and his inquiries about the cholera). Moments like this often occur in Mann’s stories as some outsider will recognize and mock the discomfort of the sufferer and his absurd condition. [Compare with the child in Tristan]

[69]
But soon thereafter comes the crucial phase of the story. Here is where we have the full shift over into Expressionistic, Freudian, Nietzschean representation of the subconscious at work—coming to full bore in his dreams.

"That night...

Here it comes: the Dionysian dreamscape of emotional turmoil.
Think expressionistic painting, expressionistic music, words for actually describing the mad, orgiastic drives that exist beneath the surface: all the senses, visuals, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, ... through him, and leaving his whole being, the culture of a lifetime, devastated and destroyed.

It began with fear, fear and joy and a horrified curiosity about what was to come. It was night, and his senses were alert; for from far off a hubbub was approaching, an uproar, a compendium of noise, a clanger and blare and dull thundering, yells of exultation and a particular howl with a long-drawn-out u at the end—all of it permeated and dominated by a terrible sweet sound of flute music: by deep-warbling, infamously persistent, shamelessly clinging tones that bewitched the innermost heart. Yet he was aware of a word, an obscure word, but one that gave a name to what was coming: *the stranger-god!* There was a glow of smoky fire: in it he could see a mountain landscape, like the mountains round his summer home. And in fragmented light, from wooded heights, between tree trunks and mossy boulders, it came tumbling and whirling down: a human and animal swarm, a raging rout, flooding the slope with bodies, with flames, with tumult and frenzied dancing. Women, stumbling on the hide garments that fell too far about them from the waist, held up tambourines and moaned as they shook them above their thrown-back heads; they swung blazing torches, scattering the sparks, and brandished naked daggers; they carried snakes with flickering tongues which they had seized in the middle of the body, or they bore up their own breasts in both hands, shrieking as they did so. Men with horns over their brows, hairy-skinned and girdled with pelts, bowed their necks and threw up their arms and thighs, clanging brazen cymbals and beating a furious tattoo on drums, while smooth-skinned boys prodded goats with leafy staves, clinging to their horns and yelling with delight as the leaping beasts dragged them along. And the god’s enthusiasts howled out the cry with the soft consonants and long-drawn-out fings; sweet and wild both at once, like no cry that was ever heard: here it was raised, belled out into the air as by rutting stags, and there they threw it back with many voices, in ribald triumph, urging each other on with it to dancing and tossing of limbs, and never did it cease. But the deep, enticing flute music mingled irresistibly with everything. Was it not also enticing him, the dreamer who experienced all this while struggling not to, enticing him with shameless insistence to the feast and frenzy of the uttermost surrender? Great was his loathing, great his fear, honorable his effort of will to defend to the last what was his and protect it against the Stranger, against the enemy of the com
We have clearly gone from Apollonian to Dionysian. Indeed, I would say, Mann stepped—in his own way—into the world of the “abstract,” where all imagery has become blended into pure emotion—though he uses words rather than paint. This is the literary equivalent of the rough-hewn, raw style of the Expressionist painters and points in the direction of expression utterly liberated from clear imagery, such as in Kandinsky’s painting and Schoenberg’s music.

However it is done, Mann is telling us what is going on under the “thin crust” of Western civilization. The story has led to this moment where the subconscious has overwhelmed reason, in his dream. Freud’s inner truth of instinctive drives competing to create and destroy. His character’s mid-life crisis has manifested itself in his dream life. He desired the Primitive elsewhere, but it was present within—as the Expressionist creators were trying to tell us in everything they painted, composed, wrote. They were demanding that we be very honest about these things. Here is this hyper refined, hyper controlled, north German, protestant Thomas Mann using his skills to describe what was going on beneath the surface, to be more open about his own desires that “could not be named”—but not his alone...

07 A Frightful Dream  [75]
At some level, everything up to this point has been in some ways, positive. Aschenbach has become more self-aware and has attempted to sublimated it through creativity. Though “decadent” he has done what Freud and Nietzsche and many others of the day had been calling for. This dream is an intense statement of that.

One might expect that the conclusion could be some kind of optimistic clarion call—like Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*—for the “next” man. Now he will step forward, become himself, come out of the closet and move forward in a new world that won’t hold him back any more.

But, Thomas Mann looks at himself, and other products of Western civilization, and essentially says that despite all the indications that we are getting from Nietzsche and Freud and the Expressionists, I don’t think that my character—or even I—can turn the corner. None of his characters make it. They almost all suffer dire consequences: either committing suicide, out of shame, or become clowns, also in shame.

So, really, Mann’s sense seems to have been, “not yet.” And Gustav Aschenbach’s end is tragically symbolic of this.

In the next phase, he sadly becomes a parody of himself—doing precisely what he ridiculed when he saw his predecessor on the boat: what he swore he would never do.

He goes to an Italian barber and, when offered to have his hair colored, and make up applied, to look younger—he says, go ahead.

[76]
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 aging body, the sight of his gray 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.

After all, we are only as old as we feel in our minds and hearts, and sometimes gray hair is actually further from the truth than the despised corrective would be. In your case, signore, one has a right to the natural color of one’s hair. Will you permit me simply to give your color back to you?”

“How so?” asked Aschenbach.

Whereupon the eloquent tempter washed his client’s hair in two kinds of water, one clear and one dark; and his hair was as black as when he had been young. Then he folded it into soft waves with the curling tongs, stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. “Now the only other thing,” he said, “would be just to freshen up the signore’s complexion a little.”

And like a craftsman unable to finish, unable to satisfy himself, he passed busily and indefatigably from one procedure to another. Aschenbach, reclining comfortably, incapable of resistance, filled rather with exciting hopes by what was happening, gazed at the glass and saw his eyebrows arched more clearly and evenly, the shape of his eyes lengthened, their brightness enhanced by a slight underlining of the lids; saw below them a delicate carmine come to life as it was softly applied to skin that had been brown and leathery; saw his lips that had just been so pallid now burgeoning cherry-red; saw the furrows on his cheeks, round his mouth, the wrinkles by his eyes, all vanishing under face cream and an aura of youth—with beating heart he saw himself as a young man in his earliest bloom. The cosmetician finally declared himself satisfied, with the groveling politeness usual in such people, by profusely thanking the client he had served. “An insignificant adjustment; signore,” he said as he gave a final helping hand to Aschenbach’s outward appearance. “Now the signore can fall in love as soon as he pleases.” And the spellbound lover departed, confused and timorous but happy as in a dream. His necktie was scarlet, his broad-brimmed straw hat encircled with a many-colored ribbon.
Ultimately, then, painted up in this way, sitting on the beach, and evidently suffering from the effects of cholera, Aschenbach fades away, watching Tadzio from a distance.

“At the edge of the sea he lingered...
He started to move toward him, but...  

10 Death on the Lido (263) [82]

It is a Liebestod: yearning, Sehnsucht, desire. But it ends in frustration. You can interpret it many ways. So I would say it continues to be a symbol that he and his generation would not be able to break through.

Was he wrong? Is the agenda not still open? Is that not, still, the fundamental “existential” problem that lives in the modern age face? Do we satisfy ourselves with the surface and its material benefits, or do they simply cover over longings that are rarely fully resolved and continue to drive people into the states of mid-life crisis and
depression.
This, I would say, is what makes Mann’s Death in Venice increasingly valid, as the “global” market and consumer society expands without really opening the door to self-becoming outside of superficial and short-lived inoculations of “romantic” culture.

AFTERWORD ON MANN’S SUBSEQUENT CAREER

If we have time to go on a bit, I would tell you about how the story unfolded beyond 1912.

[83]
In many ways, we might say that Thomas’s brother, Heinrich, “saw” the real implications of Mann’s pessimism even more clearly.

Focusing on political rather than psychological manifestations, Heinrich warned in “The Loyal Subject” that unsatisfied personalities might turn to the political Right for a sense of identity and community.

[84]
Thomas did not yet see this and defended the German cause in WWI against his brother’s support of ‘Civilisation’ via Reflections of a Non-Political Man.

Writes The Magic Mountain (1924) as representation of European culture and civilization at the cusp of WWI.

[85]
Receives Nobel Prize for Literature (1929) for The Magic Mountain.

Gradual acceptance of Weimar Republicanism and democracy.
Speaks out against rise of Nazism.
Must go into exile. [86]

Ultimately responds to WWII and the Holocaust in Dr. Faustus (1947), a work of atonement for German guilt in which he acknowledges that all German culture – all that he loves and represents so much - was tainted by horrors of Nazism. [87]

Died 1955