

The tentative title of my presentation is GENDER AMBIVALENCE (AMBIGUITY?) and deals with Renaissance iconography in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. It will show that homosexual attraction, although obvious in the story (and Mann's life) is a secondary issue and that the main concern lies with the problem provided by an aesthetic principle. (Parallel narratives, the plot is not the real/only story).

I. Speaking of the figure of St. Sebastian as a model for Aschenbach's favorite protagonist, the narrator quotes an early critic: dass er die Konzeption einer intellektuellen und juenglinghaften Maennlichkeit sei, die in stolzer Scham die Zaehne zusammenbeisst und ruhig dasteht waehrend ihr die Schwerter und Speere durch den Leib gehen. (... that it is the conception of an intellectual and youthful manliness that clenches its teeth in proud shame and stands calmly as swords and spears pass through its body).

Taken verbatim the text would reveal an astonishing ignorance of iconography, for there are neither swords nor spears in Sebastian's body. (Slides of Botticelli and others). We see only arrows. But what about swords and spears? (Slides of a Mater Dolorosa type called "Mary of the Seven Sorrows," Duerer, Folk art). There are one or seven swords penetrating the body of the Virgin Mary, a drastic echo of the words of Simeon that a sword shall pierce through her (Mary's) soul also (Luke 2, 35). Mann uses the Sebastian emblem to depict *Haltung im Schicksal, Anmut in der Qual* (composure in adversity, grace in the midst of torment) which are certainly attributes of many Renaissance and Baroque Sebastian representations but of the contemporary Mater Dolorosa as well (Slides of Michelangelo's *Pieta* and others). Thus alerted we take another look at the German text and find a large number of feminine nouns and pronouns describing masculinity. An accident of language? Maybe. But we are now wide awake and notice the following phrase:

Er kehrte zurueck, er lief, das widerstrebende Wasser mit den Beinen zu Schaum schlagend ... schoen wie ein zarter Gott herkommend aus den Tiefen von Himmel und Meer, dem Elemente entstieg und entrann: dieser Anblick gab mytische Vorstellungen ein ... vom Ursprung der Form und von der Geburt der Goetter. (He returned, he came running, beating the resisting water to foam with his feet, beautiful like a young god, approaching out of the depths of the sky and the sea, rising and escaping from the elements: this sight filled the mind with mythical images...of the origin of form and the birth of the gods).

But who is the divinity born of the sea and the sky? (Slides of the birth of Venus by Botticelli and others. Aphrodite: "born of foam"; Aphrodite anadyomene: "rising from the sea"). Quick return to the head of Botticelli's Sebastian; striking similarity between the features of Venus (female) and Sebastian (male), the flowing auburn hair the only difference. Again, a female icon used to identify/describe a male. (Visconti's choice of Tadzio, incidentally, is clearly influenced by Botticelli).

It would seem, then, that the gender of Aschenbach's object of passion is quite accidental. It might well have been an adolescent female. (It is a while yet until *Lolita*). What, then, is the object of his passion? It is beauty in living human form, an exquisite masterpiece by the "other" creator. (...dass der Knabe vollkommen schoen war;... <wie> Griechische Bildwerke aus edelster Zeit;... that the boy's beauty was without blemish...like Greek sculpture from the noblest period).

And Aschenbach's is die geruehrte Zuneigung dessen, der sich opfernd im Geiste das Schoene zeugt, zu dem der die Schoenheit hat;...And nur die Schoenheit ist goettlich und sichtbar zugleich und so ist sie denn also des Sinnlichen Weg, kleiner Phaidros;... fortan gilt unser Trachten einzig der Schoenheit ... der zweiten Unbefangenheit und der Form. Aber Form und Unbefangenheit, Phaidros, fuehren zum Rausch und zur Begierde... (the tender fondness by which one who sacrifices himself to beget beauty is drawn to one who possesses beauty...only Beauty is at once divine and visible and therefore the sensuous lover's path, little Phaedrus...and henceforth our pursuit is of Beauty alone...of a second naivete and Form. But form and naivete, Phaedrus, lead to intoxication and lust <desire>).

Begierde (desire/lust), there lies the dilemma, for it contradicts Kant's famous prescription of "disinterested contemplation" when viewing a work of art (secularized mystical concept [Gelassenheit/equanimity/aními aequitas, repose], elaborate briefly on its history).

II. The life (and death) of Aschenbach: descent into decadence? The lure of gravity? Another mythic allusion provides a clue. Der strenge und reine Wille jedoch, der ... dies goettliche Bildwerk ans Licht zu treiben vermocht hatte,- war er nicht ihm, dem Kuenstler bekannt und vertraut? Wirkte er nicht auch in ihm, wenn er ... aus der Marmorasse der Sprache die schlanke Form befreite, die er im Geiste geschaut ...? (The austere and pure will that had succeeded in bringing this divine image to life, was it not well known and familiar to the artist in him? Was it not active in him...when he freed from the marble mass of language that slender form which he had beheld in his mind...?)

Das Haupt des Eros...Gut, gut! dachte Aschenbach mit jener fachmaennisch kuehlen Billigung, in welche Kuenstler zuweilen einem Meisterwerk gegeneuber ihr Entzuecken, ihre Hingerissenheit kleiden.

Aschenbach as colleague and equal (and rival?) of the "other," divine creator? We remember that Chaucer, near the end of his life, denounced his earlier creative ambitions as inappropriate. And we are reminded of the drunken Marsyas' challenge addressed to Apollo to engage in a competitive "creation" of music. Apollo (der Schoene) wins, of course, and flays Marsyas alive for punishment. Marsyas (braeunlich, haesslich; dark-skinned (or) sallow,ugly) belongs to the tribe of Pan, his instrument is the flute, the predominant instrument which Aschenbach hears as he joins the dionysiac crowd in his orgiastic dream. Socrates too, in his fictional conversation with Phaidros, is described as haesslich (ugly), der Alternde (aging), and clearly is Aschenbach's alter ego who proceeds to improve cosmetically his gelbe, sinnlich benachteiligte Haesslichkeit (sensually disadvantaged ugliness).

It has often been pointed out that Aschenbach changes his allegiance from Apollo to Dionysos. Here's the entry from the **Oxford Dictionary of World Religions** (1997) outlining the distinction between "Apollonian" and "Dionysiac":

"Contrasted forms of religion, the former being reflective and rational, the latter ecstatic and fervent. The distinction does not altogether rest in consistent distinctions in Greek religion, though they be illustrated from Greek religion. The distinction in its modern form derives from the work of Nietzsche, who, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, argued that the achievement of Greece did not rest on Apollonian calm alone but on its fusion with the passion of Dionysos -- a blend which Greek tragedy exhibits. Apollonian art is a quest for rationality in an irrational world; Dionysiac art tears the veil from the surface and allows a glimpse into the nihilism and destructiveness below. Tragedy is the highest art, because it unites the two. It was rapidly realized that religions exhibit these two styles, and they became a frame of reference for the analysis of religious behaviour. Thus Ruth Benedict (*Patterns of Culture*, 1948) applied them to indigenous American cultures of N. America, contrasting the Apollonian emphasis on moderation, sobriety and restraint which she found among the Pueblo Indians with the Dionysiac desire for exaltation in personal experience, recklessness, and states of emotional excess (sometimes assisted by drugs) which she found in most other tribes."

(Let me urge you again that, depending on your field of inquiry, you acquire some of Oxford UP eminently useful "Oxford Dictionary of ..." and "Oxford Companion to ..." and gradually build up a small reference library at home. Cambridge UP has a similar series).

Is Aschenbach's fate Apollo's revenge? (Slides of Apollo flaying Marsyas by Reni and Ribera). Notice the imperious gesture (arm, shoulder) reminiscent of Greek/Roman statues (slide, Apollo of Belvedere) AND, influenced by them, Michelangelo's Christ of the Last Judgment (slide) who, in

turn, influenced the later Reni and Ribera.

Michelangelo's Christ seems to reject/condemn everybody on his left although the group is studded with Saints. Great commotion, even his mother, the Virgin Mary, the Heavenly Queen, appears upset. But if you follow his gaze you notice that he focuses on St Bartholomew, the martyr, who was also flayed alive and who holds his emblem, the skinner's knife, in his extended right hand as if to implore Christ to recognize him as one of his apostles, while he holds a human skin in the other. It is NOT his skin. In fact his body is quite intact, including his magnificent beard. We know who he is. It is Pietro Aretino, Michelangelo's self-appointed nemesis (slide, portrait by Titian). And the skin he holds? (Close-up slide) It is Michelangelo's own; he painted a caricature of his face (gelblich, haesslich benachteiligt; sallow, ugly, disadvantaged) unto it.

Whom, then, is Christ/Apollo rejecting? The rival artist in the creation of human form? Or the avenger who would sacrifice the villain (skin him alive) for having rivaled the god? We don't know, Michelangelo provides no answer, ambivalence here too.

Final question: is there a judgment/verdict inherent in Aschenbach's demise? Is there a cause-and-effect relationship at work here? We don't know. All we know is that there is a willing/conscious exchange of one life style for another. Value ambivalence as well? Or sublime neutrality/tolerance concerning two mutually exclusive life styles? While Aschenbach judges himself by the standards of contemporary morality, we are not invited to join in that judgment. We have more data to aid in our understanding than he does. (Remember the body language early in the story: the clenched fist vs the limp hand. Resistance vs surrender to gravity. Note the contemporary renewed scientific interest in the phenomenon of gravitation/gravity, Einstein et al. All-pervasive dominant physical force. Ethical implications?)

Why does Aschenbach die? God's punishment for homosexuality (don't laugh, it's been suggested)? Contaminated strawberries? Emptied of all vitality? Altruistic exertion of his weakened physique as he attempts to come to Tadzio's aid (preservation of the species impulse)? Total abandonment of self as he "set out to follow him" one more time: "Und wie so oft machte er sich auf, ihm zu folgen"? Add your own favorite hypothesis.

I believe the answer is simple. He dies because his hour has come, and for no other reason. Death himself announces it publicly and in person. Among the most prominent attributes of death are the scythe (the grim reaper), the hour glass (the time keeper), and a one-string violin (the fiddler). Slide of Boecklin's selfportait.

That's the music that signals the end of a life. Hofmannsthal's "The Fool and Death." Gregor Samsa's sister Grete playing the violin before formulating her verdict: he has to go. Richard II, in the Tower, hears music in the street below: Sweet music do I hear ... We know its significance before they do. There is a fiddler (eine quinkelierende Geige, a squeaking fiddle) among the group of street musicians that serenade the hotel guests, while the odor of carbolic acid is wafting up to the balcony. The meaning is inescapable, except of course to Aschenbach himself.

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