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## The Image of the Tiger in Thomas Mann's *Tod in Venedig*

### Abstract

Mann integrates the image of the tiger (according to Nietzsche a concomitant of the Dionysian) that is associated with Aschenbach into *Tod in Venedig*, commencing with the poet's anticipatory vision. Throughout the course of the novella, the city becomes Aschenbach's envisioned jungle. Of particular significance is the triangular relationship between the viewer, the birds, and the tiger in the vision, which is found again at the end of the novella. Here, there are many repetitions of expressions suggestive of the triangular relationship found in Aschenbach's vision. The tiger in the vision, repeatedly mentioned or alluded to in *Tod in Venedig*, remains crouching and makes no move until the conclusion. Here, then, this «open» aspect is resolved: Aschenbach, whose latent Dionysian side is represented by the tiger on the mythical level, ultimately dies. Citing Euripides' *Bacchae*, which, as Manfred Dierks demonstrated, served as a «structural model» for *Tod in Venedig*, we can say that just as Pentheus dons the bacchante's dress offered by Dionysus, Aschenbach symbolically assumes the garb of the tiger. Pentheus adopts the disguise to observe secretly Dionysus' bacchantes. The way in which Aschenbach tracks Tadzio is evocative of the manner in which a tiger tracks its prey. By assuming the female disguise Pentheus guarantees his own death. Aschenbach acts in a like manner to Pentheus. Finally, both protagonists begin in their respective stories as hunters and both end as the hunted.

### Keywords

Thomas Mann, *Tod in Venedig*, tiger, Dionysus

## THE IMAGE OF THE TIGER IN THOMAS MANN'S *TOD IN VENEDIG*

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Manfred Dierks has recently shown that Thomas Mann used Euripides' *Bacchae* «not only as a significant paradigm, but in important places also as a structural model» for *Tod in Venedig* (1912).(1) In addition, Dierks contends that Mann follows an «ideal structural line» taken from Nietzsche: «the demonstration of the metaphysical-psychological misfortune of 'Apollonian' one-sidedness.»(2) Here too the paradigm derives from Nietzsche: «the tragic fate of Pentheus, Apollo's servant, who falls victim to the strange god [Dionysus] who has come from Asia.»(3) Translated into *Tod in Venedig*, the «fate» is that of Aschenbach. The purpose of this paper is to show that Mann uses the image of the tiger in connection with Aschenbach, beginning with the latter's anticipatory vision, and that he integrates this image with great subtlety into the rest of *Tod in Venedig*. Of particular significance is the triangular relationship formed by the viewer, the birds, and the tiger in the vision, which is found again at the end of the novella. The tiger in the vision, repeatedly mentioned or alluded to, remains crouching and makes no move until the conclusion. Here, then, this «open» aspect is resolved. Citing more examples from Euripides' *Bacchae*, we can say that just as Pentheus dons the bacchant's dress proffered by Dionysus, Aschenbach symbolically assumes the garb of the tiger (according to Nietzsche the tiger is a concomitant of the Dionysian)(4). Pentheus adopts the disguise to observe secretly Dionysus' bacchantes. The way in which Aschenbach tracks Tadzio is evocative of the manner in which a tiger tracks its prey. By assuming the female disguise Pentheus guarantees his own death. Aschenbach acts in a like manner to Pentheus. Finally, both protagonists begin in their respective stories as hunters and

both end as the hunted.

Shortly after the novella begins, «a youthful longing after far-off places» grips Aschenbach so forcefully that he comes «to a sudden stop»(5) and hallucinates. This reaction is triggered by his encounter with a mysterious stranger in front of the mortuary chapel with the «appearance ... of a foreigner, of someone who had come from a long distance» (Burke, p. 5):

Es war Reiselust, nichts weiter; aber wahrhaft als Anfall auftretend und ins Leidenschaftliche, ja bis zur Sinnestäuschung gesteigert. Seine Begierde ward sehend, seine Einbildungskraft, noch nicht zur Ruhe gekommen seit den Stunden der Arbeit, schuf sich ein Beispiel für alle Wunder und Schrecken der mannigfaltigen Erde, die sie auf einmal sich vorzustellen bestrebt war: er sah, sah eine Landschaft, ein tropisches Sumpfbgebiet unter dickdunstigem Himmel, feucht, üppig und ungeheuer, eine Art Urweltwildnis aus Inseln, Morästen und Schlamm führenden Wasserarmen, - sah aus geilem Farrengewucher, aus Gründen von fettem, gequollenem und abenteuerlich blühendem Pflanzenwerk haarige Palmenschäfte nah und ferne emporstreben, sah wunderlich ungestalte Bäume ihre Wurzeln durch die Luft in den Boden, in stockende, grünschattig spiegelnde Fluten versenken, wo zwischen schwimmenden Blumen, die milchweiß und groß wie Schüsseln waren, Vögel von fremder Art, hochschultrig, mit unförmigen Schnäbeln, im Seichten standen und unbeweglich zur Seite blickten, sah zwischen den knotigen Rohrstämmen des Bambusdickichts die Lichter eines kauern den Tigers funkeln - und fühlte sein Herz pochen vor Entsetzen und rätselhaftem Verlangen (VIII, 446-447).

In this passage the reader notes an immediate process of intensification: desire - seizure - passion - hallucination - craving. It is significant that Aschenbach's vision is dependent of forces at work within himself and not an outside stimulus. The raw, savage, and chaotic jungle that he sees symbolizes the forbidden, for here life in its rank growth signifies decay and death.(6)

Aschenbach's vision is anticipatory. For this reason it is located at the beginning of the novella, a structurally important position. In addition, it is unique in that it is composed of only

one sentence 148 words in length. The style of the sentence is lofty and classical, which in this case is germane to its anticipatory character.

Everything in the vision ultimately points to the tiger. The closer one comes to him, the smaller other «things» become. Immediately before seeing him, the reader is told about flowers and birds. The subordinate clauses which are found shortly before the tiger is mentioned produce a slight marking of time, a short breathing-space, that provides a perspective from which both Aschenbach and the reader are startled by the eyes of the tiger. Even the manner in which one becomes conscious of the animal is noteworthy. It is as if one were standing in front of the birds and viewing them. They are looking «motionlessly to the side.» One follows their glance and thus catches sight of «the glint from the eyes of a crouching tiger» (Burke, p. 7). (The triangular relationship which exists between the viewer, the birds, and the tiger will prove to be of great significance later in the novella.) The impression is one of a calm before the storm. This world of danger contrasts completely with the other of luxuriance: in the one there is the silence of impending peril, but in the other there is teeming life. Aschenbach reacts: «He felt his heart pounding with fear and with puzzling desires» (Burke, p. 7-8), i.e. the desire for life and death becomes inseparable in him.

The above text concentrates on the tiger in still another way. Before the mention of this animal the clauses in the vision become increasingly long, beginning with five words («er sah ... Landschaft»), then ten («ein tropisches ... ungeheuer»), again ten («eine Art ... Wasserarmen»), nineteen («- sah ... emporstreben»), and, finally, forty-five («sah ... blickten»). The increasing segmental lengths have a «retarding» function, which in turn increases tension. This tension is released in the next, short clause (thirteen words), which focuses on the tiger.

Later in the novella the tiger and the other, familiar imagery in the vision figure prominently in the story. Following at least four weeks in Venice, Aschenbach goes to the English travel bureau to learn once and for all about the plague. After initially hesitating, the young English clerk confirms the danger to him. The city has been stricken by Asiatic cholera and is combatting it:

Seit mehreren Jahren schon hatte die indische Cholera eine verstärkte Neigung zur Ausbreitung und Wanderung an

den Tag gelegt. Erzeugt aus den warmen Morästen des Ganges-Deltas, aufgestiegen mit dem mephitischen Odem jener üppig-untauglichen, von Menschen gemiedenen Urwelt- und Inselwildnis, in deren Bambusdickichten der Tiger kauert, hatte die Seuche in ganz Hindustan ... ungewöhnlich heftig gewütet, hatte westlich nach Afghanistan und Persien übergegriffen und ... war ... fast gleichzeitig in mehreren Mittelmeerhäfen aufgetaucht, hatte in Toulon ... sein Haupt erhoben, in Palermo und Neapel mehrfach seine Maske gezeigt und schien aus ganz Kalabrien und Apulien nicht mehr weichen zu wollen. Der Norden der Halbinsel war verschont geblieben. Jedoch Mitte Mai dieses Jahres fand man zu Venedig an ein und demselben Tage die furchtbaren Vibrionen in den ausgemergelten, schwärzlichen Leichnamen eines Schifferknechtes und einer Grünwarenhändlerin (VIII, 512).

Clearly, the landscape description at the beginning of this account is suggestive of Aschenbach's vision. In 1904, in response to a questionnaire from Otto Julius Bierbaum, Thomas Mann wrote concerning *Buddenbrooks*: «Das Motiv, das Selbstzitat, die autoritative Formel, die wörtliche und gewichtige Rückbeziehung über weite Strecken hin, das Zusammentreten von höchster Deutlichkeit und höchster Bedeutsamkeit, das Metaphysische, die symbolische Gehobenheit des Moments -- alle meine Novellen haben den symbolischen Zug» (X, 838). The evocation of Aschenbach's vision is indeed accomplished here primarily by «wörtliche und gewichtige Rückbeziehung.» Mann's use of anticipation and «Rückbeziehung» is obviously a conscious one.

The Ganges delta elicits the topography of the visionary panorama and the «Urwelt- und Inselwildnis, in deren Bambusdickichten der Tiger kauert,» paraphrases the wording therein. However, the value judgments in this description are intensified, e.g. «mephitisch,» «üppig-untauglich.» These adjectives serve to reinforce the danger, i.e. the life and death-motif alluded to in the vision. The danger is now concretized in the form of the plague which has reached Venice and is endangering Aschenbach. Aschenbach is well aware of the possible fatal consequences of his continued stay in Venice, and yet he elects to remain.

As one notes, the tiger is expressly referred to here, just as

it was in Aschenbach's vision. It is of no small moment that the English clerk is not quoted directly in the above citation. Instead, one is confronted with Aschenbach's version thereof («Such was the substance of what the Englishman said»). Thus, Aschenbach is interpreting here. In the first sentence above the reader is informed that the cholera «had shown a heightened tendency to spread and migrate» (Burke, p. 95). The imagery used to show how the plague did in fact infect Europe is connected with the tiger. The plague is called the «specter.» This term is used in such a way that it could symbolically evoke the tiger: just as a tiger moves, the specter is continuing «its advance,» it «had raised its head,» «showed its mask,» and «raged ... with unusual strength» (Burke, p. 96). Later in Aschenbach's rendition of the clerk's quotation one reads concerning the disease: it «moved with utter savagery» (Burke, p. 97). One thus has the feeling that, based on Aschenbach's powers of imagination, it is the tiger which is on the move and has already advanced as far as «Calabria and Apulia» (Burke, p. 96). From the clerk Aschenbach also learns that because of the cholera «a certain demoralization» of Venice had occurred and the «professional debauchery» had assumed «abnormal obtrusive proportions ... usually found only in the southern parts of the country and in the Orient» (Burke, p. 98). As Hertha Krotkoff writes concerning the image of the tiger: «Es ist ein genialer Kunstgriff des Dichters, daß die Quelle der tödlichen Krankheit, des physischen Absterbens, mit dem gleichen Bild angedeutet wird wie die des moralischen Verfalles.»(7)

Before continuing, let us consider the significance of the plague's movement from Asia to Europe. In his *Geburt der Tragödie* Nietzsche writes: «Die Zeit des sokratischen Menschen ist vorüber: kränzt euch mit Epheu, nehmt den Thyrsusstab zur Hand und wundert euch nicht, wenn Tiger und Panther sich schmeichelnd zu euren Knien niederlegen.... Ihr sollt den dionysischen Festzug von Indien nach Griechenland geleiten!»(8) Thomas Mann, of course, knew *Die Geburt der Tragödie* well, as Roger A. Nicholls has demonstrated.(9) Dierks has pointed out a striking similarity to Nietzsche's *Geburt der Tragödie* found in Mann's working notes for *Tod in Venedig* concerning Dionysus' march from East to West: Mann assumes -- falsely, as had Nietzsche -- that Asia was the home of the cult of Dionysus. Thus there is a «conspicuous correspondence» between the *Geburt der*

*Tragödie* and Mann's working notes concerning the god Dionysus.(10)

In his well-known article André von Gronicka speaks of the «bifocal view of life that encompasses both the transcendent and real» in the novella.(11) At various points he terms the transcendent «symbol» and «myth» and the real «reality» and psychology.» The transcendent is represented by the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian: «Aschenbach's devotion to beauty was ... the service of the Apollonian ideal. He had sought to obtain 'that measured limitation, that freedom from the wilder emotions, that philosophical calmness of the sculptor-god,' that Nietzsche ascribes to the disciples of Apollo.»(12) But the Dionysian impulse is present in Aschenbach too: «Mann directly introduces the Dionysian as a primary symbol of the forces of nature that the creative artist can never dispense with»(13) and that Aschenbach had repressed throughout his career. «The Dionysian is the rebirth of the primitive and savage; it is the power of nature suppressed by the tyrannical need for self-control and social adjustment.»(14)

As Nösselt mentions, the tiger is associated with the god Dionysus.(15) According to the myth, on Dionysus' expedition from Greece to India «a tiger, sent by his father Zeus, helped him across the river Tigris.»(16) Thus, the tiger was the god's carrier. We can observe this function of the tiger in *Tod in Venedig* in Aschenbach's interpretation of the transmitting or carrying of the plague from Asia as far as «Calabria and Apulia» in Italy.

The plague, however, did not come to Venice by way of the Italian peninsula but, rather, its «frightful vibrations» were found «in the blackish wasted bodies of a cabin boy and a woman who sold greengroceries» (Burke, p. 96) in Venice. One infers from the mention of the cabin boy that the plague in all probability came to Venice by ship, just as Aschenbach had come to Venice. The mention of the «woman who sold greengroceries» is also significant, for the items of her trade, greengroceries, evoke associations with the lush jungle of Aschenbach's vision. In this manner the greengroceries can be tied in with the Dionysian (Dionysus is also the god of fertility and growth).(17) Perhaps Aschenbach is connected too through the reference to the cabin boy, who had died of the plague. As will be demonstrated, a relationship does exist between Aschenbach and the tiger.



Mann repeatedly uses expressions and allusions to animals and the hunt to describe Aschenbach. During Aschenbach's sojourn in Venice we read: «But time was pressing; it lashed him on» (VIII, 484). The latter verb «geißelte» calls forth the image of a driven animal. After his unsuccessful attempt to flee from Venice, he returns to his old hotel: «And so the runaway was quartered again» (VIII, 485). Here, both noun and verb are tendentious. Later, another verb, «witterte,» (VIII, 499) is applied to Aschenbach, which is highly unusual since in general usage it is usually restricted to animals. Concerning Tadzio, the reader learns that Aschenbach «pursued him, stalked him» (VIII, 501). He also «hid ..., kept under cover, ... lay in wait» (VIII, 501).

Symbolically, the tiger represents «lust» and «the concupiscent passions.»(18) In the context of *Tod in Venedig* we believe that the author uses the tiger to portray the latent Dionysian side of Aschenbach's character, which the latter as a «Classic poet» had always repressed, yet to which he ultimately submits.

We have strived to demonstrate that a continuous process of integration of the imagery connected with the tiger in the anticipatory vision can be observed throughout the entire novella. The first and second landscape pictures convey the passionate, fatal atmosphere. But since the tiger makes no move in either picture (it merely crouches), the end is left «open.» At the same time, precisely because the tiger in its crouching position does nothing (e.g. it does not attack the birds), the tension increases. It is our contention that this tension is relieved, however, in the concluding scene at the beach.

The end of the novella contains many repetitions of expressions suggestive of the triangular relationship found in Aschenbach's vision. The camera prompts one to think of the viewer Aschenbach in his vision; Tadzio recalls the birds and Aschenbach the tiger. The camera(19) stands «by the edge of the sea» (Burke, p. 110) (VIII, 523). It «sees,» it records visual impressions much in the way Aschenbach «saw.» Tadzio goes «down obliquely to the water» and lingers «on the edge of the water» (Burke, p. 111) (VIII, 524), i.e. he is within the visual field of the camera and forms part of the triangle. Then, he goes «in die seichte Vorse» (VIII, 524), just as the birds endangered by the tiger had stood «im Seichten» (VIII, 446). Shortly thereafter, Tadzio turns and «blickte über die Schulter zum Ufer» (VIII, 524),

i.e. in Aschenbach's direction. In the vision the birds also «zur Seite blickten» (VIII, 447) at the tiger. (Indeed, the most conspicuous connecting element emphasizing the relation between Tadzio and the birds, and running through the entire novella, are «shoulders.») The triangle is now completed by Aschenbach, who is called «der Schauende» (VIII, 524). Thus the image of the tiger is evoked, whose eyes were mentioned in the vision. On the beach Aschenbach's «Haupt [not «Kopf!】 war ... langsam der Bewegung des draußen Schreitenden gefolgt; nun hob es sich ... und sank auf die Brust, so daß seine Augen von unten sahen» (VIII, 524-525). This latter sentence emphasizes Aschenbach's crouched position, which is analogous to that of the tiger in the vision. It is in the illusive subtlety of these «Rückbeziehungen» wherein their artistic effect lies. In Mann's own mind these motivic interrelationships were probably less specific than we have made them out to be.

The end adds the component missing in Aschenbach's vision, in which the tiger had remained motionless. «It seemed to him [Aschenbach] ... as if the ... psychagogue [Tadzio] ... were smiling ..., nodding to him» (VIII, 525), and, in a figurative sense, Aschenbach gets up, i.e. into death, to follow the boy. Here, Tadzio is called the «psychagogue,» or conductor of souls. Thus, the text indicates that the boy plays a major role in Aschenbach's death. Needless to say, this conclusion is fraught with irony, for with the repetition of the triangular relationship found in the vision, the author has invited his reader-observer to compare Aschenbach with the fear-inspiring tiger and Tadzio with the imperiled birds. Pentheus' fate in Euripides' *Bacchae*, that of the hunter becoming the hunted, has become Aschenbach's fate.

It has generally been assumed that Tadzio represents the god Hermes on the transcendental or mythical level. Dierks, however, writes that Thomas Mann's knowledge of «Hermes» at this early date was limited to a single reference of Plutarch.(20) The latter mentions Hermes solely in his capacity as psychagogue. Dierks, of course, bases his findings primarily on the material used by Mann and now deposited in the Thomas-Mann-Archiv in Zürich. He does, however, admit that there are great difficulties connected with the researching of literary works written prior to *Der Zauberberg* (1924), since Mann's notes and sources are not longer extant.(21) This is why he will permit himself deductions

concerning the earlier works only when correspondences can be verified and all sources of error have been eliminated.(22)

Returning to the birds in Aschenbach's vision in this regard, we wish to demonstrate that Mann was indeed more knowledgeable about the mythical figure Hermes than the collection at the Archiv indicates. If one assumes that the birds are not albatrosses, as Christoph Geiser claims,(23) but rather ibises, (which unlike albatrosses are fresh-water birds and inhabitants of swampy areas), it is well worth noting that the ibis is Hermes' bird.(24) This fact in itself would be of little value, had Mann not used -- to cite once again his response to Otto Julius Bierbaum -- «wörtliche Rückbeziehung» in regard to both the birds and Tadzio. In the vision the birds «zur Seite blickten.» During the course of the novella Tadzio «wandte ... sich um» (VIII, 471), made a «Kopfwendung» (VIII, 473), «schaute sich ... um,» «blickte ... zurück» (VIII, 476), «den Kopf wandte» (VIII, 501), «wandte ... den Kopf über die linke Schulter» (VIII, 507), «wandte ... das Haupt, um über die Schulter hinweg ...» (VIII, 520), and, finally, in the beach scene «wandte ... und blickte über die Schulter.» It is thus through the device of «Rückbeziehung» that Mann betrays a more intimate acquaintance with the mythical figure Hermes than the material at the Archiv can substantiate.

Mann has thus carefully integrated the image of the tiger in Aschenbach's vision into the rest of the novella. Through the course of *Tod in Venedig*, the city becomes Aschenbach's envisioned jungle, which, as we recall, symbolized rank fertility but, at the same time, was the place where Aschenbach contracted the deadly plague. Although the vision is anticipatory in character, Mann deliberately leaves it «open,» in that the tiger makes no move. The solution to the open-ended vision is found at the end of the novella. Here, the triangular relationship found in the vision is repeated, and the component absent in Aschenbach's vision is supplied: we find out the «tiger» does. Aschenbach, whose latent Dionysian side is represented by the tiger on the mythical level, ultimately dies.

NOTES

1. *Studien zu Mythos und Psychologie bei Thomas Mann: An seinem Nachlaß orientierte Untersuchungen zum 'Tod in Venedig', zum 'Zauberberg' und zur 'Joseph'-Tetralogie* (Bern and Munich: Francke, 1972), p. 31.
2. Dierks, *Studien*, p. 24.
3. Dierks, *Studien*, p. 24.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. K. Schlechta, 3rd ed. (Munich: Hanser, 1962), I, 24.
5. The text was quoted from *Death in Venice*, trans. Kenneth Burke (1925; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 7. In the event that Burke's translation is not indicated, the translation is my own. The German text in this paper was quoted from vol. VIII of Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1960).
6. James R. McWilliams, «The Failure of a Repression: Thomas Mann's 'Tod in Venedig,'» *GLL*, 20 (1967), 233-241.
7. Hertha Krotkoff, «Zur Symbolik in Thomas Manns 'Tod in Venedig,'» *MLN*, 82 (1967), 448.
8. Nietzsche, I, 113.
9. *Nietzsche in the Early Works of Thomas Mann*, Univ. of Cal. Publications in Mod. Phil., No. 45 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), p. 61.
10. Dierks, *Studien*, p. 19.
11. v. Gronicka, «Myth plus Psychology: A Style Analysis of 'Death in Venice,'» *GR*, 31 (1956), 191.
12. Nicholls, *Nietzsche*, p. 87.
13. Nicholls, *Nietzsche*, p. 84.
14. Nicholls, *Nietzsche*, p. 85.
15. Friedrich Nösselt, *Lehrbuch der griechischen und römischen Mythologie für höhere Töchterschulen und die Gebildeten des weiblichen Geschlechts*, 5th rev. ed. (Leipzig: Ernst Fleischer, 1865), p. 135.
16. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, rev. 1st. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1960), I, 104. See also Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Symbolism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), p. 151.
17. Friedrich Creuzer, *Deutsche Schriften: Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, 3rd. rev. ed. (Leipzig and Darmstadt: Carl Wilhelm Leske, 1840), II, 1, 468-469.
18. Rowland, p. 151. Krotkoff writes: «In Jungs *Psychologie des Unbewußten* wird das Tier als Symbol eines '... nicht erzogenen, nicht differenzierten und nicht-vermenschlichten Stückes Libido, welches noch zwangsartigen Triebcharakter besitzt, also nicht durch Domestikation gezähmt ist' erklärt», pp. 447-448.
19. The camera too may be regarded with von Gronicka's «bifocal view.» On the real level it is a camera and on the mythical level perhaps Apollo's tripod. See also Dierks, p. 28 Cf. Isadore Traschen, «The Uses of Myth in 'Death in Venice,'» *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2 (1965), 165-179.
20. Dierks, *Studien*, p. 55. See also his annotation 36 on pp. 236-237.

21. Dierks, *Studien*, p. 13.
22. Dierks, *Studien*, p. 13.
23. Geiser, *Naturalismus und Symbolismus im Frühwerk Thomas Manns* (Francke: Bern and Munich, 1971), p. 72.
24. Creuzer, *Deutsche Schriften*, II, 2, 295.