Hans-Jörg Knobloch

Death in Venice: Thomas Mann's novella about the dying of a writer

ABSTRACT Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* does not deal with guilt and atonement, as one can often read, but with fate and destiny as in the ancient tragedy. In contrast, the main problem that his protagonist, the writer Gustav von Aschenbach, faces is a very modern one: the problem of the artist at the turn of the century who has seemingly reached the boundaries of his art. Aschenbach tries to overcome them by switching from the Apollinian to the Dionysian principle. He even throws himself into the arms of Dionysian ecstacy. From this point in the novella, the narrator increasingly distances himself from his protagonist. In doing so, he is representative of the author who, for himself, had decided against Bohemian-like excesses and had turned to a bourgeois lifestyle. This does not mean, however, that Thomas Mann had found a way out of that cul-de-sac in which the artists had ended up at the beginning of the modern age – on the contrary: *Death in Venice* is one of the most pessimistic texts he ever wrote.

Keywords: German literature; decadence; Thomas Mann and Nietzsche

Death in Venice makes a good title, much better than *The Death in Venice*. Even in German, *Tod in Venedig* sounds better than *Der Tod in Venedig*, but nevertheless, Thomas Mann preferred the title *Der Tod in Venedig* for his novella about a famous writer who succumbs to passion and cholera[1].

I do not want to enter into a discussion about the problems of translations in general or translating Thomas Mann who is known to many English-speaking readers as the "ironic German" (Heller, 1958), although his stylistic irony can hardly be preserved in translations. But it has

[1] The German quotations from *Der Tod in Venedig* are labelled "M" and refer to the following edition: Mann, T. 1974. Der Tod in Venedig. *Gesammelte Werke*. 2nd ed. Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer. Vol. 8. pp. 444-525. The quotations from the English translation are labelled "L" and refer to the following edition: Mann, T. 1971. *Death in Venice. Tristan. Tonio Kröger.* Translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter. Middlesex: Penguin. pp. 7-83. The label "L" is also used for the translation of *Tonio Kröger* (pp. 129-191).

to be stated, at least, that the translation *Death in Venice* does not reflect the full meaning of the original title *Der Tod in Venedig*. Surprisingly, in the vast literature about this novella, only a few scholars paid attention to the somehow strange title, and those who did interpreted it as the expression of an ambiguity: Does the title mean the death of the hero or the secret dying in Venice?[2] It probably refers to both, albeit in the first place to the death of the protagonist. But more importantly, by the article "Der", the abstract death is personified – in the same way in which Death is portrayed in the paintings of medieval artists as the skeleton with the scythe, and in the same way in which Death is still presented on stage in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Spiel vom Sterben des reichen Mannes" *Jedermann (Everyman)* of 1911[3], the year in which Thomas Mann started writing his novella.

In contrast to Hofmannsthal's play, Death does not appear in Thomas Mann's novella, but there is a string of characters who have, from the first publication, always been perceived as messengers of death, starting with the strange pilgrim, whom the protagonist meets at the North Cemetery in Munich[4]. The fact alone that this encounter takes place at a cemetery is an early indication that he is destined for death. Already his name, Gustav Aschenbach "or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday" (L 7)[5] – these are the first words of the novella – generates a connotation with death, especially if it is true that Thomas Mann took the name of his hero from the painter Andreas Achenbach (cf. Vaget, 1984: 170), but associated it, by slightly changing it, to Asche, which means ashes.

If it is true that Gustav von Aschenbach is destined for death from the beginning, all moralizing interpretations are misleading, and Thomas Mann indeed used all his literary skills to create the impression that his protagonist is a victim of fate. Especially the fourth chapter, of which he himself was so proud, is full of mythological allusions. Already in the third chapter, he shaped one of those messengers of death, the gondolier who transfers Aschenbach to the Lido, into another Charon, the ferryman, who drives the dead to Hades in Greek mythology. Aschenbach wants to be dropped at San Marco where he intends to take a Vaporetto to the Lido. When he realizes that the gondolier is taking him directly to the Lido, apparently in order to squeeze money out of him, he asks how much it is, but the gondolier replies only: "Sie werden bezahlen" (M 466) – "You will pay". After his arrival at the Lido, Aschenbach cannot pay, because the gondolier who does not have a licence suddenly disappears (like the stranger at the cemetery in Munich), but he will have to pay later – with his life.

I have not recounted this scene because of the obvious allegoric and symbolic content itself, which has been pointed out time and again, but because of its place within the novella. Aschenbach's encounter with that Charon-like figure takes place when he has not yet met

---

2 "Der Titel behält etwas schwebend Offenes. Ist mit dem Tod in Venedig der Tod des Helden in der Erzählung gemeint oder darüber hinaus jenes geheime, verschwiegene Sterben, das sich in Venedig ereignet?" (Von Wiese 1967: 306)

3 Hofmannthal's *Play about the dying of the rich man*, as the subtitle reads, is based on medieval tradition.

4 Walter Jens was, as far as I can see, the first who pointed out that the description of the stranger closely follows Lessing's description *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet (How the ancient ones have depicted Death)* (Jens, 1962: 164).

5 "Gustav Aschenbach oder von Aschenbach, wie seit seinem fünfzigsten Geburtstag amtlich sein Name lautete, [...]" (M 444)

Tadzio; so, there is no basis for the claim that he has to atone for his homoerotic love for Tadzio (cf. Jens, 1962: 165). Apart from this, if there is talk of crime and punishment, one should not forget that Aschenbach does not even enter into any dialogue with Tadzio, let alone any physical contact. He does nothing wrong, neither in legal nor in moral terms. What he does, however, is make a fool of himself, trampling all over his own dignity and hard-achieved honour. The blindness of the hero towards his going astray is, as we know, a typical feature of the ancient Greek tragedy, which does not deal with crime and punishment in the first place, but with destiny and fate. This is why Thomas Mann gave his novella the classical five-act form by dividing it into five chapters[6].

Since Thomas Mann and his contemporaries did, of course, no longer believe in the Greek Gods and their curses haunting the human victims, the antique outset had to be replaced by a more modern concept. He found it in the seductive and eventually killing force of beauty to which, as he saw it, the artist is more attracted than ordinary people, and he received some inspiration from the poet August von Platen and his beautiful verses "Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen, / Ist dem Tode schon anheimgegeben" (Von Platen, 1969a: 94) – "Who, with his eyes, has ever looked at beauty, / Is destined to death already". Platen was – like Nietzsche – a great admirer of Venice and its alluring morbidity; he wrote a whole cycle of poems about Venice, the Venetian sonnets. One of them begins as follows: "Venedig liegt nur noch im Land der Träume / Und wirft nur Schatten her aus alten Tagen" (Von Platen, 1969b: 179) – "Venice does not exist any longer but in the realm of dreams / And only casts shadows to the present from days long gone by". This is how Thomas Mann perceived Venice, too: the majestic, sinking town as an allegory of beauty and death, inseparably intertwined.

Mann was also inspired by occurrences and incidents, which were not symbolic but quite real: Richard Wagner, who had a great influence on him, had died in Venice in 1883. Mann was on holiday in Venice in May 1911. A few days earlier, on the island of Brioni[7], he had learnt of the death of Gustav Mahler whom he admired fervently. At the Lido, in the "Grand Hôtel des Bains", he wrote the essay *Über die Kunst Richard Wagners (About the art of Richard Wagner)*, and when he started writing his novella a month later, he gave Gustav von Aschenbach the physical appearance of Gustav Mahler. On the Lido, he had even found a model for Tadzio. So, he could eventually declare that in *Death in Venice*, nothing was fabricated (Mann, 1974d: 85).

His various self-interpretations have to be taken carefully, though. According to one of his own testimonies, he originally planned to write a novella about Goethe's late love for Ulrike von Levetzow, about the "degradation of a high-risen intellect by the passion for a lovely, innocent piece of life" ("die Entwürdigung eines hochgestiegenen Geistes durch die Leidenschaft für ein reizendes, unschuldiges Stück Leben") (Ibid.), but at this stage – according to himself – he did not yet dare to portray Goethe. The highly esteemed Swiss scholar Peter von Matt who views Thomas Mann's connection to Goethe as an Oedipus-like son-father relationship, including the wish of the son to murder the father, claims that Mann had to drop this plan, because Goethe survived his degradation while the father-figure had to die (von Matt, 1978). This may be a

6 Unfortunately, the English version by Lowe-Porter does not maintain this division into five chapters.

7 Brioni seems to have been the model for that island in the Adria where Aschenbach feels so uncomfortable – as Thomas Mann felt in Brioni – that, after a few days, he leaves for Venice.

psychoanalytical speculation, but it can hardly be denied that Thomas Mann saw himself in a lifelong competition with Goethe, that he wanted to inherit his fame. This is surely the reason why another scholar believes that Thomas Mann even invented the alleged plan of a novella about Goethe and Ulrike in order to hide his real intention: to compete with Goethe's *Faust*; he understands Aschenbach as a modern Faust who, like him, eventually dies in the sand at the seaside (Frizen, 1992).

Whether one regards such interpretations as convincing or not – the real adaptation of the Faust topic by Thomas Mann was, of course, his *Doktor Faustus*. In this novel, written more than thirty years later, the composer Adrian Leverkühn enters into an agreement with the devil in order to open up new avenues for music, that seems to have ended in a cul-de-sac. Aschenbach does not make a deal with the devil, but one wonders whether the devil is not involved in his downfall. Already the stranger at the cemetery in Munich, whose sight arouses his longing to travel, has the same red hair as the devil in his various incorporations in *Doktor Faustus*, and that longing to travel is not just a mood – it comes upon him "with such suddenness and passion as to resemble a seizure, almost a hallucination":

> He saw. He beheld a landscape, a tropical marshland, beneath a reeking sky, steaming, monstrous, rank – a kind of primeval wilderness-world of islands, morasses, and alluvial channels. Hairy palm-trunks rose near and far out of lush brakes of fern, out of bottoms of crass vegetation, fat, swollen, thick with incredible bloom. There were trees, mis-shapen as a dream, that dropped their naked roots straight through the air into the ground or into water that was stagnant and shadowy and glassy-green, where mammoth milk-white blossoms floated, and strange high-shouldered birds with curious bills stood gazing sidewise without sound or stir. Among the knotted joints of a bamboo thicket the eyes of a crouching tiger gleamed – and he felt his heart throb with terror, yet with a longing inexplicable (L 9-10)[8].

Is this man still the same, who "regarded travel as a necessary evil, to be endured now and again willy-nilly for the sake of one's health"?[9] And what about the obvious sexual connotations of his vision? Surely, the tiger whose eyes are gleaming out of the thicket is a barely concealed hint to the world of God Dionysos, and there can be no doubt that Thomas Mann, inspired by Nietzsche, had a shift of his protagonist from the Apollinian principle to the Dionysian world

---

8 "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 Sumpfgebiet 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 kauernden Tigers funkeln – und fühlte sein Herz pochen vor Entsetzen und rätselhaftem Verlangen." (M 446-447)

9 "Er hatte [...] das Reisen nicht anders denn als eine hygienische Maßregel betrachtet, die gegen Sinn und Neigung dann und wann hatte getroffen werden müssen." (M 447)

of ecstasy in mind, as is clearly shown by Aschenbach's dream shortly before his death – a counterpart to the just quoted dream – about the orgiastic worship of Dionysos, a dream that "left the whole cultured structure of a life-time trampled-on, ravaged and destroyed" (L 74)[10]. But we also remember that the devil, from old legends to Goethe's *Faust* to modern literature, usually tries to catch his victims by exposing them to sexual seduction. Referring to Goethe's *Faust*: One could read the attempt by the hotel barber to rejuvenate Aschenbach as an allusion to Faust's rejuvenation. In contrast to Goethe's Faust, though, Aschenbach does not have witches and their magic potions at his disposal, and so, his rejuvenation goes horribly wrong.

Whether Aschenbach is lured by a God or a devil is not that important; more striking is the fact that this man, who devoted his whole life to art, and adhered to the strictest self-discipline in order to produce those famous works that are admired by a whole nation, suddenly falls prey to the forces of chaos. Why? Aschenbach no longer gets satisfaction from his work: "To him it seemed his work had ceased to be marked by that fiery play of fancy which is the product of joy, and more, and more potently, than any intrinsic content, forms in turn the joy of the receiving world" (L 11)[11]. In other words: Aschenbach has reached the limits of his writing ability, and he tries to overcome this boundary by leaving himself to intoxication. His problem, the problem of the modern artist in general, is similar to that of the composer Adrian Leverkühn, and he chooses, albeit less explicitly, a similar solution[12]. From then on, the story of Gustav von Aschenbach is one of an increasing estrangement, and this estrangement, too, is a main problem of the modern artist, as experienced and expressed by many writers at the beginning of the twentieth century, perhaps most intensely by Franz Kafka.

Already on the ship to Venice, Aschenbach gets a feeling, as if a dreamlike estrangement were taking place, a distortion of the world towards the absurd[13]. This is exactly how Wolfgang Kayser, in his basic work, has defined the grotesque: "The grotesque is the estranged world"[14]. True, the grotesque features increase, the more Aschenbach becomes entangled, but they are present from the very beginning when he meets that strange pilgrim at the cemetery in Munich. His vision that is triggered by this encounter, that primeval wilderness-world with its bizarre plants and strange birds, is in accordance with all definitions of the grotesque in the sphere of fauna and flora. In fact, the vision resembles the famous painting *Le rêve (The Dream)* by Henri Rousseau where even the eyes of two tiger- or lion-like animals gleam out of the thicket – with one significant difference: in Aschenbach's daydream, the female nude of Rousseau's painting is missing; instead, the whole erotic fantasy is directed towards the male body.

---

[10] Dieser Traum läßt "seine Existenz", läßt "die Kultur seines Lebens verheert, vernichtet zurück". (M 516)

[11] "[...] es schien ihm, als ermangle sein Werk jener Merkmale feurig spielender Laune, die, ein Erzeugnis der Freude, mehr als irgendein innerer Gehalt, ein gewichtigerer Vorzug, die Freude der genießenden Welt bildeten." (M 449)

[12] Thomas Mann did not characterise his protagonist as a man who just loses his grip, but as an artist who perishes because of the most ambitious demands to which success entices him and which, in the end, he is not up to: "Das Leid und die tragische Verirrung eines Künstlers ist zu zeigen, der Phantasie und 'Ernst im Spiel' genug hat, und an den ehrgeizigen Ansprüchen, zu denen der Erfolg ihn verleitet und denen er zuletzt nicht gewachsen ist, *zu Grunde geht*" (Mann, 1992: 120).

[13] "Ihm war, als lasse nicht alles sich ganz gewöhnlich an, als beginne eine träumerische Entfremdung, eine Entstellung der Welt ins Sonderbare um sich zu greifen, [...]" (M 460)

[14] "[...] das Groteske ist die entfremdete Welt" (Kayser, 1961: 198).

Le rêve was painted in 1910, one year before Thomas Mann began writing *Death in Venice*. He probably did not know this painting; at least, he did not mention it in his notes referring to the novella. But the similarity between the two visions points to the situation of the arts around 1910. The sophisticated art of the nerves, so dominant at the turn of the century, was exhausted. The artists were looking for strong feelings that they could express in a fresh, unspoilt way. This is why painters like Picasso regarded Henri Rousseau as one of their predecessors, and this is why Thomas Mann, in retrospect, wrote that *Death in Venice* brought the topic of decadence and the problem of the artist to an end. He also wrote that, in Aschenbach's story, there were some hints towards a post-bourgeois attitude, although these suggestions were reduced to absurdity in an ironic-pessimistic way[15]. By that, he obviously did not mean an artistic attitude, but certain values and standards in society, especially with regard to patterns of sexual behaviour and morality. This was a question that touched the core of his own life. Although he may have been inspired to create the character of Tadzio by his encounter with that young Polish boy who, sixty years later, revealed himself as the model for Tadzio, he confessed, obviously referring to his relationship with the painter Paul Ehrenberg, that he had never written *Death in Venice* without a personal emotional adventure ("ohne ein persönliches Gefühlsabenteuer") (Wysling, 1975: 417). By the time he wrote *Death in Venice*, he had been married for six years already, and his wife Katia had even accompanied him – together with his brother Heinrich – on that holiday trip to Venice. This means that he had given himself a "constitution" ("eine Verfassung"), as he liked to put it, or in other words: He had decided on the bourgeois way of life for himself and against the post-bourgeois attitude.

It would be a trivial simplification to explain the relationship between the author and his work in the way of that well-known pattern: Goethe's Werther had to die so that he could live on, but it is certainly not wrong to read *Death in Venice* as some kind of self-affirmation by its author. Although he gave Aschenbach the appearance of Gustav Mahler, the autobiographical features are so evident – he attributed, for example, a string of works to Aschenbach, which he himself had planned but could not master – that some interpreters equated him to Aschenbach. Apart from the fact that a fictional character is never completely identical with a real person, here, in the course of the story, the narrator distances himself increasingly from his protagonist, and towards the end, he even exposes him to ridiculousness[16].

The dying Aschenbach's last perception is as though Tadzio, who had stepped out into the sea, looked over his shoulder and, smiling at him, pointed outward "ins Verheißungsvoll-Ungeheure" (M 525) – "into an immensity of richest expectations" (L 83). A lot has been speculated about the destination of Tadzio's gesture. One has even hinted at the parallel to the prostitutes in *Felix Krull*, who point "ins Verheißungsvoll-Ungewisse" (Mann, 1974a: 376) – "toward some undefined

---

15 "Die Erzählung [...] war die moralisch und formal zugespitzteste und gesammeltste Gestaltung des Décadence- und Künstlerproblems, in dessen Zeichen seit *Buddenbrooks* meine Produktion gestanden hatte, und das mit dem *Tod in Venedig* tatsächlich ausgeformt war [...]. In Aschenbachs Geschichte klingt manches an, was nicht mehr zur alten bürgerlichen Welt gehört, sondern schon mit neuer nachbürgerlicher Lebenshaltung zu tun hat, obgleich es ironisch-pessimistisch ad absurdum geführt wird." (Mann, 1974d: 87-88)

16 The increasing distance between the author and the narrator of *Death in Venice* is particularly emphasized by Dorrit Cohn (1983) who even compares the narrator to Serenus Zeitblom, the narrator in *Doktor Faustus*.

promise" (Mann, 1958: 97), as though Tadzio would lure Aschenbach into sexual pleasures beyond imagination. Such speculations are, however, in stark contrast to Thomas Mann's own note that dignity is saved by death only: "Die Würde rettet allein der Tod" (Reed, 1983: 87). Furthermore, the gesture attributed to the prostitutes in *Felix Krull* differs considerably from that by Tadzio, because it is just a "short, sidewise motion of the head" (Mann, 1958: 97)[17]. The text of *Death in Venice* itself leaves little doubt that Tadzio tries to direct Aschenbach's fading mind to another world. In the relevant sentence, Tadzio is called "der bleiche und liebliche" ("the pale and lovely") "Psychagog" (M 525)[18]. In his notes to *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann recorded: "Merkur hatte die Seelen in die Unterwelt hinabzuführen und wurde dann psychagogos und psychopompos genannt" (Reed, 1983: 96) ("Mercury had to lead the souls down to the underworld and was then named psychagogos and psychopompos"). In spite of his beauty, Tadzio is marked long before by his unpleasant teeth as the last in the row of those messengers of death.

So, after all, has Aschenbach's experiment failed? One might call it an experiment, because what he tried was: to write in Tadzio's presence, to transfer the beauty of his body into his writing, into art:

> [...] his style should follow the lines of this figure that seemed to him divine; he would snatch up this beauty into the realms of the mind, as once the eagle bore the Trojan shepherd aloft. Never had the pride of the word been so sweet to him, never had he known so well that Eros is in the word, as in those perilous and precious hours when he sat at his rude table, within the shade of his awning, his idol full in his view and the music of his voice in his ears, and fashioned his little essay after the model Tadzio's beauty set: that page and a half of choicest prose, so chaste, so lofty, so poignant with feeling, which would shortly be the wonder and admiration of the multitude (L 53)[19].

This passage seems to confirm that Aschenbach's experiment, this "intercourse [...] between one body and another mind" (Ibid.)[20], as the narrator puts it, has in fact succeeded – but at

---

[17] The complete sentence reads: "So streichen sie, deinen Arm mit ihrem berührend, auf dem Bürgersteige an dir vorüber; ihre Augen, in denen Laternenlicht sich spiegelt, sind aus dem Winkel auf dich gerichtet, ihre Lippen zu einem heißen und unanständigen Lächeln verzerrt, und indem sie dir hastig-verstohlen den Lockruf des Totenvogels zuraunen, deuten sie mit einem kurzen Seitwärts-Winken des Kopfes ins Verheißungsvoll-Ungewisse, so, als erwarte den Mutigen, welcher dem Winke, dem Spruche folgt, dort irgendwo ein ungeheueres, nie gekostetes und grenzenloses Vergnügen." (Mann 1974a: 376) In the translation by Denver Lindley: "Thus they stroll past you on the sidewalk, touching your arm with theirs; their eyes, agleam in the street light, are directed sideways at you, their lips are twisted in a hot, provocative smile, and hastily, furtively whispering the enticing cry of the bird of death, they gesture with a short, sideways motion of the head toward some undefined promise, as though for a man of courage who followed their invitation and summons there awaited somewhere a wonderful, never tasted, illimitable joy." (Mann, 1958: 97)

[18] The translation of "Psychagog" as "Summoner" by Lowe-Porter (L 33) may not be completely unfaithful, but destroys the reference to Greek mythology.

[19] "[...] Und zwar ging sein Verlangen dahin, in Tadzio's Gegenwart zu arbeiten, beim Schreiben den Wuchs des Knaben zum Muster zu nehmen, seinen Stil den Linien dieses Körpers folgen zu lassen, der ihm göttlich schien, und seine Schönheit ins Geistige zu tragen, wie der Adler einst den troischen Hirten zum Äther trug. Nie hatte er die Lust des Wortes süßer empfunden, nie so gewußt, daß Eros im Worte sei, wie während der gefährlich köstlichen Stunden, in denen er, an seinem rohen Tische unter dem Schattentuch, im Angesicht des Idols und die Musik seiner Stimme im Ohr, nach Tadzio's Schönheit seine kleine Abhandlung, – jene anderthalb Seiten erlesener Prosa formte, deren Lauterkeit, Adel und schwingende Gefühlsspannung binnen kurzem die Bewunderung vieler erregen sollte. (M 492-493)

[20] "Seltsam zeugender Verkehr des Geistes mit einem Körper!" (M 493)

which price? Right at the end of his novella, Thomas Mann has, without any introduction or comment, inserted a long monologue which follows, in its main thought, Plato's *Phaidros* (250d-252c). In both texts, it is acknowledged that the sight of beauty uplifts the soul, but that our adoration of beauty inevitably turns into love, desire and eventually into madness. According to Plato's Socrates, only the Gods can handle the seductive dangers of beauty and love. So, is Aschenbach's fault perhaps that he felt divine when he, comparing himself with Zeus, thought he could snatch up the beauty of Tadzio into the realms of the mind, in the same way as Zeus sent an eagle to bear Ganymed aloft to the Olympus? In other words: Is Aschenbach guilty of hubris? In any case, Thomas Mann whose eyes, like Aschenbach's, were firmly set on becoming a classic himself, was not completely unfamiliar with such dangers.

The main alteration he did to Socrates's words is that he restricted the reflections on beauty and desire to the writer and his art, and turned them into a most pessimistic outlook, because according to his text, it is not only beauty that leads to intoxication, desire and eventually into an abyss – cognition, insight and knowledge have the same disastrous consequence, because knowledge "is all-knowing, understanding, forgiving: it takes up no position, sets no store by form. It has compassion with the abyss – it *is* the abyss" (L 81)[21].

Already Tonio Kröger in the novella of the same title, written almost a decade before *Death in Venice*, speaks of his "Erkenntnisekel" (Mann, 1974b: 300), a feeling of disgust towards insight. Tonio Kröger, a writer like Aschenbach, also travels to the South and throws himself into a life of carnal excesses, but soon after, he returns to the North renouncing all Dionysian dissipations and looking for the "Wonnen der Gewöhnlichkeit" (Mann, 1974b: 303), which means for a bourgeois life. Although, in the end, he has to recognize that he will always be excluded from that life's "lulling, trivial waltz rhythm" (L 189) ("des Lebens süße[m], triviale[m] Dreitakt") (Mann, 1974b: 336), he still hopes that his bourgeois love of all human, living, ordinary beings will make him a true writer. In *Death in Venice*, this hope no longer exists; what remains is the writer with "jenem Mal an seiner Stirn" (Mann, 1974b: 290) ("that sign on his brow") (L 147), the *poeta dolorosus*[22].

---

[21] "[...] die Erkenntnis, Phaidros, hat keine Würde und Strenge; sie ist wissend, verstehend, verzeihend, ohne Haltung und Form; sie hat Sympathie mit dem Abgrund, sie *ist* der Abgrund." (M 522)

[22] Aschenbach's downfall begins when he abandons himself to the "wohlige[n] Gleichtakt dieses Daseins" (M 487), for which Tonio Kröger yearns so much. The English translation can hardly preserve the linguistic parallel to *Tonio Kröger*. Lowe-Porter translates this as "the pleasing monotony of this manner of life" (L 47).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hans-Jörg Knobloch
Department of German
University of Johannesburg
PO Box 524
Auckland Park
2006
Email: hjknobloch@uj.ac.za