

SPIRITS OF CHAOS: An Explication of Death in Venice by Thomas Mann

Considering that the novella, Death in Venice, is about the progressive disintegration of an aging writer, Gustav von Aschenbach, culminating in his death, that the story opens in the spring strikes me as peculiar; notably since spring represents a universal symbol of life. Looking further, though, we learn this is not a normal spring, rather a "premature summer" that follows weeks of cold, wet weather, in a "year that for months glowered threateningly over [the] continent" (3). Nothing in the text specifically denotes what visitation threateningly glowers over the continent; however, it coincides with the beginning of something insidious, emerging and taking hold of the protagonist, Aschenbach, leaving him defenseless against its power. Could it be merely by a convergence of coincidental factors or by design that prompts Aschenbach, utterly exhausted from his writing activities, to set off "on a rather long walk"? A close look at just the first few pages should reveal the answer.

The strange weather appears to be an accomplice to a mysterious series of events which ensnare Aschenbach. The weather's abrupt change, from weeks of cold and wet weather to this premature summer, foreshadows abrupt changes about to occur in Aschenbach's routine and character. Something, whether internal or external, seems to be driving Aschenbach that is beyond his control. His customary relaxing sleep during the day now eludes him; he's also unable "to halt the running on of the productive machinery within him," a continuous motion of the spirit (3). He struggles with a particularly difficult literary project, requiring "discretion, caution, penetration, and precision of will" (3). At this crucial time, when he needs a maximum of discipline, he fights an inner energy, a "spirit" energy, at odds with his need and demand for severe concentration, a need for intellectual or mental energy.

The translator uses the word "dangerous" to describe the type of work Aschenbach labors on. Without access to the novella in the German language, I can't develop with certainty any significance associated with this word. However, if the translation is accurate, this word bears the weight of any one, or all, of several consequential meanings. First, it could surmise the nature of the literary piece he struggles with. Second, the word could also refer to Aschenbach's state of physical health, suggesting that he's pushing his endurance to a dangerous limit. And, finally, it could suggest danger of being at the brink mentally. In other words, the intensity required of him for this difficult endeavor may be the catalyst which ultimately pushes him beyond endurance and towards the abyss. Indeed, as knowledge of his past emerges, it does appear that the long years of obsessive, perhaps even excessive, commitment to discipline and form, strains and weakens his will, leaving him susceptible to the strange convergence now closing around him. The narrator comments, "Was his enslaved sensitivity now avenging itself by leaving him, refusing to advance his project and give wings to his art, taking with it all his joy, all his delight in form and expression?" (6).

To refresh his mind, Aschenbach goes for a lengthy walk. The path he takes appears predestined, for taking this path seems instrumentally to eventually lead him to his death. Rather than consciously deciding where to go, Aschenbach seems directed by some unconscious force. The translated version reads, "increasingly quiet paths *led* [italics mine] Aschenbach toward Aumeister, where he spent a moment surveying the lively crowd in the beer garden" (3). If we can trust the translation, the path "led" him. The contrast between "increasingly quiet paths" and the "lively crowds" he surveys, generates an illusion he remains apart from of it, truly one being "led." After a lengthy walk, he then "took a route homeward outside the park over the open fields" (3). Here, too, there's a mesmerizing character, directing him to take a route outside the park and walking over an open field. There's no particular reason given why he doesn't walk through the park, an expected place for a walk. (I checked the map of Munich in the book, but there are no markings, so I couldn't get any bearing and trace his walk.)

Deciding to take a bus the rest of the way home, Aschenbach stops at the cemetery bus stop. The sun is going down and the area is completely deserted. "Nothing stirred" and the mortuary chapel "lay silent,"

even the stonemasons' shops appear deserted. This complete isolation, aloneness, and silence feels created and not likely attributable to chance. Ending his walk at a cemetery bus stop reveals an ironic force at work, because Aschenbach will soon return—for burial. Aschenbach is unaffected by the solitude beside a cemetery and mortuary at sunset, unlike the effect most people would experience. In fact, he seems curiously at ease here. His eye wanders to the Greek art on the mortuary facade. Because of his ardent devotion to Greek principles of order and beauty, the symmetrically arranged scriptural quotations draw him in. He slips into a reverie while looking at them. The association of Greek art and the cemetery can't be overlooked here. From this point on, Aschenbach will gradually succumb to his impulses towards Dionysian chaos, taking him away from his long devotion to Apollonian values. The mesmerizing trance he slips into while viewing the Greek art seems to mark the beginning of the slow decline, and eventual death, of the Apollonian element that has controlled so much of his life.

Almost as if from out of Aschenbach's pleasant reveries while gazing at the quotations, an odd and sinister looking man appears. The stranger's unexpected appearance on the mortuary steps possesses an air of mystery; although Aschenbach doesn't seem to realize it. The narrator describes the area when Aschenbach arrives as absolutely deserted. So, this unexpected appearance of someone suggests a presence intruding from the "other side." Further descriptions lend credence to this observation. First, Aschenbach notices him after coming out of a reverie, although he still seems to be experiencing some strange state. Second, the stranger's face bears strong resemblance to a human skull: he has a "strikingly" snub-nose, which traditionally suggests a skull; he has the milky-white complexion of a red-haired race, similar to the pallor of death; and he has colorless eyes. The most ghastly details of his face are his lips and teeth. Aschenbach notices that the lips are "insufficient" or "afflicted by a facial deformity" because "they were retracted to such an extent that his teeth, revealed as far as the gums, menacingly displayed their entire white length" (4). Such an expression would appear more than menacing—it would be ghastly and macabre. The stranger's face bears one more oddity: between his eyes are "two stark vertical furrows that went rather oddly with his short, turned-up nose" (4). This illusion would possibly be horns—the look of Satan. In any event, certainly, he's the look of death.

Several other features suggest, too, that this man may be an apparition from the other side. He's described as very thin with a thin neck, a natural illusion of a skeleton corresponding to the skull. The narrator describes his Adam's apple as "protruded nakedly from the thin neck" (4). A predominate Adam's apple "protruding nakedly" unmistakably suggests Adam after eating the apple and turned out of the garden aware of his nakedness. The fallen-Adam image establishes a relationship between the strange looking man and Aschenbach's eventual fall.

While the stranger's looks demand scrutiny, where he stands in the portico portends ominous warnings that foreshadow future events and Aschenbach's behavior. The stranger stands conspicuously "above the two apocalyptic beasts guarding the front steps" (4). Thus far, many signs point to Aschenbach's impending death. Then, considering these death signs and this skeleton-like man standing atop apocalyptic beasts guarding the entrance of the house of "death"—the mortuary—we realize that Aschenbach's approaching death will not be a gentle, peaceful one. Rather, we'll see his life slowly disintegrate, then plunge into unrestrained desire, succumbing as "a powerless victim of the demon" (57). The long-repressed part of Aschenbach slowly emerges to take control as he embraces Dionysian chaos.

While staring at the stranger, Aschenbach observes that the stranger's elevated location makes his posture convey "an impression of imperious surveillance, fortitude, even wildness" (4). (This comment, at least, appears to be Aschenbach's thoughts because free indirect speech is used here.) As we see, the stranger's stance atop the apocalyptic beasts confirms increasingly ominous signs, but Aschenbach's instincts seem to be failing him. Though he recognizes something odd about the stranger's appearance, his peculiar mental state or trance, apparently blunts his cognitive powers and prevents clear perception of the impending dangers.

Everything about the stranger at the cemetery flashes warnings to proceed with caution; but Aschenbach remains oblivious to the symbols the stranger represents. Instead, he seems swept away in a kind of mystical absorption, which begins with his walk, or possibly even before. Aschenbach is "half-distracted, half-inquisitive" when he observes the stranger. When their eyes meet, his stare is belligerent and

aggressive, which causes Aschenbach to avert his eyes. In the staring act, the one who averts the stare assumes the submissive position. From all indications, the stranger is clearly the dominant party—but to what degree? Suggested by the eye contact, the stranger's return stare evinces more than annoyance at Aschenbach. Mysteriousness about this stranger indicates probable responsibility in some way for Aschenbach's arrival at the cemetery, leading him full circle back to it—as a resident, not a visitor. This stranger is not a friendly spirit.

The narrator provides additional evidence that the stranger possesses other-worldly powers. He says that the stranger may have "exercised some physical or spiritual influence" over Aschenbach's imagination. Such a comment indicates that the stranger is indeed responsible somehow for Aschenbach's future destructive behavior. How else can it be explained that Aschenbach now feels "a sudden, strange expansion of his inner space, a rambling unrest, a youthful thirst for faraway places, a feeling so intense, so new—or rather so long unused and forgotten—that he stood rooted to the spot. . .pondering the essence and direction of his emotion" (5)?

Until this encounter, Aschenbach had been a severely self-disciplined man, following the rules of propriety and strict moral character. His writing also reflected these same disciplines. Now, he thinks and acts as a thoroughly different man. He develops a "wanderlust," one that "rose to a passion and even to a delusion" (5). At the cemetery, he began to envision a landscape, a primitive wilderness in a tropical swamp "moist, luxuriant, and monstrous." Descriptions used are images of decadence, decay, and fear, such as: terrors, stagnant, lurking, horror, mysterious, weirdly. Something inside Aschenbach has been unleashed. His vision soon fades, but only after "a shake of his head" (5). He then "resumed his promenade along the fences bordering the headstone-makers' yard" (5). Aschenbach seems now to have forgotten that he intended to take the bus back home from here. Instead, he walks past the headstone-makers' yard again—or, is he "led" past it? Likely, on some subconscious level he realizes he's a doomed man.

Similar versions of the stranger's likeness loom throughout the story and further support the assessment of the stranger's role as an evil death symbol. These demonic-like death figures represent, by their attitudes or manner of dress, Aschenbach's "deal with the devil," so to speak. Perhaps they appear to provoke, as evil Dionysian spirits, Aschenbach's fall. Each time they appear, except as the dowdy old man on the ship, the characters display an evil quality, such as the insolence and combativeness of the gondolier and the contemptuous attitude of the singer. Although repulsive to Aschenbach, the dowdy old man on the ship prefigures Aschenbach's similar attempt to look more youthful to attract the young Tadzio.

There is a last bit of evidence toward the end of the story that corroborates the stranger's demonic role in Aschenbach's life. After Aschenbach learns the truth about the epidemic in Venice, he considers telling Tadzio's mother. As he envisions telling her this, he sees himself laying his hand on Tadzio's head. The narrator describes Tadzio as, "that instrument of a scornful deity" (55). The stranger and the inscriptions on the mortuary facade then come to Aschenbach's mind. The connection between the stranger and the "scornful deity" leaves little room for doubt. He's the embodiment of the Dionysian spirit. He purposely leads the strict disciple of Apollo into chaos as punishment for Aschenbach's total denial of the Dionysian element within himself. Aschenbach's excessive adherence to one creed, to the total exclusion of the other, eventually makes him unbalanced, thus, vulnerable to completely embracing excesses of the very things he so fiercely denied. So, within the first few pages, Mann cleverly and subtly weaves the foreshadowing evils awakening in Aschenbach that will ultimately destroy him.