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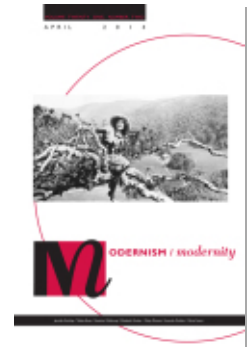
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## Aschenbach Crosses the Waters: Reading *Death in Venice* in America

**Tobias Boes**

The year 2012 marked the centenary of Thomas Mann's novel *Death in Venice*, one of the foremost examples of transnational literary modernism. The term "transnational" is admittedly much overused in contemporary criticism, but it applies perfectly in this case, for one of the great paradoxes of Thomas Mann's career is that although he was perhaps the most self-consciously "German" of all great modernist writers, he reached the height of his fame and influence only after he had been exiled from Hitler's Reich and had made a new name for himself in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Between 1933 and 1945, his books became increasingly difficult to obtain in his native country. At the same time, a new audience discovered his works in America, where the publisher Alfred A. Knopf advertised him as "the world's greatest living author," the Book of the Month Club distributed hundreds of thousands of his novels, and *Time* magazine put his image on the cover of its 11 June 1934 issue.<sup>2</sup> During these years, Mann arguably became the world's first author of what Rebecca Walkowitz has recently called "born translated fiction," stories written in the conscious knowledge that they would primarily be read in translation.<sup>3</sup>

*Death in Venice* of course predates this development; it was originally written in 1911 and first published in the pages of the *Neue Rundschau* in October and November 1912. Nevertheless, the novella played an instrumental role in building the American reputation of Thomas Mann, and a strong argument can be made that *Death in Venice*, if not "born translated," was at least "reborn translated" when Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter rendered it into English in 1928.<sup>4</sup> Between 1930 and 1941, Knopf sold roughly 110,000 copies of Lowe-Porter's *Death in Venice*, most of them

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430 as part of the anthology *Stories of Three Decades*. By contrast, Mann's German publisher S. Fischer had managed to move only about 80,000 copies of the novella during the two decades between 1912 and 1933.<sup>5</sup> Nor did the influence of the Lowe-Porter edition wane after the end of the Second World War. At a time when Mann was still routinely vilified in his native country for his support of the American war effort, *Death in Venice* made its way onto an increasing number of U.S. college syllabi. The work undoubtedly owed part of its initial popularity to the fact that its relative brevity and formal complexity made it ideal fodder for the text-immanent approaches pioneered by the New Critics, but its classicizing themes also meant that it transferred easily into the "Great Books" courses that became a common feature of college curricula during these decades.<sup>6</sup> Starting in the late 1980s, a number of other translations of *Death in Venice* began to compete with the classic Lowe-Porter version, though they never quite displaced it. Astoundingly, there are currently no fewer than eight different English versions in print in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

This abundance of competing translations puts the lie to an argument that David Damrosch advances in *What is World Literature?*: namely, that Mann, unlike Kafka, is not particularly suited to be "reconsidered or retranslated" in order to accommodate changing audience expectations.<sup>8</sup> It is certainly true that Mann, unlike Kafka, who ordered that his stories be burned after his death, began actively and successfully to shape his own reception from a very early age. But the success of the Lowe-Porter translation of *Death in Venice*, and especially the role that it played in advancing Mann's career at a time when his fellow émigré modernists struggled against poverty and obscurity, suggests that "reconsiderations" and "retranslations" were a part of this process from the very beginning. Indeed, punning on the close linguistic relationship between the German verbs for "to translate" and "to ferry across" (they are heteronyms and share a common infinitive in *übersetzen*), we might point out that Aschenbach's journey across the Venetian lagoon already is a voyage of self-translation: disembarking on the Lido, he is subtly yet profoundly altered even as a "respectfully stunned world" buys into the fiction that nothing about him has changed (Heim, 142). Moving from the level of narrative to that of biography, we can also observe that *Death in Venice* began its life as an attempt by Mann to "reconsider" and "retranslate" his own authorial persona in order to meet the demands of a changing audience in Wilhelmine Germany. *Buddenbrooks*, *Death in Venice*, and *The Magic Mountain* were all important texts in Mann's quest to become the "representative" author of his generation, the "teacher of Germany," as his admirers began to hail him shortly after the First World War. But only *Death in Venice* makes this quest, as well as Mann's secret doubt about it, an explicit topic of modernist literature.

The changes that Lowe-Porter introduced to Mann's novella are thus far more than simply the products of poetic and linguistic incompetence, as a number of critics have charged over the last twenty years.<sup>9</sup> They form part of a deliberate cultural strategy that helped introduce Mann to an American audience—a strategy that unwittingly responded to an invitation proffered by the story itself and thereby continued an aesthetic debate that had begun more than twenty years earlier on the other side of the

Atlantic. By crossing the waters, Aschenbach acquired a different appearance, but in so doing he more clearly exposed his inner nature. 431

### **Death in Venice between the Classic and the Classical**

As the foregoing remarks indicate, a comprehensive consideration of Lowe-Porter's English translation of *Death in Venice* has to begin in the year 1912, when S. Fischer published the German original of Mann's novella. The book appeared at the end of a decisive decade in Mann's creative development as a writer and as a public intellectual. He had achieved early critical and commercial fortune with the 1901 publication of his debut novel *Buddenbrooks*, and over the next ten years he set his sights on becoming what the Germans call a *Nationalschriftsteller*, a writer who serves as a kind of personified consciousness of his nation. The exact meaning of this term is difficult to reconstruct for a present-day reader, especially an American one. The author who came closest to being a "national consciousness" for the United States during the early twentieth century was the muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair. In imperial Germany, however, writers were expected to speak to the public not as agitators but as poets, to use their craft to give a living form to all that was considered good and typical within the national community. Ideally, *Nationalschriftsteller* were also expected to embody these same values in their public demeanor. The archetype of such a national poet was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; its most famous living representative was Gerhart Hauptmann, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature the same year that *Death in Venice* was published.

German society in the early twentieth century was changing, however, and literary culture was changing with it; the most innovative authors were no longer necessarily those who also appealed to the bourgeois consensus about what a *Nationalschriftsteller* should be. Mann's first substantial publication following *Buddenbrooks*, the novella *Tonio Kröger* (1903), was rightly acclaimed as a masterpiece, but it also undeniably looks backwards to the *Bildungsroman* tradition of the nineteenth century. His subsequent attempts at a play (*Fiorenza*, 1905) and at a comic novel (*Royal Highness*, 1909) met with only tepid success and fell far short of his own expectations.

As a result of these perceived failures, Mann became locked in a kind of Oedipal struggle against the model poet Goethe, a struggle that culminated in the composition of *Death in Venice*.<sup>10</sup> The work has its roots in an abandoned project called "Goethe in Marienbad," which was supposed to tell the story of the great poet's degrading infatuation with Ulrike von Levezow, who was fifty-five years his junior when he proposed marriage to her in 1823. By the time that Mann began writing his novella in the summer of 1911, his intentions had obviously changed, but *Death in Venice* remains a story about age-inappropriate love, and its protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach, remains the quintessential example of a national poet. This is not only because excerpts from Aschenbach's stories are taught in schools, or because he has won the backing of noblemen and of countless admirers from every part of the globe. A "secret affinity, indeed,

432 a congruence” also appears to connect “the personal destiny of [Aschenbach] and the collective destiny of his generation” (Heim, 15–16). Mann’s protagonist further cultivates an intentionally classical style; the narrator speaks of “a noble purity, simplicity, and harmony of form that . . . gave his production so manifest . . . a stamp of virtuosity and classicism” (Heim, 20). In this respect, he not only imitates the older Goethe, but he also uncannily anticipates the later Hauptmann, who published the travel narrative *Greek Springtime* in 1908 followed by the play *Odysseus’ Bow* in 1913. In other words, Aschenbach has achieved exactly the kind of status for which Mann himself longed, and as many readers of *Death in Venice* have noted, the main works that the fictional poet is supposed to have written are those that Mann had attempted and abandoned during the previous decade.

However, *Death in Venice* would hardly be such an interesting story had Mann merely tried to paint an idealized self-portrait. Aschenbach’s eventual downfall and abject death on the Lido show that Mann’s ambitions were of a different nature. Through Aschenbach, Mann created an alternate version of himself, a version that describes the course his life might have taken had he succeeded in repeating the success of *Buddenbrooks* and achieved the stature of representative national writer in the nineteenth-century mold. Aschenbach is a national poet in an age for which such exemplary figures are no longer appropriate. His work, like that of the famously robust Goethe, appears to be the “product of prodigious strength and unending stamina,” but it is actually built “out of daily increments of hundreds upon hundreds of bits of inspiration” (Heim, 15). In other words, it gives the impression of organic wholeness when in reality it is the product of mechanical assemblage. This mechanical origin does not necessarily render Aschenbach’s work inferior art or make it a less representative symbol of its time—after all, we are dealing with an age in which Henry Ford revolutionized industrial production and in which F. T. Marinetti favorably compared racecars with the Nike of Samothrace. It does mean, however, that the outward manifestations of Aschenbach’s success (his title of nobility, his stately correspondence, his meticulous and slightly ostentatious public appearance) are a particularly poor match for the true nature of his art.

As the story takes its course and we watch Aschenbach succumb literally to cholera and metaphorically to his infatuation with Tadzio, we realize that Mann has set a trap for us. By creating Aschenbach as a thinly veiled cipher for his own existence only to dispatch him ruthlessly at the end of his story, Mann marks a decisive break with the traditional understanding of representative art. He instead embraces one of the central premises of modernism: namely, that of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. The nineteenth-century concept of representative art was premised on an inner congruity between artistic form and moral content, a congruity in which the criteria used to judge literary classics meet the aesthetics of literary classicism. *Death in Venice* undermines this notion in a dual manner to which Oliver Jahraus has recently given the name “hybrid representation.”<sup>11</sup> First, Aschenbach’s conduct in Venice dispels the assumption that his compositions, in which “a path to moral fortitude exist[s] even beyond the depths of knowledge” (Heim, 11), accurately reflect his own character. Second, his miserable downfall renders fatuous any presumed link between

the protagonist and Mann himself. It is through this discovery of hybrid representation that *Death in Venice* progresses conceptually beyond the limits of Mann's earlier artist novella *Tonio Kröger* and allows its creator to become what Erich Heller has called "the ironic German": an artist whose achievement lies precisely in the inscrutable distance that separates him from the opinions expressed in his work.<sup>12</sup>

Already apparent in the famous opening paragraph of *Death in Venice* are both the struggle to define the nature of representative art and the lure of irony as a response to the challenges of the modern world:

Gustav Aschenbach or von Aschenbach, as he had officially been known since his fiftieth birthday, set out alone from his residence in Munich's Prinzregentenstrasse on a spring afternoon in 19. . .—a year that for months had shown so ominous a countenance to our continent—with the intention of taking an extended walk. Overwrought from the difficult and dangerous labors of the late morning hours, labors demanding the utmost caution, prudence, tenacity, and precision of will, the writer had even after the midday meal been unable to halt the momentum of the inner mechanism—the *motus animi continuus* in which, according to Cicero, eloquence resides—and find the refreshing sleep that the growing wear and tear upon his forces made a daily necessity. And so, shortly after tea he had sought the outdoors in the hope that open air and exercise might revive him and help him enjoy a fruitful evening. (Heim, 1–2)<sup>13</sup>

This passage introduces two artists. We meet not only Aschenbach but also the narrator, whose elaborate syntax (142 words divided between only three sentences) and heavily adjectival style point towards a self-consciously literary mind.<sup>14</sup> As the story progresses and we learn about Aschenbach's peculiar talent for forging seamless compositions out of incremental inspirations, the narrator's tendency to use hypotaxis, like the elaborate nested enumeration in the second sentence, appears to mimic the protagonist's imaginary style. This juxtaposition is given further credence by the (fictional) quotation from Cicero, which the narrator deliberately renders in Latin, just as Aschenbach undoubtedly would have done. In other words, *Death in Venice* begins as a novella in which content and form—the life of the neo-classical artist Gustav Aschenbach and the style in which his actions are narrated—are seemingly in harmony, and thus as a text which itself fulfills all criteria of the "classic" and the "classical." A letter that Mann sent to his friend Paul Amann on 10 September 1915 confirms that this was an intentional stylistic choice.<sup>15</sup>

From the very start, however, there is trouble in this narrative Arcadia. We can already sense this trouble in the narrator's use of the phrase *motus animi continuus*. These words turn out to be deeply ironic when applied to Aschenbach, for as the story progresses, it becomes apparent that he struggles with a profound case of writer's block and will produce only one short piece of prose in the next month or so. *Motus animi continuus* does, however, seem entirely appropriate when applied to the narrator, whose opening salvo surely ranks among the most delicately balanced yet tightly wound paragraphs in all of modern literature. Even on the first page of *Death in Venice*, then, classical style (defined as the deliberate harmony of form and content) veers towards

434 something else. Following Fredric Jameson's analysis of Thomas Mann, we might call this pastiche:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.<sup>16</sup>

The narrator invokes a classicizing idiom seemingly without any consciousness that the protagonist's deteriorating self-control casts suspicion on this very means of expression (the first symptom of that deterioration already manifests itself in this paragraph through Aschenbach's inability to halt his "inner mechanism"). The narrator's intentions are not parodic, for there is not as yet any discernible trace of judgment or mockery in his attitude towards Aschenbach. But for a reader who knows what is about to happen, the discrepancy between content and form of these paragraphs is immediately apparent, and unmasks the narrator's rhetoric as an empty stylistic exercise.

This form of pastiche is a defining characteristic of Mann's art in *Death in Venice* and contributes to what Dorrit Cohn in a classic essay calls the story's "bifurcating narrative schema."<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, Cohn observes, the narrator becomes increasingly judgmental of Aschenbach as the novella progresses; by the end of the second chapter, for instance, he already describes Aschenbach's style as "formal, even formulaic" (Heim, 21). On the other hand, the narrator maintains continuous privileged access to the protagonist's sensations and feelings, at times even mingling them with his own observations. This is accomplished primarily through free indirect discourse, but also through the elision of quotation marks around interior monolog and through frequent use of the present tense in narrative situations that, strictly speaking, call for the simple past. Pastiche bridges the gap between these bifurcating strains. As a transparent imitation of Aschenbach's characteristic style, the classicizing passages continually pull us not so much into the protagonist's mind as they do into the artistic field of which he is a leading representative, a field that equates "the classical" with "the classic" and elevates to the level of canonical art only those texts that show due reverence to formal tradition. At the same time, however, the very same classicizing passages are the vehicle through which the narrator delivers his judgment on Aschenbach. Multiplying allusions to and quotations from ancient authors essentially turn the final two chapters of *Death in Venice* into an extended allegory. Aschenbach is at once cast in the role of Phaedrus, Plato's seeker of Apollonian beauty, and in the role of Pentheus, Euripides's tragic hero who pays with his life for the sin of getting too close to Dionysian frenzy.

As the novella progresses, this metastatic spread of pastiche creates an obvious dilemma for the reader. For if we want to join the narrator in condemning the protagonist, then we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that his judgment is delivered in the same elevated and slightly sententious tone cultivated by Aschenbach, in an idiom that the story itself unmasks as an Apollonian cover over a Dionysian abyss. If, on the other

hand, we read the last two chapters of *Death in Venice* with their archaisms and classicizing allusions as a self-reflexive exercise, then we are left without a solid foundation from which to judge the protagonist. In short, the very stylistic markers that defined “classic” and “representative” art in the late-nineteenth century acquire a shimmering translucence. In their place, we are left with an unreliable narrator, that quintessential modernist figure, and with a new conception of what constitutes representative art. Mann shows that he is capable of imitating nineteenth-century stylistic conventions so convincingly that even the most sophisticated reader will be unable to decide whether a given sentence should be read as parody, and in so doing, Mann claims for himself a wholly new and wholly contemporary form of literary mastery.

### Dressing Thomas Mann

When *Death in Venice* was carried across the Atlantic, its story of the making and unmaking of a national poet lost much of the cultural context that gave it its original significance. America during the first third of the twentieth century stood at the peak of its own Augustan age: a vibrant republic transforming itself into the world’s dominant empire. Neo-classicism in the arts thus carried a very different significance than it did during the waning days of Wilhelmine Germany. This loss in context created a void that U.S. readers understandably tried to fill with new models of poetic representation.

H. T. Lowe-Porter was not the first American translator of *Death in Venice*. That honor belongs to Kenneth Burke, whose 1924 version first appeared in *The Dial* and was then published by Knopf as a separate volume the following year. But Burke’s translation did not leave much of an impact—perhaps because it remained a little too faithful to its source, possibly also because Scofield Thayer, then the editor of *The Dial*, made the fateful decision to market Mann (still in his forties) as the representative of an older, prewar generation rather than as an artist who could speak to contemporary concerns.<sup>18</sup> Knopf, by contrast, pursued a different strategy for launching Mann’s stories towards literary prominence. As Catherine Turner explains, “Knopf sold the works that he published as the functional equivalent of civilization rather than just as good books. Even works like Mann’s, which questioned accepted definitions of civilization, were sold for their abstract quality to signify civilized life” (Turner, 89). In part, this strategy simply meant pandering to the literary tastes and the social curiosities of the American middle classes. For instance, *Buddenbrooks*, which Knopf published in 1924, was advertised not as the story of the “decline of a family” but as a titillating keyhole into the lives of the European upper crust, as a work in the manner of John Galsworthy’s hugely successful *The Forsyte Saga*. Much more importantly, however, and in distinct contrast to Thayer, Knopf also tried to link Mann to the promise of a spiritual renewal, suggesting to his readers that the German author’s stories contained lessons that might help heal the cultural and social divisions that beset American society during the “roaring twenties.” *The Magic Mountain*, for instance, was marketed both as “a complete *Pilgrim’s Progress* of the physical and psychic life of modern man”<sup>19</sup> and as a “*Divine Comedy* for our disastrous age” (quoted in Turner, 91).



436 Knopf quickly realized that his marketing strategy for Thomas Mann required not only a certain kind of advertising copy but also a congenial translator who could produce English-language editions that Americans would actually want to read. He found such a translator in Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter, whose versions of *Buddenbrooks* (1924) and *The Magic Mountain* (1927) quickly became bestsellers. When Mann's own preferred collaborator Hermann Georg Scheffauer died in April of 1927, Knopf moved to consolidate his holdings and asked Lowe-Porter to retranslate systematically all of Mann's stories that already existed in other editions. Mann had initially been reluctant to see a woman translate his fiction, especially since acquaintances with a better command of English than his own offered mixed reports about the quality of Lowe-Porter's work. But he knew success when he saw it, and eventually he settled into a productive working relationship with his American ambassador.

Lowe-Porter's renditions of Thomas Mann have been criticized as linguistically incompetent, stylistically tone deaf, and philosophically ignorant. Indeed, Lowe-Porter herself wrote of the fifteen months she spent in Munich in 1906–7: "German had remained largely a foreign language to me. I was enormously impressed by the culture of all the people with whom I came into contact, and knew that my own surroundings had never compared with this picture of solid and sustained intellectual effort."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps even more damningly, she also confessed, "I sometimes do not really understand T. Mann until I have dressed his thought and put English garb on it" (Lowe-Porter, 204). But such criticism ignores that Lowe-Porter's willingness to privilege readability over stylistic fidelity not only reflected assumptions about translation that were widespread in the early twentieth century, it also constituted a distinct advantage for Knopf, who sought translations that would render Thomas Mann meaningful for an American audience unschooled in Teutonic profundities. Lowe-Porter was certainly well aware of this, for the metaphor of the translator as a garment maker, one who "dresses" a foreign text in order to make it comprehensible to a new audience, recurs frequently in her published writings, perhaps most tellingly in the lines she wrote about her first encounter with Thomas Mann in Oxford in 1923:

I feel sure T. Mann looked over all the books in our scanty library (mostly paleographical) and did his best to size up this unknown interest which—due to the ugly vicissitudes of those war and postwar years—must willy-nilly . . . serve him to change the garment of his art into one which might clothe her for the marketplace until times changed. (Lowe-Porter, 181)

Lowe-Porter, in other words, was perfectly aware that her translation would enter the stage of world literature under highly distinctive socio-historical circumstances and that she had been asked to deliver a sellable product, not a masterpiece of poetic fidelity. Further study of these lines reveals the nature of the circumstances in question. Lowe-Porter draws explicit attention to the "ugly vicissitudes of those war and postwar years" that required Mann to put his confidence in an unknown English translator. She refers most directly to the period of hyperinflation that was then ravaging the Weimar Republic and made it all the more imperative for German authors to

sell the international rights to their stories. However, the passage also alludes to the ill repute from which German culture still suffered in England during those postwar years, a circumstance that would have been foremost on everyone's mind at that 1923 meeting, for the Oxford dons that Mann had originally intended to visit had refused to see him; they considered him insufficiently reformed from his wartime chauvinism.

Further illuminating the socio-historical factors that conditioned Lowe-Porter's translation projects, a second important clue can be found in her parenthetical reference to the paleographical volumes that made up much of her personal library. The remark is clearly intended in a self-abnegating fashion, since Mann's stories are famous for the breadth of their cultural, historical, and philosophical references. But it also highlights that Mann's American ambassador was not exactly a blank slate in matters of cultural transmission, as most of her previous interpreters have argued.<sup>21</sup> It is true that her previous record as a translator was rather eclectic, consisting of a handful of translations from the German and French for the literary magazine *Poet's Lore*, which was run by a bluestocking aunt. But Lowe-Porter had also been actively involved for almost a decade and a half in a different form of translation, working as an assistant and confidante to her husband Elias Avery Lowe, who taught paleography at Oxford. Lowe studied the transmission of ancient Roman texts during the Middle Ages and made his reputation by transcribing and cataloging Latin manuscripts. Furthermore, he had done doctoral work at Munich under the supervision of Ludwig Traube, who in turn was one of the most famous students of the great Prussian philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the foremost theorist of cultural transmission and translation during the 1920s. Wilamowitz was one of the last great practitioners of nineteenth-century German academic historicism, a worldview that informed his scholarship in two different but only superficially opposed ways. First, he believed that philology would have to draw on archaeology and related positivistic disciplines in order to reconstruct the true nature of classical civilizations whose underlying social structures and guiding values are utterly incommensurate with our own. Second, he believed that modern translations should "spurn the letter and follow the spirit" of their ancient sources and "let the ancient poet speak to us clearly and in a manner as immediately intelligible as he did in his own time."<sup>22</sup>

It is tempting to postulate a direct link between this injunction and the liberties that Lowe-Porter took with Mann's source text in order to render it more vividly for an American audience. However, there is no evidence to suggest that H. T. Lowe-Porter was even aware of Wilamowitz's existence. Her close working relationship with her husband in the years prior to her translation assignments suggests a different and less direct form of influence, however. When Lowe-Porter's biography is paired with that of her husband, it is hard not to notice that her thirty-year partnership with Thomas Mann almost exactly coincided with Lowe's own lifelong project: the *Codici Latini Antiquiores*, a kind of Anglo-American offshoot of the philological megaprojects that Wilamowitz had founded in Germany. (It was his work on the *Codici* that took the couple to the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study in the late 1930s and briefly made neighbors out of Mann and Lowe-Porter.)

438 The Wilamowitz connection is especially important because it suggests that Lowe-Porter approached *Death in Venice* with substantial, albeit unsystematic, training in classical philology of a tradition antithetical to Mann's own worldview. Scholars influenced by Wilamowitz focused on the careful reconstruction of ancient sources and were motivated by respect, even reverence, for a historical period deemed irreconcilably different from their own. Mann, who had learned much of what he knew about the classics from Wilamowitz's archenemy Friedrich Nietzsche, was interested in the uses and abuses of classical history for contemporary life. The ramifications of this fundamental disagreement become apparent when we combine Lowe-Porter's description of *Buddenbrooks* as a "backwash of the romantic movement" and an expression of "emotion served up on ice" with her simultaneous admission that "I deduced [the novel's] author as an elderly man with—I don't know why—a white beard" (Lowe-Porter, 179–80). This juxtaposition shows how much neo-classical aesthetics were linked in her mind with intellectual earnestness and social distinction, with precisely those factors that also characterize Aschenbach's reception in *Death in Venice*. For biographical reasons, in other words, Lowe-Porter was inextricably caught up in many of the issues of artistic representation and the nature of "the classic" that Mann so subtly attacks in *Death in Venice*. It was clearly unfathomable for her that the man who had sat down to write *Buddenbrooks* might have been a twenty-two-year-old literary rebel.

A final, important historical factor to keep in mind is that Lowe-Porter was an American living in England. Though Alfred A. Knopf had his own reasons for commissioning a new rendition of *Death in Venice*, the formal impetus for the project came when Mann's British publisher Martin Secker declared the Kenneth Burke translation to be "too American." What he meant by this is a bit of a mystery, since there is nothing overtly American about Burke's translation of the novella. Nevertheless, Lowe-Porter was clearly aware that she was expected to deliver a product that, while primarily intended for the more lucrative American market, would also be profitable in England. As she would note later, "I came in time to follow the rule that no word or idiom should be used which was not intelligible, even if unfamiliar, to both publics. I could and did use both definitely English and definitely American words and idioms; but they had to be understandable to both sides and good literature as well." She also added, in what seems a bit of a non sequitur, "It seems few people realize that a character in a novel *must speak in character*," thereby raising the thorny issue of how a given idiom might best be represented in a different language (Lowe-Porter, 191–92).

Lowe-Porter understood herself as ambassador of a downtrodden German culture; she had done previous work on the margins of classical philology; she attempted to reach a global anglophone audience. With these three factors in mind, we can now turn to her rendition of the opening paragraph of *Death in Venice*, which reads as follows:

Gustave Aschenbach—or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday—had set out alone from his house in the Prince Regent Street, Munich, for an extended walk. It was a spring afternoon in that year of grace 19—, when Europe sat upon the anxious seat beneath a menace that hung over its head for months. Aschenbach had sought the open soon after tea. He was overwrought by a morning of hard, nerve-taxing

work, work which had not ceased to exact his uttermost in the way of sustained concentration, conscientiousness, and tact; and after the noon meal found himself powerless to check the onward sweep of the productive mechanism within him, that *motus animi continuus* in which, according to Cicero, eloquence resides. He had sought but not found relaxation in sleep—though the wear and tear upon his system had come to make a daily nap more and more imperative—and now undertook a walk, in the hope that air and exercise might send him back refreshed to a good evening's work.<sup>23</sup>

Besides the overt archaisms (“in that year of grace 19—,” “Europe sat upon the anxious seat”), Lowe-Porter's most noticeable departure from Mann's original is that she employs five sentences where the German only requires three. This change is especially apparent in the opening sentence, which Lowe-Porter splits into two unequal parts, one dealing with Aschenbach's actions, the other describing the setting of the novella. Many similar transformations can be found throughout the work.

The pioneering research of Timothy Buck has shown that this tendency to favor parataxis over hypotaxis, to simplify sentence structure and to create purely descriptive phrases where the German original has none, marks other Lowe-Porter translations of Thomas Mann, as well.<sup>24</sup> Of course, German is infamous for its involved sentence structure, and in her correspondence with Knopf, Lowe-Porter specifically highlighted the transposed opening paragraph of *Death in Venice* as a successful example of her attempts to make Mann accessible to English readers.<sup>25</sup> But as we have seen in our analysis of the German original, the complex opening sentences of *Death in Venice* serve a purpose even beyond establishing a certain narrative pace. They also contain vital information about the narrator, whose tone first appears to us as a kind of mimicry of Aschenbach's fictional style. In Lowe-Porter, on the other hand, the narrator speaks with the disembodied voice of nineteenth-century realism and appears to examine the subject matter at hand with analytical distance and emotional coldness.<sup>26</sup>

The other stylistic devices that Mann uses to align the mind of his narrator with that of his protagonist suffer similar transformations in the Lowe-Porter translation. She turns free indirect discourse into exterior evaluation, changes present-tense verbs to the past tense, and systematically adds quotation marks around passages of interior monolog. As a result of this, the delicate “bifurcating narrative schema” that Dorrit Cohn diagnoses in the German original, in which increasing evaluative distance coexists with a continued allegiance to Aschenbach's classicizing mind, is entirely lost. The narrator always speaks about Aschenbach from a distance. The gulf that separates narrator from protagonist is as wide as the Atlantic Ocean, for Lowe-Porter also turns the phrase “das Jahr 19., das *unserem Kontinent* monatelang eine so gefahrdrohende Miene zeigte” into “that year of grace 19—, when *Europe sat upon the anxious seat.*” The phrase “to sit upon the anxious seat,” taken from the sermons of the revivalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney, is an example of one of Lowe-Porter's “definitely American” idioms. Together with the substitution of the word “Europe” for “our continent,” it destroys the subtly wrought phrasing by which Mann subsumes Aschenbach, narrator, and implied reader alike under an ominous threat, and instead removes narrator and implied reader from the protagonist.<sup>27</sup>

440 Lowe-Porter introduces other small changes to the opening paragraph, as well. For instance, she changes Munich's Prinzregentenstraße into "Prince Regent Street" and alters Gustav Aschenbach's first name to the French spelling "Gustave." Lowe-Porter regularly introduces foreign terms in places where Thomas Mann has none; these are almost invariably drawn from the French, although sometimes also from the Italian, and together they constitute one of the most conspicuous yet least remarked-upon feature of the Lowe-Porter translation (see figure 1). By contrast, Mann's German original uses only a few foreign terms—and exclusively ones that are indispensable to the task of invoking local color, such as *vaporetto* or *bersaglieri*. Considering its cosmopolitan setting and multi-lingual cast of characters, the story is actually surprisingly uniform in its linguistic presentation. Although virtually all of Aschenbach's dialogue during his Italian holiday is presumably conducted in English, French, and Italian, the narrator rarely hints at such a proliferation of languages. The characters generally address one another in formal German, using appellations such as "mein Herr" or even "gnädiger Herr" rather than *monsieur* or *signore*. Lowe-Porter, on the other hand, consistently employs foreign terms of address in her dialogue.

Thomas Mann	Literal Translation	H. T. Lowe-Porter
Handstreich (506)	surprise attack	coup de main (381)
Schlafwagen (507)	sleeper car	wagon-lit (382)
Fahrlässigkeit (509)	carelessness	laissez-aller (383)
Geistreich (511)	ingenious	spirituel [ <i>sic</i> ] (384)
alles verstehen heißt alles verzeihen (513)	to understand all is to forgive all	tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner (386)
es schien folglich, dass er nicht allzu sehr ruhen durfte (524)	evidently he ought not rest too much	evidently it would not do to give himself up to sweet <i>far niente</i> (393)
Bäder-Hotel (527)	beach hotel	hôtel des bains (395)



Fig. 1. A partial list of foreign terms introduced by Lowe-Porter.

These linguistic substitutions can be partly understood as an attempt to give Mann's stories a patina of culture that anglophone readers quite clearly associated with France and Italy rather than with Germany. More importantly, however, these substitutions also have the effect of further distancing both narrator and reader from the Venetian action, which is now quite literally invoked as if in quotation. The original narrator speaks as an insider, as a cosmopolitan European addressing a likeminded audience. His description of the Venetian environment is unobtrusive, and scenes that in different hands might well slide into mere cliché—such as the ride in the gondola or the

encounter with the street musicians—are rendered in such a way as to work out the symbolic overtones to maximum effect. H. T. Lowe-Porter, on the other hand, gives a different character to this narrative voice, that of a relative outsider who self-consciously presents the audience with an exciting and unfamiliar environment. This change in tone allows Lowe-Porter to address an anglophone readership more directly, and it also solidifies an image of Mann's novella as a peculiarly "European" narrative whose tragic end points towards the larger catastrophe that was to engulf the continent. But the substitution also subtly erodes the overall narrative structure of *Death in Venice*, in which a classicizing style is eventually unmasked as a form of pastiche. The Lowe-Porter version of the novella is from the very beginning marked as pastiche because Lowe-Porter inserts linguistic elements that do not belong there for the sole purpose of achieving a "cultured" effect.

The close relationship between this *linguistic* pastiche and the *stylistic* one so characteristic of the original text of *Death in Venice* can be established through two intermediate steps. First, when Lowe-Porter somewhat pedantically restores Mme de Staël's "*tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*" to the original French, she highlights that "culture" for her is more than just a mastery of foreign terms, that it also involves the ability to recognize literary allusions from the humanist canon. Second, when she inserts literary allusions of her own devising into her translation, she actively uses her particular form of cultural mediation to distort Mann's story, rendering classicizing effects even more overtly than they appear in the original. Thus Aschenbach's perfectly harmless resolution to spend "a night in a sleeping car and a siesta of three or four weeks [*eine Siesta von drei, vier Wochen*]" at one of the internationally recognized holiday resorts in the friendly south" acquires an inflated Homeric cast when Lowe-Porter translates it as "a night in the *wagon-lit*, three or four weeks of lotus-eating at some one of the gay world's playgrounds in the lovely south" (Heim, 10; Lowe-Porter, 382). Because of this inserted Homeric reference, which occurs at the end of the first chapter, long before Aschenbach crosses the Venetian lagoon and thereby fully enters into the Dionysian realm, the delicate structure of *Death in Venice* is thrown off balance, and later, pointed references to the Phaiakian episode of the *Odyssey* are robbed of some of their potency.

In its attempt to appeal to an American audience and to stress the "cultured" neo-classical elements of *Death in Venice*, the Lowe-Porter translation thus dilutes the poetic strategies by which Thomas Mann sought to establish himself as a specifically *modernist* author during the waning days of the Wilhelmine Empire. The average American reader, unable to discern how closely the original story links the voice of the narrator to the character of Aschenbach, was much less likely to consider the delicate play of irony that governs the increasing use of classical allusions throughout the text. In consequence, *Death in Venice* was enshrined in the American canon largely as the fulfillment of themes that had already been worked out by the younger Thomas Mann—the clash of art and life, of spirit and Eros, of the Apollonian and the Dionysian—rather than as the herald of an entirely new phase in European letters.

442 **Aschenbach in Exile**

It would be easy to read the arrival of *Death in Venice* in America simply as the story of how a complex high-modernist text was diluted to suit the demands of a popular audience. However, if we view Mann's novella primarily as an attempt to retain cultural legitimacy in an age of rapidly evolving literary taste (as I have tried to do in the opening segment of this essay), then a different narrative presents itself. In 1954, a year before his death, Mann drafted a long response to a German correspondent who had attacked *Death in Venice* as a "perverted" and "irresponsible work." In this letter, Mann defended his novella with the proud boast that "in America it is regarded as 'classical,' a sign surely that even and especially in that puritanical sphere it is not felt to be immoral."<sup>28</sup> Forty years after subjecting the implied link between neo-classicism and literary canonization to a process of ironic ridicule, Mann was apparently ready not only to shoulder the mantle of having created a "classic," but also to let stand the implied association with such classical values as purity and morality.

And indeed, much had changed since those final years before the First World War, when *Death in Venice*—along with Musil's *The Sorrows of Young Törless* (1906), Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* (1909), and Kafka's "The Judgment" (1912)—rang in a new era of German prose fiction. In the years following upon the publication of his most famous novella, Mann intentionally broke with the traditional role of the national poet in order to concentrate on essayistic interventions in the public sphere. This process came to a head in 1922 with Mann's lecture "On the German Republic." Disguised as a birthday address to his secret rival Gerhart Hauptmann, this important text contains a call not only for a more engaged attitude towards politics, but also for a new kind of national writer who would take his inspiration from the bard of the American republic, Walt Whitman.<sup>29</sup> Given this transoceanic connection, it is perhaps only fitting that Mann would find the final form of his new conception of national representation when he disembarked from a steamer in New Jersey in February of 1938. His famous words, "where I am is Germany," do not simply indicate personal hubris. They document, instead, Mann's thoroughly modernist awareness that the representative symbol of German character is not to be found within official culture, but rather within the figure of the exiled artist, who shines a light on the hidden causes of a national disease of which he nevertheless knows himself to be a carrier.

Mann's commitment to this new understanding of the function of art in a modern society helped him escape the fate of many of his fellow émigrés, writers who washed up in America only to discover that there was no demand for their stories in what Bertolt Brecht called the "market where lies are bought." Mann, by contrast, enjoyed a dual career, working both as a novelist and as a tremendously popular lecturer, whose thoughts about the future of democracy and the fate of Hitler's Germany drew standing-room-only audiences in some of the largest auditoria across the country. Nor were these two identities separate from one another, for in his main literary project of the decade, the massive *Joseph* tetralogy that was carried into U.S. households by the Book of the Month Club (*Joseph in Egypt* alone sold over 250,000 copies), the author

set out to do nothing less than to create for New Deal America a mythology that would rival that of fascist Germany.

The Lowe-Porter translation of *Death in Venice* turned out to be a helpful tool in Mann's endeavor to redefine himself not as a teacher but as an explicator of Germany; it obscured the ironic stance of the original and instead reframed the narrator as a trustworthy presence capable of perceiving and judging the decline of Aschenbach from a measured distance. In a letter that Mann wrote to his American patron Agnes Meyer in May of 1938, he indicated that he had begun to reconceive his own novella as an allegory of the tragic fate of the quintessential servile Wilhelminian subject, the *Untertan*—a marked departure from the days of the First World War, when he still basked in critical appraisals of the story's "soldierly spirit."<sup>30</sup> Ten years later, he strengthened this assessment in his *The Story of a Novel: the Genesis of Doctor Faustus*, in which he highlighted *Death in Venice* as an intellectual predecessor of his inquiry into the origins of Nazism.

By the time that *The Story of a Novel* was published, *Death in Venice* was already making inroads onto American college campuses. The strong reaction of Vladimir Nabokov, who considered it to be pure kitsch, documents that even Mann's most intelligent readers in America missed out on the cunning and deeply duplicitous nature of the story's classicizing style.<sup>31</sup> They were instead taken in by the Lowe-Porter translation with its greater degree of faith in the authority of the narrator. *Death in Venice*, which had been conceived so many years earlier (and a continent away) as a high-modernist attack on representative art, thus acquired an entirely new status, that of a modern classic depicting the tragedies of the twentieth-century "age of extremes" through the mirror of the classical humanist tradition. The transatlantic creation of *Death in Venice* was also the transatlantic reinvention of its author.

## Notes

1. Thomas Mann's public success and commercial fortunes in the United States are only now attracting belated scholarly attention. On this topic, see especially Hans Rudolf Vaget, *Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner: Leben und Werk im amerikanischen Exil, 1938–1952* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2011).

2. Mann was the first non-anglophone writer to be honored with a *Time* magazine cover. On Knopf's advertising campaign for Mann as the "world's greatest living author," see Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism between the Two World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 86; hereafter cited in the text as "Turner."

3. Rebecca Walkowitz, "Comparison Literature," *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 567–82.

4. Lowe-Porter's translation was published by the U.K. firm of Martin Secker in 1928. Knopf, however, waited until 1930 to release it in America, most likely because he had published the Kenneth Burke version of the novella as recently as 1925.

5. The publishing figures for the American editions are taken from Vaget, *Thomas Mann der Amerikaner*, 326. Publishing figures for the German original are taken from Knut Beck, *100 Jahre S. Fischer Verlag 1886–1986: eine Bibliographie* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1986), 139, 199. The stand-alone version of *Death in Venice* sold roughly 58,000 copies, while the volume titled *Novellen*, which was part of both of the collected works editions that S. Fischer published during the 1920s, sold another 25,000 copies.



6. For an early discussion of this trend, see Marianne Zerner, "Thomas Mann in Standard English Anthologies," *The German Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (November 1945): 178–88.

7. Besides the classic H. T. Lowe-Porter version, now published by Vintage, the list encompasses translations by David Luke (Bantam, 1988), Clayton Koelb (Norton, 1994), Stanley Appelbaum (Dover, 1995), Joachim Neugroschel (Penguin, 1998), Jefferson Chase (Signet, 1999), Michael Henry Heim (Harper Collins, 2004), and most recently, a self-published version by Martin C. Doege (CreateSpace, 2010). Of all these, the one by Michael Henry Heim is the most accurate to my ear, and I will quote from it whenever I am trying to convey Mann's original meaning. See Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper Collins, 2004); hereafter cited in the text as "Heim."

8. David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 188. By comparison, there currently appear to be only three different English versions of Kafka's landmark story "The Judgment," which was written almost simultaneously with *Death in Venice*.

9. A partial list of such attacks would have to include David Luke, Introduction to *Death in Venice and Other Stories* by Thomas Mann, trans. David Luke (New York: Bantam, 1988), lix–lxvi; Frederick A. Lubich, "Thomas Mann's Sexual Politics—Lost in Translation," *Comparative Literature Studies* 31 (1994): 104–27; and several different articles by Timothy Buck, the most comprehensive of which is his "Mann in English," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, ed. Ritchie Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 235–48. For a thorough overview of the topic, see the introduction and bibliography in David Horton, *Thomas Mann in English* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

10. On this dynamic, see for instance Hans Wysling, "Thomas Manns Goethenachfolge," in *Hans Wysling: Ausgewählte Aufsätze, 1963–1995*, ed. Thomas Sprecher (Bern: Cornelia Bernini, 1996), 17–63.

11. Oliver Jahraus, "Die Geburt des Klassikers aus dem Tod der Figur: Autorschaft diesseits und jenseits des Textes *Der Tod in Venedig* von Thomas Mann," in *Die Erfindung des Schriftstellers Thomas Mann*, eds. Michael Ansel, Hans-Edwin Friedrich, and Gerhard Lauer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 219–36.

12. Erich Heller, *Thomas Mann: The Ironic German* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1958).

13. In the original, this paragraph reads as follows: "Gustav Aschenbach oder von Aschenbach, wie seit seinem fünfzigsten Geburtstag amtlich sein Name lautete, hatte an einem Frühlingssnachmittag des Jahres 19.., das unserem Kontinent monatelang eine so gefahrdrohende Miene zeigte, von seiner Wohnung in der Prinz-Regentenstraße zu München aus allein einen weiteren Spaziergang unternommen. Überreizt von der schwierigen und gefährlichen, eben jetzt eine höchste Behutsamkeit, Umsicht, Eindringlichkeit und Genauigkeit des Willens erfordernden Arbeit der Vormittagsstunden, hatte der Schriftsteller dem Fortschwingen des produzierenden Triebwerkes in seinem Inneren, jenem *motus animi continuus*, worin nach Cicero das Wesen der Beredsamkeit besteht, auch nach der Mittagsmahlzeit nicht Einhalt zu tun vermocht und den entlastenden Schlummer nicht gefunden, der ihm, bei zunehmender Abnutzbarkeit seiner Kräfte, einmal untertags so nötig war. So hatte er bald nach dem Tee das Freie gesucht, in der Hoffnung, daß Luft und Bewegung ihn wiederherstellen und ihm zu einem ersprießlichen Abend verhelfen würden." Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig*, in *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 2.1, *Frühe Erzählungen, 1893–1912*, ed. Terence J. Reed (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2004), 501; hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

14. For a detailed analysis of Mann's style in this opening paragraph, see Horton, *Thomas Mann in English*, 202–8.

15. Thomas Mann, *Briefe II: 1914–1923*, in *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 22, eds. Thomas Sprecher, Hans R. Vaget, and Cornelia Bernini (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2004), 93–97.

16. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 17. Jameson links pastiche exclusively to Mann's late style and especially to *Doctor Faustus*, but it seems to me appropriate to apply the concept to this much earlier passage as well.

17. Dorrit Cohn, "The Second Author of *Der Tod in Venedig*," in *Probleme der Moderne: Studien zur deutschen Literatur von Nietzsche bis Brecht*, eds. Benjamin Bennett, Anton Kaes, and William J. Lillyman (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983), 223–45.

18. For instance, when *The Dial* published its first Mann story in 1921—Kenneth Burke's translation of Mann's sophomore effort "Loulou"—Thayer placed immediately before it a critical essay by

the British diplomat Alec W. G. Randall, who argued that events such as the First World War or the November Revolution had little effect on German letters, that “literature of more than historical importance may be compared with the great undercurrents of the sea, flowing on almost undisturbed by the waves of the surface.” Alec W. G. Randall, “Main Currents in Contemporary German Literature,” *The Dial* 70 (April 1921): 422.

19. M. E. S., *Thomas Mann, Nobel Prize Winner of 1929: A Critical Estimate in Two Parts* (New York: Knopf, 1930), 5.

20. Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter, “On Translating Thomas Mann,” in *In Another Language: A Record of the Thirty-Year Relationship between Thomas Mann and his English Translator, Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter*, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 179; hereafter cited in the text as “Lowe-Porter.”

21. See, for example, Horton, *Thomas Mann in English*, 55.

22. Quoted in Lawrence Venuti, introduction to *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 1999), 13.

23. Thomas Mann, “Death in Venice,” in *Stories of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), 378.

24. See, for instance, Buck’s analysis of the opening paragraph of the Lowe-Porter *Buddenbrooks* in Buck, “Mann in English,” 235–36.

25. See John Thirlwall, “In Another Language,” in *In Another Language*, 31.

26. In his analysis of the opening paragraph, David Horton similarly concludes, “If the highly wrought style of Mann’s opening is to be seen as a reflection (or parody) of Aschenbach’s own diction, then Lowe-Porter’s reduction clearly denies the reader access to an important dimension of the text.” Horton, *Thomas Mann in English*, 210.

27. For a reading of *Death in Venice* that is particularly attentive to this rhetorical subsumption in the opening sentence, see Todd Kontje, *The Cambridge Introduction to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 46–53.

28. Quoted in Terence J. Reed, *Death in Venice: Making and Unmaking a Master* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 18.

29. As Wilhelm Haefs has shown, Mann’s career during the 1920s received a tremendous boost once S. Fischer finally became comfortable with his new status as a politically engaged author and started promoting *The Magic Mountain* as a modern-day “weapon in the battle of the worldviews” (*Weltanschauungsschlachten*). Haefs, “Geist, Geld und Buch: Thomas Manns Aufstieg zum Erfolgsautor im S. Fischer Verlag in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Die Erfindung des Schriftstellers Thomas Mann*, 140; my translation.

30. Terence J. Reed, “*Der Tod in Venedig*,” in *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 2.2.: *Frühe Erzählungen, 1893–1912: Kommentar*, ed. Terence J. Reed (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2004), 390.

31. Vladimir Nabokov, “The Art of Fiction no. 40,” interviewed by Herbert Gold, *The Paris Review* 41 (1967).