The city of Venice itself is the most significant symbol in the story. Venice is the place of Othello's insane jealousy of faithful a derivative and deviation of love that goes horribly wrong with awful consequences Desdemona – this symposium is after all about madness and symbolism. Though falling short of the clinical madness celebrated by the symbolists, Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice evokes a dialectic of resentment at social injustice, in the context of the greater madness of prejudice and the destructive letter of the law. George Gordon, Lord Byron, himself an individual touched by fire (Jamison 1993) and a notorious manic depressive given to destructive furniture smashing rages, in his productive moments writes of the magic of Venice in a kind of travelogue (Beppo) and here of Venetian women:

> I said that like a picture by Giorgione
>
> Venetian women were, and so they *are*,
>
> Particularly seen from a balcony
>
> (For beauty's sometimes best off afar),
>
> And there, just like a heroine of Goldoni,
>
> They peep from out the blind, or o'vr the bar;
>
> And truth to say, they're mostly very pretty,
>
> And rather like to show it, more's the pity!
>
> (XV-XVI)

The beauty from afar is analogous to that which Aschenbach conceives for Tadzio upon arriving in Venice. John Ruskin's multiple volumes on *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853) writes of

> […] half stagnant canals … villas sinking fast into utter ruin, black, and rent, and lonely … blighted fragment of gnarled hedges and broken stakes for their fencing … a few fragments of marble steps … not setting into the mud in broken joints, all a slope and slippery with green weeds … the view from the balcony is not cheerful: a narrow street … a ditch with slow current in it … a close small of garlic and crabs … much vociferation … down to the water, which latter we fancy for an instant has become black with stagnation [….] It is Venice. (1851/53: 413-15)

Ruskin describes a Venice of decay, stagnation, and ruin even in 1851.

Henry James visits Venice in 1869 writing:

> Venice is quite the Venice of one's dreams, but it remains strangely the Venice of dreams, more than of any appreciable reality. The mind is bothered with a constant sense of the exceptional character of the city: you can't quite reconcile it with common civilization. It's awfully sad too in its inexorable decay (1869: 134)

Marcel Proust reviews a translation of the *Stones of Venice* in 1906, though *Swann's Way* is not published until 1913, so it is unlikely that Proust was on the radar for Mann.

Closer to Mann's native tongue, Hugo von Hofmannsthal writes a fragment in 1892 on the death of the celebrated Venetian painter, Titian. The foil for the dialectic between the transfiguring beauty of art and the intoxicating and Dionysian life of the sensual, violent world of the senses outside of art is the androgynous boy Gianino, a foreshadowing of the Tadzio figure in Mann's narrative if ever there was one. Hofmannstal's imaginary Letter of Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon (1901) expresses the creative illness to which Hofmannsthal himself was subjected at that time. His breakdown in relation to community, language, people, the world of art, and his own mental integrity is expressed vividly:

> But it is my inner self that I feel bound to reveal to you – a peculiarity, a vice, a disease of my mind if you like – if you are to understand that an abyss equally unbridgeable separates me from the literary works lying seemingly ahead of me and from those behind me (quoted in Broch 1951: 134).

Different than a modern day "identity crisis" as engaged by Erik Erikson, the idea of a creative illness – a mental breakdown from which the individual emerges with a renewed, reborn consciousness of purpose and contribution – has been documented extensively by Henri Ellenberger (1971). Not only did Freud and Jung have their

own periods of intense struggle with personal demons, but David Hume, Theodor Fechner, Charles Darwin, William James, Charles Dickens, Walt Whitman, Leo Tolstoy struggled with a creative illness form which they emerged with renewed vitality and productivity. The list goes on.

Even in1912, Venice was sinking into the swamp on which in was built, sinking back into the unconscious – unconscious in the sense of that which is present but unacknowledged, that which one does not even know that one does not know.
For purposes of this essay, a symbol is defined as the mark, the place, the form, at which and through which the intersection and correlation of two or more domains of experience are expressed. One set of relations is mapped to another set as in Kant's notion of aesthetic ideas without necessarily being able conceptually to determine exhaustively in words what is being articulated. In that sense, the interpretation or exegesis of the symbol is just another symbol and extension of the symbol in a process of unlimited symbolization.

As a symbol Venice is one of those places at a boundary – we get to use the protean word "liminal" – ultimately the boundary between life and death, but also the self and other, unconscious and conscious, sea and dry land, past and the future. As with any symbol, the process is the point. Significantly enough, Aschenback, the protagonist, has no thought of death as his personal finitude in the narrative. None. No interest in death. No explicit engagement with the idea that he will die. No Heideggerian or proto-existentialist, Aschenbach has no relatedness to death. No

intimations or mortality. There is one moment of despair in which Aschenbach feels that he does not want to go on living if the Polish family leaves the resort and Tadzio departs. However, this is an expression of loss of love, not strictly speaking relatedness to death.

Instead we get a love story. Love is an idealization of the other that transgresses the boundary between self and other in such a way as to seek an extinction of the self in the other. Aschenbach never gets to an explicit *Liebestod* – Mann's next blockbuster novella, *Tristan* – though in a sense the story enacts his loving to death with the beautiful boy as the access to the beyond. In contrast, empathy navigates or transgresses the boundary between self and other such that the integrity of the self and other are maintained. One has a vicarious experience of the other – what it is like to walk in the other's shoes with the other's feet so that one knows where the shoes pinch or chafe. So empathy emerges as a breakdown in empathy – from the perspective of too much or too little engagement with the other. Yet in the narrative, empathy *lives*.

Empathy is defined as the form of relatedness to the other individual that unfolds as a process of empathic receptivity, understanding, interpretation, and responsiveness that constitute a hermeneutic circle. By "empathy" I am *not* talking about the reader's partial identification with the protagonist or his resemblance to a celebrity author and intellectual such as Thomas Mann himself in 1912, though those are factors, too. Rather by "empathy" I am talking about relatedness to the

human, the other human individual, and the other than human. Rather I am addressing the organic emergence from within the narrative itself of empathic moments in the context of the story itself. This essay engages empathic receptivity, understanding, interpretation, and responsiveness in turn.

The world of Gustav von Aschenbach, the protagonist, as portrayed by Mann, is a solipsistic one in the sense that the relationships described with the people in his life are from a third person, behavioral point of view. Mann dispenses with the wife up front – she has passed away – and Aschenbach's daughter has her own life elsewhere outside of the narrative. The emerging and luxuriantly growing infatuation with the beautify boy, Tadzio, is also solipsistic in that the reader is given limited visibility, insight, or access to what is going on with Tadzio. For all we know, and except for a few singular moments, the entire relationship unfolds in Aschenbach's subjectivity alone and by itself.

So we have to work empathically from the outside towards the inside using our vicarious experience. Empathic receptivity is an act directed at the affectivity of the other. Empathy is not reducible to emotional contagion, gut reactions, or fellow feeling; but it draws on the same function of vicarious experience as a form of receptivity to the other. It is preconsciously receptive as a kind of empathic data gathering.

The empathic receptivity in Mann's Venice narrative is enacted almost completely in the exchange of glances between Aschenbach and Tadzio. For Aschenbach, the first encounter with the not-yet-named Tadzio from afar gives the impression of Donatello's celebrated statue of David – an attractive, soft, supple, young individual. For at least 80% of the narrative, the glances are one way from Aschenbach to Tazio, and then an accidental intersection or two of their glances occurs. Tadzio looks back. Aschenbach experiences the first emergence of the infatuation that will become an all-consuming passion – the love defined as madness in Plato's *Phaedrus*, explicitly invoked by Aschenbach (and Mann). This exchange of eye contact occurs as Aschenbach observes Tadzio in a micro expression of emotion directed towards Tadzio's own family. It personalizes and humanizes Tadzio in a way that shifts him from being a lovely piece of marble to a human with an interiority, a subjectivity, a passionate inner life of his own:

> [W]hat had been as inexpressive as a god was placed within a human relationship; a precious artifact of nature, which had served only as a feat for the eyes, now appeared worthy of a deeper rapport; and the figure of the adolescent, already significant for its beauty, was now set off against a background that made it possible to take him seriously beyond his years (1912: 31).

By this point in the narrative, Aschenbach is feverish and one has to wonder whether, at least some of the time, it is elaboration bordering on the point of illusion, if not delusion:

> Tadzio was walking behind his family… and sauntering alone, he turned his head at times and sent a glance of his peculiarly hazy-gray eyes over his shoulder to make sure his lover was still following. He saw him, and did not give him away. Intoxicated by this knowledge, lured onward by these eyes, made a laughingstock by passion, the enamored man stealthily pursued his unsavory hopes … (1912a: 58-59; 1912: 64-65)

Mann's description creates a momentary empathic mutuality, with the attribution to Tadzio of a reciprocal glance. However, an equally valid redescription of this exchange of glances is that Aschenbach is projecting egocentrically. The empathic receptivity between Aschenbach and Tadzio is engaged through the eyes. However, at least some of the time, the communication is realistic and satisfies reality testing:

> Joy, surprise and admiration were allowed to be freely depicted there when his eyes met those of the boy whom had had missed – and at that second Tadzio smiled: smiled at him in a communicative, familiar, charming and unconcealed way… It was the smile of Narcissus bending over his reflection in the water [….] he [Aschenbach] says to himself: I love you [to Tadzio] (1912: 48; 1912a: 42) …

Aschenbach is nearly struck dumb in the presence of beauty, and he manages to say those three words. The Platonic lover in the presence of beauty "does not know what has happened to [him] for lack of a clear perception" (Plato *Phaedrus*: 250a). "The poetical brings the true into the splendor of what Plato in the *Phaedrus* calls *to ekphanestaton*, that which shines forth most purely. The poetical thoroughly pervades every art, every revealing of coming to presence into the beautiful" (Heidegger, *Origin of the Work of Art*: 34; quoted in Bernstein 1992: 116).

After an abortive attempt to speak to Tadzio and engage him personally, at which point, hypothetically, Aschenbach might have discovered the boy is just a kid, a self-centered air-head struggling with his gymnasium studies, Aschenbach spends his days at a distance – the ultimate voyeur – watching Tadzio. Fantasy is much more stimulating in matters of love than reality.

The infatuation gets going. It seems as though Tadzio is intermittently responding to Aschenbach. Aschenbach follows the Polish family to Church and observes them from a distance amid the throng who are kneeling, and praying, and crossing themselves. Tadzio turns around and looks at him. (1912: 50;1912a: 44). Tadzio is described as throwing a glance over his shoulder in Aschenbach's direction(1912: 54; 1912a: 48) in a kind of surprise attack.

Next, back at the hotel, Aschenbach and the boy share an empathic moment, not of laughter, but of seriousness and significance amid laughter. The entire party is convulsed with contagious laughter at the end of performance by some musicians. The performer laughs so long and theatrically that the laughter becomes infectious – everyone in the terrace is caught up in the laughter. But Aschenbach's and Tadzio's eyes meet and they are in tune - the only two who are *not* laughing. They are sharing a significant moment.

For Aschenbach, the laughter and the proximity of Tadzio and the antiseptic smell of disinfectant – the application of disinfectant in public places as the unspoken indicator that all is not well – there is an undisclosed epidemic of cholera in the city which the authorities do not want to acknowledge for fear of driving away the tourists (1912: 57) – all this induces a dream like, altered state of consciousness in Aschenbach.

Empathic understanding is understanding of possibility. In the course of his life Aschenbach had ignored the possibility of tender feelings in his strenuous intellectual activities – these feelings start to return. This too is an empathic possibility discovered in traversing the boundary between self and other and in relatedness to the other. The feeling of the furtherance of life – vitality – aliveness- begins to return to Aschenbach under the influence of this vicarious experience of youth in the form of Tadzio:

> Emotions from the past, early, delicious afflictions of the heart, which had been dissolved in the strict discipline that was his way of life, and were now returning so strangely metamorphosed – he recognized them with a confused puzzled smile (1912: 46; 1912a: 40).

Aschenbach nick-names Tadzio "Phaedrus" in his own internal conversation, which mixes at times with that of the Mann, the narrator. Aschenbach is literally inspired by the form of Tadzio to try to solve a problem in aesthetics. Reflections on Plato's Socratic conversation with Phaedrus about beauty (1912: 43; 1912a: 37) start emerging - that the one loving is more divine than the beloved – that the lover is more divine than the beloved - the holy terror that the feeling one experiences when one's eye sees a *Gleichnis* of the eternally beautiful – Aschenbach tries to get up the nerve to speak to Tadzio – using some French phrase. But he is rendered socially awkward by his infatuation and loses his nerve and walks by with head down. The fantasy of a relationship is actually more stimulating than the relationship itself.

A bold statement of the obvious: love is akin to a kind of madness. The one who is in love is hypnotically held in bonds of idealization by the beloved. According to Freud, love is aim-inhibited sexuality; according to Plato love is the desire for beauty and a divine madness – love is a God; according to St Paul, love is community and neighborliness; according to Bob Dylan, love is just another four letter word. Same

idea. Socrates distinguishes four kinds of madness. All are exemplified in the narrative:

> And we made four divisions of divine madness corresponding to four gods: to Apollo we ascribed prophetic inspiration, to Dionysus mystic madness, to the Muses poetic afflatus; while to Aphrodite and Eros we gave the fourth, love-madness, declaring it to be the best. (Phaedrus: 265)

Where there is infatuation, can acting out be far behind? Aschenbach's acting out consists in following the family around. Today it would be redescribed as "stalking". But under the more charitable description of 1912, Aschenbach is infatuated, hypnotized, and feverish. It is literally a love in a time of cholera – with apologies to Gabriel Garcia Marquez – and empathy devolves into merger.

In the context of the narrative, Aschenbach's empathy dissolves into, Dionysian mystic merger. The orgy in the dream is madness (1912: 61-62). Interestingly enough the dream includes odors. It is rare and possibly indicates that it is not a dream at all but a mixture of reality and illusion. Aschenbach dreams of a Bacchanal, the feast of Dionysus – an orgy:

> But the noise, the howling, multiplied by the echoing mountainside, grew, took control, escalated into overpowering madness. Odors befuddled his mind: the biting smell of the goats, the scent of the gasping bodies, an odor

> like that of stagnant waters, and still another smell, a familiar one – sores and a rampant sickness. His heart rumbled to the drumbeats, his brain was in a whirl, anger seized him, delusion, numbing lust and his soul desired to join in the dance of the god… (1912a: 56; 1912: 61-62)…

While Mann invokes Plato's Phaedus for its interest in love as recollection or intimation of the beautiful. It is also relevant at a deeper level as where Socrates invokes the story of the Egyptian invention of writing and asserts that writing is the ruination of memory – Aschenbach is – according to this formula – and as a writer – someone whose memory is cancelled or otherwise constrained by conformity – he breaks out of his shell at the cost of his complacency and his sanity – in the bacchanal – admittedly an imaginary one in his dream:

> The beginning was fear (Angst) and fear and desire and a terrible curiosity about what would come. Night ruled and his senses were ready; for from afar came a tumult, noise, a mixture of noises: rattling, spiking, and dull thunder, shrill howling, a definite shouting of a ululu-sound - everything permeated and atrociously sweetly over-toned by a deep cooing persistent flute playing, which enchanted/enthralled the worshippers/devotees in a shamelessly penetrating way. But he knew a work, dark however that naming, came: The other God. Painful glow glimmered forth: …. his heart beat in time with the thumping of the bellies of the devotees … his brain spun … madness gripped him … his soul desired to join the dance of the God. The

> obscene symbol, enormous and displayed and elevated … in the dream … [he] becomes one with the crowd and throws him self on the animals and tears steaming shreds [of flesh] and swallows them (1912: 61-62)

The obvious inference is that Aschenbach too succumbs to the cholera plague that is ravaging the people of the city. And that is all that is required for narrative coherence. But when you look at the symptoms in detail, it is far from clear what is the cause of Aschenbach's death. The symptoms of cholera include vomiting and diarrhea – the infected person succumbs to organ failure as a consequence of dehydration. These are noticeably absent in the case of Mann's description of Aschenbach. One is not usually able to take long walks around the city in pursuit of one's beloved since one cannot stray too far away from toilet facilities. In any case, it is pseudo-cholera from which Aschenbach is suffering. It is the ultimate tribute to Mann and a comp lit moment that Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* makes the connection between the symptoms of cholera in the form of hysterical conversion and love.

In empathic responsiveness, one attempts to express the unexpressed to which one gets access via empathic receptivity and understanding. In Mann's narrative the unexpressed is the cholera epidemic from which the city is suffering. All the locals know about it, and the smell of disinfectant lingers in the air. However, because cholera plagues are generally bad for the tourist business, it remains unspoken, unexpressed, denied. The unspoken air of disease is present even in the first scene.

Aschenbach's first foray into the narrow streets and byways of Venice on foot is disastrous. He break out in a cold, feverish sweat, oppressed by the sultry sea air warmed by the sirocco wind. He senses that he must get away immediately.

> A repulsive sultriness lay over the narrow allies. The air was so thick that the smells that percolated up out of the apartments, shops, garret kitchen. The heavy smell of oil, perfumes and other suffocating vapors hung without dispersing. Cigarette smoke hung in the air and was only gradually dissipated. The crowds of people who thronged [jostled and bumped] through the narrow passages left the walked stressed out rather than entertained. [p. 34]

Achenbach decides to flee. He immediately starts having regrets. By the time he reaches the railway station he is literally heart-broken and nearly in tears. He uses a mix up with his luggage – it is sent in the wrong direction – as a pretext to cancel his departure and return to the Hotel. He stays.

Later Aschenbach has a whispered exchange with the musical performer about the Uebel – the badness, the plague – who, in turn, makes sarcastic remarks. Two hotel employees confront the musician about what he might have said (1912: 56), who denies disclosing anything. Finally, an English travel agent gives Aschenbach the details on the epidemic – 80-100 % of those stricken die. Aschenbach thinks of warning Tadzio's family. But in what seems to be a supreme act of selfishness, he

decides to remain silent, so that he can continue to enjoy watching the beautiful boy for sometime longer. Aschenbach follows the family into the labyrinthine alleys of the city – the boy looks back once in a while to check on the follower – he goes over a bridge, goes out of sight for a moment, and disappears. Aschenbach looks hither-and-yon, working himself up into a state of thirsty exhaustion. In a moment of thoughtlessness – or is it self-sabotage - Aschenbach buys some over-ripe strawberries to quench his thirst. Aschenbach eats the strawberries and falls into an exhausted reverie parts of which we have just quoted.

Aschenbach learns of the family's pending departure – he watches Tadzio for one last time – a bigger boy who seemed to be jealous of Tadzio's popularity throws sand at him and then rubs his face in the sand. Aschenbach is about to come to his aid when the fight ends. Tadzio gets up and wanders out into the shallow water. The final scene has a dream-like aspect. It is quite possible that, in the context of the story, this really happens It would pass reality testing in the sense that it is not imagined. Tadzio seems to beckon to Aschenbach to follow him out into the sea. Aschebach sinks back in his chair and has to be rescued and taken to his room where he dies.

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