

Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* or Plutarch's way towards Eros¹

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To Maite Clavo, Jaume Pòrtulas and Jordi Binaghi

When beginning to write an article, the polite use of the *captatio benevolentiae* should never be ignored. There are certainly many reasons which advise us to beg for the indulgence of our readers since, in the end, it would be absurd to believe that we start from scratch and that a true discovery and a definitive Truth are the usual result of any philological research. I am writing in such terms, of course, because the fact of establishing a clear link between Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and the Greek *éros* may seem –and perhaps should seem– too familiar and obvious. Indeed, throughout his novel, the German writer refers too many times to Socrates and Phaedrus to continue to maintain that, regarding this theme, something new can still be elucidated³. And, nevertheless, since I translated Plutarch's *Eroticus*⁴ and, as a consequence, I retained much more than I usually do, I suspected immediately that there was still room for further contributions. Or, in other words, in spite of Thomas Mann's own indications, perhaps we should follow other ways in order to reach the true source of the Greek content of the novel. This would be, then, the reason why I present now another work on *Death in Venice*, and it would be useless saying that I hope that the following analysis will be suggestive enough not to have to beg your pardon –besides the above mentioned *captatio benevolentiae*– for the undue retention of your attention.

However, before closing this short introduction, I should like to focus on some essential points. First of all, this is a brief study on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, that is to say, on a

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³ However, I must recognize that H. Kurzke (*Thomas Mann, Epoche-Werk-Wirkung*, München 1985, p.123) already says that Thomas Mann read Plutarch's *Eroticus*. These are his words: "Von Platon las Thomas Mann "Symposion" und "Phaidros", von Plutarch "Über die Liebe", beides auf Anregung von Lukács (Sehnsucht und Form in Die Seele und die Formen, 1911). Die antiken Quellen werden ins Nietzsche-Konzept eingeschmolzen. Die heiter-überlegene, so gar nicht todessüchtige Knabenliebe des platonischen Sokrates zum Beispiel ist grundverschieden von der Verfallenheit Aschenbachs, seiner Sehnsucht, um mit Lukács' Begriffen zu sprechen, bleibt die Form versagt, die Sokrates ihr zu geben vermag, sie führt ins formlose dionysische Chaos". Nevertheless, given that my analysis presents a different exposition and ends with a personal thesis, here is another brief article about the Plutarchean nature of *Death in Venice*. And, regarding what Thomas Mann could know on *The Eroticus*, let us bear in mind: R. Volkmann. *Leben und Schriften des Plutarch von Chaeronea*. Berlin: Verlag von S. Calvary & Co, 1869, pp. 168-172; R. Hirzel. *Der Dialog*. Leipzig- Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1895, pp. 230-36; *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Classicorum et Graecorum et Latinorum. Die Literatur von 1878 bis 1896 einschliesslich. Umfassend Herausgegeben von Rudolf Klussmann. Erster Band: Scriptores Graeci*, O.R. Reisland, Leipzig 1911, pp. 216-245 (with all kinds of data about the editions and bibliography). In those years the great edition of Plutarch's *Moralia* was: G. N. Bernardakis, 7 vols, Lipsiae: B.G. Teubner 1888-1896 (*Amatorius* 1892). And it is worth mentioning as well C. Hubert's doctoral dissertation: *De Plutarchi Amatorio*. Berlin 1903. The first German translation I know of is that of W. Sieveking. *Plutarch, Über die Liebe und Ehe. Eine Auswahl aus den Moralia. Herausgegeben und übersetzt von W. S.*, München, but already in 1941.

⁴ P. Gilabert. *Plutarco. El Erótico. Diálogo filosófico sobre Eros o la confrontación de los amores pederástico y conyugal*. Barcelona: PPU, 1991.

concrete novel by a concrete author. Needless to say, references to the characteristics of a whole work will be frequent, but I would not dare speak in general terms. On the contrary, I am very conscious of the shades, changes and evolution or evolutions which are peculiar to a man who devoted his life to Literature and, consequently, I want to be very prudent. Secondly and even with regard to *Death in Venice* I should also be very prudent since I belong to those who think that very rarely we grasp the essence –or perhaps better the mystery- of a literary work. And, thirdly, I must assume my responsibilities, so that, bearing in mind the necessary reader’s criticism, I shall propound a personal thesis and defend its verosimilitude. And still a further remark. My aim is basically to prove that Thomas Mann chose Plutarch’s *Eroticus* rather than Plato’s *Symposium* or *Phaedrus* in order to write a serious and at the same time passionate *lógos* on *éros* or, more specifically, on the role of Art and artists in any society.

Éros, the tension *éros-thánatos*, the passionate love turned into both the tragic and inexorable destiny of certain people, may be explained using Plutarch’s rich reflections as the sure base on which it can rest. Therefore, it would be logical to focus on the analysis of some concrete episodes of the *Eroticus* and *Death in Venice*. However, I have preferred to follow another way. In my opinion, *Death in Venice* shows a coherent design, full of irony and paradox, which should be preserved. This fact leads me, as a consequence, not to proceed immediately to the second, third or any other phase of the novel, but to proceed little by little in accordance with its “rhythm”. Undoubtedly, I may fall into some reiterations but, if I finally prove that Plutarch’s *Eroticus* feeds the essence of Thomas Mann’s *lógos* rather than other Platonic dialogues -to the extent of permitting him to create an increasing rhythm of amorous passion-, I might be worthy of the readers’ indulgence. To sum up, another philological study which aims at a good text-comparison, at the end of which some questions should be asked and answered. I finish, then, this short preface and start immediately.

In my opinion, the starting point should be a relevant and significant fact: Thomas Mann will mention later on the Platonic features of a man, Gustav von Aschenbach, who is searching for his spiritual renewal, but he wants to show him taking previously his first steps of a long journey which is both necessary and tragic. The text explains that Aschenbach, the writer, had come out of his house in order to go for a walk. The weather was not good and, furthermore, his decision was the consequence of a whole morning of hard work in the course of which his efforts did not give valuable results. And when he was already walking along the streets, the sudden appearance of a man with a gloomy face caught his attention, but:

“Mochte nun aber das Wanderhafte in der Erscheinung des Fremden auf seine Einbildungskraft gewirkt haben oder sonst irgendein physischer oder seelischer Einfluss im Spiele sein: eine seltsame Ausweitung seines Innern ward ihm ganz überraschend bewusst, eine Art schweifender Unruhe, ein jugendlich durstiges Verlangen in die Ferne, ein Gefühl, so lebhaft, so neu oder doch so längst entwöhnt und verlernt, dass er... gefesselt stehen blieb, um die Empfindung auf Wesen und Ziel zu prüfen... Es war Reiselust, nichts weiter, aber wahrhaft als Anfall auftretend und ins Leidenschaftliche, ja bis zur Sinnestäuschung gesteigert. Seine Begierde ward sehend... und fühlte sein Herz pochen vor Entsetzen und rätselhaftem Verlangen”⁵ (9).

“Yet whether the pilgrim air the stranger wore kindled his fantasy or whether some other physical or psychical influence came in play, he could not tell; but he felt the most surprising consciousness of a widening of inward barriers, a kind of vaulting unrest, a youthfully ardent thirst for distant scenes – a feeling so lively and so new, or at least so long ago outgrown and forgot, that he stood there rooted to the spot... exploring these

⁵ I have used the following edition: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, 1981 and the numbers in brackets refer to it.

sentiments of his, their bearing and scope... what he felt was no more than a longing to travel; yet coming upon him with such suddenness and passion as to resemble a seizure, almost a hallucination. Desire projected itself visually... and he felt his heart throb with terror, yet with a longing inexplicable” (9-10)⁶.

A great deal has been written about both the meaning of this event and the concrete identity of the enigmatic man. Eric Heller, in his book *Thomas Mann, the ironic German*⁷, does not hesitate to mention everything related to his way home, i.e.: the northern cemetery, monumental masons, gravestones and funerary monuments, the silence, the last lights of the day, apocalyptic statues and, finally, a man coming out from the cemetery through the bronze door⁸. Besides, the enigmatic man's features are in accordance with the frame which surrounds him: he is thin, beardless, pug-nosed, wide-brimmed hat, a bag on his shoulders, a stick on his right hand, fierce-looking⁹, etcetera. Heller ventures, then, upon a suggestive hypothesis:

“If we add the bare teeth to the description of his physical attitude, as he supports himself with the iron-shod stick resting slantwise on the ground, then a mere extension of stick and iron, and a mere disregard of the meagre flesh, bring before our eyes a Dürer image of Death, the first in a little procession which will accompany Aschenbach on his journey”¹⁰.

I do not question it, but I should like to draw your attention to something simpler and by no means contradictory with regard to what we have just read. Indeed, Gustav von Aschenbach, has felt the urge to abandon a closed world where his intellect, both self-sacrificing and tenacious, aims at guiding any personal audacity towards the realm of what is prudent, non-sensual and free from outward influences. Suddenly, getting more and more conscious of the tragedy consisting of the lack of any contrast as well as of the fact that he has always been walking a one-way path, he finally meets the world. However, after having become once again prisoner of matter and bodily sensations –since he has taken an inverted Platonic way-, he recovers his passion and sensuality. At the end of this way –or next to it, as Heller says- he will meet *Thánatos* (Death), but he will look in the end for the living and tangible reflections of an everlasting Truth which should be capable of renewing or reviving him from a previous death.

It is too early to explain that Von Aschenbach's Platonism is a very special one which has nothing to do with any beatific contemplation of Beauty. Therefore, let us know the person as deeply as possible. First of all, Thomas Mann does not seem to want to break that tension of precarious balance which is the result of impulses and counter-impulses. Taking advantage, in my opinion, of what might be an allusion to Heraclitean wisdom¹¹, he refers to Von Aschenbach as a man who is eager for escape, freedom, relief and forgetfulness. Nevertheless:

“Auch wurde denn, was ihn da eben so spät und plötzich angewandelt, sehr bald durch Vernunft und von jung auf geübte Selbstzucht gemässigt und richtiggestellt... Zwar liebte er ihn und liebte auch fast schon den entnervenden, sich täglich erneuernden Kampf

⁶ Thomas Mann. *Death in Venice*. Translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter. London: Penguin Books in Association with Martin Secker & Warburg, 1975, the numbers in brackets refer to it.

⁷ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

⁸ With regard to all these details and everything related to Tadzio, it is worth bearing in mind that Thomas Mann affirmed that he did not invent anything at all; see, e. g.: Th. Mann, *Relato de mi vida*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1969, p. 43.

⁹ Pp. 103-4.

¹⁰ P. 104.

¹¹ See, e. g.: B 51 DK.

zwischen seinem zähen und stolzen, so oft erprobten Willen... Aber verständig schien es, den Bogen nicht zu überspannen und ein so lebhaft ausbrechendes Bedürfnis nicht eigensinnig zu ersticken" (10-11).

"And so the new impulse which thus late and suddenly swept over him was speedily made to conform to the pattern of self-discipline he had followed from his youth up (10)... That service he loved, had even almost come to love the enervating daily struggle between a proud, tenacious, well-tried will and this growing fatigue... On the other hand, it seemed the part of common sense not to span the bow too far, not to suppress summarily a need that so unequivocally asserted itself" (11).

This good tension which a short time ago was very far from him can only have emerged from a logical desire for pleasure and joy, so that new decisions have to be made:

*"...dies wenigstens war der Vorteil seiner Jahre, dass er sich seiner Meisterschaft jeden Augenblick in Gelassenheit sicher fühlte. Aber er selbst, während die Nation sie ehrte, er ward ihrer nicht froh, und es schien ihm, als ermangle sein Werk jener Merkmale feurig spielender Laune, die ein Erzeugnis der Freude, mehr als irgendein innerer Gehalt, ein gewichtiger Vorzug, die Freude der geniessenden Welt bildeten... Reisen also, -er war zufrieden"*¹².

"... the years had brought him, that at any moment he might feel tranquilly assured of mastery. But he got no joy of it – not though a nation paid it homage. To him it seemed his work had ceased to be marked by that fiery play of fancy which is the product of joy, and more, and more potently, than any intrinsic content, forms in turn the joy of the receiving world... Good, then, he would go on a journey" (11-12).

We can observe in these first paragraphs one of the constants of Thomas Mann's work, that is to say, the artist's role in the bosom of a decadent bourgeois society. If Von Aschenbach had not shown clear signs of his inner crisis, if he had desired to remain in the paradise of his mastery, serenity, etcetera, it would be easy now to enumerate his own features: good man, tireless worker, pragmatist and enemy of any doubt or fall into the abyss of what is unknown, i.e., paradoxically "dead". Yet, since he seems to opt for an unusual boldness, we should discover deeper virtues in him: he is a reckless man who always goes beyond the limits, an artist, i.e., he is "alive". But Thomas Mann says much more about his main protagonist. First of all, he is a man with impeccable ancestors:

"Gustav Aschenbach also war zu L., einer Kreisstadt der Provinz Schlesien, als Sohn eines höheren Justizbeamten geboren. Seine Vorfahren waren Offiziere, Richter, Verwaltungsfunktionäre gewesen, Männer, die im Dienste des Königs, des Staates ihr straffes, anständig karges Leben geführt hatten" (11).

"Gustave Aschenbach was born at L -, a country town in the province of Silesia. He was the son of an upper official in the judicature, and his forbears had all been officers, judges, departmental functionaries – men who lived their strict, decent, sparing lives in the service of king and state" (12).

Secondly, he is a fully responsible person and hates free time:

¹² Concerning this aspect, see e. g. the above mentioned book by Heller or the introduction by F. Formosa to the Catalan translation of *Death in Venice* in Edicions Proa (*La mort a Venècia*, Barcelona 1989, pp. 13-29); K. Schroeter. *Thomas Mann*, ed. 62, Barcelona 1990 (above all the first chapters), or Th. Mann. *El artista y la sociedad*, Madrid: Ed. Guadarrama, 1975, pp. 293-305.

“So, schon als Jüngling von allen Seiten auf die Leistung -und zwar die ausserordentliche- verpflichtet, hatte er niemals den Müsiggang, niemals die sorglose Fahrlässigkeit der Jugend gekannt” (12).

“From childhood up he was pushed on every side to achievement, and achievement of no ordinary kind; and so his young days never knew the sweet idleness and blithe *laissez aller* that belong to youth” (13).

Thirdly, he fights against misfortune and all sorts of limits:

“Und das Tapfer-Sittliche daran war, dass eine Natur von nichts weniger als robuster Verfassung und zur ständigen Anspannung nur berufen, nicht eigentlich geboren war” (12).

“And this attitude was the more morally valiant in that Aschenbach was not by nature robust – he was only called to the constant tension of his career, not actually born to it” (13).

Fourthly, he is the victim of a loneliness and isolation which stress his singularity:

“Ärztliche Fürsorge hatte den Knaben vom Schulbesuch ausgeschlossen und auf häuslichen Unterricht gedrungen. Einzeln, ohne Kameradschaft war er aufgewachsen” (12).

“By medical advice he had been kept from school and educated at home. He had grown up solitary, without comradeship” (13).

Fifthly, the origin and the result of such integrity: discipline:

“Da er also die Aufgaben, mit denen sein Talent ihn belud, auf zarten Schultern tragen und weit gehen wollte, so bedurfte er höchlich der Zucht... begann er seinen Tag beizeiten mit Stürzen kalten Wassers über Brust und Rücken und brachte dann, ein Paar hohe Wachskerzen in silbernen Leuchtern zu Häupten des Manuskripts, die Kräfte, die er im Schlaf gesammelt, in zwei oder drei inbrünstig gewissenhaften Morgenstunden der Kunst zum Opfer dar” (13).

“Bearing the burden of his genius, then, upon such slender shoulders and resolved to go so far, he had the more need of discipline... he began his day with a cold shower over chest and back... he sacrificed to art, in two or three hours of almost religious fervour” (14).

And, finally, he is experiencing at the moment a serious lack of inspiration which is compensated by tenacious work based on many little inspirations:

“Sie vielmehr in kleinen Tagewerken aus aberhundert Einzelinspirationen zur Grösse emporgeschichtet” (13).

“(his works and characters)... the truth was that they were heaped up to greatness in layer after layer, in long days of work, out of hundreds and hundreds of single inspirations” (14).

Given Von Aschenbach’s future life, I do not need to comment on these paragraphs –one could even think that we are attending a Greek tragedy and are contemplating the first signs of a clear tragic irony-, but I do emphasize two themes which remind us of Plutarch’s *Eroticus*.

Indeed, when mentioning the ancestors and the exemplary discipline with the help of which Von Aschenbach lives, I have omitted two of Thomas Mann's indications that I should like to mention now:

- 1) "*Rascheres, sinnlicheres Blut war der Familie in der vorigen Generation durch die Mutter des Dichters, Tochter eines böhmischen Kapellmeisters, zugekommen*¹³... *Die Vermählung dienstlich nüchternen Gewissenhaftigkeit mit dunkleren, feurigeren Impulsen liess einen Künstler und diesen besonderen Künstler erstehen*" (12) "... swifter, more perceptive blood had in the generation before the poet's flowed into the stock from the mother's side, she being the daughter of a Bohemian musical conductor... The union of dry, conscientious officialdom and ardent, obscure impulse, produced an artist – and this particular artist" (12).
- 2) "*Und Zucht war ja zum Glücke sein eingeborenes Erbteil von väterlicher Seite*" (13). "... and discipline, fortunately, was his native inheritance" (14).

It is quite evident that, if he wants to fight against the bourgeois stagnation that besieges him, his mother's heritage consisting of both sensuality and ardour might almost mean a true "redemption". And it is quite clear as well that, from the perspective of a self-sacrificing bourgeois, his father's heritage which is present in his sense of discipline guarantees his control over all kinds of licences. For my part, I should dare to say that as far as Thomas Mann is concerned, Von Aschenbach's future behaviour might mean the full acceptance of feminine values, though the adjective "dunkleren" could make us doubt it. I omit now any reference to the allegedly feminine nature of sensuality while rigour and discipline would belong to the masculine gender –an absurd theory, from my point of view-, but I do point out that this is precisely the thesis –*mutatis mutandis*, of course- which is defended by the pederast Protogenes in Plutarch's *Eroticus*:

'In a normal state one's desire for bread and meat is moderate, yet sufficient; but abnormal indulgence of this desire creates the vicious habit called gluttony and gormandizing. In just the same way there normally exists in men and women a need for the pleasure derived from each other; but when the impulse that derives us to this goal is so vigorous and powerful that it becomes torrential and almost out of control (πολλὴν καὶ δυσκάρηκτον), it is a mistake to give the name Love to it. Love, in fact, it is that attaches himself to a young and talented soul (εὐφυοῦς καὶ νέας) and through friendship (διὰ φιλίας) brings it to a state of virtue (ἀρετήν); but the appetite (ἐπιθυμία) for women we are speaking of, however well it turns out, has for net gain only an accrual of pleasure in the enjoyment of a ripe physical beauty (ἀπόλαυσιν ὥρας καὶ σώματος) ... The object of desire is, in fact, pleasure and enjoyment (ἡδονὴ καὶ ἀπόλαυσις); while Love, if he loses the hope of inspiring friendship, has no wish to remain cultivating a deficient plant which has come to its prime, if the plant cannot yield the proper fruit of character to produce friendship and virtue (φιλίαν καὶ ἀρετήν). If, however, such a passion (πάθος) must also be called Love, let it at least be qualified as an effeminate and bastard love (θηλιν καὶ νόθον), that takes its exercise in the women's quarters as bastards do in the Cynosarges... there is only one genuine Love, the love of boys (παιδικός). It is not 'flashing with desire', as Anacreont says of the love of maidens, or 'drenched with unguents, shining bright'. No, its aspects is simple and unspoiled (λιτὸν... καὶ ἄθροπτον). You will see it in schools of philosophy (ἐν σχολαῖς φιλοσόφοις), or

¹³ About the possible coincidences between the lives of Aschenbach and Thomas Mann, see, e. g.: K. Schroeter. *op. cit.* pp. 7-23.

perhaps in the gymnasia and palaestrae (γυμνάσια καὶ παλαίστρας), searching for young men whom it cheers on with a clear and noble cry to the pursuit of virtue when they are found worthy of its attention. But that other lax and housebound love (ὕγρον... καὶ οἰκουρὸν), that spends its time in the bosoms and beds of women (ἐν κόλποις... καὶ κλινιδίοις), ever pursuing a soft life (τὰ μαλθακά), enervated amid pleasure devoid of manliness and friendship and inspiration (ἡδοναῖς ἀνάνδροις καὶ ἀφίλοις καὶ ἀνενοουσιάζουσις), it should be proscribed, as in fact Solon did proscribe it. He forbade slaves to make love to boys or to have a rubdown, but he did not restrict their intercourse with women. For friendship (φιλία) is a beautiful and courteous relationship (καλὸν καὶ ἀστεῖον), but mere pleasure (ἡδονή) is base and unworthy of a free man (κοινὸν καὶ ἀνελεύθερον). For this reason also it is not gentlemanly or urbane to make love to slave boys: such a love is mere copulation (συνουσία), like the love of women (ὁ τῶν γυναικῶν)¹⁴.

I am very conscious that the differences are certainly great, but we should not forget that the “impact” will reach Von Aschenbach by means of Tadzio’s perfect beauty and not through a woman.

Consequently, Von Aschenbach would be the prototype of an impassive man or, in Mann’s own words:

“Über den neuen, in mannigfach individuellen Erscheinungen wiederkehrenden Heldentyp, den dieser Schriftsteller bevorzugte, hatte schon frühzeitig ein kluger Zergliederer geschrieben: dass er die Konzeption “einer intellektuellen und jünglinghaften Männlichkeit” sei, “die in stolzer Scham die Zähne aufeinanderbeißt und ruhig dasteht, während ihr die Schwerter und Speere durch den Leib gehen” (13-14).

“That new type of hero favoured by Aschenbach, and recurring many times in his works, had early been analysed by a shrewd critic: ‘The conception of an intellectual and virginal manliness, which clenches its teeth and stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side’ (15).

The novelist adds immediately that Saint Sebastian is the most beautiful symbol not of art in general but of the art which is being mentioned now. I do not question it, but, in spite of not having arrived yet at an accurate reproduction of the content of the *Eroticus*, it is worth keeping in mind the possibility that this “shrewd critic” is speaking with the help of Plutarch’s words. Why? Because in the *Eroticus* we can read the following regarding lovers:

‘He fears nothing, he admires nothing, he pays service to nothing. He’s capable of braving ‘even the Thunderbolt, the spear-wielder’; but once he catches sight of the handsome boy, He flinches like a cock that drops his vanquished wing. His confidence is broken to bits and the pride of his soul is overthrown’ (... φοβούμενος δὲ μηθὲν μηδὲ θαυμάζων μηδὲ θεραπεύων, ἀλλὰ “ καὶ τὸν αἰχματὰν κεραυνὸν ” οἷος ὦν ὑπομένειν, ἅμα τῷ τὸν καλὸν ἰδεῖν Ἐπτηξ’ ἀλέκτωρ δοῦλον ὡς κλίνας πτερόν, καὶ τὸ θράσος ἐκκέκλασται καὶ κατακέκοπται οἱ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς γαῦπον)¹⁵.

¹⁴ *Eroticus* 750C-751B -translated into English by W. C. Helmbold. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969; *idem* in all other cases.

¹⁵ 762 E-F.

Needless to say, the “thunderbolt, the spear-wielder” is not the same as “swords and spears” *stricto sensu*, but, leaving aside that this variant is not important, it is highly significant that Plutarch’s last words appear again some pages later –and literally- this time in reference to Von Aschenbach.

And still a further personal feature that should not be omitted:

“Mann kann sagen, dass seine ganze Entwicklung ein bewusster und trotziger, alle Hemmungen des Zweifels und der ironie zurücklassender Aufstieg zur Würde gewesen war” (14).

“... his whole career had been one conscious and overweening ascent to honour, which left in the rear all the misgivings or self-derogation which might have hampered him” (16).

The whole *Phaedrus*-palinode (244a-257b) might be present in this apparently innocent observation, but, as said before, Von Aschenbach is a rare Platonic man and, as a consequence, we should pay more attention to him. In fact, he is in an odd situation because of his discipline and success in his work. And when somebody has already glimpsed Beauty and, however, he/she remains in this material world, his/her life may become a real problem. Indeed, what an unfortunate man/woman the one who ascends too fast towards Perfection or believes that he/she has already reached it to the extent of not questioning anything else! Either Platonic or “Plotinic”, in search of Beauty or the One, after having turned into a bourgeois, he/she will be incapable of leaving the summit in order to dare fall into the abyss. Too self-confident, he/she will condemn everything and discard any moral doubt, any abyss, but:

“Und hat Form nicht zweierlei Gesicht? Ist sie nicht sittlich und unsittlich zugleich, - sittlich als Ergebnis und Ausdruck der Zucht, unsittlich aber und selbst widersittlich, sofern sie von Natur eine moralische Gleichgültigkeit in sich schliesst, ja wesentlich bestrebt ist, das Moralische unter ihr stolzes und unumschränktes Szepter zu beugen?” (15-16).

“And has not form two aspects? Is it not moral and immoral at once; moral in so far as it is the expression and result of discipline, immoral – yes, actually hostile to morality – in that of its very essence it is indifferent to good and evil, and deliberately concerned to make the moral world stoop beneath its proud and undivided sceptre?” (18).

Or even in more tragic terms:

“Sein Stil entriet in späteren Jahren der unmittelbaren Kühnheiten, der subtilen und neuen Abschattungen, er wandelte sich ins Mustergültig-Festsehende... so verbannte der Alternde aus seiner Sprachweise jedes gemeine Wort” (16).

“His later style gave up the old sheer audacities, the fresh and subtle nuances – it became fixed and exemplary... Aschenbach, as he went on in years, banished from his style every common word. It was at this time that the school authorities adopted selections from his works into their text-books” (18).

Everybody needs a constant renewal; everybody needs outer contrasts and impacts and, if he /she ever ascends too surely to the extent of not having to correct his/her trajectory, or if he/she has even reached his/her goal, it would be better to come back or fall again rather than to die under the weight of his/her mastery and classicism. To sum up, the protagonist becomes now perfectly outlined and in Venice is received by the god Eros and wounded by his arrows, that is to say, he is received by Beauty incarnate in the material world: Tazio.

First of all, the novelist focuses on everything that stresses the contrast between the achieved beauty –and certainly with much effort- and the spontaneous one, that is to say, the artist’s pride must be humiliated:

“Mit Erstaunen bemerkte Aschenbach, dass der Knabe vollkommen schön war. Sein Antlitz, bleich und anmutig verschlossen, von honigfarbenem Haar umringelt, mit der gerade abfallenden Nase, dem lieblichen Munde, dem Ausdruck von holdem und göttlichem Ernst, erinnerte an griechische Bildwerke aus edelster Zeit, und bei reinster Vollendung der Form war es von so einmalig persönlichem Reiz, dass der Schauende weder in Natur noch bildender Kunst etwas ähnlich Geglücktes angetroffen zu haben glaubte” (26).

“Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad’s perfect beauty. His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture – pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate” (31).

The reference to Greek sculpture makes us think, as suggested by M. Foucault in *Histoire de la Sexualité* with regard to the pederast’s aesthetic ideal¹⁶, that the sort of beauty Von Aschenbach discovers and adores in Tadzio is in fact very masculine and in some way already perceptible. Yet on other occasions Tadzio’s beauty seems rather to correspond to that ideal of soft and delicate beauty –and ambiguous, too- which is peculiar to the Hellenistic period and was so well analysed by M. Delcourt in *Hermaphrodite*¹⁷:

“Das englische Matrosenkostüm... verlieh mit seinen Schnüren, Maschen und Stickereien der zarten Gestalt etwas Reiches und Verwöhntes... War er leidend? Denn die Haut seines Gesichtes stach weiss wie Elfenbein gegen das goldige Dunkel der umrahmenden Locken ab” (26-27).

“He wore an English sailor suit... And this suit... lent the slight figure something ‘rich and strange’, a spoilt, exquisite air... Was he delicate? His facial tint was ivory-white...” (31).

Notwithstanding, these are not essential themes in *Death in Venice*, while we should outline the impact that every Platonic soul –Von Aschenbach’s in this case- receives when he starts contemplating Beauty and remembers again certain images which had disappeared long ago from his memory:

“(Aschenbach) Erschrak über die wahrhaft gottähnliche Schönheit des Menschenkindes (29). Und zu sehen, wie die lebendige Gestalt, vormännlich hold und herb, mit tiefenden Locken und schön wie ein Gott, herkommend aus den Tiefen von Himmel und Meer, dem Elemente entstieg und entrann: dieser Anblick gab mythische Vorstellungen ein, er war wie Dichterkunde von anfänglichen zeiten, vom Ursprung der Form und von der Geburt der Götter (33)... Und eine väterliche Huld, die gerührte Hinneigung dessen, der sich opfernd im Geiste das Schöne zeugt, zu dem, der die Schönheit hat, erfüllte und bewegte sein Herz...” (33).

“Aschenbach, sitting so that he could see him in profile, was astonished anew, yes, startled, at the godlike beauty of the human being (34)... The sight of this living figure,

¹⁶ Paris: Gallimard, 1984, vol. II, p. 321.

¹⁷ Bruxelles 1966.

virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky, outrunning the element – it conjured up mythologies, it was like a primeval legend, handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form, of the origin of the gods... And his heart was stirred, it felt a father's kindness: such an emotion as the possessor of beauty can inspire in one who has offered himself up in spirit to create beauty" (39).

Victim of both of emotion and *anámnesis*, Von Aschenbach decides to escape, as if his bourgeois nature fought against a passion which has not stopped being tempered, although on the other hand it might already be announcing future disasters. Nevertheless, chance –i.e., destiny– keeps him tied to Venice and Tadzio. And once again in the hotel he cannot delay any longer the accurate analysis of what is happening to him, thanks to which he can finally understand himself. The nature of his present reflections putting himself in the Creator's place proves that he has already attained the "summit":

“Welch eine Zucht, welche Präzision des Gedankens war ausgedrückt in diesem gestreckten und jugendlich vollkommenen Leibe! Der strenge und reine Wille jedoch, der, dunkel tätig, dies göttliche Bildwerk ans Licht zu treiben vermocht hatte, –war er nicht ihm, dem Künstler, bekannt und vertraut? Wirkte er nicht auch in ihm, wenn er, nüchterner Leidenschaft voll, aus der Marmor Masse der Sprache die schlanke Form befreite, die er im Geiste geschaut und die er als Standbild und Spiegel geistiger Schönheit den Menschen darstellte? Standbild und Spiegel! Seine Augen urnfassten die edle Gestalt dort am Rande des Blauen, und in aufschwärmendem Entzücken glaubte er mit diesem Blick das Schöne selbst zu begreifen, die Form als Gottesgedanken, die eine und reine Vollkommenheit, die im Geiste lebt und von der ein menschliches Abbild und Gleichnis hier leicht und hold zur Anbetung aufgerichtet war” (42).

“What discipline, what precision of thought were expressed by the tense youthful perfection of this form! And yet the pure, strong will which had laboured in darkness and succeeded in bringing this godlike work of art to the light of day – was it not known and familiar to him, the artist! Was not the same force at work in himself when he strove in cold fury to liberate from the marble mass of language the slender forms of his art which he saw with the eye of his mind and would body forth to men as the mirror and image of spiritual beauty? Mirror and image! His eyes took in the proud bearing of that figure there at the blue water's edge; with an outburst of rapture he told himself that what he saw was beauty's very essence; form as divine thought, the single and pure perfection which resides in the mind, of which an image and likeness, rare and holy, was here raised up for adoration” (50).

Needless to say, either in the *Symposium* or in the *Phaedrus*¹⁸, the references to the “constant ascent” are very frequent. Starting from visible realities and discovering in them a

¹⁸ *Symposium* 210-211: ‘He (Diotima says) who would proceed rightly in this business must not merely begin from his youth to encounter beautiful bodies. In the first place... if the conductor guides him aright, he must be in love with one particular body, and engender beautiful converse therein; but next he must remark how the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, and that if he means to ensue beauty in form, it is gross folly not to regard as one and the same the beauty belonging to all... his next advance will be to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of the body, so that however little the grace that may bloom in any likely soul it shall suffice him for loving and caring, and for bringing forth and soliciting such converse as will tend to the betterment of the young; and that finally he may be constrained to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances and our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body's beauty as a slight affair.

common origin, human beings finally reach the true Beauty, but, as usual, it is in the *Eroticus* where this process is explained “scientifically”:

‘Listen’, said my father, ‘for this account is forced upon us by the phenomenon. What happens to our vision when we see a rainbow is, of course, refraction, which occurs whenever the sight encounters a slightly moist, but smooth and moderately thick cloud and has contact with the sun by refraction. Seeing the radiance in this way produces in us the illusion that the thing we see is in the cloud. Now the devices and ruses of Love’s operations on noble souls who love beauty are of the very same kind: he refracts their memories from the phenomena of this world, which are called beautiful, to the marvellous Beauty of that other world, that divine and blessed entity which is the real object of love’ (Ακούετ’ “ εἶπεν ὁ πατήρ: “ οὕτω γὰρ βιάζεται τὸ φαινόμενον λέγειν. Ἀνάκλασις δὴ που τὸ περὶ τὴν ἰρίν ἐστι τῆς ὀψεως πάθος, ὅταν ἡσυχῇ νοτερῶ, λείω δὲ καὶ μέτριον πάχος ἔχοντι προσπεσοῦσα νέφει τοῦ ἡλίου ψαύση κατ’ ἀνάκλασιν καὶ τὴν περὶ ἐκεῖνον αὐγὴν ὀρῶσα καὶ τὸ φῶς δόξαν ἡμῖν ἐνεργάσῃται τοῦ φαντάσματος ὡς ἐν τῷ νέφει ὄντος. Ταῦτό δὴ τὸ ἐρωτικὸν μηχανήμα καὶ σόφισμα περὶ τὰς εὐφρῶν καὶ φιλοκάλους ψυχὰς· ἀνάκλασιν ποιεῖ τῆς μνήμης ἀπὸ τῶν ἐνταῦθα φαινομένων καὶ προσαγορευομένων καλῶν εἰς τὸ θεῖον καὶ ἐράσιον καὶ μακάριον ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐκεῖνο καὶ θαυμάσιον καλόν)¹⁹.

It is certainly impossible to know if Thomas Mann wrote those previous words using Plutarch’s *Eroticus* or Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* as the privileged model but, when we read that Tadzio had awakened Aschenbach’s memory, the novelist adds:

From observances he should be led on to the branches of knowledge, that... an turning rather towards the main ocean of the beautiful may by contemplation of this bring forth in all their splendour many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in a plenteous crop of philosophy; until... he descries a certain single knowledge... When a man has been thus tutored in the lore of love, passing from view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will be revealed to him... a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature... First of all, it is ever existent and neither comes to be nor perishes...’ (translated by W. R. M. Lamb. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983: δεῖ... ἐνὸς αὐτὸν σώματος ἐρᾶν καὶ ἐνταῦθα γεννᾶν λόγους καλοῦς, ἔπειτα δὲ αὐτὸν κατανοῆσαι ὅτι τὸ κάλλος τὸ ἐπὶ ὀτρωῶν σώματι τῷ ἐπὶ ἑτέρῳ σώματι ἀδελφόν ἐστι, καὶ εἰ δεῖ διώκειν τὸ ἐπ’ εἶδει καλόν, πολλὴ ἄνοια μὴ οὐχ ἓν τε καὶ ταῦτόν ἡγεῖσθαι τὸ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς σώμασι κάλλος· τοῦτο δ’ ἐννοήσαντα καταστῆναι πάντων τῶν καλῶν σωμάτων ἐραστήν, ἐνὸς δὲ τὸ σφόδρα τοῦτο χαλάσαι... μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα τὸ ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς κάλλος τιμώτερον ἡγήσασθαι τοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι, ὥστε καὶ ἐὰν ἐπιεικῆς ᾖν τὴν ψυχὴν τις κἂν σμικρὸν ἄνθος ἔχη, ἐξαρκεῖν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐρᾶν καὶ κήδεσθαι καὶ τίκτειν λόγους τοιοῦτους καὶ ζητεῖν, οἵτινες ποιήσουσι βελτίους τοὺς νέους, ἵνα ἀναγκασθῇ αὐθὲν θεάσασθαι τὸ ἐν τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασι καὶ τοῖς νόμοις καλόν καὶ τοῦτ’ ἰδεῖν ὅτι πᾶν αὐτὸ αὐτῷ συγγενές ἐστιν, ἵνα τὸ περὶ τὸ σῶμα καλόν σμικρὸν τι ἡγήσῃται εἶναι· μετὰ δὲ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα ἐπὶ τὰς ἐπιστήμας ἀγαγεῖν, ἵνα... ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ πέλαγος τετραμμένος τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ θεωρῶν πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς λόγους καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς τίκτη καὶ διανοήματα ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ, ἕως ἂν... κατίδη τινὰ ἐπιστήμην μίαν τοιαύτην... ὅς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικὰ παιδαγωγηθῇ, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλά... ἐξαίφνης κατόψεται τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν... πρῶτον μὲν αἰεὶ ὄν καὶ οὔτε γιγνόμενον οὔτε ἀπολλύμενον). *Phaedrus* 249 b-c: ‘Man must understand in accordance with what is called idea, arriving from many perceptions of the senses at the unity which is the result of the synthesis created by reason’ (δεῖ γὰρ ἄνθρωπον συνίεναι κατ’ εἶδος λεγομένον, ἐκ πολλῶν ἰὸν αἰσθήσεων εἰς ἓν λογισμῶ συναϊρούμενον -translated by Fowler, H. N. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁹ 765 E-F.

“Stand nicht geschrieben, dass die Sonne unserer Aufmerksamkeit von den intellektuellen auf die sinnlichen Dinge wendet? Sie betäube und bezaubere, hiess es. Verstand und Gedächtnis dergestalt, dass die Seele vor Vergnügen ihres eigentlichen Zustandes ganz vergesse und mit staunender Bewunderung an dem schönsten der besonnenen Gegenstände hangen bleibe” (42).

“Has it not been written that the sun beguiles our attention from things of the intellect to fix it on things of the sense? The sun, they say, dazzles; so bewitching reason and memory that the soul for very pleasure forgets its actual state, to cling with doting on the loveliest of all the objects she shines on” (51).

Let us compare this now with what Plutarch’s *Eroticus* says and the dependence about which I wrote in the introduction will become in my opinion unquestionable:

‘One might even say, if the statement is not too unpalatable, that the sun’s activities are directly opposed to those of Love. For it is the sun that turns our attention from intelligibles to sensibles, bewitching us by the charm and brilliance of vision, and convincing us that truth and everything else is to be found in the sun, or in the realm of sun, and not in any other place... If we awaken in the face of a great brilliant light, everything that has been seen in our dreams leaves our souls and vanishes; just so, when we pass from one life to another and are born on this earth, the sun seems to dazzle our memory and drug our minds, through the pleasure and wonder it rouses, into forgetting what went before’ (Εἰ δὲ μὴ δόξει πικρότερον λέγεσθαι, καὶ τάναντία φαίη τις ἂν ἥλιον Ἔρωτι ποιεῖν· ἀποστρέφει γὰρ ἀπὸ τῶν νοητῶν ἐπὶ τὰ αἰσθητὰ τὴν διάνοιαν, χάριτι καὶ λαμπρότητι τῆς ὄψεως γοητεύων καὶ ἀναπειθῶν ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ περὶ αὐτὸν αἰτεῖσθαι τὰ τ’ ἄλλα καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν, ἐτέρωθι δὲ μηθέν... Ὡσπερ γὰρ εἰς φῶς πολὺ καὶ λαμπρὸν ἀνεγρομένων ἐξοίχεται πάντα τῆς ψυχῆς τὰ καθ’ ὕπνου φανέντα καὶ διαπέφευγεν, οὕτω τῶν γενομένων ἐνταῦθα καὶ μεταβαλόντων ἐκπλήττειν ἔοικε τὴν μνήμην καὶ φαρμάττειν τὴν διάνοιαν ὁ ἥλιος, ὕφ’ ἡδονῆς καὶ θαύματος ἐκλανθανομένων ἐκείνων)²⁰.

From now on, any doubt concerning that initial thesis should be abandoned, since, a bit later, we also read:

“Amor fürwahr tat es den Mathematikern gleich, die unfähigen Kindern greifbare Bilder der reinen Formen vorzeigen: So auch bediente der Gott sich, um uns das Geistige sichtbar zu machen, gern der Gestalt und Farbe menschlicher Jugend, die er zum Werkzeug der Erinnerung mit allem Abglanz der Schönheit schmückte und bei deren Anblick wir dann wohl in Schmerz und Hoffnung entbrannten” (42).

“Amor, in sooth is like the mathematician who in order to give children a knowledge of pure form must do so in the language of pictures; so, too, the god, in order to make visible the spirit, avails himself of the forms and colours of human youth, gilding it with all imaginable beauty that it may serve memory as a tool, the very sight of which then sets us afire with pain and longing” (51).

And Plutarch writes in his *Eroticus*:

²⁰ 764 E-F.

‘Love does not approach our souls in isolation by themselves, but through the body. Teachers of geometry, when their pupils are not yet capable of initiation into purely intellectual conceptions of incorporeal and unchanging substance, offer them tangible and visible copies of spheres and cubes and dodecahedrons; in the same way heavenly Love contrives for us, as in a glass, beautiful reflections of beautiful realities. These are, however, merely mortal reflections of the divine, corruptible of the incorruptible, sensible of the intelligible. By showing us these in the form and hue and aspect of young men radiant in the prime of their beauty, Love gently excites our memory, which is first kindled by this means’ (Ἐναταῦθα δὲ πάλιν πεμπομένων αὐτῇ μὲν οὐ πλησιάζει ψυξῆ καθ’ ἑαυτήν, ἀλλὰ διὰ σώματος. Ὡς δὲ γεωμέτραι παισὶν οὐπω δυναμένοις ἐφ’ ἑαυτῶν τὲ νοητὰ μνηθῆναι τῆς ἀσωμάτου καὶ ἀπαθοῦς οὐσίας εἶδη πλάττοντες ἀπτὰ καὶ ὄρατὰ μιμῆ ματα σφαιρῶν καὶ κύβων καὶ δωδεκαέδρων προτείνουσιν, οὕτως ἡμῖν ὁ οὐράνιος Ἔρως ἔσοπτρα καλῶν καλὰ, θνητὰ μέντοι θείων καὶ ἀπαθῶν παθητὰ καὶ νοητῶν αἰσθητὰ μηχανώμενος ἐν τε σχήμασι καὶ χρώμασι καὶ εἶδεσι νέων ὥρα στίλβοντα δείκνυσι καὶ κινεῖ τὴν μνήμην ἀτρέμα διὰ τούτων ἀναφλεγομένην τὸ πρῶτον)²¹.

Very probably, after this text-comparison, any extra comment would be useless, but I should like to throw into relief the mirror-simile that I have just mentioned in relation to that “scientific” explanation of the phenomenon of light-refraction.

Thomas Mann decides now to create a brief dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus which is presented in the form of a dream of Aschenbach’s. The protagonists, of course, are enjoying the shade of that old plane tree not very far from the walls of Athens²² -they are not, as said in Plutarch’s *Eroticus*, under Helicon, next to the Muses’ shrine²³. Plato –and it is a logical decision given that on this occasion he has decided to show openly the Greek origin of the text-becomes now his guide and source, which means that the German writer adapts two passages of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and reproduces another one of the *Symposium*. Indeed, while *Death in Venice* says:

“Belehrte Sokrates den Phaidros über Sehnsucht und Tugend. Er sprach ihm von dem heissen Erschrecken, das der Fühlende leidet, wenn sein Auge ein Gleichnis der ewigen Schönheit erblickt; sprach ihm von den Begierden des Weihelosen und Schlechten, der die Schönheit nicht denken kann, wenn er ihr Abbild sieht und der Ehrfurcht nicht fähig ist; sprach von der heiligen Angst, die den Edlen befällt, wenn ein gottgleiches Antlitz, ein vollkommener Leib ihm erscheint -wie er dann aufbebt und ausser sich ist und hinzusehen sich kaum getraut und den verehrt, der die Schönheit hat, ja, ihm opfern würde, wie einer Bildsäule, wenn er nicht fürchten müsste, den Menschen närrisch zu scheinen” (43).

“Here Socrates held forth to youthful Phaedrus upon the nature of virtue and desire, wooing him with insinuating wit and charming turns of phrase. He told him of the shuddering and unwounded heat that comes upon him whose heart is open, when his eye beholds an image of eternal beauty... and of the fear and reverence felt by the noble soul when he beholds a godlike face or a form which is a good image of beauty: how as he gazes he worships the beautiful one and scarcely dares to look upon him, but would offer sacrifice as to an idol or a god, did he not fear to be thought stark mad” (51-52).

in Plato’s *Phaedrus* we read what follows:

²¹ 765 A-B.

²² 228 b-229 b.

²³ The setting of Plutarch’s *Eroticus*.

‘Now he who is not newly initiated, who beheld many of those realities, when he sees a god-like face or form which is a good image of beauty, shudders at first, and something of the old awe comes over him, then, as he gazes, he reveres the beautiful one as a god, and if he did not fear to be thought stark mad, he would offer sacrifice to his beloved as to an idol or a god’ (ὁ δὲ ἀρτιτελής, ὁ τῶν τότε πολυθεάμων, ὅταν θεοειδὲς πρόσωπον ἴδῃ κάλλος εὖ μεμιμημένον ἢ τινα σώματος ιδέαν, πρῶτον μὲν ἔφριξε καὶ τι τῶν τότε ὑπῆλθεν αὐτὸν δειμάτων, εἶτα προσορῶν ὡς θεὸν σέβεται, καὶ εἰ μὴ ἔδεδίδει τὴν τῆς σφόδρα μανίας δόξαν, θύοι ἂν ὡς ἀγάλματι καὶ θεῷ τοῖς παιδικοῖς)²⁴.

A bit later, this Socrates of whom Von Aschenbach is dreaming, affirms:

“Denn die Schönheit, mein Phaidros, nur sie, ist liebenswürdig und sichtbar zugleich: sie ist, merke das wohl! die einzige Form des Geistigen, welche wir sinnlich empfangen, sinnlich ertragen können. Oder was würde aus uns, wenn das Göttliche sonst, wenn Vernunft und Tugend und Wahrheit uns sinnlich erscheinen wollten! Würden wir nicht vergehen und verbrennen vor Liebe, wie Semele einstmals vor Zeus ? ” (43).

‘For beauty, my Phaedrus, beauty alone, is lovely and visible at once. For, mark you, it is the sole aspect of the spiritual which we can perceive through our senses, or bear so to perceive. Else what should become of us, if the divine, if reason and virtue and truth, were to speak to us through the senses? Should we not perish and be consumed by love, as Semele aforetime was by Zeus?’ (52).

And obviously Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus* affirms the same thing:

‘But beauty, as I said before, shone in brilliance among those visions; and since we came to earth we have found it shining most clearly through the clearest of our senses; for sight is the sharpest of the physical senses, though wisdom is not seen by it, for wisdom would arouse terrible love, if such a clear image of it were granted as would come through sight, and the same is true of the other lovely realities’ (περὶ δὲ κάλλους, ὡσπερ εἵπομεν, μετ’ ἐκείνων τὲ ἔλαμπεν ὄν, δευρὸ τ’ ἐλθόντες κατειλήφαμεν αὐτὸ διὰ τῆς ἐναργεστάτης αἰσθήσεως τῶν ἡμετέρων στίλβον ἐναργέστατα. ὄψις γὰρ ἡμῖν ὄξυτάτη τῶν διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἔρχεται αἰσθήσεων, ἢ φρόνησις οὐχ ὁράται – δεινούς γὰρ ἂν παρεῖχεν ἔρωτας, εἴ τι τοιοῦτον ἑαυτῆς ἐναργὲς εἰδῶλον παρεῖχετο εἰς ὄψιν ἰόν – καὶ τᾶλλα ὅσα ἐραστά)²⁵.

And this is the final thesis:

‘Und dann sprach er das Feinste aus, der verschlagene Hofmacher: Dies, dass der Liebende göttlicher ist als der Geliebte, weil in jenem der Gott ist, nicht aber in andern’ (43).

‘And then, sly arch-lover that he was, he said the subtlest thing of all: that the lover was nearer the divine than the beloved; for the god was in the one but not in the other’ (52).

²⁴ 251 -translated by H. N. Fowler, *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971).

²⁵ 250e-d (Fowler). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that in the *Phaedrus* this second paragraph appears in the first place, while the first one appears in the second.

A thesis which in its turn is defended by Phaedrus in the *Symposium* -almost word for word but with a different goal:

‘For in truth there is no sort of valour more respected by the gods than this which comes of love; yet they are even more admiring and delighted and beneficent when the beloved is fond of his lover than when the lover is fond of his favourite; since a lover, filled as he is with a god, surpasses his favourite in divinity’ (ἀλλὰ γὰρ τῷ ὄντι μάλιστα μὲν ταύτην τὴν ἀρετὴν οἱ θεοὶ τιμῶσιν τὴν περὶ τὸν ἔρωτα, μᾶλλον μέντοι θαυμάζουσιν καὶ ἄγανται καὶ εὖ ποιῶσιν ὅταν ὁ ἐρώμενος τὸν ἐραστὴν ἀγαπᾷ, ἢ ὅταν ὁ ἐραστής τὰ παιδικά. θεϊότερον γὰρ ἐραστής παιδικῶν ἔνθεος γὰρ ἐστὶ)²⁶.

Here is, then, the “written confession” of the Platonic dependence of *Death in Venice* or, in other words, an excellent summary of Plato’s theory on love and beauty. By contrast, the dependence on Plutarch’s *Eroticus* -which from my point of view is unquestionable- is never made explicit. And, if there might still be any kind of doubt, it should be abandoned definitively thanks to the presence of further coincidences. Indeed, Gustav von Aschenbach, who gets enthusiastic as never before when he contemplates Tadzio’s divine image, feels himself to be pregnant with beauty –like those noble lovers about whom Diotima talked to Socrates in the *Symposium*- and he also feels an irrepressible desire for writing, for creating, for bringing forth:

“*Er wünschte plötzlich, zu schreiben. Zwar liebt Eros, heisst es, den Müssiggang, und für solchen nur ist er geschaffen. Aber an diesem Punkte der Krisis war die Erregung des Heimgesuchten auf Produktion gerichtet... Der Gegenstand war ihm geläufig, war ihm Erlebnis; sein Gelüst, ihn im Licht seines Wortes erglänzen zu lassen, auf einmai unwiderstehlich. Und zwar ging sein Verlangen dahin, in Tadzios Gegenwart zu arbeiten, beim Schreiben den Wuchs des Knaben zum Muster zu nehmen, seinen Stil den Linien dieses Körpers folgen zu lassen, der ihm göttlich schien, und seine Schönheit ins Geistige zu tragen*” (43-44).

“He felt a sudden desire to write. Eros, indeed, we are told, loves idleness, and for idle hours alone was he created. But in this crisis the violence of our sufferer’s seizure was directed almost wholly towards production... By nature and experience the theme was his own: and he could not resist the temptation to set it off in the glistening foil of his words. He would write, and moreover he would write in Tadzio’s presence. This lad should be in a sense his model, his style should follow the lines of this figure that seemed to him divine; he would snatch up this beauty into the realms of the mind” (52-3).

It is well known that for any Platonic thinker the “original creation” is certainly impossible since the artist simply remembers, copies or follows a Model which is unique, unchanging and everlasting. But, on the other hand, it is worth observing that this desire for writing appears in the novel accompanied by “*Zwar liebt Eros, heisst es, den Muessiggang, und fuer solchen nur ist er geschaffen*”. “Eros, indeed, we are told, loves idleness, and for idle hours alone was he created”, which in its turn is also present, of course, in Plutarch’s *Eroticus*: “Love is idle and born god for idle men” (Ἔρως γὰρ ἀργὸν καὶ πῖ τοιοῦτοῖς ἔφθ)²⁷.

It is quite obvious, then, that Thomas Mann knows Plutarch’s *Eroticus* very well and, besides, Von Aschenbach has already received from Platonism everything he could expect.

²⁶ 180 a-b -translated by W. R. M. Lamb. *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983.

²⁷ 757.

From now on, Thomas Mann needs a man who is not devoted to the exciting and at the same time calm enjoyment of the eternal Beauty²⁸. On the contrary, he needs a true friend of *Thánatos*, of the abyss, capable of fighting against the dangerous conformism into which he might fall as a result of his “bourgeois” ecstasy. Until now, the awakening of senses has made Von Aschenbach perceive the seductiveness of Tadzio’s tangible beauty to the extent of discovering its most hidden secret. But now, after a new ascent towards ideal zones, after having become once more a man who simply imitates a model of Perfection –and consequently, when he is also perfect-, he has no option but to contemplate this model for evermore. Or, after having rejected the constant adoration of Beauty, he can get to the bottom of the mysteries of passion and death, thus saving himself from a new and certain death –which this time would be calm and bourgeois- in the paradise of Perfection. Therefore, Von Aschenbach is now presented as being more and more seduced –i. e., won- and the novelist considers once again that under these circumstances Plutarch’s reflections are the most suitable. Let us compare, for instance, Von Aschenbach’s inner dialogue with what we read in the *Eroticus*:

“*Im übrigen scherzte er bei sich selbst über seine komisch-heilige Angst. “Bestürzt”, dachte er, “bestürzt wie ein Hahn, der angstvoll seine Flügel im Kampfe hängen lässt. Das ist wahrlich der Gott, der beim Anblick des Liebenswürdigen so unseren Mut bricht und unseren stolzen Sinn so gänzlich zu Boden drückt”*” (45).

“And all the time he was laughing at himself for his serio-comic seizure. ‘Quite crestfallen’, he thought. ‘I was like the gamecock that lets his wings droop in the battle. That must be the Love-God himself, that make us hang our heads at sight of beauty and weighs our proud spirits low as the ground’ (54).

‘By all the Graces, Daphnaeus’, he asked, ‘is not this wonderful? I mean the fact that a man in love thinks little of practically everything else, not merely companions and relatives, but even laws and magistrates and kings. He fears nothing, he admires nothing, he pays service to nothing. He’s capable of braving ‘even the Thunderbolt, the spear-wielder’; but once he catches sight of the handsome boy, He flinches like a cock that droops his vanquished wing. His confidence is broken to bits and the pride of his soul is overthrown’ (... πρὸς Χαρίτων, οὐ δαιμόνιον; ὅτι τῶν ἄλλων ὁ ἐρωτικὸς ολίγου δεῖν ἀπάντων περιφρονῶν, οὐ μόνον ἐταίρων καὶ οἰκείων, ἀλλὰ καὶ νόμων καὶ ἀρχόντων καὶ βασιλέων, φοβούμενος δὲ μηθὲν μηδὲ θαυμάζων μηδὲ θεραπεύων, ἀλλὰ “ καὶ τὸν αἰχματὰν κεραυνὸν ” οἷος ὢν ὑπομένειν, ἅμα τῷ τὸν καλὸν ἰδεῖν Ἐπτηξ’ ἀλέκτωρ δοῦλον ὡς κλίνας πτερόν, καὶ τὸ θράσος ἐκκέκλασται καὶ κατακέκοπται οἱ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς γαῦπον)²⁹.

Given this soliloquy, it seems evident that Thomas Mann has already introduced the inflection point and that future events will take Von Aschenbach towards an inevitable end. Indeed, he is now won, without either the courage or the arrogance he always had “thanks to” his methodical and constant work, so that he has no option but to throw himself into the abyss. Pursuing an adolescent whose beauty he cannot express with the help of words –in spite of being, paradoxically, an excellent writer-, noticing that there is something which demands an unconditional surrender from him, he walks slowly towards his death through streets which in

²⁸ Thomas Mann, then, does not share Schopenhauer’s vision of Art or, in Heller’s words (*op. cit.* p.114): “Schopenhauer is left behind. For Schopenhauer accepted, transforming it into a metaphysical psychology of art, Kant’s definition of beauty as something that pleases without appealing to any self-interest in the beholder, something that gives pure, disinterested pleasure”; cf. F. Savater. *Schopenhauer, la abolición del egoísmo*. Madrid: Montesinos, 1986, pp.69-82.

²⁹ 762 E-F.

their turn are also full of death³⁰: “Überwältigt und mehrfach von Schauern überlaufen”(48) “quivering from head to foot” (59), but “Haupt und Herz waren ihm trunken, und seine Schritte folgten den Weisungen des Dämons, dem es Lust ist, des Menschen Vernunft und Würde unter seine Füße zu treten”(51) “Mind and heart were drunk with passion, his footsteps guided by the daemonic power whose pastime it is to trample on human reason and dignity” (62)³¹. Whatever the case may be, his behaviour –as a man in love- makes us think of ancient texts like Plutarch’s *Eroticus* as seen in this new text-comparison:

“So wusste und wollte denn der Verwirrte nichts anderes mehr, als den Gegenstand, der ihn entzündete, ohne Unterlass zu verfolgen, von ihm zu träumen, wenn er abwesend war, und nach der Weise der Liebenden seinem blossen Schattenbild zärtliche Worte zu geben. Einsamkeit, Fremde und das Glück eines späten und tiefen Rausches ermutigten und überredeten ihn, sich auch das Befremdlichste ohne Scheu und Erröten durchgehen zu lassen, wie es denn vorgekommen war, dass er, spätabends von Venedig heimkehrend, im ersten Stock des Hotels an des Schönen Zimmertür haltgemacht, seine Stirn im völliger Trunkenheit an die Angelder Tür gelehnt und sich lange von dort nicht zu trennen vermocht hatte, auf die Gefahr, in einer so wahnsinnigen Lage ertappt und betroffen zu werden” (51-2).

“It came at last to this –that his frenzy left him capacity for nothing else but to pursue his flame; to dream of his absent, to lavish, loverlike, endearing terms on his mere shadow. He was alone, he was a foreigner, he was sunk deep in this belated bliss of his – all which enabled him to pass unblushing through experiences well-nigh unbelievable. One night, returning late from Venice, he paused by his beloved’s chamber door in the second storey,

³⁰ It is worth remembering that Thomas Mann’s pretext for writing *Death in Venice* was to turn into a novel the love that the old Goethe felt for a girl, Ulrike von Levetzow -who was sixteen years old- and which meant “denigration” (*Entwürdigung*), a death before his death; see, e. g.: P. Mendelsohn. *Der Zauberer*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1975, p.868.

³¹ This is not the first time Thomas Mann seems to condemn what would be a “reprehensible madness”, but the truth is that on other occasions this passion is even “sacred”: “Er warf sich auf eine Bank, er atmete ausser sich den nächtlichen Duft der Pflanzen. Und zurückgelehnt, mit hängenden Armen, überwältigt und mehrfach von Schauern überlaufen, flüsterte er die stehende Formel der Sehnsucht, unmöglich hier, absurd, verworfen, lächerlich und heilig doch, ehrwürdig auch hier noch: “ich liebe dich!” (48) “He flung himself on a bench, his composure gone to the winds, and breathed in the nocturnal fragrance of the garden. He leaned back, with hanging arms, quivering from head to foot, and quite unmanned he whispered the hackneyed phrase of love and longing –impossible in these circumstances, absurd, abject, ridiculous enough, yet sacred too, and not unworthy of honour even here: ‘I love you!’” (58-9). And sometimes T. Mann introduces in his text brief allusions to the responsibility of social conventions, always showing his unquestionable psychological acuteness: “Seltsamer, heikler ist nichts als das Verhältnis von Menschen, die sich nur mit den augen kennen, -die täglich, ja stündlich einander begegnen, beobachten und dabei den Schein gleichgültiger Fremdheit grusslos und wortlos aufrecht zu halten durch Sittenzwang oder eigene Grille genötigt sind. Zwischen ihnen ist Unruhe und überreizte Neugier, die Hysterie eines unbefriedigten, unnatürlich unterdrückten Erkenntnis- und Austauschbedürfnisses und namentlich auch eine Art von gespannter achtung. Denn der Mensch liebt und ehrt den Menschen, solange er ihn nicht zu beurteilen vermag, und die Sehnsucht ist ein Erzeugnis mangelhafter Erkenntnis” (46-47) “There can be no relation more strange, more critical, than that between two beings who know each other only with their eyes, who meet daily, yes, even hourly, eye each other with a fixed regard, and yet by some whim or freak of convention feel constrained to act like strangers. Uneasiness rules between them, unslaked curiosity, a hysterical desire to give rein to their suppressed impulse to recognize and address each other; even, actually, a sort of strained but mutual regard. For one human being instinctively feels respect and love for another human being so long as he does not know him well enough to judge him; and that he does not, the craving he feels is evidence” (56-7).

leaned his head against the panel, and remained there long, in utter drunkenness, powerless to tear himself away, blind to the danger of being caught in so mad an attitude” (63).

‘In erotic madness, however, when once it has really seized upon a man and set him on fire, there is no reading of literature, no ‘magic incantation’, no change of environment, that restores him to calm. He loves when present and longs when absent, pursues by day and haunts the door by night, summons his lad when sober and sings his praises while he drinks. Someone has said that the images entertained by the poetic imagination, because they impose themselves so vividly, are dreams of those wide awake; but this is much more true of the images entertained by the imagination of lovers who speak to the beloved and embrace him or chide him as though he were present’ (Τὴν δ’ ἐρωτικὴν μανίαν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καθαψαμένην ἀληθῶς καὶ διακαύσασαν οὐ μούσα τις, οὐκ “ ἐπῶδὴ θελεκτήριος ”, οὐ τόπου μεταβολὴ καθίστησιν· ἀλλὰ καὶ παρόντες ἐρῶσι καὶ ἀπόντες ποθοῦσι καὶ μεθ’ ἡμέραν διώκουσι καὶ νύκτωρ θυραυλοῦσι καὶ νήφοντες καλοῦσι τοὺς καλοὺς καὶ πίνοντες ἄδουσι. Καὶ οὐχ τις εἶπεν αἱ ποιητικαὶ φαντασίαι διὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν ἐγρηγορότων ἐνύπνι’ εἰσίν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον αἱ τῶν ἐρώτων, διαλεγομένων ὡς πρὸς παρόντας, ἀσπαζομένων, ἐγκαλούντων)³².

Therefore, it would not be exaggerated to say that Thomas Mann had to choose only the fittest setting for a love story which was written long ago.

Sometimes Von Aschenbach is afraid of the hard criticism he would suffer if his Venetian story were known and, planning his defence, theorizes about the urges of an art which is not understood by the current middle-classes and, as a consequence, appeals to Antiquity:

“Auch er hatte gedient, auch er war Soldat und Kriegsmann gewesen, gleich manchen von ihnen, -denn die Kunst war ein Krieg, ein aufreibender Kampf, für welchen man heute nicht lange taugte. Ein Leben der Selbstübenwindung und des Trotzdem, ein herbes, standhaftes und enthaltsames Leben, das er zum Sinnbild für einen zarten und zeitgemässen Heroismus gestaltet hatte- wohl durfte er es männlich, durfte es tapfer nennen, und es wollte ihm scheinen, als sei der Eros, der sich seiner bemeistert, einem solchen Leben auf irgendeine Weise besonders gemäss und geneigt. Hatte er nicht bei den tapfersten Völkern vorzüglich in Ansehen gestanden, ja, hiess es nicht, dass er durch Tapferkeit in ihren Städten geblüt habe? Zahlreiche Kriegshelden der Vorzeit hatten willig sein Joch getragen, denn gar keine Erniedrigung galt, die der Gott verhängte, und Taten, die als Merkmale der Feigheit wären gescholten worden, wenn sie um anderer Zwecke willen geschehen wären: Fussfälle, Schwüre, inständige Bitten und sklavisches Wesen, solche gereichten dem Liebenden nicht zur Schande, sondern er erntete vielmehr noch Lob dafür” (52).

“It had been a service, and he a soldier, like some of them; and art was war – a grilling, exhausting struggle that nowadays wore one out before one could grow old. It had been a life of self-conquest, a life against odds, dour, steadfast, abstinent; he had made it symbolical of the kind of over-strained heroism the time admired, and he was entitled to call it manly, even courageous. He wondered if such a life might not be somehow especially pleasing in the eyes of the god who had him in his power. For Eros had received most countenance among the most valiant nations – yes, were we not told that in their cities prowess made him flourish exceedingly? And many heroes of olden time had willingly borne his yoke, not counting any humiliation such as it happened by the god’s

³² 759 B-C.

decree; vows, prostrations, self-abasements, these were no source of shame to the lover; rather they reaped him praise and honour” (64).

And, once more, the *Eroticus* says the same thing:

‘It is not only the most warlike peoples, Beotians, Spartans, Cretans, who are the most susceptible to love, but also the great heroes of old, Meleager, Achilles...’ (Οὐ μόνον τοίνυν μαχιμώτατα τῶν ἔθνῶν ἐρωτικώτατα, Βοιωτοὶ καὶ Λακεδαιμόνιοι καὶ Κρηῖτες, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν παλαιῶν ὁ Μελέαγρος, ὁ Ἀχιλλεύς...) ³³.

As a soldier: “*der Gedanke an Heimkehr, an Besonnenheit, Nüchternheit, Mühsal und Meisterschaft widerte ihn in solchem Masse dass sein Gesicht sich zum Ausdruck physischer Uebelkeit verzerrte*” “the thought of returning home, returning to reason, self-mastery, an ordered existence, to the old life of effort. Alas! The bare thought made him wince with a revulsion that was like physical nausea” (74). And, then, Thomas Mann thinks of a last literary resource: to set the lover in a Dionysiac atmosphere, thus showing the real dimension of his true desire for *Thánatos*³⁴. Apollo, the symbol of the harmony that Von Aschenbach glimpsed in Nature when it was illuminated by Tadzio’s light, has become useless now. At that time, when at dawn he went to the beach in search of the most sublime contemplation:

“*Der Glanz ward zum Brande, lautlos, mit göttlicher Übergewalt wälzten sich Glut und Brunst und lodernde Flammen herauf, und mit raffenden Hufen stiegen des Bruders heilige Renner über den Erdkreis empor. Angestrahlt von der Pracht des Gottes sass der Einsam-Wache, er schloss die Augen und liess von der Glorie seine Lider küssen*” (46).

“The gleam became a glare; without a sound, with godlike violence, glow and glare and rolling flames streamed upwards, and with flying hoof-beats the steeds of the sun-god mounted the sky. The lonely watcher sat, the splendour of the god shone on him, he closed his eyes and let the glory kiss his lids” (55-6).

Apollo’s time is certainly over and only Dionysus and his legacy can provide him with the mutual affirmation of life and death. E. Heller has explained it very well:

“He, the classical writer of his age and country, who has “rejected the abyss” and entered into a covenant with Apollo, determined as he is to let his art do service in the humanisation of man, unwittingly goes out in search of Dionysus and dies in his embrace. As the messenger of Death will come back, so the vision of the fertile chaos will recur and each time death will be in an ever closer alliance irresistibly strong in its attack upon the disciplined forms of human spirit. But as the disciplined forms of art require for their being the most intimate association with the dark ground of creativity, *Death in Venice* is Thomas Mann’s first tragic allegory of art”³⁵.

³³ 761D. However, although I cannot add now other paragraphs because of their length, we must take into account what is said in 760 E-762 with regard to different heroes and peoples, in 759-760 E in the same sense, or in 753 E in relation to the story about Semiramis and Ninus the Great.

³⁴ Regarding the Dionysian content of *Death in Venice*, see for instance: A.M. González Tobía; M. E. Mangariello. “Proyección de *Las Bacantes* de Euripides en *La muerte en Venecia* de Thomas Mann”. *Separata de Letras, Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina Santa María de los Buenos Aires*, Diciembre 1984 - Abril 1985, nº XI-XII.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 105.

And, under the protection of F. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* –whose influence on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* has always been admitted³⁶- and amid a dream, has a horrible vision. However, for Gustav von Aschenbach the worst is not to be able to keep the necessary distance from his dream; on the contrary:

“Sie waren er selbst, als sie reissend und mordend sich auf die Tiere hinwarfen und dampfende Fetzen verschlangen, als auf zerwühltem Moosgrund grenzenlose Vermischung begann, dem Gotte zum Opfer. Und seine Seele kostete Unzucht und Raserei des Unterganges” (62).

“But now the dreamer was in them and of them, the stranger god was his own. Yes, it was he who was flinging himself upon the animals, who bit and tore and swallowed smoking gobbets of flesh – while on the trampled moss there now began the rites in honour of the god, an orgy of promiscuous embraces – and in his very soul he tasted the bestial degradation of his fall” (76).

Death already besieges Von Aschenbach and finally takes him away while, as usual, he is contemplating his god close to the sea. A few moments earlier, Thomas Mann showed his hero meditating on his destiny –and once more as if Socrates talked to Phaedrus. Socrates' words put an end to a thesis which is personal and not transferable:

“Die Meisterhaltung unseres Stiles ist Lüge und Narrentum, unser Ruhm und Ehrenstand eine Posse, das Vertrauen der Menge zu uns höchst lächerlich, Volks- und Jugenderziehung durch die Kunst ein gewagtes, zu verbotendes Unternehmen. Denn wie sollte wohl der zum Erzieher taugen, dem eine unverbesserliche und natürliche Richtung zum Abgrunde eingeboren ist? Wir möchten ihn wohl verleugnen und Würde gewinnen, aber wie wir uns wenden mögen, er zieht uns an. So sagen wir etwa der auflösenden Erkenntnis ab, denn die Erkenntnis, Phaidros, hat keine Würde und Strenge; sie ist wissend, verstehend, verzeihend, ohne Haltung und Form; sie hat Sympathie mit dem Abgrund, sie ist der Abgrund. Diese also verwerfen wir mit Entschlossenheit, und fortan gilt unser Trachten einzig der Schönheit, das will sagen der Einfachheit, Grösse und neuen Strenge, der zweiten Unbefangenheit und der Form. Aber Form und Unbefangenheit, Phaidros, führen zum Rausch und zur Begierde, führenden Edlen vielleicht zu grauenhaftem Gefühlsfrevel, den seine eigene schöne Strenge als infam verwirft, führen zum Abgrund, zum Abgrund auch Sie. Uns Dichter, sage ich, führen Sie dahin, denn wir vermögen nicht, uns aufzuschwingen, wir vermögen nur auszuschweifen. Und nun gehe ich, Phaidros, bleibe du hier; und erst wenn du mich nicht mehr siehst, so gehe auch du” (66).

“Our magisterial style is all folly and pretence... And to teach youth, or the populace, by means of art is a dangerous practice and ought to be forbidden. For what good can an artist be as a teacher, when from his birth up he is headed direct for the pit?... however we turn, it draws us still. So, then, since knowledge might destroy us, we will have none of it. For knowledge, Phaedrus, does not make him who possesses it dignified or austere. Knowledge is all-knowing, understanding, forgiving; it takes up no position, sets no store by form. It has compassion with the abyss – it is the abyss. So we reject it, firmly, and hence forward our concern shall be with beauty only. And by beauty we mean simplicity, largeness, and renewed severity of discipline; we mean a return to detachment and to form. But detachment, Phaedrus, and preoccupation with form lead to intoxication and

³⁶See, e. g.: Th. Mann. *Relato de mi vida*. Madrid: Alianza Ed., 1980, pp. 23-26. Th. Mann, *El artista y la sociedad*, third part “Prólogo a una conmemoración musical de Nietzsche, pp. 148-52. E. Trias. *Conocer Thomas Mann y su obra*. Barcelona: Ed. Dopesa, 1978, pp. 20-8, 84-7.

desire, they may lead the noblest among us to frightful emotional excesses... Yes, they lead us thither, I say, us who are poets – who by our natures are prone not to excellence but to excess. And now, Phaedrus, I will go. Remain here; and only when you can no longer see me, then do you depart also” (80-1).

Here ends the analysis of a novel in search of its main source. Notwithstanding, this brief article would remain unfinished if it did not try to give an answer to some questions which are as evident as inevitable: 1) Why does Thomas Mann use Plutarch’s *Eroticus* rather than well-known and significant Platonic dialogues such as the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*? And 2) Why does Thomas Mann hide this dependence -to the extent of seeming to want us not to think of it- by introducing throughout the novel different dialogues –like Plato’s- between Socrates and Phaedrus? Needless to say, any answer implies necessarily a certain degree of audacity, but in my opinion there is enough room for a reasonable hypothesis.

Indeed, first of all I believe that we should not forget what is evident, i. e., *Death in Venice* deals mainly with a love-and-death story with a conscious fall into the abyss. The protagonist fully accepts his tragic destiny, thus finally acknowledging that Art is a risk worth running which guarantees the triumph over any existential paralysis. In this respect, Plutarch’s *Eroticus* was the suitable dialogue to create with its help a story such as *Death in Venice*. Leaving aside Thomas Mann’s intention –I shall approach this theme later on-, he discovered in it everything he needed. First, if he wanted to praise the pure and eternal Beauty which is extraneous to any human effort or pretension, The *Eroticus* was almost perfect. Its Platonic nature provided him with all sorts of references to the form and the model, to artists as privileged imitators of a divine paradigm, and even with many calls to the memory of the lost paradise –*anámnesis*- and to the ascent of souls –all these themes presented, moreover, in the both systematic and “scientific” way which corresponds to a dialogue of the second century after Christ. But Plutarch’s *Eroticus* offered him much more than the Platonic legacy which was so useful in designing one of the episodes of Gustav von Aschenbach’s journey. Plutarch’s *Eroticus* offered him above all passionate characters in favour either of pederasty or marriage. And, last but not least, Plutarch’s *Eroticus*, on account of being a dialogue which inherits the Aristotelian tradition and the one of the cynic and stoic diatribe -that is to say, erudite and didactic-, contained a great deal of Eros-stories which were worthy of remark.

Plutarch, given his enthusiasm for the peace which is peculiar to conjugal life, affirms that “his” *éros* has to do with peaceful homes rather than with passionate stories with an unfortunate end. Nevertheless, Plutarch, always interested in those excellent men or women who are suitable for becoming paradigms of nobility and who fight against all sorts of difficulties, seems to find it hard not to be seduced by the charm of those human beings who assume the sometimes necessary and heroic fall into the “abyss”. In this respect, the stories about the Galatian Camma, who kills the murderer of her husband -and at the same time commits suicide- thus avenging him³⁷, or the no less heroic story about Empone, victim of the Emperor Vespasian’s cruelty and faithful to her husband to the extent of sharing his tragic destiny are truly outstanding³⁸. But, furthermore, Thomas Mann was in all likelihood very interested in certain reflections in the *Eroticus* on love as enthusiasm, passion or madness with tragic ends. Here they are:

- A) ‘But’, my father said, ‘Plato’s doctrine might help in the discussion at this point, though it is a digression. There is one form of madness that rises from the body to the soul: when a noxious exhalation is put into circulation as a result of distempers or commixtures of a certain sort, a madness ensues that is a savage, harsh, and diseased.

³⁷ 768 B-E.

³⁸ 770 D-771 D.

There is a second kind, however, which does not exist without divine inspiration. It is not intrinsically generated but is, rather, an extrinsic afflatus that displaces the faculty of rational inference; it is created and set in motion by a higher power. This sort of madness bears the general name of ‘enthusiasm’³⁹.

- B) ‘There remains within the class of mutations and aberrations that man is subject to yet another kind, Daphnaeus, that is neither inconspicuous nor quiescent... this enthusiasm which arouses affection for virtuous boys and chaste women, which is much the fiercest and warmest of all our enthusiasms’⁴⁰.
- C) ‘In erotic madness, however, when once it has really seized upon a man and set him on fire, there is no reading of literature, no ‘magic incantation’, no change of environment, that restores him to calm. He loves when present and longs when absent, pursues by day and haunts the door by night, summons his lad when sober and sings his praises while he drinks’⁴¹.
- D) ‘By love he is led to make a long journey with great swiftness; he has found, as the Cynics say, the passage to virtue ‘strenuous and short at the same time’. And in fact to friendship... as it were borne along on the wave of affection with the help of a god’⁴².
- E) ‘Yes’, you say, ‘for she’s in love with him (Ismenodora with Bacchon), she’s all on fire. Who, then, prevents her from making revel-rout to his house, from singing the Complaint Before the Closed Door, from putting nosegays on his portraits, from entering the ring with her rivals? These are the actions of true lovers. Let her lower her brow, renounce her easy life, and put on the dress of those who are in the service of passion’⁴³.
- F) (And, finally, the proof that a good sense of humour is not foreign to Plutarch): ‘Samian flute-girls, ballet dancers, women like Aristonica and Oeanthe with her tambourine and Agathoclea have trampled on the crowns of kings. The Syrian Semiramis was the servant and concubine of a house-born slave of the king, Ninus the Great, who one day caught sight of her and fell in love. She grew to have such a power and such contempt for him that she asked to be allowed to direct the affairs of state, crowned and seated on his throne, for one day. He granted this and issued orders for everyone to serve and obey her just as they would himself. At first her commands were moderate while she was making trial of the guards; then, when she saw that there was no opposition or hesitation on their part, she ordered Ninus to be seized, put in chains, and finally put to death. When all this was done, she ruled gloriously over Asia for many years’⁴⁴.

To sum up, I would dare to say that Plutarch’s *Eroticus* became for the German writer not only a source of inspiration but also an excellent summary of different visions of *éros*, with a great number of instances and accurate analyses.

What would be, on the other hand, the inconveniences of Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*? The Platonic theory on *éros* appears above all in these two famous dialogues, Plutarch found inspiration in them and Thomas Mann knew perfectly well to what extent the *Eroticus* was also based on the Athenian philosopher’s reflections. I have quoted before the paragraphs of *Death in Venice* that reproduce others in the palinode of the *Phaedrus* describing the great sensations

³⁹ 758 D-E.

⁴⁰ 759.

⁴¹ 759 B-C.

⁴² 759D

⁴³ 753 B.

⁴⁴ 753 D-E.

of sensitive men as soon as they contemplate any symbol of the everlasting Beauty. And, yet, they are only simple episodes while the rest of the novel shows a true Plutarchean inspiration. Why? First of all and with regard to Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Socrates, the great Athenian master, proposes as usual wise and noble attitudes. In both dialogues Socrates maintains the same thing: human beings must understand little by little that they must refuse the concrete beauty of concrete bodies in order to glimpse finally the true One, i.e., the source of all beauties. In spite of being prisoners of matter, of their own bodies, human beings must ascend more and more towards the summit. And, If I may speak straight out, the Socrates in the last chapters of the *Symposium* needs neither Alcibiades' body nor his "generous offer". In fact, he does not need any body but the intelligent attention of those who are determined to learn the rules of an indispensable science: Virtue. The mature Socrates is a man in love with the Beauty-Good, while he is not the lover of his pupils' bodies. He guides souls and intelligences and he is not a passionate man in search of mirror-bodies. As a prudent, sober, restrained and diligent man, he has nothing to offer to those who are half-hearted; on the contrary, he is in a certain sense "a bourgeois" –I apologise for the anachronism- who feels too sure about everything, and, above all, inner crisis have nothing to do with him. But in the *Eroticus* the Platonic *lógos* about this beauty which guides human souls and the Beauty-Good at the end of the ascent does not prevent Plutarch from speaking on passion as well. The *Eroticus* deals with passionate and uncontrolled loves, with tragic deaths as a result of an inexorable destiny. The *Eroticus*, then, was for Thomas Mann an excellent source of inspiration, almost a handbook.

And, with regard to the second question, i. e., why Thomas Mann does not "make explicit" the influence of this Plutarchean dialogue on *Death in Venice* –leaving aside, of course, that writers are never obliged to reveal all their secrets-, I should like to say that *Death in Venice* contradicts in fact the spirit of the *Eroticus*. Indeed, Plutarch wrote it in order to compare pederastic love with conjugal, thus maintaining that, in spite of all the noble instances of masculine love, there is nothing better than the spiritual peace that husbands and wives create in their homes. His aim was, moreover, to vindicate for women what men considered for centuries masculine virtues: nobility, courage, prudence, etcetera. For the Greeks women were only sensual beings who were not worthy of noble feelings such as love (*éros*) and friendship (*philia*). I said before that Thomas Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach seems to assume the feminine and sensual side of human nature in order to satisfy the urges of an artistic temperament which loves taking risks. In this respect, the attitude of this new "tragic hero" might be understood as redemptive of the feminine gender, leaving behind a centuries-old disdain but, on the other hand, the novel introduces reasonable doubts as well. I am referring obviously to the fact that Tadzio and Von Aschenbach, the former being adored by the latter, contradict totally the thesis of Plutarch's *Eroticus*:

‘Furthermore, the causes that they give for the generation of love are peculiar to neither sex and common to both. For is it really the case that visual shapes emanating from boys can, but the same from women cannot, enter into the body of the lover where, coursing through him, they stimulate and tickle the whole mass and, by gliding along with the other configurations of atoms, produce seed? And those beautiful and sacred passions which we call recollections of the divine, the true, the Olympian beauty of the other world, by which the soul is made winged –why should they not spring from maidens and women... ?’ (Ἐτι τοίνυν ἄς λέγουσιν αἰτίας καὶ γενέσεις Ἔρωτος, ἴδιαι μὲν οὐδετέρου γένους εἰσι, κοιναὶ δ’ ἀμφοτέρων. Καὶ γὰρ εἶδωλα δῆπουθεν ἐνδύόμενα τοῖς ἐρωτικοῖς... οὐ δυνατόν μὲν ἀπὸ παίδων, δυνατόν δ’ ἀπὸ γυναικῶν; Καὶ τὰς καλὰς ταύτας καὶ ἰερὰς ἀναμνήσεις ἀνακαλουμένας ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὸ θεῖον καὶ ἀληθινὸν

καὶ Ὀλύμπιον ἐκεῖνο κάλλος, αἷς ψυχῇ πτεροῦται, τί οὖν κωλύει γίνεσθαι μὲν ἀπὸ παίδων καὶ ἀπὸ νεανίσκων, γίνεσθαι δ' ἀπὸ παρθένων καὶ γυναικῶν...;) ⁴⁵.

Consequently, the question would be: Why is feminine beauty discarded in *Death in Venice* as a true creative impulse? Why not a woman as the origin of an inner crisis which must regenerate a too-consolidated man? It would certainly be difficult to maintain that it has to do with a literary *tópos* the novelist still considers worthy of not being abandoned, since Plutarch affirms precisely that this centuries-old *tópos* is based on falsehood and should even be considered an insult –on the other hand, he mentions certainly noble instances of masculine love only to emphasise from this condescension the excellence of conjugal love. Therefore, we should read now Thomas Mann's *Diaries* in search of any "confession". Here is for example a paragraph which corresponds to his notes on the 20th-XII-1918:

*"Mich beschäftigte ein eleganter junger mann... blond, feiner deutscher Typus, eher zart... dessen Anblick mir ohne Frage einen Eindruck gemacht hat..."*⁴⁶.

"An elegant young man attracted my attention powerfully... blond and of this fine German type, rather delicate... to the extent of causing my admiration... when I saw him I was certainly impressed..."

Here is, then, Thomas Mann's vision of homosexuality or his well-known "erotic aestheticism". Needless to say, this is another theme which deserves a monographic approach. Nevertheless, given the nature of the reflections of the *Eroticus* that Thomas Mann sometimes reproduces almost verbatim, I should like to underline that the German writer does not want or know how to avoid certain classical misogynist topics. Let us read for instance what the novelist writes regarding Tadzio's sisters:

"Was ferner auffiel, war ein offenbar grundsätzlicher Kontrast zwischen den erzieherischen Gesichtspunkten, nach denen die Geschwister gekleidet und allgemein gehalten schienen. Die Herrichtung der drei Mädchen, von denen die Älteste für erwachsen gelten konnte, war bis zum Enstellenden herb und keusch... Das glatt und test an den Kopf geklebte Haar liess die Gesichter nonnenhaft leer und nichtssagend erscheinen. Gewiss, es war eine Mutter, die hier waltete, und sie dachte nicht einmal daran, auch auf den Knaben die pädagogische Strenge anzuwenden, die ihr den Mädchen gegenüber geboten schien. Weichheit und Zärtlichkeit bestimmten ersichtlich seine Existenz..." (26).

"What most attracted my attention was the contrast, obviously based upon pedagogic principles, among the different criteria in which the dress and behaviour of the siblings were inspired. The dresses of the three girls, the eldest of whom was already a woman, was austere and chaste... Their straight hair... gave them a nun-semblance... inexpressive. It was undoubtedly their mother who made the decisions in these affairs, and she would never have thought to apply to the boy the severity which she considered necessary for the girls. It was easy to notice that the adolescent's life was marked both by both softness and tenderness" (62).

And, concerning Gustav von Aschenbach, Thomas Mann also gives significant data:

⁴⁵ 766 E, and also 769 B, C and D.

⁴⁶ Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher* 1918-21. Frankfurt am Mein: Fischer, 1981, p. 111, the translation is mine.

“Nach einigen Jahren der Unruhe... wählte er frühzeitig München zum dauernden Wohnsitz und lebte dort in bürgerlichem Ehrenstande, wie er dem Geiste in besonderen Einzelfällen zuteil wird. Die Ehe, die er in noch jugendlichem Alter... wurde nach kurzer Glücksfrist durch den Tod getrennt. Eine Tochter, schon Gattin, war ihm geblieben. Einen Sohn hatte er nie besessen” (16).

“He had roved about for a few years, trying this place and that as a place of residence, before choosing, as he soon did, the city of Munich for his permanent home. And there he lived, enjoying among his fellow-citizens the honour which is in rare cases the reward of intellectual eminence. He married young... but, after a brief term of wedded happiness, his wife had died. A daughter, already married, remained to him. A son he never had” (18-9).

That is to say, after the death of his wife and the marriage of his daughter, the novelist has wanted a man who is almost “pure” of any woman and suitable for experiencing the seductive charm of Tadzio’s beauty.

And still a further remark. As seen before, Von Aschenbach dreamt of Socrates telling Phaedrus “the subtlest thing of all: that the lover was nearer the divine than the beloved; for the god was in the one but not in the other”. Of course, Plutarch understood that this subtle reflection –which is also present in Plato’s *Symposium*- had to be adapted to his thesis on marriage. And so, after a great number of allusions to the true advantages of conjugal love – those which are alien to the pederastic one-, Plutarch substitutes the former sentence for another which is more suitable for his thesis: “For in marriage, to love is a greater boon than to be loved”⁴⁷. Bearing in mind, then, that Thomas Mann omits this last correction and adopts once more the words of the *Symposium*, it might well be that he decided not to reveal the close relation between the *Eroticus* and *Death in Venice* in order to avoid all sorts of criticism.

Given my last comments, one could think that in my opinion *Death in Venice* is not a worthy literary work. On the contrary, besides underlining Thomas Mann’s skill at writing an excellent tragic novel, I should like to pay attention to its clear message. For Gustav von Aschenbach –i. e. for Thomas Mann himself- life, if it finally becomes anchored in strong convictions and all kinds of “stagnation” turns into a certain and useless death. By contrast, death might be advantageous when men, always courageous -to the extent of tragedy, if necessary-, finally understand that only a constant crisis consisting of a true spiritual renewal can guarantee a real life. And once gain, *Éros*, the god armed with arrows who knows how to wound men and women’s hearts -even those who are indifferent to love- becomes the perfect symbol of essential and, therefore, tragic impulses.

⁴⁷ 769 E, cf. 762 C: ‘Every lover becomes generous, single hearted, high-minded, even though he was miserly before. His meanness and avarice are melted away like iron in the fire, so that he is made happier giving to those he loves than he is made by receiving gifts from others himself’ (... μεγαλόφρων γίνεται πᾶς ἐραστής, κὰν γλίσχρος ἢ πρότερον, τῆς μικρολογίας καὶ φιλαργυρίας δίκην σιδήρου διὰ πυρὸς ἀνιεμένης· ὥστε χαίρειν τοῖς ἐρωμένοις δίδοντας, ὡς παρ’ ἐτέρων οὐ χαίρουσιν αὐτοὶ λαμβάνοντες).