

Thomas Mann's Artistic Point of View in "Death in Venice"

Sanae Tsuda

INTRODUCTION

In an essay called "Freud and Future," Thomas Mann discusses the philosophers and psychologists who influenced his thinking. One of these was Freud with his theories of the ego, the id, and also the pleasure principle which the id pursues. Mann seems to have been impressed by Freud's theory that human beings have no control over their own motives and are driven instead by an uncontrollable force called the unconscious¹.

In "Death in Venice", Mann describes an artist's unconscious which eventually leads him to destruction. He explains the artist's downfall as an inevitable result of his compulsive involvement in art. The story can be interpreted either from a metaphysical or psychological point of view in that Thomas Mann is influenced both by the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and by the psychology of Freud and Jung. In this paper, the Freudian point of view is employed to interpret the reason for Aschenbach's final destruction in relation to his concept of reality and fantasy.

I

The story, "Death in Venice", shows various factors which influenced the particular artist, Gustave Aschenbach. These factors are his parents, his childhood, and his social status as a bourgeois. Aschenbach has inherited two opposing characters from his father and his mother. The paternal side of his family is from northern Germany representing rules, discipline, and authority. In contrast, his maternal ancestors are Bohemian to which he can attribute his artistic and sensuous temper. Aschenbach, as a well-known artist, preserves his father's discipline in fostering his creativity. He does this by subliming his mother's sensuousness to art and by imitating his father's stoic way of life. For instance, he gets up early in the morning and takes a cold shower in preparation for his

1. Thomas Mann, "Freud and Future", *Essays of Three Decades* (New York, 1947), p. 414.

writing in the morning. He does not take time for anything but writing.

This stoic attitude toward life by the artist seems to have been cultivated in his childhood during which he had a private education as a result of ill health:

He had grown up solitary, without comradeship, yet had early been driven to see that he belonged to those whose talent is not so much out of common as is the physical basis of which talent relies for its fulfillment. It is a seed that gives early of its fruit, whose powers seldom reach a ripe old age.²

Being fragile, Aschenbach was kept from building relationships with other children at school; hence he substituted art which made him feel superior to other people and eventually earned him fame.

The solitary education had yet another effect, for Aschenbach identified himself with his father to an even greater extent. Therefore, in this child two opposing natures were built up approximately at the same time. One was the artistic passionate nature which was substituted for companionship and consequently not held in check by his peer group; the other was the authoritarian nature of his father. In order to imitate and please his father, however, he himself had to repress his own passionate nature. The authoritarian environment was much too secure to "fly from the nest".

Aschenbach thinks that great artists preserve their creative power all their lives. As he becomes older, he disciplines himself and follows his motto "hold fast"³ in order to keep his creativity. He remains stoic and loves the heroes who have the virtues of forbearance. His works are full of people "who labor at the edge of exhaustion; of the overburdened, of those who are already worn out but still hold themselves upright".⁴ Aschenbach is also "at the edge of exhaustion" of his creative powers. But he tries to hold himself straight by imitating his father and by describing father-like figures. He regresses to his childhood in order to preserve his fame. Thomas Mann in his essay emphasizes the importance of a father's influence to an individual:

The bond with the father, the imitation of the father, the game of being the father, and the transference to father-substitute pictures of a higher and more developed type — how these infantile traits work upon the life of the individual to mark and shape it... The artist in particular, a pas-

2. Thomas Mann, "Death in Venice", *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories* (New York, 1936), p.9.

3. Mann, "Death in Venice", p.9.

4. *Ibid.*, p.12.

sionately childlike and play possessed being, can tell us of such infantile imitation upon his own life...⁵

Aschenbach feels secure as far as he is living in the world of fantasy in which he imitates his father.

Another characteristic of this artist is that he belongs to the bourgeoisie which represents order.⁶ In other words, the bourgeoisie has the same values as the father. There is simply no room for a passionate nature in bourgeois society; hence, Aschenbach continues to repress it in order to remain pleasing to the other. He leads a sparing bourgeois life and receives many letters from other countries due to the popularity of his youthful writings. Since he does not want to lose his fame, he disciplines himself more and more as he gets older. Accordingly, his writing becomes more formal and traditional.

II

One day, however, he finds that he cannot proceed his writing at a certain point of the novel that he is working on. He takes a walk to refresh himself and encounters a strange man, who stirs up a longing to travel in his mind:

... 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, of at least so long ago outgrown and forgot...⁷

He realizes that he needs stimuli of the outside world in order to keep going on with his writing. He thinks it impossible to continue his work successfully if he stays in his house or his country house:

He dreaded the summer in the country... dreaded to see the familiar mountain peaks and walls that would shut him up again with his heavy discontent. What he needed was a break... other air and a new stock of blood to make the summer tolerable and productive... A night in a *wagon-lit*, three or four weeks of lotus-eating at some of the gay world's play grounds in the lively south...⁸

In contrast to the north, the south symbolizes sensuousness and emotion,

5. Man, "Freud and Future", p.426.

6. William Troy, "Thoms Mann: Myth and Reason", *Partisan Review*, V (1938), 25.

7. Mann, "Death in Venice", p.5.

8. *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.

which is represented by his mother. The longing for travel, therefore, has two levels of meaning; one is a real trip to the south and the other is regression to his mother and to emotion which Aschenbach has repressed in order to imitate his father.

As he crosses the water to go to Venice, some changes are made in Aschenbach's mind. On the way, he sees an old man, who pretends to be a young man and plays with boys. The old man foreshadows Aschenbach's downfall, a deep involvement in emotion and sensuousness. At a hotel in Pola, he encounters a Polish boy named Tadzio whom he thinks to be an incarnation of the ideal beauty which he has been seeking. He soon falls in love with the boy and starts following him. Aschenbach, like the old man he encountered on the way, begins to make up his face in order to attain Tadzio's love. However, he is unable to establish any relationship with the boy because he does not consider Tadzio as a human being but as an idol. Tadzio is necessary for him only because he is an embodiment of the beauty that Aschenbach has cherished in his fantasy. In other words, Aschenbach shows a strong attachment to Tadzio because the boy is indispensable to his writing.

Aschenbach does not dare warn the Polish family of the danger of cholera which is spreading through Venice, because he is afraid of losing Tadzio. In Venice, Aschenbach finally accomplishes a page and a half of prose which completely satisfies his artistic concern of the perfect writing. He is willing to die of cholera since he has achieved his goal as an artist. He does not care whether Tadzio will contract the disease or not because the moral judgement in life is not Aschenbach's concern any more.

By going to the south, Aschenbach could write perfectly beautiful prose, but also he had to die. By following emotion, he only once achieves a harmony between emotion and order, between mother and father. But once his repressed emotion is set free, he loses control over it.

In Aschenbach's disintegration we can find Freud's theory of the unconscious as a dynamic power which drives man to the satisfaction of an impulse. Aschenbach, as an artist, cannot repress all his emotion because creativity is in his unconscious. Although it strives to become released through his life, Aschenbach continues to repress it because self-preservation is more important to him. He, therefore, keeps his instinct at a lower stage of development and one might say that he fixates during most of his lifetime, for he writes only of those subjects and in a manner which will please his public. But at the end of the story, rather than be rejected by his public, Aschenbach flees to the south where he and his creative passionate instinct will be better received. And his released emotion which was repressed for such a long time traps him and leads to his ultimate destruction.

Bibliography

- Mann, Thomas. "Death in Venice", *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, New York, 1936.
- _____. "Freud and Future", *Essays of Three Decades*, New York, 1947.
- Troy, William. "Thomas Mann: Myth and Reason", *Partisan Review*, V, 1938.