

The Innocence of the South. Winckelmann in Trieste and the Aschenbach Case

PAOLO PANIZZO

1.

It might seem out of place, even irreverent, to talk about the ‘innocence of the South’ with reference to the murder of Johann Joachim Winckelmann which took place in Trieste on 8th June 1768. In effect on that day the city became the theatre of a «heinous crime» as it was later called by the Trieste priest Don Giuseppe Mainati (1760-1842)¹. And the illustrious victim was not snatched from life after «a sudden fright» and «a short, sharp pain» as Goethe was to write in his famous essay², but after prolonged and fearful suffering.

The innocence referred to in the title of this paper, however, is not of the type recognized by a judge in a court of law nor does it refer to any man in particular –

1 «[A]troce misfatto», G. Mainati, *Croniche ossia memorie storiche sacro-profane di Trieste*, Venezia, Tipografia Picotti, 1818, tomo quarto, p. 298. Cf. also M. Vidulli Torlo, *Un atroce misfatto. L'assassinio di Winckelmann a Trieste*, Trieste, Comune di Trieste, 2012.

2 J. W. Goethe, *Vita di J. J. Winckelmann*, a cura di E. Agazzi, Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 1992, p. 64. «Und in diesem Sinne dürfen wir ihn wohl glücklich preisen, daß er von dem Gipfel des menschlichen Daseyns zu den Seeligen emporgestiegen, daß ein kurzer Schrecken, ein schneller Schmerz ihn von den Lebendigen hinweggenommen», J. W. Goethe, *Skizzen zu einer Schilderung Winkelmanns*, in: *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert. In Briefen und Aufsätzen herausgegeben von Goethe*, Tübingen, Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1805, <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/goethe1805>>, pp. 389-470, here chapter *Hingang*, pp. 439-440.

and still less to Francesco Arcangeli. The latter has come down to us from the proceedings of the trial, almost in mockery of his surname, as «[...] fat rather than thin [...with] black lashes, dark eyes, a brownish, pockmarked face, a snub nose, a low brow [...]»³ – Cesare Lombroso, the acclaimed father of “criminal anthropology”, would probably have thought he knew why. The innocence in question is not juridical but symbolic. It is the innocence attributed to a point on the compass, to a light and sunny South as opposed to that Germanic North that Winckelmann described as «enveloped in heavy mists and fog»⁴. And it is the measure, let’s not forget, of an entire culture that flourished and prospered in the midst of a nature that was clement and teeming with life.

More than a century after the terrible death of Winckelmann in Trieste, Nietzsche published in an appendix to the 1887 edition of *The Gay Science* a series of lyrics titled *Songs of Prince Vogelfrei*. The third poem is entitled *Im Süden* («In the South») and the second strophe reads:

<p>Das weisse Meer liegt eingeschlafen, Und purpurn steht ein Segel drauf. Fels, Feigenbäume, Thurm und Hafen, Idylle rings, Geblök von Schafen, – Unschuld des Südens, nimm mich auf!⁵</p>	<p>The white sea lies fast asleep, And a purple sail rises above it. Cliffs, fig trees, tower and harbor, Idyll all around, the bleating of sheep, – Innocence of the South, take me in!</p>
--	--

Innocence of the South, embrace me, give me refuge. It is possible that Winckelmann was thinking in similar terms of his own South, Rome, when in the last letters from Vienna of May 1768 he wrote: «After some five weeks of arduous travelling we have at length reached Vienna, and I have fallen under so great a dejection, the causes of which are many, and however much I have been forc-

3 «[...] più tosto grasso che magro [...con] ciglia nere, ochio scuro, faccia brunetta alquanto vajolato, naso ripiegato, fronte bassa [...]», *L'assassinio di Winckelmann. Gli atti originali del processo criminale (1768)*, a cura di C. Pagnini, E. Bartolini, Milano, Longanesi, 1971, p. 83. If, as Winckelmann claims in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, «in the fairest portions of Italy [...] the form of the face is generally large and full, and the parts of it in harmony with each other» and if «the superiority of conformation is so manifest, that the head of the humblest man among the people might be introduced in the most dignified historical painting» (*Johann Joachim Winckelmann's Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums: nebst einer Auswahl seiner kleineren Schriften*, Berlin, Heimann, 1870, <<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/winckelmann1870>>, p. 30), then we must deduce that his assassin, at least in outward appearance, belonged to the least common physiological type under the Southern skies.

4 «[...] wo die Natur [...] in Nebeln und in schweren Dünsten eingehüllt ist [...]», *ivi*, p. 94. The passage is also taken up and commented on by Carl Justi in his biography *Winckelmann: Sein Leben, seine Werke und seine Zeitgenossen*, Leipzig, Vogel, 1866–1872, zweiter Band, § 116, p. 125.

5 F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in: id., *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, hg. von G. Colli, M. Montinari, Berlin/New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1988², vol. 3, pp. 343–651, here p. 641 [=KSA 3, 641]. On this *Lied* cf. the recent contribution of L. Crescenzi, “La mobile verità della poesia. *Principe Vogelfrei* e *Nel sud*: un confronto”, in: L. Crescenzi, C. Gentili, A. Venturelli, *Alla ricerca dei “buoni europei”: riflessioni su Nietzsche*, a cura di C. Gentili, Bologna, Pendragon, 2017, pp. 103–123.

ing myself since Augsburg to suppress it I see no other means of soothing my troubled spirit than to return to Rome»⁶. Could Winckelmann too, in that May of 1768, like Nietzsche's Prince Vogelfrei more than a century later, have been thinking: "Be thou my refuge, innocence of the South". Here we are obviously moving in the realm of conjecture. But for that matter so too do, not infrequently, critical appraisals of Thomas Mann's celebrated novella *Death in Venice* (1912) when they claim evidence for objective references to the biography and works of Winckelmann whereas they are in fact no more than the result of reminiscences and comments of the critics. Heinrich C. Seeba, for instance, certainly hit the mark when he affirmed, on the one hand, that in the post-classicist age, Winckelmann's violent death conferred on the solar picture of «the noble simplicity and quiet greatness» of the Greek masterpieces a characteristic tragic coloring and that the idea of a «marble classicism that abandons itself to forbidden pleasures and is therefore punishable by death» corresponds perfectly to the image of Winckelmann in the twentieth century⁷. It is rather more difficult, on the other hand, to establish if Aschenbach's platonic reflections on Tadzio's beauty can really be referred back to the figure of Winckelmann rather than to that of Gustav Mahler⁸. Or if, considering the fact that the final phrase of Mann's novella fits in perfectly with the reaction of public opinion to Winckelmann's unprecedented death, it is really the murder of the German archeologist in Trieste that lies behind Aschenbach's death in Venice⁹. Taking his cue from Seeba, Bernhard Böschenstein has also written that he «perceived in the death of Aschenbach the vengeance of Dionysus repressed by Winckelmann in favor of Apollo whom he himself made absolute»: the deaths of Winckelmann and Aschenbach,

6 «Nach fünf ganzer [sic] Wochen einer beschwerlichen Reise, sind wir endlich in Wien angelangt, und ich mit einer großen Schwermuth befallen, die mehr als einen Grund hat, und so viele Gewalt ich mir auch von Augspurg an, angethan habe, dieselbe zu unterdrücken, so sehe ich kein ander Mittel zu meiner Beruhigung, als nach Rom zurück zu gehen», J. J. Winckelmann, *Briefe in 4 Bänden*, hg. von W. Rehm in Verbindung mit H. Diepolder, Bd. 3, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1956, p. 388 (Letter from Vienna n. 954 of 14th May 1768 to Prince Leopold III Friedrich Franz von Anhalt-Dessau). See also the recent Italian edition of the letters: J. J. Winckelmann, *Lettere*. Edizione italiana completa, volume III: 1764-1768 a cura di M. Fancelli e J. Raspi Serra. Coordinamento scientifico di F. Cambi, Roma, Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici, 2016, p. 461-462. Cf. furthermore, the emotional comment that Goethe, after reading Winckelmann's letters from Italy, makes on the German archaeologist in a letter to Caroline and Johann Gottfried Herder written in Rome on 13th December 1786, in: J. W. Goethe, *Diari e lettere dall'Italia*, a cura di R. Venuti, Roma, Artemide, 2002, pp. 151-153.

7 H. C. Seeba, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte eines 'unhistorischen' Historikers zwischen Ästhetik und Geschichte*, in: "Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte", n. 56 (Sonderheft), 1982, pp. 168-201, here p. 181.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

in fact, would seem linked by a bond of strict «analogy»¹⁰. Along the same lines of interpretation can also be placed Lionel Gossman who, in an essay significantly entitled *Death in Trieste*, writes: «I am inclined to believe there are reminiscences of Winckelmann's destiny, conscious or unconscious, in Mann's celebrated novella *Death in Venice* of 1913 [sic!]»¹¹. Wolfgang Leppmann had already asked himself in the introduction to the second revised edition of his biography of Winckelmann (1982) if Arcangeli, «an insignificant individual, [could] have seemed in the eyes of the traveler to possess the physique of an Apollo or to be the incarnation of a young virile beauty to the extent that the death in Trieste prefigures, in many ways, the *Death in Venice*?»¹². And while Heinrich Detering in his investigation into the literary output on the taboo of homoerotic attraction from Winckelmann to Mann takes for granted the «implicit» comparison of Mann with Winckelmann in *Death in Venice*¹³, Robert Deam Tobin also highlights in his recent contribution to the *Winckelmann-Handbuch* a likewise implicit reference to the significance of Winckelmann for *Death in Venice* in that «the connection between homosexual desire and Italy is made immortal»¹⁴.

There is no doubt that the motif of the (fatal) journey to Italy, a life dedicated to the study of art and beauty, homoerotic urges and finally death at barely fifty years of age¹⁵ on the shores of the Adriatic in two cities so close to each other lead us to suppose that there is a strong underlying link between Winckelmann's biography and the fate of the protagonist in *Death in Venice*. If, however, we set out to find objective evidence to this hypothesis we discover that there is no refer-

10 B. Böschstein, *Apoll und sein Schatten. Winckelmann in der deutschen Dichtung der beiden Jahrhundertwenden*, in: *Johann Joachim Winckelmann 1717-1768*, hg. von T. W. Gaehtgens, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1986, 327-342, here p. 339.

11 L. Gossman, *Death in Trieste*, in: "Journal of European Studies", n. 22/3, 1992, pp. 207-240, here p. 214.

12 «Könnte Arcangeli bei aller Unscheinbarkeit in den Augen des Reisenden am Ende dennoch eine Apollo-Figur besessen, eine Inkarnation jungmännlicher Schönheit dargestellt haben, so daß dieser Tod in Triest in wichtigen Zügen schon den *Tod in Venedig* vorwegnimmt?», W. Leppmann, *Winckelmann. Ein Leben für Apoll. Das rätselhafte, dramatische Lebensschicksal des Mannes, der als „Vater der Archäologie“ und Begründer der deutschen Klassik Epoche machte*, Bern und München, Scherz, 1982, p. 21.

13 H. Detering, *Das offene Geheimnis. Zur literarischen Produktivität eines Tabus von Winckelmann bis zu Thomas Mann*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 1994³, p. 323.

14 R. D. Tobin, "Winckelmann – Homosexualität, schwule Kultur, Queer Theory", in: *Winckelmann-Handbuch. Leben - Werk - Wirkung*, hg. von M. Disselkamp, F. Testa, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2017, pp. 65-72, here p. 69.

15 When he was assassinated, Winckelmann was not yet 51 years old. According to Thomas Mann's calculations in his work-notes on *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach went on his last journey at the age of 53. Cf. also the commentary on Mann's *Frühe Erzählungen* edited by T. J. Reed, in: Thomas Mann, *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe. Werke-Briefe-Tagebücher*, Frankfurt a. M., S. Fischer, 2002ff., vol. 2.2, p. 493 [= GKFA 2.2, 493].

ence to Winckelmann in any work or essay by Thomas Mann prior to 1921¹⁶ that bears it out. Mann makes no reference to Winckelmann or his tragic death in Trieste in connection with the death of von Aschenbach on the lido in Venice, not even in his reply on 4th July 1920 to a letter from the poet and writer Carl Maria Weber who, more than anyone else, we might have expected to be the recipient of a confirmation of a hypothetical connection between the two events¹⁷. In this letter, in fact, Thomas Mann, in a clearly personal vein, tackles the theme of homoerotic attraction in response to Weber's reflections on his own bisexuality and his praise of *Death in Venice*. In his letter, however, Mann denies explicitly that the initial intention for the novella, inspired by the story of the love of the elderly Goethe for Ulrike von Levetzow, was to write a story with homoerotic implications¹⁸. And the name Winckelmann which appears in the letter is cited along with the names of Michelangelo, Frederick the Great, Platen and George, only insofar as he is a significant example of an illustrious «man» attracted by the «masculine» while himself devoid of any traces of «effeminacy»¹⁹. It is, moreover, significant that Terence-James Reed, editor of the historical-critical edition of the youthful work of Thomas Mann, also mentions only once the name of Winckelmann in his recent commentary on *Der Tod in Venedig*, and that only to deny that the 'Winckelmann case', despite the fact that it involves a fatal attraction for the South and homosexual urges, has anything to do with the attack of «Reiselust, ausgerechnet nach Italien»²⁰, i. e. with the sudden desire to leave for Italy that overtakes Gustav von Aschenbach in his beloved Munich one sultry afternoon at the beginning of May and leads him, two weeks later, to board a night train for Trieste²¹.

These are data that cannot be put aside. To reply to a lack of philological evidence with an invitation to «get free of the restricted and reductive viewpoint

16 The first mention appears, in fact, in his lecture on *Goethe und Tolstoj* given in Lübeck in 1921. Cf. T. Mann, *Essays II 1914-1926*, GKFA 15.1, 376-420, here p. 418.

17 T. Mann, *Briefe II 1914-1923*, GKFA 22, 347-353.

18 «[W]as ich ursprünglich erzählen wollte, war überhaupt nichts Homo-Erotisches», *ivi*, p. 349.

19 «[D]ie Erfahrung widerlegt die Behauptung, daß 'Effemination' dazu gehöre, damit es sich vom gleichen Geschlecht angezogen fühle», *ivi*, p. 350.

20 T. J. Reed, *Kommentar*, cit., GKFA 2.2, 399.

21 This is the same itinerary followed by Thomas Mann when he went on a pleasure trip in May 1911: from Munich to the islands of Brioni passing through Trieste and Pola, from where he took a ferry to the Lido in Venice (cf. T. J. Reed, *Kommentar*, cit., GKFA 2.2, 362-363). As far as the destinations Trieste-Pola-Brioni are concerned, it should be recalled that in 1909 there had appeared in *Neue Rundschau* the travel diary of Hermann Bahr *Dalmatinische Reise*. In a letter dated 24th March 1911 to his brother Heinrich, Thomas Mann explicitly refers to this work of Bahr's and declares that he wants to set off in May of that year for a «Trip to Dalmazia». Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, *Briefwechsel 1900-1949*, Frankfurt a.M., S. Fischer, 1968, pp. 94-95. Cf. in the Italian edition of Bahr's text, the essay by M. C. Foi, "Il pretesto di un viaggio in Dalmazia", in: *Viaggio in Dalmazia di Hermann Bahr*, prefazione di P. Matvejević, Trieste, MGS press, 1996, pp. 115-130.

of the *Quellenforschung*»²² ends up by being, in fact, no more than a convenient subterfuge for getting out of a situation of interpretative stalemate. The lack of verification to support a direct link between Winckelmann's "private person" and that of Mann's protagonist does not, however, mean that a reading of *Death in Venice* against the backdrop of the «Mythos Winckelmann» or «Symbol Winckelmann»²³ of the twentieth century cannot be profitable – on the contrary. All the more so if, instead of asking ourselves to what extent *Death in Venice* refers to the Winckelmann tragedy, we ask ourselves to what extent the novella subsequently contributed to the development of the «Winckelmann myth» in the course of the twentieth century up to the present day. The hypothesis, in fact, is that *Death in Venice* fed the creation of the «Winckelmann myth» to a far greater extent than it was influenced by Winckelmann's tragic death. Paradoxically, therefore, the traces in *Death in Venice* that point to Winckelmann should be investigated not so much in the already mentioned motifs that Aschenbach has in common with the archeologist and historian of ancient art assassinated in Trieste but to the importance that the call of classicism has in the novella. But the 'classicism' of Mann's novella is very far from that of Winckelmann and takes stock above all of Nietzsche's interpretation of Greek art and his criticism of the culture of *décadence*. What I propose therefore to illustrate, also by means of a distant comparison with Winckelmann, is that in *Death in Venice* the artist Aschenbach is, from the very start, the successful representative of what we might call the 'classicism of *décadence*': a 'classicism' that has by now lost all trace of the lightness and innocence of the South and this because of the particular symbolic significance that the South itself has assumed in the work of Thomas Mann. What's more, in Aschenbach's ideal of beauty, notwithstanding the references to Platonic doctrine, there is reflected above all the decadent aestheticism of the *Fin de siècle* and, finally, Tadzio is nothing more than the narcissistic projection of a writer from the North who is already in love with death even before undertaking his journey in the «liebenswürdigen Süden...»²⁴, the lovely South.

22 M. Fusillo, *La contaminazione dell'artista apollineo. Morte a Venezia e Le Baccanti*, in: "A.I.O.N., sezione germanica", n. s. XVII, 2007, pp. 13-37, here p. 22.

23 For a first account of the reception of 'Mythos Winckelmann' see: I. Kreuzer, *Studien zu Winckelmanns Aesthetik. Normativität und historisches Bewußtsein*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1959, pp. 1-15. Cf. moreover: M. Fuhrmann, *Winckelmann, ein deutsches Symbol*, in: "Neue Rundschau", n. 83, 1972, pp. 265-283; M. Kunze, *Neue Forschungen zu Winckelmann. Ein Literaturbericht* and H. Sichtermann, *Winckelmann in Italien*, in: T. W. Gaehtgens (Hg.): *Johann Joachim Winckelmann 1717-1768*, cit., pp. 11-30 and pp. 121-160; E. Osterkamp: *Winckelmann in Rom. Aspekte adressatenbezogener Selbstdarstellung*, in: C. Wiedemann (Hg.): *Rom – Paris – London. Erfahrung und Selbsterfahrung deutscher Schriftsteller und Künstler in den fremden Metropolen*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1988, pp. 203-230. Still by E. Osterkamp, see his recent contribution on the 'European dimension' of Winckelmann's biography: *Johann Joachim Winckelmann: Der Europäer*, in: *Winckelmann. Moderne Antike*, hrsg. von E. Décultot, M. Dönike, W. Holler, C. Keller, T. Valk und B. Werche. Klassik Stiftung Weimar, München, Hirmer, 2017, pp. 23-38.

24 GKFA 2.1, 507.

The Aschenbach case, therefore, strengthens the link that runs between the South and the themes of art and guilt and it is precisely this potent literary mix that merges, in its turn, and nourishes the «Mythos Winckelmann» in the twentieth century.

2.

But do we really find in *Death in Venice* «Winckelmann's ideal of beauty» inspired by the art of Ancient Greece²⁵? Does Mann's novella really re-propose, in Winckelmann's terms, a classical ideal of beauty charged with passion that has nothing to do with the conception of «classicism» as cold and passionless²⁶? It is necessary to start off again from the innocent «South» of Nietzsche's Prince Vogelfrei and to throw light on, by contrast, the particular significance that this cardinal point had for Mann right from his earliest works. We know that the latter, taking his cue from merely biographical data – his father was an entrepreneur and senator of the aristocratic bourgeoisie of the Hansestadt Lübeck and his mother was of Brazilian origin – established a rigid system of semantic oppositions between the paternal North and the maternal South. With reference to Mann's youthful work, it has been noted, not without reason, that the author is guilty of a downright «symbolic racism» that sets «the ethnicity of the Nordic, Germanic bourgeoisie with its connotations of conscientiousness, order, cleanliness, health, simplicity and candor of feelings» against the «amoral, anti-bourgeoisie 'Beauty' of the Latin races with all their attributes of sensuality, dissipation, disorder and disease [...]»²⁷. When all is said and done, this is the same polarity that Tonio Kröger, protagonist of a famous early novella by Mann, carries written in his very name. The carefree spirit of his southern maternal first name and the bourgeois conscientiousness of his surname Kröger. In such a system of counter-positions, the South not only represents the sphere of sensuality and of artistic talent but also the symbolic sphere of licentious dissipation and a culpable loss of self-control.

It goes without saying that homoerotic impulses also find here, in the lovely South, their symbolic collocation, and that in Mann the morally indifferent maternal South turns out to be really positive only when its centrifugal force is counterbalanced by the centripetal force exercised by the ethical sphere of the paternal North. Hence, when we read in *Death in Venice* that Aschenbach was the son of an «upper official in the judicature» and that his forbearers «had all

25 H. Sichtermann, *Winckelmann im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, Stendal, Winckelmann-Gesellschaft, 1991, p. 22.

26 *Ibid.*

27 G. Baioni, *Nota introduttiva*, in: T. Mann, *Tonio Kröger*, introduzione di G. Baioni; traduzione di A. R. Azzone Zweifel, Milano, Rizzoli, 1977⁵, pp. 17-36, here p. 22.

been officers, judges, departmental functionaries [...] in the service of king and state» but that, on the other hand, «swifter, more perceptive blood had in the generation before the poet's flowed into the stock from the mother's side» from which derived «the foreign traits that betrayed themselves» in the appearance of her son²⁸, we have the confirmation that the dichotomy between North and South is symbolically written into the DNA of this artist²⁹. The further gloss of the narrator, therefore, «The union of dry, conscientious officialdom and ardent, obscure impulse, produced an artist – and this particular artist»³⁰ seems almost superfluous. This is a crucial point: it is only by focusing on the kind of artist that Aschenbach is that we can, in fact, explain not so much “death in Venice” in line with the generic title of the novella, as *his* death in Venice. And for that matter the narrator himself seems to advise the reader to pay particular attention to the way of life and of thinking and feeling of the protagonist to which, significantly, he devotes two out of the five chapters of the novella – Aschenbach's fatal journey to the South actually begins only in the third chapter. The suspicion arises, therefore, that in the novella the game has already been played out long before Mann's protagonist sets foot in Venice and sees young Tadzio for the first time. The warning signs of death, in any case, are already unmistakable in Munich long before the departure of the protagonist on his last journey³¹.

The interpretations of *Death in Venice* that have dwelled on the Dionysian “contamination” of the pure Apollonian Aschenbach³² or on the “vengeance” of a repressed Dionysus in respect of Apollo³³, or on the thesis of the «Heimsuchung» proposed more than once by Thomas Mann himself – in other words the “devastating eruption” of the “Stranger God” or rather of “Eros-Dionysus” in an

28 T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter, London, Penguin, 1971, p. 8 [= DiV, 8] (translation revised where necessary). «Gustav Aschenbach [...war...] 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. [...R]ascheres, sinnlicheres Blut war der Familie in der vorigen Generation durch die Mutter des Dichters, Tochter eines böhmischen Kapellmeisters, zugekommen», GKFA 2.1, 508.

29 It should be noted, however, that while in *Tonio Kröger* the North/South polarity is reflected in the Hanseatic provenance of Tonio's father and in that of his mother Consuelo in a Country situated «very far down on the geographic map» (GKFA 2.1, 247), in *Death in Venice* the symbolic North and South is between a paternal Silesia and a maternal Bohemia (cf. GKFA 2.1, 508).

30 DiV, 8; «Die Vermählung dienstlich nüchterner Gewissenhaftigkeit mit dunkleren, feurigeren Impulsen ließ einen Künstler und diesen besonderen Künstler erstehen», GKFA 2.1, 508.

31 Cf. the red-haired man with the «broad, straight-brimmed straw hat» and a «not quite usual man's appearance» whom Aschenbach meets in the opening scene at the North Cemetery (DiV 3-4) and who represents the first disquieting emissary of death in the novella (see also T. J. Reed, *Kommentar*, GKFA 2.2, 398).

32 M. Fusillo, *op. cit.*

33 B. Böschenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

ordered, stable existence³⁴ – could easily lead one to believe that the solar ‘Apolonian’ artist Aschenbach had initially lived in a paradisiacal condition of equilibrium and grace that would open for him the road to success. And then, suddenly, in one of the writer’s rare moments of evasion, there erupts in his artistic idyll a dark, vaguely sinful passion capable of dragging him through the mud³⁵ and even bringing about his death.

And yet, the first part of the novella harks back, with almost obsessive insistence, not only to the extremely precarious state of Aschenbach’s health but also to the fact that his fame and success are the product of a programmatic «heroism [...] of weakness»³⁶, of an unbending will to «withstand»³⁷ which consists in the fact that «Aschenbach was not by nature robust – he was only called to the constant tension of his career, not actually born to it»³⁸.

It comes as no surprise that the doctors have ordered that the young Gustav, considering his uncertain state of health, should not attend school but be educated privately. Nor is it surprising that in the second chapter of the novella reference is made to his «slender shoulders»³⁹, and to a sudden illness, presumably serious, that strikes the already affirmed writer around his thirty fifth year⁴⁰. In short, it is not at all unexpected that we learn that he belongs to a lineage («Geschlecht»), «whose talent is not so much out of the common as is the physical basis on which talent relies for its fulfillment»⁴¹. But the most emblematic passage of the early pages of the novella is, perhaps, the one dedicated to the «type of hero» preferred by the writer and proposed in his works «in a variety of his individual characterizations»⁴². On a first reading, this «hero» would seem to fit per-

34 Cf. for example Mann’s reference to *Death in Venice* in his essay *On myself* of 1940: «Wieder war mein Thema der verwüstende Einbruch der Leidenschaft, die Zerstörung eines scheinbar endgültig gemeisterten Lebens, das durch den ‘fremden Gott’, durch Eros-Dionysos entwürdigt und ins Absurde gestoßen wird», T. Mann, *Gesammelte Werke in 13 Bänden*, Bd. XIII, Frankfurt a.M., S. Fischer, 1990, pp. 127-169, here p. 148.

35 «Auf welchen Wegen!», «what path was this on which he had set his foot[!]», Aschenbach himself will exclaim towards the end of the novella when he imagines the disapproval of his ancestors of the moral abjection of their illustrious descendant, GKFA 2.1, 568; DiV 59.

36 DiV, 12; «Heroismus [...] der Schwäche», GKFA 2.1, 512.

37 DiV, 10; «Durchhalten», GKFA 2.1, 509.

38 DiV, 9; «[...] seine Natur [war] von nichts weniger als robuster Verfassung und zur ständigen Anspannung nur berufen, nicht eigentlich geboren [...]», GKFA 2.1, 509.

39 DiV, 10; «zart[e] Schultern», GKFA 2.1, 510.

40 Cf. DiV 9; GKFA 2.1, 509.

41 Cf. DiV 10; «[Aschenbach] hatte doch zeitig erkennen müssen, daß er einem Geschlecht angehörte, in dem nicht das Talent, wohl aber die physische Basis eine Seltenheit war, deren das Talent zu seiner Erfüllung bedarf», GKFA 2.1, 509.

42 «[Ein] neue[r], in mannigfach individuellen Erscheinungen wiederkehrende[r] Helden-typ», GKFA 2.1, 511.

fectly within the eighteenth-century canon of the sublime. He mirrors, in fact, we read, a «manliness» («Männlichkeit») «which clenches its teeth and stands in [calm] defiance [...], [since] [f]orbearance in the face of fate, beauty constant under torture⁴³, are not merely passive. They are a positive achievement, an explicit triumph»⁴⁴. We might well wonder if the model for the Aschenbach hero is not actually inspired by the image of the Laocoon, the statue representing a man, in Winckelmann's terms «in extreme suffering striving to collect the conscious strength of his soul to bear it»⁴⁵. In reality the heroism of Aschenbach's characters has little or nothing to do with the powerful Trojan priest – at most his 'heroes of weakness' can adopt in a manneristic way only the agonized pose and an expression of suffering. By his explicit admission, his protagonists do not, in the least, aspire to the virility of the swelling muscles and straining nerves⁴⁶ of Laocoon but rather to an effete «intellectual and virginal manliness»⁴⁷ that finds in the figure of St. Sebastian the Martyr its most pregnant symbolical representation. It is precisely the deviation between the two heroes, between the Trojan priest and the Christian martyr that makes explicit the distinctive trait of Aschenbach's art in which the writer projects not only his weakness but also his strenuous desire to achieve social redemption. It is the narrator himself, in fact, who reveals what lies behind the «elegant self-possession», and «aristocratic self-command» of Aschenbach's weak heroes inspired by the figure of St. Sebastian:

Within that world of Aschenbach's creation were exhibited many phases of this theme: there was the aristocratic self-command that is eaten out within and for as long as it can conceals its biologic decline from the eyes of the world; the sere and ugly outside, hiding the embers of smouldering fire – and having power to fan them to so pure a flame as to challenge supremacy in the domain of beauty itself⁴⁸; [...] the

43 «Anmut in der Qual» (*ibid.*), i.e. «grace in the torture», are the words in the original passage; and not, in Schiller's terms, «Würde», or «dignity». For that matter, Aschenbach is also the famous author «of that impassioned discourse on the theme of Mind and Art whose ordered force and antithetic eloquence led serious critics to rank it with Schiller's *Simple and Sentimental Poetry*» (DiV 9): the reference, therefore, is to Schiller's 1795 essay and not to his 1793 essay *On Grace and Dignity*.

44 DiV, 11; «[...] die in stolzer Scham die Zähne aufeinanderbeißt und ruhig dasteht [...] [d]enn Haltung im Schicksal, Anmut in der Qual bedeutet nicht nur ein Dulden; sie ist eine aktive Leistung, ein positiver Triumph», GKFA 2.1, 511.

45 «Laocoon ist eine Natur im höchsten Schmerze, nach dem Bilde eines Mannes gemacht, der die bewußte Stärke des Geistes gegen denselben zu sammeln sucht», J. J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, Zweyter Teil, Dresden, Walther, 1764, pp. 348, <<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/winckelmann1764>>.

46 Cf. *ibid.*

47 DiV 11; «intellektuell[e] und jünglinghaft[e] Männlichkeit», GKFA 2.1, 511.

48 *Ibid.* «Blickte man hinein in diese erzählte Welt, sah man: die elegante Selbstbeherrschung, die bis zum letzten Augenblick eine innere Unterhöhnung, den biologischen Verfall vor den Augen der Welt verbirgt; die gelbe, sinnlich benachteiligte Häßlichkeit, die es vermag, ihre

pale impotence that reaches into the glowing depths of the mind and draws forth the strength to hurl an entire arrogant nation to the foot of the cross, to the feet of that impotence itself⁴⁹.

The symbol of the cross and a burning desire to overpower that derives nourishment not so much from strength as from its exact opposite, «biological decay»: just try for an instant to place such a description alongside the Laocoon and – the Laocoon of Winckelmann – to appreciate the strident contrast. It becomes evident, therefore, that it is not the priest Laocoon of ancient times but the very different modern «Priester» who is hidden behind the heroism of weakness of Aschenbach's characters. I am referring to the «asketischer Priester» of Nietzsche⁵⁰, to that ascetic by necessity, who, by appealing to his own resentment and by an occult management of the exiguous forces at his disposal succeeds in subduing the public of modern decadents:

Gustave Aschenbach was the poet-spokesman of all those who labour at the edge of exhaustion; of the overburdened, of those who are already worn out but still hold themselves upright; of all our modern moralizers of accomplishment, with stunted growth and scanty resources, who yet contrive by skilful husbanding and prodigious spasms of will to produce, at least for a while, the effect of greatness. There are many such, they are the heroes of the age. And in Aschenbach's pages they saw themselves; he justified, he exalted them, he sang their praise – and they, they were grateful, they heralded his fame⁵¹.

It cannot escape notice that, on the tracks of Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner, admiration for the Aschenbach described in *Death in Venice* assumes tones of downright religious veneration. And it is not hard to imagine that the most faithful 'adepts' of the writer are also disposed to swear to the 'classicism' of the actual

schwelende Brunst zur reinen Flamme zu entfachen, ja, sich zur Herrschaft im Reiche der Schönheit aufzuschwingen», *ibid*.

49 The last part of the passage quoted is taken from the following edition: T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, in: id., *Death in Venice and other Tales*, translated from the German by J. Neugroschel, New York, Penguin, 1998, pp. 285-366, here p. 296. «[D]ie bleiche Ohnmacht, welche aus den glühenden Tiefen des Geistes die Kraft holt, ein ganzes übermütiges Volk zu Füßen des Kreuzes, zu ihren Füßen niederzuwerfen», GKFA 2.1, 511.

50 Cf. F. Nietzsche, "Dritte Abhandlung: was bedeuten asketische Ideale?", in: id., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, KSA 5, 339-412.

51 DiV 12; «Gustav Aschenbach war der Dichter all derer, die am Rande der Erschöpfung arbeiten, der Überbürdeten, schon Aufgeriebenen, sich noch Aufrechthaltenden, all dieser Moralisten der Leistung, die, schwächling von Wuchs und spröde von Mitteln, durch Willensverrückung und kluge Verwaltung sich wenigstens eine Zeitlang die Wirkungen der Größe abgewinnen. Ihrer sind viele, sie sind die Helden des Zeitalters. Und sie alle erkannten sich wieder in seinem Werk, sie fanden sich bestätigt, erhoben, besungen darin, sie wußten ihm Dank, sie verkündeten seinen Namen», GKFA 2.1, 512.

«Erlöser», of the actual Messiah⁵². The narrator, on the contrary, observes the protagonist with ironic detachment. It is not by chance that the term «Klassizität»⁵³ occurs only once in the novella and not in praise of the artistic perfection of the 'Apollonian' von Aschenbach but to highlight the extent of what is willed, artificial and mannered in the «aristocratic purity, simplicity and harmony of form» of his prose⁵⁴. The text is unequivocal: the 'classicism' of the protagonist is nothing more than one of the many disguises whereby the decadent writer has been able to impose his art on the public at large. Noble purity, simplicity and harmony might well represent, in fact, as in the case of Winkelmann's Hellenism (and also that of Nietzsche), the stylistic point of arrival of the severe morals of measure. They could, however, also constitute – at least if we consider Nietzsche's criticism of *décadence* to be justified – a disguise by means of which an age devoid of vital impulses and measure tries to conceal, even to itself, its own constitutive impotence.

So far, what has been said occurs in the first two chapters of Thomas Mann's novella. It is only in the third chapter of *Death in Venice* that the German writer Gustav von Aschenbach, no longer in his youth, sets out on a journey towards the South in search of an exotic-unfamiliar, unrelated locale⁵⁵. He is consciously fleeing from the very ascetic ideal which he has imposed on himself for years and that has brought him fame and his yearned for social recognition⁵⁶. His fate, however, is sealed the moment he cedes to the desire to depart. The writer's death, therefore, is not linked a priori either to the outbreak of cholera in Venice or to the encounter with Tadzio, the adolescent Polish boy he falls in love with because deep down the latter resembles him more than might seem apparent at first glance. At the beginning, it is true, Aschenbach when he notices him on the beach in a group of other adolescents, is struck above all by the extraordinary beauty of the youth, the perfection of whose face reminds him predictably of «the noblest moment of Greek sculpture»⁵⁷. What «discipline, what precision of thought were expressed by the tense youthful perfection of this form!»⁵⁸, he will exclaim at a later stage and, in admiring the object of his passion he will imagine that he is embracing platonically in his gaze «beauty's very essence; form

52 F. Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*, KSA 6, 15.

53 Cf. GKFA 2.1, 514.

54 «[J]ene adelige Reinheit, Einfachheit und Ebenmäßigkeit der Formgebung, welche seinen Produkten fortan ein so sinnfälliges, ja gewolltes Gepräge der Meisterlichkeit und Klassizität verlieh?», *ibid.*

55 «Was er suchte, war das Fremdartige und Bezuglose», GKFA 2.1, 516.

56 Regarding these themes cf. also P. Panizzo, *Ästhetizismus und Demagogie. Der Dilettant in Thomas Manns Frühwerk*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2007, particularly pp. 199-214.

57 DiV 26; «Sein Antlitz [...] erinnerte an griechische Bildwerke aus edelster Zeit», GKFA 2.1, 530.

58 DiV 46; «Welch eine Zucht, welche Präzision des Gedankens war ausgedrückt in diesem gestreckten und jugendlich vollkommenen Leibe!», GKFA 2.1, 553.

as divine thought, the single and pure perfection which resides in the mind»⁵⁹. Inevitably, the celebrated words of Winckelmann in *History of Ancient Art* (1764) in describing the statue of the Apollo of Belvedere come to mind:

Among all the works of antiquity which have escaped destruction the statue of Apollo is the highest ideal of art. [...] An eternal spring, as in the happy fields of Elysium, clothes with the charms of youth the graceful manliness of ripened years, and plays with softness and tenderness about the proud shape of his limbs. Let thy spirit penetrate into the kingdom of incorporeal beauties, and strive to become a creator of a heavenly nature, in order that thy mind may be filled with beauties that are elevated above nature; for there is nothing mortal here, nothing which human necessities require⁶⁰.

But is it really possible to establish a direct equation between Tadzio and Apollo under the heading of 'divine beauty'? Once again, a comparison between Winckelmann's ideal of beauty and that of Aschenbach is revealing. If, in fact, the Apollo of the Belvedere described by Winckelmann has nothing to do with death and earthly suffering, in Thomas Mann's novella, frailty, sickness and death are not only indissolubly linked to the decadent 'beauty' of Tadzio but they are also the basis of the force of erotic attraction that the youth exercises on the protagonist. Therefore, while neither «blood-vessels» nor «sinews», but only a «heavenly essence» heats and stirs the body of the Apollo of Belvedere⁶¹, the protagonist of *Death in Venice* wonders, from the first moment he sees the youth who reminds him so strongly of the 'Greek statues of the noblest era', if, in fact, he is not «delicate»⁶², «sickly»⁶³, and he notes his anemic pallor⁶⁴, and, finally, his fragile pointed teeth devoid of the shining enamel of health⁶⁵. What is more, not only does the thought that the weak, delicate Tadzio will die before attaining old age, not fill Aschenbach with a sense of anguish (as one would expect, exclaim-

59 *Ibid.* «[I]n 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 [...]», *ibid.* Cf. also T. J. Reed's comment on the relevant passages in: GKFA 2.2, 436-437 and 504.

60 J. J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, in: *Winckelmann. Writings on art*, selected and edited by David Irwine, London, Phaidon, 1972, p. 139. «Die Statue des Apollo ist das höchste Ideal der Kunst unter allen Werken des Alterthums. [...] Ein ewiger Frühling, wie in dem glücklichen Elysien, bekleidet die reizende Männlichkeit vollkommener Jahre mit gefälliger Jugend, und spielt mit sanften Zärtlichkeiten auf dem stolzen Gebäude seiner Glieder. Gehe mit deinem Geiste in das Reich unkörperlicher Schönheiten, und versuche[,] ein Schöpfer einer himmlischen Natur zu werden, um den Geist mit Schönheiten, die sich über die Natur erheben, zu erfüllen: denn hier ist nichts Sterbliches, noch was die Menschliche Dürftigkeit erfordert», J. J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, cit., p. 392.

61 *Ibid.*; «Adern», «Sehnen», «ein Himmlischer Geist», *ibid.*

62 DiV 27; «War er leidend?», GKFA 2.1, 531.

63 DiV 36; «kränklich», GKFA 2.1, 541.

64 DiV 26; «bleich», GKFA 2.1, 530.

65 Cf. DiV 36; GKFA 2.1, 541.

ing with Schiller: «Auch das Schöne muß sterben!»)⁶⁶ but, on the contrary, he is pervaded by a sense of «satisfaction and consolation»⁶⁷. What is the narrator discreetly alluding to when he affirms that Aschenbach «did not try to account for» his peculiar feelings⁶⁸, if not to the fact that such feelings are the reflection, in Nietzsche's words, of the «morals of *décadence* » or, in other words, to the *Resentiment* and the *Schadenfreude* of a *Schlechtweggekommener*⁶⁹? It can come as no surprise, therefore, that once he has set foot in Venice, Aschenbach becomes enamored precisely of the effete Polish boy, (significantly without a father present and, hence, outside paternal control) not so much because he finds in him the «eternal spring» of the Apollo of Belvedere described by Winckelmann as because he is the personification of his own particular ideal of decadent beauty.

At this point, we should actually ask ourselves if the boy Tadzio, who in *Death in Venice* is complicit in and willingly accepts with mischievous grace the infatuation of his elderly admirer as he follows him through the winding streets of Venice in prey, we might well say, to the *disease* of his passion, is not, deep down merely the projection of the unconditioned desire for gratification of the writer himself. In other words, does the homoerotic attraction of Aschenbach to the boy not reveal, in reality, nothing more than the narcissistic love of a 'classicist' of *décadence* by now totally incapable of substituting for the seductive call of the «lovely South», the norm of the rigid work ethic that has so far helped him to make his living and made him famous in the eyes of his public – the public, that goes without saying, of the *décadence*.

3.

The analysis I propose here has followed in the steps of the sunny South of Nietzsche but I have turned the limelight instead on Thomas Mann for whom the South represented, above all, the symbolic equivalent of 'perdition', a geographic reference to the loss of oneself and moral depravation. In going back to Winckelmann, I think it is clear that the 'classicism' of Aschenbach and his 'heroism' are marked from the start by sickness and weakness and I have highlighted how it is precisely sickness and weakness that determine the ideal of beauty in the person of the sickly youth with whom he becomes narcissistically enamored.

In a posthumously published fragment written at the end of 1880, by way of upbraiding the 'classicists' of his own age, Nietzsche wrote: «As long as you find beauty in Apollo, you will have to find morals that correspond to it: that beauty

66 F. Schiller, *Nänie*, in: *Schillers Werke. Nationalausgabe. Gedichte 1799-1805*, hg. von Norbert Oellers, Zweiter Band. Teil I., Weimar, Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger Weimar, 1983, p. 326.

67 «Gefühl der Genugtuung oder Beruhigung», GKFA 2.1, 541.

68 *Ibid.*

69 F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, KSA 6, 272 and 331.

is not in accordance with Christian morality!»⁷⁰. If Nietzsche had read Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*, written just a few years after his death, he would probably have condemned the decadent 'classicism' of Aschenbach and criticized the air of 'Hellenism' and 'Christianity' that the novella exudes. And he wouldn't have been far wrong.

It is Thomas Mann himself, in fact, who confirms, in the already quoted letter to Carl Maria Weber of July 1920, that there is a very «spiritual» air about the characters in *Death in Venice* that is very «personal» to himself; something deep down that has very little to do with the idea of a solar Apollonian Hellenism: but with «the altogether non-'Greek' but rather Protestant, Puritan ('bourgeois') basic state of mind»⁷¹. Again it is Mann, in the same letter, who elaborates on the peculiar 'Protestant-Puritanical-Bourgeois' element to Weber: it is a question, he writes, of «our fundamentally mistrustful, fundamentally pessimistic relationship to passion in general»⁷². All passion, even that necessary for artistic production, implies for the bourgeois writer Mann a sense of stigma, of guilt, of original sin. That is why in his eyes the sunny South, already exalted by Nietzsche's Prince Vogelfrei, linked as it is to exuberance, to desire and to passion and art can never be innocent but must always, perforce, be guilty.

It is precisely the stigma of guilt that determines the specific 'Protestant-puritanical' coloring of 'classicism' in the last literary work of Thomas Mann before the outbreak of the First World War. And after all it is precisely the image not of the *innocence* but of the *guilt* of the South that probably constitutes the major role that Mann, thanks to the literary power with which he narrates the tragic destiny of the artist Aschenbach, has played in the construction of the «Winckelmann myth» that sprang up in the eighteenth century, gained momentum in the twentieth century and continues to this day.

70 «So lange ihr die Schönheit im Apollo findet, müßt ihr die dazu gehörige Moral suchen: jene Schönheit paßt nicht zur christlichen!», F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1880-1882*, KSA 9, 348. On Nietzsche's criticism of the reception of Winckelmann's 'classicism' in his own time cf. R. Reschke, *Der ‚hässliche‘ Apollo im Belvedere und die ‚naiserie Allemande‘. Nietzsches Angriff auf Winckelmanns Lieblingsgott*, in: "Nietzscheforschung", n. 24, 2017, pp. 59-82.

71 *Letters of Thomas Mann 1889-1955*, selected and translated by Richard and Clara Winston, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990, p. 94; «Etwas noch Geistigeres, weil Persönlicheres kam hinzu: die durchaus nicht "griechische", sondern protestantisch-puritanische ("bürgerliche") Grundverfassung [...]», GKFA 22, 349.

72 *Ibid.* «[U]nser gründlich mißtrauisches, gründlich pessimistisches Verhältnis zur Leidenschaft selbst und überhaupt», *ibid.*