

Intersecting Geographies/Intertextual Traces: Queered Desire and Imperilled Love in Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*

Gregory Graham-Smith^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

ABSTRACT

This article explores Michael Cunningham's 2010 novel, *By Nightfall* along with its suggestive fragments of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912). In an examination of two beautiful young men, Tadzio in *Death in Venice* and Mizzy in *By Nightfall*, the article investigates the dialectic between (queered) desire and death/self-dissolution. Through a deployment of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the article will interrogate the permeable boundaries between homoerotic love, beauty and death. Derrida's concept of the trace is used as indicative of the paradoxical relationship between absence and presence to investigate the imbrication of the constitutive and yet also destructive and unstable relationship between Eros and Thanatos, beauty and lack, ideality and actuality. In both texts, art and the quest for ideal beauty become fatally caught up with self-deception and sexual ambiguity, played out against the respective backdrops of early twentieth-century Venice and contemporary Manhattan. In the figures of Gustav Aschenbach and Peter Harris, the article demonstrates how they embody a threatened heterosexuality and a precarious selfhood involving, not only a courting of death, but, furthermore, an exposure of the fissures within seemingly hegemonic gendered subjectivity.

Keywords: *By Nightfall*, *Death in Venice*, intertextuality, homoeroticism, beauty, love, death, Lacan, Freud, Derrida

BACKGROUND

It might seem somewhat strange to investigate the intertextual resonances between Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice*, published in 1912, and Michael Cunningham's novel, *By Nightfall*, published virtually a century later in 2010. The former deals with an ascetic, putatively heterosexual and famous scholar, Gustav Aschenbach, who, on a trip to Venice, becomes infatuated with a young boy, Tadzio, staying at the same hotel with his family. Cunningham's novel's main character is Peter Harris, a fairly successful art dealer living in Manhattan with his wife, Rebecca. It is only when Rebecca's brother, Ethan, comes for a visit that Peter's seemingly assured heterosexuality and secure, if mundane, marriage are called into question. Peter, like Gustav Aschenbach, becomes increasingly obsessed with a handsome young man, to the point that both men are drawn to the conflation of ecstasy with their own self-annihilation. This recalls the work of the French philosopher, George Bataille who, in his book, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1962), explores the nexus between ecstasy and self-annihilation. Commenting on this contiguity, Thomas Minguy points out that, for Bataille, 'Eros is not to be understood according to the logic of selfish desire, but under the loss of selfhood – which is akin to the experience of death' (Minguy, 2017: 34). Aschenbach, aware of the dire threat of cholera sweeping through Venice, chooses to remain in the city while Tadzio and his family remain, and this brings about his death from the disease. For Peter Harris, his compulsive infatuation with Ethan is conflated with a desire to risk the destruction of his marriage and everything that has hitherto contributed to his settled, safe existence. Disease is also present in *By Nightfall*: Peter's older brother succumbed to AIDS, and the memory of his fascination with his brother's corpse while preparing it for burial becomes an introjected memory that connects with Peter's self-destructive fascination with his brother-in-law.

Cunningham's novel represents both an homage to, and a reclaiming/reconstitution of Mann's *Death in Venice* in ways which reimagine the urtext within a twenty-first-century context. Through a repetition of some of the novella's central tropes, *By Nightfall* enacts a partial reimaging of its predecessor, recognising the contiguity of

¹ University of South Africa, SOUTH AFRICA

*Corresponding Author: grahagh@unisa.ac.za

past and present and showing how the past, whilst it can never be fully recovered, still persists to inform and expand the present. Quoting Paul Valéry, Edward Casey, in his article, 'Imagination and Repetition in Literature: A Reassessment', makes the following point:

Paul Valéry, setting forth the general character of mental images, spoke of their 'indefinitely repeated regeneration,' their 'curious cyclical substitutions.' If Valéry is correct, imagination and repetition are linked intrinsically, and it would be wrong to suppose that the two phenomena are disjunctive Far from being mutually exclusive, imagination and repetition are capable of conjoint action, combining in projects in which the activity of either one alone would be insufficient. (Casey, 1975: 249)

Intertextuality, a term first coined by Julia Kristeva, establishes a productive dialogue between Mann's text and Cunningham's, one which not only constitutes a recapitulation, but an imaginative reworking, demonstrating the continuum which the literary canon represents, as well as its perpetual re-enactments and reconfigurations.

INTRODUCTION

'Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror'. Significantly, this famous line from the first of Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Duino Elegies' is used by Michael Cunningham as the epigraph to his 2010 novel, *By Nightfall*. It points to the complex imbrication of love, beauty, art and death that is apparent in both Cunningham's text and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*¹, published for the first time in book form in 1913. The brief quotation from Rilke presents an arresting paradox, one which functions like a metaphysical conceit. In this novel and novella respectively, Rilke's words are perfectly apposite. In their very brevity, they capture the horror and abjection that represent beauty's dark understudies. They gesture, too, towards the precariousness and lack that, ironically yet inevitably, inspire, underpin and threaten the experience of love, love with its vertiginous combination of *jouissance* and impending loss, the dangerous lure of its seeming perfection.

And art is seen to be as duplicitous as love. For the artist, whether the literary wordsmith, sculptor, painter or performer, is always at one remove from the artefacts or music that they create, seeking perfection, and yet riven by a sense of impending failure, of loss, and its accompanying terror, fear of the artistic abyss, by which they are both compelled to create and yet which also haemorrhages their capacity for creation. In this regard, Peter Harris, an art dealer and the central male character in *By Nightfall*, remembers the belief expressed by one of the artists he supports that 'the art we anticipate is always superior to the art we can create' (Cunningham, 2011: 70). Furthermore, Rilke's poem epitomises the elegiac notes which constitute both Mann's and Cunningham's creations, the strange and profoundly unsettling contiguity between love and death. This link is reflected both in the actual landscapes of Venice and New York, but also in the cartography of desire, whereby Peter Harris and Gustav Aschenbach's attraction to much younger men — Mizzy (Ethan) and Tadzio respectively — is replete with a combination of ecstasy and a pull towards self-annihilation. Aschenbach's reaction to arriving in Venice is telling, as it prefigures his ultimate fate as well as establishing the paradoxical correspondence between beauty and death. Aschenbach is, at first, struck by the magnificence of the city:

Thus it was that he saw it once more, that most astonishing of all landing places, that dazzling composition of fantastic architecture which the Republic presented to the admiring gaze of approaching seafarers (...) As he contemplated it all he reflected that to arrive in Venice by land, at the station, was like entering a palace by a back door: that only as he was doing, only by ship, over the high sea, should one come to this most extraordinary of cities. (Mann, 1988 [1912]: 272-273)

Less than a page further on, however, Aschenbach experiences a very different reaction:

Can there be anyone who has not had to overcome a fleeting sense of dread, a secret shudder of uneasiness, on stepping for the first time or after a long interval of years into a Venetian gondola? How strange a vehicle it is, coming down unchanged from times of old romance, and so characteristically black, the way no other thing is black except a coffin — a vehicle evoking lawless adventures in the

¹ Whilst it would have been interesting to have extended the discussion in this article to an exploration of Luchino Visconti's 1971 film of *Death in Venice* and Benjamin Britten's opera, also based on Mann's novella and first performed two years after Visconti's film, such a discussion lies outside the scope of my analysis. The same holds true for Colm Tóibín's novel, *The Magician* (2021) based on the life of Thomas Mann. For an analysis of Visconti's film adaptation of *Death in Venice*, see Hans Rudolf Vaget's article, 'Film and Literature: The Case of "Death in Venice": Luchino Visconti and Thomas Mann' (Vaget, 1980: 159–175), as well as George B. von der Lippe's 'Death in Venice in Literature and Film: Six 20th-Century Versions' (1999: 35–54).

plashing stillness of night, and still more strongly evoking death itself, the bier, the dark obsequies, the last silent journey. (273-274)

Venice, with its ambiguous beauty², mirrors Aschenbach's responses to Tadzio, whom he sees, at first, as being 'beautiful as a young god' (290) but then, moments later, he notices

that Tadzio's teeth were not as attractive as they might have been: rather jagged and pale, lacking the lustre of health and having that peculiar brittle transparency that is sometimes found in cases of anaemia. 'He's very delicate, he's sickly,' thought Aschenbach, 'he'll probably not live to grow old.' And he made no attempt to explain to himself *a certain feeling of satisfaction or relief that accompanied this thought*. (291; my italics)

In Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall*, art dealer Peter Harris and his wife are in a taxi in New York on their way to a party. A horse has been struck by a car and killed:

Peter is mesmerized by the ruined car and the horse's body. Isn't this the bitter pleasure of New York City? It's a mess, like Courbet's Paris was. It's squalid and smelly; it's harmful. It stinks of mortality. (Cunningham, 2011: 8)

As he thinks this, Peter's thoughts turn to a memory of his elder brother, Matthew, and Matthew's lover, Dan, Matthew having died of AIDS, with Dan's death from the same disease following later:

Don't we always want to see the body? While he and Dan washed Matthew's corpse (my God, it was almost twenty-five years ago), hadn't he felt a certain exhilaration he didn't mention afterward to Dan or, for that matter, to anyone, ever? (8)

Later on in the novel, once he has become infatuated with Mizzy, his brother-in-law, Peter remembers Matthew again, dying in hospital. Now Peter wonders how he managed to suss

out the fact that he was getting his first true vision of mortality, and that it was the most moving and fabulous thing he had ever seen? Hasn't he been looking for another moment ever since? (192)

The link between human corporeality and its fragility and the strange lure and beauty of death becomes a defining trope for both Cunningham's and Mann's texts and also informs the relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio, Peter and Mizzy. Both *By Nightfall* and *Death in Venice* may be seen as works of mourning, elegies for an always-already lost love. In terms of the hegemonic cultural mandate, gay desire cannot exist and therefore cannot be mourned. As Judith Butler (1995: 168) comments, such desire represents 'unlivable passion and ungrievable loss'.

Commenting on the nexus between love, the desire for possession and death, Albert Camus, in his seminal 1951 book-length essay, *L'Homme Révolté*, writes:

The desire for possession is only another form of the desire to endure; it is this that comprises the impotent delirium of love (...) On the pitiless earth where lovers are often separated in death and are always born divided, the total possession of another human being and absolute communion throughout an entire lifetime are impossible dreams (...) In the final analysis, every man (sic) devoured by the overpowering desire to endure and possess wishes that the people whom he has loved were either sterile or dead. This is real rebellion. Those who have not insisted, at least once, on the absolute virginity of human beings and of the world, who have not trembled with longing and impotence at the fact that it is impossible (...) cannot understand the realities of rebellion and its ravening desire for destruction. But the lives of others always escape us and we escape them too; they are without firm contours. Life, from this point of view, is without style. It is only an impulse which endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it. (Camus, 1951: 227-228)

Camus' words recall those from Plato's *The Symposium* dealing with the myth of androgyny, a myth which, in psychoanalytic terms, is also utilised, first by Freud and then by Jung and Lacan. In Plato's work, Aristophanes explains to the assembled company that originally there were three sexes, not only two, in the form of circular beings comprising man/man, woman/woman and man/woman. Zeus then decided that these primal beings had to be punished for their pride, and this led to his decision to

² Michael O'Neill, *et al.* refer to 'the alluring, often treacherous attraction that Venice has held for the imagination since the Renaissance' (O'Neill *et al.* 2012: 3).

cut the members of the human race in half (...) It is from this distant epoch, then, that we may date the innate love which human beings feel for one another, the love which restores us to our ancient state by attempting to weld two beings into one and to heal the wounds which humanity suffered. Each of us (...) is the mere broken tally of a man, the result of a bisection which has reduced us to a condition like that of a flat fish, and each of us is perpetually in search of his (sic) corresponding tally. (Plato, 1951: 60-62; Walter Hamilton translation)

In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud seems to be seduced by the suggestiveness which the myth of androgyny holds, to the extent that he almost suspends the objectivity of scientific observation in favour of a vision of sentimentalised heterosexual desire. That he also normalises such desire is reinforced by the fact that his reference to Plato's *Symposium* occurs under the sub-heading 'Deviations in Respect of the Sexual Object'. Freud writes:

The popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic fable which tells us how the original human beings were cut up into two halves – man and woman – and how these are always striving to unite again in love. It comes as a great surprise therefore to learn that there are men whose sexual object is a man and not a woman, and women whose sexual object is a woman and not a man. (Freud, 1953: 136)

Sexual orthodoxy and the psychic wholeness which it purportedly serves is figured within the idealised complementarity of the male/female binary, where the two terms are combined into a totalising and totalitarian rubric of normalisation. The male/male or female/female pairings are conveniently edited out of Freud's account of Plato's myth, persisting only in the form of silenced traces within the space of abjection associated with the so-called sexual deviations.

In terms of Lacan's use of the Platonic myth, Kari Weil comments that, for Lacan, the myth of androgyny 'is misleading because it marks desire for the lost totality of the self in a desire for the other' (Weil, 1992: 5). In his *Écrits: A Selection*, Lacan comments:

Aristophanes's myth pictures the pursuit of the complement for us in a moving, and misleading, way, by articulating that it is the other, one's sexual other half, that the living being seeks in love. To this mythical representation of the mystery of love, analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that he is only a sexed living being, and that he is no longer immortal. (Lacan, 1977: 205)

It is both interesting and revealing that Lacan repeatedly uses the masculine generic in his discussion of the myth, and that he refers to the fact that 'analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, *not of the sexual complement*, but of the part of *himself*, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that *he* is no longer immortal' (my italics). This would seem to betray a nostalgic longing for a time when the monolithic, explicitly male subject was complete and autonomous as the origin, the self-contained repository of sexuality – in other words, before the fall into heterosexual dividedness split the idyll of a totalisable masculinity. In terms of this valorisation of a masculine seamlessness, a transcendent, all-encompassing maleness is commensurate with immortality, a state of 'perfection' where man does not require the feminine for completion. His subsequent fall into sexual division, according to Lacan, initiates a search, not for the feminine Other as the 'sexual complement' to complete his no longer cohesive maleness, but a narcissistic movement to reclaim the transcendental male element that marked his magical self-sufficiency as a self-grounding subject. Within the paradigm of the prelapsarian sexual state sketched by Lacan, full self-presence is co-extensive with a homoerotics of the same. This is shown as a realm of ideality which predates the intervention of normative desire, where the feminine is then inserted as the means by which the loss of all-male primacy is assuaged. The female Other is now relied upon as offering a completion which is only illusory, but which is the only way in which the masculine subject can gesture towards his lost completeness. As Trevor Hope puts it, taking his cue from the work of Luce Irigaray:

the feminine becomes the occluded point of the materialization and reproduction of a symbolic regime within which women are permitted to figure, to 'count', only insofar as they are insistently appropriated back into a paternal genealogy – 'homologated' once again into the discourse of the Same. (Hope, 1994: 170)

Earlier on, in his article entitled 'Sexual Indifference and the Homosexual Male Imaginary', Hope comments:

in an interpretive move clearly intended to dereify the workings of the profoundly phallogocentric logic at the heart of Western culture, theorists [such as Craig Owens, Mandy Merck and Luce Irigaray] have often gestured toward the male homoeroticism that lies deeply repressed within the workings of an ostensibly heterosexual symbolic. The operations of erasure, foreclosure, disavowal, metaphorization,

and specularization that have grounded the ‘sexual contract’ of Western society in the refusal of positive admittance to the feminine have been read as signs of an archaic male pact, a solidarity and primal bond that underlies and underpins the fraudulent pretense of heterosexual relations. This logically, mythologically, and prehistorically prior male solidarity that apparently violently seized and monopolized the symbolic at the site of its very origin (...) has been understood as necessarily charged with homosexual desire. (Hope, 169)

When viewed against Hope’s insights, Lacan’s contention that ‘it is through the lure that the sexed living being is induced into his sexual realization’ (Lacan, 1977: 205) gains added significance. The word ‘lure’ refers to ‘[a]n apparatus used by falconers to recall their hawks’ and, by extension, may be applied to ‘[s]omething which allures, entices, or tempts’ (*OED*). The feminine Other is the lure by which the male subject is recalled from his false dream of recovering the all-inclusiveness of his archaic homoerotic past. The fact that he has to be ‘*induced* into his sexual realization’ (my italics) points to the innate precariousness of heterosexual subject formation and to the ultimate tenuousness of the Lacanian Symbolic order. Far from attaining any sort of autonomy within this order, the feminine is merely co-opted as a secondary, retroactive defensive formation by which the male subject is prevailed upon to relinquish the phantasm of a primal homosexual (man)tra.

DOUBLE TAKES

In light of this context, I should now like to examine a central scene in Cunningham’s *By Nightfall*, which acts as an interesting re-imagining of the Lacanian psychoanalytic script. Peter Harris, seemingly happily married to his wife, Rebecca, by whom he has a daughter who is away in Boston, has been informed by his wife that her brother, Mizzy (Ethan), who has a long history with drug addiction, is coming to stay with them for a while, the exact date of his arrival unknown. Returning home from his art gallery one afternoon, Peter enters the New York loft where he and his wife live:

Peter walks through the bedroom to the bathroom. There she is, the pink blur of her behind the frosted glass shower door. There’s mortality in the air (...) but there’s this, too. Rebecca taking a shower, the vanity mirror fogged by steam, the bathroom smelling of soap and that other undersmell Peter can only call *clean*.

He opens the shower door.

Rebecca is young again. She stands in the stall facing away from Peter, her hair short, her back strong and straight from swimming; she is half hidden by steam and for an instant it all makes impossible sense (...) Rebecca in the shower sluicing away the last twenty years, a girl again.

She turns, surprised.

It isn’t Rebecca. It’s Mizzy. It’s the Mistake.

(...)

‘Hey’, [Mizzy] says cordially to Peter. Being seen naked by Peter does not, apparently, render Mizzy even remotely uncomfortable.

‘Hey’, Peter answers. ‘Sorry’.

He steps back, closes the shower door (...) With the shower door closed Peter can only see the fleshy pink silhouette, and although Peter knows it’s Mizzy (Ethan) he finds himself pausing, thinking of the young Rebecca (striding into the surf, slipping out of a white cotton dress, standing on the balcony of that cheap hotel in Zurich), until he realizes he’s lingered there a second or two longer than he should – Mizzy, don’t get the wrong idea – and he turns to leave. As he does he catches sight of his own ghostly image, the blur of him, skating across the steam-fogged mirror. (Cunningham, 2011: 40-41)

The incident described here provides a subversive take on Lacan’s psychosexual triad of the Real, the Imaginary (Mirror stage) and the Symbolic. The scopophilia of the Imaginary, where the mirror provides an illusion of a subject’s fullness of being is, of course, as Lacan makes clear, based on a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). The frosted glass of the shower door, as a metonymic replacement for the mirror, literalises this moment of flawed cognition in its blurring of the figure beyond it. Not only this, once Peter actually enters the shower, the image he views is a

palimpsest of gender – Rebecca superimposed upon Mizzy. Significantly, later on in the novel, Peter thinks of Mizzy as ‘[Rebecca] in boy-drag’ (Cunningham, 2011: 117). The event accomplishes a scrambling of gender: Peter’s actual double-take once he realises that the figure in the shower is his brother-in-law, is paralleled by a gendered double-cross, a chiasmic criss-crossing of gender lines. The description also recalls Roland Barthes’ concept in *Camera Lucida*, his study of photography and work of mourning for his late mother, of the punctum which, as Andy Grundberg (1999: 34) elucidates, ‘breaks through [a] complacency of response, provoking a more intense and personal reaction in the viewer’. As Barthes puts it, it is this ‘accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’. Returning to the extract from the novel quoted earlier, as Peter withdraws from the bathroom, he ‘catches sight of his own ghostly image, the blur of him, skating across the steam-fogged mirror’. The ghost, the blurring, in their conjuring up of insubstantiality and death, foreshadow what comes later in the novel, as the complacency of Peter’s seemingly assured heterosexual identity is put in question. Significantly, near the end of the novel, Peter’s wife, Rebecca, suddenly questions their marriage and its ongoing viability, as well as her success as a mother:

I’m a rotten mother. To everybody. I couldn’t help Bea, I couldn’t help Mizzy. I’m just a child who’s learned how to impersonate an adult’. (Cunningham, 2011: 234)

The word ‘impersonate’ is significant as it points to Rebecca’s sense that her roles as mother, sister and adult are simply failed performances, mere approximations of a reality that has passed as authentic. This recalls Judith Butler’s work on drag, where she shows how transvestism reinforces the fact that both hegemonic femininity and masculinity are fundamentally dependent upon role-playing, where the notion of playing suggests an underlying artifice at the very heart of the seeming inviolability of sex roles, and where the concept of roles hints at the expendability of one role and the possibility of appropriating another. As Butler puts it in her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993: 231), drag is able to serve

a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure.

Taking this idea further, Peter’s attraction to his brother-in-law exposes his seemingly unassailable heterosexuality as an impersonation. Far from being monolithic and impermeable, his role as a straight man is just that, an act that has shown its innate precariousness, its susceptibility to a queering that threatens to undo his assured accession to the validating social codes of the Lacanian Symbolic.

His growing obsession with Mizzy, like Aschenbach’s with Tadzio in *Death in Venice*, leads Peter to blur the boundaries between feeling an overwhelming need to embrace a new intensity of being which desire for his brother-in-law represents, and a wilful, dangerous courting of his own self-destruction.³ In this way, love is finally performed in the gap of its own undoing, where both love and beauty can only truly be realised through death.

In a scene from *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach, after realising that the threat of cholera in the city is very real, has a terrible dream, one which also envisages the dark dialectic between desire, abjection and self-dissolution:

Was it not also enticing him, the dreamer who experienced all this while struggling not to, enticing him with shameless insistence to the feast and frenzy of the uttermost surrender? Great was his loathing, great his fear, honorable his effort of will to defend to the last what was his and protect it against the Stranger, against the enemy of the composed and dignified intellect. But the noise, the howling grew louder, with the echoing cliffs reiterating it: it increased beyond measure, swelled up to an enrapturing madness (...) With foaming mouths they raged, they roused each other with lewd gestures and licentious hands, laughing and moaning they thrust the prods into each other’s flesh and licked the blood from each other’s limbs. But the dreamer now was with them and in them, he belonged to the Stranger-God. Yes, they were himself as they flung themselves, tearing and slaying, on the animals and devoured steaming gobbets of flesh, they were himself as an orgy of limitless coupling, in homage to the god, began on the trampled, mossy ground. And his very soul savored the lascivious delirium of annihilation.⁴ (Mann, 1912: 334-335)

³ Significantly, in an essay, Mann’s own pull towards death is reflected in his description of himself as ‘a chronicler and analyst of decadence, a lover of the pathological, a lover of death, an aesthete with a proclivity toward the abyss’ (Mann in Luke, 1988: xvii).

⁴ As Tom Hayes and Lee Quinby (1989: 171) point out, ‘the spiritualized male homoerotic desire of the *Phaedrus* is parodied in the primitive physicality of Aschenbach’s Dionysian vision’.

For all his former asceticism and intellectual rigour, Aschenbach's orgiastic, bacchanalian dream reflects a complete unmaking of and alienation from his former self, whereby the purity of love and the intense rationality which characterizes his previously defining role as artist/author become radically abject, coterminous with what he sees as a deathly moral decay. The pornographic depiction of sexual frenzy contrasts starkly with his etherealisation of Tadzio. In the very gap between these different impulses lies his impossible love for the object of his obsession, who compels desire and yet remains always beyond its consummation.

In her article entitled 'Approaching Abjection', under a sub-heading 'Neither Subject nor Object', Julia Kristeva writes:

There is, in abjection, one of those violent and obscure revolts of being against that which threatens it and which seems to it to come from an outside or an exorbitant inside; something which is thrown next to the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It is there, very close, but unassimilable. It solicits, disturbs, fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Fearful, it turns away. Sickened, it rejects. It is protected from the vileness by an absolute of which it is proud, to which it is attached. But at the same time, even so, the *élan*, this spasm, this leap, is attracted towards an elsewhere as much tempting as it is condemned. Tirelessly, like a wild boomerang, a pole of attraction and repulsion draws the one inhabited literally out of himself. (Kristeva, 1982: 125)

Like Aschenbach, Peter is drawn to an almost self-negating abjection. The latter's safely predictable, if unremarkable marriage to his wife, Rebecca, represents 'the possible, (...) the thinkable', something which protects rather than disturbs the familiar contours of his life before his attraction to Mizzy. For both Peter and Aschenbach, desire, although illusory, existing dangerously beyond its consummation and fulfilment, is nevertheless persistent, threatening to unravel the self, ceaselessly torn between 'attraction and repulsion'.

At a stage in *By Nightfall*, Peter is suddenly struck by the fact that:

He wants, he needs, to do the immoral, irresponsible thing. He wants to let this boy court his own destruction. He wants to commit that cruelty. Or (kinder, gentler version) he doesn't want to reconfirm his allegiance to the realm of the sensible, all the good people who take responsibility (...) He wants, for at least a little while, to live in that other, darker world — Blake's London, Courbet's Paris; raucous, unsanitary places where good behavior was the province of decent, ordinary people (...) Here, practically cupped in Peter's hands, is youth, wanton and self-immolating and scared to death; here is Matthew fucking half the men in New York; here is the Rebecca who no longer exists. Here is the terrible, cleansing fire. Peter has been too long in mourning, for the people who've disappeared, for the sense of dangerous inspiration his life refuses to provide. So, yes, he'll do it, yes. He and Mizzy will not, cannot, lock lips again, but he'll see where this takes him, this dreadful fascination, this chance (if 'chance' is the word for it) to upend his own life. (Cunningham, 202)

In a reminder of the earlier quotation from Camus, Peter's first perverse wish is for Mizzy to be destroyed: in death, both Mizzy's beauty and Peter's attraction to him will be preserved, captured forever like a work of art. At one point in the novel, Peter muses that 'Youth is the only sexy tragedy. It's James Dean jumping into his Porsche Spyder, it's Marilyn heading off to bed' (120). Just after this, Peter is aware of 'the glamour of self-destruction' (125). Allowing himself to act on his impulses, his growing obsession with his wife's brother would be tantamount to an act of suicide, resulting in the destruction of his marriage and professional reputation. In an attempt to displace his feelings for Mizzy, Peter indulges in a fantasy:

he and Mizzy in a house somewhere, maybe it's Greece (...) reading together, just that, no sex, they'd manage sex with whomever, they'd be platonic lovers, faux father and son, without the rancor of lovers or the fury of family. (206)

The reference to Greece and Plato, with its ancient roots in an older man educating a much younger one in the ways of life and sex⁵ recalls Plato's *Symposium* mentioned earlier. Peter's fantasy is just that, an imagined and illusory etherealisation of reality, a mental 'snapshot' by which he can confine and contain his desire. And yet, like all fantasy, his is illusory, impossible, a self-created myth. Like the Platonic and Lacanian script based on a perpetual desire for the other which, although endlessly repeated, can never be attained, Peter's projected future is one which is hopelessly contingent. Interestingly, David Luke, in his introduction to the Bantam Classic edition of *Death in Venice* used in this article, makes the following observation:

⁵ For an excellent discussion of gay male sex in ancient Greece, see David Halperin's seminal 1990 study *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love*. London: Routledge.

in treating a homosexual theme, it was natural that Mann should seek to associate it strongly with a pre-Christian world which looked upon homosexuality as normal; and his notebooks attest that while working on *Death in Venice* he not only refreshed his memories of Homer but, above all, immersed himself in the Platonic theory of love. He read especially the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* and Plutarch's *Erotikus* (...) His understanding of the theory (for purposes of the Aschenbach project and as transmitted through Aschenbach) has a strongly monistic and paganizing, aesthetic and sensuous tendency; in fact it has been shown that Mann's use of the material seems to aim at a synthesis of Platonic doctrine and pagan mythological elements. He evidently understood Plato's perception of the profound continuity between 'Eros' and the 'higher' intellectual or spiritual faculties — a perception which of course amounts to a transfiguration of sexual love (...) (Luke, 1988: xlvi)

The notion of 'transfiguration' is important: Mann's own homosexual leanings⁶, which are transferred onto Aschenbach, his fictional protagonist, are, in this way, transfigured through the prism of classical history, and thus safely intellectualised⁷, although always shadowed by a sublimated eroticism. The role of Aschenbach as a type of stand-in for his author, is paradoxically both fictional and autobiographical⁸, predicated upon the open/closed secret of Mann's own lived experience, enjoying the normative filiations of heterosexual marriage and fatherhood, whilst hiding in plain sight.⁹

Peter's infatuation with Mizzy eventually results in a spontaneous kiss on the beach overlooked by Peter's client, Carole Potter's home. Their kiss recalls that between Sally Seton and Mrs Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's eponymous novel, which forms the template for Cunningham's 1998 text, *The Hours*. Commenting on the significance of the kiss in *Mrs Dalloway* and those in *The Hours*, Kate Haffey writes:

These moments hold so much power not because they are same-sex kisses (...) but because they exist outside an imaginable, scripted future. The queer moment disrupts not only hetero-normative time but also homo-normative time. It complicates those temporalities that naturalize the development through conventional life stages. (Haffey, 2010: 152)

Peter and Mizzy's first and only kiss represents a sexual and temporal crisis for Peter who has, in his marriage to his wife, Rebecca, which resulted in the birth of their daughter, Bea, attained what Lee Edelman (2004: 2) refers to as the 'reproductive futurism' which typifies the future-oriented, linear goal of heterosexuality. The reality of the kiss takes Peter's present, seemingly impossible erotic fantasy of a relationship with Mizzy into the realm of the possible. It also represents a moment of temporal rupture which causes a hiatus where present and future become confused. As Neville Hoad points out:

The language of the *telos* of evolution is rife in the writings by, for and about homosexuals: in the manifestos of people so self-identified, in the sexological, psychoanalytic and anthropological documents about them, and in artistic and literary representations. At every turn, one encounters terms of 'arrest', 'retardation', 'decadence' and 'degeneration'. (Hoad, 2010: 135-136)

Hoad goes on to quote Freud's (in)famous letter to the American mother of a gay son, where Freud writes of homosexuality that:

we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain *arrest* of sexual development. (Freud, in Hoad, 2010: 141)

Peter's sexuality embodies a veering off, a queering and implicit querying of the normative path of his previously unquestioned heterosexuality. Continuing the position (or relative lack thereof) of the figure of the homosexual in Freudian psychoanalysis, Diana Fuss comments:

⁶ Mann acknowledges his homosexual impulses in his diary entries. For an investigation of these, see Anthony Heilbut (1996), *Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁷ As James M. Saslow points out in his 1988 article "A Veil of Ice between My Heart and the Fire": Michelangelo's Sexual Identity and Early Modern Constructs of Homosexuality' (*Genders* 2: 135–148), idealised male-male love in the Renaissance, before the term 'homosexual' was first coined, was 'still officially modeled on such classical exemplars as Socrates' chaste love for Alcibiades. In this taxonomy, male-male love is understood in terms of classical *amicitia*. Its goal is fundamentally spiritual (...) it is anagogic to the higher love of the (male) godhead' (Saslow 1988: 82).

⁸ As Philip Kitcher (2013: 19) puts it: in his novella, Mann 'placed himself on trial' and his text reveals 'his painful self-exposure'.

⁹ As David Luke explains in his introduction to the novel, Mann, his wife and brother spent time in Venice in May 1911. Here, Mann became infatuated by a Polish boy, Wladyslaw, Baron Moes, upon whom the fictional Tadzio is modelled. Wladyslaw 'was on holiday at the Lido in May 1911 with his mother and three sisters and (...) was in those years by all accounts exceptionally beautiful (...) Mann's widow confirmed that her husband had been "fascinated" by him' (Luke, 1988: xliv).

In Freud's reading of identification and desire, homosexual desire is not even, properly speaking, desire. Rather homosexuality represents an instance of identification gone awry — identification in overdrive (or, one might say, oral drive). This overdrive is also implicitly a death drive: *cadere* (Latin for 'to fall') etymologically conjures cadavers. For Freud every fall into homosexuality is *inherently suicidal* since the 'retreat' from oedipality entails not only the loss of desire but the loss of a fundamental relation to the world into which desire permits entry — the world of sociality, sexuality, and subjectivity. (Fuss, 1993: 19)

The earlier reference in this article to Peter deriving a 'certain exhilaration' when washing his dead brother, Matthew's, corpse can be seen, in Freudian terms, as indicating Peter's 'regression' and, in a Lacanian sense, as existing in a liminal area between the Symbolic and the Real. Drawing again on Judith Butler's work, this demonstrates that, even for heterosexual men, their accession to the culturally mandated realm of the Symbolic, what Fuss refers to above as 'the world of sociality, sexuality, and subjectivity' can be precarious and is a position that no one can ever fully inhabit. The fact that Peter's gay brother died from AIDS, which, for many years, was profoundly pathologised as 'the gay disease', further underscores Peter's attraction to the abject and the world of non-being, the void. For Aschenbach, too, there is a pull towards death: despite the threat posed by the cholera epidemic, he refuses to surrender Tadzio as love object. As Jonathan Dollimore (1998: 276) notes, for both Mann and, by extension, Aschenbach, 'genius in the grip of disease nurtures an energy at once creative and lethal, and generates the paradox that disease and death are only life manifested in its most vigorous form. Disease — and in this sense love, or at least infatuation is a disease — effects an unbinding which energizes even as it destroys'.

There is another important scene in *By Nightfall*, which again intersects with Cunningham's novel, *The Hours*. This scene is strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's attraction to 'moments of being', which became the title of her posthumously published collection of essays that first appeared in 1972. Shuli Barzilai writes that:

Like Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and [James] Joyce's 'epiphanies', the Woolfian revelation or 'moment of being' creates a pocket of stability in the midst of (...) vicissitudes (...) Mutable and fugitive impressions are momentarily arrested, fixed and grasped. Further, it is noteworthy that, in Woolf's writings, these epiphanic moments (...) are most frequently granted during and through ordinary, even banal experience. (Barzilai, 1988: 204-205)

The 'moment of being' in *By Nightfall* occurs on an 'ordinary' Sunday afternoon when Peter, his brother, Matthew, their parents and Joanna (the latter a friend of Matthew's and Peter's putative girlfriend) are on the annual family vacation on Mackinac Island in Michigan. Peter remembers watching Matthew and Joanna standing in the lake:

The two of them stand in the blue-black water with their backs to Peter, looking out at the milky haze of the horizon, and as Peter watches from the sand he is taken by a sea-swell of feeling, utterly unexpected, a sensation that starts in his bowels and fluoresces through his body, dizzying, giddy. It's not lust, not precisely lust, though it has lust in it. It's a pure, thrilling, and slightly terrifying apprehension of what he will later call beauty, though the word is insufficient. It's a tingling sense of divine presence, of the unspeakable perfection of everything that exists now and will exist in the future, embodied by Joanna and his brother (...) Time fails (...) (Cunningham, 2011: 110)

That Peter is 'taken by a sea-swell of feeling' suggests an overwhelming *jouissance*, a sexual surrender, one which is in excess of naming and even of beauty itself. The suspension of time ("Time fails") carries another reminder of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. The memory of the episode at the lake, where time is almost divinely stilled, is like a photograph. Barthes comments on the photograph that it

represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer knows this very well, and himself fears (...) this death in which his gesture will embalm me. (Barthes, 1981: 4-5)

The photograph, like the memory of the scene at the lake, is both embodied and disembodied: the person 'captured' in the photograph 'neither subject nor object', both absent and present, an about-to-be objectified subject. At the heart of memory and the photograph is a void, an absence, a death, and yet this very void is nevertheless also an informing lack, a paradoxical and indefinable presence. The photograph is like a Derridean trace, bearing within

itself the instability between absence and presence, an instability which still conveys meaning¹⁰. As Derrida puts it in *Writing and Difference*:

The trace is the erasure of selfhood and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance. (Derrida, 2003: 289)

And yet the very threat of disappearance has a strangely powerful agency: the reference to ‘the disappearance of its disappearance’ sets up a chain of repetition by which the irremediability of disappearance is, paradoxically, to use Derrida’s concept of *différance* (to differ and to defer), both riven by a difference (an absence) from itself and yet also present *sous rature* (under erasure), both deleted and yet still visible, its crossing out perpetually deferred. As Alexandra Fanghanel comments:

The erasure does not only mark that which is beyond the realm of articulation ... it marks, quite simply, the absence of any originary presence at all. (Fanghanel, 2014: 347)

CONCLUSION

Founded on Lacanian lack, the need for completion by anOther which is perpetually elusive and yet perpetually compelling, the desire experienced by Peter Harris and Aschenbach for beautiful boys is placed under erasure – there but not there, present but absent, always beyond the realm of adequate articulation or fulfilment.

As Michael Downs notes in relation to the Lacanian *objet petit a*:

Strictly speaking, *objet petit a* is not some positive reality, but, instead, is a void, an empty spot, a position of lack. Yet it’s a void that, for the subject, is like a thing or a missing part that has its own substantial reality. As paradoxical as it sounds, *objet petit a* is a positive negativity, a ‘substantial’ void, a reified emptiness. (Downs, 2019: n. p.)

By Nightfall finally shows how Peter has consistently objectified Mizzy: as Peter’s fantasy, a product of Peter’s own lack, Mizzy has been denied full subjecthood, deprived of a self. And Mizzy’s own manipulativeness and innate narcissism mean that Peter is not able fully to trust Mizzy’s eventual declaration of love for him. When Peter tells Uta, his assistant at the gallery he owns, about his relationship with Mizzy, he says: ‘He was just fucking with me’, and goes on to think that:

he, Peter, is a comic character. How had it happened that he’d imagined, even briefly, otherwise? He’s the capering fool on whom others play tricks. He’s an easy mark, all vanity and pomade. (Cunningham, 2011: 224)

It is after this, before he has confessed what happened between him and Mizzy to Rebecca, that it is revealed that he has been doubly duped. At the end of the novel, Peter discovers that his marriage to Rebecca has been yet another illusion, an insubstantial travesty sustained only by the thin underpinnings of domestic rituals and their repetition. It carries a reminder of Lacan’s famous comment in his Seminar XII that ‘Love is to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it’ (Lacan, 1965: 191). Despite the seeming riddling (il)logic of this statement, it actually makes a profound comment on love: one is, according to the Lacanian psychoanalytic script and Plato’s *Symposium*, never fully in possession of either the love one feels for another or of love itself. And the love one gives is not what one’s love object wants in the sense that their innate lack, like one’s own, makes love an illusion, perpetually sought but always deferred, never completely realised. It is this insubstantiality and evanescence of love that informs Peter’s final thoughts in the novel:

Here is Peter’s art, then. Here is his life (though his wife may leave him, though he’s faltered in so many ways). Here is a woman who keeps changing and changing, impossible to cast in metal because she’s already not who she was when he walked through the door, nor who she’ll be in ten minutes from now. (237-238)

For both Peter Harris and Gustav Aschenbach, their love for the beautiful Mizzy and Tadzio has pointed to an irrevocable truth — that love is based on a perpetual quest and also on perpetual failure, demonstrating the final incommensurability between love and a seductive, ultimately elusive grace.

¹⁰ As Marianne Hirsch (2012: 84) puts it, photographs ‘enable us in the present, not only to see and to touch that past (...) but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’. The retrospective irony of every photograph (...) consists precisely in the simultaneity of this effort and the consciousness of its impossibility’.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1982). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography* (translated by R. Howard). London: Jonathan Cape.
- Barzilai, S. (1988). Virginia Woolf's pursuit of truth: 'Monday or Tuesday', 'Moments of Being' and 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass'. *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 18(3), 199–210.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1995). Melancholy gender — Refused identification. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 5(2), 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481889509539059>
- Camus, A. [1951] (1992). *The Rebel: An Essay on man in revolt* (translated by A. Bower). London: Vintage.
- Casey, E. (1975). Imagination and repetition in literature: A reassessment. *Yale French Studies*, 52, 249–267. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929757>
- Cunningham, M. (2011). *By Nightfall*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Derrida, J. (2003). *Writing and Difference* (translated by A. Bass). London: Routledge.
- Dollimore, J. (1998). *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Downs, M. (2019). Lacan's concept of the object-cause of desire (*objet petit a*), *The Dangerous Maybe blog*, 7 February 2019. Available at: <https://thedangerousmaybe.medium.com/lacans-concept-of-the-object-cause-of-desire-objet-petit-a-bd17b8f84e69.html>. (Accessed 12 May 2022).
- Edelman, E. (2004). *No Future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpkpp.7>
- Fanghanel, A. (2014). Approaching/departure: effacement, erasure and 'undoing' the fear of crime. *Cultural Geographies*, 21(3), 343–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013495643>
- Freud, S. (1953). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (translated by J. Strachey). Vol. VII of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Fuss, D. (1993). Freud's fallen women: Identification, desire, and 'A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman'. *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 6(1), 1–23.
- Grundberg, A. (1999). *Crisis of the Real: Writings on photography since 1974*. New York: New York Aperture Foundation.
- Haffey, K. (2010). Exquisite moments and the temporality of the kiss in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Hours*. *Narrative*, 18(2), 137–162. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0043>
- Halperin, D. (1990). *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And other essays on Greek love*. London: Routledge.
- Hayes, T. and Quinby, L. (1989). The aporia of bourgeois art: Desire in Thomas Mann's 'Death in Venice'. *Criticism*, 31(2), 159–177.
- Heilbut, A. (1996). *Thomas Mann: Eros and literature*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hirsch, M. (2012). *Writing on Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hoad, N. (2010). Arrested development or the queerness of savages: Resisting evolutionary narratives of difference. *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy*, 3(2), 133–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790050115277>
- Hope, T. (1994). Sexual indifference and the homosexual male imaginary. *Diacritics*, 24(2), 169–183. <https://doi.org/10.2307/465170>
- Kristeva, J. (1982). Approaching abjection. *Oxford Literary Review*, 5(1–2), 125–149. <https://doi.org/10.3366/olr.1982.009>
- Lacan, J. (1965). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Crucial problems for psychoanalysis 1964-1965*. Translated by Cormac Gallagher. Available at: <https://esource.dbs.ie/bitstream/handle/10788/161/Book-12-Crucial-problems-for-psychoanalysis.pdf?sequence=1.html>. (Accessed 6 June 2022).
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A selection* (translated by A. Sheridan). London: Tavistock Publications.
- Mann, T. [1912] (1988). *Death in Venice* (translated by D. Luke). New York: Bantam Books.
- O'Neill, M., Sandy, M. and Wootton, S. (eds). (2012). *Venice and the Cultural Imagination: 'This strange dream upon the water'*. London: Pickering and Chatto.
- Plato. (1951). *The Symposium* (translated by W. Hamilton). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Saslow, J. M. (1988). 'A veil of ice between my heart and the fire': Michelangelo's sexual identity and early modern constructs of homosexuality. *Genders*, 2, 135–148.
- Tóibín, C. (2021). *The Magician*. London: Viking Press.
- Vaget, H. R. (1980). Film and literature: The case of 'Death in Venice': Luchino Visconti and Thomas Mann. *The German Quarterly*, 53(2), 159–175. <https://doi.org/10.2307/405628>
- Von der Lippe, B. (1999). *Death in Venice* in literature and film: Six 20th-century versions. *Mosaic*, 32(1), 35–54.
- Weil, K. (1992). *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Citation: Graham-Smith, G. (2023). Intersecting Geographies/Intertextual Traces: Queered Desire and Imperilled Love in Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 7(2), 23. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/13551>

Copyright © 2023 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.