

Platonic Seduction: *The Phaedrus* and *Tod in Venedig*

Language: English

The literature on the classical influence on Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* is vast, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to Plato, especially the erotic aspects of his dialogues. We know that Mann carefully read and annotated the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* (and also Plutarch's *Erotikos*). Many critics see *Tod* as one of the most profound engagements with Platonic philosophy (plus the Nietzschean dichotomy of Dionysus vs. Apollo), but it also marks a turning point. Mann's novella, ironically drawing on the full brunt of the sparkling *Phaedrus* and its intense seduction, is a monologue and represents a total failure of Platonic intercourse. Gustav von Aschenbach loves (*lieben*) Tadzio, but Tadzio, if at all, flirts with him (moreover, Tadzio is tantalizingly silent).

Having done extensive research in the Thomas Mann Archives in Zürich, I want to offer new insights. For example, as has often been noted, Aschenbach sees the beautiful Polish boy's physical appearance like a statue ("hold zur Anbetung aufgerichtet"), an association Plato would have never condoned. Mann may actually have fallen victim to a mistranslation of a crucial passage (he knew no Greek). I do not think that the Greek text of *Phaedrus* 251a warrants Rudolf Kassner's translation as "würde er dem Geliebten opfern – gleichwie vor einer Bildsäule, gleichwie einem Gotte" (in Mann's notes and almost verbatim in the text: "und den verehrt, der die Schönheit hat, ja, ihm opfern würde wie einer Bildsäule"), for *agalma* means the more or less animate *image* of a god rather than the petrified *statue* of a god.

Furthermore, several symbols deserve greater attention in a Platonic context: the various strangers as Socratic seducers; the lost luggage and its "demonic" significance; Tadzio's brittle teeth and the failure of philosophy; the vicissitudes of Tadzio as "der Schöne," "das Schöne," and "das Schöne selbst"; Aschenbach's "kreißen" (often misquoted as "kreisen") and spiritual pregnancy; Aschenbach and Aristophanes as two halves that never complete; Dionysian elusive ecstasy and vicarious sex; and Tadzio's role as *eromenos* vis-à-vis his *erastes*' expectations.

Finally, the strangest thing is that Aschenbach, never at a loss for Platonic quotations, fails to refer to the erotically most outstanding speech in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato seems to condone sexual desire, even on the part of the *eromenos*, where *eros* is reciprocated, where the lover's soul literally ejaculates: "it looks upon the beauty of the boy and takes in the stream of particles flowing into it from his beauty [and] when it is watered and warmed by this, then all its pain subsides and is replaced by joy." As Mann would have read in Kassner's translation: "sie werden selig ihren Weg vereint eilen und in der Fülle der Zeit beflügelt werden und dieselben Flügel um der Liebe willen haben, denn auch sie haben geliebt, auch sie." Could Mann not imagine such a possibility? We will have to go beyond *Tod* to find out Mann's stand on erotic reciprocity.

Unlike the previous generation's attitudes toward Platonic love (Oscar Wilde's "the love that dare not speak its name," Benjamin Jowett's heterosexualized translations, John Addington Symonds' exaltation of superior spiritual begetting, Edward Carpenter's erotic democracy...), Mann offers a unique moment in the reception of classical antiquity by actually transferring *Knabenliebe* into a modern context: Socrates at the Lido.

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