MANN AND HESSE:
PORTRAYING A PLATONIC IDEA OF ART AND LOVE

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MANN AND HESSE:
PORTRAYING A PLATONIC IDEA OF ART AND LOVE

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Abstract

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MANN AND HESSE:
PORTRAYING A PLATONIC IDEA OF ART AND LOVE

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Regina Lea Karsh

On account of the manner in which he loves, the modern artist as conceived in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* and Herman Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, comes to realize that in order to produce art that is true to the soul of its creator, he must transcend or transgress the moral boundaries of literary conventions as well as society; he must be not only an artist, but also a philosopher, bound only by his dedication to love and truth. In these two novels, Mann and Hesse explore the nature of art as it relates to the soul, beauty, and love. Mirroring the challenges of the Platonic idea of love and art, as they are discussed in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, two heroes embark upon journeys of self-discovery and a renewal of the hunger for life that should never be lost to begin with.

______________________ Committee Chair
Jeffrey Brodd Ph.D.
DEDICATION

Thank you to Sofia and Matthew for being my sources of inspiration and love.

Thank you to Dr. Victoria Shinbrot, who showed me how to believe in what I write.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

On account of the manner in which he loves, the modern artist as conceived in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* and Herman Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, comes to realize that in order to produce art that is true to the soul of its creator, he must transcend or transgress the moral boundaries of literary conventions as well as society; he must be not only an artist, but also a philosopher, bound only by his dedication to love and truth. In these two novels, Mann and Hesse explore the nature of art as it relates to the soul, beauty, and love. Mirroring the challenges of the Platonic idea of love and rhetoric, as they are discussed in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, two heroes embark upon journeys of self-discovery and a renewal of the hunger for life that should never be lost to begin with.

Preoccupied with the decline of his life and the nostalgia of sacrificed passions, the protagonist of *Death in Venice*, renowned author Gustav von Aschenbach decides to take a holiday in Venice. Hoping to find a release from the “torpid discontent” that has afflicted his life and work, he is pleasantly surprised to encounter an ethereal boy named Tadzio, whose inspiration allows Aschenbach to finally give fully of himself as an artist and who will serve as a kind of surreal companion on Aschenbach’s transition into death.

One way to interpret *Death in Venice* is as a moral fable that asserts a universal warning to artists about the corrupting powers of beauty and art. Various critics, such as Ludwig Lewisohn, suggest that Aschenbach, “having achieved both
intellectual and moral greatness through the self-disciplined labor of the years, falters and falls and crashes to destruction” (Lewisohn 532). It seems less likely, however, that Aschenbach’s weakness leads to his destruction, but rather that after years of self-discipline, Aschenbach gives himself permission to let go of the need to please his audience in favor of creating something for himself, something to feed his own soul; if this may be seen as an artist’s weakness, perhaps it is because in his moment of passion, Aschenbach realizes that he is not only not in control of himself, but that he has no desire to be, because he solemnly yearns for the abyss into which his final artistic expression leads him and he is ecstatic to be so afflicted. It may be that Mann wants his readers to understand that Aschenbach dies in the midst of what he loves most; he dies in awe of a beauty so pure that its force transgresses not only his ability, but also his need to capture it with art.

Evoking Plato, as he retells a myriad of dueling speeches on love and rhetoric, Mann explores the notion that art is born when the soul is inspired by beauty and love. “Inspired by Love, the man who sees beauty among men is reminded of true beauty, of an image he saw when his soul was with the gods” (Phaedrus 249d). “What is truly written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention: such discourses should be called [the artist’s] own legitimate children…” (Phaedrus 278a-b). Thus, the Phaedrus supplies a philosophical and metaphysical context for Aschenbach’s experience. Beauty, according to Plato, is the one absolute that is perceivable by the senses. When man encounters the “Beautiful,” he is visited by a shock recognition that he has come face
to face with an intimation of his higher spiritual destiny. Tadzio, then, represents a manifestation of the Platonic idea of the kind of beauty that the soul experienced when it was with the gods; it is as much the idea of beauty, as the boy Tadzio himself, with which Aschenbach becomes enthralled. But in order to transcend the moral dilemma produced by Aschenbach’s infatuation with a young boy, Mann must persuasively defend his right to be in love with him. As a writer, he knows that he will be judged harshly for his seemingly immoral obsession; but as a philosopher in tune with the Platonic idea that true love transcends morality, Mann has no other choice but to write his tale and fulfill the destiny for which his soul craves.

Likewise for Hesse, the critical ramification of writing an erotically provocative novel is that he will be shunned as a man who is a slave to his passions. *Steppenwolf* is the story of Harry Haller, aged author and intellectual who is afraid of the man whom he has become; he does not understand the chaos that seems to be overflowing from inside of him. He longs for inspiration but contemplates suicide because he cannot bear the thought of reaching deep inside himself in order to discover what it is that has made him lose his love for life and his inspiration for artistic creation. When Haller meets Hermine, she represents for him something far beyond the traditional seducing beauty; she is a messenger sent from his own soul’s depths to persuade him to find faith in the art of life and love so that when he does die, he will do so with pride and satisfaction, not anger and regret.

Critics seem to feed on the plethora of varying commentaries on this novel, most claiming that it is one of the most misunderstood stories of its time. Critic
Joseph Mileck notes that in 1929 *Steppenwolf* was disposed of as “a peculiarly unappetizing conglomeration of fantasy, philosophy, and moist eroticism” (Mileck Trends 347). It seems more likely that Hesse’s goal is not to disgust his readers, but to challenge them to appreciate a realm of art within which the illusions of compromise are stripped away, where the artist can reestablish the potency of the illusive meanings of his characters’ sufferings. Hesse knows his story must be told such that the symbols are presented almost naively in order that readers of all walks of life may benefit from the realization that one gaping wound is like another; each tells a story, no matter how shocking, of the history of a people who far too often condemn themselves to the tortures of monotonous existence. The imaginary world that Hesse strives to create is, in a sense, more real than the tragically lethargic life that Haller longs to forget he ever had. Hesse revels in the capacity to shock, to startle his lifeless audience from their mockingly un-profound slumber just as Haller needs to be shocked. And as Mann does, Hesse urges his audience to see the value in taking a risk, in allowing the simple pleasures of life to nourish and awaken the life and the conviction within us, in order that we may find some excitement for that which will inevitably happen next.

Thus, in order to establish that *Death in Venice* is not simply a cautionary tale in which unbridled passion is punished by death, Mann must persuade his audience that it is a story about an author’s ultimate artistic destiny. Likewise, to defend the passions with which he lives, Hesse must show that *Steppenwolf* is not just an erotic fantasy within which seemingly unjust behaviors should be forgiven without
reproach; it is the story of a man who braves the depths of his own soul so that he might overcome the hurdles that strive to bind the artist within him to mediocrity.

To prove that both writers have, in fact, achieved what they set out to do, despite the assertions of various critics, I will first describe the nature of a soul, according to Plato, and how it becomes inclined toward rhetoric. Likewise, I will show how Mann’s and Hesse’s perceptions of an artist parallel Plato’s description of a philosopher and lover, as their protagonists struggle to find a balance between the isolation of self-consciousness and the moral transcendence afforded by divine inspiration. Second, I will do the same for the nature of art, specifically rhetoric. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I will use the words artist, rhetorician, philosopher, and lover, somewhat interchangeably.

Next, I will follow Aschenbach’s and Haller’s progression from disciplined but disenchanted authors to seemingly reckless lovers. Also, I will show how the affairs of Aschenbach and Haller can be seen in varying perspectives, with the help of several Platonic speeches: as they progress from infatuations to love, their course may be seen as being purely immoral, somewhat pragmatic, or exquisitely aesthetic. Thus, I will show that while love and the madness it creates may cause a lover to be rebuked for his feelings and suffer the moral scrutiny of a judgmental society and literary audience, real philosophical insight comes from overcoming the perspectives of others in favor of listening to the convictions of one’s own soul.

Third, I will explain how, depending on one’s understanding of the nature of the soul, of love, and of rhetoric, as well as on one’s intentions towards art, one may
perceive beauty and love as either a curse or a means of salvation. I will challenge my reader to decide whether Aschenbach’s obsession and Haller’s act of murder are a result of irrational lust or of philosophical necessity, in the context of their love. Asserting that only the philosopher can judge the actions and intentions of his fellow lover of beauty and wisdom, Plato’s argument redeeming the seeming immorality of the lover’s madness rests on the claim that the false critic is simply ignorant of the true purpose of the soul and of the spoken or written word. Thus, I will provide a close analysis of the texts’ passages in order to explore whether Aschenbach dies for the sake of love or at the mercy of folly and whether Haller kills because he has succumbed to the sufferings of an artist’s inevitable personal chaos or because he has, at last, come to terms with the part of himself that he fears most.

The Soul and the Philosopher

Plato

To understand the Platonic idea of love and rhetoric, we must first understand his views on the nature of the soul, divine or human, by examining what it does and what is done to it. Citing a previous speech he has heard, Socrates’ discourse on the soul begins by likening it to a team of winged horses and their charioteer (Phaedrus 244a). The souls of the gods are comprised of horses and charioteers that are all good, while the souls of humans are driven by one charioteer and a pair of horses, the first of which is beautiful and good, while the other is the opposite; “this means that chariot-driving in our case is inevitably a painfully difficult business” (Phaedrus 246a-b).
So long as the horses’ wings are in perfect condition, Socrates continues, the soul flies high, desiring to be where the gods dwell. Nourished by the divine, which has beauty, wisdom (intelligence and pure knowledge), and goodness, the wings grow and flourish; foulness and ugliness, however, make the wings shrink and disappear (Phaedrus 246d-e). A soul that follows a god closely, making itself like a god, is delighted to see what is real and true. At that point, a soul that has seen the most will be planted in the seed of a man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love (Phaedrus 247d, 248d).

As a result of the juxtaposition of the horses’ temperaments, the work of the charioteer is to steer them by way of balance and moderation in order that the soul will lead its person on the path of the virtuous life. A philosopher’s divinely inspired soul, however, is further burdened by the inclination for rhetorical expression, for it has enticed the gods with its demonstration of creativity and its understanding of how to nourish the souls of others. Thus, the gods recognize his ability to see and articulate the beauty of the earth, and so bestow upon him a sort of inspired madness. It is this divine madness that turns the ordinary appreciation of beauty and love into a frantic need that longs for expression and feeds on intensity (Phaedrus 265-266).

Only a philosopher’s mind, Socrates tells Phaedrus, grows wings, since its memory always keeps it as close as possible to the realities it recollects from its time with the gods. He stands outside of human concerns and draws close to the divine; ordinary people think he is disturbed and rebuke him for this, unaware that he is possessed by god (Phaedrus 249c-d). Thus forms the foundation of the argument for
the lover’s divine permission to transcend the constraints of the moral dictates of the
social realm; as “he stands outside of human concerns,” both his love and his
madness are no longer subject to the criticisms of the “ordinary people” who rebuke
him and his rhetoric because he is inspired by beauty, wisdom and goodness. Through
his actions and expressions, he will nourish the souls of others and perpetuate the
divinity of the gods, as it is honored among men.

Mann

As Plato describes the philosopher’s soul in the context of what is done to it
and what it does, the protagonists of both Mann and Hesse describe themselves in the
context of their personal journeys through self-assessment and self-discovery. Not
without struggle and emotional turmoil, each artist, the narrator as well as his literary
incarnation, must learn to follow the inclinations of his soul in order to overcome
social isolation and speculations of madness to achieve the literary immortality which
they crave; only then will the force of their stories be able to truly nourish their own
souls as well as the souls of others.

Though Mann does not explicitly describe what he believes to be the nature of
the soul or what it does, it is not difficult to see its workings within him. Mann
discloses that Aschenbach once wrote a treatise on “Mind and Art,” within which he
indicates the great value he places on the dominance of reason over instinct. Though
the dominance of reason over instinct would seem to be the path by which the soul
would find comfort and intellectual flourishing, Aschenbach slowly begins to realize
that comfort and truth are not the only needs of the soul. Just as the horses and
charioteer of Plato’s myth of the soul strive to find a balance between desire and what is good, Aschenbach, first unknowingly, struggles to find a way to mediate the battle between what he feels, or what he has forgotten how to feel, and what he thinks he should believe.

Though Aschenbach is a very successful author, Mann reveals that Aschenbach knows that he has “overindulged the intellect, overcultivated erudition […] revealed secrets, defamed talent [and questioned the] nature of art and genius” (Mann 19). Thus, the overindulging in the intellect has caused a rift between what he considers to be genius and what he feels should be the duty of rhetoric; he suddenly feels less content with the work he has produced. Subdued by his intellectual stronghold, his instincts are beginning to fight their way back into his conscience.

But Aschenbach has previously taken great pains to hide this. In fact, Mann states, these “are not mere matters of endurance, they are active achievement, a positive triumph.” And though the world as narrated by Aschenbach “was elegant self-possession,” it concealed an “inner dissolution and biological decay from the eyes of the world” (Mann 17). It is just such inherently private feelings that Aschenbach can and will never allow the world to know he has. As the epitome of the divinely inspired philosopher, Aschenbach embodies “composure in the face of destiny and equanimity in the face of torture.” Thus, Aschenbach maintains the elegant façade because he must; being the master of instincts on account of his strong mind, he knows exactly how to compensate for the inequities and personal tortures involved in keeping up one’s necessary appearances.
Suddenly, though, he looks back on his life and comes to the realization that the more experience and personal triumph he achieves, the greater also is his personal dissolution. Perhaps there must be more to life than relenting one’s discontent to an audience that cares little what the man behind the artist feels. Mann writes:

Yet nothing would seem to dull a deft and noble intellect more swiftly, more surely than the sharp and bitter stimulant of erudition, and clearly the adolescent’s melancholic and ever so conscientious thoroughness is shallow when compared with the profound resolve of the mature master to deny knowledge, disavow it, put it behind him, head high, lest it should in the slightest maim, discourage, or debase the will, action, feeling, and even passion. (Mann 19)

Aschenbach, in his accomplished age, is beginning not just to feel the toll of his life’s work; he is beginning to be consumed by its weight on his soul. All of the truths he thinks he has learned to some great end now provide little consolation. Though he is sure that the achievement of great work is his destiny, he is becoming uncertain as to whether these great works have done for him what he thought they should. Finally acknowledging the debasement of his will, he scoffs:

Only incorrigible bohemians find it boring or laughable when a man of talent outgrows the libertine chrysalis stage and begins to perceive and express the dignity of the intellect, adopting the courtly ways of a solitude replete with bitter suffering and inner battles though eventually gaining a position of power and honor among men. And what sport, what bravado, what pleasure there is in fashioning one’s own talent! (Mann 21)

And Aschenbach is distinctly proud of the talent he has fashioned; he is content knowing that he has gained an honorable position among men. In fact, it seems to be the very satisfaction with his life’s diligence and ambition that brings Aschenbach to
the point of boredom and realization that he has more needs than he has thus far allowed himself to recognize.

In the beginning of *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach describes what he has previously believed to the artist’s nature and destiny. In order to be successful, the artist should be disciplined, organized and courageous. And at the start of the novel, Aschenbach is all of these: “Since boyhood he had been pressed from all sides to achieve – and to achieve the extraordinary – and thus had never known the carefree idleness of youth. He had grown up solitary and friendless” (Mann 13-14). Instead of spontaneity and imagination, the very successful author that Aschenbach has become strives to be a paragon of reason and reflection. “Solitary and friendless,” Aschenbach seems to stand outside of life; he has alienated himself emotionally from the rest of the world, perhaps because he feels that he is different from other people and they will not truly understand him; perhaps he fears that they would scorn his divergence from his former life or try to impose some preconceived notions upon him; in any case, this aversion to the norm is his first step toward discovering his destiny.

Thus, Aschenbach becomes aware of the “source of his sudden trepidation;” he yearns for freedom, release from the daily struggle and growing fatigue of his work; the work that, as of late, “had refused to yield” to his inability to keep up with its “impossible demands” (Mann 8-9). Impossible demands dictated by himself or the literary community, Aschenbach seems to have no motivation to keep trying to meet them. He does not want to be alone; he needs a bit of “spontaneity, an idle existence” and “an influx of new blood to make the summer bearable and productive” (Mann
10). And these are in fact his own thoughts, to and about himself; his motives are clear and calculating; he seems to finally be comfortable with asserting what he needs and is at least mostly aware of the consequences.

As Aschenbach’s talent seems to be based on mastery of the instincts, critics condemn Mann for allowing Aschenbach to succumb to them so easily. They speculate as to whether Aschenbach ceases to be an artist, not only in the sense that he has abandoned his discipline, but because he has broken with his own ascriptions of what an artist should be. On the other hand, while his actions may seem to be a loss of control over one’s instincts, they may also be a long awaited release that will allow Aschenbach to fully experience the very kind of intensity that a person’s instincts are intended for.

And so through Aschenbach, Mann pushes into the literary world as an artist who must write what he feels and listen to no one’s criticisms but his own. As such, Aschenbach is a man whose soul craves truth and expression; despite his inner doubts about how he has lived his life, he is convinced that he must be a divinely inspired artist. In the following excerpt, Mann describes Aschenbach’s ability to affect the world around him through his intellect and his writings:

For a major product of the intellect to make an immediate broad and deep impact it must rest upon a secret affinity, indeed, a congruence between the personal destiny of its author and the collective destiny of his generation. The people do not know why they bestow fame upon a given work of art. […] the true basis for their acclaim is an imponderable, mere affinity. Aschenbach [once] stated outright that nearly everything great owes its existence to “despites”: despite misery and affliction,
poverty, desolation, physical debility, vice, passion, and a thousand other obstacles.
(Mann 16)
The “secret affinity” that Aschenbach’s intellect rests upon seems to parallel Plato’s notion of “inspired madness.” Though others misunderstand him, the congruence between the author’s destiny and that of his generation seems to be the kind of revelatory rhetoric that the gods seek to promote in order to bridge the gap between historical perspectives and the importance of understanding the nature of the soul.

Furthermore, as the philosopher’s soul is burdened by the inclination for verbal expression on account of its ability to nourish the souls of others, it seems that Aschenbach’s ability to do just that is expressed by his gratitude toward “despites.” This ironic gratitude reveals that he is somewhat surprised by his audience’s approval of his work; perhaps it is precisely “despite” the many obstacles that stand in the way of people’s appreciation for art that Aschenbach’s writings achieve the ability to distract them from their troubles; even if only for a certain period of time, his stories engulf them in a literary world that not only nourishes their souls, but will also gives them reprieve from their daily lives.

Hesse

Haller describes himself as a man who has attempted to achieve the kind of education that will allow him to be at least a respectable writer; though he had sought to be schooled in the traditional sense, perhaps he has come to find that his education is quite lacking in the passionate intensity of the kinds of experiences that are rooted in profundity – ones that have the ability to shake the foundations life’s daily tedium.
Though he is outwardly successful, like Aschenbach, Haller soul seems to be longing for different kind of nourishment. Also struggling to find a balance between his professional career and the instincts that compel his feelings, Haller’s inward discontent causes him to feel sick.

I had painted a picture of myself as a person who was in fact nothing more than a most refined and educated specialist in poetry, music and philosophy; and as such I had lived, leaving all the rest of me to be a chaos of potentialities, instincts and impulses which I found an encumbrance and gave the label the Steppenwolf. (Hesse 128-129)

In the form of Haller’s somewhat rudimentary half-man, half-wolf theory, Hesse describes the encumbrance which he believes to be the cause of his soul’s frustration.

Like the opposing forces of the charioteer and the horses, according to Hesse, most artists have two souls, two beings within them.

These two souls represent God and the devil, the capacity for happiness and for suffering. With the help of these, the artist must navigate the chaos within him in order to discover and carry out his destiny.

And in just such a state of enmity and entanglement towards and within each other as were the wolf and man in Harry. And these men, for whom life has no repose, live at times in their rare moments of happiness with such strength and indescribable beauty, the spray of their moment’s happiness is flung so high and dazzlingly over the wide sea of suffering, that the light of it, spreading its radiance, touches others too with its enchantment. [These men] cannot live intensely except at the cost of the self. And so at the cost of intensity [they achieve, through the creation of art, their] own preservation and security. (Hesse 52)

Within the soul’s capacity for happiness, suffering and the longing for rare moments, Haller must learn how it is that his soul can be properly nourished. Whether made up
of two parts or of thousands, Haller’s soul is not destined to succumb to the temptations of idleness and mediocrity; the forced determination that is needed to overcome the long periods of personal dissatisfaction and emotional starvation will pay off if he can successfully battle through the lonely and uninspiring periods of his life.

In a pamphlet that a stranger gives to Haller, Hesse presents his readers with an intimate disclosure of Haller’s affliction. The pamphlet, titled *Treatise On The Steppenwolf. Not For Everybody*, explains that though Haller has learned a good deal of all that people of a good intelligence can, what he has not learned, is how to find contentment in himself and his own life (Hesse 40). Hesse describes Haller as a generally unhappy man:

[In him the man and the wolf] were in continual and deadly enmity…one existed simply and solely to harm the other…If Harry, as a man, had a beautiful thought, felt a fine and noble emotion, or performed a so-called good act, then the wolf…showed him with bitter scorn how laughable this whole pantomime was in the eyes of a beast. [When] Harry felt and behaved as a wolf [he] showed others his teeth and felt hatred and enmity against all human beings and their lying and degenerate manners and customs. For then the human part of him lay in ambush and watched the wolf, called him brute and beast, and spoiled and embittered for him all pleasure in his simple and healthy and wild wolf’s being. (Hesse 42)

Like the competing horses and charioteer of the soul as Plato describes it, the different parts of Haller’s soul have created an illness that is not only enough to shroud him in constant misery, but also one that is nearly too much for him to bear; he has forgotten the fond memories of his past and he is convinced that there will be no future events worthy of desire or preparation.
Of himself, Haller reveals that he often ponders what it is to be an artist; he
seems somewhat ashamed that he has spent his life occupied by esthetics, intellectual
and artistic pursuits. He wonders what his life would be like if he would do something
‘real,’ something serious or responsible. These thoughts end, however, with the
resignation to a destiny which, though it may lack validation or explicit meaning, he
is nonetheless inclined to follow because it is that for which he feels he is made
(Hesse 136). Thus, by assertion of Plato’s description of the nature of the artist’s soul,
it becomes necessary to see that Haller must struggle to overcome the obstacles that
make it difficult for him to follow his path; intimidated by the moral rebukes of the
‘ordinary people’ around him, Haller’s fears start to become the inspiration that
beckons him, as his soul clearly yearns for some greater truth. The Steppenwolf, for
Haller, is exactly the part of him that yearns for intensity and adventure; unable to
respect and control the Steppenwolf’s impulses, though, Haller shuns this hungry part
of him and fears its emergence on account that the world may rebuke the freedoms
that both he and the wolf hold so dear.

Works of art and philosophy, then, arise from individuals who must sacrifice
their own lives and emotional needs because “their lives are not their own;” their life
is relegated to waiting and suffering through the tedium of mediocrity in order that
the artist will be ready and receptive to seeing life’s true meaning in just those rare
experiences, acts, and thoughts, that shine out above the chaos of such a life (Hesse
45). As a philosopher, Haller despises the thought of contentment. “An easy life, an
easy love, an easy death” says Haller, “these were not for me…A wild longing for
strong emotions and sensations seethes in me, a rage against this toneless, flat, normal
and sterile life” (Hesse 158, 27). Just as Plato describes the difficulties with which the
soul’s charioteer must steer his horses, Hesse describes the artist’s soul as having to
cope with much hardship in order to experience and learn how it is that his soul needs
to be nourished. Such men, most intellectuals and artists, Hesse declares, belong to
this type; they believe either that the whole of human life is but a bad joke or that man
is perhaps not merely a half-rational animal but a child of the gods and destined to
immortality (Hesse 45). Haller, in fact, wants desperately to believe that he, like his
idols before him, could possibly be worthy of being destined for immortality.

As with Aschenbach, Hesse describes Haller as the kind of artist who seems to
be endowed with a “secret affinity” for inciting conviction in the souls of others. In an
introduction to the manuscript left by Haller following his peculiar adventure, a
former neighbor describes Haller as having the face of an intellectual whose features
reflect “an abnormally delicate soul,” that of an “extremely emotional and unusually
delicate sensibility”(Hesse 8).

He had thought more than other men, and in matters of the intellect he had that calm
objectivity, that certainty of thought and knowledge, such as only really intellectual
men have, who have no axe to grind, who never wish to shine, or to talk others down,
or to appear always in the right…I suspect that the man was ailing, ailing in the spirit
in some way, or in his temperament or character…this affliction was not due to any
defects of nature, but rather to a profusion of gifts and powers which had not attained
to harmony. (Hesse 8, 10)

Perhaps it is the case that Haller has not found the way to harmonize his “unusually
delicate sensibility” and the “profusion of gifts and powers” that have been divinely
bestowed upon him not only because he lacks confidence in his abilities, but because he struggles to figure out what is his destiny and place in the world. Looking for something real and true around him, Haller is described as a person whose discontent is rational, but nonetheless unrelenting; the philosopher among the ordinary struggles to find someone to validate his intellectual energy and inspire his desire for creation.

The same neighbor recalls Haller once saying that every age, culture, custom and tradition has its own character, weakness, strength, beauty and ugliness; it accepts certain sufferings as matters of course and puts up patiently with certain evils. When two ages overlap, human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell. Furthermore, there are times when a whole generation is caught up between two ages or modes of life, “with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no simple acquiescence.” Haller, the neighbor asserts, belongs to those who have been caught between two ages; “he belongs to those whose fate it is to love the whole riddle of human destiny heightened to the pitch of a personal torture, a personal hell” (Hesse 22). Haller’s soul, then, seems to be extending outward in hope of finding nourishment.

Chapter 2

RHETORIC AND MORALITY

Plato’s Rhetorical Art

According to Plato, it is in the soul that one attempts to produce conviction. Anyone who teaches the art or rhetoric must, first, know the nature of and be able to describe the soul (Phaedrus 271a). The nature of speech and rhetoric, then, is to direct
the soul such that all other matters can be related to it (Phaedrus 271c). Unless a person pursues philosophy and truth, he will never be able to make a proper speech on any subject; only by way of truth will a person be able to use speech artfully, either to teach or to persuade (Phaedrus 261a, 277b-c).

The reason that most people cannot define rhetoric, then, is because they are ignorant of dialectic (Phaedrus 269b). Within the study of dialectic, the rhetorician learns that there are different ways of interpreting the same idea; thus one must make certain to delineate the various descriptions of things, when speaking to others, in order that confusion on any matter will not ensue (Phaedrus 263b).

The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge – discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse is grown in the character of others. Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be. (Phaedrus 277a) And the dialectician also thinks that only what is said for the sake of understanding and learning, what is truly written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention: such discourses should be called his own legitimate children…(Phaedrus 278a-b). If a speech is composed with knowledge of the truth and if it can be defended when you are challenged, then its creator can truly be called wisdom’s lover – a philosopher (Phaedrus 278d).

Plato’s Morality

In the case of morality, Plato insists upon the assertion that the divinely inspired rhetorician is not only nourished by the divine but that he is also a philosopher; he cannot accept into his soul anything but beauty, wisdom and
goodness because he seeks out only what is real and true. Thus, he stands outside of human concerns and does not write for the sake of the ordinary person. Anyone who rebukes or misunderstands his writing does so out of ignorance for the nature of the soul and rhetoric. Morally, the only judges for the rhetorician’s work are the gods and the philosopher’s own soul.

Hesse’s Rhetorical Art

For Hesse, the nature of art is to create the kind of work that restores, in the artist as well as in his audience, the appetite for the fundamental realities of life: desire, experience, love, and acceptance. The hero of a book seeks to exist not in time but in timelessness; he or she ought to touch an audience in a realm where the restorative value of experience, the prime source of wisdom and creation is unrestrained and uncensored. Just as Plato describes the role of the rhetorician and philosopher, Hesse wants his hero to inspire and nourish others. In order to provide a profound lesson, the literary hero should be one whose innocence emerges from the excesses of his egoism; it is from this chaotic assertion of individuality that the audience will gain the most enlightenment.

Haller, Hesse reveals, is distinct from the bourgeois in the higher development of his individuality; he has in him strong impulses both to be a saint and a profligate; what he lacks, though, is the ability to “make the plunge into the untrammeled realms of space.” Hesse goes on to say that “all extreme individuation turns against itself, intent upon its own destruction;” Haller is thus not only bound by his need for loneliness and independence, but he is also condemned to it (Hesse 53).
There was never a man with a deeper and more passionate craving for independence than he. In his youth when he was poor and had difficulty in earning his bread, he preferred to go hungry and in torn clothes rather than endanger his narrow limit of independence (Hesse 45). But in the midst of the freedom he had attained Harry suddenly became aware that his freedom was a death and that he stood alone. For now it was his wish no longer, nor his aim, to be alone and independent, but rather his lot and his sentence (Hesse 46). For the air of lonely men surrounded him now, a still atmosphere in which the world around him slipped away, leaving him incapable of relationship, an atmosphere against which neither will nor longing availed. This was one of the significant earmarks of his life. (Hesse 47)

Though Haller has thought that freedom is that which is to be most desired, he has come to realize that, within the world in which he lives, freedom can only serve to condemn a person to solitude; especially as an intellectual and artistic person, Haller can rarely identify with others; he stands alone enraged by the gripes he holds and by the inequities he cannot help seeing within a society that seems to sleep through life and disregard any need for change or improvement due to their own insecurity and devotion to the status quo.

To call suicides only those who actually destroy themselves, Hesse states, is false. Though the “suicide,” he continues, and Harry was one, believes that this will be his most probable manner of death, he is able to fashion a philosophy that is actually serviceable to life because he gains strength in knowing that the “emergency exit” is always available. Consequently, Haller, becoming curious of just how much misery a man can take, lives each day torn between the desire for escape and wondering just how much worse his life can get (Hesse 48).

How had I, with the wings of youth and poetry, come to this? Art and travel and the glow of ideals – and now this! How had this paralysis crept over me so slowly and
furtively, this hatred against myself and everybody, this deep-seated anger and obstruction of all feelings, this filthy hell of emptiness and despair…(Hesse 74) Religion, country, family, state, all lost their value and meant nothing to me any more. The pomposity of the sciences, societies, and arts disgusted me. No, in all conscience, there was no power in the world that could prevail with me to go through the mortal terror of another encounter with myself, to face another reorganization, a new incarnation, when at the end of the road there was no peace or quiet – but forever destroying the self, in order to renew the self. Let suicide be as stupid, cowardly, shabby as you please, call it an infamous and ignominious escape; still, any escape, even the most ignominious, from this treadmill of suffering was the only thing to wish for. (Hesse 69)

Perhaps Haller refers to his life as a “treadmill of suffering” because he has buried the memories of the experiences that once brought him satisfaction; he has convinced himself that there will be no more satisfaction to be had in his life and that he can never again feel the vigor and carelessness of youth. Here Hesse reveals Haller’s deepest fear; he is afraid to live, he is afraid to know just who he has become; he is afraid of self-disappointment and, most of all, he is afraid to die.

I was horribly afraid of death. Although I saw no other way out, although nausea, agony and despair threatened to engulf me, although life had no allurement and nothing to give me either of joy or hope, I shuddered all the same with an unspeakable horror of a gaping wound in a condemned man’s flesh. I reasoned with myself as though with a frightened child. But the child would not listen. It ran away. It wanted to live. (Hesse 84-85)

At this point, interpretations of Haller’s predicament and its outcome begin to diverge; critics challenge Hesse’s metaphors and question whether or not he presents any tangible resolutions. Richard Costa suggests that Hesse’s artist figure must be prepared to surrender to the chaos within, in order to struggle through to self-
awareness. He points out that Haller traverses dark labyrinths of emotion, depravity, and error that have convinced him to resort to suicide. The magic theatre that Hesse presents is a place where Haller comes to know himself, Costa states, but it is not a solution for the problems Haller seems to face. In fact, Costa maintains that Haller fails the tests he is set to complete (Costa 126). In response, it seems first that it is not the case that Haller must ‘surrender’ to the chaos within in order to gain self-awareness; surrender would imply that the chaos within him can and should be victor over either awareness his self or his will. If Haller, in the end, has a chance at victory over the misery that he has inflicted upon himself, then there can be no surrender to any subconscious intentions or deeply rooted emotions. Furthermore, it may be the case that the misery that Haller hides behind is somewhat of a front; it may act as a protection or wall between him and the world he barely feels that he is apart of.

Within the walls of the magic theater, it is perhaps more likely that Hesse would have his readers believe that it is Haller who has set his own tests and that there is not only no solution to the mysteries of his psyche, but no success or failure as well. Costa describes the magic theatre as a place where Haller’s past is reflected in a box of many-faceted mirrors; from the reflections of these mirrors he learns that the other reality for which he longs is only to be found in his own inner being (Costa 126). This description validates the point that Haller is indeed in control of his fate and that experiences of this sort cannot be labeled as succeeding or failing.

The magic theatre is the kind of space within which Haller can do as he pleases; within its walls, he is permitted to dream and to release himself, to be the
wolf or the lover of his youth; he can relive the feeling of loving himself, women, art, and the life that he once treasured and held important. Within the confines of the theatre, Haller gains validation for the emotions that he thinks the world should not allow him to have; in the theatre he is truly free.

A change is now happening in Haller’s life; he not only longs for the kind of relationships that give him a desire to live, to partake in the pleasures of the body, and to write, but he also feels that if he may not take the opportunity to have these, he will surely die. In any case, coming to this realization opens him up to the possibility that there may still be some promise of satisfaction in his future; thus his curiosity is sparked at the opportunity. Within the walls of the magic theatre, Mozart mocks Haller: “You are willing to die, you coward, but not to live” (Hesse 216). Haller is at once ashamed and invigorated with new curiosity; perhaps being mocked by his idol is exactly the kind of push he needs to realize that permission to make art true to one’s self comes from within, from the forces of inspiration that have not only survived the ages, but which are themselves timeless, like the gods Plato so highly praises.

**Hesse’s Morality**

Through the medium of magical artistry, Hesse is able not only to draw his readers into his world emotionally, but he is also able, in a sense, to trick them into being seduced by the seemingly risqué content of his story. While Haller is indulging in intoxications and sexual promiscuity, the reader struggles to overcome the natural inclination for moral judgment in favor of truly empathizing with Haller’s troubled
soul. Rudolf Koester, in the article *Terminal Sanctity or Benign Banality: The Critical Controversy Surrounding Herman Hesse*, discusses the critical controversy surrounding Hesse’s writings. The dilemma, he states, is perpetrated by his audience; while Germans disavow him, contemporary youth love him but misunderstand him. While one side belittles him as “a neo-Romantic Pied Piper who spellbinds the naïve with his mellifluous but time-worn metaphysical melodies,” the other side “vociferously hails him as [a] patron saint” who glorifies drugs, sex, and suicide (Koester 6). Koester then further explores why this is the case and what assessments can be made in order to give Hesse a fair critique.

In a letter to his parents, Hesse synopsized his aesthetic creed as based on the firm belief that “aesthetics take the place of morality for the artist…and art, especially poetic art, is not intended to serve the purpose of propagating that which is morally good” (Helt 61). For Hesse, the creativity of the artistic temperament was dependent upon freedom from social restriction and scrutiny. Though this kind of detachment from the norm is the artist’s greatest asset, it is accompanied by a fairly steep price to pay: he will be generally misunderstood and condemned to the loneliness of isolation.

The Steppenwolf stood entirely outside the world of convention, since he had neither family life nor social ambitions. He felt himself to be single and alone, whether as a queer fellow and a hermit in poor health, or as a person removed from the common run of men by the prerogative of talents that had something of genius in them. Deliberately, he looked down upon the ordinary man and was proud that he was not one. (Hesse 50)

The Magic Theatre, then, is just such a place beyond the world of convention; it is a place where Haller’s kind of genius is not only accepted, but in a way necessary, as
the magical aspects of the theatre’s games depend upon an uninhibited creativity.

“What happens to me in my rare hours of joy,” Haller admits cautiously, “what for me is bliss and life and ecstasy and exaltation, the world in general seeks at most in imagination; in life it finds it absurd” (Hesse 31). Furthermore, these games are not constrained by any moral rules; one game tempts Haller and his childhood friend Herman to shoot at people in cars; another game invites Haller to play a sort of chess game with the people and events in his life; within a third game Harry sees himself, in turn, as both beastmaster and wolf who take turns asserting power over each other.

The artist who Haller sees himself as being is a failure in his own eyes; he longs for inspiration and greatness but knows that he will settle for even the dimmest spark to maintain his tired existence. The writings of his past leave little for him to be nourished by; perhaps he has written these for others or perhaps for no one at all. The manuscript of this story, however, he knows is different; the experiences of the magic theatre have forced him to face his demons and admit the defeat that has plagued his artist’s soul. It is his neighbor who discovers the records and comments on their author:

And now that we come to these records of Haller’s, these partly diseased, partly beautiful, and thoughtful fantasies, I must confess that if they had fallen into my hands by chance and if I had not known their author, I should most certainly have thrown them away in disgust. But owning to my acquaintance with Haller I have been able, to some extent, to understand them, and even to appreciate them. I see them as a document of the times, for Haller’s sickness of the soul, as I now know, is not the eccentricity of a single individual, but the sickness of the times themselves, the neurosis of that generation to which Haller belongs, a sickness, it seems, that by
no means attacks the weak and worthless only but, rather, precisely those who are strongest in spirit and richest in gifts. (Hesse 21)

He goes on to say that these records are an attempt to preserve the trials and battles that Haller faces against a sickness that cannot be cured except by taking the journey through the chaotic hell that his mind has become.

Critic Ralph Freeman suggests that with the records of his experiences Haller seeks to reach the realm of art where his visions would be whole and essentially nonverbal. Freeman claims that Haller dreams of a language which would “say the unsayable and represent the unrepresentable,” reflecting a poetic style within which poetry can portray experience directly, transcending the time-bound, analytic world (Freeman 280). Perhaps Haller hopes that his words will challenge a reader’s imagination and emotional countenance in the way that his experiences will feel to his reader as their own, especially in the sense that each person can imagine a personal hell of sorts.

Haller acknowledges that each artist desires his own level of immortality. He desires that his words will have meaning for future ages and that his emotional trials will provide sympathy and comfort for others who feel a similar inner turmoil. In this sense, the time-bound, analytic world cannot appease the ailing soul; it is only in the realm of the imagination, Haller wants to impart upon his readers, that the nonverbal, raw emotional self can be given room to roam free of the constraints and judgments of a conservative society that prides itself on instilling strict reticence.

As music plays from Don Giovanni, a magical apparition of Mozart enters, laughing, from “a world beyond all suffering, and born of divine humor;” he tells
Haller that the artist must pay a debt to his time: “The law must take its course. Until they have paid the debt of their time it cannot be known whether anything personal to themselves is left over to stand to their credit. They cannot help it…one’s born and at once one is guilty (Hesse 204, 206). To this Haller responds:

I saw myself as a dead-weary pilgrim, dragging myself across the desert of the other world, laden with the many superfluous books I had written, and all the articles and the essays…All this, then, was to be paid for in endless purgatory. And only then could the question arise whether, behind all that, there was anything personal, anything of my own, left over; or whether all that I had once done and all its consequences were merely the empty foam of the sea and a meaningless ripple in the flow of what was over and done. (Hesse 207)

It is precisely because his art is not just for himself that Haller is bound by the artist’s law to continue enduring the life that he has created for himself; though he considers his many works superfluous to the needs of humanity, unless he pushes on to create a truly worthy work, he will pay dearly for this indolence while he awaits the immortality that he may never be granted.

Pablo the musician describes the making of music as needing to be “as well and as much as possible with all the intensity of which one is capable” (Hesse 132). For Haller, music represents the most elusive and secretive representation of emotional and aesthetic experience exactly because it is nonverbal; music can reveal emotions or hide them; it can bring them on or abate them. The manuscript which Haller composes in secrecy and the internal monologue which helps him resolve his inner conflicts reflects, in a way, represents his detachment from the revelatory aspect of art. As with music, he seems to long for a medium which will allow him to unite in
Oh, what a dull maze of error I had made of my life! For long during this night’s walk I had reflected upon the significance of my relation to music, and not for the first time recognized this appealing and fatal relation as the destiny of the entire German spirit. In the German spirit the matriarchal link with nature rules in the form of the hegemony of music to an extent unknown in any other people. We intellectuals, instead of fighting against this tendency like men, and rendering obedience to the spirit, the Logos, the Word, and gaining a hearing for it, are all dreaming of a speech without words that utters the inexpressible and gives form to the formless. Instead of playing his part as truly and honestly as he could, the German intellectual has constantly rebelled against the word and against reason and courted music. And so to the German spirit, carousing in music, in wonderful creations of sound, and wonderful beauties of feeling and mood that were never pressed home in reality, has left the greater part of its practical gifts to decay. None of us intellectuals is at home in reality. (Hesse 135)

In longing to portray the “inexpressible” fears of his past and give “form to the formless” emotions that are brewing inside of him, Haller’s suffering finds solace by hiding in the shadows of art; as an artist, though, he is compelled to express, or at least release, a bit of the war that his sensibility is raging inside of him. Music, it seems, is just such a shadow; it serves as both intoxicator and liberator for his spirit; the reality from which he cowers can be braved with at least some dignity when Haller perceives that he traverses its landscape in the company of his immortal idols’ musical manifestation.

Although Hesse attaches no specific meaning to the term magic, its various functions seem to suggest that it provides a bridge between the imagination and the harmony the aesthetic dissonances of music and rhetoric (Freeman 280). Hesse’s use of magic is just such a unifying source; it uses the abstract emotional forces of music to tame the vulgarity of a man’s intoxicated tongue.
external world; it supersedes temporal sequence and verbal expression but carries with it the intuitive meaning of Haller’s most private experiences and feelings. Freeman describes Hesse’s use of magic as a “reflection of unity in aesthetic illusion, neutralizing the clash between the poetic sensibility and the hostile forces of the external world which it must seek to absorb” (Freeman 281). From his internal psyche, Haller’s experiences are translated into the aesthetic absolutes of artistic expression through his manuscript. While the neighbor who finds it reveals that without having known the sensibility of its author he would have discarded it with disgust, he is also a sort of messenger to assure future readers that the individual experiences of this seemingly mad man are, in fact, artistically worthy of notice. This is precisely because Haller’s experiences represent both a madness that any person may fall prey to and a magical remedy that such person might seek as a refuge from the world’s hostile forces. The moment of reconciliation, then, Freeman explains, must be frozen in time, as it so becomes through the manuscript’s release into the world; the magic elicited from the materials of Haller’s crude experience becomes immortalized through words and empowered by the emotions it evokes (Freeman 281).

Thus Hesse draws his reader into his world with the bluntness of his words, with the greatness of his musical idols and with the magical intensity of his journey. In a passage early on in the text, Hesse presents Haller’s description of a newspaper as an introduction into his artistic psyche: “I allowed the spirit of an irresponsible man who chews and munches another’s words in his mouth, and gives them out again
undigested, to enter into me through my eyes” (Hesse 34). While on the surface this pretentious grumble may seem misplaced, perhaps it is a glimpse into Haller’s perceptions of his own printed words; he may be subconsciously questioning as to whether he has been an irresponsible man, whether he has chewed and munched the words in his mind for far too long without really digesting them, without really knowing what it is he is trying to say.

But then Hesse transitions, leading his audience right up to the doorway of a magical world where they will decide who is irresponsible and who has taken the time to digest that which life feeds them. A doorway stands in the darkness of an old stone wall; a Gothic arch frames the portal upon which a tablet with illuminated letters states: Magic Theatre/Entrance Not For Everybody/For Madmen Only! (Hesse 31-32).

I had had a greeting from another world, and a few dancing, colored letters had played upon my soul and sounded its secret strings…There perhaps lay my desire, and there perhaps my music would be played. The dark stone wall looked back at me with composure, shut off in a deep twilight, sunk in a dream of its own. (Hesse 33, 38-39)

This wall, as if he is coming upon the border between his world and another, provides not only a nostalgic comfort for Haller, but also it represents the part of his countenance that gladly desires to leave reality behind for the chance to awaken in the kind of world within which he is more than a casual player; he longs for some thrill and dramatic climax to propel him from his languid existence into a place where artists honorably kneel in awe of their surroundings.
Mann’s Rhetorical Art

“Art,” Aschenbach describes, “is life intensified; it delights more deeply, consumes more rapidly; it engraves the traces of imaginary and intellectual adventure on the countenance of its servant” (Mann 23). Thus Aschenbach sacrifices his emotional self in order to create works of art and he is honored to be art’s loyal servant. For Haller, the world of the magic theatre is his great escape from society, politics, and the critics who would humiliate the freedoms for which he would die. For Aschenbach, a life of personally insignificant successes keeps him out of public reach by necessity and by choice. And so Aschenbach revels in the solitude that the artist’s life condemns him to; he knows this isolation from the world is what “begets originality, bold and disconcerting beauty, poetry” (Mann 43).

But within the realm of isolation is also a sadness that, if left uncared for, may beget perversity, disparity, the absurd and the forbidden (Mann 43). Aschenbach is quite familiar with this affliction; it is the “monastic calm of his external existence.” He cautiously fears that it has led him to overrefinement and a restless curiosity that a lifetime of wild passions and pleasures could scarcely engender (Mann 23). Achenbach’s name, in German, means “stream of ashes.” Along with the allusion to death, it paints the picture of a volcanic eruption, which represents his eventual release from the world at large, from the world to which he has given his fervent commitment for all to long a time.

Near the end of his story, Aschenbach sits on a grassy patch to rest:

There he sat, the master, the eminently dignified artist…who had rejected bohemian excess and the murky depths in a form of exemplary purity, who had renounced all
sympathy for the abyss and reprehended the reprehensible, climbed the heights, and, having transcended his erudition and outgrown all irony, accepted the obligations that come with mass approbation, a man whose fame was official, whose name had been made noble, and whose style schoolboys were exhorted to emulate – there he sat, his eyes closed, with only an occasional, rapidly disappearing sidelong glance, scornful and sheepish, slipping out from under them and a few isolated words issuing out from his slack, cosmically embellished lips, the result of the curious dream logic of his half-slumbering brain. (Mann 135-136)

The words still issuing from his lips are like the last of the volcanic lava of the artist’s eruption. Aschenbach reviews his life, as he has seen himself and as he has been seen by others; neither of these conceptions matter to him any longer; now Aschenbach is content to live in this moment. In the realm of art, this moment, this grassy patch within Venice’s long history of art and culture, is to Aschenbach nearly as complete a final resting place as he can imagine; the only thing missing now is the kiss of death; the kiss which is bestowed upon the dying man by a caring figure who will catch the soul as it parts from the physical body it has so long been companion to and begins the journey that will reunite it with its maker.

The word is powerful indeed; it can be at once binding or liberating. Andre Brink, in the book *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*, explores the way in which language, for Aschenbach, becomes both an isolating force and “an opening in his imagination to life’s song” (Brink 177). The voyage to Venice, Brink begins, to the splendid city of art on one hand and of decadence and pestilential vapors on the other, “confirms the distance between the writer as aesthete and the lives and language of ordinary humanity” (Brink 177). Aschenbach sets out, he
continues, with the help of the narrator, in search of a language beyond the obsolete grandeur of his own writing (Brink 188).

Such was Venice, the wheedling, shady beauty, a city half fairy tale, half tourist trap, in whose foul air the arts had once flourished luxuriantly and which had inspired musicians with undulating, lullingly licentious harmonies. The adventurer felt his eyes drinking in its voluptuousness, his ears being wooed by its melodies. (Mann 104)

Thus Aschenbach the adventurer immerses himself in a world were he is no longer king of his artistic domain. Alone, but open to the prospects of the world, he gives himself over to the fairy-tale city in hope that it will bring him the inspiration for which he so longs.

Mann’s Morality

Several critics, who will be mentioned shortly, pass judgment on Mann’s artistry; they accuse Mann and his characters of being indecisive, detached and unprincipled; they question his treatment of the relationship of the artist and the nature of art. They are curious as to why his writing raises questions that should be answered, yet ultimately seem unanswerable for him. In the article, *Thomas Mann’s Disorder and Early Sorrow*, written by Sidney Bolkosky and Mann together, they explain that Mann, in his writings, hopes to afford all sides of an issue equal understanding and sympathy. And when the critics allege that Mann fails to take up a solid position, he replies:

The political freedom of the artist to pursue the more difficult quest for some aesthetic middle ground, to achieve a proper balance for a medium of sensitivity is not only a personal prerogative, but a way to express certain issues that are seemingly
beyond politics and history because they are timeless and suprahistorical. (Bolkosky 218)

When considering Mann’s artistic expression alongside the description of Plato’s notion of love and rhetoric, the freedom that the philosopher holds most dear is precisely the freedom that is bestowed upon him by divine inspiration. If Mann’s critics misunderstand him, it is because they are imposing their own artistic standards on his work, the work he has framed with the form of his personal needs and desires; after all, an artist desires to produce art on account of the fact that his or her artistic input is unique or provocative. Therefore, to impose upon an artist an objective standard, some moral necessity, is to assert that the inspiration of some new and profound feelings he experiences are somehow incomplete; the freedom necessitated by Aschenbach’s emotional turmoil, however, is exactly the freedom with which Mann knows he is supposed to nourish the souls of his audience.

With a closer examination of the text, though, the reader will find that Mann does take the time to address important issues; he very elegantly and discreetly uses Aschenbach to discuss the innate nature of art and philosophy, to explore the very power of the word and the responsibilities that the artist must keep in mind when writing. Mann is, in fact, very concerned with the moral obligations that the artist’s public attaches to art; he is very aware that because of these obligations, the artist is often subject to isolation and solitude.

Innate in the artist’s nature, Mann asserts, “is a wanton, treacherous penchant for accepting injustice when it creates beauty” (Mann 47). It seems that Mann is trying to establish the case that accepting injustice is not to say that it should be
condoned, but to say that the composer is not bound by moral convention to abstain from its discussion in his work; in fact, the nature of the philosopher depends on being able to describe every aspect of life’s experiences in a way that is true and complete. In the next passage, Mann explains the force that compels Aschenbach to be morally impartial:

The power of the word by which the outcast was cast out heralded a rejection of all moral doubt, all sympathy with the abyss, a renunciation of the leniency implicit in the homily claiming that to understand is to forgive, and what was under way here, indeed, what had come to pass was the miraculous rebirth of impartiality. (Mann 20)

Through the power of his words, Aschenbach realizes that though he feels cast out by those who reject him, he is also no longer bound by some need for others to understand him. If he is able to rise above the scruples of morality, he must get past the need for forgiveness because, if he knows what he writes is the truth, then he can admit to no indiscretions and can have no regrets. Since questions of morality tend to promote disagreement, not unite people’s sensibilities, as art should, his written revelations, then, should reject any moral adherence that sensitive matters seem to necessitate. In order to effect change within himself and pursue his soul’s higher inclinations, Aschenbach must write not for the sake of being understood or acknowledged as some moral negotiator; he must follow the truth of his convictions and write the story that comes forth from the depths of his soul. Though some critics believe that the story of Aschenbach and Tadzio serves to show what happens when a man loses control over his passions and can no longer distinguish between art and life, with the help of Plato’s explication of the nature of the philosopher’s soul,
Mann’s story can be interpreted as revealing the challenges of an artist striving to reach his artistic apex; and as the fine line between art and life begins to disappear, the artist finds that the greatest work he will ever produce is the work he creates for himself.

In the following passage, Mann takes his reader even further into the intimate abyss that Aschenbach so cherishes; Mann seems to be asking whether or not the abandonment of morality as a priority within art will lead the artist to clearly immoral desires and experiences. But then he returns the reader’s attention to the form of the artist’s work which not only frames the lives of his characters and their story, but which ultimately frees him to construct his own unique interpretation of the nature of art, unbound by convention or morality.

Does not moral fortitude beyond knowledge – beyond disintegrative and inhibitory erudition – entail a simplification, a moral reduction of the world and the soul and hence a concomitant intensification of the will to evil, the forbidden, the morally reprehensible? And has not form a double face? Is it not moral and immoral at once – moral as the outcome and expression of discipline, yet immoral, even amoral, insofar as it is by its very nature indifferent to morality, indeed strives to bend morality beneath its proud and absolute scepter? (Mann 20-21)

The absolute scepter is the word; it is at once universal because it can be bequeathed to and understood by one and all; yet it is also absolute because the rhetorician’s own words are forever just that, they are his own. Therefore, it seems that the moral reduction of the world and the soul is a reduction to each individual person and his or her manner of self-expression; this is the moral fortitude that goes beyond knowledge – it takes very little worldly knowledge to be moral or immoral, but it takes a
combination of diligent self-discovery and consistency in conviction to be the kind of philosopher whose work is worthy of being elevated above the ordinary scope of moral norms. As Aschenbach’s journey takes him from the realm of knowledge and sacrifice to a realization of discontent, he begins to learn that there are some needs with which no one but himself can help him with; he is finally ready to experience life with no limitations.

Chapter 3

LOVE

Aschenbach’s Boy

The love affairs of Aschenbach and Haller are meant to represent the kind of experiences that a person may only have once, if at all, in his or her life; they are life-changing, mind-altering and personality shaping. For Aschenbach, Tadzio not only represents a piece of his own youth, but he also represents the kind of forbidden fruit that Aschenbach may have never even had the opportunity to be acquainted with, even if he had he been a boy himself at the time of meeting him. For Haller, Hermine and Maria are the kind of women he would, under normal circumstances, shun as immoral and dirty; in the nadir of his life’s misery, though, he is nearly helpless to resist this extraordinary experience that will undoubtedly change the way he sees himself and that which he feels is the purpose of his life.

For Aschenbach, Tadzio represents a kind of emotional awakening; the artist in him is longing for inspiration, something to motivate his need for creation. Brink points out that the first sign of the entry of Tadzio’s family into the text is on the level
of language; and Aschenbach is enchanted by the fact that he is surrounded by foreigners (Brink 178). “Smiling and murmuring a word in his soft, fuzzy language, [the boy] took his seat, and now, especially as he had turned his full profile to the observer, the latter was once more amazed, indeed, startled by the truly godlike beauty of this mortal being (Mann 49). As Aschenbach continues to see the boy around the hotel and at the beach, he tries to get to know him, indulging in the revelation of petty secrets about him, beginning with his name:

His name was the most often heard. He was clearly sought after, courted, admired. The serious Aschenbach found it a suitable, perfectly satisfying use of his time to guess at or postulate on the name that sounded like Adgio […] its soft consonants and long-drawn-out final u making it at once sweet and wild: “Tadziu!” (Mann 59-60) With fascination, Aschenbach begins to realize that Tadzio’s beauty will present to him even more of a challenge than the ordinary attraction toward a thing of beauty; through this attraction, which, Brink expresses, marks the limit of language, not only is Tadzio’s ordinary speech transformed from language into a realm of pure aesthetics, setting it at the level of music, but also Aschenbach’s desire and ability to describe its beauty are heightened (Brink 179). Among Aschenbach’s first reactions to the inspiration of Tadzio’s uncanny beauty was, inevitably, the urge to write: “at this point in his crisis the stricken man was aroused to production;” using the boy as a model and a muse, he sets up his table on the very beach where Tadzio is playing and ventures into what Brink refers to as “a noble display of linguistic passion” (Mann 85, Brink 177). It is to him a new but artistically exemplary experience:
Nothing gladdens a writer more than a thought that can become pure feeling and a feeling that can become a pure thought [...] nature trembles with bliss when the mind bows in homage to beauty. He longed to work in Tadzio’s presence, to model his writing on the boy’s physique, to let his style follow the lines of that body, which he saw as godlike, and bear its beauty to the realm of the intellect. (Mann 85)

And so Aschenbach allows the boy’s beauty to inspire him and to indulge his emotions without any inhibitions or shame. What’s more, as Aschenbach begins to understand what true beauty is and as he attempts to capture it with a physical description, with words, he realizes that this is exactly the task that his entire literary career has been preparing him for.

Never had he experienced the pleasure of the word to be sweeter, never had he known with such certitude that Eros is in the word than during those dangerously delightful hours when, seated at his rough table under the awning, in full view of his idol, the music of his voice in his ears, he formulated that little essay – a page and a half of sublime prose based on Tadzio’s beauty – the purity, nobility, and quivering emotional tension of which would soon win the admiration of many. (Mann 86)

In the Symposium, when Socrates retells the dialogue between himself and Diotima, who is his teacher on the nature of love, he recalls her describing the manner in which the lover desires a thing of beauty. The lover desires that the object of his affection will become his own; the achievement of this results in the happiness that is the natural desire of each person (Symposium 204d-e). Love, then, Socrates continues, is not just a matter of wanting to possess the object of desire, the good, forever, but also is to give birth, in beauty, as a means of preserving one’s immortality (Symposium 206b-207a).

[The] lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful speeches, in unstinting love of wisdom,
until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty [that is the] goal of Loving. (Symposium 210c-e)

Thus, Aschenbach’s urge to write speeches glorifying his feelings for the boy are the catalyst not only of his deep love but also of his commitment to the disenchanted artist within him who longs for a second chance to reconnect with the true purpose of art; he must write and be moved and dedicate himself wholly to his love and his craft.

Yet he also knows that he is now embarking on a journey not only from which there is no return, but also one for which there can be no logical justification or remorse. Aschenbach idolizes Tadzio; he sets him upon the highest pedestal, as if for the gods themselves to behold; he never forgets, however, that depending on the perspective, all audiences will not see his adoration for the boy this way.

It is surely as well that the world knows only a beautiful work itself and not its origins, the conditions under which it comes into being, for if people had knowledge of the sources from which the artist derives his inspiration they would oftentimes be confused and alarmed and thus vitiate the effects the artist had achieved. How strange those hours were! How oddly enervating the effort! How curiously fruitful the intercourse of mind and body! When Aschenbach put away his work and quit the beach, he felt exhausted and, yes, spent, as if his conscience were reproaching him after a debauch. (Mann 86)

Aschenbach’s conscience is not just touched by the boy’s inspirational beauty, it is attacked; instead of fighting back, though, to ensure that the effects he knows he can produce will be understood, Aschenbach decides to tempt his fate and expose himself to the powerful influence that his own words on paper will have over him. He has come to the realization that he wants nothing more than to finally feel “the intercourse
of mind and body” (Mann 86). This intercourse, then, will not be, for Aschenbach, the simplistic bodily gratification of an ordinary erotic fantasy; it will be the mark of a journey of an artist who has realized that he must look past the world in which he resides to receive the blessings of divine inspiration; he is finally ready to transgress the moral constraints of ordinary society.

Aschenbach, in a sense, studies the boy until he seems to own a mental representation of him; the artist within him seeks to leave no detail about the boy unknown. On one occasion, when the boy spies a Russian family, he suddenly becomes passionately angry for no apparent reason. First, Aschenbach turns away not wanting to see the boy exhibit such a show of nationalistic emotion, but then he is pleasantly taken aback by the feeling of elation; this fascination gives the boy’s “mute divinity a human perspective,” Aschenbach reveals: it made the boy “something worthy of deeper consideration and placed the figure of an adolescent, already remarkable for his beauty, against a background enabling one to take him seriously beyond his years” (Mann 56-57). Soon the observer would come to know every “line and pose of that body so noble, so freely exposed,” and “his wonderment and delicate sensual delight knew no bounds” (Mann 80). Aschenbach cannot help but continue to pursue the boy and reap the rewards of inspiration as he keeps “chiseling with sober passion at the marble block of language, [releasing] the slender form he had beheld in his mind [carefully preserving it to] present to the world as an effigy and mirror of spiritual beauty” (Mann 81). As Aschenbach studies the boy and allows his beauty to inspire him, he seems to be coming closer to the knowledge of goodness and the
nature of love; though he knows not where his infatuation with the boy will lead, he seems to be adequately restrained by the grace of his art – he could never hurt or disrespect his beloved because his duty to the nature of art cannot allow it.

Haller’s Girl

For Hesse, the artist’s connection to love and morality are similarly encompassed in his protagonist’s romantic relationship with another person. Before going home one evening, where he plans to commit suicide, Haller stops at a bar to have a drink and meets a beautiful young girl. Like Aschenbach, he does not even know her name.

All of a sudden there was a human being, a living human being, to shatter the death that had come down over me like a glass case…All of a sudden there were things that concerned me again, which I could think of with joy and eagerness. All of a sudden a door was thrown open through which life came in…A girl had bidden me eat and drink and sleep, and had shown me friendship and had laughed at me and had called me a silly little boy. And this wonderful friend had talked to me of the saints and shown me that even when I had outdone myself in absurdity I was not alone. And she treated me exactly in the way that was best for me at that moment, and so she has since without an exception. She took me under her wing just as I needed, and mocked me too, just as I needed. “You’re not difficult. I wouldn’t mind betting it’s a long time since you have had to obey any one.” She was like a mother to me. In a glimpse, though, now and then I saw how young and beautiful she was. (Hesse 101, 86, 91)

The meeting with Hermine has undoubtedly changed Haller’s life; he is excited from their first meeting and cannot wait until the next. Hermine, though this is a name that Haller has himself given her to commemorate his childhood friend Herman, is at once intoxicating and dangerously profound in her diction as well as countenance. In a way, she suddenly and voluntarily becomes a new obsession for him while it is
unclear what it is that she wants or will gain from him. She is part of a world that he
has never dared to be a part of; yet in her eyes he sees, as in himself, the intense but
dormant realization that only a difficult and sad end can be in store for her.

As if she knows that Haller’s obsession with her may prove too intense,
Hermine arranges for another woman to pose as a temporary distraction for Haller’s
emotional self while he and Hermine develop their more spiritual friendship. “I went
into my bedroom at night and to my indescribable astonishment, dismay, horror and
enchantment found the lovely Maria lying in my bed. Of all the surprises that
Hermine had prepared for me this was the most violent” (Hesse 134). “Violent,” he
calls Hermine’s gift; perhaps he is a bit ashamed to admit just how much he knows he
will enjoy her; perhaps he also wonders how Hermine will feel knowing this. And it
is true, Haller loves to learn from Maria; he describes himself with her as both a child
and beast in the innocence of sex (Hesse 157). So he pursues the fleeting but honest
joys that she bestows upon him; he recalls the many pictures of his life’s memories
and is gladdened that he is inspired to revel in their glory:

In the tender beauty of the night many pictures of my life rose before me who for so
long had lived in a poor pictureless vacancy. Now, at the magic touch of Eros…my
heart stood still between delight and sorrow to find how rich was the gallery of my
life. These pictures…I had forgotten, that they were my life’s possession and all its
worth…Their series was the story of my life, their starry light the undying value of
my being. My life had become weariness. It had wandered in a maze of unhappiness
that led to renunciation and nothingness; it was bitter with the salt of all human
beings; yet it had laid up riches, riches to be proud of. It had been for all its
wretchedness a princely life. Let the little way to death be as it might, the kernel of
this life of mine was noble. It had purpose and character and turned not on trifles, but
on the stars. (Hesse 140-141) There were moments when I felt with a glow that I had only to snatch up my scattered images and raise my life as Harry Haller and as the Steppenwolf to the unity of one picture, in order to enter myself into the world of imagination and be immortal. Was not this, then, the goal set for the progress of every human life? (Hesse 142)

Though he is happy there with Maria, he knows that this happiness is gifted to him for a purpose: he is to be reawakened from his hateful disposition and he is to remember what it is to feel desire for life. He knows that he cannot be content being happy; he perceives the unhappiness that he longs for as that which will let him suffer “with eagerness and lust after death” (Hesse 148). The happiness he feels with Maria satiates his surface desires, “but it is not a happiness to die for…The longing I have is not to keep this happiness forever, but to suffer once again, only more beautifully and less meanly than before. I long for the sufferings that make me ready and willing to die” (Hesse 149). Perhaps the happiness, or unhappiness, that he speaks of is the kind that represents the best and most intense moments of a person’s life; the kind of moments that come in abounding ecstasy and leave with the terrifying sorrow that that experience might represent the apex of a person’s meaningful existence. It is like chasing a fleeting moment, one that may yet be bested, but then again, it may not ever. So Haller desires not only to experience this kind of happiness, but to let it go so that he might return to the silence within which he can collect his thoughts and immortalize them within the medium of his art.

Plato: Love Misunderstood

With the advent of their new and invigorating intoxications, both Aschenbach and Haller become swept up in their romantic affairs. Though they are unsure of
where these escapades will lead them, the artists within them, who they have so delicately cultivated, can only hope that they will not succumb to the debaucheries of reckless infatuation. Aschenbach admits that he observes Tadzio as a “Greek statuary…yet in its purest formal perfection” (Mann 45). Either mocking, hiding behind, or truly devoted to the Platonic idea of love, Aschenbach struggles to account for his feelings as he imagines they should be according to the philosophers of the ages. Socrates and Phaedrus begin their discussions of love with Phaedrus retelling a speech given by Lysias, a mutual acquaintance, who is known for his speeches. Phaedrus relates that Lysias argues that it is better to give your favors to someone who does not love you than to someone who does because it is most practical to grant your favors to those who are best able to return to them. The non-lover, as a true friend, deserves your favor because he will, in turn, share his goods with you when you are older. The lover merely desires the favor; he will take pleasure in the bloom of your youth, and then move on to the next love and boast about it in public (Phaedrus 234a). Though Socrates and Phaedrus do not disclose at this point whether or not they agree on Lysias’ specific descriptions of the lover and the non-lover, they attempt to do his speech-making justice by describing it in its entirety.

Next, Phaedrus’ retelling continues, lovers generally start to desire your body before they know your character or have any experience of your other traits, with the result that even they can’t tell whether they’ll still want to be friends with you after their desire has passed. Non-lovers, on the other hand, are friends with you even before they achieve their goal, and you’ve no reason to expect that benefits received
will ever detract from their friendship with you (Phaedrus 232c-233a). A man in love will wish he had not done you any favors once his desire dies down, but the time will never come for a man who’s not in love to change his mind. A lover keeps his eye on the balance sheet while a non-lover can’t keep a tab on the trouble he’s been through. A lover will praise what you say and do far beyond what is best, partly because he is afraid of being disliked, while a lover will admit that he’s more sick than sound in the head; he’s well aware that he is not thinking straight, but he’ll say he can’t get himself under control (Phaedrus 231a-d).

Furthermore, a lover is easily annoyed, and whatever happens, he will think it was designed to hurt him. That is why a lover prevents the boy he loves from spending time with other people. If you show more sense than he does in looking after your own interests, you will come to quarrel with him. But if a man really does not love you, if it is only because of his excellence that he got what he asked for, then he will not be jealous of the people who spend time with you. If this is so, it would make more sense for you to be afraid of lovers. Thus, you can expect to become a better person if you are won over by a friend, rather than by a lover (Phaedrus 233a-c).

Thinking for a moment about the structure and details of the speech he has just heard, Socrates decides to continue in the same vein, but to add a bit more on the theme of madness. Still, neither he nor Phaedrus are committing to any firm notions of the nature of love; they are simply humoring the previous attempt and analyzing its methodology and organization. Socrates begins by stating that love is some kind of
desire and that we must realize that each of us is ruled by two principles which we follow wherever they lead: one is our inborn desire for pleasure; the other is our acquired judgment that pushes toward what is best. Sometimes these two are in agreement, but there are times when they quarrel inside us; then sometimes one of them gains control, sometimes the other. Now when judgment is in control and leads us by reasoning toward what is best, that sort of self-control is called ‘being in your right mind’; but when desire takes command in us and drags us without reasoning toward pleasure, then its command is known as ‘outrageousness’” (Phaedrus 237a-e).

The unreasoning desire then, the “outrageousness,” that overpowers a person’s considered impulse to do right and is driven to take pleasure in beauty, all-conquering in its forceful drive, takes its name from the word for force and is called love (Phaedrus 238b-c). Thus, Socrates asks, presupposing that the lover is less sane than the non-lover, do we think that anyone could argue that one should favor the non-lover rather than the lover without praising the former for keeping his wits about him or condemning the latter for losing his?” (Phaedrus 235e).

Socrates poses another question: But what benefit or harm is likely to come from the lover or the non-lover to the boy who gives him favors? It is surely necessary that a man who is ruled by desire and is a slave to pleasure will turn his boy into whatever is most pleasing to himself? Now a sick man takes pleasure in anything that does not resist him, but sees anyone who is equal or superior to him as an enemy. That is why a lover will not willingly put up with a boyfriend who is his equal or superior, but is always working to make the boy he loves weaker and inferior to
himself (Phaedrus 238e-239a). That way the boy will give his lover the most
pleasure, though the harm to himself will be severe (Phaedrus 239b). The friendship
of a lover, then, seems to arise without any good will at all; like food, its purpose is to
sate hunger (Phaedrus 241c). This reasoning rests, however, on the interpretation of
illness or madness as being undesirable and detrimental to the lover as well as the
beloved.

If the older man clings to the younger day and night, never willing to leave
him, driven by necessity and goaded on by the sting that gives him pleasure every
time he sees, hears, touches, or perceives his boy in any way at all, so that he follows
him around like a servant, with pleasure, then neither the lover nor his beloved will
succeed in their endeavors (Phaedrus 240c-d). While he is still in love, the lover is
devoted but deceitful; after his love fades he breaks trust with his beloved for the
future, in spite of all the promises he has made (Phaedrus 240e).

All along the youth has been completely unaware that he should never have
given his favors to a man who was in love – and who therefore had by necessity lost
his mind. He should much rather have done it for a man who was not in love and had
his wits about him. Otherwise it follows necessarily that he’d be giving himself to a
man who is irritable, jealous, disgusting, harmful to his property, to his physical
fitness, and “absolutely devastating to the cultivation of his soul, the most valuable
thing to gods and men” (Phaedrus 241b-241c). And though Socrates’ speech seems
necessarily to be just as much a denouncement of love in favor of the sane non-lover
as is Lysias’, he has taken great care to pin its validity on the assumption that
madness is interpreted in a particular context. If madness is irrational, harmful and thus intolerable, then so is love. But before any final judgments are made, it should be noted that it is at least possible that this is not the case.

Mann: Love Misunderstood

Perhaps a case can be made that Aschenbach and Haller are just the kind of lovers that are described by Lysias’ and Socrates’ first attempts at describing love’s nature. If the objects of their desires have forced them to become irrational slaves to beauty and love, then it is possible that they are no more than madmen chasing a meaningless infatuation; their actions are thus intolerable and their stories lack any moral security.

And it certainly seems as though Aschenbach succumbs to the faults of the feverish lover; he makes a point to try to be near the boy whenever he can. Aschenbach sees him “almost continually, the narrow confines and common activities making it only natural that the beautiful creature should be close to him throughout the day with only brief interruptions;” from his hotel window he watches Tadzio and feels “the rapture of his blood, the joy and agony of his soul,” and acknowledges to himself that it is Tadzio who makes it so hard for him to even think about leaving Venice (Mann 73). “With a most felicitous regularity,” mornings on the beach afforded him almost all the time near the boy that Aschenbach can emotionally manage (Mann 78).

…when Tadzio disappeared from the scene, the day seemed over to him, but at the first hint of dawn he would be awakened by a sweet panic, his heart would recall its
adventure, and, finding it impossible to remain in bed, he would rise and, lightly clad against the morning chill, await the sunrise at the open window. (Mann 90)

Like the lover Lysias and Socrates describe above, Aschenbach desires Tadzio because he perceives him as being the most beautiful thing that he has ever laid eyes upon; although he attempts to exercise the temperance which his whole life is based on, he acknowledges that he has little desire to do so.

Aschenbach cannot help but desire to have the boy all to himself. At one point, he notices that Tadzio is “very frail, he is sickly… he’ll probably not live long,” he thinks to himself. What’s more, he “makes no attempt to account for why he felt satisfied or consoled at the thought” (Mann 62). But the lover’s madness explains this quite simply: the lover wants to deprive his beloved of anything that will stand in the way of his belonging to the lover, at all costs.

Aschenbach has indeed released his inhibitions. One morning he sees the boy and thinks that he may say something to him; though he fails to do so, he is elated by the wonder that even the thought of doing so excites.

The step he had failed to take might well have led to something joyous, untroubled, and good, to a salutary sobriety. But it is more likely that the aging man had not desire for sobriety, that he too was taken with his intoxication. Who can unravel the essence, the stamp of the artistic temperament! Who can grasp the deep, instructional fusion of discipline and dissipation on which it rests! For the inability to desire salutary sobriety is tantamount to dissipation. (Mann 88)

Driven to madness, Aschenbach’s life seems to depend on the movements of the boy; he renounces sobriety and the life of discipline that has deprived him of such joys for far too long.
Mann’s Critics: Love Misunderstood

It is at this point that the critics step in to shun the kind of lover who Aschenbach becomes. Lewisohn asserts that Aschenbach allows his moral standards to break down; he becomes a slave to beauty, to desire: “he becomes debased.” Thus, Aschenbach undergoes “a total displacement from one extreme of art to the other, from the cerebral to the physical, from pure form to pure emotion.” Lewisohn concludes that there is a great danger when beauty is severed from moral seriousness, from compassion, and from love (Lewisohn 528). This critique, for the most part, describes the irrational and hurtful lover that Lysias and Socrates entertain; that lover certainly does end up debased and engulfed in the emotions of the physical self—morality is abandoned, compassion is irrelevant, and love is really greed.

Where it diverges, however, is in the fact that this is not really a slave to beauty and desire; according to Plato’s descriptions on the nature of rhetoric, there seems to be a significant distinction between being a lover (of the first kind described) and being a philosopher who loves beauty. The selfish lover cannot possibly appreciate beauty, at least not in the way that beauty deserves, because he attempts to become master over it. He is therefore not a slave to beauty, but only a slave to passion. To desire beauty in the sense that the lover feels the need to acquire it and to keep it only for himself seems to be what Plato would consider to be an immorality against art. If Aschenbach were a slave to beauty, in the Platonic sense, then he would fear and revere its great power; he would devote his life to its study
until he became the philosopher who honored it with even the most meager amount of justice.

Another critic, Ruth Longobardi, in the article *Reading between the Lines: An Approach to the Musical and Sexual Ambiguities of “Death in Venice,”* describes Mann’s moral dilemma as a “double edged sword.” Longobardi poses the question as to whether Mann wants his audience to learn from Aschenbach’s mistakes or to rebuke them all together. She juxtaposes the natural and universal element of artistry and love against the disgust that a homoerotic affair could evoke (Longobardi 330). The result, she concedes, is that the answer does not easily reside on one side of a particular moral sphere since critical assessments of the story often dwell on ambiguities of perspective. Toggling between a rebuke of the erring protagonist – in which death becomes a just punishment for crimes of homoerotic lust – and a depiction of intolerance, the only claim that Longobardi is sure of is that some morality has in fact been breeched (Longobardi 330). For Longobardi, the natural and universal element seems to be that love and desire can lead to immorality, but that they themselves aren’t immoral forces as long as they produce a lesson to dissuade others from doing the same. Similarly, in the Symposium, in the speech of Pausanias, he describes love as being morally complex: “it is neither honorable nor a disgrace – its character depends entirely on the behavior it gives rise to. To give oneself to a vile man in a vile way is truly disgraceful behavior; by contrast, it is perfectly honorable to give oneself honorably to the right man”
(Symposium 183d). The vulgar lover loves the body rather than the soul, rendering his love inconsistent because the beauty that he desires is only temporary.

Longobardi continues by arguing that the devices that distance the narrator from the protagonist, the elevated style and noble tone, which are themselves a form of detachment, and, of course, the tragic ending, all these elements visibly put Mann on the “right” side of morality. On the other hand, she points out that the narrator’s hostile depiction of Aschenbach’s adventures is intended to cause irritation in the reader because it seems that he does not defend Aschenbach, but rather rebukes his increasingly obsessive actions (Longobardi 330). The result is that through the protagonist’s gaze, the audience is either made an accomplice to Aschenbach’s lustful escapade, as he follows Tadzio through the streets of Venice, or else the audience is forced to disengage all sympathies for the stricken lover and perhaps for the story itself. The greatest danger of the story, then, Longobardi reveals, is that it seems that by even suggesting that Aschenbach’s countenance remains artistically inspired, Mann may be trying to ensure that his audience is seduced, and that they seduce, along with Aschenbach (Longobardi 331).

In light of these criticisms, it seems as though Mann may be trying to allude to the fact no human being is without at least the occasional odious desire; the human mind can be, after all, a very curious and boundary-testing entity. The city of Venice provides an ideal setting for any seduction; Aschenbach, in fact, feels a “morose satisfaction” with the officially concealed secret that Venice’s cholera-infested streets are harboring. Like the city officials who want Venice’s tourists to remain seduced,
Aschenbach is in love and concerned only that Tadzio might leave. As he realizes, “not without horror that in the event he would not know what to make of his life. Thus did the man’s infatuation determine his way of thinking; thus did he seek to defend himself and preserve his dignity” (Mann 100, 107). Nearly a desperate man, Aschenbach seems to be taken over with a madness that he hardly understands. “The addled traveler could no longer think or care about anything but pursuing unrelentingly the object that had so inflamed him, dreaming of him in his absence, and, as is the lover’s wont, speaking tender words to his mere shadow” (Mann 105). Aschenbach is now afflicted not only with a deep affection for the boy, but also with the dilemma as to whether or not he should warn Tadzio’s family of the ensuing epidemic.

Devising a plan to approach Tadzio’s mother and perhaps even make contact with the boy, Aschenbach tries to convince himself that warning the family is the right thing to do. “Yet at the same time he felt infinitely far from seriously wishing to take such a step. It would lead him back, restore him to himself, but there was nothing so distasteful as being restored to oneself when one is beside oneself. ‘I shall say nothing.’” (Mann 123-124). Perhaps it is especially at this point that Mann’s audience would rebuke Aschenbach’s morality as a lover. Aschenbach seems to be obsessed with the boy not only beyond artistic necessity, even to the point of negating all of their needs for safety, in light of the impending epidemic. Whether he is just being irrational, or whether his desire has led him to madness, the emotions with which he
grapples cannot be easily dismissed. All in all, he seems to be sure that he cannot risk continuing to be the miserable coward who he has spent his life being.

While critics like Longobardi would have their audience believe that their seduction would reveal an immoral tendency within them and within us all, it may be that this is not quite what Mann has in mind. In fact, it seems very likely that Mann wants his readers to sympathize with Aschenbach’s emotional crisis. Not only can the case be made that the narrator in fact defends and protects Aschenbach, but also that he feels that his hero has earned the right to pursue some great emotional pleasure to appease the suffering and sacrifices that he has so long endured.

Hesse: Love Misunderstood

Thus, Aschenbach and Haller pursue the kind of fantasies that suit their personalities. Aschenbach sees in the boy that which he missed in his own youth; he is admiring the kind of boy he could only have dreamed of being. Haller, in the same sense, is enamored by the uninhibited and coy manner in which his new companions seem to float through life; he longs for lightness because he has shunned the dreams that carry the burden of his destiny. Before Haller completes his manuscript, he is very much like the lover that Lysias and Socrates describe initially. He is looking for the wrong kind of love because he loves himself incorrectly. Hesse describes Haller not only as a man who is generally very unhappy, but also as one who can make others unhappy, when he loves them or they love him:

Many loved him as a refined and clever and interesting man, and were horrified and disappointed when they had come upon the wolf in him. And they had to because Harry wished, as every sentient being does, to be loved as a whole and therefore it
was just with those whose love he most valued that he could least of all conceal and belie the wolf. There were those, however, who loved precisely the wolf in him, the free, the savage, the untamable, the dangerous and strong, and these found it peculiarly disappointing and deplorable when suddenly the wild and wicked wolf was also a man, and had hankerings after goodness and refinement, and wanted to hear Mozart, to read poetry and to cherish human ideals. Usually these were the most disappointed and angry of all; and so it was that the Steppenwolf brought his own dual and divided nature into the destinies of others besides himself whenever he came into contact with them. (Hesse 43)

It is the case, of course, that Haller has, from youth, despised himself to the extent that he is not capable of maintaining a successful romantic relationship; the ones he has are based on mistrust and deception because this is exactly how he treats himself. When he meets Hermine and subsequently Maria, he is not sure how to proceed with their affections; luckily, Hermine’s commanding disposition is not easily resistible, so much so, that he finds it easy to yield to each new adventure. Thus, along with being so intrigued and unusually enamored with Hermine, he does not resist the pleasures that are in store for him with the beautiful and exotic Maria. Though he seems initially to be falling into the same category of lover as Lysias describes, it may be the case that this is the way he needs to see himself before he can act any other way.

Much of his life, he has been led astray by the desires he never knew he was worthy of having; irrational or not, he was, in a sense, a slave to the wolf within, though he did not realize that it would be the wolf, as well as the beautiful Maria, who would show him how to surrender to the right kind of passion.

For the artist in Haller, Maria represents the theatrical world; she is a woman who lives half for art and half for pleasure. He is enthralled by her lifestyle, singularly
innocent and corrupt; it is a lifestyle that he has thus far considered to be trivial, forbidden and degrading (Hesse 138). Despite this world Maria represents, Haller respects her art and the task she sets herself; she can extract the utmost delight from her lovers from the gifts that she is endowed with: her particular figure, her voice, her skin, her temperament:

And in employing every faculty, every curve and line and every softest modeling of her body to find responsive perceptions in her lovers and to conjure up in them an answering quickness of delight…I had caught the scent and the charm of a brilliant and carefully cultivated sensibility and had been enchanted by it. (Hesse 143)

Haller does come to love Maria, but when the time is right, he is just as ready to leave her. The moments that they share are mutually beneficial and nothing more; Maria, by being with Haller, is doing a favor for Hermine. Haller, by being with Maria, is reminded that the art of love-play comes with rules of the game; while the lovers are together, there is no one else in the world; they do not ask about each other’s personal lives and they may not expect anything of each other that does not fall within the domain of their time shared; their relationship is but a transaction. The love Haller and Maria share, though it is a temporary desire reinforced by the kind of passion within which each participant is both a victim of his desire and a slave to pleasure, serves to perform a particular function: it serves to teach Haller an important lesson about himself. Unlike Aschenbach and Tadzio, Haller and Maria seem to take turns in playing the lover and the beloved; by this exchange, Haller will be better able to accept not only love, in its true sense, but also the impending duty that Hermine needs him to accomplish.
Hesse’s Critics: Love Misunderstood

One critic, Joseph Mileck, says that Hesse’s characters “tower like gods chiseled from marble, given breath by mother earth and cursed with insatiable desires” (Mileck Trends 350). Hesse’s heroes, he continues, are predominantly aesthetes who live only in dreams, hopes and anticipation and who shrink from realization; they are self-preoccupied, temperament artists who are paralyzed by chronic indecision and who indulge in romantic morbidity. They are timid souls who ask too little of life, yet expect too much of it, and hence live in perpetual frustration and disillusionment (Mileck Prose 172). And while it seems that if Hesse’s story is assessed according to Lysias’ and Socrates’ first description on love, then Mileck’s assessment may not be too harsh. Haller’s crisis, at times, may seem larger than life; his hatred for himself can be interpreted to manifest itself in morbidity and seems to engulf everything around him as the dreams within which he becomes lost begin to encroach into the lives of others and into reality itself. Perhaps Haller does not allow himself to ask enough of life and perhaps his expectations of what life should entail cannot but leave him disillusioned and afraid to make any important decisions for himself. These, however, are only speculations; as with Lysias’ and Socrates’ initial portrayal of love, Mileck’s critique is subject to interpretation. If Haller’s crisis, like the eccentricities of the other characters, is only an irrationally induced illness, then their intentions and actions are simply products of the same.

The question of justice is indeed a prominent one in the discussion of how to interpret Haller’s actions within the magic theatre. The killing of Hermine seems to
be a wholly selfish act, out of jealousy, a result of betrayal, and without mercy.
However it can also be understood as a surrender to unbridled passion, an artistic
release, and a sacrifice to the gods of beauty and love. As a result of this final act,
Haller finally finds the kind of suffering for which he is willing to live, to kill and to
die. In the depths of his soul’s assertions, he finds the strength to defend himself; as a
defense for life itself, Haller commits a crime of passion. In a room of the theatre
 titled ‘How One Kills For Love,’ Haller reaches into his pocket and finds a knife. He
looks into a mirror and after at first seeing a wolf, he sees himself, weary and pale. He
says to himself: “What are you doing here? I am waiting for death” (Hesse 210).

What I saw was a simple and beautiful Hermine and the beautiful Pablo, side by side
in a sleep of deep exhaustion after love’s play. Beneath Hermine’s left breast was a
fresh round mark, darkly bruised – a love bite of Pablo’s beautiful, gleaming teeth.
There, where the mark was, I plunged in my knife to the hilt. Her wish was fulfilled.
Before she had ever been mine, I had killed my love. I had done the unthinkable, and
now I kneeled and stared and did not know at all what this deed meant, whether it
was good and right or the opposite…My little happiness and love were like this
staring mouth, a little red upon a mask of death…Had I stopped the heart of all life?
(Hesse 209-210)

Is this act, then, unthinkable? What does it come to mean for Haller? Does morality
necessitate that it was good or bad or for some greater purpose? Freeman suggests
that some resolution of Haller’s conflicted self is imminent and that the resolution
achieved through Hermine’s murder is not a positive one on account that it leaves him
shattered. Freeman posits that Haller cannot recognize and accept the truth of the
aesthetic illusion and kills Hermine as an act against the vision of his own creation
(Freeman 280).
Plato: Love and Madness

Just after he finishes his alteration of Phaedrus’ rendition of Lysias’ speech on love, Socrates stops as though he has heard a voice coming from his very spot, forbidding him to leave until he has made atonement for some offense against the gods. “I recognize my offense clearly now. In fact, the soul too, my friend, is a sort of seer… I was disturbed by a very uneasy feeling… that for offending the gods I am honored by men” (Phaedrus 242c-d). Desiring to right the wrong he suddenly feels he has committed, Socrates begins again. He asks Phaedrus if it isn’t the case that Love is the son of Aphrodite. And if Love is a god or something divine – which they agree he is – he can’t be bad in any way; and yet the previous two speeches spoke of him as if he were. That, the two men agree, is an offense against Love (Phaedrus 242e). And so Socrates begins to recant all that has been said of Love before.

The opponent of Love, then, Socrates begins, who claims to interpret the lover’s madness as being harmful to his beloved, must show that love is not sent by the gods as a benefit to a lover and his boy. And the promoters of Love must prove the opposite: that this sort of madness is given by the gods to ensure good fortune (Phaedrus 245b-c). The opponent of Love would prevail, then, if madness were bad. But in fact, Socrates asserts, the best things have come from madness, when it is given as a gift from the god (Phaedrus 244a). As such, there are two kinds of madness, one produced by human illness, the other by “a divinely inspired release from normally accepted behavior” (Phaedrus 244d). By this distinction, it becomes the case that neither the opponent nor the promoter of Love is mistaken regarding
whether madness is harmful; they are simply committing the dialectic mistake of misrepresenting madness as having only one nature.

Furthermore, within the divine kind of madness, there are four parts and these are connected to four gods: inspiration comes from the prophet Apollo, the mystic from Dionysus, the poet from the Muses, and the fourth part of madness is attributed to Aphrodite and to Love, the madness of love being the best and noblest (Phaedrus 265b). Thus, when Socrates refers to the madness of Love as being a divinely inspired release from normal behavior, it is precisely by this inspiration that the maddened lover achieves the transcendence over social morality; because his thoughts and actions are guided by Love, the speeches that he gives birth to can be nothing but honorable, to his beloved as well as to the future souls that will be nourished by his words.

Thus, Socrates continues, inspired by Love, the man who sees beauty among men is reminded of true beauty, of an image he saw when his soul was with the gods. But when his soul grows wings and flutters in its eagerness to rise up, he is unable to do so: “he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below; he is beside himself and his experience is beyond comprehension, as he is unable to grasp what it is that he is seeing – and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad” and “justice and self-control do not shine out through their images down there…” (Phaedrus 249d-e, 250a-b). Again, the lover, having “gone mad” by his inability to understand what he is experiencing, seems to be out of his mind; it is from
this experience, however, that his philosophical inclinations toward knowledge move him to articulate his experience.

Though wisdom cannot help him understand what he is seeing, the perception of beauty he encounters when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, makes him shudder and a fear comes over him. Then he gazes at this beauty with reverence due a god, and if he weren’t afraid people would think him completely mad, he would sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god. Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him and melts the places where the wings [of his soul] once grew, places that were long ago closed off with hard scabs to keep the sprouts from coming back; but as nourishment flows in, the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul. Now the whole soul seethes and throbs in this condition (Phaedrus 251b-c).

Then, Socrates continues, all its pain subsides and is replaced by joy. When, however, the lover is separated from the boy and the stream of beauty runs dry, then the openings of the passages in which the feathers grow are dried shut and keep the wings from sprouting with the result that the whole soul is stung all around, and the pain simply drives it wild – but then, when it remembers the boy in its beauty, it recovers its joy. From the outlandish mix of these two feelings – pain and joy – comes anguish and helpless raving: in its madness the lover’s soul cannot sleep at night or stay put by day; it rushes, yearning, wherever it expects to see the person who has that beauty. Though they are maddening, the soul is not at all willing to give
up these extraordinary feelings; nothing or no one can become more important than the beautiful boy. The soul forgets mother and brothers and friends entirely and does not care at all if it loses its wealth through neglect. And as for proper behavior, the soul despises the whole business; it is even willing to sleep like a slave as near to the object of its longing as it is allowed to get. This is the experience, Socrates states, we humans call love (Phaedrus 252a-b).

Mann: Love and Madness

Though Aschenbach wants to be a wise lover, he cannot help but find it difficult to cope with his shame. The world he comes from is the world within which such relentless passion is shameful; it is the evil that drives immorality. Aschenbach defends himself by evoking Phaedrus’ speech in the Symposium: “The lover is more divine than the beloved, because god dwells in the former, not the latter;’ [this] is perhaps the most delicate, most derisive thought ever thought by man and the source of all roguery and deep-seated lust in longing” (Mann 83-85). The inspired lover, then, must find a balance between divine sanction and public rebuke; to escape the shame he perceives to be upon him, Aschenbach retreats into isolation in order that he might enjoy his love if only within the depths in his own mind.

Though his obsession seems to have rendered him immoral and obsessed, the kind of person who Aschenbach has trained himself to be would never abuse or insult the right to love; though he has not previously allowed himself this experience, perhaps thinking it frivolous to his cause, he now understands that it is precisely what he needs to finish his philosophical tutelage. Perhaps his evocation of Plato is a
means of looking for sanction within the literature of his idols; perhaps his fear of public rebuke brings forth from a certain kind of desperation. But even though in the *Phaedrus* Plato assigns both the lover and the beloved with an equal responsibility and divine ascension, Aschenbach’s relation to it through the *Symposium’s* quote seems to have more to do with the pressures put on him by his literary audience than with the feelings of love he knows he cannot abandon.

Perhaps Aschenbach is also struggling with the dialectical distinction between the madness of human illness and that of Love’s divine inspiration. And while social norms may continue to rebuke the lover’s pursuits as frivolous, Aschenbach’s life and literary career have shown to reflect the mark of greatness. In fact, as a renowned author, he has made a great impact upon his world, even to the extent that his writing is used to teach youth in schools. Like the madness of a prophet, Plato might grant that Aschenbach has the kind of natural talent that deems him worthy of being chosen by the gods to study the beauty of his world and then convey its greatness and mysterious effects through his writing. Likewise, it certainly seems as though Aschenbach could be inspired by the Muses. From his youth he was motivated to sacrifice what was necessary to produce his life’s ambition; his entire career has been devoted to the exploration of the relationship between nature and art. He has cultivated his senses and his countenance in a way that has produced great results and fame. When properly stimulated, Aschenbach would be able to rise to the task that would be his magnum opus, perhaps even his culminating work; and so he prepares:

He had the feeling that the eros which had taken possession of him was in a way singularly appropriate and suited for such a life [as his]. Had [Eros’ affliction] not
been held in particular esteem amongst the bravest of nations? Countless warrior heroes in older times had willingly borne its yoke, for no action imposed by a god could be deemed humiliating, and actions that might otherwise have been condemned as signs of cowardice – genuflections, oaths, importunate supplications, and servile behavior – such actions were accounted no shame to a lover but rather earned him praise. (Mann 105-106)

Thus Aschenbach hopes that he is indeed worthy of praise; though he feels possessed by his madness, he will not run from the feelings that he himself barely understands. He feels as if he is meant for some great task, he desires literary immortality, and he pursues his soul’s newly realized desire as if he is being directed by some superior authority.

And so Aschenbach does come to worship the boy; he pursues the boy as an idol with the pure fascination that his soul cannot but long for. He has taken great pains to become the kind of artist who would be worthy of such an experience and he is prepared to sacrifice his whole self for the reward that can only be called divine – the opportunity to be in the presence of his beloved beauty for just a bit longer, just long enough, in fact, to collect his thoughts and immortalize them forever in the beautiful prose that are the expressions of the artist’s soul. And though the boy is more beautiful than words can convey, Aschenbach marvels, knowing he has never felt this way before; he realizes that the language that he thinks he has mastered cannot reproduce the physical beauty that he is so in awe of; it can only praise it (Mann 95).
And though the kind of work to which he has devoted his life cannot compare
to the task at hand, Aschenbach is invigorated by his love and his new sense of
purpose.

Aschenbach’s soul seems to meet its idol in just such a manner: “Joy, surprise, and
admiration may thus have shown openly in his face when his eyes met those of the
boy.” And as Tadzio returns Aschenbach’s glance, he smiles “an effusive, intimate,
charming, unabashed smile” from which the recipient hurries off with it “as if it were
a fatal gift.” Astonished at the feelings welling up inside of him, Aschenbach utters:
“You mustn’t smile like that! One mustn’t smile like that at anyone!” Then he pauses
and whispers ‘the standard formula of longing’ – “I love you” (Mann 96)! The fatal gift that Aschenbach feels he is receiving from the boy is more than likely
just a product of his own imagination. Nonetheless, its potency and power of
restorative invigoration for Aschenbach’s aching soul is an unparalleled experience as
compared to the life he has previously devoted himself to. Whether or not
Aschenbach is morally in the right for even fantasizing about an affair with the boy,
the feelings he experiences are just as nourishing to his soul and provide inspiration
for the thoughts he longs to put on paper.

Hesse: Love and Madness

Like Aschenbach, Haller suffers deeply at the hands of the inspiration he fears
and struggles to understand. Nearly desperate to emerge whole from the madness that
society around him tries to convince him is nothing but destructive, Haller agrees to
get help from the most unlikely of people and places. Perhaps it is not the case,
though, that Haller’s circumstances require any resolution at all; in fact, it seems
reasonable to assume that within his journey of self-discovery he will realize various
truths about himself that will allow him to mature emotionally; he has already
decided that no matter the suffering, he is willing to see it through, if only to find out
just what he is capable of enduring. Like the Platonic lover, Haller must overcome the
impulse to abandon a life that others see as being merely physically ill; he must
recognize that the realization of a shattered self is the first step toward reunification.
The transgression achieved by embracing love and the expressive inclinations of his
soul sanctify the actions he must perform to overcome his fears; released from the
clutches of truth and seriousness, Haller becomes free to enact his culminating
experience.

Thus, the manifestation of Haller’s madness is played out in the magic theatre.
Within its walls, each character seems to be a representation of the various aspects of
Haller’s self; they act as guides or teachers, but they also stand to reveal the
conflicting attitudes of Haller’s own personality. Pablo, posing as the arbiter of the
magic theatre experience, instigates Haller’s journey by challenging him to look deep
within himself; he instills upon Haller the importance of humor so that Haller can
learn to laugh at himself as he is confronted by the disappointment he finds in his own
reflection. Like the charioteer and his horses, through different scenarios in various
rooms of the theatre, Haller must discover what his soul needs and how it will strive
to attain it; he must learn that it is he and no one else who is in charge of his
personality, his sexuality and his ability to love.

Pablo takes it upon himself to welcome Haller into the theatre and prompt his
initiation into its magical world. He explains to Haller that the theatre can provide an
escape, “a world beyond time.” He tells Haller that this world is the world of Haller’s own soul and it is only within himself that this other reality exists. Pablo’s theatre can simply provide the opportunity for Haller to explore the picture gallery that is his soul’s wisdom (Hesse 175). The man who he is upon entering the theatre, though, is not yet the man who could be capable of killing Hermine; it is not even the case, before he has undergone the theatre’s journey, that Haller is really capable of loving Hermine. The purpose of the journey, then, is to come to know himself. Pablo tells Haller, “You have no doubt guessed long since that the conquest of time and the escape from reality, or however else it may be that you choose to describe your longing, means simply the wish to be revealed of your so-called personality. This is the prison where you lie” (Hesse 176).

Pablo hands Haller a mirror within which to take a good look at himself. Within it Haller sees the reflection of an “uneasy, self-tormented, inward laboring and seething being.” Looking further inward, Haller sees the Steppenwolf, “a shy, beautiful, dazed wolf with frightened eyes that smoldered” (Hesse 186). And he thinks to himself, “I am condemned to live” (Hesse 175). Like Aschenbach who decides to stay in Venice to be near his beloved boy, Haller must make the decision to follow his instincts. Perhaps Haller means that by acknowledging the images looking back at him, he can no longer deny that for some time his life has been a miserable existence and that he has no one to blame for this but himself. Between the intellect that they think they have so fervently nurtured and the chaos that plagues their souls, Aschenbach and Haller have satiated themselves with the banal comfort that comes
with reducing one’s life to happenstance. Now each has a chance to fight their previously surrendered ability to desire, to feel pleasure, and to love; in the magic theatre as in the streets of Venice, though, with the help of their guides, each man will once again see a glimpse of the life he should have been living all along.

The divinely inspired lover’s appreciation for life should, in a sense, be a sensual experience. And sensuality, as the catalyst for artistic integration between the intellect and chaos, must be experienced without constraint. For Haller, the constraints that his entire will to live hides timidly behind must be overcome in order for him to accept the freedom that desire and creativity demand. In a room of the theatre titled ‘All Girls Are Yours,’ Haller finds the life-thirsty man who he once was:

All that I had done and thought and had been since, fell away from me and I was young again. An hour, a few minutes before, I had prided myself on knowing what love was and desire and longing, but it had been the love and the longing of an old man. Now I was young again and this glowing current of fire that I felt in me, this mighty impulse, this unloosening passion…was young and new and genuine…But far deeper and stronger and more awful than all there burned and leaped in me the flame of love, the hunger of sex, the fever and the foreboding of desire. (Hesse 197)

Every girl that he had once loved in youth, he encounters in this room and loves her again; only now he is able to inspire each with love. He discovers that there is something that he can give to each and something each can give to him (Hesse 201). And he is astonished to find how rich is his life: “the seemingly poor and loveless life of the Steppenwolf…had been in the opportunities and allurements of love. I had missed them…I had made haste to forget them” (Hesse 202). And though he leaves the room in reverence for his life gone by, he realizes that all this has been in
preparation for what is to come, because he must soon confront Hermine, the true object of his desire.

To really love, however, Pablo reminds Haller, he must first learn to laugh at himself; this, then, is the true aim of the theatre’s entertainment. True humor, he says, begins when a man ceases to take himself seriously (Hesse 177). Humor, Hesse pleads, is “the most inborn and brilliant achievement of the spirit…[it] attains to the impossible and brings every aspect of human existence within the rays of its prism;” humor alone allows a person to live without possessions and without conventional, but irrelevant, worldly wisdoms (Hesse 55). Especially for the artist, it is imperative to utilize the “imaginary and yet sovereign” world of humor (Hesse 54). The riddle of existence, then, that Haller must recognize, is that he must take a good look at himself; he must venture deep into the chaos of his own soul: “Man and wolf would then be compelled to recognize one another without masks of false feeling and to look one another straight in the eye” (Hesse 55).

As it turns out, what Haller is really seeking is acceptance into the realm of the immortals like Goethe and Mozart; they are the muses who inspire his artistic prowess. In order to be one of them, he must learn to laugh and overcome the paralyzing nihilism that perpetuates his self-disgust. Goethe comes to Haller and tells him that the immortals like he and Mozart do not like things to be taken seriously because it does them injustice; they like joking, he says, because seriousness is but an accident of time; it consists of putting too high a value on time. “In eternity there is
no time. Eternity is a mere moment, just long enough for a joke” (Hesse 97). Mozart, Goethe explains to Haller,

\[ \ldots \text{did not make pretensions in his own life to the enduring and the orderly and to exalted dignity as you did. He did not think himself so important! He sang his divine melodies and died. He died young – poor and misunderstood – I believe that the struggle against death, the unconditional and self-willed determination to live, is the motive power behind the lives and activities of all outstanding men.} \] (Hesse 96)

Thus Goethe urges Haller to forget the notion that the desperate clinging to the self and to life are the surest way to eternal death; it is the power to strip one’s self naked, to die content with the eternal surrender of the self that begets immortality. When Haller worships his favorites among the immortals…he must abandon the tendency to explain their perfect being as a supreme and special gift in favor of the realization that their talents are the outcome of immense powers of surrender and suffering, of their indifference to the ideals of the bourgeois, and of their patience under that last extremity of loneliness (Hesse 63). He further cautions Haller that he must not lie to himself, when he employs his wolf-theory.

The wolf-theory, Haller is warned, cannot be expected to explain so complex a man as he is by the “artless division into wolf and man” (Hesse 57). In fact, if one considers the Steppenwolf from this standpoint it will be clear why he suffers so much. While Haller believes that “two souls are far too many for a single breast and must tear the breast asunder,” what the immortals seek to teach him is that they are on the contrary far too few; when Haller attempts to understand himself this way, he “does shocking violence to his poor soul by means of so primitive an image…”(Hesse 60).
For it appears to be an inborn and imperative need of all men to regard himself as a unit...And if ever the suspicion of their manifold being dawns upon men of unusual powers and of unusually delicate perceptions, so that, as all genius must, they break down the illusion of the unity of the personality and perceive that the self is made up of a bundle of selves, that have only to say so and at once the majority puts them under lock and key, calls science to aid, establishes schizomania and protects humanity from the necessity of hearing the cry of truth from the lips of these unfortunate persons...A man, therefore, who gets so far as making the supposed unity of self two-fold is already almost a genius, in any case a most exceptional and interesting person. (Hesse 58)

What Haller must do, then, is to come to terms with himself, get to know himself; he must free his neglected soul, meet himself face to face in the mirrors of the theatre’s rooms, and learn to laugh at that which he shrinks from with such deathly fear (Hesse 56). Instead of narrowing his world and simplifying his soul, Goethe tells him, he will have to absorb more of the world and take all of it up in his painfully expanded soul; if he is ever to find peace, the reunion with God will require the expansion of the soul until it is able once more to embrace the All (Hesse 64). Haller’s greatest crime, then, is that he cannot see, even though he considers himself an artist possessed of insightful perceptions, that a great deal else exists within him besides and behind the wolf. Goethe scoffs at him, “Consider all that he imputes to ‘man’! All that is cowardly and apish, stupid and mean – while to the wolf, only because he has not succeeded in making himself its master, is set down all that is strong and noble” (Hesse 65).

The mirrors of the magic theatre, then, will allow Haller to confront a reflection that essentially represents all of humanity. To himself, he is the often
rebuked, lone artist who is afraid of whom his work will offend and how his ideals will be misunderstood. Perhaps he is influenced far too strongly by the world around him such that he forgets that the muses that possess him urge him to produce a timeless story, one that will inspire and enchant generations to come, regardless of how current critics may receive him. In any case, the story he is destined to write must be written and the mirror into which he must gaze will show him what he needs to see.

Hesse’s use of mirrors provides the story with a full range of perspectives. Within the world of mirrors, magic becomes a hidden faculty of control; perception of self and others creates an opposition of sense and intellect within which each player, who is then able to create his or her own reality and subsequently find a way into the realities of the others. Haller, as the forlorn artist, is faced not only with confronting his real self, but also with discovering what an artist’s true relationship to his experiences is. Seeing the world at it stares back at him through the mirror, the poet who loves all that is beautiful in life is forced to accept the variety of perspectives that the magic theatre seeks to offer; within the world of mirrors and magic, each character and scenario may surrender the ascetic control that in the external world fuels the struggle between person and persona. Through the safe surrender that the magic theatre allows, Haller can allow himself to give in to the allure of passion, sensuality, and suffering at its most intense.

Chapter 4

IMMORTALITY
In the *Symposium*, Agathon’s speech states that Love has power over all of the gods; through justice, moderation, and bravery, the god is so skilled a poet that he can make others into poets: once Love touches him, anyone becomes a poet (*Symposium* 196d-e). Phaedrus’s speech describes the god of Love as giving humans the greatest goods – there is a certain guidance each person needs for his whole life, if he is to live well and nothing imparts this guidance as well as love (*Symposium* 193c). Aristophanes adds that there’s just one way for the human race to flourish: we must “bring love to its perfect conclusion;” if we treat the gods with due reverence, they will restore us to our original nature and by healing us, they will make us happy (*Symposium* 193d).

As such, Pausanias, in his speech, asserts that the freedom given to the lover by both gods and men according to their custom is immense. “In our city we consider the lover’s desire and the willingness to satisfy it as the noblest things in the world” (*Symposium* 183b-c). Finally, Eryximachus adds that the love felt by good people or by those whom such love might improve in this regard must be encouraged and protected. The lover must, however, be careful to enjoy his pleasures without slipping into debauchery – “the problem of regulating the appetite so as to be able to enjoy a fine meal without unhealthy aftereffects” (*Symposium* 187e). Eryximachus continues to warn that when the elements of love are in harmony with one another, their mixture is temperate, and so is the climate; no harm can come to the lover or his beloved. But when the sort of Love that is crude and impulsive controls the seasons, he brings
death and destruction. Such is the power of Love – so varied and great that in all
cases it might be called the absolute giver of happiness and good fortune, providing
the bonds of human society, in accordance with the gods above (Symposium 188a-d).

As it is in the soul that love begins, Socrates gives a detailed description of
how the soul reacts when it encounters an object of beauty: when the charioteer of a
man’s soul looks love in the eye, his entire soul is suffused with a sense of warmth
and starts to fill with tingles and the goading of desire. As for the horses, the one who
is obedient to the charioteer is still controlled, then as always, by its sense of shame,
and so prevents itself from jumping on the boy. The other one, however, no longer
responds to the whip or the goad of the charioteer; it leaps violently forward and does
everything to aggravate its yokemate and its charioteer, trying to make them go up to
the boy and suggest to him the pleasures of sex. At first the other two resist, angry in
their belief that they are being made to do things that are dreadfully wrong.

At last however, when they see no end to their trouble, they are led forward,
reluctantly agreeing to do as they have been told. So they are close to their beloved
now, and they are struck by the beloved’s face as if by a bolt of lightning and when
the charioteer sees that face, his memory is carried back to the real nature of Beauty
(Phaedrus 253e, 254a-b). When a bad horse has suffered this same thing time after
time, it stops being so insolent; now it is humble enough to follow the charioteer’s
warnings, and when it sees an object of beauty it dies of fright, with the result that
now at last the lover’s soul follows its beloved in tempered reverence and awe
(Phaedrus 254e).
Then, through the lover, the stream of beauty goes back to the object of beauty and sets him aflutter. It enters through his eyes, which are its natural route to the soul; there it waters the passages for the wings, starts the wings growing, and fills the soul of the beloved with love in return. Then the beloved is in love, but has no idea what he loves. He does not realize that he is seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror. So when the lover is near, the beloved’s pain is relieved just as the lover’s is, and when they are apart each yearns as much as he is yearned for, “because he has a mirror image of love in him” (Phaedrus 255c-d). These are the ways in which the souls of the lover and the beloved are tamed by love and beauty.

Mann: The Taming of the Soul

I suggested before that I do not believe that Mann is presenting a moral dilemma in terms of whether or not Aschenbach should love Tadzio; with the illumination of the nature of the love from the Symposium and Socrates’ second speech to Phaedrus, it becomes clear that the nature of the soul is such that it cannot ignore that which it comes to find beautiful or who it comes to love; the soul is itself like an artist who can only interpret and react to the world around it; it is the mind which must undergo vigorous training from the experiences it encounters in order that it will guide the soul’s potentially unbridled passions. Aschenbach’s mind is indeed like a sharpened knife; he has knowingly come on this holiday in search of the kind of stimulation that he has been depriving his mind of his whole career; he has come to Venice to create his magnum opus and this is exactly what the fates long to see him do.
Self control, Plato maintains, is the key to virtue and happiness; Aschenbach and Haller both must refrain from giving in to the desperation of fear; if they fear failure, then they will subconsciously create the circumstances that produce it; if they maintain order within their soul, then they will find happiness whether or not they come to ‘posses’ the beauty they covet, since possession is not the goal of love.

The moral, then, Plato warns, is not to allow the vicious element of the soul to enslave the virtuous one; the mind must, in order to please the lover and his beloved, show restraint and love with a moderation that will ensure a long-term happiness, not a short term debauchery. The lover must follow the beloved in modesty and holy fear; for Plato, this seems to mean that a mutual respect of life and self-worth are necessary compliments to any love affair.

He almost felt he was sitting there to keep watch over the boy as he rested…yet constantly guarding the noble figure a little way off to his right. And he was infused with a paternal affection, the attraction that one who begets beauty by means of self-sacrifice feels for one who is inherently beautiful. (Mann 61)

For Aschenbach, this may mean that no matter how intense his feelings are for the boy, he must remain an observer from a distance; he must maintain the boundaries that are set by society, by the boy’s family, and by the boy himself. Put simply, this means that if the only real love affair that Aschenbach is allowed to pursue is the one that happens within his mind alone, then that is where he must keep it; for in the world of his own creation, Aschenbach is free to feel and experience as he chooses – the story he creates from the truths of his heart are his own and carry the weight of the inclination of the soul.
While it can be said that Aschenbach may have expected his “magnum opus” to be something more tangible than a few notebook pages of the description of a fourteen-year-old boy, what his final artistic act comes to be is indeed much more than that. In a way, Aschenbach comes to experience ultimate truth; he becomes one with the abyss he has long shrank from. While Brink suggests that the truth is allied with death and can be known only through it, there seems to be one act even more revealing of Aschenbach’s humanity than his passage into death – that is, his emotional surrender of all that has been his life (Brink 187). Brink maintains that Aschenbach can only know truth in death because it is his only escape from the betrayals of his life. He also suggests that perhaps it is the city’s evil secret, together with the one in the depths of Aschenbach’s heart, that is the key to Aschenbach’s real betrayal: “It is not his corrupting love of the innocent boy, not even his sacrifice of life to the pursuit of the aesthetic, but his betrayal of language as he colludes with silence, its original enemy and antithesis” (Brink 181). But it does not seem that this is quite right. Could it be more likely that Mann would not want his audience to believe that Aschenbach the artist has failed in some way, not against art, his mastery of language, or against his soul’s final desired triumph? In fact, perhaps it is not that he has betrayed anything, but that he has sacrificed all that he is to come to terms with the true purpose of art and beauty.

Brink further builds his case with the claim that “the beauty which Aschenbach so desperately sought to confront directly, to possess, to communicate with, remains forever elusive; and for the artist who has only the word – a word
which defiles beauty – this is too much to bear” (Brink 187). But it may be the case that this claim cannot be substantiated; not only does Aschenbach have no real need to confront the boy, but the words on paper that do no justice to his beauty nonetheless do not defile it. As for the presence of the boy being in any way too much for Aschenbach to bear, it seems to be the case that Aschenbach would do anything to continue to watch him from afar and scribble tawdry notes upon a page that no one may ever read. At this point, it is the experience itself that Aschenbach values above anything; he has few expectations from it and it has already given him more joy than any other event of his life.

While Brink thinks that for Aschenbach beauty remains unattainable, it does not seem to be the case that Aschenbach even seeks to possess it; in the end, Aschenbach willingly gives up his need for the world, for his rhetorical art, and even his beloved, as he drifts off into the abyss. And he is completely content to bid farewell to the companion who, at least in his own mind, seems to have provided him with exactly what he needed at this time in his life, allowing Aschenbach to make his final exit, his soul finally at peace.

Likewise, artistically, it is not necessary that Aschenbach must be able to express what he feels with words because his feelings are immortalized in his thoughts and in his soul. Therefore, the case can be made that it is not Aschenbach who betrays language, but language that betrays him. This is because he comes to realize that language can no longer give him the satisfaction that he thinks it has given him for so long; in fact, the use of language would now not only prove to be
insignificant in the face of the kind of beauty Aschenbach perceives himself to be in
the presence of, but furthermore, it is likely that his readers would, if they knew the
source of his inspiration, rebuke the passion that Aschenbach would like to put words
to; an audience might misunderstand it for something vicious or vile; kept safe in his
thoughts, Aschenbach’s only audience is the gods and his own soul.

Hesse: The Taming of the Soul

Haller’s final experience in the magic theatre greets him with this heading:
Tonight at the magic theatre / For madmen only / Price of admittance your mind /
Hermine is in hell. If then, hell is the place to where Haller must go in order to find
his own dark secrets, Hermine becomes the perfect lure for him to chase, that is, she
is the perfect motivator (if he imagines that he must go to hell to save her), for him to
stand up to his fears (Hesse 164). The importance of Haller’s relationship with
Hermine becomes most clear to him after the room where All Girls Are [His]. Even
until now he thought of nothing but her. “I expected everything from her. I was ready
to lay everything at her feet…She was my release and my way to freedom. She had to
teach me to live or teach me to die” (Hesse 104). To Haller, Hermine is like life itself,
he treasures her ability to live so entirely in the present; she breaks through his
isolation and forces him to appreciate life’s simple pleasures: to dance, to laugh, to
live. On the day he meets her, she tells him that the reason she means so much to him
is because she is a kind of mirror for him; there’s something in her that answers and
understands him. They are the same kind of person, she declares; they are the kind of
people who “demand the utmost of life and yet cannot come to terms with its stupidity and crudeness” (Hesse 125-126).

Telling Haller exactly what he wants and needs to hear, Hermine describes the circumstance that is their fate. She tells him that as an artist and a thinker he has always been on the track of what is great and eternal, disregarding the aspects of life that he considers trivial and petty. But the heightening of the senses, proliferated by his inclination towards art and writing, has increased his needs and deepened his sufferings. Despair, she continues, has overtaken him and “all that he once knew and loved and revered as beautiful and sacred, all the belief [he] once had in mankind and our high destiny, has been of no avail and has lost its worth and gone to pieces” (Hesse 149).

Whoever wants to live and enjoy his life today, Hermine confides, finds no home in this trivial world (Hesse 151). They who ask too much from life find themselves longing for something beyond this world, for an eternity at the back of time; this, she says, is the kingdom of truth. In eternity is where the music of Mozart belongs, the poetry of the great poets and the heroic sacrifices of the saints who give a great example to men.

But the image of every true act, the strength of every true feeling, belongs to eternity just as much, even though no one knows of it or sees it or records it or hands it down to posterity. In eternity there is no posterity. [Eternity] is the kingdom of on the other side of time and appearances. It is there we belong…It is that which the heart strives for. And for that reason, Steppenwolf, we long for death. (Hesse 153)

With this speech he remembers what she said to him the first time they met: I mean to make you fall in love with me, and it is part of my calling. I need you…for something
very important and beautiful too…You won’t find it easy, but you will do it. You will carry out my command and – kill me (Hesse 108, 110). Clearly the purpose of Hermine’s enlightening monologue and request for death are a part of the greater lesson that Haller is to learn; as an artist, he must find peace while he still inhabits the world of the mediocre; he must learn to laugh at the trivialities that once enraged him and he must acquiesce to the inner suffering that is his soul’s cry for love and acceptance. In the end, it is not humor that will enable him to assume the stance of the immortals, but love. He must learn to love the wolf within him; it is love alone that will help him realize the value of his many souls.

The killing of Hermine is a grand artistic act; this is what he must sacrifice to regain control of his self and to let go of the weight that his emotional burdens have placed upon him. Through the creative imagination that the theatre allows Haller to explore, he is able to unify a seemingly contradictory flow of experiences with the active forms of his imagination; the hostile world that his mind has become is allowed to roam free, unencumbered by the real world, to indulge in the illusion and detachment that the magic of the theatre provides an ideal environment for. When unity is achieved, art can take on the form of the imagination and sustain it through time.

Freeman labels Hesse as a moralist on account of his attempts to “penetrate to the depth of the human psyche.” As an artist, though, Hesse, like Plato, seems to be stressing the importance of transcending the constraints of morality; he is not so much “questioning aestheticism by reconquering a piece of the world,” as Freeman
describes, as he is using it to assert that aestheticism is an individual’s playground within which each artist can do as he or she pleases. Freeman continues to say that Hesse allows his hero “to be sacrificed at the altar of beauty in that losing battle against a hostile world” (Freeman 275). It seems that Hesse’s hero would rather be a willing sacrifice at beauty’s altar and that there is no battle or piece of the world that needs to be reconquered; a battle for stakes would make an artistic sacrifice end potentially in vain; Hesse would not agree that any artistic offering to the gods could be in vain; he would defend Plato’s notion that art is the physical manifestation of the gods’ inspirations. By killing Hermine, Haller is offering the greatest sacrifice; he learns to laugh, to love, and to live; he kills Hermine because she has served her purpose, he must kill her to prove that he can live fully (as an artist) without her; by killing her he is released from their infatuation to search for a new muse.

After the murderous act, Mozart says to Haller: “You have made a frightful history of disease out of your life, and a misfortune of your gifts. And you have, as I see, found no better use for so pretty, so enchanting a young lady than to stick a knife into her. Was that right, do you think?” (Hesse 213) And Haller replies, “Right? No! My God, everything is so false, so hellishly stupid and wrong! I am a beast, Mozart, a stupid, angry beast, sick and rotten...But as for this girl – it was her own desire. I have only fulfilled her own wish” (Hesse 214). Afterwards, Haller ponders the act he has just committed; he repents desperately and longs to lay his head “beneath the axe and pay the penalty of annihilation” (Hesse 214). Thus an execution is set and Haller is tried and sentenced.
Haller had not alone insulted the majesty of art in that he confounded our beautiful picture gallery with so-called reality and stabbed to death the reflection of a girl with the reflection of a knife; he has in addition displayed the intension of using our theatre as a mechanism of suicide and shown himself devoid of humor. Wherefore we condemn Haller to eternal life and we suspend for twelve hours his permit to enter our theatre. The penalty also of being laughed out of court may not be remitted. (Hesse 215)

First, it seems that what Mozart says to Haller is precisely contrary to the sentence he inflicts upon him. While accusing Haller of making a disease of his life and a misfortune of his gifts may have been true of Haller’s life before the Magic Theatre, this is exactly what he has overcome within its walls; the physical illness of Haller’s suicidal discontent prevented him from using his literary gifts successfully. Once however, he acknowledged that his illness was really the cry of his soul needing nourishment, Haller was able to overcome his fear of failure in favor of submitting to the most emotionally painful feelings he could be subjected to – by killing the girl he loves, by means of an illusory act, and the realization that there is no greater gift than love.

Next, as Haller is condemned to eternal life, it becomes evident that his actions are respected though their outwardly moral implications are not necessarily condoned. Perhaps the meaning relayed is such that the transgression achieved is a metaphorical or metaphysical one; extinguishing a reflection with a reflection implies that Haller has carried out the task that he needed to, without inflicting physical or moral harm, in order to realize something about himself which could not be known without overcoming some great emotional obstacle. The act of killing Hermine, then,
seems to represent Haller’s ability to kill, or put to rest, the part of himself that kept him confined to mediocrity; he found a way to love himself enough to let go of the fear and loathing that was his past.

Lastly, Haller’s punishment for being devoid of humor is counteracted by his being laughed out of court. By being laughed at, Haller must learn to laugh at himself. In the fact that the court grants him eternal life and only suspends his theatre privileges for twelve hours, Hesse seems to be saying that Haller has begun to understand the purpose of his tutelage and had been granted the permission to seek its rewards. According to Hesse, the art of building up the soul is the only antidote for madness; the separation of the unity of the personality into numerous pieces can drive a person mad, especially if he holds “that one only and binding and lifelong order is possible for the multiplicity of subordinate selves” (Hesse 192).

The art of life, then, is that each person, desiring to be an artist, must realize that he or she is not only in complete control of his or her own life, but that it is life’s goal to develop that which one wants from it and lend it animation. “Just as madness in a higher sense, is the beginning of wisdom, so is schizomania the beginning of all art and all fantasy” (Hesse 193). Schizomania, he seems to be saying, is the realization that there is a multiplicity to the self; madness then, sparks the process of coping with those selves, via fantasy and art, which leads to the creative and willful reunification of the self.

Plato: The Transcendent Artist
If, while the soul was with the gods, it stayed close to Zeus, it will be able to bear the burden of the difficult forces of love with dignity. But if it is one of Ares’ troops who has fallen prisoner of love, then upon the lover’s slightest suspicion that his beloved has done him wrong, he may turn murderous, ready to make a sacrifice of himself as well as his beloved. So it is with each of the gods: each soul spends its life honoring the god in whose chorus it danced, and emulates that god in every way it can, so long as it remains undefiled in its life on earth. And that is how each soul behaves with everyone at every turn, not just with those he loves. Everyone chooses his love after his own fashion from among those who are beautiful, and then treats the beloved like his very own god, building him up and adorning him as an image to honor and worship (Phaedrus 252c-e).

Now if the victory goes to the better elements in the minds of the lover and his beloved, which lead them to follow the assigned regimen of philosophy, their life will be one of bliss and shared understanding. And because he the beloved is served with all the attentions due a god by a lover who is not pretending otherwise but is truly in the throes of love, the beloved realizes that no other friendship can compare to that of this friend who is inspired by a god (Phaedrus 255a-b). Thus the lovers will be modest and fully in control of themselves now that they have enslaved the part of their souls that brought trouble in and set free the part that gave it virtue. There is not greater good than this that either human self-control or divine madness can offer a man. If, on the other hand, they adopt a lower way of living, with ambition in place of philosophy, then, when they are careless because they have been drinking or for some
other reason, the pair’s undisciplined horses will catch their souls off guard and they will succumb to the harmful habits of unworthy lovers (Phaedrus 256a-c).

Thus it is through love that a human being can share a god’s life. For all of this the lover knows he has his beloved to thank, and so he loves him all the more; he pours love into the soul of the one he loves in order to help him take on as much of their own god’s qualities as possible (Phaedrus 253a-b). The lover shows no envy, no mean-spirited lack of generosity toward the beloved, but makes every possible effort to draw him into being totally like himself and the god to whom they are both devoted. This, then, is any true lover’s heart’s desire: the friend who has been driven mad by love will secure a consummation for the one he has befriended that is as beautiful and blissful as it should be (Phaedrus 253b-c). These are the rewards given by the gods for a lover’s friendship and they are as great as divine gifts should be. A non-lover’s companionship, on the other hand, is diluted by human self-control; all it pays are cheap, human dividends (Phaedrus 256e).

Aschenbach: The Transcendent Artist

Before his expiration, Aschenbach presents a final monologue of his thoughts; it is, in effect, his own eulogy, serving to once more confront his feelings for the boy, to praise his beauty, and to bring forth from his soul an arrangement of words that both soothe him and exalt the emotions that he holds so dear. In fact, it ceases to matter whether the words he chooses actually convey beauty, because it is their tone, their eloquent complement to each other that evokes beauty itself. Bringing to life Plato’s notion of the soul and its need for love, Aschenbach speaks freely and truly as
if directly to Tadzio; he speaks to him as if this speech could be his final literary statement, yet he speaks to him with a candidness that can only be had when in fact no one else is listening.

It is in these final words that Aschenbach pays tribute to his whole life’s work and to the linguistic rhetorical affair that he first nurtured and then abandoned, with the words that made his name known and revered but made his soul tired and malnourished. Now he is speaking for himself only; he is releasing the emotional truths that he has been waiting his whole life to admit.

For beauty, Phaedrus, mark thou well, beauty and beauty alone is at once divine and visible; it is hence the path of the man of the senses, little Phaedrus, the path of the artist to the intellect. But dost thou believe, dear boy, that the man for whom the path to the intellect leads through the senses can ever find wisdom and true dignity of man? Or dost thou rather believe (I leave it to thee to decide) that it is a perilously alluring path, indeed, a path of sin and delusion that must needs lead one astray?

(Mann 136)

Whether Aschenbach is led stray by his affections for the boy or whether he is in fact coming closer to the natural truths of beauty and love, he seems to be realizing that his senses and the ability to express what he feels is the true purpose of his expressive gifts. Having come a great distance in understanding the needs of his soul, Aschenbach seems content to accept the fact that it may in fact take a lifetime within the craft to come to know the distinction between good writing and a truthful story.

The intellect of the artist, he seems to be saying, is not based on some universal knowledge that all people need to agree upon. As the lover of beauty and life pursues neither wisdom nor dignity, neither sin or delusion, the duty of his soul is
to allow the experiences of life to make their impressions upon him so that he can use his rhetorical talent to phrase them in such a way as to make them attainable for any person. He is the great translator of human experience from the soul to the eyes and back again: “for passion is our exultation and our longing must ever be love – such is our bliss and our shame. Now dost thou see that we poets can be neither wise or dignified? That we must needs go astray, ever be wonton and adventurers of the emotions?” (Mann 136) Though he calls himself a poet, in the Platonic sense, he is much more of a philosopher; and as the philosopher is as misunderstood in Mann’s time as he was in Plato’s, Mann relates to Plato’s divinely inspired lover more than to the audience he is forced to speak to in his own time.

The magisterial guise of our style is all falsehood and folly, our fame and prestige a farce, the faith that the public places in us nothing if not ludicrous, and the use of art to educate the nation and its youth a hazardous enterprise that should be outlawed. For how can man be worthy as an educator if he have a natural, inborn, incorrigible penchant for the abyss? Much as we renounce it and seek dignity, we are drawn to it. Thus do we reject, say, analytical knowledge: knowledge Phaedrus, lacks dignity and rigor; it is discerning, understanding, forgiving, and wanting in discipline and form; it is in sympathy with the abyss; it is the abyss. We do therefore firmly resolve to disavow it and devote ourselves henceforth to beauty alone, which is to say, simplicity, grandeur and a new rigor, a second innocence, and form. (Mann 137) Mann likens the poet to an outlaw; perhaps he means that using art to educate nations is hazardous in the sense that art is not necessarily meant to be understood or accepted by the generation within which it is produced; like a fine wine, it needs time to come in to its own; it may only be properly appreciated when the audience for which it was intended have come and gone, because this is the audience about whom
any immoralities or deficiencies within the societal norm are written about; this audience does not want to hear that it is they who are the real transgressors, they who sustain a society within which the true forms of beauty and love are interpreted as vile and vicious; it is they who blaspheme against their own kind and who turn toward the artist for blame because he or she dares to describe what is true and real. Like Venice’s secret disease, Aschenbach keeps his own secret, as he dies quietly, but fervently infected with the boy’s aura.

It is nonetheless Mann the narrator who reveals both secrets, reminding the audience of the true artist’s duty. Had Aschenbach revealed Venice’s secret to anyone, he would have surely been rebuked and silenced by the proper authorities; perhaps he would have been asked to leave Venice before he was willing; and perhaps any work produced as a result of the escapade would have been seen as traitorous as an attempt to tarnish the reputation of Venetian culture and art may be seen as blaspheming against art itself.

But form and innocence, Phaedrus, lead to intoxication and desire; they may even lead a noble man to horrifying crimes of passion that his own beautiful rigor reprehends as infamous; they lead to the abyss; they too lead to the abyss. They lead us poets thither, I tell thee, because we are incapable of taking to the heavens, we are capable only of taking to profligacy. Now I shall go, Phaedrus, and thou shalt remain. And when thou seest me no more, then thou shalt go. (Mann 137-138)

So Aschenbach finds peace in the artistic form that has come to frame his life; like a soldier who is given an increase of pain medicine to hasten his final moments of despair, Aschenbach allows the intoxication of the boy’s presence to take him away from the harsh realities of the human world, to soften the fear of encroaching death,
and to delude the thoughts of the noble and proud man within him who perhaps cannot help but wonder whether he will soon be welcomed by a merciful caretaker or whether he will be damned to the eternal criticisms of they who have been his loyal audience.

As the story comes to a close, the audience may be left to wonder whether, in fact, Mann intends to instill some final lesson. If there is one to be had, perhaps it would be to remind the lovers of any time to beware of the dangers posed by extremes; either the restriction of passion in one’s art or of the intoxicating intensity of unbridled passions. Moderation, then, is the prescribed ideal. To balance Aschenbach’s life of strict diligence, he resolves to seek out a leisurely repose, opens himself up to the possibility of an infatuation to inspire his artistic drive, and is challenged by the constraints of language (ones he thought he had already mastered), until he willingly surrenders to a perfect ending to a great life. Thus, the fine line between art and life disappears as experience and existence are manifested in corporeal form; for Aschenbach, that form is love: love of self, love of another, and love of life; this great expression of love allows his soul to proceed into death with great fulfillment and ease.

There sat the observer as he had sat before. […] to him it seemed as if the pale and charming psychagogue out there were smiling at him, beckoning to him, as if, releasing his hand from his hip, he were pointing outward, floating onward into the promising immensity of it all. And, as so often, he set out to follow him. (Mann 141-142)

While it seems as though Aschenbach is betraying everything that he has been and purported to believe in order to find the man who he wants to end up being, any
betrayal, if reinterpreted through Plato’s discourse on the soul and his final assessment of the lover, will be seen as a sacrifice. He seems to betray the kind of art his life was committed to, he seems to betray morality, and he seems to betray language; however when interpreted as a sacrifice, the three loves he abandons are what he gladly gives in order to free himself, in order to end his life the way it deserves to be completed. Thus, Aschenbach’s final artistic and philosophical act is his death; as a sacrifice to the gods of love and beauty his final thoughts and his life as a whole are given in dedication to the conviction with which he came to live. Through his surrender to a love that required transcendence from the moral constraints of social norms and misunderstandings came the truth of a man who worked through his fear of finding it.

Haller: The Transcendent Artist

As for Aschenbach, it becomes imperative that Haller learns to tame the vicious elements of his soul so that they will not enslave the virtuous ones; his mind must show restraint and his imagination must serve to enhance his creativity, not negate his self-esteem. Within the walls of the magic theatre, Haller is given a sort of carte blanche to extinguish the fires that scorch the sensibility he so desperately protects; it is his only defense as he feigns contentment for the real world. Thus, his actions raise no moral queries and the final lesson to be learned is between him and the memories he will take with him to his next destination.

Artistically, Haller neither fails nor succeeds expect to say that he finally breaks through the writer’s block that he knows has thus far only produced
superfluous irrelevancies. Neither does art betrayed him or he it; the manuscript he produces is an ode to the genuine feelings of a man whose thoughts are easily articulated into words on paper and whose memories long for expression. Even in the moments when Haller revels in the intensity of the nonverbal tinges of the swimming mind, his thoughts regain their vigor as they rush to immortalize every moment with just the right tone or expression. Haller, in fact, fittingly exemplifies Plato’s claim that the lover is not in pursuit of wisdom or dignity; while his various decisions are far from wise or dignified, they are the decisions of a man who has resolved to look himself in the face and honestly assess his ailments. That which he may have once thought was unattainable, whether love of self, love for others or love from others, his journey teaches him to let himself experience; he can now appreciate every moment of his life and find the truths that are really relevant to the soul, especially from the experiences that he once feared for being the most painful.

Though the journey of the disintegration of his personality turns out to be “an exceedingly painful, often almost intolerable” sacrifice, Haller is relieved to find a trace of anything like feeling still remaining in his burned-out heart (Hesse 129, 159). Haller comes to accept that the Steppenwolf treatise and Hermine too were right in their doctrine of the thousand souls; he now sees clearly what an illusion his former life has been. He realizes that he has been a traitor to all that he held most sacred, including his own soul; his fear of death had been rooted in his “old conventional and lying existence” (Hesse 129). Though he is the author of essays on the metaphysics of art, on the genius and tragedy and humanity itself, Haller had become the melancholy
hermit who was given over to self-criticism and discontent (Hesse 129). He only continued to live because he had found a way of accommodating himself; it was a compromise behind which to hide and to appear noble and nothing more. Now, instead of longing to be freed and completed, he longs to reclaim the self-confidence of his youth, “when his intellectual trifling had been his diversion and brought him fame” (Hesse 130).

 Returning to the speculations of critic Mileck, a new assessment of Haller’s character can be made based on Plato’s revelations. Haller’s crisis represents a truly significant part of his ailment and it is warranted; growing up, he was not taught to find balance between dignity and guilt and he was not shown how the love of self provides a valuable foundation for all future relationships. The dreams within which he becomes lost are the only escape that he thinks he has from a world that he has not learned how to appreciate, even if only for the material it can provide him as a writer. He has not sought to learn that which other people can teach him, especially the various others who may be ailing just as he is. Perhaps he does not allow himself to ask enough of life because he cannot believe that he should deserve it; perhaps he thinks that if he deserved more, that life would somehow alert him of this or force itself upon him. Essentially, Haller closes himself off from the world as a protective measure; he cannot bear anymore disappointment and regret.

 Plato’s illuminations on love and subsequent description of the soul urge the ailing spirit to exercise the necessary self-control in order that it can begin to heal the damage of its past. Remembering the joys of love, Plato prescribes, will awaken the
senses and emotional desires that are natural and necessary to every person. Modesty and temperance will ensure that the lover will only pursue another person with the utmost respect; the mind must remain firm in its convictions such that the vicious elements of the soul will not prevail in doing harm to the sensitive task that interaction with others is. These interactions are fundamentally integral to each person as they come to provide a valuable reflection of each to the other; this reflection, then, allows each to see him or herself through the interpretations of others such that they can assess if their actions are pleasing or not to the other; if the responses received are not what they expect or like, then they can strive to make adjustments by changing their interactions.

For Haller, the magic theatre, along with its score of hosts, provides exactly the kind of reflections he needs to realize the ills that he has bestowed upon himself as well others. Perhaps the process of first accepting and then letting go of, graciously, the affections of Maria opens Haller’s mind to seeing himself as a worthy lover and seeing Maria, a type of person he would previously have despised, as a worthy object of desire and even as a valued teacher of life lessons. Pablo, who Haller first dismisses as a flighty and naïve musician, is actually Haller’s most important guide, not only to the magic theatre, but to accepting the visions of himself that he encounters within the theatre’s many mirrors. Pablo likewise becomes the catalyst of passion when Haller comes upon him and Hermine in each other’s post coital arms. Lastly, Hermine is who Haller comes to adore and worship; she represents what would have previously been for him an unattainable beauty as well as a caricature of
the many pieces of himself he’s never admitted to seeing. Perhaps, when he kills her (reflection), what he is really doing is unifying the parts of himself that he has negated and rejected for so long; he is reclaiming his rights to his dignity, his self-worth, his memories and his passion for life. The act of killing her is a sacrifice and a release; he is relinquishing his need for her and he is ready for a future in which there may be no more guides.

At the close of the story, Haller completes the manuscript describing the aforementioned adventures; he feels a profound sense of accomplishment in this creative endeavor; the experiences he recounts are those of a man who has finally overcome the coward inside of him.

The sacred sense of beyond, of timelessness, of a world which had an eternal value and the substance of which was divine had been given back to me today by this friend of mine who taught me dancing…I understood Goethe’s laughter, the laughter of the immortals. It was a laughter without an object…It was that which is left over when a true man has passed through all the sufferings, vices, mistakes, passions and misunderstandings of men and got through to eternity and the world of space. I understood it all. I knew that all the hundred thousand pieces of life’s game were in my pocket. A glimpse of its meaning had stirred my reason and I was determined to begin the game afresh. I would sample its tortures once more and shudder again at its senselessness. I would traverse not once more, but often, the hell of my inner being. (Hesse 154, 217-218)

As an artist and philosopher now worthy of immortality, he is ready to be honest with himself and honest to the life’s work that he has longed for the right inspiration to create; for Haller, this book is the story of a timeless quest for the buried life of the soul and the manifestation of his life’s greatest work, above restriction and without inhibition.
WORKS CITED


