CHAPTER 1

Aschenbach's Makeover
Physiognomic Faces in Death in Venice

At the center of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*) (1912) is a charged play of glances. The observer is Gustav von Aschenbach, a German writer described as representative of "the European spirit."[1] For the duration of the short text, Aschenbach watches a young Polish boy named Tadzio. The boy's face, in particular, captures Aschenbach's attention:

> With astonishment Aschenbach observed that the boy was perfectly beautiful. His face, pale and charmingly secretive, with the honey-colored hair curling around it, with its straight-sloping nose, its lovely mouth and its expression of sweet and divine earnestness, recalled Greek sculpture of the noblest period, and, along with its extremely pure perfection of form, it was of such unique personal charm that the onlooker thought he had never come across anything so felicitous either in nature or in art.. . . [L]ike that of Boy with a Thorn, it [the hair] curled over his forehead and ears and was even longer at the back of his neck.. . . He sat in semiprofile opposite his observer, one foot, shod in black patent leather, placed in front of the other, an elbow leaning on the armrest of his wicker chair, his cheek pressed against his closed hand, in an attitude of decorous indolence. (DV 20–21)

The text stills the narrative into a pause, allowing the observer to engage in a reading exercise. Aschenbach is reading Tadzio's semi-profile – a privileged locus of physiognomic attention. Tadzio's hair functions as a frame for the face. How to describe a perfectly beautiful face? Aschenbach draws on his classical training and conjures Greek sculpture. The paragraph moves from the general "Greek sculpture of the noblest period" to a particular sculpture, *Boy with a Thorn* (the Spinario). Often used since the Renaissance as a didactic model for aspiring sculptors, the Spinario serves as a classical reference for self-absorbed youthful masculine beauty. In this scene, Tadzio's face recalls that of *Boy with a Thorn*, becoming a signboard for an intriguing affect: "decorous indolence" – or, in Michael Heim's translation, "nonchalant propriety" (*lässigem Anstand*). Although

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Aschenbach finds Tadzio's entire being beautiful, the text metonymically spotlights the beauty of his face.

The distance posited by the comparison to Greek sculpture collapses as Aschenbach identifies Tadzio himself as a work of art. Watching him, Aschenbach comes "face-to-face with a masterpiece" (DV 23). Within the fiction of the text, beauty in life and beauty in art, both a function of form, become one. On one side of this face-to-face, we have Aschenbach, the onlooker or gazer; on the other, Tadzio's face as an art object. In the framing of Tadzio, the novella blurs the line between life and art: Tadzio is beheld as a work of art, a neoclassical masterpiece. As a result, his face triggers meditations on aesthetics.

Four major implications follow the invocation of Greek sculpture in the description of Tadzio's face.[2] First, Tadzio's facial features are described as divine, inviting mythological speculation.[3] Narcissus, in particular, becomes a foil for Tadzio; absorption is one of the defining features of Tadzio as a work of art. Second, his face is eroticized in a homoerotic framework familiar to Aschenbach through his classical training; its physiognomic description is key to the text's queerness.[4] Third, Greek sculpture is embedded in the text through a neoclassicist use of ekphrasis, the figure of speech used to translate between the visual and the literary realms. Fourth, the reliance on classical Greece leads to a certain configuration of the "European spirit" and a game of European insiders and outsiders, belonging and unbelonging, defined along lines of the face.[5]

In this chapter, a reading of *Death in Venice* introduces this book's argument concerning the centrality of physiognomy to the European modernist project – its afterlives following its supposed death at the end of the nineteenth century. As foils to Tadzio, Mann's novella constructs a racialized gallery of minor characters identified, through a detailed reading of their faces, as physiognomic types. This dynamic embeds a highly consequential politics of the face, whereby belonging and unbelonging are filtered through the form of the face. In one of the essays he wrote during World War II, "Brother Hitler" (1939), Mann acknowledged that his early writings risked dangerous forms of simplification. In this context, he referred to *Death in Venice* specifically as containing ideas that "twenty years later were the property of the man in the street."[6] This chapter argues that *type* is such an idea. In the 1930s and 1940s, physiognomy was claimed by National Socialism as a mechanism of racial taxonomy. Claudia Schmölders has documented the use of the physiognomic face in Nazi propaganda.[7] Mann's retrospective reading of his text sees it unwittingly – if ambivalently – anticipating this trajectory.

In order to contextualize the distance between *Death in Venice* (1912) and "Brother Hitler" (1939) when it comes to physiognomic type, the first section of the chapter sketches the intermediality of the concept, in relation to photography and cinema. One explanation for physiognomy's endurance in modernism is its embedding in visual aesthetic practices, which interlock with the literary. The next section argues that, in the context of an early modernist intermedial culture, Mann's novella refines its use of ekphrasis to produce a neoclassical modernist theory of the face, anchored in formal symmetry, with Tadzio's face as a model of form. Finally, the third section of the chapter traces a shift in the economy of faces framed by the novella, at the climax of the narrative, as Aschenbach undergoes a makeover, with the help of a barber. This scene, which I understand as a version of Mina Loy's "auto-facial-construction," repositions Aschenbach, up to this point a masterful observer of faces, as a visual object himself, redirecting narrative authority away from Aschenbach's physiognomic reading practices and toward the creative strategies of facialization, makeup, and cosmetic surgery. A coda brings the politics of the face staged by the novella into the present, through a brief encounter with the recent documentary by Kristina Lindström and Kristian Petri, *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* (2021). The documentary traces the fate of Björn Andrésen, the young boy who played Tadzio in Luchino Visconti's 1971 adaptation of *Death in Venice*. How, the documentary asks, did Andrésen inhabit a face that became "an icon all over the world"? As seen through the lens of Lindström and Petri's documentary, Visconti's film reproduced the risks attending the fascination with a perfect face, which offered the impetus for Mann's novella in the first place.

Modernist Physiognomy: The Close-Up

The first decades of the twentieth century saw a resurgence of interest in physiognomy in art history and aesthetic theory across Europe.[8] In order to unpack the physiognomic dimension of Mann's *Death in Venice,* in this chapter, we need to trace the particular form this resurgence took in the German cultural space.[9] In *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, Richard T. Gray proposes that the late nineteenth-century reception of Goethe's work functioned as "an invigorating force in the emergence of German physiognomics and the primary intellectual cause for its renaissance among humanistic thinkers in the early twentieth century."[10] Mann used Goethe's infatuation with a young woman as one of his models for Aschenbach's passion. Goethe's work also functioned as a

model for the neoclassical writing Mann theorized. Goethe, in turn, was a reader of Lavater, until he distanced himself from his work. Goethe contributed passages and illustrations to the German edition of Lavater's works and allowed some physiognomic principles into his endeavors, including his science.[11] In turn, Lavater included a hagiographic description of Goethe's face in his *Essays*.[12]

Importantly, modernist physiognomic resurgence was not strictly literary. Rather, it took on an intermedial form – in relation to photography and cinema. In 1931, in "Short History of Photography," writing with a retrospective eye, Walter Benjamin invoked the work of photographer August Sander, *The Face of Our Time* (*Das Antlitz der Zeit*) (1929), in which he witnessed the promise of photography to restage a face imagined to be at risk of homogenization.[13] In Benjamin's interpretation, Sander's photography, which he started to produce in 1910, belonged to the "powerful physiognomic galleries" produced by early cinema, especially Soviet cinema.[14] In this context, in which he also invoked Goethe, Benjamin lauded Sander's "ability to read facial types." One such type was "the farmer," framed by a photograph of three men walking on a country road. For Benjamin, writing in 1931 and looking back at the impact of early photography, type is tied to one's provenance: "[O]ne will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others the same way."[15] He concluded: "Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual." Benjamin's text critically registers a situation whereby modernism – "whether on the right or the left" – reclaimed a physiognomic configuration, anchored in the dynamic between face and type. His own project converged toward what he called a "materialist physiognomics."[16] The men in the photograph captioned "The Farmer" have in the meantime been identified; they turned out not to have been farmers. It is clear that the historical people who stood in for such types always exceeded – and spoke back to – the categories bestowed on them.[17]

Benjamin's comparison of Sander's photography to the physiognomic galleries of early cinema is prescient. Both early cinema and early film theory found the concept of type seductive. Most prominently, and with long-term impact, Béla Balázs's *The Visible Man* (1924) produced the first theory of film drawing on physiognomic principles. When Balázs turned to physiognomy in search of a theory of film, it was, like with Mann, Goethe's reading of Lavater that functioned as a reference.[18] Balázs was interested in drawing out cinema's specificity as an art form.[19] He found it in what he described as a new art of the face: the close-up. Face and close-up came to define each other. Balázs claimed that, through the close-up,

cinema gave human beings a new face: "Now another device is at work, giving culture a new turn toward the visual and the human being a new face."[20] The drama within the film's diegesis was to be found in the face, as emotions, belonging to a new cinematic temporality, became legible in the close-up. In turn, a close-up of any object facialized it, rendering it readable by analogy with faces – a premise developed by Gilles Deleuze's theory of cinematic faciality.[21] For Balázs, the film director was an astute physiognomist (casting was paramount) and film reception functioned as a mode of physiognomic reading.

Cinema, then, promised to offer a technical supplement to Lavaterian physiognomy. The cinematic face, according to Balázs, dissimulates unsuccessfully: "In vain he knits his brow and flashes his eyes. The camera moves in even closer, isolating his chin, showing him as a coward and a weakling."[22] The camera renders an invisible face behind the dissimulating face visible. In a sense, it "invents" the so-called naked face. The "face of class," in particular, is rendered legible through cinema, which allows for a "physiognomical cross section of social class stratification."[23] Balázs believed in the international language of cinema, anchored in a physiognomic concept of immediacy, which he posited as the possibility of overcoming the multilingualism of Babel (especially its East Central European version). "The language of gestures is the true mother tongue of mankind," he declared, adding that "the actors' facial expressions must be comprehensible to the whole world."[24] Balázs's theory of the universality of cinematic language veered into racial logics; he acknowledged that the close-up he theorized was modeled on a white face.[25]

Balázs proposed a theory of modernist physiognomy *after* physiognomy. There are echoes of eighteenth-century physiognomy in the invocation of the soul and in the theory's racializing tendencies. But Balázs believed in a modern shift in human perception. His texts witness a faith that a new kind of physiognomy, technically produced, can aid human vision, revealing what the naked eye cannot see.[26] Affect, in particular, finds its way to the face as "microphysiognomy." Balázs's work constitutes one of the most eloquent symptoms of a period in which physiognomy resurfaces out of its own ashes, in some of the most unexpected sites. In the context of this chapter, Balázs's name functions as a reminder of the pervasiveness of physiognomic thought in early twentieth-century German and European culture and its intermedial arts. Aside from the close-up, which becomes almost synonymous with face, central to physiognomy's resurgence is the notion of type – a feature Mann's novella shares with Balázs's theory of film.

Mann's writing emerged against the background of this intermedial resurgence of physiognomy, which would become more accentuated in the decades to follow. Introducing Sander's photographs, Alfred Döblin would refer to them as "raw material for writers."[27] *Death in Venice* zoomed in on Tadzio's face in a literary equivalent of a close-up. And it sketched its minor characters as a gallery of facial types. Later in life, in exile in the United States during World War II, Mann, by that time a Nobel laureate and self-styled cosmopolitan world author, would become the German voice of anti-fascism.[28] Schmölders has traced an arc of continuity between this early moment, its amplification in Nazi photography, and the immediate post-World War II period, arguing that physiognomy was "the parascience that dominated the theory of bodily cognition in Germany between 1918 and 1945."[29] The semantics of the face framed by Mann's novella both registered and challenged this theory.

Physiognomic Types

In the scene with which I began this chapter, as Aschenbach observes Tadzio, he is struck by a contrast between the boy and his sisters. While Tadzio teases his observer with his "casual insolence," the girls come across as stiff, austere, and bitter. Crucially, the difference between the siblings is most strikingly legible in the sisters' faces, which, to Aschenbach's eye, "seem as empty and inexpressive as a nun's" (DV 20). Tadzio's face thus stands out in contrast to his sisters' styling, austere to the point of grotesque disfigurement. Form and deformity co-produce each other. Tadzio's face speaks volumes, because his sisters' faces say nothing. The gendered contrast Aschenbach perceives allows him to frame a long-haired androgynous Tadzio, a function of the softness and tenderness bestowed on him by a family that, in Aschenbach's interpretation, denies these attributes to his sisters. Importantly, none of Tadzio's sisters are individualized; instead, theirs is a group portrait as Polish women, an instance of "family physiognomy" risking a tacit slide into "national physiognomy."[30]

The grouping of Tadzio's sisters tests the reader's understanding of minor character. As a group, Tadzio's sisters are even more minor than the novella's memorable minor characters. Against the background of these nothing-saying female characters, the novella plots an arc featuring four highly visible minor characters, all men. Mann scholarship has come to refer to these four characters as the traveler, the elderly fop, the gondolier, and the musician. It is in the representation of these four characters, highly eloquent though minimalist in design, that physiognomic discourse is

most legibly at work in the text. The description of these characters helps solidify Tadzio's portrait.[31]

The first of these characters appears at the very beginning of the text as Aschenbach goes on a walk around Munich.[32] Walking, the writer functions as a flaneur.[33] The equivalent of a philosopher's walk – a physical respite from the work of writing, which Aschenbach experiences as strenuous – doubles here as cruising. Soon, Aschenbach spotlights the face of a man with an "unusual appearance" (DV 2):

> Moderately tall, thin, beardless and conspicuously snub-nosed, the man was redheaded and had the milky, freckled skin peculiar to that physical type. He was clearly not of Bavarian ancestry: at least, the broad, straight-rimmed bast hat that covered his head lent his appearance the stamp of foreignness, of having come from far away. To be sure, he was also wearing the locally common rucksack bucked around his shoulders and a yellowish belted outfit that seemed to be of loden.. . . His head raised, so that his Adam's apple stuck out, prominent and bare, against the scrawny neck protruding from his loose sport shirt, he peered sharply and searchingly into the distance with colorless, red-lashed eyes between which, as a most unusual counterpart to his short, turned-up nose, stood two energetic vertical furrows. In this way – and perhaps his elevated and elevating standpoint contributed to the impression – his bearing was somewhat like that of a lord surveying his domain, with an element of boldness or even savagery; for, whether it was because, dazzled, he was grimacing into the sinking sun, or whether his features were permanently deformed [*physiognomische Entstellung*], his lips seemed too short; they were drawn all the way back, so that his long, white teeth, exposed up to the gums, were visible between them. (DV 2–3)

Aschenbach is observing a man identified as a red-haired type. The reading that ensues places the man spatially on a pedestal – as if he were a strange statue. This stage of observation – which, in this case, becomes an instance of extended staring – renders the man's facial features available for reading. Aschenbach is confused by the man's combination of clothes, a source of meaning for the flaneur – and for the physiognomist. In this case, an unfamiliar hat mixes with a familiar loden outfit and rucksack. The man's exaggerated masculinity comes forth through his protruding Adam's apple and a bold bodily posture – details suggesting what Robert Tobin calls a "botched homosexual encounter."[34] Alongside his clothes and manly posture, the man's features signal his foreignness, his non-belonging in the space Aschenbach calls home.

Sander Gilman emphasizes that "certain types of nose are 'better bred' than others, and, other things being equal, a man with a 'good nose' is

more likely to gain immediate respect than one with a 'vulgar' nose." Gilman concludes: "The tiny nose, the flattened nose, thus became part of the very definition of race."[35] In Mann's scene, the correlation between type and nose reproduces a racial trope, at this time associated with anti-Semitism, enlisting race in the description of an ambivalent queer encounter. But the paragraph also draws on tropes of disability. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson demonstrates, certain ways of staring are deployed in response to what are perceived as "unorthodox faces."[36] In Aschenbach's staring eyes, the man's countenance is dominated by a grimacing mouth, one of the loci for the construction of disability.[37] As a function of asymmetrical proportion, the mouth cannot close, disfiguring the tacit form of the face (the German text refers to this deformity as *physiognomische Entstellung*).[38] The man's asymmetrically distributed mouth implicitly helps construct Tadzio's mouth, described as "a pure perfection of form" (20). Race, disability, and queerness are entangled here in the production of a staring scene in which the paradigmatic object of staring is an asymmetrical face.

The scene in the street is rewriting, in miniature, the premise of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), which similarly has its protagonist spotlight a man of "unusual appearance." Poe writes: "I well remember that my first thought, upon beholding it [the man's expression] was that Retzsch, had he viewed it, would have greatly preferred it to his own pictural incarnations of the fiend."[39] The intermedial reference is to the illustrator of Goethe's *Faust*, Moritz Retzsch, who would have presumably taken the man with the unusual face as a model for the devil. Mann's novella restages the connection Poe established between temptation and an intriguing face that, ultimately, despite Aschenbach's physiognomic projections, "*er lasst sich nicht lessen* [it does not allow itself to be read]" – the phrase in German in Poe's text.[40] Importantly, in Mann's text the man returns Aschenbach's stare, momentarily shifting the locus of visual attention to his own staring face (a staring face is itself asymmetric in Georg Simmel's logic), a dynamic that returns later in the novella.[41]

The visual encounter with this man – his face – shifts Aschenbach's desire. It prompts "an expansion" of the self, which manifests itself in a "desire for faraway places" (DV 3). The encounter produces an exotic/erotic vision, which translates into a "representative sampling" of all the places Aschenbach could see. In search of an exotic locale, the novella takes him to Venice, after a short, disappointing stint in the Adriatic, in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Through these geographical references, the text stages a relation between three Europes: [T]he Europe of Aschenbach's

Munich, the Europe of his visit to Venice, and the Europe of Tadzio's "Slavic element." The Europe represented by Venice, in particular, is a foreign land for Munich-based Aschenbach. His arrival on a boat emphasizes the city's history as a port.[42] Arabic window frames stand out. The plague that hits the city is an Oriental disease. The fantasy that takes Aschenbach to Venice shares a spatial imagination with other European modernist texts that take their protagonists to destinations in Africa, the Pacific, or the Caribbean.[43]

Once in Venice, Aschenbach has a charged experience with another minor character in this gallery, a gondolier with a "brutale *Physiognomie*" (DV 17). *Gesichtsbildung*, which Heim translates as "the cast of the face," belongs in the physiognomist's toolbox.[44] Scrutinizing the gondolier's face, with a short nose standing out, Aschenbach immediately rules out Italian ancestry (*Schlag*). Reading *Death in Venice*, Michael Taussig refers to this predicament as a "face-without-a-country."[45] Note that Aschenbach is as confident declaring the gondolier's non-belonging in Venice as he is declaring the red-haired man's non-belonging in his home city, Munich. Later in the novella, this scenario repeats as Aschenbach reads a musician's appearance physiognomically: "pallid snub-nosed face, lined with grimaces and vice, two furrows stretching savagely" (DV 112). Aschenbach concludes that the musician "seemed less the Venetian type than of the race of Neapolitan comedians: half pimp, half performer, brutal and brash, dangerous and entertaining" (DV 112). In this case, the presumption of physiognomic criminality meets the European tradition of racializing Romani musicians. In these scenes, filtered by Aschenbach without narratorial qualification, facial type determines belonging and unbelonging.[46] The detective gaze in search of a crime asks the highly charged question, "Where are you from?" and, based on face reading, retorts, "Clearly not from here." Narratively, the faces of these minor characters serve to spotlight Tadzio's face – its perfect form. Importantly, Tadzio does not belong in the space either, which is why the novella needs ekphrasis as a mechanism of familiarization.

Physiognomic Ekphrasis

What should we make of Mann's conjuring the sculpture *Boy with a Thorn* in the novella's description of Tadzio? Ekphrasis, a figure of speech we will see return throughout this book, refers to the translation of a visual art object into verbal language; a poem's invocation of a painting or a sculpture constitutes ekphrasis. Most broadly, however, ekphrasis

dramatizes, in W. J. T. Mitchell's words, "an affair between a speaking/seeing subject and a seen object."[47] Mitchell sketched his theory of ekphrasis in *Picture Theory* (1994), at a time of heightened interest in the concept.[48] Developing his notion of the "pictorial turn," Mitchell captures the moment of what he calls "ekphrastic hope": "The estrangement of the image/text division is overcome, and a sutured, synthetic form, a verbal icon or imagetext, arises in its place."[49] Acts of literary conjuring of a visual artwork produce an *imagetext* – a hybrid visual and verbal object. Ekphrasis, for literary critics, is largely a subniche of description – often qualified as "vivid."[50] The reader retraces the workings of ekphrasis in the act of reading, visualizing the verbal representation of an artwork.

The structure of ekphrasis reproduces and interlocks with a structure of power – a silent, passive image is rendered in need of verbal representation. This structure is profoundly asymmetric, where the dynamic between speaking/being seen reproduces power asymmetries in the social world. Mitchell acknowledges that one mode of power at work in ekphrasis is gender, invoking the "staging of ekphrasis as a suturing of dominant gender stereotypes into the semiotic structure of the imagetext, the image identified as feminine, the speaking/seeing subject of the text identified as masculine."[51] And yet, as recent scholarship has shown, the structure of ekphrasis allows for gender play. As in the case of *Death in Venice*, ekphrasis can name queer difference. Indeed, queer ekphrasis could be said to be at the heart of a certain configuration of modernism.[52]

Mann's novella certainly dramatizes the relation between "a speaking/seeing subject" (Aschenbach) and a "seen object" (the Spinario/Tadzio). The novella conjures a sculpture, but in invoking Tadzio as a visual work of art, it acquires forceful ekphrastic dimensions even when sculpture is not mentioned. There is ekphrastic hope on the part of the observer (faith that one can describe what one sees), mixed with a dose of ekphrastic fear and skepticism (can one ever find the words to describe a perfect form?). Mann's ekphrastic representation centrally concerns prosopopoeia, giving face to beauty. The descriptions of Tadzio's face acquire a vivid solidity, producing an *imagetext*. Passages of slow-paced description function as lulls in the narrative; the ekphrastic situation occurs in a moment of narrative lingering, which settles into a tableau. Aschenbach's ekphrastic pleasure, a form of voyeurism, hinges on the "fondling" (Mitchell's word) of Tadzio's image.[53] In turn, the reader summons the image of Tadzio out of these descriptions. The text's queerness, as Tobin has argued, finds its actualization in visual pleasure – consequentially imbricated with the aesthetics of the face.[54]

In Mann's text, the aesthetic impact of Tadzio's face is most forceful when exhibited at a particular angle. Aschenbach starts following Tadzio and his family around Venice, watching him from a calculated distance. As he pursues his visual object, Aschenbach imagines Tadzio returning the gaze: "[Tadzio] turned his head at times and sent a glance to make sure his lover was still following" (DV 58). In the last episode of the novella, Tadzio's pose is quoted again, as the bathing boy turns to face Aschenbach: "And suddenly, as if recalling something, as if through some impulse, he placed one hand on his hip, swiveled the upper part of his body in a beautiful contrapposto to the stance of his feet, and looked over his shoulder to the shore" (DV 62). Tadzio's gesture of looking over his shoulder as he turns to face Aschenbach one last time displays his face at the angle the novella curates as its most impactful effect. Tadzio's semi-profile as he turns his head amplifies the aesthetic dimension of his face. If this work of art were to be exhibited in a gallery or museum, a curator (a stand-in for Aschenbach) would have to place it at this angle and at some distance from the viewer.

The novella posits memory as a mediator between Greek sculpture, likely mediated by a photograph, and the observed face of Tadzio ("His face … recalled [*erinnerte*] Greek sculpture of the noblest period"). Memory seemingly offers a reservoir of visual images; while the verbal act of recollection acquires an ekphrastic dimension. As the scholarship on ekphrasis reminds us, in the modernist period, memory is tied to the modern institution of the museum and has become reliant on technologies of reproduction (in the next chapter, we will see Proust encounter many of the artworks he invokes through postcards and textbooks). The verb "recall" thus lingers between its passive and active possibilities. In the observation of Tadzio, Aschenbach is the agent of recollection. Free indirect style nonetheless often ambiguates the agent of memory, making it possible to attribute the act of recalling to the unnamed narrator or an impersonal agent. Given the reader's task of reconverting the *imagetext* into a visual image, she is likewise enlisted in the act of recollection – whether *Boy with a Thorn* belongs to her memory archive or not.

This memory-mediated act of summoning an artwork yields a game of signification through resemblance and likeness. Tadzio's curly hair is "like" the hair of the Spinario. The whiteness of his skin "resembles" a certain kind of marble. His absorbed self-sufficiency "recalls" the narcissism of the Greek sculpture. Tadzio is at his most perfect when seen in semi-profile – "like" *Boy with a Thorn*, when observed from one side in the space of the museum. Mediating these resemblances is the modernist narrator who

doubles as art connoisseur, a pseudo art historian – and an expert in ekphrasis.

How, then, is Mann's use of ekphrasis gendered? To be sure, on one side of the ekphrastic structure, there are soft, feminine touches in Aschenbach's description of Tadzio's hair. Tadzio's "sickly" nature renders him weak. His age signals his dependency on his family. Aschenbach cannot comprehend Tadzio's language, which registers like music, effectively rendering Tazio speechless to him, a visual spectacle. In the scene in which he engages in a wrestling game with a friend, Tadzio is defeated, prompting Aschenbach's fantasy of rescue. Alongside these feminizing touches in his portrait, however, Tadzio projects the image of youthful masculine beauty. If in conventional ekphrasis gender is often a central, organizing figure of difference, through the portrait of Tadzio, Mann's novella stages a queer version of the structure's gendering mechanism.

On the observer side of ekphrasis, the onlooker, Aschenbach, loses many of the tenets of his mastery, especially his self-discipline and upstanding morality.[55] Figured as a master, Aschenbach initially can listen to the call of desire, abandon his rigorous project of self-discipline metonymized as the relaxation of a clenched fist, only if he can claim to be working at the same time. A dignified bourgeois male writer who has bracketed desire in pursuit of his life's intellectual work, Aschenbach can allow himself to contemplate an object of desire insofar as he can simultaneously indulge in philosophical and aesthetic rumination.[56] As the novella progresses, the dynamic becomes more and more legible as a strategy of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called "the epistemology of the closet." While critics have placed the relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio on a homosocial spectrum, often following statements made by Mann, Sedgwick's work functions as a reminder of the fluid threshold between the homosocial and the homoerotic.[57] As deployed in *Death in Venice*, ekphrasis reproduces features of the classical figure of speech, but it ultimately names a modernist blurring of gender norms, on both sides of the ekphrastic structure. As a consequential sign of such blurring, Aschenbach likens his desire to women's passion, troubling the relation between gender and sexuality embedded in the description of Tadzio's sexually unattractive sisters (DV 60).

Importantly, the ekphrastic staging of an encounter with a queer other relies on Tadzio's Polishness. As the text first introduces Tadzio, the "Slavic element" predominates. At the turn into the twentieth century, "Slav" was a racial category; the Polish/German border on which

Aschenbach grew up doubled as a racial border.[58] Prussian self-discipline, to which Aschenbach aspires, a leitmotif in Mann's writing, was theorized by sociologists like Max Weber relying on the racial difference signified by Polishness.[59] Mann's novella registers this European racial field in its suggestion that, on account of his background on the Polish border, Aschenbach himself visually displays "signs of foreign ancestry in his appearance" (*fremder Rasse in seinem Äußern*). In turn, a Prussianized Aschenbach registers Tadzio's difference, which mediates his sexual desire. At the same time, he projects, through the Spinario, an ideal of beauty borrowed from Greek classicism onto the Polish boy's face. Unlike his sisters, who remain entangled with the "Slavic element," Tadzio enters the European canon of beauty through ekphrastic projection.

The neoclassicist use of ekphrasis in *Death in Venice* risks a problematic encounter with a physiognomy that moves fluidly between aesthetics and racial science.[60] An Enlightenment thinker, Lavater imagined physiognomy as a tool in the service of love and the happiness of mankind. Like other Enlightenment projects, the pseudo-science worked with the assumption of racial hierarchy, in this case of faces.[61] At times, physiognomy intersected with phrenology.[62] Readers of Lavater know that "physiognomic discernment" is a skill anchored in the comparison of faces against a hierarchical scale. At the top of Lavater's physiognomic hierarchy of faces are classical Greek faces, known from classical sculpture.[63] One of Lavater's illustrations of physiognomic beauty is a youthful Greek head, reproduced from Rafael.[64] It could just as well be the Spinario. All faces are compared, to their disadvantage, with this Greek face. Such acts of comparison anchor what Shu-mei Shih calls "comparative racialization," where racialization follows a tacit physiognomic law.[65] In the long run, one of physiognomy's most pernicious and enduring impacts has been its intersection with criminology, whereby the physiognomic gaze overlaps with the detective gaze in search of a crime (recall Poe's "The Man of the Crowd").[66]

For Mann, invested in a modernist neoclassical aesthetics, Greek sculpture offered a facial ideal – a perfect form. Tadzio's face becomes this form. The implication is that writing, Mann's writing, should aspire to the same neoclassicist form – to write Tadzio's face, as it were. The essay Aschenbach writes in Venice, the reader is told, follows the form of Tadzio's body, which we have seen metonymized in his face. As Aschenbach concludes his observation of Tadzio, he speculates: "Inborn in nearly every artist's nature is a voluptuous, treacherous tendency to accept injustice if it creates beauty and to grant sympathy and homage to aristocratic preferences [*Fast jedem Künstlernaturell ist ein üppiger und verräterischer Hang*

eingeboren, Schönheit schaffende Ungerechtigkeit anzuerkennen und aristokratischer Bevorzugung Teilnahme und Huldigung entgegenzubringen]" (DV 21). The artist – the artist appointed to represent the European spirit – rationalizes aristocratic preferences inherited from the classical world. He accepts and reproduces injustice for the sake of an aesthetic ideal. Given the ambiguous relation between the narrator and Aschenbach, the reader is invited to entertain the possibility that she can attribute this reflection to Aschenbach, while allowing an increasingly ironic narrator to claim the qualification at work in the adjective "treacherous."[67] Mann's novella occupies a threshold on which it is difficult to decide whether the text reproduces the injustice embedded in comparative physiognomic racialization – whether, in terms I proposed in the Introduction, one is exploring enemy territory or aiding the enemy.

The Face of the Artist and the Cosmetic Arts

In Benjamin's framework, reading for facial type identifies Aschenbach as a man of the nineteenth century, a flaneur who "flatters himself that, on seeing a passerby swept along by the crowd, he has accurately classified him."[68] Note that, for Benjamin, the flaneur "flatters himself" with the confidence associated with this practice. Physiognomic skill is a fantasy. "The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not home," Benjamin wrote in one of the most memorable takes on modernist physiognomy.[69] As Mann's novella advances, it likewise implies that Aschenbach flatters himself with his mastery of physiognomic knowledge. The narrator subtly distances himself from Aschenbach's reading practice, offering it up for contemplation and critique, while reproducing it for narrative effect.[70] As the novella comes to a close, the reader notices that the narrator has slowly become an observer – of Aschenbach observing both Tadzio and the text's constellation of minor characters. In turn, the reader realizes that the narrative has equally been invested in a description of Aschenbach's aging face, the face of a master. Almost unnoticeably, the text registers a shift in its framing of physiognomic reading. This shift pivots around the representation of Aschenbach's face.

At the beginning of the novella, the description of Aschenbach unfolds as a complex palimpsest:

> The gold bridge of his rimless glasses cut into the root of his thick, nobly curved nose. His mouth was large, often limp, often suddenly narrow and

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> tensed; his cheeks were thin and furrowed, his well-developed chin had a gentle cleft. Significant destinies seemed to have left their mark on his head, which usually leaned sideways as if in pain; and yet it was art that had here undertaken that task of forming the features [*und doch war die Kunst es gewesen, die hier jene physiognomische Durchbildung übernommen hatte*] which is usually the work of a difficult, agitated life. Beneath this brow had been born the brilliant dialogue of the conversation about war between Voltaire and the King; these eyes, gazing wearily and profoundly through the glasses, had seen the bloody inferno of the military hospitals of the Seven Years' War. Yes, even on a personal basis art is an enhancement of life. It makes you more deeply happy, it wears you out faster. It engraves on the face of its servant traces of imaginary, intellectual adventures. (DV 11)

This description, appearing in the chapter that serves as Aschenbach's *obituary avant la lettre*, functions as what Schmölders calls a "physiognomic hagiography" – a mode of praising an artist by way of his facial features.[71] A great man is revealed through a great face. Lavater wrote numerous such hagiographies, including one of Goethe. So did Balzac, Wilde, and Proust.[72] In Mann's portrait, Aschenbach displays a noble nose (in Heim's translation, "strong nobly aquiline"). His mouth is tense, a "trace" of his determination and hard work (Taussig refers to it as a "fist-face").[73] Myriad adventures have been formative of this "physiognomic design" (*physiognomische Durchbildung* in the passage above). These adventures do not come from direct experience, but from Aschenbach's imaginative and intellectual work. The art he has created or contemplated "engraved" itself on Aschenbach's face (note the language of sculpture). It "dug" material furrows onto his skin. Art, Aschenbach's writing, has brought him canonical status, a noble name (*von* Aschenbach), and a noble face – even a noble nose.[74] In another reference to Goethe, letters with postage from around the world testify to his status: Through his writing, Aschenbach has entered both a national literary canon and world literature.[75] Aschenbach's face functions as an advertisement for his writing.[76]

A brief detour: In 1921, Wolfgang Born made a series of nine lithographs for an illustrated edition of *Death in Venice*.[77] A copy of the illustrated edition was sent to Mann. As Ernest M. Wolf documented, the face Born gave Aschenbach surprised Mann, who had not publicly mentioned that he had modeled Aschenbach's face on composer Gustav Mahler's face. The latter's face had made a strong impression on Mann when the author met the composer in 1910.[78] Mahler died in 1911, as Mann was working on *Death in Venice*. At the time, Mann cut a photograph of Mahler from a newspaper. In 1921, faced with Born's lithographs, Mann acknowledged that in 1911 he had given Aschenbach "Mahler's

mask when describing his appearance."[79] How could Born have known, since Mann had not spoken publicly about the Aschenbach/Mahler connection? Mann assumed it to be a case of reverse ekphrasis: Born visually captured a Mahler-face from the verbal description of Aschenbach's face in *Death in Venice*, which, unbeknownst to Born, was in fact modeled on a photograph of Mahler. The anecdote, much rehearsed in the wake of Visconti's decision to model his cinematic Aschenbach on Mahler and use Mahler's music as a stand-in for Aschenbach's art in his 1971 film adaptation of *Death in Venice*, condenses an almost magical faith in the power of ekphrasis to capture the mysteries of a human face. While critics have noted that Mahler does not share many characteristics with Aschenbach other than his facial features, the hagiographic reproduction of Mahler's face in *Death in Venice* speaks to the centrality Mann ascribed to the face of the artist – a theme I return to in Chapter 4.[80]

The story of Aschenbach's face does not, however, end with this description of its physiognomic intellectualism and presumed greatness – Mahler included. This is only one "mask" in the composition of Aschenbach's face. If Aschenbach is a master, he is also a master of his facial choreography. His face is his nature, as Goethe argued, but human beings manipulate nature. At a few junctures in the novella, the reader is told that Aschenbach adjusts his face to fit the situation. In one scene, "he had not had time to settle his features into an expression of dignified calm" (DV 42). The German verb used here, *befestigen*, suggests a performative, almost technical operation, an arrangement of facial features to the demands of the moment. On another occasion, Aschenbach "assumed the expression of distressful foreigner" (DV 52). He is taking on a familiar role, which comes with its own facial configuration. Having formed a noble physiognomy through his life's work, Aschenbach has also learned to *use* his face. The database for such performances has been developed by the theater.[81] The implication is that Aschenbach can performatively modify the expression of his face beyond what art has engraved on it, within a dialectic of mobile and immobile dimensions of the face.[82]

The consequential scene for Aschenbach's facial development occurs toward the end of the novella. This scene revisits the promise of Loy's facial mastery. As Aschenbach starts paying more attention to his appearance, he wears youthful clothes, uses perfume, and shows up in the hotel restaurant "adorned" (*geschmückt*; Heim: "bedizened"). Flirting with the figure of the dandy (the text is in dialogue with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde's biography), he is visiting a barber working in the Lido.[83] The barber, a creative artist-entrepreneur, asks him: "Would you permit me to

restore to you what is rightly yours?" (DV 57). The question resonates with Aschenbach (he has a right to his face, Loy would say). So the barber proceeds to offer Aschenbach a makeover:

> [Aschenbach] saw in the mirror how his eyebrows were arching in a more well-defined and symmetrical style, how his eyes were growing longer, their brightness enhanced by a slight painting of the lids; looking farther down, he saw a lightly applied, gentle carmine appear where the skin had been brownish and leathery; he saw his lips, which had just been anemic, now pouting in a shade of raspberry; he saw the furrows in his cheeks and around his mouth, the wrinkles around his eyes, vanish beneath cream and the breath of youth – with beating heart, he caught sight of a youngster in his prime. (DV 58)

The barber doubling as a cosmetician (he is a *visagiste*, an expert in the face) works to further destabilize the physiognomic understanding of inner/outer. Perhaps gray hair lies about one's inner truth. The cosmetician proceeds to freshen up "Aschenbach's outer man" (*Äußere*) (DV 58). He dyes his hair. He plucks his eyebrows. He uses eyeliner, lipstick, and blush. The cosmetic arts, having emerged as the purview of Venetian courtesans in the early modern period and having entered the toolbox of the dandy, are at this time enlisted in the service of an ever-growing makeup industry.

The promise of the cosmetic arts is to camouflage what the other arts engraved on Aschenbach's face. Slowly, a youngster appears in the mirror. The prop for this scene is a mirror, which Venice helped popularize in the modern age. The commercial multiplication of mirrors at the end of the nineteenth century, Peter Sloterdijk argues, facilitated a new experience of the face. For Sloterdijk, this entails the production of a tension between what he calls a face-subject and a face-object.[84] The scene reveals Aschenbach, up to this point a face-subject, as a face-object, working, with the help of the barber, on his "auto-facial-construction." If the opening of the novella posits Aschenbach as a masterful observer, this scene transforms him into a spectacle, an object calling on others' visual attention. His first and most devoted observer remains himself, as he contemplates his new visage in the mirror. Then come the narrator and, secondarily, the reader: Aschenbach's cosmeticized face becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation.

The cosmetic arts had already made an appearance earlier in the novella. One of the four minor characters the text assembles wears makeup. Aschenbach scrutinizes the minor character, referred to as the "elderly fop," on the boat he takes to Venice:

> This was an old man, there could be no doubt. Wrinkles surrounded his eyes and mouth. The faint crimson of his cheeks was rouge; the brown hair beneath the straw hat with its colorful band was a wig; his neck was scraggy and sinewy; his little stuck-on mustache and the tiny beard on his chin were dyed. . . . Didn't they know, didn't they notice, that he was old, that it was wrong for him to wear their dandified, colorful clothing, wrong to be playing the part of one of them? (DV 13)

The dandy (*Stutzer*) on the boat prefigures Aschenbach's dandification, his turn to cosmetics to produce a new face.

In the makeover scene, the cosmetician convinces Aschenbach to reassess his judgment; maybe he was wrong in his moralizing of the elderly fop. It is not a coincidence that this shift occurs in Venice, often associated not only with cosmetics, but also with Venetian courtesans, excessive sexuality, and racial mixing.[85] The narrative further distances itself from Aschenbach – shifting the theoretical weight of the novella's project to the barber.[86] If Mann posited the inter-arts dimension of the novella as unfolding between the writer and the composer (Aschenbach/Mahler), supplementing the already dominant art of sculpture (the Spinario), this scene reminds us that there is another art and another artist in the text: the cosmetic arts represented by the barber. Modernist facialization is an intermedial affair, mixing the highbrow (Aschenbach's aristocratic preferences) and the lowbrow (the barber's tricks).

Importantly, Mann's invocation of the cosmetic arts is aligned with a broader discourse of facial transformation during the modernist period. While cosmetics offer a temporary shift in the dynamics of the face, cosmetic surgery offered the temptation of permanent change. The impetus behind both was the project of auto-facial-construction. Gilman traces the beginnings of cosmetic surgery to this period. In Gilman's view, cosmetic surgery developed particularly on account of the desire to "change the nose, and perhaps the character" of Jewish men in fin-de-siècle Berlin.[87] In 1898, Jacques Joseph performed the first reduction rhinoplasty, reducing the size of a man's nose. "He is happy to move around unnoticed," Joseph reported by way of arguing for the success of the surgery.[88] In 1904, Joseph perfected the procedure, to make sure surgery left no scars. "The invisibility of the patient hinged on the elimination of the scar," Gilman emphasizes.[89] Patients – Jewish men from Central and Eastern Europe – wanted to be invisible to the physiognomic gaze.[90] Men, more than women, requested the surgery. Facial symmetry was seen as the goal of surgery. Greek sculpture offered models.[91] The surgeon became a sculptor of faces, literalizing an insight

into modernist facialization articulated by Rochelle Rives: "Given the importance of the face in individualizing the subject, to view the face as sculptural, I argue, means to advance a vision of the human subject that is articulated through the exterior, not the interior."[92] Patients requesting cosmetic surgery wanted to cease to be a "facial type" and walk around the city unnoticed – by observers like Aschenbach at the beginning of Mann's novella. They asked the surgeon to sculpt their faces, in Gilman's words, so that they could be "accepted *without comment*."[93] The hope was that a new face would open the door to social categories from which such patients were excluded.[94] In terms that Mann's novella proposes through its minor characters, they wanted to be perceived as belonging to the urban crowd and, ultimately, a developing notion of Europeanness.

As the novella plots a change in the narrative's relation to Aschenbach, it ironically frames Aschenbach's physiognomic reading practices – from the reporting of his encounter with the traveler to the episode with the barber; from faith, however ambivalent, in one's ability to read the face of the traveler to an acknowledgment that the face can be reconfigured aesthetically to make meaning without the assistance of a soul; from Aschenbach as an invisible observer to Aschenbach doubling as a visual object of attention. One of the most consequential shifts the novella dramatizes involves physiognomic reading. This is a shift anchored, on the one hand, in the enduring desire to read faces, sedimented into a habit of perception, and, on the other hand, in the emerging desire to develop creative practices of "auto-facial-construction." This chapter has argued that Mann's *Death in Venice*, a canonical and influential text of early German-language modernism, which imagines its aesthetics as European in scope, is centrally motivated by this tension. The next chapter traces the complex negotiation of this tension in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.

Coda: On Casting

It has become difficult to disentangle a reading of Mann's novella from the film's 1971 adaptation by Luchino Visconti. The film amplified the text's investment in the face, lingering in extended close-ups on the face of the young actor who played Tadzio, Björn Andrésen. "The image that pervades the film is Tadzio's face," writes Douglas Radcliff-Unstead in a comparative reading of the novella and the film.[95] The film especially tracked and amplified Tadzio's turned head, adding a cinematic dimension to an already intermedial face. In a recent documentary tracing Andrésen's life, *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* (2021), Kristina Lindström and

Kristian Petri filter the question of the face posed by Mann's novella through Andrésen's face.[96] If Andrésen was deemed to have the most perfect face, what was his fate?

The documentary starts with Visconti's casting of Andrésen as Tadzio, a scene captured on video in 1970. The recording comes across as a "screen test," a device Visconti enlisted within the diegesis of his films. Casting, the project behind the screen test, has long occupied a place of honor in theories of cinema, starting with Balázs; it is an opportunity for the film director, in this case Visconti taking a cue from Mann, to find the perfect actor for each character type.[97] In the 1960s, Andy Warhol developed the screen test into a stand-alone genre; one of Warhol's series of film portraits was titled *13 Beautiful Boys*.[98] Neorealist Visconti is, like Warhol, looking, for a young "non-actor," a face presumably untouched by cinema.

Having searched for such an actor/non-actor who could play "the most beautiful boy in the world" in Hungary, Poland, Finland, and Russia (the European cultural imagination of the novella returns), Visconti made his way to Stockholm. In an interview with Visconti included in the documentary, the director states that he knew exactly what he wanted as he searched for Tadzio: A perfect profile and eyes the color of water. In short, in a reference to the Spinario, "a child as a statue." In Lindström and Petri's documentary, a voiceover announces this project over images of Visconti studying children in what seems to be a Swedish classroom. One candidate is scrutinized; "good face," the director exclaims, in Italian and French, before dismissing the boy. As Andrésen comes into the casting room, his beauty awes the casting crew. Visconti inquires about Andrésen's age, worried that, at fifteen, he might be too old. Andrésen is asked, via a translator, to show his profile, to sighs of satisfaction. He follows directions to walk around the room in a circle. Andrésen seems disconcerted as Visconti, via a translator, asks him to undress. A range of close-ups are taken. "He has a beautiful face," Visconti concludes. "His face is to become an icon all over the world," the voiceover announces.

Andrésen signed a contract with Visconti whereby the director, as the documentary details, "owned his face" for three years. An overnight celebrity, Andrésen became a "face-object."[99] When he arrived in Japan following the release of *Death in Venice* in 1971, Andrésen became "the first idol from the West." In this role, he inspired a generation of manga artists, through a dynamic of semiotic circulation I return to in Chapter 5. To this day, young, blond, androgynous animated characters look like Andrésen. His face proliferated. "I always wondered if our interest hurt him," a Japanese female artist muses. Lindström and Petri's documentary

answers this dilemma in the affirmative. Visconti's film froze Andrésen's face in time as the signature of "the most beautiful boy in the world." His face became the surface for a star persona he could not control. For the rest of his life, Andrésen wrestled with his young face. At sixteen, he was already deemed too old. No one, especially Andrésen, could live up to the aura of Tadzio's face. Alongside the warnings stemming from a reading of the racialized minor characters in *Death in Venice*, the documentary functions as a cautionary tale about the risks inherent to the aesthetic search for perfect form – Mann's and Visconti's alike.