



## **The Outward Gesture: Reading the Artist and the Critic in Mann's *Death in Venice* and Coetzee's *Disgrace***

**Sneha Sharma\***

### **Abstract**

*The aim of this paper is to examine through close reading the intertextual worlds of David Lurie and Gustav Aschenbach in the novels of Thomas Mann and J. M. Coetzee. Coming from the twin worlds of criticism and fiction, the protagonists' relations to their worlds is expressed through allusions, references, and sometimes, explicit quotations from literature. Both the characters inhabit a world mediated by their vast scholarship. Their sexual seductions, whether successful or not, are mediated through powerful literary texts, motifs and discourses. My paper hopes to uncover some of the "heteroglossia" that these characters exhibit in their reading and references in order to understand their socio-historic moorings and to explain their literary destinies. The moral vicissitudes that they go through, as the stories progress, sets before them unexpected tasks and makes them act in uncharacteristic ways. Their writerly goals vanish and the presumptions that they carry about themselves come to naught, allowing the texts they inhabit, namely *Disgrace* and "Death in Venice," to continue the dialogue between fiction and reality. One might argue that it is at those points of failure and breakdown when they actually begin experiencing life, that the double meditation on art and literature gains greater intensity for the reader of the novel and the story.*

**Keywords:** *Realism, Narcissism, Intertextuality, Literary Sensibility, Counterfocalization.*

The aim of this paper is to examine the intertextual worlds<sup>†</sup> of Gustav Aschenbach and David Lurie in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Coming

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\*Assistant Professor, Ramjas College, Delhi University, Delhi – 110009, India. Email: [sneyhamail@gmail.com](mailto:sneyhamail@gmail.com)

†This idea of the intertextual goes beyond the formulation which believes that all texts are intertextual, and hopes to bring into focus the deliberate nature of the choice of protagonists in both the novels under consideration. I also aim to highlight the self-consciousness that exists within the realist framework of these texts. Both the writers, I believe, aim to push the reader towards an apprehension of the psychic distortions that literature can produce in characters and an understanding of the "practice" of literature.

from the twin worlds of criticism and fiction, their relation to their worlds is expressed through allusions, references, and sometimes, direct citations from literature. Both the characters inhabit a world mediated by their vast scholarship. Their sexual seductions, whether successful or not, are mediated through a web of references to literary texts, motifs and cultural discourses. My paper hopes to uncover some of the “heteroglossia” that these characters exhibit in the citational field that they draw on, in order to understand their sensibilities and to explain their literary destinies. The “preconditioned status” of their experiences isolates them from the world; their real-in-fiction dramatization of themselves inures them to it. They live in a self-ironized space that is suspended between the experiential and the literary. Both the texts complicate the relation of the text with the world through their protagonists. Their heightened self-reflexivity and their keen interest in a semantic ordering of the world, ironically, prevents them from viewing the world without projecting on to it their narcissistic views. The moral vicissitudes that they go through, as the stories progress, sets before them unexpected tasks and makes them act in uncharacteristic ways. As their narratives progress their writerly goals vanish and the presumptions that they carry about themselves come to naught, allowing the texts they inhabit, to continue the dialogue between fiction and reality. I argue that it is at those points of failure and breakdown when they *actually* begin experiencing life, that the double meditation on art and literature gains greater intensity for the reader of the novels.

This is not a case of novelistic self-consciousness. At no time do Coetzee or Mann as writers impinge on the consciousness of the reader. The reader is never forced to engage with the “artifice” of what he is reading. It is the ontological struggles of the protagonists which become the struggles of the readers too. What values are being endorsed? Which worldviews are being legitimized? What final meanings are being conferred? These are some of the questions that the texts raise without straying from their formal structure of realism.

At the start, both the characters, Lurie and Aschenbach lead quiet lives and are devoted to their academic and writerly projects. However, they soon reach a point where a certain disquiet begins to affect their work. Lurie has lost his position as a Professor of Modern Languages and teaches Communications to students as an adjunct faculty member at the Cape Technical University. He gets to teach a course of choice every semester and is teaching Romantic poetry in the current session. Aschenbach, soon after being introduced in the novella, experiences a writer’s block and decides to take a vacation, landing first in Pula but then heading for Venice. The scholar and the writer represent a world of power and privilege that has provided them with an epistemological stance that considers itself to be the closest to all that lies at the heart of humanity and its experiences. While in the case of Aschenbach, it helps the author inflect the narrative with irony; in Lurie’s case it takes on an ideological cast as he struggles with the realities of a post-apartheid world. Edward Said reflecting on the role of the University and the discipline of Humanities in his book *The World, The Text, and the Critic* says:

Thus we find the university experience more or less officially consecrating the pact between a canon of works, a band of initiate instructors, a group of younger affiliates;

in a socially validated manner all this reproduces the filiative discipline supposedly transcended by the educational process. (21)

It is from the “cloistral world” of the University that Lurie views the world around him, and derives his sense of self. His love for Wordsworth and Byron are reflected in his scholarship and also in his conversations with students; he is immersed in it. “For as long as he can remember, the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him” (Coetzee 13). He quotes Byron to ease his anxieties about age, seeks solace in Rilke and Hugo for his pain. One must read this as a narcissistic trait which as theorized by Freud is, “the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation” (73-74). This desire for self-preservation and immortality becomes even more pronounced when towards the end, Lurie hard-pressed by reality, seeks refuge in the imaginary figure of Teresa Guiccioli, Byron’s mistress and the heroine of the chamber opera he has been writing. A similar egotism is displayed by Aschenbach too in his lofty ruminations about great literature at various points in the text. It is the narrative voice which calls for greater circumspection from the reader through its gentle, mocking tone.

Tired and yet intellectually stimulated, he beguiled the long and tedious meal with abstract and indeed transcendental reflections. He mediated on the mysterious combination into which the canonical and the individual must enter for human beauty to come into being, proceeded from this point to general problems of form and art, and concluded in the end that his thoughts and findings resembled certain seemingly happy inspirations that come to us in dreams, only to be recognized by the sober senses as completely shallow and worthless (Mann, 146).

Later on, the narcissism undergoes a transformation as through a “projective mechanism,” Aschenbach develops an infatuation for a young Polish boy, Tadzio, in Venice. The day after seeing the boy, anticipating a second sighting, he calls him, “...my little Phaeacian,” hinting that Tadzio’s Hellenistic features betray a hedonism represented by people of Scheria in *Odysseus* (146). Freud in his 1914 essay on narcissism lists three sources of narcissistic confirmation. He writes:

One part of self-regard is primary—the residue of infantile narcissism; another part arises out of the omnipotence which is corroborated by experience (the fulfilment of the ego ideal), whilst a third part proceeds from the satisfaction of object-libido. (100)

One sees Aschenbach going through these stages as he moves from being an immensely successful writer with literary ambitions, to someone who “impoverishes his ego,” in his desire for the object-libido as represented by the boy. The abjection he achieves in the end is in contradistinction to his theorizing about it earlier. Earlier in the text, while on the beach, he quietly gloats on the deference and respect that people offer him, “...saluting the unerring and graceful power of his language...” (150).

While a psychological reading of the texts exhibit the psychic investment the protagonists have in their sense of self, their affective investment in literature is not exhausted by such an explanation. The possibilities of ideological capture and hold that literature has over their lives derives its potency from the socio-cultural status that literature enjoys. Their desire for the aesthetic ideal, and ethical preoccupations go beyond the instinctual and structural analysis that psychoanalysis offers and must be excavated in the many layers of acculturation, legitimation, and legibility that canons of European literature carry in their composition. Said talking about the lack of the “generative impulse” in modern novels says, that what the university as a space attempted to do was replace the family structures with modern forms of affiliation based on taste, reading, and one might add, cultural capital. As a result, literature as a system of signs and semantics, produces a certain mode of visibility in thought while, invisibilizing everything that lies outside it.

The process of representation, by which filiation is reproduced in the affiliative structure and made to stand for what belongs to us (as we in turn belong to the family of our languages and traditions), reinforces the known at the expense of the knowable (Said22-23).

One of the earliest literary references in *Disgrace* is from Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. David Lurie thinks of Emma Bovary twice in the novel. Once, at the beginning, when in a state of contentment about his discrete arrangement with Sorayya, he imagines telling Emma a thing or two about the pleasures of “moderate bliss.” The second is when after having sex with Bev Shaw, he imagines Bev triumphant about taking him as a lover. Both the instances indicate a narcissistic personality – a man who in the service of the ego, projects an ideal image of himself to safeguard his narcissistic equilibrium. However, the mention of Emma Bovary is not a matter of mere chance. It is indicative not only of Coetzee’s ironic distance from Lurie, who exhibits certain signs of Bovarism but also underlines a certain identification with Flaubert and his mode of writing. Coetzee has used the free indirect style and other modes of represented thought in narrativizing through Lurie and relaying his interiority at the cost of everyone else’s. Iain Bamfort in his essay titled, “Literature and Ethics: Learning to Read with Emma Bovary writes:

Flaubert had transgressed the rules of good taste, and committed a contextual sin. Not only had he not included a morally exemplary character to counter the flightiness of Emma, but he as author had shirked the task of telling readers how to judge this “provincial tale.” (13)

Bamfort goes on to make the point that,

The ethics of reading requires the reader to assume the full privilege of his freedom and face up to the demands it imposes upon him... It would be entirely a mistake to assume that the morality inherent in the work itself is a lesson to be learned, a list of catechisms, an account settled, or indeed any kind of certitude extricable from the substance of the novel itself. (18-19)

It is this political responsibility that the reader must also undertake when she reads *Disgrace*. Spivak in her essay, “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching,” talks about Lurie’s “race-gender illiteracy” and the need for counterfocalization while reading the novel.

In the arrangement of counterfocalization within the validating institution of the novel in English, the second half of *Disgrace* makes the subaltern speak, but does not presume to give “voice,” either to Petrus or Lucy. This is not the novel’s failure, but rather a politically fastidious awareness of the limits of power. (326)

The few acts of volition that Lurie performs in the text, indicate, as Spivak points out a literal-mindedness that is unable to bridge the gap between intent, sentiment and gesture. His failure to understand Lucy’s decisions, is the result of his inability to overcome the literary egotism that his disciplinary training has instilled in him and allows him to project ideological innocence in the face of the “Enlightenment style rape” that he commits on Melanie Isaacs, his student, while, suffering and agonizing over the rape of his daughter later. The mention of the painting, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, is one such moment in the text. He believes that the rape committed by Pollux and the other two men might have been condonable without the threat to life and the violence they inflicted. His own “seduction” he classifies as undesirable but doesn’t persist in any self-interrogation. Lurie shields himself from his own culpability and one can only glimpse a certain *ressentiment* when he says:

He shrugs. ‘These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn’t oblige’. (66)

He has moved on from his work on Wordsworth and is working on Byron when he is discharged from the University. He has chosen to work on Byron’s stay in Italy which was assumed to escape a scandal. This literary detail, in keeping with a certain literary convention, prophesizes Lurie’s own social fall. His race and class privilege allow him to adopt the Byronic stance in his dealings with people around him, especially women in positions socially inferior to his. He uses a line from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 1 to seduce Melanie and justifies it as an act in the service of Eros showing traits of what in today’s political parlance is termed as “toxic masculinity” by using his intellectual and social prowess for sexual gains. At no point does he realize his own complicity in a system which through studied apathy, and moral aridity have led to this moment in a post-apartheid society where violence on women is ubiquitous.

For the disciple of Wordsworth to name his daughter Lucy also lends itself to literary speculation. The collection of poems titled, “Lucy poems,” examine man’s relationship with nature, a growing awareness of one’s mortality and most importantly, a growing sense of individuated identity. While it might be a disservice to simplistically summarize and dismissively assign meaning from the poems to the person, Lucy does come to represent a loving interchange between person and nature. While she refuses to sentimentalize the

relationship, Lucy expresses an uncertainty and an openness which is radical in the face of the legal-rational orthodoxy that Lurie believes in. It is in trying to play a filial role and accommodate Lucy's choices that Lurie comes to inhabit his reality more fully. Spencer Hall, in his essay, "Wordsworth's "Lucy" Poems: Context and Meaning," writes:

The [Wordsworthian lover] speaker comes to the deepest awareness of his own, and of Lucy's, threatened humanness precisely because he is forced beyond the interior landscape of his own mind, his own memory, to a more complete and more objective view of things. (170)

This idea of literary affirmation is at the heart of both novels; to seek latent connections in the events of one's life and to give it the fulsomeness of a carefully crafted literary text. A literary education allows them to ponder and seek moral solace through aesthetic reflection. Aschenbach's passion for Tadzio is an extension of his desire to achieve aesthetic excellence. It is not a simple matter of a dialectic between repression and dissolution; a matter of Dionysian excess overcoming Apollonian restraint. This kind of a reductive binarism does not fully engage with the subtleties of the text and with the function that literary validation serves in matters of the heart when they overcome the austere disposition of someone like Aschenbach. Lukacs in his essay on Mann says:

He [Aschenbach] creates a perfectly formed life and an impressive body of work on the basis of a 'composure' ethic. Both life and work rise above the vulgar everyday with a stern pride, above both its small-minded philistinism and its equally small-minded anarchist bohemianism. But it takes only a little conflict, provoked by scarcely anything tangible, and a dream within this conflict, for the 'composure' to break hopelessly, irresistibly down, as if it had never been the product of a sincere, self-denying, hard-won life. (24)

While one agrees that Mann exposes the Puritan ethic of 'composure' to a withering critique through Aschenbach's decomposition, it is important to pay attention to the nuances of his passion as it grows in measure. His initial attitude towards Tadzio is one of wonder at his appearance and cultivation. Tadzio stands at the cusp of adulthood. He exudes what Foucault in his discussion of pederastic desire has called, "legitimate desirability" (201). The formal perfection of his features are constantly compared to a Greek sculpture. Talking of this model of erotics and the part played by the pubescent male, Foucault writes:

But in the sphere of sexual ethics, it was the juvenile body with its peculiar charm that was regularly suggested as the "right object" of pleasure. And it would be a mistake to think that its traits were valued because of what they shared with feminine beauty. They were appreciated in themselves or in their juxtaposition with the signs and guarantees of a developing virility. (200)

Foucault elaborates on the exacting morality that circumscribed the amorous relationship between an older and a younger man. It was connected with ideas of cultivation, esteem, and

propriety—differentiating it vastly from the sense of debauchery that it had come to be associated with in later centuries.

What is historically singular is not that the Greeks found pleasure in boys, nor even that they accepted this pleasure as legitimate; it is that this acceptance of pleasure was not simple, and that it gave rise to a whole cultural elaboration. In broad terms, what is important to grasp here is not why Greeks had a fondness for boys but why they had a “pederasty”; that is, why they elaborated a courtship practice, a moral reflection, and—as we shall see—a philosophical asceticism, around that fondness (Foucault, 214).

Aschenbach seems to be reacting to his own infatuation with the knowledge of both these conventions. He cannot stop himself from finding classical references when he is talking about Tadzio. He compares him to Ovidian characters like Narcissus, Hyacinthus as well as heroes from Greek mythology. At one point in the text, he reflects on the very intertextual nature of his desire and reflects on the legitimizing influence that classical education has had on him.

His eyes embraced that noble figure at the blue water’s edge, and in rising ecstasy he felt he was gazing on Beauty itself, on Form as a thought of God, on the one and pure perfection which dwells in the spirit and of which a human image and likeness had here been lightly and graciously set up for him to worship. Such was his emotional intoxication; and the aging artist welcomed it unhesitatingly, even greedily. His mind was in labour, its store of culture was in ferment. His memory threw up thoughts from ancient tradition which he had been taught as a boy, but which had never yet come alive in his own fire. (156)

In both the novels, the protagonists seek mental nourishment and sustenance in their literary sensibility. In my reading of these two novels, I have attempted to show that ways in which certain modes of literary reading fashion the artistic personality in their psychic existence and functioning. This form of intertextual reading is an attempt to uncover the structures of experience and action that reading practices engender. Literature plays a key role in the shaping of androcentric structures of desire which can produce a “hopeless romantic” like Emma Bovary but also a sexual predator like David Lurie. David Lurie proclaims himself a scholar but only exhibits the political quietism that he chooses to read into Romantic poetry and not its democratizing impulse or the insurrectionary and oppositional reading that literary criticism has come to exhibit in the last century. His moral blinkeredness and cultural parochialism divulge what Wendy Brown has called an intolerance rooted in tolerance. Reading a singular, consistent motive and a linear movement in Aschenbach’s passion for Tadzio fails to account for the psychological complexity at work. The novella makes it a point to highlight the belatedness of Aschenbach’s realization of his infatuation for the boy allowing the reader not only the necessary dramatic irony but also an early reflexivity on the dialectic of fiction and reality. One can speculate that the possibilities of readings that this kind of boundedness of the literary and the ideological that these texts offer go beyond simplistic

readings of mimetic life-art connection into a deeper theorization about the connected, one might even say, implicated, worlds of the bourgeois artist, critic, and the reader.

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