

and Indignation,” and “Love of Human Beings.” The title of the anthology, *Menschheitsdämmerung*, can mean dawn or dusk and so captures the ambiguity of transition and the movement’s circling around pessimism and optimism. These works contain an appeal to renewal, the refrain of the new human being, an exclamatory call to fraternity, spirit, humanity, heart, and soul in the face of a bestial existence. At times a political program is evoked, as in Johannes R. Becher’s “Der Sozialist” (1916; “The Socialist”). Much of the messianic rhetoric is abstract, as in Ernst Stadler’s “Der Spruch” (1914; “The Maxim”), Karl Otten’s “Die jungen Dichter” (1918; “The Young Poets”), or Franz Werfel’s *Der Weltfreund* (1911; *Friend of the World*). Often the emphasis on brotherhood and ecstasy becomes bombastic, hollow, and stale. For Benn the pathos of “the new human being” was “the last fever of lying out of a mouth already swollen from discharge” (3:125). The Expressionists were clearly better at diagnosing evil and shocking people than in painting a path to salvation, even if this impulse is irrepressible and surfaces in some respects, if highly subdued and much later, in Benn’s elevation of artistic form as a manifestation of the absolute, a position he assumed after briefly embracing, then abandoning, National Socialism.

Not all Expressionist poetry was as stylistically innovative as Benn’s, but several tendencies are visible. Common to all is the nonmimetic, nonrepresentational character. Even Benn’s cancer wards are hardly realistic. The artists express their concept of the world without seeking to represent objective reality. More specifically, Expressionist poetry makes frequent use of parataxis. Images are juxtaposed with a certain degree of randomness and without any overarching sense of grammatical relation or causality. This is especially evident in works such as Trakl’s “Im Winter” (1910; “In Winter”) and “Trübsinn” (1912; “Melancholy”), van Hoddiss’s “Weltende” (1911; “End of the World”), Max Hermann-Neisse’s “Nacht im Stadtpark” (1914; “Night in the City Park”), and Lichtenstein’s “Die Dämmerung” (1910/11; “Twilight”) and “Der Morgen” (1913; “Morning”). We find the structure in *Morgue and Other Poems* as well, especially in “Requiem” and “Man and Woman Walk through the Cancer Ward.” In addition, the language tends to be bold, intense, shocking, as might befit the depiction of decay and crisis, apocalypse and war. Highly charged and enthusiastic rhetoric, even when it ends with an allusion to destruction, is evident, for example, in Stadler’s “Fahrt über die Kölner Rheinbrücke bei Nacht” (1913; “Ride Across the Cologne Rhine Bridge at Night”). Expressionist poetry has little of the subtle refinement and sensitive delicacy of turn-of-the-century Impressionism. The language is also very heterogeneous. Benn is the most pronounced example here, employing a montage style that links clinical language, everyday language, religion, and poetry. Expressionist lyric is a mix of tone as well as of diction: the serious and comical seem to combine in works such as van Hoddiss’s “End of the World,” Benn’s “Nachtcafé” (1912; “Night Cafe”), or Lichtenstein’s “Twilight.”

Finally, some Expressionist poetry was highly concentrated. Here the best example is August Stramm, who was influenced by Marinetti’s Futurist mani-

festoes, which recognize the world as a disjointed array of information and events, brought to life by newspapers, cinema, telephones, airplanes, phonographs. Such a world calls for new forms—above all, collage. Adjectives and adverbs must disappear, so too must finite verbs and punctuation. The well-formed sentence is abandoned, replaced by a telegram-like style, with frequent use of compound nouns, phonetic spelling, and onomatopoeia to convey the continuity and rush of life, and a variety of typographical accents for emphasis. Stramm took these precepts further than most, with his paratactic linking of nouns and transcendence of conventional syntax. But aspects of the so-called telegram style are also evident in the early Benn. Paradoxically, in their efforts to convey the pace of reality and its vitality, such works remain, despite their innovative form, highly, if abstractly, mimetic.

Although Expressionists transformed our sense of poetry and had a very good sense of the ills of society and the consequences of the abandonment of metaphysics, their abstract answers were of little help to those seeking positive guidance. Many artists, disillusioned by the shortcomings of the movement, turned to a new sobriety, which was more concrete, more social, and more cynical. One of the few poets who outlived Expressionism as an active artist, Benn enjoyed a revival after World War II with works that turned much more to a classical elevation of pure form. Despite the distance in time, many of the Expressionist problems are still our own: loss of orientation resulting from the crises of Christianity and metaphysics; the search for appropriate and innovative modes of expression; the role of the ugly within aesthetics; and the new responsibilities of art in an age of technology.

See also 1882, 1910, 1921, 1929 (October), 1999

*Bibliography:* Gottfried Benn, *Prose, Essays, Poems*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York: Continuum, 1987). ———, *Sämtliche Werke. Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, 7 vols., ed. Gerhard Schuster (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986–). Roy F. Allen, *German Expressionist Poetry* (Boston: Twayne, 1979). Peter Hohendahl, ed., *Benn—Wirkung wider Willen* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1971). Kurt Pinthus, ed., *Menschheitsdämmerung: Dawn of Humanity: A Document of Expressionism with Biographies and Bibliographies*, trans. and intro. Joanna M. Ratyck, Ralph Ley, and Robert C. Conard (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1994). Walter H. Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959). Silvio Vietta, ed., *Lyrrik des Expressionismus*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1990). John Willett, *Expressionism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

Mark W. Roche

## 1912, June

Thomas Mann completes his novella *Der Tod in Venedig* after a year of writing

### *The Lasciviousness of Ruin*

Many Junes after Thomas Mann (1875–1955) finished his most famous story, the newspaper *USA Today* (June 7, 1999) reported that the Publishing Triangle, “a group of 250 gay men and lesbians who work in publishing,” was

about to release a list of what they called the “100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels.” *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*) would be at the top of the list, the number one “gay novel” of all time. Dorothy Allison, a prominent lesbian author and one of the judges who created the list, was quoted calling Mann’s story “an aesthetic and ethical struggle useful to me and my community.”

Allison’s carefully chosen words offer much to consider, particularly now that *Death in Venice* has become the foremost example of a genre, gay literature, that did not and could not openly exist in the Europe of 1912. When she speaks of “my community,” she might refer primarily to gays and lesbians, but perhaps also to other writers and artists, and indeed perhaps to an even broader group of men and women involved in aesthetic and ethical struggle. Allison seems to suggest that Thomas Mann wrote a story centered on artistic and moral issues that could be useful both to remarkable individuals like Allison (and Mann himself) and to the community of which such individuals are a part, whatever we choose the word “community” to mean.

We can be certain that Mann did not imagine the community he wished to address in the summer of 1912 as anything like the members of the Publishing Triangle. Much as such a group might have interested him, nothing of the kind was imaginable at the beginning of the 20th century in a society that displayed official and relentless hostility to the practice of homosexuality. The memory of the trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde in the mid-1890s was still fresh in the minds of Europeans of the 1910s, and even hints of homosexuality could create large-scale public scandal. Mann was acutely aware that there was no visible gay community to which he could turn for public support of the kind offered by the Publishing Triangle nearly a century later, and he knew that he would have to be extremely careful in presenting his material to a potentially hostile audience. When he mentions beginning work on *Death in Venice* to Philipp Witkop in a letter (July 18, 1911), he is careful to stress the high moral tone of his project: “I am in the midst of a work: a really strange thing that I brought back with me from Venice, a novella, serious and pure in tone, concerning a case of pederasty in an aging artist. You say, ‘Hum, hum!’ but it is quite respectable.” Mann’s insistence that his material is “quite respectable” in spite of its treatment of homoeroticism is instructive. One of the most important features of the homosexual attraction felt by Mann’s protagonist, Gustav Aschenbach, for the Polish boy he sees on the beach is that it is *not* respectable. It is dangerous, improper, impermissible, and ultimately fatal. When Aschenbach goes so far as to whisper the words “I love you,” not to Tadzio himself but to the empty darkness, Mann’s narrator describes it as “impossible under these conditions, absurd, reviled, ridiculous” (*Death in Venice*, 44). Mann can claim that his fiction is respectable precisely because it presents Aschenbach’s passion as completely out of bounds. He appears to have understood from the outset that his story could succeed in 1912 not by embracing homosexuality as a lifestyle but by placing it in a context where its impropriety is beyond question. Mann’s astounding achievement is to have made this absolutely impermissible homoerotic feeling interesting, understandable, and mov-

ing not only to a potential audience of gay readers but to the average heterosexual, possibly even homophobic, European. At the very moment when the narrator confesses that Aschenbach's "I love you" is absolutely impossible, he also affirms that it is "holy and venerable even under these conditions" (44). That the community of readers, including those indifferent or hostile to gays, has regularly assented to this affirmation is testimony to Mann's skill at turning what seems at first eccentric and "queer" to the very center of his audience's concern.

In a world that finds a list of "100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels" not only appropriate but even worthy of featured treatment in a mass-market newspaper like *USA Today*, it is particularly important to remember how different our world is from the world of 1912, when issues of a far different sort were at the center of attention. That world is not only the one in which Mann himself lived, it is the one in which he explicitly sets his story. The tale opens on "a spring afternoon in 19—, a year that for months glowered threateningly over our continent" (3). The mysterious 19— could be any year in the still young 20th century, but Mann's audience would certainly recognize it as 1911, a year marked by diplomatic crises. The blank left in the date, a typical touch of Mannian irony, in fact withholds little or no significant information, but it does set a tone of apparent editorial tact appropriate for a story dealing with scandalous events. Thus the very mention of "19—" at the commencement of the narrative insists that what is to come will be both threatening and sensational, a story fitting the circumstances of a continent on the brink of the most ruinous war anyone had ever experienced.

Oddly enough, the moment of crisis in which Mann's story is set and in which it first appeared in print marks one of the high points in the history of German letters. Not only did *Death in Venice* appear in print in the fall of 1912, during those same months Franz Kafka composed "The Metamorphosis," another investigation into the psychology of ruin. Today these two stories are by far the most widely read works of German literature, even more firmly seated in the European canon now than Goethe's *Faust*. For a large number of educated non-Germans, these fruits of autumn 1912 represent everything they will ever know about a rich German literary tradition. The highest artistic success thus comes on the brink of political and cultural collapse.

As surprising and strange as this circumstance may be, it is worth pondering as more than an odd coincidence or evidence of worldwide educational decline. For the author of *Buddenbrooks*, a novel that equates artistic success with the onset of ruin, there would be nothing at all surprising in the apparent paradox of the success-in-failure of German culture in 1912. He had been pondering such issues throughout his career. And thus when Mann writes in the opening lines of *Death in Venice* about a glowering threat hanging over Europe, we can be sure that he is deliberately putting his story of individual ruin in the context of a much larger ruin that is about to befall all of Europe, a ruin that was as palpable in Kafka's Prague as in Mann's Munich.

How important this sense of ruin is to *Death in Venice* should be apparent

from the title, which after all does not allude to “Romance in Venice” or even “Lust in Venice” but to a disastrous and in many ways humiliating collapse. The focus of attention right from the start is on decline, fall, and dissolution. In many ways the English word “dissolution” perfectly captures Mann’s intended fusion of lasciviousness and ruin. Aschenbach’s experience in Venice is a relentless process of dissolution in which the protagonist, as he becomes more and more dissolute, comes closer and closer to dissolving into formlessness. Mann makes this fusion concrete in the figure of the sea, a place clearly identified in the story both as the scene of sensuous abandon and as the elemental “ground of all being” to which the soul returns in death. The setting in Venice, a city completely dominated by water, affords the opportunity for numerous variations on this theme. Canals, fountains, and the great lagoon that separates the city from the barrier island of the Lido all provide locations for important events in the tale. The entire city is a “sunken queen” on the verge of dissolving in the waters that surround and nurture it.

But again and again, it is the sea itself that dominates the story and its protagonist. The narrator stresses Aschenbach’s love of “the beach scene, this view of a carefree society engaged in purely sensual enjoyment on the edge of the watery element,” and he even hyperbolically alludes to “the nakedness sanctioned by the bold and easy freedom of the place” (25). It seems unlikely that, aside from little children, anyone on that beach was actually naked, but Mann’s language pushes the sexuality of the situation right to the edge, scattering on the sands before the reader’s eye a crowd of rhetorically nude bodies. The sea itself begins to take on the seductive qualities of the beach society: “A silky white sheen lay on the Pontos, its broad stretches undulating languidly” (34).

The story also makes clear that this sensuality is morally suspect. Aschenbach “loved the sea from the depth of his being” because as an artist, he harbored “an affinity for the undivided, the immeasurable, the eternal, the void. It was a forbidden affinity, directly contrary to his calling, and seductive precisely for that reason” (26). There are thus two sorts of seduction inherent in Aschenbach’s sojourn on the seashore, one physical, the other spiritual. The physical seduction (the naked flesh and the “bold and easy freedom” found on the beach) is powerful, but no more so than the spiritual seduction represented by the ocean’s formless immensity. The “watery element” seems to call on the artist to let go of his art, to release himself from the discipline of form, to abandon the laborious quest for artistic perfection in exchange for the perfection of absolute release into nothingness.

From its opening paragraphs, the story emphasizes Aschenbach’s struggle to keep formal control both of his artistic material and of his own physical and mental self. The mechanism of the plot is set in motion at a moment of loss of artistic control in which Aschenbach fails to master the difficulties of his “dangerous” morning’s work, “which just now required particular discretion, caution, penetration, and precision of will” (3). As the story progresses and Aschenbach finds himself attracted to the “perfectly beautiful” Polish boy he sees on the Lido, an attraction he himself feels is far out of bounds, he is once

again in need of discretion, caution, and precision of will. But he can no more master his surging emotions than he could master his recalcitrant material, and he lets himself dissolve instead in the waters of his Venetian adventure.

That Aschenbach, the dignified, respected model of discipline and restraint, should permit himself to develop a crush on one so young is bad enough, but it is catastrophically worse that this youthful beloved should be a boy. And the story requires this ultimate catastrophe. It would not do for the hero's ruin to be partial, as indeed it might seem if the plot hinged on an older man's infatuation with a young girl. Mann claimed at one point that he first conceived the story as a retelling of Goethe's love for Ulrike von Levetzow, "the love of the seventy-year-old for that little girl" (94). But that would not nearly have been a dissolute enough love for Mann's purpose, not nearly impermissible enough. Mann had far better material at hand in his own experience—for he had himself become fascinated with a Polish boy he saw on the beach in Venice in 1911—and in his vivid personal understanding of both the attractions and the dangers of homosexual love. No one knew better than Mann the cost of living a life of renunciation and severe discipline, and no one knew better than he what it would cost if he were to let that discipline slip. What we would call today a "gay lifestyle" was never a real option for a man of Thomas Mann's ambitions living in his time and place.

Mann cared deeply about his career, and in particular he cared about his stature in the community. In 1911, at the age of thirty-six, he aspired to, but had not yet attained, the level of public esteem he ascribed to his character Aschenbach. A writer known to practice homosexuality would simply not be granted such esteem by Europeans of the early 20th century, no matter how excellent his work. In a very real sense, then, what happens to Mann's hero in the story is exactly what Mann feared might happen to him if he ever let himself go: Mann's relation to this aspect of his story is not unlike that of Goethe toward suicide in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Mann was clearly determined that such a thing should never take place in real life, and as far as we know it never did.

This is not to say that Mann rejected or regretted his own homosexuality or that *Death in Venice* is intended as a cautionary tale against pederasty. On the contrary, the existence of homoerotic feelings is one of the fundamental assumptions on which the fiction is built. It has been argued that homosexuality "should be assumed in Mann's works, given its importance both in late 19th-century Germany and in his personal life" (Reed, *Death in Venice*, 219), and there is substantial evidence both here and in Mann's other stories to support this claim. It is equally clear, however, that Mann felt renunciation was necessary for him. His attraction to men, he claimed in a late diary entry, evoked in him "only a renunciation, specifically a not-to-be-determined, wishful-impossible one" (quoted in Reed, *Death in Venice*, 217). Everything we know about Mann's life suggests that, at the time he wrote *Death in Venice* and for the rest of his life thereafter, he steadfastly persisted in this renunciation.

Aschenbach, however, is unable and/or unwilling to renounce his pas-

sion for the beautiful Tadzio, and this inability to maintain his long-held habits of self-discipline leads to his contracting a fatal case of cholera. Mann's readers, straight or gay, are made to understand, through the deftness of Mann's prose, both the great strength of Aschenbach's artistic will and the even greater strength of his overwhelming need to let go, to ride the wave of passion, to relax in the cushions of a gondola and float onward in pursuit of love. Aschenbach succumbs in his aesthetic and ethical struggle, but he does so in a process so carefully and sensitively described that the reader feels a deep sense of kinship with him. He becomes part of our community, and his story is useful to us.

See also 1831, 1882, 1912 (September), 1943

*Bibliography:* Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice: A New Translation, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. and trans. Clayton Koelb (New York: Norton, 1994). ———, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8: *Erzählungen, Fiorenza, Dichtungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1960–1974). T. J. Reed, *Death in Venice: Making and Unmaking a Master* (New York: Twayne, 1994).

Clayton Koelb

## 1912, July–October

Carl Einstein publishes a radically experimental short novel in serial form in the expressionist journal *Die Aktion*

### *An Optics of Fragmentation*

*Bebuquin oder Die Dilettanten des Wunders* (1912; *Bebuquin, or Dilettantes of the Miracle*) was Carl Einstein's (1885–1940) earliest published literary work and remains his sole contribution to the German literary canon. Although he was bitterly disappointed by its reception, several notable contemporaries did hail it as a literary milestone. And yet Einstein, only twenty-four when he finished *Bebuquin*, never again produced a literary text that approached its impact; it was as a writer on art that he achieved the greater fame.

Literature and art criticism were not conflicting vocations for Einstein; rather they functioned as two discursive modes through which he addressed the philosophical issues central to his thinking. The protagonist seeks to remake himself and the world by changing his perception of it, and this is also the focal point of Einstein's art theory and criticism. "Through vision we change human beings and the world," he wrote in 1931 (*Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 92). Consistent with this theoretical position, the visual imagery of *Bebuquin*, generally treated summarily in the literature on the novel, is as crucial to its meaning as are its often abstruse dialogue and bizarre narrative.

Einstein's short novel is the product of a particular moment in the nagging cultural crisis of modernity. Nietzsche had first articulated its principal themes—the death of God, the loss of myth and of a unified culture, the epistemological crisis of faith in the objectivity of science and reason, the resulting nihilism and fragmentation of modern experience. Like Nietzsche,

Einstein offers at once a diagnosis of the modern malaise and a searing expression of longing for a cure.

The narrative argument of *Bebuquin* is contained in its subtitle, “Dilettantes of the Miracle”: the dilettante and the miracle are for Einstein incompatible. The dilettante, who lives for the moment, cultivates his individuality and subjectivity, pursues pleasure, and is unwilling to subordinate himself to any collective purpose, is the embodiment of modern fragmentation and formlessness. The miracle—a miracle because it must transcend reason, science, and logic—is a compelling collective myth, an instrumental fiction with the force of law, capable of restoring to human life and to work a unifying form and purpose.

Paradoxically, *Bebuquin* brilliantly exemplifies, on many levels, the cultural malaise that is its subject and that its protagonists long to overcome, not least in its assertive—and dilettantish—metaliterary self-reflexivity. “What bad material I am for a novel,” laments Bebuquin in chapter 2, “since I will never do anything, I revolve within myself; I would gladly say something clever about action, if only I knew what it is” (*Bebuquin*, 8). Even Bebuquin’s name, as Dirk Heißeberer has proposed, is self-reflexive, a compound of “book” (French, *bouquin*) with “Beb,” a contraction of *Bébé* that Einstein used elsewhere in referring to the character, his alter ego (Heißeberer, 113–114). In short, Bebuquin is named after the book about himself. Such devices recur throughout, as in Bebuquin’s prayer in chapter 12: “Lord, grant me a miracle, we have been seeking it since chapter one” (34). And yet this narcissistic self-reflection becomes symptomatic of the futility of that quest.

The transcendence of the self as a precondition of the miracle is drastically signified in the novel by death. The three major characters—Bebuquin, Euphemia, and Nebukadnezar Böhm, dilettantes all—are in search of a miracle, and each has a characteristic encounter with death. Euphemia, in a circus trapeze act, resolves, “for formal reasons,” to break her neck, but suffers a failure of nerve. “Morally ruined,” she repairs to the Cloister of the Free Miracle of Blood, taking the easy, anachronistic path of religion (27, 32). Böhm dies in chapter 1 but, irredeemably a dilettante and hence resistant to self-surrender and the fixity of death, continues to inhabit the narrative in wildly varying scales and shapes, until he is buried under bizarre conditions in the penultimate chapter. Only Bebuquin, though initially anxious to preserve and cultivate his individuality, grows weary of his dilettantish existence and resolves to liquidate it. In the desperate hope of achieving transformation, and perhaps a miracle, he wills and achieves his own death, and the “book of Beb” ends abruptly.

Einstein wrote to the art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in 1923 that he wanted to tell a “story precisely of sensations, with experiences brought into the foreground, of which so-called things are at best a symptom.” This certainly fits the textual world of *Bebuquin* (*Carl Einstein–Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: Correspondence*, 140). Those experiences are of deranged senses, of persons and objects with blurred or fluid identities, at times even of seemingly disembod-