



Representation and function of characters from Greek antiquity in Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice*¹

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Abstract

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*Lack of insight into Greek antiquity, more specifically the nature of classical tragedy and mythology, could be one reason for the negative reception of Benjamin Britten's last opera **Death in Venice**. In the first place, this article considers Britten's opera based on Thomas Mann's novella as a manifestation of classical tragedy. Secondly, it is shown how mythological characters in Mann's novella represent abstract ideas² in Britten's opera, thereby enhancing the dramatic impact of the opera considerably. On the one hand it is shown how the artist's inner conflict manifests itself in a dialectic relationship between discipline and inspiration in Plato's **Phaedrus dialogue** that forms the basis of Aschenbach's monologue at the end of the opera. The conflict between Aschenbach's*

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- 1 This essay is a revised version of a paper read at the Intercongressional Symposium of the International Musicological Society held in Budapest during August 2000.
 - 2 In classical Greek the word "idea" has several meanings. For example, one important facet of the word involves a concrete visual connotation of "seeing". In this sense Plato referred in *Protagoras* to a person as being "very beautiful in idea", meaning a person is good-looking (Urmson, 1967:118). But an idea can also have an abstract meaning. In this case "abstract" is specifically used to distinguish symbolic abstractions from traditional musical representations of phenomena such as rain, wind, the sea, birdsong, sounds of machinery, electronic effects, etc. Kant, for example, distinguished between a practical idea which represents objective reality and an aesthetic idea which represents phenomena of the beautiful and the sublime (Neumann, 1976:118).

rational consciousness and his irrational subconscious, on the other hand, is depicted by means of mythological figures, Apollo and Dionysus. Two focal points in the opera, namely the Games of Apollo at the end of Act 1 and the nightmare scene which forms the climax of the opera in Act 2, are used to illustrate the musical manifestation of this conflict.

1. Introduction

Twenty-five years after the death of Benjamin Britten in December 1976, opinions about his stature in the world of music are still divided. On the one hand he is described as the most important British composer, but on the other hand the English themselves are not really very enthusiastic about his music. Indeed, the reaction of the British has been described as “icy” (Odendaal, 2001:4) or at best “cautious” (Ashman, 2001:29). What is certain, however, is that interest in his music has been growing rapidly – over the last two years 60 different productions of his operas took place in 18 countries. Of these productions 500-plus performances were staged in non-English-speaking countries (Kettle, 2001:3).

Benjamin Britten chose Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912), one of the most widely admired short novels of the twentieth century (Schmidgall, 1997:295), as text for what turned out to be his last opera. The fact that this novella deals with the doomed fascination of the internationally acclaimed author Gustav von Aschenbach for the beautiful Polish boy, Tadzio and that the composer enhanced the opposition of mythological figures to achieve this end, surely could not have furthered his cause among the English public. When this opera was premiered in 1973 it elicited considerable negative comment. For example, the composer Ned Rorem (1987:186), holds that on paper the opera looked “sterile, padded, colorless, simplistic and, yes, lazy with endless recitative on neumelike signs speckling an over-extended text”. Even the composer's friend and English writer, Ronald Duncan was of the opinion that it lacked conflict and that vocal monotony was the result of the overuse of recitative. What is more, he “could not bear the public revelation of private agony. Art always surpasses life, even in immodesty” (Duncan, 1981:153).

What is not understood here is that the downfall of the tragic hero, who is normally associated with an extraordinary destiny, results in his isolation from society and that this downfall constitutes a cornerstone of tragedy as genre. The central idea of tragic irony is that “whatever exceptional happens to the hero should be causally out of line with his character” (Frye, 1957:37, 41). Another reason for the negative view of Britten's opera could be found in a too close reading of the musical and literary text. Moving back a little from the musical work of art, the design, or the

way in which content is shaped, comes into clearer view. Viewed even further back, the organizing design becomes even more distinct. Continuing this “moving back” strategy eventually allows a comparison between works of art in a general sense. According Northrop Frye (1957:140) “... we often have to ‘stand back’ from the poem to see its archetypal organization”. Lack of an historical awareness as well as insight into the meanings of forgotten symbolic references, many of a mythological nature, could also be reasons for the criticism and the misunderstanding of the opera. The fact that the mythical mode (stories about gods) is the most abstract and conventionalized of all literary modes (Frye, 1957:134) further complicates matters.

In Mann’s novella abstract oppositions such as beauty, purity, order, simplicity, discipline on the one hand, and confusion and derangement on the other hand, are developed. The conflict is, therefore, situated in the mental domain. This kind of subject-matter does not lend itself easily to visual representation, an important characteristic of traditional opera. However, in Britten’s opera abstract ideas are developed symbolically by specifically opposing two mythological figures, Apollo and Dionysus. In his novella Mann does not mention the two deities by name but they are implied by references to the sun (Mann, 1912:46, 47, 55) and “the stranger god” (Mann, 1912:75). The fact that Britten relied on mythological figures to represent abstract ideas could be regarded as a contributing factor towards the perception that the opera is “remarkably true to Mann” (Evans, 1979:523).

Whereas the conflict in Aschenbach’s mind is represented by mythological figures in the opera, the unfolding of the operatic plot follows the pattern of Greek tragedy. “(T)ragedy continues to be a channel for embracing the whole of life in all its contradictions and ambiguities”, was Nietzsche’s later philosophy (Oudemans & Lardinois, 1987:228). Northrop Frye (1957:206), well-known author of *Anatomy of Criticism*, also believed that the authentic basis of human nature comes into literature largely through the tragedies of Greek culture. Knowledge of classical Greek tragedy and its nature could therefore assist in understanding the meaning of Benjamin Britten’s opera.

After showing how the structure of the opera could be understood in terms of Greek tragedy, I shall argue that the librettist Myfanwe Pijper and the composer Benjamin Britten have enhanced the contrasting role of Apollo and Dionysus in the opera as a means to concretize abstract ideas through music. I shall demonstrate how veiled allusions to mythological figures in the novella are developed through musical means to structure on the one hand, the inner landscape of the characters and on the other hand, the outer landscape, that is the plot in the opera. Within

the limited scope of an essay it is impossible to do justice to the variety of ways in which Britten realized Mann's text in a musical manner. Therefore, in the second part of the essay I shall concentrate on the organization of pitch in three crucial moments of the opera, namely Aschenbach's Phaedrus monologue, the Games of Apollo and the dream.

2. Greek tragedy

The fall of the hero is a typical characteristic of tragedy (Frye, 1957:221). The basic structure of tragedy therefore represents a downward movement, "the wheel of fortune falling from innocence toward hamartia, and from hamartia to catastrophe" (Frye, 1957:162). Hamartia denotes a flaw or weakness that has an essential connection with sin or wrongdoing. In Aschenbach this flaw could be the result of the conflict between his disciplined, rational background, which suppressed the intuitive side of his nature, an inheritance from his artistic mother. Catastrophe is the result of hybris, "a proud, passionate, obsessed or soaring mind which brings about a morally intelligible downfall" (Frye, 1957:210).

The binary opposition in Aschenbach's mind which fluctuates between a rational consciousness and an irrational subconscious is strengthened by the music, more specifically by the musical enhancement of mythological figures. On the whole, however, the overarching pattern is one in which he moves steadily away from the Apollonian ideal towards the Dionysian, which in the end results in the corruption of his mind and soul. An oscillation between idealism and decadence eventually settles on a downward course when Aschenbach, after having eventually decided to leave Venice because of the plague, has to stay on after his luggage has been sent to a wrong destination.

The magnitude of the celebrated author's downfall is emphasized by contrasting his greatness with ordinary people at the beginning of the opera. In scenes 1 to 6 Aschenbach is juxtaposed with the traveller, the group of young people on the boat, the elderly fop, rouged and wrinkled, the old gondolier who turned out to be operating without a licence, the hotel manager, hotel guests and the strawberry seller. Scene 7 (Games of Apollo) represents the loss of innocence when Aschenbach realizes that he loves Tadzio.

In scene 9 Aschenbach addresses himself: "What is this path you have taken? What would your forebears say – decent, stern men, in whose respectable name and under whose influence you, the artist made the life of art into a service, a hero's life of struggle and abstinence?" (Britten, 1973:194). A world of shock and horror, portrayed by the conflict

between Apollo and Dionysus during the nightmare (the dream in scene 13), results in great agony and humiliation. On awakening after the dream Aschenbach acknowledges “it is true, it is all true, I can fall no further” (Britten, 1973:237). However, the final humiliation is reached when Aschenbach (scene 15) ironically resorts to the same rejuvenating strategies which he despised in the elderly fop at the beginning of the opera, namely requesting the barber to colour his hair and make up his face.

3. Mythology

According to Douglas Davies (1994:1) myth reflects “a characteristic search for meaning which is typically human”. Heroic and noble ideas found in myths often communicate an underlying message of human suffering which is always relevant, regardless of time and place. In classical Greek tragedy, for example, mythical characters are not only known for their deeds but for their signification of universal ideas which still inform our view of human behaviour and the social environment. Myths represent intuitive wisdom expressed through images.

Knowledge of mythology is of notable assistance in the search for meaning because in myth the narrative can be perceived at various levels of significance (White, 1971:45) and in different codes. Myth can therefore be regarded as a mode by which a society communicates. Myths in general have a surplus of meaning in that they embody more significance than their overt content suggests (Oudemans & Lardinois, 1987:10-12). As myth lends itself to a variety of interpretations, it can be observed in different guises. Consequently every generation of artists interprets the symbolic content of a myth according to its frame of reference. According to Lévi-Strauss “all human behaviour is based on certain unchanging patterns, whose structure is the same in all ages and in all societies” (quoted in Morford & Lenardon, 1995:10). As myths are open to changed interpretation over the course of time (Davies, 1994:1), the use of mythological figures allows the artist to describe the modern world by means of a readily available set of models.

Because myths are derived ultimately from the structure of the mind, myth could represent patterns of behaviour and therefore establish archetypes (Morford & Lenardon, 1995:9). As the concept of the archetype could be regarded as a generic abstraction which signifies something timeless (White, 1971:44) it could assist in the communication of meaning. Frye (1957:99) refers to the idea of the archetype as a “communicable unit” but uses it in its widest sense, namely as signifying “a typical or recurring image”. By an archetype Frye means

... a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience. And as the archetype is a communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication.

The capacity “to express in story form the primary emotional and imaginative workings of the human mind” (Kirkwood, 1958:22) is the distinctive quality of myth that gives it its peculiar value for literature. According to the psycho-analytical school of Jung myth represents the psychological processes of the human subconscious, more specifically he interprets myth as the projection of the collective unconscious of the race, that is, a revelation of the continuing psychic tendencies of society (Morford & Lenardon, 1995:9).

The typical in humanity and the characteristic of the idea interested Thomas Mann much more than the person as specific individual in his / her uniqueness (Marcus-Tar, 1982:83). As myth describes typical actions, being more philosophical than history (Frye, 1957:83), it stands to reason that Mann would be attracted to mythology. He is well-known for veiled allusions to mythological motifs in his novels (White, 1971:49-50). More than two decades after the publication of *Death in Venice* in 1912, he wrote as follows to the Hungarian philologist and later compiler of his letters, Karl Kerényi (Kerényi, 1975:37):

[I]n my case, the gradually expanding interest in myth and religious history is a ‘sign of old age’. It corresponds to a taste that has, in the course of years moved away from the bourgeois-individualistic toward the typical, the general, the universally human.

Referring to Kerényi’s plea (1975:38) for a return of the European spirit to the “highest, the mythic realities”, Mann replied in a letter that it is “in truth a great and positive cultural movement, and I may claim that my own work has to some extent played a part in it”. He connected his own mythological bent with the maternal sphere of nature (Kerényi, 1975:17).

4. Myth as representation of the subconscious in Britten’s opera

Universal ideas represented by mythological figures situate the discussion within the context of metaphysics. Expressing the metaphysical in musical terms is natural for Britten, an aspect which, according to Mitchell (1984:249) until now has received perhaps less attention than it should.

According to Morford and Lenardon (1995:10) the mind has a binary character insofar as it constantly deals with pairs of contradictions or opposites. Therefore, myth as a reflection of the mind mediates between opposing extremes such as nature and culture. Lévi-Strauss believes that “[m]ythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution” (Morford & Lenardon, 1995:11).

Although Apollo and Dionysus are not mentioned by name in the novella, Mann explicitly stated that *Death in Venice* is based upon the distinction between an epic Apollonian and a lyric Dionysian spirit (Mann, 1962: 317). In the novella the creative artist, Aschenbach, is caught between Apollonian order and Dionysian licence. As the opposition of these two Greek deities plays an important role in the development of the plot on a psychological level, understanding of their respective natures is crucial to the understanding of the opera. (See Spies, 2001:39-57 for a discussion of the way in which the music expresses ambiguities caused by the opposition of the two mythological figures.)

According to Nietzsche the names of Apollo and Dionysus are borrowed from the Greeks who taught their view of art not through concepts but through clear figures of their world of gods (White, 1971:48). Apollo and Dionysus were regarded as personifications of qualities found both in art and life. These two deities each represents a certain mental attitude. The Apollonian ideal is associated with balance, the avoidance of extremes (Calarco, 1968:7), clarity and purity, order and harmony (Kerényi, 1976: 209). Although Apollo was, in all probability, not originally a sun-god, he came to be considered as such (Morford & Lenardon, 1995:46). On the other hand, Dionysus was regarded as the “representative of the productive and intoxicating power of nature” (Smith, 1952:110), the god of ecstasy and the most enraptured love. He was also known as the raving god whose presence makes man mad and incites him to savagery (Otto,1933:49, 70). For Walter F. Otto, the German theologian and philosopher, Dionysus is an enigmatic god, born of a deity (Zeus) and a human mother (Semele) and therefore already by birth a native of two realms: “Any study of him will inevitably lead to a statement of paradox and a realization that there will always be something beyond, which can never be explained adequately in any language other than the symbolic” (Palmer,1965:xix-xx).

For Nietzsche there is a further opposition to the one represented by Apollo and Dionysus, an opposition between power and order which is situated within the internally conflicting nature of Dionysus himself (Oudemans & Lardinois, 1987:227). Contrary to a mainly one-dimensional view of Dionysus as representing irrational emotion only, his ambivalent nature also contains a positive side. According to Oudemans and

Lardinois (1987:96, 142, 277), Dionysus, the “many-named” was a paradox symbolizing life and death, peace and war, and truth and falsehood as these words appear next to his name on two fifth-century Orphic tablets. “Dionysus represents power which has to be both abhorred and worshipped”. On a deeper level then this opposition within Dionysus himself establishes another ambiguity which is situated in the creative tension that opposites generate.

Even with regard to visual appearance, Dionysus had two images. In ancient writings on Dionysus, Diodorus Siculus wrote: “He seems to be dual in form because there are two Dionysoi: the bearded Dionyssos of the old times, since the ancients wore beards, and the younger, beautiful and exuberant Dionyssos, a youth” (Kerényi, 1976:363).

Unlike Apollo, Dionysus was not native to Greece but a god whose cult was imported from the East. The “stranger god” brought something new and overpowering into Greek life (Kerényi, 1976:139). It swept through Greece like a plague in the same way as, in the opera, the cholera has reached Venice from the East. In the opera this ambiguous Dionysus does not only represent the sensuous and the irrational but also the plague which again represents the darker side of ambiguous Venice.

A perspicacious observation by the Hungarian scholar Kerényi assists in making a connection that is not noticeable on the surface of the music, i.e. a connection between Aschenbach and Tadzio on the one hand, and between the opera and Greek antiquity on the other hand. Kerényi (1976: 134) points out that, as in a breakthrough, consciousness and the unconscious may well merge in a mental state called mania by the Greeks, that is a state in which man's vital powers are enhanced to the utmost. In the art of prophecy, madness is represented as secret knowledge (Otto, 1933:131). In the opera the connection with the Greek view of mania is represented by Aschenbach's *Phaedrus monologue* which takes place during his last visit to Venice (second last scene). In this monologue the confusion in his mind reaches a climax. In order to understand the nature of the conflict in Aschenbach's mind, knowledge of Plato's *Phaedrus dialogue* is therefore essential.

5. Plato's *Phaedrus dialogue*

This important writing of Plato (Pieper, 1964:xi) describes a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, one of Socrates's young admirers. According to De Vries (1969:23) the central theme in the *Phaedrus* is the persuasive use of words. “Its means is beauty, its condition ... is knowledge. Eros is the striving after knowledge and after beauty.” In Plato's *Phaedrus dialogue* Eros plays a central role (Pieper, 1964:xiv).

The ambivalent nature of this mythological figure is summarized as follows by the Greek scholar E.R. Dodds: Eros represents a combination of the physiological impulse of sex and “the dynamic impulse which drives the soul forward in its quest for a satisfaction transcending earthly experience” (Hindley, 1990:520).

Thomas Mann sees the role of Eros as follows: For the artist Eros is the guide to the intellectual, to spiritual beauty, for him the way to the highest goes through the senses. But it is a dangerously beautiful road, a sinful road although there is no other (Marcus-Tar, 1982:36).³ It is precisely the dualistic character of Eros that eventually leads to the disintegration of Aschenbach’s mind and soul when he asks in the opera: “Does beauty lead to wisdom, Phaedrus? Yes, but through the senses ... And senses lead to passion, Phaedrus, and passion to the abyss” (Britten, 1973:250-252). Eros is perceived as symbol of passion and of mania. According to Socrates mania is not an evil in every case because it “can possibly be a means, an aid, a path to a good, in fact even to the greatest blessings – on condition, that is, that mania is imparted to man as a divine gift” (Pieper, 1964:49).⁴

The guiding principle in determining the meaning of Eros in this opera might lie within the opposition of ideal and reality, in other words the distinction is situated within the dialectic of appearance and essence: passion could be perceived as the ideal to strive for. When Aschenbach acknowledges the power of Tadzio’s beauty earlier in the opera, he reflects on the relationship between the rational and the passionate:

When thought becomes feeling, feeling thought ...
 When the mind bows low before beauty ...
 When nature perceives the ecstatic moment ...
 When genius leaves contemplation for one moment of reality ...
 The Eros is in the word.

3 Original German text: “Eros ist für den Künstler der Führer zum Intellektuellen, ... zur geistigen Schönheit, ... der Weg zum Höchsten geht für ihn durch die Sinne. Aber dass ist ein gefährlich lieblicher Weg, ein Irr- und Sündenweg, obgleich es einen anderen nicht gibt.”

4 This formulation comes nearer to the German expression *Göttlicher Wahnsinn* used in the original title *Begeisterung und Göttlicher Wahnsinn* than to the English translation *Love and Inspiration* (1964). Mania is subdivided into prophetic, cathartic, poetic and erotic mania – all of them may be beneficial. The demonstration that the fourth madness is “given by the gods for our greatest happiness” involves the discussion of the nature of the soul, divine and human (De Vries, 1969:26).

Near the end of the first act the music that accompanies Aschenbach's view represents Eros as an unambiguous concept (see Spies, 2001:50). At this stage Aschenbach's music is a clear reference to Tadzio's beauty which, he hopes, will inspire him to overcome the writer's block mentioned during the opening scene of the opera. However, near the end of the opera the double meaning represented by Eros is emphasized by the bitonal and bimodal effects in the parts of the harp and the piano in Aschenbach's *Phaedrus monologue*.

Example 1: Scene 16 – The last visit to Venice (also see p. 11)

Example 1 contains the first of three stanzas. The text of the other two stanzas reads as follows:

Should we then reject it, Phaedrus,
The wisdom poets crave,
Seeking only form and pure detachment
Simplicity and discipline?

But this is beauty, Phaedrus,
Discovered through the senses
And senses lead to passion, Phaedrus
And passion to the abyss.

The final notes of every harp-piano interjection represent the systematic disintegration of Aschenbach's mind. Aschenbach's monologue starts with the word "beauty" against a doubled C, representing unity of thought (marked 1). If the principle of octave transposition is acknowledged, the closing interval of the next five interjections demonstrates a systematic increase in tension. Passing through three consonant intervals, a major third (2), a perfect fifth (3), and another major third (4), then through the dissonant diminished fifth (5), the last interjection ends on a dissonant semitone clash against the sentence "to compassion with the abyss" (6). The next stanza follows the same pattern, somewhat contracted (omitting the second major third interval), but also ending with a semitone clash against Aschenbach's question "Simplicity and discipline?" The third stanza follows this pattern but with the diminished fifth replaced by chords in both hands. These chords enhance the dissonant effect because the polytonal result causes semitone clashes, ending with a single semitone clash, marked *sf*, against "abyss".

The fact that each stanza, regardless of the line of argumentation, ends in a dissonant clash, could suggest that at the end of the opera

Aschenbach realizes that his conception of beauty might not have the kind of future that he had envisaged.

6. The meaning of myth enhanced by music

In a letter to Kerényi (1975:101) Mann referred to his “own unscholarly mythological musings” in a passing remark about Tadzio in *Death in Venice*. If considering Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) as a relatively early work (he was eighty years when he died in 1955), and his explicit interest in mythology as a phenomenon of mature age, the deduction could be made that Benjamin Britten and Myfanwe Pijper actually reinforced Mann's mature view of mythology through their explicit musical characterization of Apollo and Dionysus.

In order to illustrate how the meaning of myth is intensified by the music in the opera, I shall concentrate on the Games of Apollo (scene 7) at the end of the first act and the nightmare scene (scene 13) in the second act. The Games of Apollo portrays the systematic disintegration of Aschenbach and his belief in himself as disciplined writer, rational artist and servant of Apollo. In the nightmare scene the triumph of Aschenbach's irrational subconscious over his rational consciousness is symbolized by the triumph of Dionysus over Apollo in a conflict during the dream

• The Games of Apollo

The idea of competition in both athletics and the arts was vital to the Greek spirit. In Greek antiquity both physical and intellectual competitions were included in these kinds of conquests (Morford & Lenardon, 1995:175). The importance of both the physical and the aesthetic also suggests a fundamental duality exemplified by the god Apollo himself.

Many writers have criticized this lengthy scene in the opera that lasts for 17 minutes (Hindley, 1990:515; Carnegy, 1987:173; Northcott, 1987:202). However, if it is realized that the Games of Apollo is not an innocent *divertissement* but a musical representation of the systematic disintegration of Aschenbach and his belief in himself as disciplined writer, rational artist and servant of Apollo, the games in the opera acquire new meaning. As the games progress from running to long jump, discus and javelin throwing, ending with wrestling, the dance becomes less controlled and more explicitly sensual (Corse & Corse, 1989:359) ending with a broken-down Aschenbach. Instead of regaining inspiration to write again, he is plunged into Dionysiac passion. He realizes that his love for the boy was not the Apollonian ideal of beauty but sensual love.

The Games of Apollo signifies an ambiguity in that the Apollonian ideal of discipline, order and clarity is in reality corrupted: Aschenbach systematically falls under the spell of the boy's charms and this already anticipates the outcome of the dream that forms the climax of the opera in the second act. The fact that the opening strain of Apollo's music can

be traced back to Tadzio's music could be regarded as a musical anticipation of the effect of the outcome of the games on Aschenbach. Consequently the outcome of the conflict between Apollonian order and Dionysian passion in Aschenbach's mind is suggested by Aschenbach's confession that "Eros is in the word" (see Spies, 2001:50).

- **The nightmare**

In the second act the conflict between Aschenbach's rational consciousness and his irrational subconscious takes a downward curve to reach a low point in scene 13 (the dream). This conflict is symbolized by a contest between Apollo and Dionysus, which represents the contest for Aschenbach's soul. Apollo implores Aschenbach to reject the abyss and to love beauty, reason, form while Dionysus and his followers lure him towards the mysteries, towards life. Dionysus's warm, earthy baritone voice is contrasted with Apollo's ethereal, countertenor voice.

Just as myths provide information on the inner world of humankind, dreams can be a vehicle for the transmission of elements into imagery or symbols (Morford & Lenardon, 1995:7-8). The significance of dream-symbols led Freud and his followers to analyse the similarity between dreams and myths. In the Freudian analysis of dreams, opposites (such as ideas represented by Apollo and Dionysus in this opera) are important because a Freudian opposite registers dissatisfaction, "the notion of what you want involves the idea that you have not got it ... that you want something different in another part of your mind" (Empson, 1953:193). In the state of sleep what is repressed can no longer be held back. The dream-situation represents a wish as fulfilled, a wish "which is represented in an unrecognizable form and can only be explained when it has been traced back in analysis" (Freud, 1952:55). In his theory on dreams, formulated at the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud showed that most of the dreams of adults can be traced back by analysis to erotic wishes (Freud, 1952:66). According to this theory, Aschenbach's subconscious must have been made up already and the nightmare only confirmed the triumph of his irrational subconscious as represented by Dionysus.

Example 2: Scene 13 – End of the dream (also see p. 14)

The sacrifice of the bull (referred to in example 2) is a typical Dionysian rite, that can be regarded as a symbol of the sacrifice of Aschenbach's soul. In this regard one can refer to the dangerous bull game of the Minoan civilization: "The player seizes the horns, lets himself be thrown upward by the bull, turns one or more somersaults in the air and lands behind the animal which is running away" (Kerényi, 1976:12). Ritual as

an imitation of nature, and as a manifestation of magic, could be regarded as a deliberate recapturing of something no longer possessed (Frye, 1957:119).

Although every phrase in Apollo's and Dionysus's music has A, Tazio's tonal area, as starting point, with regard to argumentation they then move in opposite directions. The dichotomy in the purpose of their pursuit is further accentuated by the fast interchange between F major-minor and E major in the accompaniment. At the climax, against the word "sacrifice", the leap of a perfect fifth in Dionysus's part finally connects the two fields of A and E (that represent Tazio and Aschenbach respectively), thereby implying an idealized state. However, ending on D# could be regarded as a corruption, in a horizontal manner, of the tonal field which represents Aschenbach. The dialogue ends with Apollo yielding his tonal field as well by descending to the field of A, the tonal area which symbolizes Tazio.

The fact that Apollo withdraws ("I go now") into the field of Tazio (the final note in example 2) is a clear indication that Tazio, representing the senses and the passionate in the artistic endeavour, turns out to be the winner in the contest for Aschenbach's soul. However, the apparent triumph of Tazio is vertically corrupted by the ever-present semitone clash A-G# (283) in the accompaniment. This dissonant semitone could be regarded as an ironic constriction of its inversion, the expressive major seventh leap (the Tazio-call) formed by the outline of Tazio's theme (see Spies, 2001:50).

7. To conclude

The opposition of the two mythological figures, Apollo and Dionysus, creates a tension which, according to Hegelian thought need not be regarded merely in a negative light as it involves a positive dialectic. In Hegel's view of dialectics – a term which also originated in Greek thinking – "thought proceeds by contradiction and the reconciliation of contradiction, the overall pattern being one of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" (Flew, 1979:94). Kerényi (1976:204) identifies a formal similarity between the conscious, conceptual thought of Hegel's dialectic and the natural, primordial dialectic as exemplified by the Dionysian cult.

The natural, primordial dialectic may be explained by the assumption that in every living being there are two innate tendencies: a tendency to build and a tendency to destroy, on the one hand a life drive and on the other a death drive. Thus, death and the destruction of life would be a part of life itself. Hegel did not think in terms of 'drives', but he pointed to the basis of the primordial dialectic when he said: 'It is the nature of the finite to have within its essence the seeds of extinction: the hour of its birth is the hour of its death'.

Dionysus brought the primeval world along with him. His onslaught stripped mortals of their conventions, of that which⁵ made them "civilized". From the depths of life that have become fathomless also arise ecstasy and inspired prophecy. Life is intoxicated by death at those moments when it glows with its greatest vitality, where the most remote is near and the past is the present (Otto, 1933:128-129).

According to Lévi-Strauss (1979:22) mythical thinking is original in that it plays the part of conceptual thinking: "[M]ore and more the sense data are being reintegrated into scientific explanation as something which has a meaning, which has a truth, and which can be explained" (Lévi-Strauss, 1979:6). Myth represents a kind of thinking other than what we are used to, a thinking through images. Images can reflect human experience without the mediation of ideas. As man reacts inwardly to his experience even before thinking takes place, prephilosophical insights and reactions to experience are established which can be regarded as prephilosophical wisdom (Kerényi, 1976:xxx). In this connection Otto is correct when he regards philosophy as the heir of myth (Otto, 1933:127).

By exploiting the mythical dimension of Thomas Mann's novella in his opera, Britten expressed the metaphysical in musical terms. In this essay I have tried to show how the musical treatment of myth has the potential to enhance understanding of the unconscious mind, or the inner landscape, regardless of time and place. As mythical characters in the opera communicate a message of universal human suffering, it demonstrates Otto's belief (1933:128-129) that the past is in the present, and that the remote is actually very near.

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5 Original German text: "Da ist das Fernste nahe, das Vergangene gegenwärtig, alle Zeiten spiegeln sich in dem Augenblick, der jetzt ist".

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Key concepts:

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Thomas Mann

Kernbegrippe:

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