‘A city of irresistible allure!’ The Venetian Landscape in Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *The Flame* and Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*

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Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *The Flame* (1900) and Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912) are two texts rarely considered in constellation, the authors of whom appear at first glance to have little in common. Yet several parallels seem to exist between the texts and, more broadly speaking, even between the authors themselves: In both we read of the experiences of an artist in Venice, where an object of desire exerts such an intoxicating allure that further artistic creation is threatened. Moreover, in both cases a manifestation of Nietzsche’s Dionysus appears, offering creative insight and drive but also threatening to conduct the initiate into the abyss of self-forgetfulness and oblivion. In the two texts, Venice is no mere setting: the landscapes of this unique watery city pervade the very action of the texts and the city functions almost as an active character, rather than a passive backdrop. The landscapes depicted enhance the plots, such as they are, and interact with the protagonists. They also provide crucial elucidation regarding the psychology and state of mind of the protagonists. In this article I intend to give a critical comparison of the Venetian landscapes portrayed by D’Annunzio and Mann, to establish some idea of the extent of the parallels between these texts.

In *Death in Venice* and *The Flame* we witness the inner struggle of the artist who, confronted with debilitating desire, is distracted from his artistic goal. The object of desire (Tadzio for *Death in Venice*’s Aschenbach, Foscarina for *The Flame*’s Stelio) both aids and impedes the artist’s creativity. Dionysus presides over the process releasing impulses to intoxication, abandon, and oblivion. In Venice, Aschenbach embraces Dionysus absolutely and dies watching his beloved against the sea—the intensity of his desire for Tadzio has eradicated the possibility of future creative production. Stelio and Foscarina reach a healthier conclusion: she eventually departs to allow her lover freedom to compose his great work, a move that yokes their potentially crippling desire and places it into the service of art. This allows Stelio to devote himself fully to his artistic aim of rejuvenating the stale cultural landscape and establishing a tragic tradition (and outdoor theatre to rival Bayreuth) for the modern age. Venice never goes unnoticed in the texts, and we find the Venetian landscape acting as an inspiration, a work of art, a labyrinth, a temptress, and an allegorical device.

Mann visited Venice in the summer of 1911 with his wife and his brother, Heinrich. Mann’s diaries document his sojourn mentioning a young Polish boy who caught Mann’s eye. His fascination with this boy was adapted to provide the central thread for Aschenbach’s Venetian experience. It was in the Venice of 1895 that D’Annunzio became acquainted with the actress Eleonora Duse, who was to become his lover and the model for *The Flame*’s Foscarina. In the same year D’Annunzio also spoke at the first Venetian Biennale: His oration, entitled *Allegory to Autumn*, was adapted and incorporated into Stelio’s climactic speech in *The Flame*.

One of the first functions fulfilled by the Venetian landscape of the texts is that of a mirror: Just as the waters of the sea and canals reflect the buildings and changing skies, so the landscape reflects both the psychology of the characters, and the cultural mood of the time as Mann and D’Annunzio perceived it. Both writers were intrigued by decadence, which Paglia defines as ‘a counterreaction within Romanticism, correcting its tilt toward

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1 While D’Annunzio’s works embrace decadence, Mann’s opinion of the cultural phenomenon seems more ambiguous: but if he disapproved of decadence, he certainly felt compelled to depict it.
Dionysus’. Weir describes decadence as ‘both an extension of and a reaction to Romanticism; as both a languorous and a rebellious state of mind; as a decorative, superficial art and a pioneering, profound aesthetic.’ Weir also elucidates the decline associated with decadence, differentiating it from ‘degeneration’; while the former is a standard to be maintained, the latter ‘lets those standards slip’. Mann and D’Annunzio employ the Venetian landscape, with its festering canals, crumbling palazzi, and overgrown gardens, as a space in which to reflect the cultural decadence and stagnation they recognised. The once preeminent city is for Mann ‘the sunken queen’; for D’Annunzio, ‘without pulse and without breath, dead in her green waters’. The latter describes ‘the leafless plants, villas in ruin, the silent river, the relics of queens and empresses, […] the wild labyrinth’, and Mann finds a ‘sickened city’ with sultry, unwholesome air.

In both texts the decaying landscapes contrast starkly with the protagonists’ ambitions: against the ‘stagnant reeking lagoon’ Aschenbach feels spiritually elevated by his encounter with Tadzio, and on this ‘torpid water’ Stelio searches for artistic inspiration. The rotting canals of Mann’s landscapes play a crucial part in his parodic undermining of his protagonist: Foul smells and festering waters debase Aschenbach’s vision of a noble Platonic experience, hinting at the degradation of his own once-respectable character. Motifs of death litter these descriptions of decay, creating deathly landscapes that reflect the characters who encounter them. Mann’s deteriorating landscapes suggest Aschenbach’s crumbling self-control and welcome him into a deathly realm en route to his own demise, an ending we come to expect. D’Annunzio offers many hints that Foscarina may expire: This melancholy woman has suffered much in life (rendering her a more talented actress but a more burdensome lover—and muse) and with her eyes like violets, symbolic of death and mourning, she matches the deathly landscapes D’Annunzio describes.

In their portrayal of such noxious spaces, both Mann and D’Annunzio turn the Venetian gondolas into funeral barges. For D’Annunzio, they are ‘the boat of Charon’, and as Aschenbach is transported against his will in a ‘coffin-black’ boat by a rogue gondolier, he idly considers that his rower might deal him a blow with an oar and send him down ‘to the house of Hades’. Both authors also reference the cemetery island of San Michele, and as Stelio and Foscarina pass by in their gondola they enter ‘dark water, passing under the bridge that looked to the island’, brushing past ‘boats that rotted along the decaying walls’. Overhead the sky rumbles thunderously and ominously; a moment later the lovers learn of Richard Wagner’s death in Venice. The proximity of our protagonists to the cemetery island (Aschenbach notes the ‘hideously brisk traffic’ going to the island amidst the cholera epidemic) clearly illustrates their states of mind and matches the sinister landscapes D’Annunzio describes.

4 Weir, p. ix.
5 Weir, p. ix.
6 Thomas Mann, Der Tod in Venedig in Frühe Erzählungen (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2004), p. 543.
7 Gabriele D’annunzio, Il fuoco (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1900), p. 67.
8 D’Annunzio, p. 439.
9 Mann, p. 565.
10 Mann, p. 541.
12 D’Annunzio, p. 30.
13 Mann, p. 523.
14 Mann, p. 526.
15 Mann, p. 579.
16 D’Annunzio, p. 496.
17 D’Annunzio, p. 496.
18 Mann, p. 579.
At another point, as Foscarina rests exhausted from terror after losing her lover in a maze, they pass through a landscape that deals a bleak judgement on their relationship. Stelio has playfully eluded Foscarina in the maze despite her pleas not to be left alone; her attack of panic has demonstrated her absolute dependence on Stelio, exposing their relationship as a ‘costly obligation’.\(^{19}\) As they are rowed homeward, they encounter ‘a wilderness, Stygian, like a vision of Hades: a country of shadows, vapours and waters. All things evaporated and dissipated like spirits.’\(^{20}\) Darkness and silence make this a lifeless landscape: ‘the sky could observe its own melancholy reflected in innumerable quiet mirrors. And here and there, along the discoloured shore, like the spirits of a vanished people, the statues passed by.’\(^{21}\) This haunting landscape is colourless, joyless and dead; it reflects the lovers’ mood and perhaps gives a metaphorical adumbration of the cultural landscape that would result if Stelio should succumb to overwhelming desire and fail in his artistic task. The statues evoke faded glory of extinct civilisations and perhaps remind Stelio of his aim to recapture such splendour again.

Comparatively gloomy and hazy is the landscape through which Aschenbach frantically pursues Tadzio: ‘The place itself is a ‘labyrinth’\(^{22}\) and ‘the air was still and foul, the sun burnt harshly through the vapours that coloured the sky like slate’.\(^{23}\) The ‘Arabian lattices [which] showed shadowy in the gloom’\(^{24}\) recall both the east (Dionysus’s origin) and even prison bars, suggestive of Aschenbach’s transgression and captivity. The thick vapours in both D’Annunzio’s and Mann’s descriptions render the landscapes claustrophobic and oppressive, mirroring their protagonists’ enthralment to (the object of) desire. These Venetian landscapes offer confinement, decay, and death, not inspiration and art. Just as Stelio and Foscarina experience a desolate scene when they realise the crippling nature of their desire, so Aschenbach experiences a hostilely transfigured beach when he learns that Tadzio’s family are shortly to leave Venice: ‘it was inhospitable there. […] The pleasure spot, once so colourful and lively, now almost deserted, appeared now autumnal, out of season; the sand was no longer kept clean.’\(^{25}\) Both Mann and D’Annunzio use a lack of colour to illustrate lifelessness and employ autumn (the season in which The Flame is set) as a symbol for past splendour. Stelio can embrace autumn in the knowledge that spring—renewing the Venetian landscape and rejuvenating his artistic landscape—will arrive; in Aschenbach’s case, however, there will be no spring and no continuation of nature’s cyclical renewal.

Despite the deathly scenes found above, Venice’s spectacular beauty still survives and strikes both Aschenbach and Stelio. Aschenbach arrives in Venice to a ‘blinding composition of fantastic architecture’,\(^{26}\) ‘the light splendour of the palace and the bridge of sighs, the columns of lion and saint on the shore, the showy projecting flank of the fairy-tale temple’.\(^{27}\) ‘This welcome seems almost a seduction, given the unwholesome side of Venice (including the cholera epidemic) that will gradually be revealed. Indeed, Mann describes Venice’s beauty as ‘seductive and suspicious’\(^{28}\) and Stelio asks Foscarina, ‘do you know of a greater temptress?’\(^{29}\) To his eyes, Venice can still appear as ‘a dream of infinite beauty’\(^{30}\) and ‘there is no dawn and no sunset that can equal that hour of light on stone and on the waters.’\(^{31}\)

\(^{19}\) D’Annunzio, p. 410.
\(^{21}\) D’Annunzio, p. 407.
\(^{22}\) Mann, p. 567.
\(^{23}\) Mann, p. 567.
\(^{24}\) Mann, p. 567.
\(^{25}\) Mann, p. 590.
\(^{26}\) Mann, p. 522.
\(^{27}\) Mann, p. 522.
\(^{28}\) Mann, p. 567. The city is also described as being of ‘irresistible appeal’ (Mann, p. 517) by the ticket seller on the boat to Venice.
\(^{29}\) D’Annunzio, p. 9.
\(^{30}\) D’Annunzio, p. 66.
\(^{31}\) D’Annunzio, p. 67.
As well as luring Aschenbach and Stelio into barren landscapes of decay, Venice also seduces the careless visitor to inertia and inactivity. For Aschenbach the seascape is a crucial feature of Venice here: As an exhausted artist, he finds a refuge in the sea that satisfies his need for ‘the unorganised, the immeasurable, the eternal—in short, for nothingness’. Arriving in his hotel room, Aschenbach immediately inspects his sea-view, finding a landscape of infinity and vastness: ‘he glanced upon the empty afternoon beach and the sunless sea; the tide was coming in and sent small, elongated waves in quiet regular rhythm against the shore.’ This rhythmic and eternal element will effect inertia in Aschenbach as he watches Tadzio against the shoreline: As the seascape erodes his will to productivity Aschenbach will be lulled into a lethargy in which he allows time to dissipate in idle hours of voyeurism. In The Flame, Stelio periodically experiences a similar apathy. As the lovers pass the house of the ageing Countess of Glanegg the landscape provokes languor:

the inertia of things overwhelmed them, the humid ashy smoke engulfed them, thickening […] The guttural wail [of birds] gradually diminishing became sweet like flute-notes on the weak air, they seemed to linger like those discoloured leaves that abandoned the branch […]. How long was the time it took the leaf to fall from the branch and reach the ground?" In this landscape, all becomes ‘slowness, vapour, abandon, consumption, ashes’.

But D’Annunzio promises hope in the struggle against cultural stagnation and, in contrast to Aschenbach, his artist-protagonist’s torpor is not fatal. The Venetian landscape also stimulates Stelio intermittently to activity and creative inspiration, especially when he is granted clarity by Foscarina’s absence (or the absence of those aspects of their desire that eclipse reason and purpose). After a chance encounter with Wagner, for example, Stelio feels artistically exhilarated and intoxicated and an aural experience of the Venetian landscape kindles the creative flame surging forth within him. A storm approaches, Stelio leaps to the crest of the Rialto bridge and drinks in the sounds that the wind has gathered from the Venetian landscape. The sounds borne on the air condense a temporal landscape of centuries into the rich but disorganised wind:

In this wind, Stelio discerns a melody that requires his help to develop itself: ‘The city of stone and water had become sonorous like an immense organ. The hiss and rumble transformed themselves into a type of choral invocation that grew and diminished with a rhythmic mode.’ In an almost symbiotic process the melody offers Stelio visions of distant ancient lands, ‘the Libyan desert […], the Nile at Memphis, the parched Argolides.’ In this vivid episode of fervent creative inspiration, D’Annunzio’s artist works with his landscape to reach his artistic goal. For this reason Stelio values Venice and her landscapes so highly: ‘I do not know of another place […]

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32 Mann, p. 536.
33 Mann, p. 528.
34 The Countess shuns society and keeps no mirrors, to hide her fading beauty from the world and from herself.
35 D’Annunzio, p. 231.
36 D’Annunzio, p. 231.
37 Stelio’s placement on a bridge may be significant; we remember that Nietzsche likens mankind to ‘a bridge’ leading to the Übermensch, only superior individuals can cross this bridge.
38 D’Annunzio, p. 283.
39 D’Annunzio, p. 276.
40 D’Annunzio, p. 284.
where a strong and ambitious spirit can […] so expect the active power of his intellect and all of those energies of his being, to be incited to a superhuman degree.'

Aschenbach’s episode of creative production, the only one we witness, is also aided by the Venetian landscape. In Aschenbach’s case, however, the landscape seems to act less benevolently, presenting the object of his illicit and inappropriate desire to him in a way that seems to tease the ageing writer, whilst still stimulating (briefly) his creativity. Aschenbach watches Tadzio on the beach as ‘a wanton sun poured a lavish lustre onto him, and the noble distances of the sea was a film and a background to his appearance.’ The landscape interacts with Tadzio, ensuring that he appears to Aschenbach in his most alluring light. Just before his creative outburst, Tadzio and the landscape offer an even more seductive vision: Aschenbach gazes at ‘the noble figure there on the edge of the blue, and in rapturous delight he believed to behold beauty itself.’

This entrancing vision triggers thoughts of Plato, offering an insight into Aschenbach’s own interpretation of his (ever more sensual) desire. Along with the sight of Tadzio, ‘from the rush of the sea and the glare of the sun he spun himself a sublime image’. He sees an Athenian plane, ‘that sacred-shady place, filled with the scent of cherry flowers’, a gentle grassy slope with a clear-running stream and shady trees, in contrast to the sweltering Venetian beach with its heavy air and relentless heat. In this landscape Aschenbach sees Socrates and Phaedrus, ‘an elder with a younger’—himself and Tadzio. For this is how Aschenbach justifies his behaviour to himself: To his mind, his desire for Tadzio is nothing more sinister or sensual than the affectionate and didactic attentions of a wise teacher for his pupil. After this vision of a balsamic landscape, and the sight of Tadzio in the Venetian landscape, Aschenbach is compelled to write and composes his most sublime prose—even if it is only one and a half pages long, and his last artistic output.

This is not the first time that Aschenbach has been transported to an imagined inner landscape. Just as the Venetian beach is transfigured into a landscape that matches Aschenbach’s (deluded) mental state, so we witness his hallucinations of a wild and exotic landscape when he is struck by Wanderlust. Taking a walk through Munich he pauses to consider an ‘exotic’ stranger in the cemetery grounds. Aschenbach becomes lost in his thoughts, sensing ‘a strange expansion of his interior […]’, a kind of roving unrest, a youthfully thirsty desire for the far-off. He sees ‘a tremendous landscape, a tropical marshland under a thickly vaporous sky, damp, lush and unwholesome, a deserted primordial wilderness of islands, morasses’, full of ‘hairy palm trunks’ and lush vegetation. A tiger crouches in a thicket and ‘on the stagnant, green-shadowed, mirroring flood floated milk-white flowers, as big as dishes.’ The exotic landscape reflects Aschenbach’s need for a change of scenery; its primordial wildness suggests the arousal of primitive impulses (the Dionysian) within this controlled character; the phallic tree trunks foreshadow an imminent sexual experience; and the tiger hints at lurking dangers. Several features (the islands and water) recall Venice and several hint at an eastern location, alluding to Dionysus’s supposed historical origin. As Reed notes, Aschenbach may not make it all the way to the tigers, but he will find himself wandering south, to the sea, and into Dionysus’s embrace.

In The Flame, a similar use of an imagined landscape to reflect the protagonist’s psychology can also be found. Stelio’s vivid creative visions exemplify this, where he finds himself confronted with antique landscapes ripe for

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41 D’Annunzio, p. 99.
42 Mann, p. 552.
43 Mann, p. 553.
44 Mann, p. 554.
45 Mann, p. 554.
46 Mann, p. 554.
47 Mann, p. 503.
48 Mann, p. 504.
49 Mann, p. 504.
50 Mann, p. 504.
translation and insertion into his modern tragic work. He recounts one of his most intense visions to his companion, in which Stelio ‘becomes’ the archaeologist Schliemann, uncovering ancient artefacts at the site of Mycenae. The objects pulled from the earth conjure up a hallucination of an ancient landscape for Schliemann/Stelio:

a series of tombs: fifteen intact bodies, […] on a bed of gold, their faces covered with masks of gold, their foreheads crowned with gold, their breasts bound with gold; and everywhere, […] everywhere an abundance of things of gold, innumerable as the leaves that fall in a fairy-tale forest…53

Stelio becomes intoxicated by this mythical landscape and tries to transmit the living images he sees to his companion, just as he will incorporate these images into his great artistic work. The brilliance of this vision, with its abundant gold, promises rich rewards to Stelio if he applies himself to his artistic mission. Even the tombs do not spoil the mood: they are not dusty and decaying but resplendent and beautiful, perhaps foreshadowing the awakening of ancient tragic traditions that Stelio will effect, before adapting them for the modern era.

This vision of an ancient Mycenaean landscape opens up a new point of discussion: namely, the use of mythical landscapes in Death in Venice and The Flame. Both Mann and D’Annunzio make extensive use of figures, events, and places from classical mythology, and on several occasions the landscapes before Aschenbach and Stelio are mythically metamorphosed. Again, this often provides insight into the protagonists’ state of mind. Aschenbach is subconsciously aware of the deviancy of his desire, and looks for precedence and familiar frameworks with which to defend his obsession. As a classical writer, he can turn to classical sources for reassurance. He casts himself and Tadzio in ennobling roles such as Zeus and Ganymede, and similarly observes the Venetian landscapes as transfigured. The quotidian events of daybreak and sunset undergo mythical metamorphoses and the landscape becomes a space in which Aschenbach can project his (subconsciously) guilt-ridden classicism: A classically-interpreted sunrise allows Aschenbach to imagine himself in ancient times, where pederasty was no shameful thing. The sun becomes Helios’s chariot and Poseidon’s horses drive the wind. He watches the sunrise, observing ‘that first, sweet reddening of the farthest strip of sky and sea’ through which ‘the creation makes itself perceptible’.54 ‘Child-like clouds, transformed, illuminated, hovered like attendant cupids in the rosy, bluish haze’ and, as he watches on, ‘golden spears streaked from below toward the heights of the sky, the sparkle became a blaze, soundless, with god-like violence glow and heat and blazing flames heaved themselves upwards’.55 This transformation of the mundane into the mythical suggests that Aschenbach’s mind has been rendered imaginative and artistically fertile by his encounter with Tadzio; it is Aschenbach’s failure to channel such potential into creative output that is his tragedy. Instead, he allows himself to luxuriate lazily in fanciful imaginings, preferring to keep his eyes on Tadzio rather than his hand on the pen.

For D’Annunzio’s artist, the classical world holds the key to an artistically rejuvenated future and a reawakening of ancient figures and landscapes will stimulate Stelio’s creativity to achieve this. When Stelio alludes to Greek mythology, he experiences an artistic fecundity of the mind similar to Aschenbach’s, but in Stelio’s case, creative potential will be realised. When the Venetian landscape appears to him as classically inspired, we therefore sense imminent productivity rather than Aschenbach’s idle fantasies. Shortly before giving a speech on the artistic affinity of Venice and the need to recapture the glory of the past, Stelio observes the Salute, which becomes the domain of the pagan sea-god:

52 Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) was a German archaeologist most famous for uncovering Mycenae and what is regarded as the site of Troy.
53 D’Annunzio, p. 293.
54 Mann, p. 559.
55 Mann, p. 559.
56 Mann, p. 559.
57 Mann, p. 559.
the octagonal temple […] emerged from its own blue-green shadow, with its dome, its spirals, its statues, its columns, its balustrades, sumptuous and strange like a building of Neptune constructed in the likeness of the twisted marine columns, whitened as mother of pearl.  

Salt and water have spread over it, creating ‘in the concavity of the stone something fresh, of silver and gem-like […], a vague impression of open oystershells’. The building becomes Neptune’s palace, and its architectural features suddenly reflect the fantastical nature of Neptune’s realm. Like Aschenbach, Stelio interprets an everyday landscape as a vision from antiquity, illustrative of his artistically active mind and the importance he places upon ancient mythology.

The mythical landscapes Aschenbach sees testify to the intensification of his self-delusion and of his increasingly more sinister desire: The stronger his desire, the more frequently he turns to familiar (and comforting) classical sources. At times, however, mythical allusions offer no solace. One afternoon Aschenbach decides to pursue Tadzio and becomes lost in the ‘alleyways, waters, bridges and piazzas of the labyrinth’, no longer able to tell north from south. ‘The onlooker’ becomes ‘the confused one’. Allusion to the labyrinth, the legendary lair of the minotaur, evokes a perilous and unfathomable landscape from which there is no escape: Aschenbach is no Theseus, but rather a helpless and condemned victim sent down into the labyrinth to appease the savage beast. The landscape exacerbates Aschenbach’s torture, seeming to collude against him in his chase by hiding Tadzio from view: ‘the Polish family had crossed a short curved bridge, the peak of the arc hid them from the pursuer, and once he had climbed up, he could no longer discover them.’ Having once presented Tadzio to Aschenbach with the most fetching landscape as accompaniment, Venice now taunts Aschenbach by hiding the coveted object from his gaze.

Foscarina finds herself in a similar situation when she becomes lost in the maze mentioned earlier. The Italian word for ‘maze’ is the same as the word used to denote the mythical labyrinth and so D’Annunzio’s description carries the same classical connotations. The maze has become ‘overgrown, sad’ from neglect, lost all regularity and, become ‘a closed bush, between brown and yellow, full of impenetrable ways, where the diagonal rays of the sunset here and there reddened the leaves, so that they appeared to burn’. As with Aschenbach, the claustrophobic labyrinth carries an element of danger: ‘she could see nothing but the multiple and regular maze of ways’ and in exasperation Foscarina looks up at the sky that ‘curved immense and pure over the two walls of branches in which she was prisoner’. Foscarina becomes as lost as Aschenbach and as feverishly afraid. So hostile is this landscape that she cannot ‘separate in her mind the reality of the place from the image of her inner torment’.

The mythically interpreted landscapes encountered by Aschenbach, Stelio, and Foscarina demonstrate artistic dispositions and creative potential. Whilst Aschenbach’s potential to create dissipates along with the heightening of his desire, Stelio succeeds in sublimating his sexual urges for the sake of art and productivity. This is illustrated several times by the Venetian landscape, which offers decay, entrapment, and impotency, but also a hint of optimism for the future. It seems that Venice’s deathly elements, like those of Dionysus, will not overpower

58 D’Annunzio, p. 10.
59 D’Annunzio, p. 10.
60 Mann, p. 586.
61 Mann, p. 552.
62 Mann, p. 567.
63 Mann, p. 587.
64 D’Annunzio, p. 394.
65 D’Annunzio, p. 394.
66 D’Annunzio, p. 394.
67 D’Annunzio, p. 398.
68 D’Annunzio, p. 398.
Stelio, whose superhuman artistic prowess enables him to sublimate such dangers and even incorporate their expression into his art. As Felice notes, Stelio inhabits ‘a Venice that is not always a Dionysian city of Life; but exactly this funereal desert was introduced as a conscious strategy to give value to the temerarious vitality of the hero’.\(^69\) Stelio notes that while Venice may appear dead and withered, ‘my feelings did not deceive me when I perceived that she was labouring in secret with a life-force sufficient to renew the most ancient wonders.’\(^70\)

When Stelio begins to become impatient to return to his work, he encounters an auspicious scene:

> the squalid canal-banks, the crumbled stones, the putrid roots, the traces of destructive works, the odours of dissolution, the funereal cypresses, the black crosses […] Stronger than all the signs, only that song of freedom and victory could touch the heart of he who had to create with joy. “Onwards! Onwards! Higher, even higher!”\(^71\)

A decaying landscape cannot quench Stelio’s creative drive—rather, he embraces the destruction and degradation as part of life’s endless Dionysian cycle of death and renewal, creation and destruction. The deathly landscapes that seduce Aschenbach and lull him into inertia hold less power over D’Annunzio’s superuomo. Confronted with a similar scene of decline shortly afterwards, Stelio’s irrepressible revitalised creativity masters once again: ‘a deep enchantment like an ecstasy rendered the desert blessed.’\(^72\) Such sentiments are absent from Death in Venice, where the deathly landscapes deliver exactly what they promise.

At the heart of Death in Venice and The Flame we find a force that binds together the impulses of death, art, desire, classicism, and abandonment that constitute the protagonists’ experience. This is the Dionysian, strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche’s appropriation of the deity, triggering loss-of-control, intoxication, licentiousness, and wantonness in his initiates. Nietzsche champions a re-embrace of Dionysus in order to rejuvenate the stagnant cultural landscape he perceives in his The Birth of Tragedy (1872) but warns that the potentially destructive Dionysian requires sublimation through the Apollonian in order to remain useful. Both Aschenbach and Stelio flirt with Dionysus but only the latter succeeds in holding the unruly force in check, whilst Aschenbach—who has previously led an (excessively) Apollonian existence of control, reserve, and monk-like routine—succumbs to a wholesale embrace of the Dionysian and the unproductive self-forgetting that this induces. Within Mann’s and D’Annunzio’s versions of Venice we find Dionysian landscapes hinting at artistic fervour but warning of the protagonists’ proximity to danger.

The most shocking and explicit Dionysian landscape appears to Aschenbach in a dream shortly after his fateful utterance of ‘I love you!’\(^73\) and immediately after his discovery of the cholera epidemic (that he keeps secret from Tadzio’s mother). Naturally, Aschenbach cannot leave Tadzio prematurely and remains resident in the hotel, consciously risking his life. Aschenbach’s dream signals his utter embrace of Dionysus and henceforth he is a helpless (but not unwilling) victim. The dream begins with ‘fear’\(^74\) and a night-time scene. Unsettling sounds herald the approach of a wild crowd of revellers, worshippers of ‘the stranger god [Dionysus]’:\(^75\)

> [s]mokey embers smouldered: he recognised a mountaneous land, identical to that of his summer-house. And in the torn light, from wooded heights, between trunks and mossy crumbled rocks they came

\(^70\) D’Annunzio, p. 67.
\(^71\) D’Annunzio, p. 526.
\(^72\) D’Annunzio, p. 536.
\(^73\) Mann, p. 563.
\(^74\) Mann, p. 582.
\(^75\) Mann, p. 582.
pouring down, lunging down reeling: people, animals, a swarm, a clamorous horde, and inundated the place with bodies, flames, tumult and a swaying circular dance.\textsuperscript{76}

The landscape is dominated by nature with which Dionysus is strongly associated as a ‘god of vegetation’\textsuperscript{77} signalling Aschenbach’s return to primordial elements. The riotous pagan worship of the horde (which engages in sparagmos\textsuperscript{78}) supports this and we realise that the once-controlled Aschenbach is surrendering to those most primitive, almost animalistic energies that his experience of desire has caused to surge forth. He now inhabits a ‘realm of chaos and self-negation’.\textsuperscript{79} The summerhouse in the mountains mentioned by the narrator no longer suffices as a restorative retreat for Aschenbach: he has gone far beyond this and such simple respites can no longer save him.

D’Annunzio’s Dionysian landscapes remain grounded in Venice, the city that is so crucial a participant in Stelio’s creativity. After Stelio’s oration, Venice becomes a space that reflects the incitement of Dionysian energies, illustrating the creativity that can be stimulated once Dionysus is welcomed back onto the cultural landscape. After Stelio’s speech a bacchic chorus arises from the crowds, intoxicated by the speaker’s words. Stelio waits for his boat observing the landscape and ‘it seemed that in that moment the Dionysian delirium, recalling the burning of ancient woods on sacred nights, had given the signal for the conflagration in which the beauty of Venice could be gloriously resplendent’.\textsuperscript{80} Fireworks and flames light up the Venetian night:

\begin{quote}
all the innumerable appearances of the volatile and multi-coloured Flame extended itself across the sky, they brushed the water, they wrapped themselves in the masts of the ships, garlanding the domes and towers, decorating cornices, wreathing the statues, bejewelling the capitols, […] transfiguring every aspect of the sacred or profane architectures within whose courtyards the deep lagoon was like an enchanting mirror that multiplied the marvels.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

The fireworks themselves, of eastern origin, could be a reference to Dionysus and extravagant Dionysian pleasures: Their myriad colours evoke ‘perfumes and spices’\textsuperscript{82} creating a landscape of exotic sensory delights in abundance. The mood after Stelio’s speech is optimistic: The crowds have responded positively to his calls for artistic rejuvenation and welcome Dionysus back to Venice with their delirious spontaneous chorus. The sinister notes of Mann’s Dionysian landscape in Aschenbach’s dream are absent here, perhaps because D’Annunzio’s artist is the artistic superuomo to whom such dangers pose no real threat.

With such Dionysian landscapes in mind it is worth considering where we may find Apollo. The landscape of light and clear architecture of Aschenbach’s arrival\textsuperscript{83} seems Apollonian, as do the statues littering D’Annunzio’s descriptions.\textsuperscript{84} Yet in Mann’s Venice, reflecting Aschenbach’s shift from Apollonian to Dionysian, Apollonian features quickly recede in the Dionysian landscapes that emerge. In D’Annunzio’s Venice the statues appear, on closer inspection, lifeless and forgotten,\textsuperscript{85} and the Apollonian aspects of the landscape in general are dilapidated.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{76} Mann, p. 582.
\textsuperscript{78} ‘Sparagmos’ was an ancient Dionysian ritual involving the dismemberment of a victim, animal or human, re-enacting Pentheus’ dismemberment by the maenads. The flesh would sometimes be devoured raw.
\textsuperscript{79} Hannelore Mundt, \textit{Understanding Thomas Mann} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 93.
\textsuperscript{80} D’Annunzio, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{81} D’Annunzio, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{82} D’Annunzio, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{83} The narrator admires the ‘blinding composition of fantastic architecture’ (Mann, p. 522).
\textsuperscript{84} Before entering the maze in which she becomes lost, Foscarina comments ‘How many statues!’ (D’Annunzio, p. 391).
\textsuperscript{85} Myriad statues appear in the Stygian landscape encountered after the fiasco in the maze: ‘like the spirits of a vanished people, the statues passed and passed’ (D’Annunzio, p. 407).
\end{flushright}
The long-neglected Dionysian now seems the more active impulse here, invigorating Venice with a Dionysian frenzy that rekindles artistic passion. Perhaps once the Dionysian is embraced again, and the artistic landscape rejuvenated, the harmonious balance of Apollo and Dionysus will once again create true art. In both texts, the Venetian landscape displays Apollonian features overshadowed by an emerging Dionysian dominance; for D’Annunzio this seems to foretell the reconciliation of these energies, but in Aschenbach’s case we understand that his embrace of the Dionysian will prove irreversible and fatal.

As proof of Stelio’s capacity to overcome the obstacles he encounters and to reign in those impulses of desire and Dionysian abandon that jeopardise his artistic success, one of the final landscapes of The Flame is an imagined one depicting the theatre Stelio wishes to build as Italy’s answer to Bayreuth. Impatient for coming times of great productivity, Stelio sees ‘the Roman hill, the growing building, the evenness of the cut stones, […] the vigilant and stern architect, the bulk of the Vatican opposite the Theatre of Apollo.’ Nature is abundant in this landscape and ‘one hears nothing but the song of birds, the roar of fountains, the murmur of leaves’. Mythical nature-spirits, including companions of Dionysus, are present and the poet discerns ‘the pulse of the Hamadryads and the breath of Pan’. This is a clear indication of Stelio’s return to artistic focus and his triumphant and productive harmony with Dionysus.

By contrast, the final landscape Mann describes is pitifully hopeless, promising no redemption. Aschenbach, ever-solitary, watches Tadzio against the ‘hazy-infinity’ of the seascape and ironically interprets his stance as an inviting gesture towards the ‘promising-vastness’. But the promise of this immense space is illusory, the final, and fatal, part of Aschenbach’s self-deception. Naturally, Aschenbach ‘follows’ Tadzio and in four rather dispassionate lines we read of Aschenbach’s departure from the world.

The Venetian landscape takes on many guises in the texts of D’Annunzio and Mann and constitutes a substantial thematic parallel between them. It becomes a vital part of the protagonists’ Venetian existences, actively interfering with their experiences and influencing their behaviour and thoughts. Deployed as a reflective space in both texts, it becomes a crucial key to understanding the characters’ psychological development and reveals which force is likely to triumph in the battle between desire and creativity. With this article I hope to have demonstrated that The Flame and Death in Venice warrant further comparative analysis and that the parallels between these two seldom-linked texts run deeper than may be assumed at first glance.

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86 When Stelio calls his Theatre of Apollo ‘harmonious’ (D’Annunzio, p. 524), it seems likely that this harmony refers (at least partly) to the perfect balance of Apollo and Dionysus that for Nietzsche was so crucial for the creation of great art.
87 D’Annunzio, p. 523.
88 D’Annunzio, p. 525.
89 D’Annunzio, p. 525.
90 Mann, p. 592.
91 Mann, p. 592.