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Two Pandemics - Making Meaning of Illness through the Works of Thomas Mann and Thomas Glavinic

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Thesis title Two Pandemics: Making Meaning of Illness through the
Works of Thomas Mann and Thomas Glavinic

Intended date of commencement May 8, 2021

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Melissa Etzler  4/12/21
Date

Reader(s) Clare Carrasco  4/15/21
Date

Date

Certified by _____
Director, Honors Program Date

**Two Pandemics: Making Meaning of Illness through the Works of Thomas Mann and
Thomas Glavinic**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Samuel Thomas Stucky

8 April 2021

Abstract

By March 2020, most of the world had gone into varying levels of lockdown to try to prevent further spread of what was proving to be a deceptively deadly disease: COVID-19, commonly referred to as “the Coronavirus.” One way to gauge the effect that a massive, traumatic event such as a global pandemic has on individuals is to analyze how those people write about their experiences. In this study, I examine what the German body of discourse contained and what it can teach regarding two major pandemics that fell one hundred years apart via Thomas Mann’s novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*) and Thomas Glavinic’s autofictional “*Der Corona-Roman*” (“*The Corona Novel*”). By finding common themes and subjecting them to various critiques and analyses, I discovered that the “German experience,” so to speak, was remarkably similar to those I was reading from my compatriots in English, if a bit blunter. I analyze these texts cross-linguistically to understand universal themes of experience during pandemic times, and how those views have changed across time and space, with four overarching topics: time, self-writing of illness, pandemic descriptions, and mortality. In this way, I show how readers are able to connect with the texts and use them to make meaning in their own lives.

Introduction

In December of 2019, reports began to filter out of Wuhan, China that a new form of coronavirus (COVID-19) had been identified in multiple deaths developing from pneumonia-like symptoms. Travel bans along with other basic measures were put into effect internationally while China went on lockdown. Though wildfires in Australia in early 2020 drew attention away momentarily, suddenly Italy was also on lockdown, along with a handful of other countries. And just like that, in early March of 2020, most of the world had gone into varying levels of lockdown, attempting to prevent further spread of what was proving to be a deceptively deadly disease.

However, even in times of dire illness, life goes on. Much as during the “Spanish flu” pandemic almost exactly a century earlier, the world did not simply come to a standstill, but found ways to work around new health and safety guidelines. With more advanced virology and even wider access to technology in general, more effective—and often more restrictive—steps could be taken. The world had expected a reasonably quick return to normal during the initial phases, which involved postponement of everyday routines in two-week increments while the problem of spread was addressed. However, as the two-week periods extended into months and people lived each new day with social contact restricted to technology-based forms of communication, people were thrown into experiencing a sense of time-out-of-time such as humanity has never seen before.

One way to gauge the effect that a massive, traumatic event such as a global pandemic has on individuals is to analyze how those people write about their experiences. In particular, I was interested in better understanding what the German body of discourse contained and what it could teach regarding two major pandemics that fell one hundred years apart. I began with

Thomas Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*), a story about a fictional pandemic written just prior to the 1918 influenza pandemic, and continued with Thomas Glavinic's autofictional "*Der Corona-Roman*" ("*The Corona Novel*"), a novel in twenty-seven daily installments published through *WELT.de* about the modern pandemic.¹ By finding common themes such as (of course) pandemic illness, time, and mortality, and subjecting them to various critiques and analyses, I discovered that the "German experience," so to speak, was remarkably similar to those I was reading from my compatriots in English, if a bit more blunt.

These themes do not stem merely from our lived present of the Coronavirus pandemic and moments like it. Nor do they pertain only to such moments. Ideas regarding time, uncertainty, the individual's relationship to various levels of social organization, death, and more are sources of constant anxiety for many. But times such as those that began in early 2020 tend to bring these issues to the fore of people's consciousness, not merely those whose constitutions are like that of Gustav von Aschenbach, the protagonist of Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*: "daß seine Natur von nichts weniger als robuster Verfassung und zur ständigen Anspannung nur berufen, nicht eigentlich geboren war" ("by no means robust and, though called upon for constant exertion, [are] not really born for it").²

It will be beneficial to begin with a brief summary of the two primary works to which it pertains, beginning with Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig*. At the opening of the story, we are given a picture of a distressed man on a nightly stroll whose encounter with a strange figure leads to an inexplicable urge to travel, or as he describes it, "Fluchtdrang war sie," ("it was an

¹ In some critiques of Glavinic's writing, the work as a whole is italicized, as would be the title of a novel. However, I put it in quotation marks because at the time of writing it has not been published in novel form, only as separate installments.

² Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 14-15.

urge to escape”).³ The narrator then exhaustively describes Aschenbach’s background, the main purpose of which is to establish him as a staple of elite German literary figures of the day by giving him characteristics akin to Mann himself and other famous German authors such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Joachim Winckelmann.⁴ At this point, Aschenbach takes flight from his Munich home with Venice as his destination. After a mildly unsettling journey there, he begins to feel that he might do better to return home, where he is most comfortable. However, before he leaves, he becomes peripherally acquainted with a Polish family staying at the same hotel and becomes fixated on Tadzio, the lone boy among his sisters, governess, and mother. He quickly comes to regard the youth as a specimen of beauty and begins to use him as a muse of sorts, a symptom of the vampiric hold Tadzio seems to unknowingly have over the author. He becomes so infatuated with the boy that he cannot return home, unable to bear parting from his new (unrequited) love. This becomes problematic sooner than expected, however, as a plague of “Indian cholera” descends on the ancient city, and Aschenbach becomes too drunk on his love for Tadzio to take necessary precautions. Finally, having learned that the family will soon be departing, Aschenbach gives in to the “Übel” (“sickness”), allowing it to claim his life rather than live apart from his vision of perfection.⁵

Thomas Glavinic’s autofictional “Corona-Roman” was published in twenty-seven installments in March and April of 2020, in the early days of mandatory quarantining. The diary takes place in Glavinic’s home of Vienna, though the narrator is not meant to be an exact replica

³ Mann, *Der Tod*, 10-11.

⁴ Johann Winckelmann's *The History of Art in Antiquity* (1764) established the classical Greek sculpture as the standard of artistic perfection due to its "edle Einfalt und stille Grösse." His quote would be cited by nearly every author of the Classical period and it is this phrase which appears in variations in *Death in Venice* when Aschenbach shows his appreciation for Tadzio's beauty. For further information on Mann's connection to authors from German Classicism, see: Lida Kirchberger, "'Death in Venice' and the Eighteenth Century," *Monatshefte*, vol. 58, no. 4 (Winter 1966): pp. 321-344.

⁵ Mann, *Der Tod*, 120.

of the author. This defines the diary as autofiction—a blend of real and imagined elements. Averaging around a page, each “Teil” (“part”) has its own self-contained topic. Examples include the practice of washing cash to get groceries delivered, making a journey to the pharmacy for a prescription, the narrator’s existential terror regarding illness, his neighbors, and even his great-grandmother’s first love. There are overarching themes as well: he often quotes the latest numbers of cases in Germany, the UK, Italy, China, the US, and other places. He discusses his views on world markets and the future of the economy, as well as his crippling social anxiety and depression. Politics and other social topics such as racism arise regularly. There is never a plot across installments, and since each is self-contained there is no more resolution in “Teil 27 - Wir sind in Geiselhaft – aber nicht wegen Corona” (“Part 27 – We are in captivity, but not because of Corona”) than there was in “Teil 1 - Kampf zwischen Verdrängungstalent und Beobachtungsgabe” (“Part 1 – Conflict between a talent for repression and powers of observation”).⁶ Because of the apparently random order of topics from one installment to the next, the text as a whole develops in a stream-of-consciousness format. Apart from the occasional reports of increased case numbers, Glavinic removes temporal markers from his overall narrative, allowing readers to become lost in the story, so to speak.

These two texts will serve as my German-language rhetorical basis. I will analyze them cross-linguistically in order to best understand universal themes of experience during pandemic times, and how those views have changed across time and space, with four overarching topics: time, self-writing of illness, pandemic descriptions, and mortality. In this way, I will show how readers are able to connect with the texts and use them to make meaning in their own lives.

⁶ Thomas Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” *WELT*, March 19, 2020, 1-27, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article206628297/Thomas-Glavinic-Corona-Roman-Teil-1.html>.

Time

The most substantial theme throughout the literature in this study is time. While apparently an easy concept to understand, describing time itself tends to be a difficult question. While the Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives multiple definitions with various sub-definitions contained in each, the one most applicable to this discussion is, “a nonspatial continuum that is measured in terms of events which succeed one another from past through present to future.”⁷ This definition particularly captures an important element of time as it relates to disease in general, but especially to a protracted one like the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of its nonspatial nature, the events used to measure time are essential. When these are removed, such as during a pandemic, the nonspatial nature of time becomes apparent and the way in which people experience it changes, sometimes drastically.

An experience of time-out-of-time is obvious in a few places for Aschenbach in *Der Tod in Venedig*. From the beginning of the novella, the narrator describes Aschenbach as being possessed of a strange desire for travel, quite unlike his usual demeanor. In quick succession, the man has also decided that he should travel to Venice, a city with which he associates previous trauma.⁸

And yet he acts on his impulses, allowing a seemingly chance encounter with an admittedly odd-looking individual to remove him from his sense of normalcy; again, something the “sane” Aschenbach would be unlikely to do. The man whom he sees on the spring evening is described as bearing “ein Gepräge des Fremdländischen” (“an imprint of foreignness”):⁹

⁷ “Time,” Merriam-Webster, accessed January 21, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/time>.

⁸ Mann, *Der Tod*, 27

⁹ Mann, *Der Tod*, 4. (my own translation)

Mäßig hochgewachsen, mager, bartlos, und auffallend stumpfnäsiger, gehörte der Mann zum rothaarigen Typ und besaß dessen milchige und sommersprossige Haut. ... Erhobenen Hauptes, so daß an seinem hager dem losen Sporthemd entwachsenden Halse der Adamsapfel stark und nackt hervortrat, blickte er mit farblosen, rotbewimperten Augen, zwischen denen, sonderbar genug zu seiner kurz aufgeworfenen Nase passend, zwei senkrechte, energische Furchen standen, scharf spähend ins Weite. So – und vielleicht trug sein erhöhter und erhöhender Standort zu diesem Eindruck bei, hatte seine Haltung etwas herrisch Überschauendes, Kühnes oder selbst Wildes; denn sei es, es sich um eine dauernde physiognomische Entstellung handelte: seine Lippen schienen zu kurz, sie waren völlig von den Zähnen zurückgezogen, dergestalt, daß diese, bis zum Zahnfleisch bloßgelegt, weiß und lang dazwischen hervorbleckten.

Moderately tall, thin, beardless, and conspicuously snub-nosed, the man was redheaded and had the milky, freckled skin peculiar to that physical type. His head raised, so that his Adam's apple stuck out, prominent and bare, against the scrawny neck protruding from his loose sport shirt, he peered sharply and searchingly into the distance with colorless, red-lashed eyes between which, as a most unusual counterpart to his short, turned-up nose, stood two energetic vertical furrows. In this way, and perhaps his elevated and elevating standpoint contributed to the impression – his bearing was somewhat like that of a lord surveying his domain, with an element of boldness or even savagery; for, whether it was because, dazzled, he was grimacing into the sinking sun, or whether his features were permanently deformed, his lips seemed too short; they were drawn all the way back, so that his long, white teeth, exposed up to the gums, were visible between them.¹⁰

With his skeletal appearance, nearly translucent skin, and fire-colored hair, this unnamed foreigner represents Death. When he is described as surveying his territory in a predatory manner, the stranger stakes out Aschenbach as his next victim. Aschenbach looks Death in the eye in this scene then proceeds to take a vacation in a pandemic hotspot. This marks the beginning of his time-out-of-time. For Aschenbach, time slows more and more steadily until finally he succumbs to the disease and dies; from his perspective, when time stops. However, this scene could just as easily have taken place once he had already arrived in Venice—meeting Death on a deserted street at twilight is just as probable in an ancient, pandemic-afflicted city,

¹⁰ Mann, *Der Tod*, 4-7.

perhaps more so, than a bustling German metropolis. By placing it at the beginning, Mann intends this scene as foreshadowing. Just as Aschenbach forgets his encounter almost immediately thereafter, the reader places it out of mind until the end of the novella when the author is summoned to death by Tadzio.¹¹

At first, this step through the looking glass is far from problematic, much less fatal. Aschenbach reasons that because his constitution is perhaps not up to bearing any more hard work at the moment, he might do well to take a vacation. However, as the story progresses, Aschenbach's reasoning turns quickly to rationalization. At many junctures, he is presented with the opportunity to turn back from his chosen path of unrequited lover, but each time his rationalization becomes wilder. In the fifth chapter, after receiving undeniable proof of the spread of the pandemic in Venice, Aschenbach considers telling Tadzio's family to flee for their safety and subsequently taking his own leave, with his life and sanity mostly intact. While this feels initially like the right thing to do, his rationalization is swift:

Aber er fühlte zugleich, daß er unendlich weit entfernt war, einen solchen Schritt im Ernste zu wollen. Er würde ihn zurückführen, würde ihn sich selbst wiedergeben; aber wer außer ist, verabscheut nichts mehr, als wieder in sich zu gehen. ... und der Gedanke an Heimkehr, an Besonnenheit, Nüchternheit, Mühsal und Meisterschaft widerte ihn in solchem Maße, daß sein Gesicht sich zum Ausdruck physischer Übelkeit verzerrte.

But at the same time he felt that he was infinitely far from seriously wishing to take such a step. It would recall him to his senses, it would restore him to himself; but a man who is beside himself dreads nothing worse than to become himself again. ... and the idea of returning home, acting sensibly, sobering up, and resuming his labors and his status as a master was so repellent to him that his face contorted into an expression of physical nausea.¹²

¹¹ Mann, *Der Tod*, 7, 151.

¹² Mann, *Der Tod*, 120-21.

This is the danger with taking a time-out-of-time. The deeper one dives into the experience, the harder it can be to pull oneself back out. Aschenbach finds this out the hard way, as he is unable to bring himself to leave his beloved Tadzio and his despised Venice to return to his normal life. Even when his life is threatened, the thought of taking all of his burdens back on, of subjecting his fragile constitution once again to the horrors of real life, of leaving what he believes to be paradise on earth (albeit an oppressively hot and muggy paradise), is abhorrent to the mind that has been conditioned otherwise. It is also worth noting that the word “Übelkeit” can, in this instance, be translated as “nausea.” However, it is also used frequently to refer to the plague sweeping Venice instead of “Pandemie” (“pandemic”) or “Krankheit” (“illness”). This creates an instance of wordplay whereby a reversal is recognized. That which one would typically associate with Übel (nausea, illness, something horrific and outside the norm) is embraced by Aschenbach, since the diseased world of the pandemic is the preferable new norm that has rendered Aschenbach’s former life repugnant (übel).

The easy explanation for all of this is that Aschenbach finds it so difficult to return to his once daily routine because he was the one who subjected himself in the first place to this “out of self” experience. He did not foresee the effects of the pandemic in Venice and thus cannot take it seriously enough to pull himself back to safety once he was in the deadly situation.

Compounding that, he finds himself addicted to the presence of Tadzio. He takes to following him and his family around the city as the novella progresses. Had the Polish family left sooner, taking the object of Aschenbach’s affections with them, Aschenbach may have had the time to clear his head and make his escape before succumbing to the pandemic. Or, he may have already found himself in so deep that he would have stayed in Venice and waited to be carried off by the disease to ease the suffering of his parting. Of this, the reader can never be sure.

The internal conflict presented in Mann's novella is particularly worrisome when compared to the current Coronavirus pandemic. If Aschenbach stayed in Venice as long as he did only because he could not take the pandemic seriously, then it seems that he had in some form planned an exit strategy from his "out of self" experience. In that case, the current pandemic situation must be given proper gravitas. The severity of the illness cannot be underestimated; this was Aschenbach's mistake, as well as that of so many real people. The suddenness of the changes resulting from the spread of the Coronavirus has also left many at a loss. There was no time to plan an exit strategy; people were simply plunged into the deep end. This indicates that people may have to come up with one on the fly, which may or may not work, as per the other possible reason for Aschenbach's continued residence in Venice. With vaccines becoming increasingly available during the initial months of 2021, pandemic exit strategies may have relevance sooner than many scientists originally expected.

If Aschenbach was indeed addicted to the feeling of his time-out-of-time, compounded by the presence of his beloved, then society must be wary of how deeply it allows itself to sink into the current situation. People cannot allow themselves to become addicted, as it were, to the alienation they feel. Certainly, there have been many negative outcomes from the Coronavirus, but people have also found instances of seemingly incredible light in the darkness. The danger lies in forgetting that society has merely entered a cave and thinking that the small beams of light that somehow shine in the darkness are the only ones to exist, when the whole world shines brightly just outside. The main hurdle is that the cave was not entered willingly or with much preparation at all, and therefore the path to the exit is unclear. It may be near, or the journey may not even be halfway over. But it is out there. That means that for now, hard as it is, the forward motion must continue. Warning must be taken from Aschenbach. People cannot allow

themselves in so deep that they cannot escape, nor can they ignore the situation to the point of not dealing with it at all. The most difficult aspect of this situation is that this form of existence, halfway between the dark and the light, is incredibly taxing. Many, like Aschenbach, have constitutions that are being made to bear burdens they were not built for.¹³ However, this does not mean people can simply abandon who they were. To submit to the darkness, to admit that they cannot live without Tadzio, is tantamount to accepting that life is death.

Time plays a unique dual role in Mann's writing, in this case displaying his mastery of storytelling. On the one hand, Mann often describes the events of Aschenbach's day with phrases such as "Er verbrachte zwei Stunden auf seinem Zimmer" ("He spent two hours in his room"), or "Um Mittag erblickte er Tadzio" ("At noon he caught sight of Tadzio").¹⁴ These types of phrasing offer specificity to the reader accompanying Aschenbach about his day. Noticeably, such specific references fade over the course of the novella as Aschenbach's mental and physical states spiral out of control, an intimation of the time-out-of-time that increases as the pandemic spreads, gradually giving way to the second type of temporal description. This second kind of phrasing is more ambiguous about the passage of time, ranging in specificity from "Nach Mittag" ("In the afternoon"), and "eines Nachmittags" ("one afternoon"), to "Einige Tage später" ("A few days afterward"), and even to "Seit mehreren Jahren schon" ("For several years").¹⁵ By the end of the novel, the specificity with which the departing trains had been discussed is lost. When Aschenbach attempts to make a hasty departure from Venice (ironically, for the sake of his health), he leaves his room "um acht Uhr" ("at eight [am]"), but despite there being "Mehr als eine Stunde blieb bis zur Abfahrt seines Zuges" ("more than an hour before his train left"),

¹³ Mann, *Der Tod*, 14-15.

¹⁴ Mann, *Der Tod*, 60-71.

¹⁵ Mann, *Der Tod*, 60-61, 114-15, 128-29, 132-33.

the hotel staff is anxious that all the departing guests should leave.¹⁶ Aschenbach purposely stalls in hopes—that he cannot yet admit to himself—that he will miss the train and the question of staying or leaving will be answered for him. However, near the very end of the novella, as the Polish family is preparing to leave, the only answer Aschenbach receives as to their time of departure is, “Nach dem Lunch” (“After lunch”).¹⁷ This is one clear example of how time descriptions change throughout the novella. The change from specificity to ambiguity reflects the effect that a change in frame of temporal reference, such as at the onset of a pandemic, can have.

This dual role of temporal description in Mann’s novella expresses perfectly the definition of time referenced earlier. With the former, more specific type of discovery, Mann provides a system of measurement for readers, such that the events of the novella do not happen in a vacuum. They show, as per the definition, “events which succeed one another from past through present to future.”¹⁸ However, the latter type of—if not ethereal, then at a minimum ambiguous—descriptions show the “nonspatial continuum.”¹⁹ We do not ever really gain a sense of how long Aschenbach stays in Venice. Based on the logical descriptions of the passage of a few days at a time, we can assume that it is a minimum of several weeks. But although the story starts in the spring time, the only description we receive for the time of year at the end of the novella is that “Herbstlichkeit, Überlebtheit schien über dem einst so farbig belebten, nun fast verlassenen Lustorte zu liegen, dessen Sand nicht mehr reinlich gehalten wurde” (“an autumnal mood, a feeling that it had outlived its time, seemed to weigh upon the once so colorfully animated, now almost deserted, pleasure ground, on which the sand was no longer kept clean”).²⁰

¹⁶ Mann, *Der Tod*, 65.

¹⁷ Mann, *Der Tod*, 132-33.

¹⁸ Merriam-Webster, “Time.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Mann, *Der Tod*, 133.

Does the mood actually signify the presence of the fall season? Or does it merely reflect the absence of so many of the guests who fled the seaside for their own safety? Or is it merely part of Aschenbach's perception, tainted by the sudden yet expected news of his beloved's departure? The answer to those questions is not the point—the point is that they must be asked in the first place: these descriptions disassociate the reader from temporal structure. The duality presented shows how Aschenbach, and by extension the reader, experience a time-out-of-time on this vacation to Venice.²¹

This gradual shift toward ambiguity in temporal descriptions is mirrored in the Coronavirus pandemic. When the pandemic first entered the United States and lockdowns were declared, people of course wanted to know how long such measures would last. “Two weeks” was often touted as the starting length for any measures taken against the virus, whether that be self-isolation, store closures, or others. Two weeks quickly turned into a month, which turned into two, then three. Now more than a year into the pandemic, the timelines provided by scientists become increasingly foggy as to when things will “end.”²² Will vaccines help to bring an end, or will they simply be another step on the journey through this disease?

Many expected the duality of measurement within a period of exception in time to last mere weeks, at most a month or two. Therefore, there was no reason to stop measuring by the same systems as had been in use. They would be in use again in no time at all, and things would be “put right” after a brief blip. This, I believe, is part of what has made life in a pandemic difficult for many. This time-out-of-time was cleverly disguised when it initially presented itself

²¹ Mann, *Der Tod*.

²² The thought that the coronavirus pandemic will have a hard end is a dangerous thought in and of itself – people still get infected with Ebola, though for much of the world that danger has passed. Where is the line that defines a pandemic as “over?”

in China and Italy. In those countries where the disease spread first, governments were caught almost unawares and needed to enact extreme measures of lockdowns, curfews, and the like. Take these few easy steps now and it will not be so long and arduous like it was for other countries, many assumed. But the period of exceptionality continued, and people began to reorient the ways in which they measured their time after already having “lost” days or weeks. Certainly, there have been markers of time—holidays have come and gone, the United States had an election (and more), Germany has gone in and out of lockdown and served as the president of the Council of the European Union. Until the promise of widespread vaccinations began in March 2021, these events caused confusion in their passing. “How are we already to the Fourth of July? To Oktoberfest? To Christmas?” people asked.²³ As of April 2021, we are unsure of how long this pandemic will last, and so these measurements of time from inside it often seem like false footholds.

Time also has an individual, psychological aspect. While even a few decades ago a pandemic like COVID-19 would have brought the world to a halt, the technology of our present allowed the world to continue turning. Or at least, some aspects of it. This has been one of the most confusing elements for many people about our current situation—x is still happening, but y needs to stop right now. For example, German media sources such as *Der Tagesspiegel*, *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reference the simultaneous acceleration of “die Außenwelt” (“the outside world”) as relative to the deceleration of “die Innenwelt” (“the inside world”).²⁴ This refers to the businesses that continued to operate and the sometimes hourly

²³ In fact, there were many iterations of a certain internet meme in late February 2021 that reflected the feeling that we had never truly left March 2020, when much of the world entered a state of quarantine. Suddenly March 2021 was coming up, surprising many with the fact that a whole year had passed.

²⁴ Gerrit Bartels, “Der Hype um die Corona-Literatur: Es gibt sie, wie bald Martin Meyers Erzählung “Corona”, es gibt sie nicht,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/der-hype-um-die-corona-literatur-es-gibt-sie-wie-bald-martin-meyers-erzaehlung-corona-es-gibt-sie-nicht/25805436.html>.

updates on the progress of the virus, while people were asked to stay home and slow down their lives.

Existing on the inside of the fishbowl, as it were, created a major disassociation for those who saw a rift between the inside and outside worlds. What could be seen in each individual's fishbowl had slowed, almost to a halt. By comparison, everything outside the bowl that the individual cannot see, that the individual is not experiencing, continued at a similar pace to before. This is a large part of what has made the current pandemic a unique situation. Because the advancements made in recent years have allowed for only a partial slowing when the pandemic broke out, it forced every person to live in two contrasting moments simultaneously. Inside worlds all skidded to a halt and became a time-out-of-time. This necessitated the need for a reorientation, which was obfuscated by the fact that communal moments kept going. Thus, the reorientation of systems of temporal measurement did not happen (we may never know if it could or should have been different). There is a continued attempt to reconcile two presents, two realities that society was unprepared to reconcile. Reconciliation may still occur, but it will require first a recognition that this duality exists.²⁵

The reception of so-called "Corona-Literatur" has also discussed this new genre's relation to time.²⁶ For some, like Gerrit Bartels of *TagesSpiegel*, the best forms of literature dealing with the pandemic are those that confine themselves to handling concrete topics, such as heroic frontline medical workers. This avoids unnecessary presentation of emotion without

Florian Werner, "Neues Genre Corona-Literatur - Lesen ist ansteckend," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, April 4, 2020, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/neues-genre-corona-literatur-lesen-ist-ansteckend.1270.de.html?dram:article_id=473758.

Marie Schmidt, "Eine Pandemie sucht ihren Autor," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/literatur-corona-1.4877583>.

²⁵ Simon Grondin, Esteban Mendoza-Duran, and Pier-Alexandre Rioux, "Pandemic, Quarantine, and Psychological Time," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (October 2020): 1-6.

²⁶ Bartels, "Der Hype."

proper reflection, which he believes cannot be achieved at the moment. For this literature to have gravitas, it needs time to mature, and as exemplar he offers the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He remembers how authors held back from publishing gut reactions, only many years later publishing works like Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, published in 2007 and 2005 respectively.²⁷ Literature about other pandemics receives the same treatment. Bartels specifically cites *Der Tod in Venedig* as an example of good "Seuchenliteratur" ("Pandemic literature"), among other examples that are all older than Mann's novella.²⁸ Bartels' point here is clear—with the exception of some stories born of the AIDS crisis in the late twentieth century, there has been a lack of recent pandemic literature with either critical or cult acclaim. However, is there such a thing as too much time to allow literature to mature, so to speak?

Bartels' opinion is not without warrant; with the exponential rise in importance of social media in the past decade and a half, there have been fundamental changes in how society relates to itself. It has become the norm to put much of one's life on display for the whole world to see, whether the world asked for it or not. While this has its benefits, one major drawback is rampant posturing, which literature relating to the Coronavirus pandemic certainly should not include. Thus, Bartels recommends focusing on the concrete in order to avoid unnecessary retractions of blurted out feelings later on, once those feelings have matured months or even years later. However, the accompanying danger to that line of thinking is that reactions and emotions must be kept to oneself until such time as they are deemed worthy of publishing. If they are put out there now, they will remain out there, unchangeable; by waiting, they run the risk of festering.

²⁷ Don DeLillo, *Falling Man: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 2007).

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

²⁸ Bartels, "Der Hype."

Which is the better course, and is there a middle way? Focusing on the concrete is important when faced with the problem of our own mortality, as this usually includes an instinctual chokehold on what we believe we are sure of.²⁹

One such example of “Corona-Literatur” is Thomas Glavinic’s “Corona-Roman.” Written at the beginning of the first major lockdown in March of 2020, Glavinic presents various thoughts on modern life and how the pandemic already has and will continue to alter it. Presented through the eyes of a semi-autobiographical, paranoid, neurotic recluse, Glavinic often discusses how he (or rather, the narrator) views the continuum of time. While he considers it linear, he often discusses the past and the future through the lens of the present, drawing connections between various points in time.

One other way in which we can attempt to understand both Aschenbach’s and Glavinic’s narrators’ concepts of time in their respective pandemics is by taking them as representatives of greater trends in humans’ relationship to time. In the book *Understanding Behavior in the Context of Time*, Alan Strathman compiled various studies of how humans perceive and react to time. Two studies are particularly applicable in this analysis: one dealing with Terror Management Theory (TMT), the other with the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI). The latter deals directly with perceived time. In their analysis, John N. Boyd and Philip G. Zimbardo of Stanford University presented a set of five independent temporal outlook tendencies with a sixth modifier: two deal with the past, two with the present, and the last and the modifier with the future. The researchers remind readers that it is important to consider that each category is highly subjective for each individual. Therefore, particularly with the past factors, it is just as

²⁹ Clay Routledge and Jamie Arndt, “Time and Terror: Managing Temporal Consciousness and the Awareness of Mortality,” in *Understanding Behavior in the Context of Time: Theory, Research, and Application*, ed. Alan Strathman and Jeff Joireman (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 71-72.

important to consider a person's perception of reality as it is to consider veritable facts and events.³⁰ Here is a brief overview of each of the six factors:

Factor	Description
Past-Positive	Those who score highly in this category tend to have a "warm, sentimental, nostalgic attitude toward the past." They might look fondly on family traditions or enjoy reminiscing with others about past events.
Past-Negative	High scorers in this category often look upon their past with regret, feeling that they may have missed opportunities, been a victim of various levels of trauma, and/or wish that things were different.
Present-Hedonistic	This is best exemplified by those whose focus is to live in the moment. These individuals may exhibit high levels of spontaneity and even restlessness but can also become exceedingly absorbed in the moment and the activity at hand.
Present-Fatalistic	This factor tends to show itself as the feeling that events happen to a person rather than their taking an active participation in them. They generally feel that they have a lack of control or that there is a lack of consistency in life.
Future	This scale indicates a prevalence of thoughts and actions dealing with the future. These can either be in the interest of planning for the future and taking action, or simply considering what may occur in the future as having an effect of what one does in the present.
Transcendental Future	This deals with the individual's focus on what may occur after the future, so to speak. This is often present in those with strong religious belief in an afterlife, or in those that see their being as extending past their physical forms.

Table 1: Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory Factors³¹

First, the two present outlooks: "Present-Hedonistic" and "Present-Fatalistic." By comparison, those scoring high in the former tend to believe that they have more control over their lives than not, while those in the latter believe they do not maintain enough control over

³⁰ John N. Boyd and Philip G. Zimbardo, "Time Perspective, Health, and Risk Taking," in *Understanding Behavior in the Context of Time: Theory, Research, and Application*, ed. Alan Strathman and Jeff Joireman (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 103-04.

³¹ Boyd and Zimbardo, "Time Perspective," 89-90.

their lives for it to have any lasting effect.³² Neither of the scales has any inherent value judgement attached to it. However, the authors do express a preference for a certain configuration of high and low scores.³³ It is also essential that while the trend was generally toward a high score in one and a low score in the other, high or low scores in both is possible; for example, a person could see themselves as being at the mercy of outside forces yet still take joy in spontaneity. In my assessment, Aschenbach becomes one of those with high scores in both, at least after his encounter with the strange man on his evening stroll. People with this orientation of scales take great pleasure in the present but do not see the need to take precautions for the future because they cannot exert enough control over their present to ensure stability.³⁴ Aschenbach takes great pleasure in his travels to Venice, acting on a whim for the first time in a very long while. Once there, he takes even greater pleasure in the form of Tadzio. On the other hand, he has never felt much control over his life, but rather as though he is in service to and at the mercy of greater societal forces.

From the narrator's perspective it seems as though he might like to gain some control, as in the scene where the author attempts to leave Venice. There, he makes all the arrangements with the hotel the night before his would-be departure to ensure that everything is efficiently made ready for him. Even in the moments when he ignores the advice of the hotel staff that he should leave or miss his train, he attempts to take matters into his own hands and makes his own way to the station. Once there, the stumbling block that his luggage was sent on to the wrong destination allows him to slip back into the present-fatalistic mindset and returns to the station,

³² Ibid.

³³ Boyd and Zimbardo, "Time Perspective," 101-02.

³⁴ Ibid.

permitting his plans to be derailed. Thus, he exhibits elements of both present-oriented outlooks.³⁵

The two future outlooks (the main scale and the transcendental) on the other hand, concern a general outlook towards the future and what may be said to be an outlook past the future. One possible flaw of this study is that it does not incorporate different outlooks on the future, positive or negative (or something in between); it measures simply whether people tended to account for the future at all. The transcendental future element, listed as separate from the main five, deals with how people view their future after death; in other words, past the certain future. This was mainly used to qualify people's present actions more than their outlook and future planning.³⁶ In my reading of Mann's text, Aschenbach has spent much of his life pretending that he scores high on the future scale while ignoring his tendency towards present-hedonism. Aschenbach was constantly at the grindstone, churning out masterworks for years on end, even though he was not really the type of person who was made for such work.³⁷ By that measure, he also scores high on the transcendental future scale, seeing his work as part of a larger cultural effort. Thus, when given the chance, his sense of present-hedonism completely shuts off the tendency toward the future that he had tried to embody. Because he has not experienced time-out-of-time in the same manner before, he does not understand how to cope with his "new" tendency and it ultimately brings about his downfall, as he digs in his heels in his attempts to remain blissfully in Venice with Tadzio.

The narrator of the "Corona-Roman" is a bit more difficult to define with these scales. While he is never given a name, we understand him to be based on the author, Thomas Glavinic.

³⁵ Mann, *Der Tod*, 65-73.

³⁶ Boyd and Zimbardo, "Time Perspective," 90.

³⁷ Mann, *Der Tod*, 15.

In terms of the present, he seems to be more present-fatalistic than -hedonistic with his anxiety and a noticeable lack of risk taking, such as getting groceries delivered in “Teil 3 - Wo sind die Bitcoins, wenn man sie mal braucht?” (“Part 3 – Where are the Bitcoins, when one needs them?”).³⁸ He also seems to be relatively high-scoring on the future scale, as his anxiety constantly causes him to imagine what will happen to him, often with widely varying results, as in “Teil 13 - Meine Killerzellen wurden auf der Militäarakademie ausgebildet” (“Part 13 – My killer cells were trained at the military academy”).³⁹

However, he also does not fit in with the general characterization of someone with these characteristics as “all work, but no play.”⁴⁰ Because of the style of narration, it is less clear whether each of these elements is representative of his general character or simply results of the pandemic, as we only receive snapshots of his daily life in contrast to a long stretch of Aschenbach’s. It is also likely for both characters that their perceptions of time as we are privy to them are direct results of their respective pandemics. This lines up with the quote provided by Boyd and Zimbardo in their study, “Albert Einstein ... demonstrated that time is not a constant, but rather subject to context and frame of reference events.”⁴¹ Keeping in mind the pandemic experience of a time-out-of-time, then it makes sense that these characters may be experiencing time differently and reacting in ways that are not their version of normal. In a pandemic, nobody is experiencing “normal.” However, people also have a tendency to hold on tight to their normal when presented with representations of time and death.⁴² If so, then can we discount these narratives as fictional and useless?

³⁸ Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 3.

³⁹ Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 13.

⁴⁰ Boyd and Zimbardo, “Time Perspective,” 99.

⁴¹ Boyd and Zimbardo, “Time Perspective,” 87.

⁴² Routledge and Ardnt, “Time and Terror,” 64-66.

Critics such as Gerrit Bartels and Michael Angele suggest that autobiographical illness narratives (particularly autofictional ones) are not to be considered part of the literary canon because they are more sensational than profound. This presents quite a hurdle for works such as *Der Tod in Venedig* and the “Corona-Roman.” As we shall see later, critics tend to praise Mann’s novella as an acceptable use of illness as a narrative device, mostly because the pandemic therein is used as a metaphor.⁴³ The “Corona-Roman” and other narratives like it are not acceptable uses of illness, on the basis of disgust at reading about characters’ prolonged suffering and/or death. I do not believe that this use negates the actions of the main character in light of an analysis of outlooks on time. It is important to remember that an individual’s perception is just as important to analysis as the objective facts of the case.

In her book *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twenty-First Century German Literature*, Nina Schmidt expresses her opinion that the field of *Germanistik* (the study of German literature) lacks a disability studies lens. She explains that this is a result of the reliance of many literary elites on the classical canon, which disdains *Seuchensliteratur* (confessional literature). By analyzing a few different narratives and their critics, she concludes that there is a general view of autobiographical and especially autofictional illness narratives as inherently *Seuchensliteratur*, and therefore of a lower class than can be admitted into the canon. This often implies that these works are also unfit for analysis.⁴⁴

Aschenbach’s actions are not affected by the reader’s reactions to them because at this point the readers are more than a century removed from them (even though they never happened

⁴³ Michael Angele, “Wer hat geil Krebs?” *Der Freitag*, September 3, 2009, <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/michael-angele/wer-hat-geil-krebs>.

⁴⁴ Nina Schmidt, *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twenty-First-Century German Literature* (Camden, 2018), 114-16.

in real life). The “Corona-Roman” was published in real time, sequentially over the course of two months. In our time of instant communication, readers are now able to connect more readily with authors in these situations. However, I again argue that this does not have an effect on the characters’ actions that would render them useless for analysis. In the original days of the novel, when it was published in journals and newspapers in segments, the timeline of the story and its delivery to the public was prolonged. The modern process for feedback has not changed so drastically that publishing in installments is now a problem for authors. From my analysis, these works run the risk of being discounted because of the actions of the characters, not the influence our world has on them.

There are certain situations that have an effect something like a reversal of time. Two of the narratives that Schmidt discusses in her book are Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *So schön wie hier kanns im Himmel gar nicht sein! Tagebuch einer Krebserkrankung* (*It cannot be as beautiful in heaven as it is here! Diary of a Cancer Battle*) and Wolfgang Herrndorf’s *Arbeit und Struktur* (*Work and Structure*). Each of these consists of daily entries from two cancer patients from the time of their diagnosis until roughly the time of their death. Even though they are, for a time at least, able to continue living with something approximating a normal routine, each of the authors experiences life with a level of certainty few people have. They have been given, with relative accuracy, the date of their imminent demise. Because they are now living with what amounts to a lack of a future (or at least a limited one), their locus of temporal measurement has shifted. Based on the scales from the Zimbardo study mentioned above, the function of their future outlook has now changed. This correlates to a higher score on the present fatalistic scale (the tendency toward viewing life as happening to oneself instead of taking an active role), though the

past could be a high score on either scale.⁴⁵ Because of the shift in temporal locus, time is no longer so defined and the lines between past, present, and future become blurred.

This shift is described in the context of the Coronavirus in the article “Pandemic, Quarantine, and Psychological Time.” In it, psychological researchers from Quebec address “the feeling of strangeness about the perception of time that many people with ordinary lifestyles experienced during the quarantine imposed to fight the presence of COVID-19.”⁴⁶ The authors found that the ways people engage with the outside world are often indicative of how they measure time. Because many people had one schedule before the pandemic and needed to adopt a new one during quarantine, they lost some of their sense of how to measure the passage of time. One of the warnings in the article regards focusing too much on time and how it often leads to increased symptoms of anxiety and depression.⁴⁷ If this is true, then Schlingensief and Herrndorf run the risk of increasing their scores on the past negative scale, regardless of how they would otherwise score. The constant reminder of death has increased for the two diarists. Therefore, an increased focus can be expected from each on their past, of which they can be certain.

The paradox is that their future is no less certain. However, it must now be geared more toward the sixth scale for the uncertain future, because while the future now takes up a larger portion of their focuses, it is a future consumed with death, not life.⁴⁸ This might lead to a vicious cycle unless, as Schlingensief shows a bit better than Herrndorf, they are able to force a higher present-hedonistic and past-positive score on our outlook. Much of Schlingensief’s diary is concerned with his continuing work and reviewing the impact he had and shows a more

⁴⁵ Boyd and Zimbardo, “Time Perspective,” 89-90.

⁴⁶ Grondin, Mendoza-Duran, and Rioux, “Pandemic, Quarantine,” 1.

⁴⁷ Grondin, Mendoza-Duran, and Rioux, “Pandemic, Quarantine,” 3-4.

⁴⁸ Boyd and Zimbardo, “Time Perspective,” 89-90.

positive future correlation. Herrndorf, on the other hand, shows more present-fatalism and, by extension, more negative feelings toward the past and future.⁴⁹ Altogether this shows the oddly inverse effect of how a focus on the future due to knowledge of mortality also creates a larger focus on time as whole—past and present included.

With varying descriptions of time both within and across the two major texts, comparisons and contrasts were easy to find. By applying qualitative analysis through the ZTPI scales and by referencing opinions of critics and researchers on people’s awareness of time, I found that this variance is natural, especially when people find themselves in a time-out-of-time like the current pandemic. Overall, it is a matter of knowing when to focus on the past, present, or future that readers learn most about when searching for time in texts such as *Der Tod in Venedig* or the “Corona-Roman.”

Effective Self-Writing of Illness

As discussed above with the rise of social media since previous pandemics, having too many voices offering their opinions can be a challenge. However, this mainly becomes an issue when readers attempt to focus on one single voice at a time. It can be difficult to distinguish one writer’s opinion from another writer’s opinion of them, and that cycle continues endlessly. It may seem easier to dismiss voices entirely, rather than to focus in to block out distractions. This trend presents itself in literature when dealing with forms like the diary form. This is a form, fictional or nonfictional, based on regular entries by an individual that are “published” as separate entities within a continuous whole. The author does not go back to edit previous material but addresses and amends it later on if need be. It is based on the practice of keeping a

⁴⁹ Schmidt, *The Wounded Self*, 114-16.

personal journal or diary, and so deals primarily with the inner thoughts and emotions of the narrator or author. When nonfictional, it actually does consist of the real thoughts and emotions of a narrator or author. This has long been a practice associated with reflection and mindfulness, and because of its highly personal nature it has become a topic of debate among literati who wish to cultivate more or exclusively high art literature.

One of many points that Schmidt addresses in her book *The Wounded Self* is that many critics of German literature, such as Michael Angele and Gerrit Bartels, argue strongly for the exclusion of additional voices to preserve a more elite canon. Bartels, for instance, posits that it is easier to deal with the concrete first, before concerning readers with unnecessary or incomplete feelings. Angele takes this general view one step further in his article, “Wer hat geil Krebs?” He suggests that illness writing in general should be abandoned, speaking specifically of the cancer narrative that he found to be gaining in popularity. He claims that cancer narratives all fall under the banner of “Bekennnisliteratur” (“confessional literature”) as can any that deal with illness.⁵⁰ For these critics, any illness narrative that is not metaphorical (such as *Der Tod in Venedig*) cannot be considered real literature. Through her lens of disability studies, Schmidt poses the following query: If these narratives cannot be considered true literature, are they even valid?⁵¹

Two of the narratives Schmidt discusses in her book are those of Christoph Schlingensiefel and Wolfgang Herrndorf, the cancer narratives introduced earlier. Each of these consists of daily entries from two cancer patients from the time of their diagnosis until roughly the time of their death. According to critics such as Bartels and Angele, these two narratives cannot be considered

⁵⁰ Angele, „Wer hat geil Krebs?“

⁵¹ Schmidt, *The Wounded Self*, 24-32.

literature because they were written in the midst of the suffering. They were written to have something to write, or as Angele put it, as a “confessional.”⁵² But why should this mean that they should not be taken seriously? Given Angele’s focus on time elements in his critiques, these diaries would prove a useful case study as they contain so many different angles of time. With daily entries, the authors are constantly putting down new thoughts. Even when in both chronicles there are extended periods of silence from the authors, readers are still able to track progress over time. As Bartels anticipated, both authors changed their minds on things that they had already published earlier in their diaries.⁵³ Is that part of what sparks his criticism, the fact that they are not waiting, they are simply writing, putting down their thoughts and pressing send? If so, then Schmidt is right to consider German criticism traditional, in that only the most refined should be preserved in a canon of works of high art. The same thing happened with music, visual art, drama, etc. By publishing so frequently and with such a sense of urgency, these narratives can lack the refined character so appealing to traditionalist Germans.⁵⁴

However, another aspect of time in relation to these narratives makes that refined character impossible. As both authors are suffering from advancing cancerous tumors, each understands that they are working to a deadline. Short of a miracle, neither will have a period “after” their illness in which to reflect on its effects on their lives; at least, not one during which they will be able to communicate their findings to those of us still here on earth. Thus, the diary format makes sense for them—they must constantly come to conclusions in their writing, even if only to say that they have not yet reached a conclusion on a particular topic. Leaving it too long, they run the risk of not being able to put down their thoughts at all.⁵⁵ In *Der Tod in Venedig*,

⁵² Angele, “Wer hat geil Krebs?”

⁵³ Bartels, “Der Hype.”

⁵⁴ Schmidt, *The Wounded Self*, 123-26.

⁵⁵ Schmidt, *The Wounded Self*, 126-29.

Aschenbach does something similar. In the last few pages of the novella, the author finds that he has found a physical representation of his inspiration, his muse, in Tadzio. The reader, who has been privy to his thoughts on the boy for some time, understands that he has been subconsciously aware of this source for some time but has been too infatuated to put it to any use. As it turns out, his realization comes too late and he leaves his work too long, because just after making this realization he succumbs to the *Übel* and falls into the “merciful” coma from which he never wakes.⁵⁶

One of the main issues with Schlingensiefel and Herrndorf’s diaries that also factors into “Corona-Roman” and even *Der Tod in Venedig* to some extent is that each centers around a single perspective. The former three all take on a diary form, with entries being written at semi-regular intervals and then left as-is, with the only edits made as commentary in later entries on previous ones. This is a sticking point for Bartels in his critiques. Each published entry marks a single point in time and cannot be altered later.⁵⁷ If the authors wish to edit their thoughts, their only recourse to do so is by publishing their revision of it as a separate thought. This lends an element of stream-of-consciousness, with topics coming and going as they run through the author’s brain, seemingly in real time. For Bartels and Angele, this is a problem because they consider it a lower form of writing than taking a thought and perfecting it before presenting it, as in “literature.”⁵⁸ However, just because something is less refined does not mean that it should be considered less important or real. Schmidt confirms this through her lens of disability studies, and even on a subconscious level readers do it themselves.⁵⁹ When we read a narrative of the self

⁵⁶ Mann, *Der Tod*.

⁵⁷ Bartels, “Der Hype.”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Angele, “Wer Hat Geil Krebs?”

⁵⁹ Schmidt, *The Wounded Self*, 9-19.

like the “Corona-Roman,” we identify with the shared experience, and thereby simultaneously reaffirm both our own experiences of pandemics and illnesses alongside those of the author. Even in a novella such as *Der Tod in Venedig*, I experienced multiple instances of recognition when certain elements of the pandemic were discussed.⁶⁰

However, this identification is also inherently problematic for the diary form. In its original conception, the diary is a highly personal form written for an audience that exists only in the author’s head. Even if the author imagines that they are writing for an entire nation to read, that national audience and their reactions to the work are born in the author’s head. If it is the case that the purpose of a diary is to be a device for personal reflection or, at a minimum, accounting for one’s time, then the diatribes of critics such as Bartels and Angele are clearer. By making public a work conceived for privacy, the effect is altered, particularly in works like the “Corona-Roman,” *So schön*, and *Arbeit und Struktur*. There, the presence of the public is compounded by the fact that they are being published in real time, with real-time feedback having the potential to alter the story. By contrast, a diary such as that of Shoah victim Anne Frank is not subject to these criticisms. She was neither writing to an audience of real people, nor was she receiving feedback in real time that could have changed her account.

Perhaps with public figures such as Glavinic, Schlingensiefel, and Herrndorf the influence of external forces is unavoidable. Given that conclusion, the true privacy of any individual of notoriety is called into question. Because the diaries are only as public as the authors choose to make them, however, they are still able to maintain the efficacy of their genre. It was up to

⁶⁰ I even laughed out loud when reading one scene in which Aschenbach reads multiple newspaper accounts of the pandemic spreading through Europe. Some categorically deny the disease, a few say that it is being handled well and should not be feared, while still others say that quarantines are imminent because of the dangers posed. Laughter was, of course, the only option in that scenario other than crying at the absurdity of how many viewpoints can be taken in a moment that can literally be of life or death.

Glavinic to write his “Roman,” and Schlingensief and Herrndorf could just as easily have kept logs with paper and pencil that they kept hidden under their pillows. If the diary is to be an instrument of personal reflection, then the author must do with it what they see fit. If they believe that their needs (physical, mental, emotional, etc.) will be met with publication, then that is their choice to make freely and to rescind at any time. If the diary is a personal narrative, then the presence or lack of an audience should not affect the inherent purpose of keeping the diary for one’s own sake.

In any rhetorical analysis, one must consider the voice being heard, read, or even in today’s world, viewed. How is the speaker or narrator presenting the information to the reader, and what effect does this have? *Der Tod in Venedig* is not a biographical work, nor is it presented as a diary. The narrator is an entity separate from Aschenbach, though in a narrative sense they are never apart. The narrator also seems to have partial omniscience, knowing each thought that passes through Aschenbach’s head and even providing close readings of the emotions of other characters. The narrator does come across as biased toward Aschenbach and his goals, however, such as in the final scene of the fourth chapter. Aschenbach is about to admit to himself that he loves Tadzio, and the narrator describes the scene thus:

Und... flüsterte er die stehende Formel der
Sehnsucht, - unmöglich hier, absurd,
verworfen, lächerlich und heilig doch,
ehrwürdig auch hier noch: „Ich liebe dich!“

And ... he whispered the standard formula of
longing – impossible in this case, absurd,
perverse, ludicrous, and yet even here still
sacred and respectable: “I love you!”⁶¹

Here, we can see how the narrator is at once harshly realistic (“unmöglich hier, absurd, verworfen, lächerlich”/ “impossible in this case, absurd, perverse, ludicrous”) and still sympathetic to the author (“heilig doch, ehrwürdig auch hier noch”/ “and yet even here still

⁶¹ Mann, *Der Tod*, 92-93.

sacred and respectable”). Because there are no lapses in time and the narrator remains steady, they are overall trustworthy. Thus, in the interest of analyzing temporal experience, readers come to trust *Der Tod in Venedig* as a reliable account of a fictional character.

On the other hand, the narrator of the “Corona-Roman” may not be as trustworthy. While we get some general semblances of accurate time passing between segments (for instance the correct placing of Angela Merkel testing positive for the Coronavirus), in general time is represented in a much less linear manner. Reading it in real time helps to put the work in perspective (reading one entry per day gives a more solid structure to the work), but other elements show that the narrator may not be as reliable. Despite the fact that the main character is the narrator in this case, he gives some major clues that shake our faith in him from the beginning. In the first segment, he describes how he was paralyzed for eleven months, in a coma for a short time, and suffers from clinical depression.⁶² In the fifth, he refers to himself as a “Vollbluthypochonder” (“full-blooded hypochondriac”).⁶³ In the sixteenth, he gives a detailed description of the paranoia he faces when he receives a call on the intercom system to his third-floor apartment.⁶⁴ Because he is so paranoid, readers may find it difficult to walk in his shoes, instead feeling alienated by the narrator’s neuroses.

By showing the readers all of his various “weaknesses,” the speaker creates a bond of trust with the reader, relying on his vulnerability to make himself more relatable. However, these vulnerabilities are not simple ones. In fact, they are generally debilitating for him in many situations, causing him to be a recluse more by choice than by reason of pandemic.⁶⁵ In addition,

⁶² Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 1.

⁶³ Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 5.

⁶⁴ Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 16.

⁶⁵ Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 2.

he sometimes references the present only briefly in his entries, such as in the eighth or fifteenth segments.⁶⁶ Taken all together, it is a complex question to determine whether the narrator of the “Corona-Roman” is trustworthy. Overall, I believe he is, because despite all the weaknesses he presents to readers, he does not attempt to hide or diminish them. He owns his identity as a paranoid hypochondriac, and his rhetoric is bolstered this, just as the rhetoric presented in *Der Tod in Venedig* is trustworthy despite the fact that the main character is ostensibly a pedophile.

Descriptions of Pandemic Illness

The main character in *Der Tod in Venedig* begins his journey by meeting Death on a deserted street at sunset. This scene leads to many more that have become commonplace for many people in countries where preventative measures against the Coronavirus have been and are still in place. These scenes are also mirrored in the “Corona-Roman,” and will most likely also appear in every other piece of “Corona-Literatur” that will be written from now on: warring news outlets, various sanitization schemes, and once bustling locales suddenly devoid of visitors.

I begin with that opening scene of Mann’s novella in which Aschenbach unknowingly receives a preview of what is to come. While taking a lonely walk at sunset, the author spies a foreign-looking man whose skeletal, pasty-skinned, fire-haired description immediately sets him apart from the backdrop of the chapel and not one but two surrounding cemeteries. This figure represents Death, and this scene seems almost more readily placed nearer the end of the story, after the plague has begun to ravage Venice, the streets cleared of all but the most determined tourists, the residents seeking refuge in their homes. Instead, it is placed at the beginning to

⁶⁶ Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 8-15. Teil 8 is mostly a story about his great-grandmother, and the fifteenth is largely a description of his neighbor.

foreshadow what is to come. And just as omens of the Coronavirus pandemic went unacknowledged, Aschenbach did not recognize Death coming to stake his claim on his life.⁶⁷

While not nearly as poetic as Mann's writing, the world was given certain forewarnings in regard to the pandemic in which we now find ourselves. Also unlike Mann's story, those warnings came mere weeks or sometimes days before outbreaks of the Coronavirus began and death tolls began to rise. Certainly, unlike Mann's *Hauptfigur* (main character), those warnings did not offer ample time to change course, at least not at first. Unlike Aschenbach, who had this warning first, and then plenty more once he arrived in Venice, previews of Coronavirus deaths came too late. They came too late to avoid every casualty, but not so late that lives could not have been saved.

Once Aschenbach arrives at his vacation destination, his mind and the story become consumed with the young Tadzio, with whom the author falls in love for his beauty and fragility. Himself another omen, the Polish boy is described as god-like in appearance, yet sickly, unable to endure periods of intense or extended physical exertion, and overprotected by his governess. This may put readers in Coronavirus times in mind of individuals with "pre-existing conditions" such as those with immunodeficiency or respiratory ailments who must take extra care to avoid infection. Aschenbach's own impending illness is almost entirely delayed until the final chapter, when Aschenbach inadvertently discovers a mysterious pestilence that the citizens of Venice will not discuss openly with tourists such as himself. He begins to notice more and more abnormalities, beginning with the smell of the city.

⁶⁷ Mann, *Der Tod*, 4-7.

Upon his arrival Aschenbach had intended to leave almost at once, finding himself disgusted with the “slightly foul odor of the sea and swamp.”⁶⁸ However, because of Tadzio, he convinces himself that he loves the scent and stays, enduring its mild repugnance until he becomes accustomed to it. Later, the author once again begins to take notice of the smell of Venice again, but this time it is an odor of forced, chemical cleanliness. Because of the sealed lips of the Venetians, the only answer he can obtain is that it is a preventative measure against the normal seasonal afflictions that arise due to the temperature combined with the sea air. Nothing out of the ordinary, he is told, but in the back of his mind he continues to question the smell because he continues to look for answers. He finally makes the connection while watching a group of street musicians performing for the hotel guests one evening. Aschenbach had already taken particular notice of one of the men because of his overly made-up, façade-like appearance which, in addition to the particularly strong odor of chemicals coming off him, gave the author an impression of phoniness. Detaining the entertainer for a moment, he asks him about the source of the odor, and Aschenbach finally receives confirmation of his suspicions. The government has been running covert disinfecting schemes in order to fight the spread of “Indian cholera,” which has arrived in the city from merchant ships from the East. The silence of the officials has been an effort to preserve the tourist business that is the backbone of the city’s economy.⁶⁹

The focus on odor in *Der Tod in Venedig* is particularly powerful given that one of the tell-tale symptoms of a COVID-19 infection is a loss of taste and smell. However, this is not a universal symptom, and indeed there is little consistency among reported symptoms. This is in

⁶⁸ Mann, *Der Tod*, 67.

⁶⁹ Mann, *Der Tod*, 119.

contrast with the pandemic in Mann's novella, which is described as causing patients to either "dry up" shortly after infection, or to fall into a merciful coma from which patients seldom awoke and even more rarely recovered.⁷⁰ In thinking about the "Corona-Roman," this last aspect would most likely be enough to cause permanent agoraphobia in the already anxious hypochondriac of a narrator, who suffered a short coma and paralysis unrelated to the Coronavirus.⁷¹ Like COVID-19, Mann's "Indian Cholera" is incredibly infectious, spreading quickly through air and water from merchant ships. The disease had spread its way slowly westward, and in a striking turn of phrase Mann describes it as "in Palermo und Neapel mehrfach seine Maske gezeigt" ("[having] shown its mask repeatedly in Palermo and Naples").⁷²

There is not a personification of the illness itself in *Der Tod in Venedig* as there is with death, who could be said to represent both. The imagery of the "mask" makes it seem as though the pandemic has a face that must be disguised. For that matter, its personification could be in Aschenbach, who gradually begins to gussy himself up more and more to please Tadzio.⁷³ Or it could be Tadzio, who is often described as having a sickly air about him. It could also be the street performer that Aschenbach meets in the fifth chapter, who is described similarly to the death figure that was introduced in the first chapter.⁷⁴ My inclination is that it is the latter, as it is he who finally gives Aschenbach the facts of the situation in Venice.

Additionally, given how ubiquitous the face mask has become in the current pandemic, the reader wonders if Venice was simply comprised of an overwhelming majority who simply denied the reality of the disease. Though there is no mention of it in this novella, there have been

⁷⁰ Mann, *Der Tod*, 116-17.

⁷¹ Glavinic, "Corona-Roman," 1.

⁷² Mann, *Der Tod*, 116-17.

⁷³ Mann, *Der Tod*, 94-95.

⁷⁴ Mann, *Der Tod*, 108-09.

many instances in the COVID-19 pandemic of denial and disbelief.⁷⁵ In a real-life pandemic contemporary with the novella, masks were already being used as a preventative measure – during the influenza pandemic of 1918. (And, like today, were infuriatingly a topic of controversy over infringed rights and personal freedoms as the death tolls mounted.⁷⁶) Thus, it was clearly understood that the mask was beneficial in slowing the spread of diseases. Back then it was a pandemic of influenza, unhelpfully nicknamed the “Spanish flu,” whereas today we have the similarly detrimental moniker “China virus” for our pandemic.⁷⁷

One other classic refrain from various health officials to fight COVID-19 has been to maintain social distancing, specifically six feet from those with whom one does not live. This also tends to be a source of ire for many dissenters, though it comes as a blessing for socially anxious people like Glavinic’s narrator. In the second part of the “Corona-Roman,” he remarks:

Man merkt, es ist wichtig, die richtige Balance zwischen dem Bedürfnis nach Nähe und dem Wunsch nach Distanz zu finden. Aber nur weil man das merkt, heißt das nicht, dass man sie auch findet. Ich habe sie nie gefunden, und allmählich zweifle ich, dass so etwas wie Balance überhaupt existiert.

One notices that it is important to find the right balance between the need for nearness and the wish for distance. But just because one notices, does not mean that one also finds it. I have never found it, and gradually I begin to doubt that something like balance even exists.⁷⁸

This quote demonstrates how human beings, as social animals, need to balance what is best for our bodies and what is best for the spirit. It also illustrates how difficult this line can be to find.

⁷⁵ “Video Shows Unmasked Employees and Customers in Florida Supermarket,” Today, accessed February 14, 2021, video, <https://www.today.com/video/video-shows-unmasked-employees-and-customers-in-florida-supermarket-100513861518>.

⁷⁶ Christine Hauser, “The Mask Slackers of 1918,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/us/mask-protests-1918.html>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Corona-Roman Teil 2, trans. my own

However, like Glavinic's narrator we can be glad that the pandemic of Mann's novella is not reality, given that it has a mortality rate of eighty percent.⁷⁹ By comparison real-world pandemics seem tame, with neither the Coronavirus nor the 1918 Influenza pandemic reaching rates of more than five percent. However, this seems to be one of the only differences between Mann's fiction and our reality. As he describes it:

Aber die Furcht vor allgemeiner Schädigung, die Rücksicht auf die kürzlich eröffnete Gemäldeausstellung in den öffentlichen Gärten, auf die gewaltigen Ausfälle, von denen im Falle der Panik und des Verrufes die Hotels, die Geschäfte, das ganze vielfältige Fremdgewerbe bedroht waren, zeigte sich mächtiger in der Stadt als Wahrheitsliebe und Achtung vor internationalen Abmachungen; sie vermochte die Behörde, ihre Politik des Verschweigens und des Ableugnens hartnäckig aufrecht zu erhalten.

But the fear of causing general panic, harm to the city, concerns for the recently opened exhibition of paintings in the Public Gardens, and anxiety over the tremendous losses with which the hotels, businesses, and the entire multifaceted tourist industry were threatened in case of a panic and boycott, proved to be of more weight in the city than love of the truth and respect for international conventions; these concerns induced the authorities to maintain obstinately their policy of silence and denial.⁸⁰

The description continues, mentioning that the chief medical officer had stepped down in protest of the handling of the disease. That the Venetian response has many international repercussions is also mentioned as important to the official position of the city.

Another intriguing aspect of the nature of our current pandemic and the advanced state of technology is that global communication has never been so immediate. Even in historical pandemics, such as the influenza pandemic of 1918, when the telegraph had already become widespread, news could not be made available to the general public until it could be printed and distributed. In contrast, email, social media, and long-distance telephone calls now transmit

⁷⁹ Mann, *Der Tod*, 116-17.

⁸⁰ Mann, *Der Tod*, 118-19.

information comparatively instantaneously. This provides not only for putatively more coordinated efforts towards safety, but also for the possibility of comparing the handling of various aspects of the pandemic by different groups.

Glavinic makes a few references to this new use of information technology in his “Corona-Roman.” In the sixth part he contrasts the behavior of German chancellor Angela Merkel with that of former US President Donald Trump. After being informed that she had tested positive for COVID-19, Merkel held a socially distanced press conference with every safety precaution in place for those in attendance. In contrast, Trump continued to hold meetings and conferences without safety precautions.⁸¹ This contrast becomes even more striking considering that Merkel tested positive in late March and immediately quarantined herself. When Trump tested positive in early October, however, he was coming off of a series of events that did not observe preventative measures. Similarly, Aschenbach is unable to pull himself away from his indulgence in Tadzio’s presence in order to maintain sanity and health. He would prefer to live in the blissful fantasy that he has created than deal with real life. In contrast, somewhat like the handful of characters that advise Aschenbach to flee Venice, Merkel immediately took action after her diagnosis and took the necessary measures to keep herself and those around her safe. This difference may be one reason that Glavinic provides readers with this quote regarding infection rates from the mouth of a concerned child: “Ich glaub, die USA wird gewinnen!” (“I think the USA is going to win!”)⁸² If the example of the former president was to be taken as the prime example for the whole country, it is morbidly comical reaction to say that the USA will top the rest of the world in cases and deaths, all as a result of a poor response to the pandemic.

⁸¹ Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 6.

⁸² Glavinic, “Corona-Roman,” 18, trans. my own.

Mortality

In modern Western society we have come to view time as linear, with a beginning and an end. While this is by no means the only meaningful version of temporal awareness, because the rhetoric covered here lies under the umbrella of Western thought, that ingrained psychology is important. To quote Clay Routledge and Jamie Arndt,

Temporal consciousness cannot be divorced from the awareness of death. ... And what is more, humans have developed methods of measuring and labeling time, rendering the passing of time, and ultimately the mortal condition of life, an integral and quantifiable component of daily existence.⁸³

Here, I will discuss a few of those elements used in the measuring of time and how they indicate the stances of mortality presented in the pandemic literature under consideration.

One particular facet of Aschenbach's experience of pandemic in Venice that is vital to a discussion of mortality is the emphasis placed on odor. This is also directly relevant to our current Coronavirus pandemic. One of the telltale symptoms of multiple strains of COVID-19 has been a loss of taste and smell. Were that one of the symptoms of the fictional pandemic, Aschenbach's olfactory tic would be even more meaningful. Not only would it be symbolic of his internal struggle, but it would also mean that so long as Aschenbach recognized those scents, he would still be free of the illness. Because Mann wrote his novella over a century ago, the attention he pays to the sense of smell is purely literary, acting as a calling card for the death that awaits Aschenbach. However, reading it since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, one

⁸³ Routledge and Arndt, "Time and Terror," 62.

cannot help but see a deeper connection between the chemical disinfectant smell of Venice and the fear of a lack of the ability to sense it.

But what does this mean for those living through the Coronavirus pandemic? It is a reminder to pay attention to minute changes in our surroundings, such as a new scent on the air, because even these can have meaning. And, like with many other aspects of life during times of illness, it is a reminder that these things must not be taken for granted. Although at the time he is rationalizing in order to stay behind with Tadzio, Aschenbach's thoughts wander to his own finitude on the gondola ride to the station:

Der Reisende schaute, und seine Brust war zerrissen. Die Atmosphäre der Stadt, diesen leis fauligen Geruch von Meer und Stumpf, den zu fliehen es ihn so sehr gedrängt hatte, - er atmete ihn jetzt in tiefen, zärtlich schmerzlichen Zügen. War es möglich, daß er nicht gewußt, nicht bedacht hatte, wie sehr sein Herz an dem allem hing? ... Was er als so schwer erträglich, ja zuweilen als völlig unleidlich empfand, war offenbar der Gedanke, daß er Venedig nie wiedersehen sollte, daß dies ein Abschied für immer sei.

The traveler looked and there was conflict in his heart. The atmosphere of the city, that slightly foul odor of the sea and swamp, from which he had been in such a hurry to escape – he now breathed it in deep, tenderly painful drafts. Was it possible that he hadn't known or considered, how dear all this was to him? ... Obviously, what he found so hard to bear, and at moments completely intolerable, was the thought that he would never see Venice again, that this was a permanent farewell.⁸⁴

Aschenbach thus convinces himself to stay is by appealing to his own sentimentality. In the current Coronavirus pandemic, a smaller version of that exists in the loss of taste and smell that some experience. While many have recovered these senses with the rest of their health, some sufferers have continued to deal with this and other symptoms (including fever, fatigue, and vertigo) for weeks or even months after contracting the illness.⁸⁵ Even so, just a brief loss of two

⁸⁴ Mann, *Der Tod*, 66-67.

⁸⁵ "COVID-19 Long Haulers: Patients Share Lasting Impact of Virus," Today, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.today.com/video/covid-19-long-haulers-patients-share-lasting-impact-of-virus-98324549975>.

deceptively important senses triggers a realization of how important these functions are. There is a sudden realization of those things that we are not experiencing; when they return it is momentary bliss at being able to taste chocolate or smell a favorite air freshener again. But this feeling may be fleeting—a week later, these things are once again taken for granted.

And if they should not come back, as they may not for those select few who still find themselves sensorially deprived after too long? What if they really have tasted chocolate for the last time? What if they will not smell that air freshener again? This part, as Aschenbach describes, is the hardest to bear, the part that, if we are not careful, can crush us under its weight.⁸⁶ This feeling was perhaps best summed up by author Amy Krouse Rosenthal in her memoir. Titled *Textbook Amy Krouse Rosenthal*, it deals with a wide variety of topics, presented like a schoolbook, that often deal with tough topics like hope and mortality.⁸⁷ In it, she writes:

How many more times, then, do I get to look at a tree? Let's just say it's 12,395. Absolutely, that's a lot, but it's not infinite, and I'm thinking anything less than infinite is too small a number and not satisfactory. At the very least, I want to look at trees a million more times. Is that too much to ask?⁸⁸

Unfortunately, the fact is that human beings are not infinite, and therefore nothing that is said or done will be infinite. Confronting this fact is rarely easy and having a support system in tough moments like that is amazingly helpful. But what about moments such as this one, during a pandemic? The entire world is having one of these moments simultaneously, and some have the

⁸⁶ Mann, *Der Tod*, 124-127.

⁸⁷ John Green, "Auld Lang Syne," December 26, 2019, in *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, produced by Rosianna Halse Rojas and Tony Phillips, podcast, mp3 audio, 10:32, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/anthropocene-reviewed/episodes/anthropocene-reviewed-auld-lang-syne>.

⁸⁸ Sam Roberts, "Amy Krouse Rosenthal, Children's Author and Filmmaker, Dies at 51," *New York Times*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/style/amy-krouse-rosenthal-dies-modern-love.html>.

constitutions built for it while others, like Aschenbach, were not made for such chronic mortality brooding. This is made more difficult by the fact that it is not only death as a reminder of mortality, but plenty of smaller reminders too—reminders like a temporary loss of taste or smell. The only mistake that can be made with this knowledge is to believe that we have already looked at a tree for the last time. The only mistake to make is to believe that 12,395 has already been reached, and life will continue with only the small death of not looking at trees.

But what do these reminders actually cause, other than a sobering reminder of an inevitable demise? The chapter “Time and Terror: Managing Temporal Consciousness and the Awareness of Mortality” by Routledge and Arndt, summarizes a number of studies that ask participants baseline questions, present them with an instance of “mortality salience,” and then measure the extent to which their answers change. Instances of mortality salience could be anything relating to death, including performing the study down the street from a funeral home, asking participants to read an article about death, and showing them pictures of elderly people. These questions were aimed at finding trends in the concept of “terror management.” This is the idea that humans have subconscious reactions when presented with reminders of death that keep their complex awareness of existence from crippling their ability to perform everyday functions out of mortal terror.⁸⁹

Two of the broader conclusions that the researchers drew from the collection of studies were that when confronted with even subtle reminders of death people tend to: 1) become increasingly protective of their worldview, and 2) become increasingly focused on augmenting their self-worth. In the first case, people who are reminded of their mortality tend to identify

⁸⁹ Routledge and Arndt, “Time and Terror,” 65-68

more strongly with various elements of their worldview (political, religious, social, etc.) in order to reassure themselves that there is some measure of stability in the world, even if it is only a smokescreen. This becomes even more apparent with religion, which inherently includes a belief in immortality or a lack thereof, as it deals with the metaphysical.⁹⁰

This may provide a partial explanation for why politics were so charged in the 2020. Particularly in the US due to the presidential election, but also worldwide, political discourse became particularly cutthroat.⁹¹ This is likely in large part because mortality salience causes people to become more sure of their own convictions, no matter how sensible they may seem to an objective observer. In a country where the COVID-19 death toll has been particularly high (as the child in Glavinic's story predicted), we have seen terror management turn political as there was record voter turnout in many states. Even after the election had been decided, some who were particularly unhappy with the outcome brought another form of mortality salience to the nation's consciousness by breaking into the Capitol buildings while Congress carried out the validation of the electoral ballots. This manner of terror management is also related to the second conclusion regarding people seeking to augment their self-worth. By banding together and attempting to put themselves above the rule of law, the rioters at the US capitol building on January 6, 2021 showed the world that they had found their breaking point. From the mortality salience perspective, those people had lost an election and had linked this knowledge with a loss of power and control. Out of desperation in a time of crisis, they saw the best way to maintain a sense of self-worth was to change the results of that election.

⁹⁰ Routledge and Ardnt, "Time and Terror," 65-68. This is separate from philosophy, which is often entwined with religion but which does not necessarily cover the metaphysical.

⁹¹ Vis-à-vis the first presidential debate between Former President Trump and the current president Joseph Biden, as well as the increasingly radical rhetoric of the AfD (Alternativ für Deutschland) party in Germany.

In a more positive take on the second conclusion, people tend to amplify the parts of their lives that are community- or achievement-based in an attempt to connect their own self-worth with “entities that extend beyond the self.”⁹² This aspect is more focused on an attempt to create a sense, again arguably a smokescreen, that humans are more than the sum of their parts, that they have an infinite number of times to look at a tree. At a minimum, even if individuals will not be allowed infinite looks, then they are part of something that collectively attains infinity.

In possibly the broadest sense of any of the literature considered here, Routledge and Arndt’s conclusions may explain why the narrator of the “Corona-Roman” is writing in the first place. Not only is he attempting to deal with an illness that has changed his life, but he is also attempting to establish a baseline of stability in a moment when stability has been removed, or at least questioned. The interesting part for him is that because of his anxieties, he does not conform to the conclusions drawn about connecting the self to something greater. Or rather, he does not necessarily accept extant communities as worthy of the connection that might offer him “immortality.” Instead, he opts for the more achievement-based route, almost offering his narration of a diary-form novel as the source for overcoming human finitude.

This action aligns with the conclusions presented by Jason K. Swedene in his book *The Varieties of Immortality*. In it, he discusses how various creative activities serve as a substitute (or at least a supplement) for immortality, claiming that “creativity is a response to immortality’s antecedent concern: death.”⁹³ This sentence acts as a sort of thesis for his views on creators’ motives for their work. Swedene builds his argument with a view to the whole spectrum of time: past, present, and future. He discusses how creations, once left alone by their creators, attain a

⁹² Routledge and Arndt, “Time and Terror,” 69.

⁹³ Jason K. Swedene, *Staying Alive : The Varieties of Immortality*, UPA, 2009, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/butler/detail.action?docID=1037724>, 48-58.

sense of “completeness” that roots them in the past. Similarly, they are products of their time (the creator’s present), even if they include past influences. They are also created while looking toward the future, both one that includes the creator and one that stretches past their time on earth. However, creators may not be totally self-absorbed, as they create with a view to influencing the progress of history, and therefore other people.⁹⁴

Swedene’s argument provides an explanation for both Glavinic’s and Mann’s main characters’ actions in the view of death. Glavinic’s narrator turns to his “Corona-Roman” as he longs for a sense of even futile immortality, and in doing so he produces an artifact that he intends to survive him and extend past his physical limitations. In contrast, Aschenbach exemplifies the other pole of Swedene’s argument—the act of carnal creation instead of intellectual or artistic creation. Having spent his entire life slaving away at works to benefit humanity, he becomes intoxicated in thoughts of another kind. While in Aschenbach’s case it is a futile attempt for multiple reasons, the feelings he experiences are nonetheless real.⁹⁵ And as with the earlier discussion of perceptions of time, even false perceptions are often just as important for drawing conclusions as empirical evidence.⁹⁶

Conclusion

The last and perhaps most existential question brings together each of the four main topics discussed here—time, writing, illness, and mortality. I conclude by asking: “What meaning do these literary accounts provide for readers?”

Considering time elements through the primary literature and related secondary literature, I found that there were almost as many variations on the experience of the pandemic time-out-of-

⁹⁴ Swedene, *Staying Alive*, 48-58.

⁹⁵ Mann, *Der Tod*, 14-15.

⁹⁶ Boyd and Zimbardo, “Time Perspective,” 99.

time as there were accounts. In comparing the accounts of characters such as Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach and Glavinic's unnamed narrator, I found two characters that each retreat to the "Innenwelt" described by critics to deal with the effects of pandemic illness. While Aschenbach chooses to focus his energies on his newfound muse Tadzio from afar, the narrator of the "Corona-Roman" takes time for reflection and consideration of how the pandemic will affect society moving forward. Aschenbach in particular shows readers how not to handle time-out-of-time through his spiral leading to death. Glavinic's protagonist shows how we can bridge the gap of major temporal shifts by recognizing that life is neither only the light of our "normal" routine nor only the darkness associated with the anxiety and depression of trauma. By using the scales of temporal analysis presented by Boyd and Zimbardo in *Understanding Behavior in the Context of Time*, I was able to quantitatively compare the main characters in addition to analyzing their rhetoric. I learned especially that lived experience has as much bearing as the "truth," and can even cause shifts in peoples' general tendencies as they see major changes in their lives.

The discussion of experiences of time continued in considering the use of the diary form and other personal forms used in portraying illness. Critics such as Gerrit Bartels and Michael Angele present the idea (popular through German literary critique) that "Seuchenliteratur" ("confessional literature") is less valuable and cannot be considered part of the exemplary canon. However, this assumes that all literature must have a higher purpose, and cannot exist merely as a testament to the experiences of the author or narrator.

The experiences of the authors and narrators were the strongest connection in terms of the pandemics themselves. Even though *Der Tod in Venedig* was written prior to the 1918 influenza pandemic, the comparisons of those early twentieth century illnesses with COVID-19 are striking, particularly with regard to how they are dealt with on a large scale (in the news and by

governments) as well as on the small scale (wearing masks, balancing physical and mental/emotional health). These approaches seemed merely to update themselves with new technologies rather than in core message or purpose.

Finally, I dealt with mortality on its own and how we as humans relate to it. Drawing on studies by two psychological researchers, I analyzed the effect that a near constant reminder of human mortality has had on people through the cases of the two main characters. Drawing on other studies about the Coronavirus pandemic and the reaction of creators to death, I began to understand that Aschenbach's and Glavinic's narrators deal with "mortality salience" in nearly diametric ways. However, their manners of coping are directly related to their general perspectives on time: Aschenbach reacts by focusing on the present and the past, while Glavinic's narrator looks toward the future.

In the future, I would like to do more research with podcasts and other audiovisual sources of news and media to better understand how people actually speak about pandemic illness, an act even more personal than writing about it. The podcast medium in particular piques my interest because the form, like literature, varies so widely. Some podcasts provide another outlet for news media (such as *FAZ—Podcast für Deutschland* by the parent company of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), while others are more subjective and provide personal takes on various aspects of the pandemic (for instance *Der Achte Tag* by Gabor Steingart). Another fascinating source are programs such as Deutsche Welle's *Langsame Gesprochene Nachrichten* ("Slowly spoken news"), which provides news to language learners wanting to practice listening skills. This one in particular would make a good case study because of the miniature nature and target audience for each piece.

But does that mean that these fictional experiences have real impacts for readers? Even though multiple studies explicitly stated that the subjective is just as important for analysis as the objective, that does not necessarily make them corporeal. I think this scenario is best summed up by Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*: “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?”⁹⁷ That is the thing to remember as we fight through trying times like the pandemic—as fictional as what we think, read, and hear might feel, it is also real. The good and the bad are all important parts of life, and times of pandemic simply alter in how they are seen and understood. But I think the truest testament of that conclusion is the universality of works like *Der Tod in Venedig*, the “Corona-Roman,” and even non-pandemic works like Schlingensiefel and Herrndorf’s cancer diaries, *Textbook Amy Krouse Rosenthal*, and even the analyses of how we navigate our temporal existence. It is almost certain that whatever feelings a person experiences, someone else in the world is feeling it too. Thus, moving forward through whatever the rest of the Coronavirus pandemic holds for the world and hopefully in a time afterward, it is important to remember another quote from Albus Dumbledore, supported by the diverse body of literature in this study: “Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.”⁹⁸

May your heart remain open until the very end.

⁹⁷ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Arthur A. Levine Books, An Imprint of Scholastic Inc, 2007, 723.

⁹⁸ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Arthur A. Levine Books, An Imprint of Scholastic Inc, 2000, 723.

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