

# Bodily Transformations: Goethe and Mann in Venice

Heather I. Sullivan  
Trinity University, San Antonio, USA

**Abstract** Using material ecocriticism, this essay considers how Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Italian Journey* portray the experience of Venice's watery boundaries as transformative of both one's sense of the body and of body itself. Mann obsessively presents bodies in *Death in Venice*, including the impact of cholera on the body of his protagonist, Aschenbach, and the idealised form of the Polish boy Tadzio; yet his text also eludes portraying Aschenbach's death in any graphic detail. In other words, bodies matter in *Death in Venice* but there appears to be an inappropriate and less bodily gradient for the impact of disease such that the bodies of the workers who succumbed to cholera are portrayed in horrific detail while Aschenbach just quietly falls asleep, transformed visibly only by cosmetics. Goethe, in turn, also embraces both a bodily focus in his Italian writings, and one that similarly looks away from gritty embodiment. His journal depicts more abstract and scientific details of non-human bodies that later shape his writings on botany, optics, and morphology. However, Goethe's text presents a proto-ecological sense of natural bodies immersed in an animated, lively, and disturbing world of water and life, one clearly inspired by his study of the ocean and lagoon in Venice.

**Keywords** Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Thomas Mann. Venice. Material ecocriticism. Death in Venice.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: Bodies and the Environment in Goethe's and Mann's Venice Texts. – 2 Mann's *Death in Venice*. – 3 Goethe's *Italian Journey*. – 4 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction: Bodies and the Environment in Goethe's and Mann's Venice Texts

While visiting Venice on the edge of the sea and within the lagoon, the German authors Johann Wolfgang Goethe, in his autobiographical 1816-17 *Italian Journey* describing his trip from 1786-1788, and Thomas Mann, in his fictional yet very personal 1912 *Death in Venice* written after his 1911 visit, document how experiencing the city's fluid boundaries can radically transform both one's sense of the body as well as the body itself. The Italian culture and the Adriatic Mediterranean's hotter climate in Venice connote for the Germans a stereotypically exotic and rather Orientalised otherness of the southern environment. In this essay I will analyse the environmental implications of Mann's and Goethe's various portrayals of transforming bodies, whether by climate, cosmetics, culture, or cholera. Specifically, I will use material ecocriticism's emphasis on the ecological enmeshments of bodies immersed in, and interfacing with, their physical environment in order to assess the bodies described by these authors during their stay in the lagoon city. Both men reveal uneasy responses to the power of their material surroundings in Venice, yet with very different ecological implications as we now understand them. Reconsidering these two older texts in terms of possible environmental relevance reveals significant insights but also deflections away from ecological bodies. Mann obsessively presents bodies in *Death in Venice* including the impact of cholera on the body of his protagonist, Aschenbach, and the youthful form of the young Polish body Tadzio, whose body is the object of desire; yet his text also ends with a kind of gradation of bodily connections to the physical world as if some people were more material and so must suffer more graphically than others. Goethe also embraces a bodily focus in his Italian writings, but one more abstract, scientific, and comprehensible only later in his writings on botany, optics, and morphology that present the full bodily immersion of natural bodies in an animate world while partially deflecting his discussion away from more uncomfortable aspects of human embodiment.

*Death in Venice* documents brutal bodily transformations through the story of Gustav Aschenbach's fatal vacation in Venice. The exotic setting and growing desire for the young Polish boy Tadzio produce a profound reorientation of his aesthetic and philosophical principles gradually resulting in physical changes when he uses cosmetics to attempt self-transformation. Cosmetics for men have been popularised by the recent US president famed for his bronzing makeup, copious hair spray, and other body-altering tactics, yet their role in *Death in Venice* is closely associated with a loss of boundaries or morals, revelry in Nietzschean and/or ancient Greek philosophies of love, disease, and eventual death. Revised philosophies and cosmetic enhancement

are just the first steps of Aschenbach's path to full transformation which is ultimately brought about by cholera. He experiences the terrors of disease-induced bodily transformations even though the novella carefully avoids attributing to its protagonist the distasteful reality of cholera such as its typically extreme diarrhea and vomiting. Other victims are not so lucky, and there is a long paragraph in the form of report graphically describing the horrific course of the "plague" as it spreads across lands and killing 80% of those who are infected, leaving "emaciated, blackened corpses" in its wake (Mann 1963, 64). It is thus noteworthy that Aschenbach's demise occurs atypically for cholera: the great scholar just falls quietly into repose, avoiding all such bodily ugliness while staring off at the sea and his beloved Tadzio, for whom he has donned the cosmetics. While bodies transform in *Death in Venice*, Mann presents a scale of physicality that is rather problematic in ecological terms since it assumes that some bodies are, in more contemporary terms, more closely related to the raw physicality of ecological life than others.

For Goethe, in contrast, Venice's watery world causes minor unease and consternation regarding life on the lagoon, which is in constant motion, but does not bring bodily harm or a quest for body cosmetics; instead, it helps inspire his developing scientific vision of the entire natural world as fluidly active metamorphological processes. Indeed, Goethe's *Italian Journey* includes copious comments on the natural bodies he experiences including plants and his quest for the *Urpflanze*, rocks, sea creatures, and natural and artistic forms that inform his later well-known scientific texts on, for example, botany (*The Metamorphosis of Plants*, 1790), optics (*Theory of Color*, 1810), and his many morphological texts (he, in fact, coined the term "morphology"). His experience on the island of Lido with its crabs and limpets running in and out of the high and low tides produces a sense of instability and flux that results in the further development of his enthusiastic theory about nature's ongoing processes.<sup>1</sup> For Goethe, natural bodies are fully physical, although he presents human bodies primarily in a rather gentle relationship with their surroundings. Arthur Zajonc explains: "For Goethe, the world is no mere surface reality but a living cosmos that we can gradually learn to see if only we do not abandon a 'gentle empiricism'" (Zajonc 1998, 27). Goethe's inspirations about nature's flux and ongoing transformations through the watery encounters detailed in his *Italian Journey* express this gentle empiricism and not surprisingly avoid the graphic horrors of Mann's text. On the one hand, I claim, Goethe provides much more ecologically relevant information in terms of contemporary scientific knowledge, but, on the other, he also tends to deflect our gaze away from

<sup>1</sup> For new insights on snails as living figures in Goethe's work, see Nagel 2020.

particularly gritty aspects of the human bodies' participation in these processes and towards the glorious vibrancy of nature.

Despite the wealth of scholarly studies on Goethe's *Italian Journey* and especially on Mann's *Death and Venice*, there are still relatively few ecocritical analyses overall, much less studies considering how either text portrays the transformation of concrete bodies participating in the physical world. Yet the work done by Serenella Iovino in her essays on material ecocriticism and her 2016 book, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*, is a noteworthy exception. She looks at both Goethe's text on Italy and Mann's Venice texts through the lens of material ecocriticism, highlighting the authors' bodily experiences in the lagoon city. Iovino reads *Death in Venice* specifically in terms of bodies, writing:

The points that principally draw our attention, however, are two: first, the fact that Mann's novel is a story about bodies, whose macro-category is Venice's body itself as a hybrid and collective organism; second, the fact that *Death in Venice* is also the story of how discursive falsifications of Venice's bodily texts generate forms of cognitive injustice, culminating in death. (Iovino 2016, 64-5)

She elaborates on the bodily themes:

Venice's body is indeed Aschenbach's body, an elegant but also aging, decaying, unquiet, embellished body - a dirty, sweating, sublimely dying artist's body. But Venice's body is also Tadzio's body, an ineffably beautiful young body in which, however, the germ of decay resides for the very fact that this is a living body, a biologically determined matter. (65)

Thus, Iovino brings our attention to the prominent themes of bodily existence in both texts and connects them to the political deceptions so frequent when addressing questions of power, wealth, and bodily health or death.<sup>2</sup> I build on her analysis here to consider how much of the focus on transforming bodies in Mann's and Goethe's Venice texts reflects a sense of ecological immersion and engagement, and in what forms.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Iovino's 2013 essay on Mediterranean Ecocriticism for additional comments on Mann in Venice.

## 2 Mann's *Death in Venice*

Goethe, of course, famously collected large numbers of geological and botanical samples and theorised about the history of the Earth and of the metamorphosis of plants during his Italian travels. He was very attuned to bodies in Italy, human and otherwise. And he responds directly to the physicality of Venice, which is the frame for our discussion as a specific environment unto itself that impacts bodies even if he wavers on corporeal details. Mann is a different case. Indeed, debates rage whether one can read Mann's *Death in Venice* in terms of actual bodies or only metaphorical ones. While Mann's many tomes have inspired libraries full of discussions regarding their national, social, psychoanalytical, mythological, literary, and philosophical topics, or, with specific reference to his Venice novella, how it embodies Modernism, Decadence, pedophilic love, the life of artists, and the question of form (among other topics), one does not find many ecocritical analyses of *Death of Venice* other than Iovino's. Nevertheless, several essays that take on the discourse of disease in *Death in Venice* are helpful for our discussion. Let us consider two exemplary readings that represent the spectrum of those who pay more attention to the cholera theme directly. First is Thomas Rütten's 2009 essay on "Cholera in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*", which presents the text not only as another example of Mann's well-documented cultural analysis of Nietzsche, Greek philosophy, or of the German bourgeoisie but also as a specific study of the 1911 outbreak of cholera in Venice that Mann himself witnessed. Rütten seems to think it is necessary to justify reading the text with any literal understanding, noting:

It may come as a bit of a surprise that, in view of the abundance and general lucidity of the existing critical commentary on *Death in Venice*, very little, or, as in some cases, no attention whatsoever has been paid to a whole host of autobiographical and contemporary events that yet inform the novella in fundamental ways. (Rütten 2009, 258)

Furthermore, he notes that analyses of cholera tend to see it as a symbol, psychoanalytical motif, or mythological theme. Otherwise, he notes,

cholera is referred to as a metaphor for the monstrous rebound effect of colonial ideology or as an intertextual reference to the lives and works of Platen and Flaubert, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Tschaikovsky and Winckelmann, Turgenjew and Feuerbach. (258)

Coming to his own discussion and careful documentation of Mann's time in Venice during the 1911 outbreak of cholera, Rütten offers a

brief but historically documented description of the events in Venice relevant to the details of the novella. He notes:

Only occasionally do we find a reference to cholera as a real and historically verifiable event that Thomas Mann himself witnessed, endured (at least retrospectively) and finally worked through intellectually. (258)

Less analysis than description that includes copies of the actual guest lists from Brioni Island where the Manns are named, original handwritten charts on the mortality rate of cholera in 1911 in Venice, and pages out of the sketchbook of the famous Dr. Koch who worked in Venice on hygiene issues and malaria, Rütten's article nevertheless sets up the debate of whether to read cholera in *Death in Venice* as, well, cholera, a force that brings involuntary bodily transformations.

Amrita Ghosh takes on and critiques Rütten's claims directly in her 2017 article, "The Horror of Contact: Understanding Cholera in Mann's *Death in Venice*", looking at how the novella uses the 1911 outbreak of cholera in Italy as a metaphor enabling colonial discourse reminding the reader of the danger of contact zones between cultures. Ghosh begins with Rütten's documentation:

As Rütten explains, Mann and his wife, Katia, left for Venice on 7th May 1911; he then charts the textual chronology and compares to a more specific historical chronology that coincides with Mann and his wife's journey into Venice. Mann and his wife stayed at the island of Brioni on 9th May 1911, a place that also forms the transition island for the protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach before he arrives in Venice. The island of Brioni was supervised by Dr. Robert Koch, a famous pathogen expert, who was extensively known in the West and the East for his work on sanitization and contagious diseases. (Ghosh 2017, 2)

Ghosh agrees that the disease and historical context of the Manns' visit is relevant, yet then asks:

Certainly, the historical verisimilitude is important for the medical history of transmission of cholera, and how Italy responded in order to control the disease, yet the larger question that is worthwhile to raise is - what is at stake in such a charting of the historical trajectory of the 1911 cholera outbreak through the *Death in Venice*? (3)

Ghosh reads cholera through a postcolonial lens, seeing Dr. Koch's problematic influence on the fear of the 'East' fuelled by the fact that the outbreak of cholera came from India. Indeed, Mann specifies in

his novella that this is an eastern strain from India that infects Venice during Aschenbach's fateful visit.

Citing Susan Sontag's study on disease as a metaphor, Ghosh justifiably critiques Mann's descriptions and Orientalism associated with both India, the "unfit wasteland", as Aschenbach says, and the exotic, red-headed figure who inspires Aschenbach to head south at the very beginning of the novella while he is back in Munich.

This is the only time that the novella pronounces the Asiatic cholera germinating from India, the 'unfit wasteland' - 'a wilderness' that is to be avoided and a spectre that is waiting to take over Europe. The hostility of the tropical environment is evident here, and interestingly enough, a crouching tiger hiding in bamboo thickets is even mentioned, completing the orientalist vision marking the unstable, dangerous tropics (Ghosh 2017, 4).

Her argument about the hostility towards India and the tropics that carries over into Aschenbach's experience in Venice is compelling, and helps contextualise historically the similarly framed racist arguments surrounding COVID-19 and its 'Asian origins argued with fervour and associated with violence in the United States and elsewhere over the past year, 2020-21. Ghosh concludes that

At best, Mann's text posits the age old imperial fear of colonized and colonizer coming in any contact, and at worst, the text presents a deep rooted anxiety of contamination - 'a horror of diversity' that Aschenbach first notes when talking about the imagined space of India and disease. (Ghosh 2017, 9)

She precisely documents prejudices held by European doctors regarding diseases and practices from the East and Africa with much relevance for Mann's portrayal of the path of cholera. Ghosh concludes, in reference to Rütten, that Mann can still be acknowledged as a "meticulous chronicler of facts" and that the novella has the cholera epidemic as a "historical backdrop of the text" (9). As Ghosh's essay demonstrates, Mann's careful presentation of Venice's 1911 outbreak is framed and skewed by his colonial perspective on the 'Asian' origins of the disease; such an insightful reading reveals Mann's troubling embrace of the ecological body as primarily a cultural or geographical entity.

And yet, Venice nevertheless functions as the site where bodies reassert themselves even if oddly in *Death in Venice*. Before his trip to Venice, Aschenbach was driven, contained, and disciplined. However, despite his life-long focus on form and writerly process, all it took to distract him was an encounter one day on his daily walk in Munich when he spotted a strange red-headed man and is overcome with wanderlust for exotic, tropical, sexualised scenery. It hits him in full vegetal glory:

with such suddenness and passion as to resemble a seizure, almost a hallucination. Desire projected itself visually: his fancy, not quite lulled since morning, imaged the marvels and terrors of the manifold earth. He saw. He beheld a landscape, a tropical marshland, beneath a reeking sky, steaming, monstrous, rank – a kind of primeval wilderness-world of islands, morasses, and alluvial channels. Hairy palm-trunks rose near and far out of lush brakes of fern, out of bottoms of crass vegetation, fat, swollen, thick with incredible bloom. (Mann 1963, 5)

Note the strange vision of plants as sexualised, phallic bodies whose crassness is to be hairy and “fat, swollen, thick”, filling morasses and alluvial channels. Vegetal bodies stand in for Aschenbach’s mythologized, exotic, and Orientalist vision of travelling. Like the hairy palm trucks rising out of the ferns, the body rises in this opening scene of the novella.

Additionally, the relevance of the fourteen-year-old Polish boy Tadzio’s youthful body for Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* has received much attention, particularly after the revelations in Mann’s personal writings on his own pederastic feelings. Also frequently noted is that Mann’s protagonist is physically and emotionally transformed due to his experiences in Venice where the supposedly formless sea radically alters his sense of bodily boundaries. The beach of Lido is a contact zone for him, one of desire, bodily reshaping, and bacterial penetration that finally lead to his dissolution and demise. The older German scholar is transformed bodily (with the magic of the hairdresser, cosmetics, and eventually cholera) and aesthetically (with his turn away from writing and towards languid mornings staring at bathing adolescents and then chasing Tadzio through the Venetian canals). Famously abandoning his pedantic and military diligence, Aschenbach opens his horizons to the beauty of Tadzio who stands before the endless seascape of the Adriatic Mediterranean. Tadzio is for Aschenbach the ultimate form – but bodily form, now: “his face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture” (Mann 1963, 25); that is, he is an artistic object who stands framed against the infinite openness and chaos of the sea. Aschenbach also experiences his first beach view of Tadzio while contemplating the sea as a void, the “unorganized, the immeasurable, the eternal” (31), that is interrupted, “cut by a human form”, who, when later emerging from the water, is a “living figure, virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god, emerging from the depths of the sea and sky, outrunning the element”, like the vision of “a primeval legend, handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form” (33). As a body, Tadzio fundamentally exists as an object of idealised desire, whereas Aschenbach returns – or is brought to – the harshness of embodiment by experiencing the world of Venice’s marine environment and the delightful sight of Tadzio.

The end of the novella presents most clearly the paradoxical aspects of bodies in *Death and Venice* when the readers witness Aschenbach's infection with, and death from, cholera. Having become obsessed with Tadzio as the seeming embodiment of physical perfection, he spends his days gazing at the youth while on the beach, in the hotel restaurant, and then even in the streets of Venice as he secretly trails behind the family. On a particularly sweltering day during his pursuit, his hot desires and fast pace bring thirst, leading him to consume fresh, overripe strawberries that potentially are the source of his demise. Enraptured, he is overcome by heat:

His head burned, his body was wet with clammy sweat, he was plagued by intolerable thirst. He looked about for refreshment, of whatever sort, and found a little fruit-shop where he bought some strawberries. They were overripe and soft; he ate them as he went. (71)

The bodily danger, of course, is not just deflecting his homoerotic desires for the boy, but rather the cholera sweeping through the city upon winds from the fantasised and colonially perceived "East".

For the past several years Asiatic cholera had shown a strong tendency to spread. Its source was the hot, moist swamps of the delta of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of that primeval island-jungle. (3)

Here, as Aschenbach learns more from quiet conversations about the spread of disease, unspeakable death arrives in Italy via a long route from the East to the Mediterranean.

But in May, the horrible vibrations were found on the same day in two bodies: the emaciated, blackened corpses of a bargee and a woman who kept a green-grocer's shop. Both cases were hushed up. (64)

Food is believed to be contaminated and the plague rages into Venice even as officials still deny its presence. Mann includes full details of the strains and the virility of their power:

Yes, the disease seemed to flourish and wax strong, to redouble its generative powers. Recoveries were rare. Eight out of every hundred died, and horribly, for the onslaught was of the extremest violence, and not infrequently of the 'dry' type, the most malignant form of the contagion. In this form the victims' body loses power to expel the water secreted by the blood-vessels, it shrivels up, he passes with hoarse cries from convulsion to convulsion, his blood grows thick like pitch, and he suffocates in a few hours. (64)

The paragraph goes on to state that some, however, the fortunate ones, just have a slight malaise, fall into unconsciousness, and never wake up. This is the case for our aging non-hero, Aschenbach, in his passing at the end of the novella. His final philosophical ponderings come as he sits with his “rouged and flabby mouth”, having an internal dialogue with Phaedrus, the beloved of Socrates (72). Mann then allows Aschenbach to fade away, with no convulsions or other actual cholera symptoms like vomiting and diarrhoea, mentioning only: “[h]e was not feeling well and had to struggle against spells of giddiness only half physical in their nature” (73). Thus, Aschenbach becomes ever more bodily present in the novella but never achieves the level of the gruesomely blackened corpses of others.

Indeed, he has a surprisingly peaceful death. On his final morning, Aschenbach walks to the beach, aware of his indisposition and the imminent departure of the Polish family, only to witness, to his dismay, the beautiful Tadzio be bullied. The last thing that he sees as he sits dying is Tadzio standing out on a sandbar in the sea, much as he was on the very first day. Mann’s descriptions of Tadzio shows his stance on the sandbar as a contrast of perfect form juxtaposed with absolute formlessness: “[h]e paced there, divided by an expanse of water from the shore, [...] a remote and isolated figure, with floating locks, out there in sea and wind, against the misty inane” (74). The juxtaposition of the young boy’s body and the sea inspires Aschenbach to feel seen and even invited to join the boy, but this vision is actually his death. What we do not see directly, just hear about in the hushed report from the one honest official who warns Aschenbach to leave, is the reality of a cholera outbreak and the extended bodily suffering of an individual infection. Bodies in Mann’s *Death in Venice* can be youthful and desirable, horrifically physical with graphic deaths, or old and cosmetically altered, yet the only choleric horrors we see directly are of unknown victims. Death and passion in full bodily experiences are present but primarily in dreams, reports, and internal dialogues. Mann presents yet skews the overtly bodily stories in his Venice novella. Ecologically speaking, *Death in Venice* offers strong historical context and a solid focus on bodies, yet it also shies away from embodiment just as it appears to document its greatest challenges.

### 3 Goethe’s *Italian Journey*

In contrast to Mann, Goethe’s proto-ecological views are fully immersive for bodies though his emphasis trends much more towards generalised ‘nature’. His autobiographical writing on his first trip through Italy describes at great length and in lavish detail his surroundings, whether artworks, plays, people, the city layout, or the

plants, rocks, water, and animals. One could speak of all of these living and non-living things as traditional objects, passively viewed by an active subject, yet Goethe already was beginning to see the world around him in terms of interrelated active forces in flux that change with our perception. He sees Venice primarily as a disturbing yet art-rich swamp in his *Italian Journey*; that is, as a fluctuating zone of water and land shaped by tides, shifting grounds, and the built environment. Having fled Germany after the mine in Ilmenau, which he oversaw as a minister in Weimar, flooded yet again, he appears troubled by the water's endless acts (one can also view the final "putrid swamp" in Act V of *Faust II* as another example of his frequent references to water's troubling powers). Goethe's *Italian Journey* specifically describes how "ancient nature" and the human together have shaped Venice and how it is still a site of ongoing change:

The lagoons are an effect of ancient nature. First low then high tide and earth work against each other, then the gradual sinking of the original waters were the cause for an impressive stretch of swamp emerging on the upper end of the Adriatic Ocean. This stretch is covered by the high tide and exposed in the low. Art [human artifice] had conquered the highest positions, and thus Venice exists surrounded by hundreds of islands grouped together and surrounded by hundreds of others. At the same time, they expended unbelievable efforts and costs in order to excavate deep channels in the swamp so that one can also have access to the main ports with warships even during low tide. (Goethe 1982, 91)<sup>3</sup>

Water, land, tides, and human labour interact in shaping and transforming this fluid area and city. The world in Goethe's description changes with the actions of both human and nonhuman agents. Venice is thus a geophysical set of processes that are quite literally shifting daily with the tides, and entering this realm brings transformation to the visitors. In Goethe's texts, the waves act on the sandbars and architectural features, as do the human residents who shape the buildings, islands, and sandbars for their own uses, and as do the crabs and limpets that so delight Goethe.

Regarding the *Italian Journey* and the many material things described there, scholars like Astrida Orle Tantillo, Achim Aurnhammer and Thomas O. Beebee read the autobiographical work as an exemplary text of Weimar classicism and the entrance into a new phase where Goethe shifts to a more 'objective tone'. Aurnhammer writes that

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<sup>3</sup> All translations of Goethe 1982 are by the Author.

Goethe de-subjectivises sentimental travel [accounts] in that he enriches it through the distancing elements of informational travel. [...] In this way, he objectivises his poetic consecration and so creates for himself classicism. (Aurnhammer 2003, 83)

Beebe similarly argues that Goethe emphasises the “real as opposed to the fantastic” (2002, 337); and claims that “[d]espite its high degree of self-reflexivity, the *Italienische Reise* emphasizes exact observation rather than inspiration” (337). Indeed, the text is filled with detailed observations, though one might note that observation and inspiration are not necessarily disconnected, particularly for those who work on Goethe’s science. One of Goethe’s main considerations in most of his scientific and philosophical writings, I claim, is learning how to see, or how to observe without imposing yourself onto the observed and yet still perceiving the underlying patterns to which one must be open.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps we might call it ‘inspired observation’. Goethe’s *Theory of Colour* directly addresses, in fact, how there is an entire category of colours that occur due to the interaction of light with objects and our brain; he labels these “colours that belong to the eye” rather than the objects themselves. Goethe’s vision of objects is thus not a supposedly objective gaze of a neutral scientist observer but rather a reciprocal sense of interactions. Bodies are co-constitutive and constantly undergoing transformations. Already in Goethe’s *Italian Journey*, we can see such active morphological ideas as Tantillo’s 2002 book, *The Will to Create: Goethe’s Philosophy of Nature*, demonstrates. Tantillo describes how his time in Italy directly influences the development of such scientific concepts such as polarity and *Steigerung* describing how natural elements and bodies engage in shifting evolutions into new forms. Human perception plays a significant role in these engagements, but Goethe focuses more on seeing and creative alignment with nature than extreme bodily situations.

Nevertheless, the *Italian Journey* demonstrates that Goethe’s experience of the sea places human bodies alongside natural forces as both seek to shape the watery city of Venice. For Goethe, the combination of the rich marine ecology and the complex cultural and artistic experiences that make up his version of Venice emerges in his writing as a threatening swamp created by diverse power struggles. The city is an embodiment of battles among human and non-human forces:

This folk did not flee to these islands for pleasure; it was not random chance that drove them to unite themselves with the islands. It was necessity that drove them to seek security in the least favoura-

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<sup>4</sup> See my essays on his optics, Sullivan 2008 and 2009.

ble circumstances that later became so advantageous for them and made them clever while the entire northern world remained in the dark [...]. The buildings were crammed ever more closely together; sand and swamp were replaced by cliffs, and the houses sought the air, like trees. (Goethe 1982, 67)

The city grew out of the land like trees toward the sky, driven by need and struggles rather than artistic impulse. It is a battle zone of competition where houses expand like organic life striving upwards for air.

The water, on the other hand, flows day in and day out exposing one to the open view of the vast sea and the tiny scurrying creatures revealed at low tide. When Goethe rides out to Lido, the sandbar surrounded by lagoons, he hears the tides and sees the sea up close for the first time.

I heard a stark noise; it was the ocean, and I soon saw it. It went high against the shore, and then it pulled back at midday, time of low tide. Thus I have also seen with my own eyes the ocean and I went onto the lovely threshing floor that it left behind, following the water. (89)

He is delighted with this sweeping view and enthusiastically describes his day on Lido, the very beach also experienced not coincidentally by Mann's Aschenbach. Goethe revels in the sea creatures he views, and especially in the business of selling sea snails. He writes over two pages about his experience with the lively bodies of crabs, limpets, and mussels.

His stay in Venice is brief, however. The direct experience of the sea fascinates him, but also, in certain regards, disturbs him profoundly. In Venice, Goethe declares, "[i]f only they kept their city cleaner!" (92). Still, he enjoys and clearly profits from visiting the many architectural delights, attending plays, and riding out to Lido to walk along the sea and the sandbanks. The one absolutely unique experience of Venice for him is, in fact, seeing the sea. His first view is from the tower of St. Mark's on 30 September 1786. He makes the climb twice: once at low and once at high tide.

It looks strange to see all around the land appearing where earlier there was water. The islands are no longer islands, but only elevated and built on spots of a great gray-green marsh ridden through with nice canals. (92-3)

The sea inscribes itself on his consciousness as much as human craft has inscribed the shape of the canals, but Goethe is also unnerved by its flows and the griminess of the water-urban coalition.

Inspired and troubled by Venice, Goethe departs rather preemptively after only about three weeks. He expresses a joyful celebration of the return to solid ground exemplified for him by the exploration of minerals and mountains and the chance to add to his rock collection.

This beautiful day I spent entirely under the open sky. I had hardly approached the mountains, and I was already drawn in again by the rocks. I seemed to myself like Anthaeus, who was continually strengthened anew, the more powerfully one brought him into contact with mother earth. (109-10)

Referring to Anthaeus, Goethe ascribes to himself the power derived from contact to “mother earth” or back among the solid rocks and in the mountains after the unsettling sands, sea, and agentic swamp. He notes a need to escape from the fluidity back to his solid “gardens and possessions”, back to the clarity of the mountains, and back onto his road trip to Rome, which is, in his terms, the centre of the world. For ecocriticism, this discomfort provides an access point for viewing nature-culture as integrated yet strained boundaries. The sea reveals to Goethe a profound and yet uncomfortable sense of being part of the ‘world’ whose boundaries flow like tides. His observations of the city and its geographies reveal him primarily as a viewer instead of part of the forces acting on the city. It is important, however, to note that this perspective is not so much the ‘objective’, scientific subject who sees and describes the world as passive matter from a distance, but rather that Goethe draws in active earthly forces that continually shape the world and which he desires to grasp most precisely in relation to human creativity. In other words, he aligns the artist’s creative projects with the physical manifestation of natural creations.

Though he is troubled by the watery city, he later declares that we only have an accurate concept of the world when seeing the ocean surrounding us from all sides. “If one hasn’t seen oneself fully surrounded by the ocean, then one has no concept of the world and one’s relationship to the world” (Goethe 1982, 230-1). The ocean gives him a profound sense of relationship to the rest of the world, yet swamps typically function in his literature as a sign of uncomfortable nature-culture always on the edge of becoming fully uncontained, a sign of combined ecological and anthropogenic impacts written as cultural development engaging with incessant floods, ever reemerging mud, and edible snails surrounded by incredible art and architecture. On the other hand, spending time in this space of shifting nature-culture forces and ongoing transformation inspires Goethe’s scientific works. I suggest that his theories of metamorphosis and of nature as a realm in motion are influenced by the fluid and changing world he saw in his travels, especially in Venice, which also apparently influenced him to focus on delineating transformation as a capacity of

the physical world. Human beings also transform through *Bildung* and through exposure to nature's forms, albeit less brutally than, say, in Mann's text.

#### 4 Conclusion

This ecocritical reading of Mann and Goethe in Venice documents the German encounters with transformative experiences of human and non-human agencies (desire and cholera, artists, crabs, and limpets), and with absurdly Orientalist German fantasies of a Southern Other (while still in Europe) that they adore or flee. In these contrasts, a picture of Venice emerges that demonstrates it can be advantageous to step out of the familiar into an unfamiliar geography of practices in order to feel and see what is so often overlooked: that we are imbricated in a world of mattering whose stories interweave with ours in discursive and physical signs, bodies, and contact zones. Damaging that world or altering it alters us, too. A walk in the swamp at the beach can bring awareness of the hybrid and active exchanges between our own bodies and ecologies of all forms and scales. But it can also be profoundly disturbing, as Goethe and Mann demonstrate. Finally, in a manner similar to science fiction's 'cognitive estrangement' that transforms the mundane into a new strangeness, the German experience of Venice and the Mediterranean alters their self-identities and in, Goethe's words, their "relations to the world". Goethe sees these relations as being part of creative processes, though his *Italienische Reise* locates the bodily aspects primarily in the active, material environment. Mann similarly sees the relations to the world also in terms of the artistic endeavour yet his intellectual insights come, in contrast to Goethe, along with cosmetics and deadly bodily transformations. Venice, for Goethe and Mann, reveals the land, sea, and art to be active processes in a living world. Mann simultaneously takes the active, creative world into abstract philosophical discourse and also portrays the fully physical embrace of porous bodies, at least for some. In other words, Mann appears to have a rather non-ecological hierarchy of bodily existence whereas Goethe's scientific insights from Italy are intensely ecological if somewhat softened.

Thinking ecologically, I read both Goethe's and Mann's responses to Venice and their very different depictions of bodily transformations in terms of what I call a 'skewed reciprocity'. Reciprocity refers to the fact that all living bodies participate in reciprocal exchanges of energy, matter, and information when breathing, eating, excreting, and perceiving or interpreting their physical surroundings. Plants, for example, absorb carbon dioxide while releasing oxygen, while animals respire in the exact opposite chemical reaction, using oxygen and producing carbon dioxide; indeed, as we know from ecology, all

living bodies are enmeshed in shared systems of exchanges. Furthermore, living things must perceive and respond to their surroundings whether growing towards light or seeking food. These interactions of living bodies can, however, be skewed by either physical changes or discursive and semiotic systems. The physical changes skewing ecological systems include a wide range of shifts such as movements of species, changes in populations, climate factors, geological disruptions, and disease, but also anthropogenic deforestation, pollution, development, and resource extraction. In fact, I would say that most industrial cultures exist in an ongoing state of deliberately skewed reciprocity such that the living world is treated as if it were merely a heap of resources perceived, rather magically, to be unlimited. Along with the harsh materiality of skewed reciprocity exist examples of perceived bodily differences by individuals or even entire communities, that is, we can speak also of 'a sense of skewed reciprocity', which can include a feeling of being disconnected, bodily alienated from the physical surroundings, or even a belief that human bodies and subjectivity are not a part of ecological reciprocity at all. Travel to new lands, as we see in Mann and Goethe, issues with bodily identity, and the view that humanity has successfully used technology (or religion) to escape from 'natural' systems, to mention a few examples, can all create a sense of skewed reciprocity, which in turn, can impact practices resulting in additional physical impacts. Indeed, discursive practices such as the denial of disease in Mann's *Death in Venice* and in the contemporary case of COVID-19, exemplify the reality of how discourse can further harm bodies, lived and imagined. Mann and Goethe display various degrees of deflection and concurrence with ecological reciprocity but also very familiar aspects of how easily skewed ideas of human bodies come into play.

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