

TWENTIETH CENTURY QUEER LITERATURE AND ORIENTALISM

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TWENTIETH CENTURY QUEER LITERATURE AND ORIENTALISM

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This thesis explores the intersection of orientalism with queer literature through an analysis of Andre Gide's *The Immoralist*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. It pays particular attention to how the oriental locales and images are utilized in order to facilitate the sexual awakenings of the protagonists and how the oriental and the homosexual other are in fact managed and constructed by similar processes. To elaborate how the orientalist narrative plays a part in sexual identity formation, I look at three different novels that make use of oriental locales, characters or dynamics in vastly different ways and pay close attention to how these authors subvert the oriental binaries in order to make explicit the particular positionalities of their characters and queer identities at large.

YIRMİNCİ YÜZYIL QUEER EDEBİYATI VE ORYANTALİZM

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Tez Danışmanı: Hülya Adak

Bu tez Andre Gide'nin *L'Immoraliste*, Thomas Mann'ın *Venedik'te Ölüm* ve James Baldwin'in *Giovanni'nin Odası* romanlarının analizi üzerinden oryantalizm ve queer edebiyatın kesişim noktalarını inceliyor. Özellikle ana karakterlerin cinsel kimliklerini keşiflerinde doğu imgelerinin ve doğudaki mekanların nasıl kullanıldığına ve doğulu ve homoseksüel kimliklerin inşa ve ihya sürecinin nasıl benzer süreçler sonunda ortaya çıktığına yoğunlaşıyor. Oryantalist söylemin cinsel kimlik inşasındaki rolünü ayrıntılı bir şekilde inceleyebilmek için doğulu mekan, karakter veya oryantalist dinamikleri farklı biçimlerde kullanan üç ayrı romanı ele alıyorum. Doğulu imgelerin cinsel kimlikle olan ilişkilerini incelerken, bir yandan da nasıl bu yazarların şarkçı ikilikleri alt üst etme çabalarının karakterleri ve genel bağlamda queer kimlikler için hegemonik düzen içinde farklı konumsallıklar yarattığının altını çiziyorum.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (Edward Said, *Orientalism*)

The starting point of this thesis is precisely this phenomenon that Said outlines in his introduction to *Orientalism*. Othering is a process that exists within a binary of self and the other, and it is as much about excluding as it is about including and setting boundaries. The western identity constructed by artists, writers, travelers, politicians, colonizers and missionaries over time has relied on the perceived differences between the east – that is, the ‘other’ – and the west, and has manifested itself largely in terms of certain binaries that imbue the artistic, literary, and political approaches to and narratives of the Orient. The eastern locales and people depicted in these narratives are oftentimes presented as the morally inferior, exotic, uncivilized other to the civilized western populace. They are always irreversibly marked by their race, their ethnicity, homeland or culture, and as a result are almost always positioned on the peripheries and the margins of the western civilization.

The economical, political and not least, psychological benefits of this otherizing project are thoroughly explored in Said's *Orientalism* and many other works dealing with the aftermath of the colonial era. What interests me and informs the connecting thread behind the works analyzed in this thesis, however, is a more particular kind of othering, which Said alludes to a few times in passing in *Orientalism*, but never really delves into –

that is, the sexual othering of the east. Said admits that the east holds a ‘sexual promise’ and has a seductive effect on the westerner but does not spend time dwelling on particular instances in which the east is fashioned as a locale of sexual fantasy and a source of ‘other’ sexual identities.

The breadth of literature (and art) that depicts an overtly sexualized east, of course, is virtually endless. The sexual promise, the enticement of the ‘veiled’ women, the sense of safety and liberation of a foreign locale are repeated in paintings such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ *The Grand Odalisque* or *The Turkish Bath*, novels such as Pierre Loti’s *Aziyade*, or even operas like Mozart’s *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. These artworks afford us the spectatorial pleasure of gazing upon that which is meant to be hidden from the public eye – like the face of a veiled woman, or the concubines in the harem. The pleasure of orientalist artwork for the westerner gazing at the east, then, is this sense of transgression that is evoked through imaginary scenes of looking behind the protective veil and into the private domain of the oriental other. Because the Orient is constructed by the western gaze as a locale open to penetration and exploitation, these imaginary transgressions in art and literature become almost expected, and rather acceptable even when depicting things that are not in line with western sensibilities and morals. It is therefore no surprise that alternate sexualities that cannot find a place for themselves in western society, or are vilified and marginalized by the hegemonic values thereof, become recurring figures in orientalist literature.

The self versus the other dynamic already present in most literary works set in the east makes it easier to insert into the narrative another level of otherness – that of sexual difference. Indeed, many works of queer literature either use oriental imagery or oriental locales and characters to make explicit the homosexuality of the main characters and to explore the issues of sexual identity and orientation in a manner that is more explicit than what the western norms allow. Just as the oriental is the marginalized other to the west, so is the homosexual to the hegemonic, heterosexist culture of his environment. These two ‘othered’ identities are intertwined in many cases and form a sense of double-otherness that shapes and marks the characters presented in these novels. The dynamic between the oriental and queer narratives proves quite fascinating and at times, nebulous – sometimes these two narratives are combined in such a way as to subvert the heterosexist notions of

the author's era, and sometimes their interaction serves to reenact the binaries that marginalizes them in the first place.

There are no hard and fast rules as to how orientalism and queer literature interact and influence one another. What I intend to do, in this thesis, is to look at three different works of literature that each utilize oriental imagery and locales in various ways in order to explore their protagonists' sexual identity. In Chapter II, I focus on Andre Gide's *The Immoralist*, in which the oriental locale and the diseases associated with it bring about a sexual awakening in Michel, the young scholar protagonist of the novel. As imbued with narratives of death and disease as *The Immoralist* may be, I argue that Gide subverts these tropes of the disease ridden and morally inferior Orient by importing the very same orientalist narrative he sets up in the Biskra chapters of the novel to the parts set in France. By shifting the orientalist narrative into a decidedly western setting, Gide in fact hints at the arbitrariness of these binaries and takes a stab at deconstructing them. Along with exploring his subversive attempts, I also look at how the oriental other is constructed throughout the novel and is utilized, at times, to provide the psychological justification that Michel needs as he comes to terms with his sexuality.

In Chapter III, I move on to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, which bears a significant resemblance to *The Immoralist* in terms of the tropes it utilizes. Like Gide's protagonist, Mann's Aschenbach also discovers his sexuality in a foreign locale, and the narrative of disease becomes one of the defining motifs of his sexual awakening. With Mann, however, we are one step closer to Europe – Venice is as far east as Aschenbach has to venture to explore his sexuality. What differentiates Mann from Gide is the highly philosophical framework in which he chooses to position Aschenbach's conflicts. The protagonist's struggle becomes more mental than physical, which takes homosexuality out of the domain of the purely physical and repositions it within the intellectual and emotional realms. Still, Mann's novel remains quite problematic in that Mann does not subvert the disease narrative as Gide does, and bears the risk of remaining too uncritical of this clichéd narrative it utilizes.

In the final chapter of my thesis, I turn to an entirely different orientalist dynamic – one that manifests itself in an entirely western setting with a racially homogenous cast. Perhaps James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is the most telling of the novels I have chosen

to explicate this notion of traveling orientalism. Here, the orientalist dynamics that we readily associate with colonial settings are explicit in the heart of the western culture, in Paris. Baldwin subverts the clear-cut binary of the colonial and orientalist power dynamic by placing each of his characters in intricate positions that can never be classified as belonging solely to either one end of the binary structure. Giovanni, for instance, is a working class expat negotiating his place as an illegal immigrant in France, but he is emotionally the most mature one of the cast, not to mention completely at ease with his sexuality. David, while financially slightly better off as a result of his tourist status in France, is nonetheless not one of the 'privileged' members of society – he is a gay American expat, a double other, who has to navigate his way through the pressures of a heterosexist and morally rigid cultural past and his own desires. Even the French citizens of the novel, Jacques and Guillaume, are placed on the margins of society due to their sexual identities and are only slightly better off than the other characters. Through a negotiation of expatriate, homosexual and racial experiences, Baldwin perhaps sets up a more insightful exploration of the interaction between oriental and queer narratives than Mann or Gide whose works make use of oriental imagery more readily.

Despite the differences in their approaches to the material at hand, all three writers rely heavily on certain tropes associated with particular geographical locations – North Africa, Italy, the French countryside – and demonstrate (either reflexively or by design) just how much these tropes affect the ways in which identities of the self and the other are constructed. I believe an analysis of Mann, Gide and Baldwin's work, while certainly not exhaustive of the possibilities afforded by an intersection of queer and oriental narratives – can shed light to various processes at play in (queer) identity construction in oriental settings and expose the internalized ideologies that reveal themselves in the ways in which the characters instinctively depict, analyze, construct and refashion both themselves and their manifest others.

CHAPTER 2

Gide's *The Immoralist*: The Queer Traveler in North Africa

In the year 1902, when Gide's *The Immoralist* was published, France and Great Britain were still in the heights of their colonial projects. Britain was still the empire on which the sun never sets, while France had a considerable presence in western and northern Africa. The expansion of the French and British colonies resulted in a greater level of interaction between highly diverse locations and cultures, and rekindled interest in the Orient. Orientalist art and literature had already been on the rise in Europe, but newly conquered territories and the large number of French and Englishmen traveling through the colonies increased the influence of these locales on the arts. Gide's *The Immoralist*, then, could have easily joined the ranks of orientalist works such as *Aziyade* by Pierre Loti, and become yet another variation on an all too familiar theme of a sexually charged and decadent East in which the westerner (re)discovers a more primitive, visceral part of his psyche.

Indeed, the plot of *The Immoralist* is an easily recognizable one that deals with self-discovery and rebirth through travel and displacement: A young scholar named Michel has just married a still younger Marceline at his dying father's bequest. The couple travels to Tunis for their honeymoon, where Michel falls ill with tuberculosis. During his recovery, he becomes obsessed with the young Arab boys around him; begins to favor physical pleasures over mental ones; acknowledges his desire for the male body; and half-heartedly attempts to convince himself to be a better husband to Marceline. Upon their return to Paris, Michel tries to act the part of the dutiful husband, but various reminders of his true sexual orientation – chiefly in the form of his gay friend Menalqué – drive him to his family farm in Normandy, where he aims to go back to his studies. However, no matter

where Michel goes, there is no shortage of young, handsome boys who attract his attention. Ultimately, he finds himself back in Tunis in self-imposed exile, which is where he recounts the entire story to his friends whom he has summoned all the way from France, as he is lost in the lethargy of the Tunisian landscape and cannot bring himself to leave.

What sets *The Immoralist* apart from other orientalist works is the homosexual awakening that Michel undergoes. While it is quite easy to read Gide's novel as an orientalist work, and while it does, at times, make use of the orientalist narratives already present in French literature and culture, reading it solely as a narrative steeped in the binaries of the East versus the West proves quite reductive. The binaries employed in the novel prove to be not an end in themselves, but rather stepping-stones into a more complicated discourse, which subvert the orientalist tropes employed in the work. In this chapter, I will analyze not only how the East/West binary enables the narrative of homosexuality and self-discovery, but also how this binary is echoed in the non-colonial settings of the novel as, and thereby how it becomes central to Gide's attempt to dismantle the popular myth of the decadent East versus the moral West.

Part I of *The Immoralist* is structured entirely upon the binaries of East/West, Tunis/France, illness/health, homosexuality/heterosexuality and body/mind. During his time in Tunis, Michel sheds his healthy, heterosexual, western intellectual persona, and begins to take pleasure in the physical sensations of the East through which he discovers his homosexuality after recovering from his initial illness. In *The Immoralist*, illness is a recurring motif – it serves as a harbinger of rebirth by virtue of the recovery it anticipates, as well as a symbol for the collapse of the heteronormative, hegemonic order. Both Marceline and Michel's illnesses and health bring about momentous events in the novel, and introduce one of the other predominant themes of the novel: rebirth. Gide sets up his protagonist's recovery as a process of rebirth – Michel emerges from his bout of tuberculosis a new man; entranced with life, open to new ideas, hungry for uncharted sensations.

Michel's transformation is closely related to the setting – Tunis and Italy both serve as locales outside the hegemonic realm of the morally rigid western European society. These spaces allow him the flexibility to step out of the norms of his previous existence,

and to reconstruct his identity in keeping with the shift in his paradigms that occurs after his recovery. Tunis, as an oriental locale, and Italy, as yet another “Orient” within Europe, allow him the distance from the constrictions of his urban and western upbringing. The traveling itself connotes a sense of being *in motion*, as opposed to his stationary existence as a scholar in Paris, and brings him into contact with places and people who present alternatives to his environment in France. While these new locales bring him into contact with people from different groups and backgrounds, thereby aiding in his transformation, the very status of those people with respect to his own creates a certain power dynamic which enables him to engage in homoerotic relationships with them.

Michel’s position as a Frenchman in Tunis, and a well-off traveler in Italy place him in a superior position with respect to the men and boys with whom he gets involved. His implied racial and economic superiority gives him a greater freedom within each of these settings, and places him firmly in a position of authority. His whiteness and affluence seem to allow him to transgress with no tangible repercussions – a freedom afforded to the colonizer in the colonized country. Michel’s racial and economic privilege affect his actions to a great extent – in fact, in Part I, they are the sole reason his actions are even possible.

While Michel certainly holds a great deal of authority, this does not necessarily mean that he has agency or that he gets away unscathed from his ordeals. Tunis undoubtedly transforms him, but this transformation is marked by a deterioration of his health and consequent emotional instabilities. Michel’s illness begins with the first leg of the couple’s honeymoon. As they travel eastward, from Paris to Tunisia, Michel also transitions from health to illness, from the life of the mind to the life of the body. Illness and health are, of course, directly relevant to the body, as they render the body either *present* or *invisible*. As the body fails the subject on a very physical level, it also makes itself *known*, and in a way prioritizes its needs above all else. At the very beginning of the novel, Michel talks about how he was unaware of his own fragility:

Another thing of which I was unaware, something perhaps even more important, was that my health was very fragile. How could I have known? I had never subjected it to any test. I had the occasional cold, which I ignored. The excessively quiet life I led both made me feeble and protected me from illness at the same time.
(17)

A life of scholarship in Paris has not afforded Michel many opportunities to explore his physical capabilities. It is only when he is out of the bounds of his previous life that he can ‘test’ his body. Travel, changing locations, and in particular, going to Tunis, Algeria and Italy put his body to test, and make him realize how vulnerable he actually is to different climates than the one he is accustomed to. Illness in *The Immoralist*, then, can be read as the very physical response of the body to the changing environment, a way of warning the mind that the physical conditions around it are unfavorable. What an illness does, first and foremost, is to make one acutely aware of one’s body, and its (in)capabilities. As disabled as one feels during an illness, the regaining of the bodily functions upon recovery makes one feel all the more powerful and sparks a renewed appreciation for the body. It is precisely this process of ‘losing’ the body only to recover it, that forces Michel to pay attention to it like never before, and allows Gide to set up his recovery in Biskra as a rebirth. Indeed, after some time in Biskra, Michel’s health returns bit by bit, bringing with it a whole new outlook on life:

One day, finally, like a lost sailor spotting land, I felt the first glimmer of newly awakening life. I was able to smile at Marceline. Why tell you all of this? Suffice it to say that death, as the saying goes, had brushed me with its wing, that simply being alive was astonishing, that each new day was a day I had never hoped to see. Before, I thought, I had no sense that I was alive. Now the thrill of discovering life afresh. (24)

For Michel, this marks the beginning of his self-discovery: suddenly, all the sensations of his environment seem to be magnified and the “charming ankles and wrists” (25) of a young Arab boy, or the “exquisite” (26) timbre of his voice stirs in him an acute desire to live. Confronted with the strength and the health of the young Arab boys Marceline brings to their rooms, Michel fully comprehends his own fragility. The blood he coughs up is a “horrible, thick clot” (26) whereas Bachir’s blood is “beautiful, glistening” (27) in comparison. As Bachir licks a small cut on his thumb, Michel thinks to himself “That is what I fell in love with – his health. This small body was in beautiful health” (26). Bachir’s health – and his healthy body – becomes an object of desire for Michel, who is bed ridden, feeble and dependent on his wife’s care. After he has regained his health, he admits to himself that he has grown tired with the boys and that he is “no longer so weak that [he] needed the spectacle of their health” (40). The Arab boys merely function as the healthy

‘other’ to Michel’s ill ‘self’ and upon his recovery, there is no need for a healthy other to aspire to or position one’s self towards. However, the connection between Michel’s recovery and his desire towards the Arab boys can be read through an alternate framework. In his essay “Some Perversions of Pastoral: Or Tourism in Gide’s *L’Immoraliste*,” Jonathan Lang incorporates Michel’s desire into his recovery:

His illness is a metaphor for sexual repression; the cure requires that he accept a life of the body driven by its instinctual passions, and that he acknowledge his (homo)sexual nature.

So then the Arab boys are not simply healthy others to Michel’s fragile body – rather his growing desire for and interest in them mark the beginning of his acceptance of his homosexuality, and therefore relieve his body of the pressure of repressing one’s latent desires. It is only through an acknowledgement of his true self that Michel can really recover from his illness. In *The Immoralist*, Michel’s repressed sexuality wreaks havoc both on his mind and his body – he must acknowledge, embrace and reconcile it in order to regain function on a both physical and intellectual level.

While Michel’s illness certainly takes him away from his academic studies, and changes his fields of interest upon recovery, it also becomes instrumental in the inception of his new philosophy of life. The moment Michel decides to take his health into his own hands through strict diets and regular exercise, he actively begins to work on his own self as he would on a project. At the beginning of Chapter III, he postulates at length about his own body and its relationship to his mind, and lays out his plan:

I am going to talk at some length about my body. I am going to talk about it so much that you will think at first that I am neglecting the mind entirely. The omission is quite intentional; it is how it was. I don’t have the strength to lead a dual life, I said to myself. I’ll think about the life of the mind later, when I am feeling better. (30)

With this mind/body binary in mind, Michel sets out to develop and strengthen his body. He begins to take long walks in the parks and in nature, often leaving Marceline behind and taking Bachir or Ashour with him as companions. As he discovers the landscape of Algeria, Michel gets more and more entranced with the sensations his new life makes available to him. Out of the urban environment of Paris, he can, for the first time, appreciate the power of nature, which enraptures him:

The cassias, which flower long before they come into leaf, gave off a sweet scent – or perhaps it emanated from everywhere, that light, unfamiliar smell which seemed to enter into me by all my senses and gilled me with a feeling exaltation. I was breathing more easily, walking with a lighter step. I did have to sit down on the first bench, but I was more intoxicated, more dazzled than tired. . . . I remember I shrub whose bark, from a distance, seemed to have such a strange texture that I had to get up to go over and feel it. My touch was a caress, it filled me with rapture. I remember. . . was this finally the morning when I was to be born? (34)

As the nature in Biskra comes to life, Michel, too, is reborn – now, he is no longer a scholar whose future lies in his research, but a sensualist, whose psyche is governed by his senses, his new experiences. He talks about how the African earth “awakening from winter, drunk with water, bursting with new sap” (40) puts him into a “frenzy” and “strikes an echo in [his] own feelings” (40). The powerful, violent words Gide uses – ‘bursting,’ ‘strike,’ ‘frenzy’ – make Michel’s own awakening all the more urgent and volatile. This sudden and explosive transformation of the earth is echoed in Michel’s soul, which is now striving to be one with nature. Slowly, he begins to venture out of the western, urban, civilized sphere that he has been born into. His sensibilities now align more with nature, and the emotions he feels rage within him in uncontrollable turmoil. One such night, disturbed by the stillness of the evening, which reminds him of death, he experiences a violent psychological reaction:

This quietness frightened me, and once again all my negative feelings about my life came back, protesting, asserting their presence, bewailing their existence in the silence. They were so violent, painful almost, so insistent that, if I could, I would have, howled like an animal. (41)

Despite his inner turmoil, Michel cannot howl like an animal and unleash his rage. He is still steeped in his European sensibilities to a certain extent; he still cannot let go entirely. Immediately after this episode, he picks up the Bible and reads Christ’s words to Peter, “When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands. . . .” (41). And this is precisely what happens – at the end of the novel, in his self-imposed exile in the East, Michel stretches out his hands to his friends and recounts his story.

Michel’s recovery and his subsequent return to continental Europe mark a new awareness of his transformation and his circumstances. He associates the state of being ill

with being exempt from moral duties, and acknowledges that since he has recovered fully, he can no longer disregard his moral and intellectual responsibilities:

Since I had fallen ill my life has been free of rules or moral scrutiny; I had merely concentrated on living, like an animal or a child. Now that I was less preoccupied with the state of my health, I was regaining awareness of the world around me and starting to determine my own life once again. After my long period of suffering, I had believed that I had been reborn intact and that my past and present formed a seamless unity. When I had had the novelty of a new country to absorb, I was thus able to deceive myself, but not here. I was constantly reminded – much to my surprise – that I had changed. (42)

As his illness had forced him to put his body first, he had been freed of the responsibilities that usually govern his actions. Upon recovery, however, he can no longer hide behind the guise of an illness to justify his actions, or to focus solely on himself. While at first glance this seems to be a satisfactory explanation for his “out-of-character” actions, his diction betrays a desire to justify his homoerotic behavior. Phrases such as “regaining awareness” and “starting to determine [his] own life” imply that in one bold move, Michel wants to abnegate any responsibility for his feelings and actions in Biskra, sweeping them aside as a mere result of his illness, and being in a different country. He is inclined to use his illness as a tool to excuse his homosexuality, to classify it as something brought about by outer forces, as opposed to something that emerges from within. This sentiment, however, is undercut by his confession that he has deceived himself. His sexual awakening, while perhaps triggered by his illness and Tunis, is not something temporary – a fact he feels all the more acutely once he’s in Syracuse, Italy.

Gide’s *The Immoralist* certainly lends itself to a very orientalist reading – the plot in itself is straightforward enough: The Frenchman travels to the East, discovers his homosexuality, and consequently loses everything afforded to him by his western socioeconomic sphere, and finds himself exiled in the squalid, yet morally permissive Algeria. Indeed, Gide makes use of the orientalist tropes in setting up Michel’s transformation – the northern African landscape, the overly marked bodies of young Arab boys which prove interchangeable with one another, the association of the East with illness pointing at penetration and infection by a foreign influence resulting in “unwestern” and “perverse” sexuality – and yet, it would be highly reductive to regard Gide’s work as entirely orientalist. It is certainly true that Michel discovers his sexuality by virtue of being

a Frenchman in the East – as Edward Said writes in his introduction to *Orientalism*, the westerner in the east has a “*positional* superiority.”

The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because *he could be there*, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient’s part. (7)

Michel’s implied racial and economic superiority allows him to take liberties that he could not otherwise have taken either in another western country or back in Paris. While his positional superiority is instrumental in the explicit expression of his homosexuality, it hardly means that his positional superiority is the *reason* behind it. His position as a westerner in the East allows him to express his homosexuality openly, or even to become fully conscious of his homosexuality – but it does not *create* it.

The abundance of works that associate the Orient with homosexuality can hardly be ignored. The tropes of the effeminate oriental man, the sexual largesse and exotic fantasies are a large part of the orientalist discourse. Indeed, Part I of *The Immoralist* does little to diverge from these clichéd representations of the East. What Gide does in the subsequent parts of the novel, however, is remarkably different from the simplistic East/West, homosexual/heterosexual discourse set up in the beginning.

Instead of reading *The Immoralist* as an orientalist work, I propose that Gide actually subverts the orientalist beginning of the novel by structuring the “western” part of the novel in similar binaries, thereby drawing a parallel between the “oriental” and the “western” spheres. While Part I of the novel is organized around the binaries of the east versus the west, illness versus health and body versus mind; the parts set in Paris and Normandy are built upon the binaries of Menalqué versus Marceline, country versus city and working class versus the bourgeoisie. The existence of binary structures that allow for the emergence of homosexuality within the western cultural and economic circles implies that Michel’s homosexuality is not an eastern phenomenon – what is explicit in the East is always already there in the West.

Several key points in the novel that seem to point at the restoration of the heterosexual and hegemonic order, and the ultimate vilification of the homosexual actions can be read subversively through this argument. One of the most significant parts, of course, is the episode with the Italian coach driver, which results in the consummation of

Michel and Marceline's marriage. Having recently become fond of physical exercise, Michel decides to walk from the village of Ravello to Sorrento, while Marceline takes a coach. As Michel is walking, he sees Marceline's coach approaching at a deadly speed, with a crazed driver in control, and a terrified Marceline in the back. Subsequently, Michel gets into a fistfight with the driver, overpowers him, and saves Marceline. The consummation of their marriage happens the night of this event:

Ah, what tender looks, what kisses we exchanged after that. I hadn't been in any great danger, but I had had to show my strength, and do so in order to protect her. I felt that I could have given my life for her – and given it gladly. . .
That night, for the first time, I possessed Marceline. (51)

There are several things of significance about this episode. First of all, Michel and Marceline's (hetero)sexual union takes place only after – actually, as a result of – Michel's display of physical masculine power. It is only when he can *prove* himself physically – and what more appropriate way than to evoke a damsel-in-distress scenario – can he 'possess' Marceline. He has to earn her in order to *have* her. In a way, this excerpt draws upon the hegemonic narratives of marriage in which the strong (male) partner protects the weak (female) partner, and in turn, is rewarded by possessing her. While this is quite significant in revealing the way in which Gide almost parodies the conventional marriage plot, what is even more noteworthy is that Michel's ability to save Marceline is a direct result of his sexual awakening – it is his illness and recovery, and his desire for Arab boys that incites him to take walks and develop his body, which makes it possible for him to have the physical power to overcome the Italian coachman, and thus, to save and possess Marceline. Moreover, it is only when Marceline is in a state of distress and helplessness does he muster up the desire to actually consummate the marriage – when they are in Algeria and she is the physically stronger one of the two, Michel feels no desire whatsoever for her. It is only when his physical strength has surpassed hers that he can have intercourse with her. It is, of course, possible to interpret this episode as a reestablishment of the heterosexual and hegemonic order – upon their return to continental Europe, the couple is able to assume their prescribed gender roles, and consummate their marriage. However, this interpretation proves quite fallacious. When Michel watches Marceline after they have sex, it is not desire that he feels, but pity. "Gripped by love, pity and tenderness," he plants on her eyes "the most tender, loving and pious of kisses" (52).

By making us privy to Michel's feelings upon having sex with his wife, Gide yet again devalues the East/West and homosexual/heterosexual parallelism – even in Europe, even after arguably the most heterosexual act one can imagine, Michel feels pity and not desire. What is supposed to be an act that would connect him to the heterosexual realm only serves to mark how different he is, and how despite having performed the acts required by the heteronormative gender roles prescribed by his western culture, Michel still cannot belong.

Michel and Marceline's consummation of their marriage is soon followed by their return to their family farm, La Morinière, in Normandy. A stark contrast to the wilderness of the eastern landscape, La Morinière is a classic example of tamed and domesticated nature – its paths are weeded and raked, the grounds are ploughed by the resident farmers, and are ready for the harvest. Here nature is indeed lush and yet it is kept under control:

From this ordered abundance, this joyful labour, this happy cultivation a harmony emerged, not by chance but by design, a rhythm, a beauty that was both human and natural, where the bursting fecundity of nature and the skilful regulation of man were so bound together, so in tune with one another, that one no longer knew which one found the most admirable. What would this human effort be, I thought, without the power of the wildness it sought to tame? What would the force and vigour of this wild profusion be without the intelligent effort which channels it and so joyfully extracts such wealth from it? (60)

Through the shift in setting to the family farm and its tamed wilderness, Gide introduces the larger motif prevalent in the entirety of the novel – that of nature versus culture. The contrasts between the 'uncivilized' setting of the East versus the 'civilized' circles of Parisian society serve to underscore the colonial subplot of the novel. While each setting in the novel plays a certain part in the construction and emergence of Michel's sexuality, it is the chasm between the two realms of the east versus the west, and the experience of traveling back and forth between such radically different societies that acts as a catalyst to his self-realization. In *The Immoralist*, the rural/eastern landscape is framed as a realm of the senses, whereas the urban setting symbolizes the civilized, western world of traditions and conventions. In his essay "Some Perversions of the Pastoral: Or Tourism in Gide's *L'Immoraliste*," Jonathan Lang theorizes on the connection between the health/illness plot and nature:

The restorative value of the pastoral landscape, which clearly belongs to the plot of Michel's illness and recovery, is linked to the story of his sexual liberation as well so that Gide might more fully associate the virtuousness of nature's healing qualities with Michel's discovery in the self of natural forms of human sexuality. Gide uses the positive meanings attached to nature as a place of escape from the artificiality of and onerous discipline enforced within the civilized world in order to counter the negative meanings attached to nature represented in primitive forms of human sexuality, which was as often as not conceived of as fundamentally unnatural. (Lang, 8)

Indeed, Michel's emerging homosexuality brings with it an awareness of his body – he is conscious of his body's limitations and capabilities, and strives to take better care of himself. He starts exercising in Italy and veers towards a healthier lifestyle, which both helps restore and develop his body. Time spent in nature – walking, exercising, riding, hunting – brings him closer to the realm of the physical. By embedding his homosexuality into a discourse of improving health, Gide implies the natural roots of Michel's desires. As Michel spends more time in nature, both in Algeria and Italy, his intellectual desires begin to slowly align themselves with his physical ones. As his physical strength returns, Michel is once more interested in his studies and becomes more productive. His areas of interest, however, have shifted after his experiences. He is no longer interested in history, but rather poetry:

The facts of history now seemed to me like museum pieces, or rather like plants in a herbarium, so completely dried out that I could forget that they had ever grown in the sun, plump with sap. Now I could only derive pleasure from history by imagining it in the present. I was much less inspired by great political events than by the new emotions stirred by the poets or certain men of action. In Syracuse I reread Theocritus and imagined that his goatherds with their beautiful names were the same as those I had loved in Biskra. (42-3)

Theocritus, a 3rd century BC Greek poet, is the creator of ancient Greek bucolic poetry, which focuses on dialogues between herdsmen. Virgil was inspired by Theocritus' *Bucolica* when writing his *Eclogues* – he borrowed the bucolic style from Theocritus, though his works were decidedly more political. Gide himself was a reader of Virgil, and his non-fiction manifesto on homosexuality, *Corydon*, is named after the shepherd in Virgil's "Eclogue 2." Michel's shift from history to poetry signifies a shift from rationality to emotions, from civilization to nature. In fact, from this point on, Michel begins to dislike everything that he deems unnatural. His education seems to him an unnatural identity

imposed upon his true self – something that he needs to discard in order to unearth the real Michel:

I likened myself to a palimpsest. I felt the joy of a scholar who discovers, beneath newer writings, a more ancient and infinitely more precious text inscribed on the same piece of paper. What was this secret writing? Was it not necessary to efface the more recent writing in order to read it? (44)

In Michel's mind, education, and by extension culture, become almost corrosive and damaging to one's ideal self. All the traditions, thoughts patterns and sentiments imposed upon us by society, therefore, are evil. He rejects that which comes from without, and instead strives to embrace that which comes from within. His growing love of nature, and disdain for culture ultimately are reflected in his attitude toward religion – from the very beginning, Michel does not want to be associated with god at all. When Marceline prays for him during his illness, he scoffs at her and tell her that he does not wish to be indebted to anyone. Throughout the novel, he rejects organized religion altogether, scorning Marceline many times for her religious sensibilities. There is no place for a god in his newfound philosophy – in fact, the philosophy that Michel spouts throughout the book and especially after his meeting with Ménéalque is none other than Nietzsche's notion of *Übermensch* versus god. He attaches little importance to the afterlife and the divine world – he is concerned with *this* world, with what he can grasp and experience through his senses. He does not wish to subscribe to the idea of a god who is mightier than him, who ultimately holds his destiny in his hands. In a way, Gide sets Michel up to fail – throughout the novel, we see in his indecisions, in his weak attempts at deceit, in his careless vacillations between his married life and the life of a bachelor, the inevitability of his downfall: As much as he wants to live like Ménéalque, Michel is simply not strong enough an individual to sustain this philosophy. Even in his palimpsest metaphor we can see that he is unwilling or unable to let go of the markers of his culture and background – as he attempts to explain his disdain, he ends up using the very notions born of the culture he is trying to criticize.

In the end, Michel is unable to ultimately sustain the philosophy with which he so eagerly aligns himself. Rejecting all that the western civilization has to offer – especially in terms of religion – proves too radical a step to take for him. The surprising thing about Michel's adamancy in pursuing this path is that earlier on in the novel, in his description of La Morinière which I quoted previously, he actually outlines the way in which he *could*

survive the supposed clash between his desires and his culture. He asks, “What would this human effort be, I thought, without the power of the wildness it sought to tame? What would the force and vigour of this wild profusion be without the intelligent effort which channels it and so joyfully extracts such wealth from it?” (60). Implicit in these two questions is the interdependency between nature and culture and how a reconciliation of the civilizing impulse with the chaotic tendencies of nature can – and indeed does – allow for a harmonious, if a little affected, coexistence of both. With these two questions, Gide sets up the binary of culture versus nature, while at the same time gesturing at the possibility of striking a balance between the two. The “what would be” structure of the questions implies that as in any binary structure, one could not be understood, experienced, appreciated in its entirety without its opposite (and no less important) counterpart. It is precisely moments like this in *The Immoralist* that allow for a more hopeful reading than the one that the ending denotes.

By introducing the nature versus culture motif in such a manner, Gide emphasizes how interconnected they actually are, and blurs the lines between perceived binaries. If culture and nature are co-dependent, then by extension, so are east and west, illness and health, body and mind, and of course, homosexuality and heterosexuality. All these, in fact, co-exist within the same individual, the same location, the same socio-economical sphere. This particular point is further explored through Michel’s encounter with Menalqué. Upon their return to France, Michel and Marceline begin living the life of a well-to-do Parisian couple – they pay visits to their friends, give parties and set up their house. They are, however, plagued by Marceline’s deteriorating health and Michel’s frequent neglect of her as he fulfills the responsibilities of their social standing and as he spends time with Menalqué. While Michel’s relationship with Menalqué never becomes – at least explicitly – physical, the recognition of the homoerotic tension between them serves to underscore the presence of homosexuality even within their geographical location, and even within their socio-economic class. Marceline’s and the baby’s subsequent death indicates a collapse of the heterosexual order even when it is situated in its optimal environment.

As the narrative moves from Algeria and Tunisia to Normandy and Paris, we observe the parallels between Michel’s two worlds. One of the recurring points in literature on Gide’s work is how the Arab boys are positioned with respect to Michel. Their apparent

economic disadvantage and the racial dynamics between the members of the colonized and colonizing countries put them in a position of inferiority. *The Immoralist*, after all, is a work that is steeped in the colonial discourse – Gide utilizes colonialism and the dynamics it brings about in order to establish Michel’s sexuality in a way that does not upset western sensibilities in a significant manner. Michel’s (homo)sexual awakening takes place in Tunis and Algeria, and as he begins to embrace his queerness, he becomes more and more distanced from his western background. In fact, Michel’s mere presence in Tunis and Algeria is a direct result of the colonial regime. To put it in Said’s terms, Michel has a *positional superiority* with respect to the Arab boys he encounters – he has penetrated *their* country, his money allows him the passage to Algeria, and it also allows him the companionship of these boys. And above all, Michel has the luxury of leaving any time he wishes – he is not tied to this country by any means. This freedom allows him the space to act as he wishes. Aside from his positional superiority, Michel also has the advantage of *representing* the Orient. Michel is the one recounting the story, he is the one with the means to recount the story. The Arab boys are ultimately silent. Though we may guess at their thoughts and motivations, we do not know. There is no place for them to speak within a discourse created by the west. Yet despite their silence, they are not ineffectual – in fact, their presence and their interaction with Michel creates the entire narrative, provokes the entire story line. In *Orientalism*, Said writes:

I mean to say that in discussions of the Orient, the Orient is all absence, whereas one feels the Orientalist and what he says as presence; yet we must not forget that the Orientalist’s presence is enabled by the Orient’s effective absence. (208)

The power dynamic between Michel and the Arab boys, whose rules has been established by decades of colonial rule, also inscribes the rules of their relationship – it is due to this hegemonic power dynamic that Michel can experience his homosexuality without any fear of penalty or moral outrage.

A similar dynamic is at play also at La Moriniere – Michel’s status as the owner of the farm places him in a privileged position with respect to Alcide and Charles. It is partially through this positional superiority that he can enter into transgressive relationships with the two young men. As is the case with the various Arab boys, Michel finds it easy to lose interest in Charles in favor of Alcide – it is not *who* they are that is important but

rather *what they do for him*. Ashour, Bachir, Charles and Alcide seem, at times, like mere functions of the environment rather than subjects in their own right. In Part III of *Orientalism*, “Orientalism Now,” Said talks about the French interest in the Orient in similar terms:

The point here is that the space of weaker or underdeveloped regions like the Orient was viewed as something inviting French interest, penetration, insemination – in short, colonization. (219)

It is not merely that the landscape is orientalized through the extremely sensual descriptions and its effect on Michel’s psyche. The Arab boys he meets are also a part of this landscape – a part that is rendered mostly silent throughout the novel. In Michel’s encounter with these boys, we can see the influence of colonial narratives. When Michel begins his walks with Bachir upon his recovery, it is not Bachir’s health and youthfulness that is emphasized, but rather his subservience. Bachir walks behind him “as faithful and docile as a dog” (32). Now that Michel himself is mobile again, it is not Bachir’s agency that he emphasizes, but rather his docility, and the way Michel perceives him to take the more submissive role upon the restoration of the older, male, European figure which Michel symbolizes. When Bachir is taken away due to his responsibilities to his family – his mother and sister need him to help out – Michel wastes very little time replacing him with fourteen-year-old Ashour, which in turn, proves interchangeable with any other boy he may encounter:

For all that I liked Bachir, I knew him too well now and I was glad to have a change. I even promised myself I would come to the park on my own one day, sit on a bench and wait for some pleasant chance encounter. . . (33)

The interchangeability of the Arab boys imply that they are important to Michel insofar as they serve a certain function – the function of a racially and economically inferior object upon which Michel can exert his own power and superiority. Whether it’s Bachir, Ashour or Moktir, what really matters about these Arab boys is their position with respect to Michel. Similarly in Part II of the novel, Michel easily dismisses Charles once he no longer interests him, and shifts his attention to Alcide instead. What Alcide offers him, of course, is the thrill of transgression.

Gide uses the motif of transgression various times throughout the novel in order to signify Michel’s departure from the hegemonic, heterosexual order. Taking part or being

complicit in activities that diverge from the moral norms of the society such as poaching or turning a blind eye to theft, are set as parallels to Michel's homosexuality, which of course, also lies outside of the strictly defined moral codes of his culture. In his hotel room in Tunisia where he is trying to recover from tuberculosis, Michel witnesses Moktir, another one of the Arab boys, steal a pair of scissors through the mirror. As Michel reflects upon this episode to his friends, he says, "In fact, I would have to say that the feeling that swept over me was nothing other than joy!" (38). Michel does not let on that he has seen Moktir's theft, and afterwards, Moktir becomes his favorite. Moktir's transgression becomes a source of excitement for Michel, and he is drawn to him precisely because of the silent complicity he shares with Moktir. In fact, we later find out that Moktir was well aware that Michel has seen him steal the scissors and was perplexed as to why Michel has never said anything. By remaining silent, Michel automatically positions himself on the side of the little thief, and the thief, knowing his deliberate silence, gains a certain amount of power over Michel.

The same pattern is repeated with Charles, the young son of Bocage, who encourages him to take a more active part in the running of the farm. Through Charles's tutelage, Michel becomes more involved in the farm, which sets him apart from most bourgeoisie farm owners who leave the running of the farm to their gamekeepers. Charles, of course, is different from the genteel Parisian crowd both in terms of his upbringing and his youth:

He was a handsome fellow, so blooming with health, so lissome and well-made, that even the dreadful city clothes he was wearing in honour didn't make him look too ridiculous. If anything, his bashfulness merely added to his fine, rosy complexion. He looked about fifteen, with his bright, child-like eyes. He was articulate, devoid of false modesty, and, unlike his father, did not speak when he had nothing to say. (61-2)

Like the Arab boys, Charles is at the prime of his health, and his youth lends him a certain air of innocence, which Michel fancies. In that regard, he emerges as a figure parallel to the Arab boys – a figure that is at once enticing and inferior to Michel. His awkwardness in the city clothes emphasizes his country upbringing, while the descriptions of his physical attributes underline his youth and inexperience. And yet, it is Charles that Michel listens to in running his farm and making it more productive and profitable. This points to the fact

that Michel is now following the advice of those who awaken within him similar desires to those he felt in Tunisia and Algiers. The moment Charles ceases to be an awkward youth, however, Michel loses all interest in him. Their meeting the following year is nothing like the first one:

In place of Charles there entered an absurdly pompous figure in a bowler hat. My God, how he had changed! Despite my embarrassment, I tried to not react too coldly to his evident joy at seeing me again; but even his joy displeased me – it was gauche and came across as insincere. I had received him in the drawing-room, and as it was late I couldn't make out his features very well. But when a lamp was brought in, I saw to my disgust that he had let his side-whiskers grow. (92-3)

Once Charles has assumed the manners of a precocious young adult, and adopts a dress and attitude aspiring towards an image of a young man from the city, Michel becomes disgusted with him. Indeed, the language Gide employs in describing Michel's reaction is extremely strong – he is embarrassed and disgusted all at once by this young man who was once the center of his affections.

While Michel's interest in Charles lasts for a while, he is ultimately drawn to another young man, Alcide, who goes poaching in the grounds late at night. Michel is fascinated by this illegal pursuit, and becomes fast friends with the poachers to the extent that their nightly poaching begins to hurt the farm financially. By choosing an illegal adventure over the proper care of his estate, Michel demonstrates his propensity for transgression. The poaching, however, is not simply something that costs him financially. The illegal activities render the farm dysfunctional and decrease productivity, which affects all the farmers and their families. In a sense, this productivity can be read in relation to the 'productivity' of the heterosexual intercourse, and the possibility of procreation, which Michel's obsession with his poacher friends renders impossible.

Michel's relationship with the Arab boys and the young men of La Moriniere, however, cannot easily be explained away by a simple colonizer/colonized, landowner/employee power dynamic that endows Michel with endless authority and his companions with little agency. In his reevaluation of Said's *Orientalism*, Homi Bhabha conceptualizes a way of interpreting the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized that is not solely based on binaries. Instead, he proposes the concept of hybridity, which is defined as the double consciousness of the colonized hovering between

submission on one's own terms and accepting authority as given. At this point in his argument, the concept of "sly civility" comes into play – the colonized submits to the colonizer because it realizes that it is beaten. However, while it does not resist openly to the colonizing force, it nevertheless subverts his authority by not bending to its will all the way. Sly civility, then, becomes a way of existing within the structure of colonization by performing a certain idea of submission while not losing a sense of one's original identity.¹

Indeed, the young Arabs or the farm boys are not without a certain agency even within their disadvantaged situation. Moktir steals from Michel brazenly, and he is quite aware that Michel has seen him and has done nothing to stop him. This gives him the control of the situation, as he is aware that little steps he takes by way of stealing from the colonizer will be tolerated. The interaction between the Arab boys and the Frenchmen then become a game in which both parties are fully aware of the rules – the boys will allow the men their liberties as long as the men keep their silence and turn a blind eye to certain actions. Similarly, Alcide is fully aware that Michel will allow him to poach on his own land in return for the intimacy of their midnight hunts, and Michel's awareness of the unlawfulness of their actions will, in the end, protect the poachers from legal liabilities. In an act of sly civility, both the Arab boys and Alcide find ways to benefit from an arrangement that by all appearances place them in an inferior and powerless position. Just as the colonized cannot escape colonization but has to exist within the system, the boys cannot escape the sexual advances of men of power, but they find ways to at least benefit from these interludes.

All this being said, there are certain questions regarding *The Immoralist* that need to be addressed. The most glaringly obvious one is, of course, why Gide chooses an oriental setting for his novel, when insofar as his diaries and other writing reveal, he is not an orientalist. In his novel *Maurice*, Gide's contemporary, E.M. Forster takes up a similar plotline of the awakening of a young homosexual man, in which the main character, Maurice, has relations with various men from different backgrounds, ranging from

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Sly Civility," in *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 99.

bourgeoisie Cambridge men like himself, to a young gamekeeper. Forster chooses not to associate homosexuality with the East, though he certainly had an experience of the East as evidenced by his other works. *Maurice* confines himself to upper-middle class circles and is racially quite homogenous. So why the colonial setting of Gide's work? One possible reason is the Wilde trials, which took place in 1895, a mere 7 years before *The Immoralist's* publication. The scandal surrounding the trials was surely still fresh in the public's memory, and while Gide was in France and not in England, he may have felt that a direct treatment of this subject may not be the wisest course of action. Forster's *Maurice*, of course, was published posthumously, in 1971 – yet another indication that the political and social climate was adverse to positive portrayals of homosexual relationships. The orientalist setting and the less-than-happy ending, then, can be interpreted as defensive mechanisms against the general public opinion of the time.

Aside from serving as a protective measure, the colonial setting allows the binaries employed in the novel to crystallize, and provides Gide with the opportunity to portray Michel's inner conflicts to a greater extent. Despite the blatant use of certain orientalist tropes, I maintain that *The Immoralist* could be read as an anti-orientalist attempt, since in the end the west does not succeed in 'curing' Michel of his homosexuality and the homosexual experiences he has in the east are mirrored in France, both in Paris and in Normandy. By employing the colonial plot, Gide in fact draws attention to the fact that the locale or the culture has little to no effect on Michel's desires. Even the ending, which is by all appearances miserable as a helpless Michel reaches out to his friends, does not quite condemn Michel. He is physically ill and has to summon his friends in order to ask for their help, but he is, ultimately, not hiding anymore. Despite his physical deterioration, he is living openly with an Arab boy. By reuniting Michel with his friends in Tunis, where the heterosexual French men can witness Michel's open homosexuality, Gide reconciles the east and the west, and implies that despite Michel's geographical removal from the west, he still exists fully and openly in both worlds. The explicit sexuality in the East brings forth the implicit sexuality already present in France, and ultimately it is not the east that is brought into the west by means of orientalist narratives or objects, but the west brought into the east through the arrival of Michel's friends in Tunisia. It is the exposition of the falseness of these binaries between east and west, homosexuality and heterosexuality, and

health and disease that is the crux of Gide's novel. Once we take note of the parallels between the eastern and western setting of the novel, it becomes more and more clear that the defensive nature of the oriental locale is merely a smoke screen, a way to divert the less discerning gaze from what Gide actually means to say – that 'the immoralist' is not just a creature of the east or the west, the affluent or the poor, but he is, rather, in every imaginable locale, among people of all socio-economic status, and is, ultimately, as resilient or as vulnerable as any others that he encounters on his way to self-discovery.

CHAPTER 3

Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*: Afflictions of the East

Queer literature, and early 20th century queer literature in particular, features a great deal of works that make use of the motif of travel and displacement. For most of the authors, travel is a loaded concept that brings with it all sort of connotations that can be utilized in order to delve into issues that are otherwise either impossible to deal with due to societal or political concerns, or that cannot be crystallized to the same extent without the backdrop of a foreign landscape. Orientalist writing, too, shares a common thread with queer writing of its time – sexual desires that are taboo in the western spheres are freely depicted in orientalist works, thereby affording their writers certain liberties that they cannot take with an entirely western cast of characters in an entirely western setting. Much of the queer and orientalist writings of the early 20th century employ similar tropes related to the east in order to make explicit the non-hegemonic (mostly in terms of sexuality) sides of their own psyche in the form of an oriental other, or a western subject as reconfigured by the Orient.

It would, however, be reductive to argue that this dynamic is solely present in the binary of the east versus the west, or the European versus the non-European. The concept of “the other” is frequently used in all sorts of textual (and visual) productions to establish a sense of the self – whether this arena is literature, politics or anthropology. The orientalism inherent in the “us vs. them” mentality is ever-present in the discourses within Europe – processes of othering are used in various contexts within relatively homogenous regions in order to define and redefine an even narrower hegemonic identity. Consider, for instance,

Ireland's "shared hegemonistic oppression"² by England, which puts her position somewhat on par with England's eastern colonies. In Italy, on the other hand, the divide manifests itself not within an empire, but first historically between the northern and southern city-states of the Italian peninsula, and later between the northern and southern provinces of the unified Italy. The familiar orientalist discourse based on clear cut binaries once again manifests itself, but now it is concentrated within a geographically small, religion and ethnicity-wise homogenous area:

In the North, people were citizens; in the South they were subjects. . . In the North the crucial social, political, and even religious allegiances and alignments were horizontal, while those in the South were vertical. Collaboration, mutual assistance, civic obligation, and even trust. . . were the distinguishing features in the North. The chief virtue in the South, by contrast, was the imposition of hierarchy and order on latent anarchy. (Putnam, 130)

The south, then, is formulated in a very similar fashion to how the east is formulated in orientalist discourse. And just as the east, by virtue of its supposed backwardness and inferiority, serves as a locale of western fantasies, so did the Mediterranean for northern Europe. Aside from a vast economical or agricultural exploitation of the south, there is also the sexual exploitation, which has long been a part of the cultural, literary and artistic discourse regarding the Mediterranean.³ As Robert Aldrich outlines in the introduction to his *Seduction of the Mediterranean*, the south serves as a setting in which the strict moral codes of the north could be bent, and displacement becomes a way of hiding 'deviant' relationships or excusing misbehavior.⁴ The relationship between northern Europe and the Mediterranean as portrayed by literary and artistic works before sexual liberation (gay or

² Joep Leersen, "Ireland and the Orient," in *Oriental Prospects: Western Literature and the Lure of the East*, ed. C.C. Barfoot and Theo D'. Haen, (Amsterdam: Rodopi), 168. Leersen also points out that there is a tendency in 19th century Anglo-Irish literature to self-exoticize and write for a specifically English audience, which perhaps could be read as a version of sly civility.

³ Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 182-3.

⁴ Ibid. 8-9.

heterosexual) shows a great deal of similarity to Said's argument about how the west has traditionally positioned itself with respect to the east, and how it 'gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.'⁵ The Mediterranean, consequently, becomes a locale of internal orientalism, in which any region, group, cultural or religious practice that lies outside of the hegemonic 'center' is subjected to discrimination, orientalism and exoticism.

This notion of internal orientalism is what lies at the heart of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. The theme of exploring one's sexuality through travel is situated not in an oriental setting, but rather within Europe. The protagonist of the novella, Gustav von Aschenbach, is an aging scholar who has hitherto dedicated his life to his intellectual pursuits, and has led an excessively dignified existence characterized by his strict discipline and work ethic. Upon seeing a foreign traveler in Munich during one of his customary afternoon walks, he is struck with a sense of *Wanderlust* and decides to take a break from his work. While this desire to travel inspired by a foreign element hearkens back to the beginning of most orientalist works, Aschenbach is quite unwilling to stray too far from his home. He ends up going to Venice, where he falls in love with a young Polish boy named Tadzio. Despite the cholera epidemic that seizes the city, Aschenbach is unwilling to leave Tadzio behind, and finally succumbs to the illness as he watches Tadzio play on the beach one last time.

The lack of an oriental setting in Mann's *Death in Venice* does not mean that the novella is not built upon the similar binaries of other orientalist works. Binaries such as mind versus the body, health versus disease, and homosexuality versus heterosexuality that are present in Gide's *The Immoralist* are also very much a part of Mann's narrative. While Gide utilizes the oriental setting to make his meaning more explicit, Mann emphasizes a slightly different point by explicating these issues within Europe. Through a distinction between northern and southern Europe – namely Germany and Italy in Mann's case – he ultimately draws attention to the othering processes at play within a distinctly western and Christian region. *Death in Venice*, then, serves as a great example of how orientalist tropes can be applied to narrower cultural spheres, where the east/west binaries are projected onto factions within a relatively homogenous region.

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1979), 3.

In his review of *Death in Venice*, Edgar Rosenberg points out the parallel between the five-chapter division of the novella and the five-act division of classical tragedy.⁶ Indeed, just as the first act of a tragedy usually introduces the characters as it foreshadows the overarching themes of the play, the first chapter of *Death in Venice* subtly introduces the motifs and binaries that dominate much of the narrative in the following chapters. The novella begins just as Gustav von Aschenbach takes a break from his morning's work to take a stroll in the city. The academic work that he does is described in a peculiar fashion, which immediately calls forth images of physicality:

He had been overstrained by the difficult and dangerous morning's work, which just now required particular discretion, caution, penetration, and precision of will. (3)

There is almost a physical quality to the work that Aschenbach undertakes – it is *dangerous* and it requires *caution*. From the very first sentences of the novella, Mann gives us hints that Aschenbach is venturing into a forbidden territory – both intellectually, and, as we later find out, quite literally. To invigorate himself, Aschenbach decides to take a walk in the city, which leads to the strange encounter with a man he assumes to be a foreign traveler. This foreign man becomes one of the recurrent images of the novella – we see his echo in the gondolier and the gipsy singer later on in the Venice chapters. The man's appearance evokes in Aschenbach a certain curiosity, wonder, and eventually an undeniable feeling of wanderlust:

He was clearly not of Bavarian stock, and in any case the wide and straight-brimmed straw hat that covered his head lent him the appearance of a foreigner, of a traveler from afar. . . With his head held up, so that his Adam's apple protruded nakedly from the thin neck that emerged from his loose sport shirt, he gazed intently into the distance with colorless, red-lashed eyes, between which stood two stark vertical furrows that went rather oddly with his short, turned-up nose. It may be that his elevated and elevating location had something to do with it, but his posture conveyed an impression of imperious surveillance, fortitude, even wildness. His lips seemed insufficient, perhaps because he was squinting, blinded, toward the setting sun or maybe because he was afflicted by facial deformity – in any case they were retracted to such an extent that his teeth, revealed as far as the gums, menacingly displayed their entire white length. (4)

The grotesque yet otherworldly description of the man brings forth a certain tension to the narrative – we are at once repulsed and drawn in by this figure whose unexplained presence

⁶ Edgar Rosenberg, "Mann's *Death in Venice*," in *Explicator* 62 (2004), 154.

at the chapel steps connects him both to a Christian order and to foreign lands. His strong stance and physically elevated position lends him an aura of authority but his foreignness somewhat undercuts this, and implies that he does not really belong to this environment. The potential facial deformity and the bared teeth that Aschenbach takes note of hints at an animalistic, almost sub-human quality that connotes danger and wilderness. Quite ironically, it is this ambiguous figure of danger and enticement that Aschenbach encounters when he seeks respite from the danger of the intellectual work he undertakes. In a way, the figure can be read as the embodiment of the danger that Aschenbach feels in his mind – what this foreign man is, is nothing more than a sense of danger made manifest and put upon the pedestal of the very foundation of western Europe, on the steps of a chapel overlooking a member of the congregation. The foreign, dangerous element, then, is already at the heart of Europe – in fact it is always already present within the cultural sphere – even if it is somewhat restrained and subdued. Perhaps, we might even argue that the restraints imposed upon it are what make the figure of the other appear so wild, so savage and dangerous.

It is precisely the foreignness of the figure that incites wanderlust in Aschenbach. Since the scholar already seeks respite from his intellectual work, he is inclined to any diversion – when he encounters a perceived traveler, the idea is implanted in his brain. The passage in which Aschenbach processes the emotions the traveler stirs in him is remarkable in its intensity and the way in which the exotic imagery imbues his psyche:

Aschenbach's imagination was set working. He felt a sudden, strange expansion of his inner space, a rambling unrest, a youthful thirst for faraway places, a feeling so intense, so new – or rather so long unused and forgotten – that he stood rooted to the spot. . . It was wanderlust and nothing more, but it was an overwhelming wanderlust that rose to a passion and even to a delusion. (4-5)

The wanderlust evokes in Aschenbach's imagination a decadent landscape – he imagines “a tropical swamp under a vaporous sky, moist, luxuriant, and monstrous,” in it, he sees “hairy palm trunks rise up near and far out of rank fern brakes, out of thick, swollen, wildly blooming vegetation” and among the wilderness he glimpses the “eyes of a lurking tiger sparkle between the gnarled stems of a bamboo thicket” which makes “his heart pound with horror and mysterious desire” (5). The overly sexualized depiction and the rampant phallic symbolism of the hairy trunks and lurking beasts suddenly renders this wanderlust not

merely a desire for a foreign place, but for a foreign experience, and by extension, a foreign other to *be experienced*. The image of the tropical swamp, of course, can also be read as a landscape of disease as well as a signifier of the exotic. The terrain is both threatening and enticing – the unknown and the unexplored assume sexual meanings, and in a manner, seduce Aschenbach into a new set of experiences. Mann calls Aschenbach’s experience a “vision” (5) but perhaps it is more justly characterized as an omen, as a foreshadowing of what is yet to come. Despite the fact that Aschenbach has “never been tempted to leave Europe before” (5) the intensity of his vision at the very least compels him to leave his present condition – both physically and emotionally. This desire to travel, the thirst for a foreign experience, however, is not something that is created by an outside influence. Indeed, Aschenbach himself acknowledges that the impulse is simply “long unused and forgotten”, that is, the foreigner merely awakens within him what he has once felt before, what he has since buried deep into his subconscious, what is *already there*. As Aldrich, too, notes in his introduction, the images associated with male homosexuality, especially in the era before sexual liberation, had to be heavily coded.⁷ The wanderlust, then, could be interpreted as sexual desire, and more specifically, homosexual desire. While this impulse may have been “moderated and set right by reason and a self-discipline practiced since early youth,” (5) it can no longer be contained. From the moment Aschenbach leaves Munich, his latent desires are no longer so strictly controlled and the battle between his mind and body begins.

By the end of Chapter 1, Mann has effectively outlined the central issues in the novella: The draw of the exotic versus the resistance of the intellectually inclined mind, the strain between youthful desire and the hesitations of the old, the conflict between the Christian setting as opposed to the feelings inspired by a figure foreign to it. Aschenbach is stuck between these competing tensions – he feels the temptation and the “desire for release, freedom and forgetfulness” (6) and yet his sense of discipline as an aged scholar makes him hesitant about giving into these impulses. Ultimately, however, the scholar has little choice in the matter – if he is to continue with his work, he must take the time off and clear his mind. “The malaise of scrupulousness” (6) disables him – even his beloved work is depicted in pathological terms and defined more like a symptom of a disease rather than

⁷ Aldrich, 7.

a fulfilling intellectual activity. Quite ironically, Aschenbach reasons that “foreign air and an infusion of new blood” (6) might renew his productivity and resolves to travel south for a small vacation. This, of course, proves rather true in a morbid way – while the foreign air and infusion ultimately kill him, they also render his imagination more productive than he ever could have fathomed. It is through the foreign air and infusion that Aschenbach is able to delve into emotions that had hitherto been unimaginable to him, and it is also through the foreign air and infusion that he is, in a sense, released from the malaise of the work he has dedicated his life to.

While the locale in *Death in Venice* plays a significant part in making explicit Aschenbach’s sexuality, it is by no means the defining factor of it. In other words, the foreign setting is not used as the sole catalyst to or the reason for Aschenbach’s homosexual desire. While the Italian city allows Aschenbach an escape from his disciplined life, it is not through its exoticism but rather by mere virtue of being a different place than Aschenbach’s own habitat that Venice truly emerges as a locale of (homo)sexual desire. Indeed, even in Munich Aschenbach’s awakening is already in motion. The figure of the traveler incites in him an intense emotional upheaval, but ultimately Mann does not cite even this influence as the beginning of Aschenbach’s desire. In Chapter 2, which focuses on Aschenbach’s past, we witness the same conflict between desire and rationality in his family history:

His ancestors had been officers, judges, and government functionaries, men who had led upright lives of austere decency devoted to the service of king and country. A more ardent spirituality had expressed itself once among them in the person of a preacher; more impetuous and sensuous blood had entered the family line in the previous generation through the writer’s mother, the daughter of a Bohemian music director. It was from her that he had in his features the traits of a foreign race. The marriage of sober conscientiousness devoted to service with darker, more fiery impulses engendered an artist and indeed this very special artist. (7)

This combination of more sober and more fiery inclinations sums up Aschenbach’s subsequent experiences par excellence. What it really implies, however, is that Aschenbach’s desires are not produced by the traveler or the foreign locale he visits – this propensity for sensuality is already in his blood. While this may seem like too much of an essentialist point of view to most contemporary readers, what really matters is that Mann chooses to portray Aschenbach’s desire as an inherent trait rather than a foreign, exotic or

dangerous influence. The foreign locale might make the (homosexual) desire more explicit, or make its manifestation possible, but it does not *create* it. By thus absolving the setting of this responsibility, Mann in fact makes a profoundly progressive statement about the nature of human sexuality.

Despite his fiery impulses however, Aschenbach has clearly led a strict and dignified life up until this point in the novella. One of the most telling images associated with Aschenbach is the image of a closed fist (which represents the way in which he has lived his life) versus a comfortably dangling, open hand (which is a level of relaxation that Aschenbach has never been able to succumb to). This particular image that characterizes the amount of self-control that Aschenbach possesses, later becomes unraveled through echoing images of his arms and legs dangling off of chairs as he watches Tadzio on the beach, and the final scene in which Aschenbach, seated on his beach chair as usual, quietly succumbs to his death:

When he got sick in Vienna around the age of thirty-five, a canny observer remarked about him to friends, “You see, Aschenbach has always lived like this” – and the speaker closed the fingers of his left hand into a fist – “never like this” – and he let his open hand *dangle comfortably* from the arm of the chair. (8)

Then he raised his head and with both his arms, which were *hanging limp* over the arms of the chair, he made a slow circling and lifting movement. . . (34)

The observer sat there as he had sat once before, when for the first time he had met the gaze of those dawn-gray eyes cast back at him from that threshold. His head, *resting* on the back of the chair, had slowly followed the movements of the one who was striding about out there; now his head rose as if returning the gaze, then *sank* on his chest so that his eyes looked out from beneath. His face took on the *slack, intimately absorbed expression* of deep sleep. (62-3) [Italics mine]

As Aschenbach becomes increasingly obsessed with Tadzio, and as the desires and impulses of his more fiery – Dionysian – side prevail upon his rational – Apollonian – side, his strictly proper and tightly wound personality begins to relax bit by bit. It is not that Aschenbach does not try to fight this unexpected desire – in fact, he is almost out of Venice for good when a mistake with his luggage compels him to stay an extra day, which promptly dissolves his resolve to leave Tadzio behind. The second excerpt above is from the scene in which he sees Tadzio for the first time after his unexpected return to the hotel. The end of the passage marks a definitive turn in Aschenbach’s struggle between his

rational and passionate impulses – in the end he turns “his palms forward, as if to signify an opening and extending of his embrace” (34) – a gesture that Mann defines as one of “readiness, of welcome, and of relaxed acceptance” (34).

The dichotomy between the Dionysian and the Apollonian serves as a structuring element throughout the novella. Apollo, who is the god of the sun, governs dreams and reason, while Dionysus, the god of wine, governs sensuality, intoxication and ecstasy. Aschenbach’s entire past, of course, is a testament to an Apollonian lifestyle. Both his personal and academic life have been ruled by reason – by dignity, perseverance and discipline. His vacation in Venice and meeting Tadzio, however, awaken the Dionysian in him. While the Greeks never formulated the two deities as direct opposites, Mann seems to take a more Nietzschean approach – Nietzsche argued that the fusion of these two contrasting impulses and inclinations is what creates theater, and in particular, tragedy. As Aschenbach struggles between leaving or staying in Venice, going back to his work or watching Tadzio, staying true to his principles or transforming himself physically much like the old man he makes fun of on the ferry to Venice, he is in fact struggling between much larger dichotomies than the specific dilemmas he is faced with.

In essence, the Apollonian–Dionysian dichotomy is a struggle between intellectual pursuits and bodily desires. The Apollonian represents Aschenbach’s academic work, whereas the Dionysian, which comes alive the moment he encounters the foreign traveler on the chapel steps in Munich, represents wanderlust, the desire for the foreign, the exotic, and the forbidden. This binary between the intellectual and the sensual finds its parallel in the novella in similar binaries; namely, Italy versus Germany, Greek versus Christian, young versus old, disease versus health and homosexuality versus heterosexuality. In fact, *Death in Venice* can be read as a study in binaries in which various contrasting paradigms and opposing forces intersect and build on one another like concentric rings of water rippling on a lake, each effecting and expanding the other.

Stuck between these binaries, Aschenbach constantly tries to reconcile them and navigate his way through his conflicting desires. His is an exercise in negotiation – when he is struck by wanderlust, his more rational side tempers his impulses:

Besides, even this impulse that had come over him so suddenly and so late in life was quickly moderated and set right by reason and self-discipline practiced since early youth. (5)

At the beginning of Chapter 3, Mann uses the first of his many qualifiers for Aschenbach: “The eager traveler” (13) he writes, was forced to “remain in Munich for about two weeks after his walk in the park.” As eager as Aschenbach is for his trip, however, he is not yet wholly enticed by the exotic images evoked by his encounter with the foreign traveler – what he seeks is “someplace foreign, someplace isolated, but someplace nonetheless easy to get to” (13). In Munich, his decisions are still made with his more rational side, and he is reluctant to take any unnecessary risks or expose himself to a locale too different than the one he is accustomed to. As he gets farther away from Germany, and away from the “exclusively Austrian clientele” (13) at his first destination on an Adriatic island, his decisions become more and more spontaneous and indulgent.

From the moment he sets foot on the ferry going to Venice, everything around him begins to transform. The sailor who shows him to the ticket booth treats him with “smirking politeness,” (13) the movements of the ticket man have an “anesthetic and diversionary effect” (14) but most importantly, Aschenbach encounters a particular figure who exudes a certain uncanniness. On the ferry, he watches a group of young people joking around, and one of them in particular draws his attention:

One of the merrymakers, wearing a bright yellow, overly fashionable summer suit, red tie, and a panama hat with a cockily turned-up brim, outdid all the others in his screeching gaiety. But scarcely had Aschenbach gotten a closer look at him when he realized with something like horror that this youth was not genuine. He was old, no doubt about it. There were wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. The faint carmine of his cheeks was rouge; the brown hair beneath the colorfully banded hat was a wig; his neck was shrunken and sinewy. . . With a shudder Aschenbach watched him and his interaction with his friends. Did they not know, had they not noticed that he was old, that he had no right to wear their foppish and colorful clothes, had no right to pretend to be one of their own? (14-5)

The figure of the old man incites in Aschenbach not a sense of embarrassment that might come from seeing somebody else act foolish, but rather *horror*. Aschenbach is horrified of this figure – perhaps, in this man, he sees where his desires could take him, if left unbridled. Indeed, not much later, Aschenbach dyes his hair, and attempts to dress in a more youthful fashion to impress and get the attention of Tadzio. In a way, this figure of the old man is reminiscent of the foreign traveler in its grotesqueness. Both serve as interventions to Aschenbach’s orderly life – the foreign traveler encourages him to leave

Munich, while the old man serves as a warning for what might happen if he should stray too far. Aschenbach himself is aware of this on some level – he is horrified by the figure, and he regards the entire episode as something out of the ordinary:

It seemed to him that things were starting to take a turn away from the ordinary, as if a dreamy estrangement, a bizarre distortion of the world were setting in and would spread if he did not put a stop to it by shading his eyes a bit and taking another look around him. (15)

With the introduction of the old man to Aschenbach's consciousness, things become distorted – the old man, then, is a signifier of things yet to come, or perhaps of the time when it is not the environment but Aschenbach's rationality that is being distorted. In fact, even the gondola ride to his hotel takes on a secondary meaning:

Who would not need to fight off a fleeting shiver, a secret aversion and anxiety, at the prospect of boarding a Venetian gondola for the first time or after a long absence? This strange conveyance, surviving unchanged since legendary times and painted the particular sort of black ordinarily reserved for coffins, makes one think of silent, criminal adventures in a darkness full of splashing sounds; makes one think even more of death itself, of biers and gloomy funerals, and of that final, silent journey. (17)

Aschenbach's thought process is quite telling: an experience that most people would deem interesting or romantic becomes, in his mind, a morbid journey. The gondolier refuses to take him to the vaporetto as Aschenbach asks and begins to row him straight to his hotel, telling him "I row you well." Aschenbach thinks to himself, "Even if you are just after my money, even if you send me to the house of Aides with a stroke of your oar from behind you will have rowed me well" (19). The canals of Venice, then, become the rivers Styx and Acheron, and the gondolier emerges as a Charon-like figure, rowing Aschenbach into the underworld. Ironically enough, the gondolier turns out to be an unregistered one, and ends up having to escape the police before Aschenbach can pay him. If not paying Charon for the passage means having to wander the shores for a hundred years, stuck between life and the underworld, then perhaps this is the tragic turning point of the entire novella. It quite subtly foreshadows Aschenbach's fate – how he will be stuck in the diseased city, teetering on the edge of life and death; and how, unable to leave, he will wait out his hundred years before he can finally enter the underworld.

The allusions to Greek mythology, while present in the previous chapters, intensify and become more explicit once Aschenbach gets to Venice. In other words, Aschenbach is now beginning to get closer to the other end of the dichotomies I outlined earlier. As he moves from western Europe to Mediterranean Europe, Aschenbach is also moving from Christianity to Hellenism, from the rational to the sensual, the intellectual to the physical, and of course, from the heterosexual realm to the homosexual one. Once alone in a foreign (exotic) land, he is no longer so heavily constrained by the hegemonic structures of his homeland. Travel becomes a way of distancing one's self from one's situation, from the structures and institutions in which one has existed from birth. It also creates room for introspection – once physically afar, the individual is at liberty to take the same distance towards his own self, and to discover within things that could not emerge in a different set of circumstances. Aschenbach, too, turns introspective during his time in Venice, and discovers the same distortion within himself that he observes around him:

Loneliness fosters that which is original, daringly and bewilderingly beautiful, poetic. But loneliness also fosters that which is perverse, incongruous, absurd, forbidden. Thus the events of the journey that brought him here – the ghastly old fop with his drivel about a beloved, the outlaw gondolier who was cheated of his reward – continued to trouble the traveler's mind. Though they did not appear contrary to reason, did not really give cause for second thoughts, the paradox was that they were nonetheless fundamentally and essentially odd, or so it seemed to him, and therefore troubling precisely because of this paradox. (21)

The 'odd' figures Aschenbach encounters – the foreign traveler, the old fop, the gondolier, the gipsy singer – are in fact like a single recurring figure which connotes a sense of queerness, and at times, constitutes a warning. Each brings forth various aspects of Aschenbach's psyche: The foreign traveler incites in him a desire to travel (that is, a desire for the foreign), the old fop reflects Aschenbach's insecurities and fears about aging and being ridiculed, the gondolier embodies a foreign influence which takes control of Aschenbach's life (and quite literally, gives direction to it) and the gipsy singer, with his silent complicity, serves to entertain the hotel guests and Aschenbach to their deaths. All of them draw Aschenbach into a web that he cannot extricate himself from, a web that ultimately leads to his death.

As impulsive as Aschenbach grows throughout the novella, his desires still cause a great deal of inner conflict. Perhaps this is why he attempts to reconcile his attraction to

Tadzio by integrating it into an intellectual framework. He cannot help but experience this sexual (re)awakening through the motif of the Dionysian versus the Apollonian – by situating his desire as a part of the Greek model, Aschenbach seeks to create a reconciliatory space between physical and intellectual realms. From the very first moment he sees Tadzio at breakfast, Aschenbach describes him in a Hellenistic fashion:

Aschenbach notes with astonishment that the boy was perfectly beautiful. His face, pale and gracefully reserved, was framed by honey-colored curls. He had a straight nose and a lovely mouth and wore an expression of exquisite, divine solemnity. It was a face reminiscent of Greek statues from the noblest period of antiquity; it combined perfection of form with a unique personal charm that caused the onlooker to doubt ever having met with anything in nature or in art that could match its perfection. . . Softness and tenderness were the obvious conditions of the boy's existence. No one had yet been so bold as to take the scissors to his lovely hair, which curled about his brows, over his ears, and even further down the back of his neck – as it does on the statue of the “Boy Pulling a Thorn from his Foot. (21-2)

“Eyes captivated by the beautiful vision before him,” (22) Aschenbach's imagination is set in motion. He calls him “little Phaeacian,” (24) likening him to the festive, pleasure-loving island people from *The Odyssey*; he sees his face as “the face of Eros,” (25) the Greek god of love, which lends the young boy an aura of divinity that he most likely does not possess; and when Tadzio's friend Yashu kisses him, Aschenbach wants to say to Yashu, “Let me give you a piece of advice Kritobulos. Take a year's journey. You will need at least that much time for your recovery,” (27) which is the advice Socrates gave to Kritobulos, who had kissed the handsome son of Alcibiades, according to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. (Bk. 1, ch.3).⁸ The Hellenistic imagery continues until the end of the novella, as Mann either casts Tadzio as a Greek deity, or describes his person and movements in an increasingly mythical and pastoral fashion.

Aschenbach's preoccupation with this sort of imagery, of course, could largely be attributed to his background – as a renowned scholar, he is presumably well-versed in Greek and Roman history and mythology. However, this density of the Greek influence on the novella also points to an attempt on Aschenbach's part to justify his desires, and his need to place this new experience within the framework of what is familiar, and by virtue of being academic, respectable. The lack of explicit physicality in the novella – with the

⁸ Thomas Mann, and Clayton Koelb. *Death in Venice: a New Translation, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 28.

exception of the dream sequence – furthers the coded nature of the story, and in combination with the highly intellectual manner in which Aschenbach formulates his desires, perhaps serves as a potential deterrent against a negative public reception of the novella.

While the Greek allusions provide an intellectual framework for Aschenbach's emotions, the most potent and telling motif in the novella is that of disease. The disease narrative subtly enters the story from the very beginning – Aschenbach refers to the 'mild breath of sirocco,' (18) which is a moist wind ideal for spreading diseases, when he first gets to Venice. As he gets more and more entangled in his desire for Tadzio, the atmosphere of the city becomes more and more overwhelming. After spending a morning watching Tadzio on the beach, Aschenbach decides to take a walk in the city. This walk, however, initiates "a complete reversal of his mood and his plans" (29):

The air in the little streets was *odiously oppressive*, so thick that the smells surging out of the dwellings, shops, and restaurants, a *suffocating* vapor of oil, perfume, and more, all hung about and failed to disperse. Cigarette smoke hovered in place and only slowly disappeared. The *press* of people in the small spaces annoyed rather than entertained him as he walked. The longer he went on, the more it became a torture. He was *overwhelmed* by that horrible condition produced by the sea air in combination with the sirocco, a state of both *nervousness and debility* at once. He began to *sweat* uncomfortably. His eyes ceased to function, his breathing was *labored*, he felt *feverish*, the blood *pounded* in his head. (29) [Italics mine]

What Aschenbach exhibits, of course, are the symptoms of a panic attack. After admiring Tadzio from afar for a few days, and upon leaving his immediate presence, Aschenbach is now alone with his thoughts in the city for the first time, and the foreign environment, sights and smells overwhelm him to an unusual degree. The panic attack he experiences could be read as a physical manifestation of the homosexual panic he feels upon being forced to confront the intensity and the extent of his interest in Tadzio. The panic overwhelms Aschenbach, so much so that he immediately decides that he must be away from "the noxious extra of the lagoon and its fever-inducing vapors" (30) and informs the hotel that he will be leaving the next morning. Come morning, however, he has already begun to second-guess his hasty decision:

What this morning had been a partial regret, a slight doubt as to the rightness of his decision, now became affliction, genuine pain, a suffering in his soul so bitter that it brought tears to his eyes more than once. [. . .] What was so hard to take, actually

sometimes downright impossible to endure, was the thought that he would never see Venice again, that this was a parting forever. Since it had become evident for the second time that the city made him sick, since for the second time he had been forced to run head over heels away, he would have to regard it henceforth as an impossible destination, forbidden to him, something he simply was not up to, something it would be pointless for him to try for again. (32)

The possible finality of his decision weighs heavily on Aschenbach – if he leaves Venice (and by extension, Tadzio) he may never experience anything like it ever again. Leaving would mean admitting defeat, admitting that he is perhaps too old for such sensuality, and it would mean walking away from this sexual reawakening forever before getting a chance to experience what it has to offer. Just as he is leaving the city, however, a case of misplaced luggage compels him to remain in Venice an extra day, at the end of which he decides to cancel his departure. The decision to leave thus (at least partially) taken out of his hands, Aschenbach can once again delude himself into justifying his emotionally indulgent decisions by rational means. He once again begins to indulge in watching Tadzio on the beach and following him Venice, all the while making allusions to Greek mythology, Plato's *Phaedrus* and thus attempting to “carry his beauty into the realm of intellect” (39) which renders his emotions permissible.

This distant spectatorship and fanciful imaginations, however, cannot last. Soon, the first signs of the Asiatic cholera begin to appear in the city: The dis-ease in Aschenbach's mind is now fully manifest in the physical world around him, and poses as an imminent threat not only to Aschenbach's rationality, but to his life. In his fourth week in Venice, Aschenbach begins to hear disturbing news from various sources. An overly talkative barber offhandedly remarks, “But you're staying, sir, aren't you. You're not afraid of the disease” (44). Later that day, Aschenbach notices a “peculiar aroma” (44) in the air, which he realizes has been around for a few days:

It was a medicinally sweet smell that put in mind thoughts of misery and wounds and ominous cleanliness. [. . .] The odor became stronger in the narrow streets. (44)

A glance at the newspapers tells him that the official denial of any disease in the city is disputed by German and Austrian sources. Despite grasping the potential gravity of the situation, Aschenbach thinks to himself, “Best to keep quiet. Best to keep it under wraps” (45). By deciding to keep quiet about the disease lest the Polish family hear of it and decide

to leave, Aschenbach becomes complicit in the subterfuge of the locals who are trying to keep the tourists uninformed, and in the city. While the disease can be read as the physical manifestation of Aschenbach's emotions – dangerously enticing but deadly and destructive at the same time – the way Aschenbach deals with the disease is quite surprising. He neither flees it, nor tries to take precautions. By staying silent, he helps the locals in keeping the cholera a secret and makes sure that the Polish family will be around longer, hoping that the situation might somehow get him closer to Tadzio:

For passion, like crime, does not sit well with the sure order and even course of everyday life; it welcomes every loosening of the social fabric, every confusion and affliction visited upon the world, for passion sees in such disorder a vague hope of finding an advantage for itself. Thus Aschenbach felt a dark satisfaction over the official cover-up of events in the dirty alleys of Venice. This heinous secret belonging to the city fused and became one with his own innermost secret, which he was likewise intent upon keeping. (45)

In a single passage, Mann brings together the motif of disease and Aschenbach's homosexuality, linking them through a perceived 'out-of-ordinariness' that they share. The disease, then, becomes a metaphor for Aschenbach's sexuality – the more it takes hold of the city, the more Aschenbach is seized by his feelings towards Tadzio. By positioning disease and homosexuality on par with one another, Mann takes part in a long-standing tradition of linking non-heterosexual sexualities to non-healthy images. Not only does Mann connect these two concepts intimately by drawing parallels between the insidious spread of the disease throughout the city and Aschenbach's growing obsession with Tadzio, but he also partakes in an orientalist narrative both by setting the novella in Venice, and specifying the origin of the disease as the East.

Despite the threat of getting infected, Aschenbach follows Tadzio to mass at San Marco, and afterwards through the streets of Venice. Everywhere he goes, he senses the "smell of the diseased city" (45). Indeed, even in the cathedral, he cannot avoid the smell of the disease. The possible salvation through Christianity is no longer an option for him – the church offers no refuge for those who wish to flee from the cholera. Aschenbach keeps following the family even after they take a gondola. This gondola ride in pursuit of the Polish family, however, is markedly different than his previous gondola ride, which has a sinister and threatening effect on Aschenbach. This time he takes immense pleasure in the ride:

That was Venice, that coquettish, dubious beauty of a city, half fairy tale and half tourist trap, in whose noisome air the fine arts once thrived luxuriantly and where musicians were inspired to create sounds that cradle the listener and seductively rock him to sleep. To the traveler in the midst of his adventure it seemed as if his eyes were drinking in just this luxury, as if his ears were wooed by just such melodies. He remembered, too, that the city was sick and was keeping its secret out of pure greed, and he cast an even more licentious leer toward the gondola floating in the distance before him. (47)

It is only when the disease becomes manifest that Aschenbach becomes more and more explicit with his desires – his eyes “drink in” the luxury, his ears are “wooed.” And putting aside his long assumed elderly scholar identity, Aschenbach dares to cast a “licentious leer” towards Tadzio’s gondola. Deciding that “a humiliation imposed by gods [does] not count,” (48) Aschenbach feels more and more secure in the legitimacy of his desires. This shift is quite crucial – it is not the Christian monotheism that he adheres to now, but the Greek gods of antiquity. He has effectively severed his ties with the god of his upbringing, and has now embraced a different sort of religion, based on a culture that is more forgiving and open than his own.

In Mann’s universe, then, homosexuality can only be made manifest when there is displacement: Displacement of the individual from his homeland to a foreign locale, displacement of religious values and morals one has embraced previously, and displacement of intellectual priorities in favor of sensual ones. By journeying to what is, perhaps, ‘the Orient of Europe’ Aschenbach does not simply change his position physically – he shifts his mental paradigms in order to explore fully what he intimates upon first arriving in the city. The foreign locale allows him the distance he needs in order to overcome the limitations and moral sanctions of his own upbringing and reevaluate the person he thought he was. By setting the novel in Venice, Mann in fact joins a literary (and historical) tradition of queer identities in exile – Gide guides Michel through his sexual awakening in a similar fashion, and Baldwin’s David attempts (though unsuccessfully) to come to terms with his homosexuality in Paris.

The other trope of queer literature that Mann utilizes, of course, is the disease: Just as Gide’s Michel gets tuberculosis upon entering Algeria, and upon recovery becomes more and more aware of his homosexuality, the true extent of Aschenbach’s passion becomes obvious only after the city becomes afflicted with the cholera. This is not to say,

however, that Aschenbach's homosexuality can be read as an affliction – to the contrary, what Mann achieves with this unlikely metaphor is not the supposedly dangerous, infectious or negative aspects of homosexuality but rather its reality. Cholera overtakes Venice even as the locals vehemently deny its existence: no matter how many times they deny it, it is there as a force of nature that leaves those who wish it gone defenseless against it. This is what Mann means to get at – that denying the existence of homosexuality cannot change the simple fact that it is real, and it exists within the very heart of the site they are trying to protect. As imbued as the motif of disease may be with negative connotations, Mann subverts those connotations to make room for another (if a little subtle) meaning, which perhaps makes Aschenbach's death not simply the end result of destructive passions, but the logical conclusion to a story in which the main character has faced his reality, and need not travel any further.

CHAPTER 4

Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*: Queer Identities in Exile

In 1953, James Baldwin published *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, a semi-autobiographical novel exploring issues of religion, racism and the African-American experience in America. The novel was received with high acclaim and has since been cited numerous times as one of the best novels of the century. The reception of Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, however, was lukewarm at best. It was widely criticized by the literary circles as being too white-washed, and in general morally unacceptable, as it depicted homosexual desire in an intensely intimate manner.

The protagonist of *Giovanni's Room*, David, is an American expat in Paris, whose girlfriend, Hella, has just left for a trip to Spain. Introduced to the underground gay scene in Paris by his wealthy Belgian-American friend Jacques, David soon becomes involved with Giovanni, a young Italian man working as a bartender in Jacques' friend Guillaume's bar. David and Giovanni's relationship becomes more intense over the following weeks, though David's struggle with his sexuality and their financial problems often create a tremendous strain. Unable to cope with his homosexuality, David eventually abandons Giovanni for Hella, who has finally returned from Spain and has accepted David's marriage proposal. Giovanni, left destitute and penniless, is dragged into a downward spiral. To survive, he must now depend on Jacques and Guillaume, who both wish to take advantage of him sexually. After Guillaume rapes him, Giovanni murders Guillaume and is sentenced to death. The novel ends with David reflecting on the consequences of his actions on the eve of Giovanni's execution, and being unable to let go of the burden of the part he has played in his impending death.

While the novel is indeed racially quite homogenous, the issue of race nonetheless plays a significant role in the construction of the relationship between David and Giovanni. The more blatant racial divide between the western European and the North African characters in works such as Gide's *The Immoralist* is lacking in *Giovanni's Room*, but a similar dynamic is achieved through a binary between the United States and Europe, and within Europe, between France and Italy. Italy, or the south in general, is construed as the 'other' to northern/western European sensibilities. The dynamic of most orientalist works which manifests itself along the axes of the rational, civilized west versus the emotional, sexually deviant east is now replicated on a smaller scale, as western European countries (usually France, England and Germany) reconstruct the south (Italy and Spain) as the 'other' within Europe, on which they can play out their orientalist and sensual fantasies.

This is precisely the dynamic that Baldwin utilizes and ultimately subverts in *Giovanni's Room* – Giovanni is the racial/cultural other to David and to the French characters of the novel at large, and it is upon his person that each play out their sexual, emotional and even financial fantasies. As a foreigner in France at the mercy of Frenchmen for survival, Giovanni is no better off than Bachir or Ashour in Gide's *The Immoralist*. His relative position of power that derives from his age (he is a man, not a boy) is negated by his socio-economic and racial disadvantage with respect to David, who, while not rich, is still being supported quite generously by his father, and to Jacques and Guillaume, who by virtue of being French citizens and financially well-off, are the privileged members of the cast.

In this chapter, I argue that the orientalist dynamics so explicitly apparent in works set in the east are in fact present even in the heart of the western society, and even in the absence of a geographically 'oriental' other. I will attempt to demonstrate how the concept of orientalism can travel to various contexts quite effortlessly – whether it manifests itself locally as 'orientalism' within Europe, or transnationally as 'orientalism' between America and the continent. Considering that above all, orientalism is a theory of 'the other' and how the self is constructed through this marginalized other, it can prove an effective paradigm in making sense of the ways in which people are othered within Europe, through their nationality, socio-economic status, or sexual identity.

Despite the lukewarm reception of Baldwin's second novel, and the allegations that it was far too white-washed, I argue that Baldwin continues the racial discourse in *Go Tell It On The Mountain* in *Giovanni's Room* and explores the dynamics of race in a more subtle manner as they become intertwined with issues of sexuality. If race and sexuality can both be read as possible arenas of othering in which marginalization takes place through similar mechanisms, then *Giovanni's Room* is neither solely a work on homosexual relationships nor the expatriate experience, but rather a work that delves into the ways in which sexual and racial others are managed and treated by the hegemonic powers and the privileged members of society.

In his 1993-book *The Seduction of the Mediterranean*, Robert Aldrich explores the image of the Mediterranean as a recurring motif in homoerotic writing and art from the 1750s to the 1950s.⁹ His research on Italy, in particular, could potentially shed light to the general attitudes of Baldwin's time towards the Mediterranean, and prove fruitful in exploring the position of Italy with respect to other western European countries. Aldrich writes about a popular pamphlet published in 1902 on homosexuals, in which the author, one Dr. A. Sper, reaches the following conclusions on the relationship between sexual behavior and climate and geography:

In colder, northern climes, where men [are] obliged to work hard just to survive, the sexual instinct [is] less strong than in southern and tropical regions, where warmth, fertility and temperament provoke greater sexual desire. . . .To this heightened sexuality in the South was coupled earlier sexual maturation; whereas Germans reached sexual maturity only between the ages of 15 and 17, Italians did so by the age of 12.

Sper also remarks that southern Italy in general is "a veritable incubator for handsome youths, and Italians themselves appreciated such youthful make beauty."¹⁰ In the 19th and early 20th century, Italy was also a popular destination for sexual tourism, as it was more accessible than the colonies, and offered the climate and atmosphere of the south without

⁹ Aldrich, Robert. *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

¹⁰ Ibid. 162. Sper frames this in a context of pederasty in the South as well as a commentary on the homosexual proclivities of popes and priests.

being entirely foreign. In Chapter 6 of his book, Aldrich also notes that the homosexual relationships enjoyed by western Europeans in the south were still imbued with economical disparity between the two participants, and the power balance tipped always on the side of the western European tourist, rather than the local Italian men and boys.¹¹

So it is in the aftermath of such a culture of sexuality and racial inequality within Europe that Giovanni comes to France. The fact that he is a European does not matter – the past century of sexual tourism in his country of origin has already marked him as potentially sexually available, and ultimately exploitable.¹² Already disadvantaged by his alien status in France, Giovanni is left at the mercy of his French employer, Guillaume, who gives Giovanni a job only in order to exploit him sexually. David, on the other hand, despite sharing the status of a foreigner in Paris with Giovanni, is decidedly in a more advantaged position than he is. Most importantly, David is in Paris by choice – Giovanni, on the other hand, has escaped his life in Italy with no hope of ever returning to it, and must now make a living in Paris. This necessity traps him in certain situations in which Giovanni must compromise on his own values and even allow himself to be used by others in order to survive. David, however, by virtue of his financial situation and his position as a tourist (and not a worker) in Paris, can afford to make decisions accordingly and remove himself from situations that he feels might be compromising. This freedom allows him the luxury of isolating himself from parts of life that he deems dirty and unpleasant. The discourse of innocence and dirtiness comes into play quite often with respect to David's experience of his relationship with Giovanni, the exploration of the American versus European binary in the novel, as Baldwin exposes the destructiveness of this myth of innocence, and extols the honesty of embracing the 'dirtiness' of life.

In his 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein, James Baldwin formulates what has since then become the starting point of most criticism concerning *Giovanni's Room*, namely that "the sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you

¹¹ Aldrich, 182-3.

¹² For more details on the assumed bisexuality of all Italian men, see page 177 of the Aldrich book.

know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality.”¹³ Various critics have quite justly argued that the issues of expatriation and homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room* serve as metaphors for the black experience in America.¹⁴ Through an intersection of these three experiences – homosexual, expatriate and black – Baldwin creates a text that speaks of various levels of marginalization within the structure of the hegemonic French society. While the connection between the three domains is made quite explicit throughout the novel, I would be hesitant to say that the homosexual and the expatriate experiences are subjugated to the black one and are mere paradigms to create a discourse on the marginalization of blacks in America. I propose, rather, that *Giovanni's Room* functions on all these levels quite equally, and the various (racial, sexual, expatriate) identities that come forth in the novel are, in fact, inseparable from and by no means subordinate to one another.

What sets *Giovanni's Room* apart from works that explore queer identities through the (arguably) safer discourse of orientalism is its refusal to adhere to the clichéd power dynamics between the European characters imposing their will upon their native or oriental objects of desire. In Baldwin's novel, the foreign locales do not bring about a sense of freedom – and when they do, it proves quite deadly. All of the characters in *Giovanni's Room* – even Jacques and Guillaume who are natives of Paris – are pushed to the peripheries by the hegemonic order. Despite being part of the social order in Paris – Jacques is independently wealthy, and Guillaume is a business owner – they are still marginalized due to their sexuality and forced to exist within the confines of the underground queer scene. David and Giovanni, of course, experience an even deeper marginalization – David through his position as an American expat, Giovanni through his exile from Italy and his working-class roots. The freedom that Paris promises for each of them becomes their undoing. Looking out the window of his rented summerhouse in southern France, and having to face the consequences of his actions for Giovanni, David finally acknowledges that “nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom” (5).

¹³ Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz, *James Baldwin: America and beyond* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011), 7.

¹⁴ See Nelson (1983), Tomlinson (1999), Abur-Rahman (2007).

David may have well escaped the heterosexist expectations of his father and the American culture for a while, but this escape costs him the one thing that he is so keen on protecting: his innocence.

Baldwin's characters do not fully comprehend the various racial, sexual and economic dynamics they are enmeshed in – Jacques and Guillaume are protected from the consequences of their actions to a large degree respectively through their wealth and citizenship, and David has the option of leaving France and returning home. The only character in the novel who realizes how complicated and precarious his position can actually be is Giovanni. At the mercy of Frenchmen for employment and money, and David for hope for a future, Giovanni soon becomes the emotional center of the novel, on whose vulnerable person Baldwin explores the extent of the abjection and the negation a racial and sexual other can experience. Perhaps it is through this precarious position that Giovanni is able to cultivate a self-awareness that David (until the very end) lacks.

As disillusioned as he may be by the vicious and sexually exploitative gay scene in Paris and as much as he feels like he does not belong in that setting, from a distance Giovanni manning the bar is a vision. Both David and Jacques are struck by his aura of authority, and his captivating presence when they first see him in Guillaume's bar:

Jacques was aware, I was aware, as we pushed our way to the bar – it was like moving into the field of a magnet or like approaching a small circle of heat – of the presence of a new barman. He stood, insolent and dark and leonine, his elbow leaning on the cash register, his fingers playing with his chin, looking out at the crowd. It was as though his station were a promontory and we were the sea. (27-8)

David's description of Giovanni merits close attention – what he finds attractive about Giovanni is his command of the entire room, his “dark” and animalistic masculinity. Giovanni is no Bachir following Gide's Michel in the streets of Biskra with dog-like docility; he is, rather, through his darkness which connotes his foreignness and his aloofness, the sexual focal point of the room, a magnet beckoning onlookers to get closer. Despite the aura of authority granted to Giovanni, however, the way David and Jacques register his presence nonetheless evokes a certain sense of exoticism. This singular image of Giovanni, executed with precision, is what makes Giovanni's vulnerability in the later chapters so poignant – we see him first at the apex of this underground world; from here, he can only fall.

A certain shyness takes hold of both David and Giovanni as they converse for the first time at the bar. David feels embarrassed to be seen with Jacques, who is acting in a foolishly predatory manner, and Giovanni seems “boyish” (36) as he speaks of Italy and how warm its people are in comparison to Parisians. This narrative is no coincidence – the shyness connotes a sense of innocence, which later becomes a central theme to Giovanni and David’s relationship. David is no stranger to sexuality; he has a girlfriend, Hella, and a youthful encounter with a black boy in New York from his teenage years. He is, however, nonetheless quite uneasy about the subject – when he thinks of Hella, he thinks of the “peculiar innocence and confidence” (5) of their nights together and how those nights were “so delightful, so unrelated to past, present, or anything to come” (5). What David fears is the responsibility that comes with entering into a sexual relationship with someone. His American upbringing has left a Puritan streak in him that makes it hard for him to embrace the complications of adult relationships, and which ultimately makes it impossible for him to accept his homosexuality. The memory of the night he spends with Joey, the black boy in New York, torments him constantly. When he wakes up next to Joey after their one and only night together, he feels a sudden sense of alienation from the body that he had desired the previous night:

I would have touched him to wake him up but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid. Perhaps it was because he looked so innocent lying there, with such perfect trust; perhaps it was because he was so much smaller than me; my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy*. I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists, The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. (8-9)

Joey becomes the embodiment of David’s fears – he is both David and David’s abject other. He constitutes David’s past – a past that will tirelessly be rehashed once David begins his relationship with Giovanni. It is through Joey’s memory that David begins to comprehend the consequences of his actions for Giovanni and it is again through Joey that he acknowledges (though not accepts) his homosexuality. In Joey’s body, he sees the possibility of losing his masculinity, which he assumes is the keystone of his identity. The dark cavern of Joey’s body is reminiscent of the dark past David has trouble facing, and the

light imagery associated with Giovanni throughout the novel. Lights and reflections appear in moments of reflection and defeat; at times it is the fading glimmer in Giovanni's eyes, and at times it is the solemn reflection in a train window that tells us more about how both David and Giovanni's identities are formed despite and fight against the stifling darkness of the world around them. What self-awareness David manages to muster about his own identity in the final moments of the story, he does so through facing his own past and gazing at the image of himself reflected in the window:

I stand at the window of this great house in the south of France as night falls, the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life. I have a drink in my hand, there is a bottle at my elbow. I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past. (3)

This opening paragraph of the novel hints at the themes that Baldwin picks up throughout the story – the location of the house in southern France, which places David on the periphery of his life in Paris, and in close connection to Italy through his landlady; his reflection which finally becomes all the more clear as darkness surrounds him; his rigidness “like an arrow” that evokes both an inflexibility and defensiveness; and finally his whiteness that he must reconcile with the racial history of both his ancestors and his own life. In her analysis of David's homosexual panic and the moment of self-reflection it brings, Mae Henderson emphasizes the importance of this racial and personal guilt that helps construct David's subjectivity:

The literal reflection of his own image, along with the figurative reflection on events in the historical past which have brought him to his present personal dilemma, combine to fade into a more phantasmal reflection returning the narrator to a mythic national past: the darkness of David's vision and the complexity of his dilemma are fused with that of his ancestors. . . . The evocation of his ancestors identifies David's loss of innocence with America's, even at the moment of its incipency. Like his ancestors, whose violence and violation have claimed a continent and destroyed an indigenous people, David's emotional violence and moral violations have wrought destruction, not only to others, but to himself as well. . . . It is a moment of self-contemplation that constructs subjectivity as a site of

mediation between the present and the past, the personal and the historical, the self and the other.¹⁵

Despite being far from home, David can never escape his past – his father and the memory of his mother constantly plague him, and he has trouble letting go of the restrictive American morals he has been brought up with. He realizes, albeit belatedly, that the expatriate experience only gives him the illusion of freedom; home is embedded in his person, not his environment. He thinks, “perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition” (92) as he watches an American soldier out on the street. The soldier, who symbolizes the masculine, patriarchal gaze of American society, makes out David’s homosexuality, and David, spooked by the realization that he is so transparent, walks away, only to run into an American acquaintance, Sue, whom he promptly seduces almost as a retort to the knowing gaze of the soldier from home.

Much of David’s homosexual panic and shame is depicted through the outside gaze that bears down on him oppressively throughout the novel. He feels self-conscious when the men at Guillaume’s bar watch him “in order to discover, by means of signs [he makes], but which only they could read,” (27) when they witness the beginning of his relationship with Giovanni, (38) or when realizing something is amiss, Hella watches him closely. Hella’s gaze, in particular, which stands in for the heterosexual order, makes him feel immensely guilty. Feeling the deepening chasm between them, Hella finally yells at David, “I’ll soon be gone. Then you can shout it to those hills out there, shout it to the peasants, how guilty you are, how you love to be guilty!” (163-4). And indeed there is something pathological about David’s guilt; he refuses to let go of it, perhaps because it is the only thing that connects him to his life in America. As he keeps vigil at night in southern France, waiting for the morning that will bring with it Giovanni’s execution, he thinks, “It would help if I were able to feel guilty. But the end of innocence is also the end of guilt” (112). Despite these words, there is no indication whatsoever that David does not feel guilty. The state of his room in southern France, the tormented confrontations with his past memories

¹⁵ Mae G. Henderson, “James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man’s Estate,” in *Callaloo*, Vol. 23, No.1, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender: Literature and Culture (Winter, 2000), 315.

all point to a state of mind laden with grief, self-punishment and guilt. Even at the beginning of their relationship, David feels the weight of the conventional morality of his country. David cannot let go of his guilt about his sexuality – not even for Giovanni, whom he loves – because letting go of it would mean letting go of his innocence, of the identity he creates for himself the moment he decides to leave the bed as Joey sleeps peacefully.

The narrative of guilt in *Giovanni's Room* does not simply function on a personal level but on a racial and socio-economical level as well. While the issue of guilt is taken up on a very personal level throughout the novel, Baldwin nonetheless implies that much of David's guilt stems from his relatively privileged position as a white, American, and (at least to most outsiders) heterosexual male. His projected heterosexuality and financial situation allows him to disentangle himself from Giovanni and seek Sue's company, with whom he can perform his heterosexuality. Hella, too, remains accessible to him as long as he can keep up the façade of heterosexuality. His financial situation, though not stellar, still is good enough to allow him some mobility, and his status as an expat affords him the luxury of returning home on a whim. Giovanni, however, is deprived of all these exit routes – he cannot return home to Italy, nor can he make enough money to exist anywhere outside of the periphery of Parisian society. Above all, however, David feels an immense racial guilt, which bears down on him the moment he becomes aware of his white privilege. As he keeps vigil the night before Giovanni's execution, he thinks about his ancestors who "faced away from Europe into a darker past" (3). The awareness his country's and his race's violent history of slavery unsettles him, especially since he now realizes that he can be guilty not only for what he does but also what he does not to – that by abandoning Giovanni, he has become complicit in his destruction.

While his race and nationality allows David to walk away from Giovanni, from Europe and from the destruction he casts upon those around him at will, Giovanni's race forever confines him to the marginalized spaces of society. When he is charged with Guillaume's murder, his race and his status as an illegal immigrant – as opposed to David's tourist status, for instance – immediately place him in a position of immense disadvantage and most likely account for the severity of the punishment accorded to him. Left to defend himself against Guillaume, without emotional or financial support, Giovanni tries to escape rape with the only advantage he has – physical strength. After Giovanni is condemned to

certain death, David must finally face and try to come to terms with the reality of his (white, American) identity.

While at times problematic, David's white, American identity is, for the most part, allowed to flourish and find a space (both metaphorical and physical) for itself. Baldwin explores the dynamics of queer identity formation in exile through the central image of the novel – that of Giovanni's room. The room functions on several levels – it is at once a kind of a closet wherein David and Giovanni's relationship is confined, a physical and psychological plane that makes manifest their struggle to create and recreate their own existence and identity, and a liminal space at the periphery of Paris and the hegemonic culture they are excluded from. As limiting as it may seem to be, the room is meant to be a locale of transformation, a space that David could replicate within his own self. Just as home is not a place but an irrevocable condition, the room becomes every room David has ever been in and every room he finds himself in thereafter. (85) David and Giovanni's challenge – as foreigners, as gay men – lies in managing to reconstruct this room, to take "Giovanni's regurgitated life" (87) that the room bears witness to, and to transform it into a habitable place:

I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's, must first become a part of Giovanni's room. (88)

At least, this is what David convinces himself he is expected to do. He assumes that the messiness of the room is something that needs ordering, the dirt something that needs cleaning. He picks up the empty bottles, and plays at cleaning the house, but this is not the transformation that will save Giovanni – that, David withholds from him with deadly consequences. What Giovanni wants is David's acceptance of the room; of its conditions, of its position, and of their existence within it. By failing to recognize that Giovanni's space is also his, David abjects his lover, and distances himself from him.

David's obsession with innocence anchors him to the heteronormative sphere and prevents him from accepting the 'mess' of Giovanni's liminal existence. Giovanni, on the other hand, does not have the same illusions as David – he knows that one cannot remain clean and innocent, that to live is to "stink." He sees all too clearly that David's denial of his

emotions, his refusal to commit to Giovanni or any sense of identity is precisely what makes David not innocent:

“You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to *kill* him in the name of all your lying little moralities. And you – you are *immoral*. You are, by far, the most immoral man I have met in all my life. Look, *look* what you have done to me. Do you think you could have done this if I did not love you? Is *this* what you should do to love?” (141)

David is stuck between conflicting identities – if he wants to hold on to his American identity, he must adhere to its strict moral codes; but if he wants to stay true to his sexual identity and be with Giovanni, then he must let go of the moral codes of his own country, and to accept that he may forever be in exile. The irony is that while in America, all David wants to do is to get away from his father’s gaze and expectations, and to walk away from the patriarchal values of his society. It is in relocating to Paris that he feels just how much he has internalized those sensibilities that he runs away from:

David’s immersion into the Parisian *demimonde* has as much to do, then, with his desire to understand himself as *not* dirty, as *not* vulnerable, and, indeed, as *not* homosexual as with any real affinity for the people by whom he finds himself surrounded. (Reid-Pharr, 129)

It is only through a contrast with the Parisian gay underground that David can truly construct his heterosexual masculinity. The people and the locales around him serve as an affirmation of his difference, not his belonging:

Most of the people I knew in Paris were, as Parisians sometimes put it, of *le milieu* and, while this milieu was certainly anxious enough to claim me, I was intent on proving, to them and to myself, that I was not of their company. I did this by being in their company a great deal and manifesting toward all of them a tolerance which placed me, I believed, above suspicion. (22-3)

Here the self and the other dynamic that informs Said’s work is quite apparent: David can only reaffirm his own heterosexuality through the backdrop of the Parisian homosexual culture, which, by virtue of being entirely different from what David envisions himself to be, allows him the illusion that he has managed to cultivate such a solid heterosexual identity that the queer environment around him can have no effect on it whatsoever.

This illusion, of course, is torn apart quickly enough when David meets Giovanni. His growing interest in the Italian man positions him on the margins of the heterosexual

order, and renders him an “other” once again. Now he is not just an American in Paris, or a gay man in America but both at once. The double-otherness he encounters in either sphere of his life – as a gay American and as an American gay – places him amid two impulses that are impossible to reconcile fully. When she returns from Spain, Hella says to David, “I should think that even if you returned here in some awful sorrow, you might – well, you might find it possible here to begin to be reconciled” (120). This may hold true for Hella, who does, after all, find the strength to leave David and start over, but for David, a reconciliation with his own conflicting identities, his past and the consequences of his actions is impossible. At the end of the novel, when he rips Jacques’ letter informing him of the date of Giovanni’s execution and tosses the pieces away, the wind blows them back on him, signaling that David can never really walk away from Giovanni’s death.

David (perhaps naively) sets out to find a place, and by extension, an identity for himself in the world, but he scarcely realizes that his identity must always be in negotiation with his location. His American background, his homosexuality and his position as an expat in Paris demand that he inhabit multiple positionalities at once – a feat that proves impossible for David. In her analysis of the role of home and physical space on identity formation, Kathleen Drowne argues that Paris functions as an alternate space wherein David can explore his homosexual identity:

For more than a year Paris itself functions as David’s alternate space, offering him a homeplace that seems preferable to the places he associates with his WASP background. But David’s repressed homosexuality won’t stay repressed forever, and as his attraction for Giovanni grows and deepens, so too does his need to find other places of refuge that will save him from the sexual longings he most dreads in himself. (Drowne, 76)

While it is certainly true that Paris serves as a space of exploration for David where he can be free of the limitations of his own culture, and certain parts of it become spaces of refuge; it is still not an altogether freeing and reconciliatory place for David. As much as his love for Giovanni may grow, his own homophobia and fear of remaining in the margins of society rears its head, turning the once alluring and liberating Parisian landscape into a locale of abjection in which David wants no part.

Perhaps this is why after the debacle with Giovanni, David travels to southern France to stay in the country, away from the sexually charged environment of Paris. While

David's sojourn is still within the borders of France, the country house is nonetheless associated with Italy through the French-Italian landlady. David's escape from Paris and from his relationship with Giovanni, then, proves futile, as he ends up in a domestic and Italian space, which is exactly where Giovanni himself has come from. The traditional tendency to fetishize the south and impose upon it certain sexual and moral characteristics¹⁶ is somewhat subverted through this space in which Baldwin positions David. While throughout the novel there is a certain Italian narrative that Giovanni is quick to distinguish, the south (in this case, Italy) functions on both a traditionally orientalist level and a subversive level which turns around the suppositions about the moral qualities of the north versus the south. When David and Giovanni first meet, David offhandedly remarks that the French say "that the Italians are too fluid, too volatile, have no sense of measure" (36) betraying an alliance with the clichéd assumptions about Italy. Indeed, the way Jacques and Guillaume treat Giovanni as though he is merely a foreign body on which they can play out their fantasies and discard when they no longer need him, creates a discourse very much in line with the orientalist tendency to view the eastern (or southern) body as a vessel for enacting western fantasies.¹⁷

Contrary to Jacques and Guillaume's suppositions, and to the binaries enacted in works like Gide's *The Immoralist* and Mann's *Death in Venice*, however, Baldwin's south is depicted as a locale where the traditional values reign supreme. By reconstructing the south as a space of traditional family values rather than rampant sexuality, Baldwin subverts the north/south orientalist discourse. If the south takes on the hegemonic and patriarchal values of family and morality, it is then the north (namely, Paris) that must take

¹⁶ For a detailed explanation of the function of the south as an oriental other to the north, and orientalism within a single country, see Jane Schneider's *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1998). Briefly, Schneider argues that in Italy the south was constructed as morally inferior and sexually, financially and culturally exploitable locale by the more industrial, urban north.

¹⁷ In his book *Black Gay Man*, Robert Reid-Pharr takes this a step further by arguing that Giovanni's body not only becomes an object on which others play out their orientalist fantasies, but Giovanni himself becomes "simply a creature of his body, a creature of sex and desire, by which other men are able to gauge their own humanity." The emphasis on humanity is significant considering the way Guillaume later becomes the embodiment of a noble French history after Giovanni murders him.

on the role of the decadent and immoral other. In Baldwin's formulation, no one gets away with clean hands. Giovanni's Italy, where life is "dripping and bursting and beautiful and terrible" (138) and is full of wine, babies and simplicity, markedly differs from the morally loose and sexually decadent Italy depicted by traditional literary canon. Rather, it emerges as a space of innocence and traditional family values that neither Giovanni nor David can partake in:

Everyone, after all, goes the same dark road – and the road has a trick of being most dark, most treacherous, when it seems most bright – and it's true that nobody stays in the garden of Eden. Jacques' garden was not the same as Giovanni's of course. Jacques' garden was involved with football players and Giovanni's was involved with maidens – but that seems to have made so little difference. Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember count madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare. (25)

David, who cannot let go of his garden of Eden, is constantly plagued by the loss of his innocence. Jacques and Guillaume, on the other hand, have already forgotten and they despise David's preoccupation with innocence, and Giovanni's actual innocence despite the fact that by being in exile, Giovanni is effectively outside his own garden of Eden. The country house in southern France can offer no solace to David – it represents, through the Italian landlady, Giovanni's garden. When David looks upon his landlady, he sees Giovanni's mother, and is wrecked with guilt from the destruction he has cast upon her son. When he attempts to make himself a place there, he can only reproduce his existence in Paris: He does not take the master bedroom but rather settles in the smaller side room, which is untidy, with "the light burning, [his] bathrobe, books, dirty socks, and a couple of dirty glasses, and a coffee cup half full of stale coffee" sprawled around (69-70) – a perfect replica of Giovanni's room. And it is in this replica of Giovanni's room that David faces the morning of Giovanni's execution. The flaming sword is ever present for David, who can neither hope to regain his innocence, nor forget about it entirely. The only hero in the novel, perhaps, is Giovanni: he has certainly not forgotten his garden of Eden – his stillborn child, the possibility of building a life with a country girl – but he has managed to let go of

it in order to build himself a life in Paris, to fall in love with David, and to embrace his sexuality even when it has placed him on the margins of society, in a space that is filthy and tormented. Despite his circumstances, Giovanni never gives up on remodeling the room and creating a space for himself and he does not hide behind a set of moralities like David does to justify his actions – it is only when he loses control of his body, the one thing he cherishes, that he is pushed to murder Guillaume:

It is not that Giovanni simply despises his flesh. On the contrary, he loves his flesh. It is the *idea* of his flesh, or rather, the fiction that his flesh represents, that he so despises. He wishes to make love again, but only with his body, a body onto which others will no longer project notions of either filth and bestiality or respectability and autonomy. (Reid-Pharr, 129)

The sanctity of his body is destroyed when Guillaume rapes him in an act of not only sexual violence but also a racial and socio-economic one. Indeed, Baldwin makes it clear that Guillaume occupies a place of supreme authority with respect to Giovanni by merely being a French citizen. When they first meet, Guillaume tricks Giovanni into going out with him by subtly threatening to make a scene in public by accusing him of stealing his scarf; and when he fires Giovanni for refusing to have sex with him, he does so in such an ambiguous manner and in front of all the patrons of the bar, that Giovanni has no choice but to leave quietly if he wishes to avoid the police. It is clear, therefore, that Giovanni's nationality and his socio-economic status are what leave him vulnerable to Guillaume's advances and that ultimately set the tone for the murder trial coverage in the newspapers:

It was fortunate, therefore, that Giovanni was a foreigner. As though by some magnificently tacit agreement, with every day that he was at large, the press became more vituperative against him and more gentle towards Guillaume. It was remembered that there perished with Guillaume one of the oldest names in France [. . .] It is perhaps not as incredible as it certainly seemed to me, but Guillaume's name became fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly became, indeed, a symbol of French manhood. (150)

Because of Giovanni's nationality, the murder ceases to be an internal strife in the gay community, but quickly becomes an attack against France itself. Despite being on the margins of French society himself, Guillaume is immediately aligned with the hegemonic order by virtue of his name, and is absolved of any wrongdoing, whereas Giovanni is vilified by the press and presented as the violent, abject foreigner.

According to Julia Kristeva, the abject is that which falls outside of the symbolic order, that which is at once repulsive and seductive, and that which, ultimately, functions through blurring the boundary between the subject and the other.¹⁸ Kristeva proposes that confronting the abject is almost always traumatic in that the viewer is not merely confronting an “other” but something that is a part of his/her own self. Seeing a corpse, for instance, is jarring because a corpse is a former subject, and it reminds the spectator subject of his/her own fatality. The abject (object) is used to perpetuate the spectator’s place within the symbolic order, which is constitutive of identity, and to reaffirm his/her existence. Abjecting something or someone, then, is a way of casting them out of the hegemonic order and imposing on them certain qualities that are undesirable.

A novel dealing with exile and expatriation, center and periphery, *Giovanni’s Room* is full of confrontations with the abject. Giovanni’s room in the periphery emerges as a space of abjection, while an encounter with a drag queen repulses David to the point of describing her as a corpse:

Now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie – this was the first, overwhelming impression – of something walking after it had been put to death. And it walked, really, like someone who might be sleepwalking or like those figures in slow motion one sometimes sees on the screen. It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness. (38-9)

Not only does David invoke a narrative of death and decay but he uses the neuter pronoun “it” in referring to the drag queen, thereby rendering her not a human being but an object. The dehumanizing approach David has is in fact a way of positioning himself outside of the queer culture that he encounters in Guillaume’s bar. The abject queen is, however, anything but dead: it is through her presence and her words that David is confronted with the reality of his existence. She says, “You will be very unhappy. Remember that I told you so” (40). The abject, in Baldwin’s novel, emerges as the singular voice of truth – in fact, it is only the abject that can really discern David’s self-deception.

The most prominent abject other in the novel, however, is Giovanni himself. Always left in the periphery of Parisian culture, and confined to liminal spaces, Giovanni is

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 2-3.

abjected by French society and by David alike. He jokes that all the garbage of the city is in his room and perhaps he is right – his room in the outskirts of the city serves as a metaphor for the marginalized spaces where the abject are exiled to. Even during the best times of their relationship, David hates the room. He feels he does not belong (though he is quick to think when he first meets Giovanni, that Giovanni does belong to Paris, and by extension to the place Paris can afford him) and always refers to the room as Giovanni’s room – never ‘their’ room. By refusing to refer to the room as such, David effectively distances himself from Giovanni and Giovanni’s position as a marginalized foreigner in Paris. It is once again Giovanni, the abject, that confronts David and his hypocrisy:

You want to be *clean*. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap – and you do not want to *stink*, not even for five minutes, in the meantime [. . .] You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. (141)

The stink is the stink of life, the stink of abjection. It is a stigma that David wants to run away from, something that would mark him as outside of the heterosexual, hegemonic realm, and as a part of Giovanni’s world. David thinks that by divesting himself of the material reminders of his sexuality and the physical environments it can be expressed in (the bar, Giovanni’s room) he can get rid of the emotional burden it brings. As the state of David’s room in southern France proves, however, this can never be the case.

Both David and Giovanni must construct their identities through a constant negotiation of the racial, cultural and sexual spheres they inhabit. David experiences this negotiation through his attempts at reconciling his American identity with his homosexual one; while Giovanni has to navigate the complexities of being an Italian working-class gay man at the mercy of the French *milieu* in order to make a living. Baldwin locates his characters in an intersection of race, sexuality and class, which determines their position within the social order. As Mae Henderson puts forth in her “James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man’s Estate,” Baldwin explores “the homosexual dilemma as one of expatriation, or exile – from nation, from culture, from body.”¹⁹ This experience of exile is vastly different for David and Giovanni who occupy different socio-economical spheres.

¹⁹ Henderson, 314.

David's search for identity is imbued with his struggle to reconcile what it means to be an American with what it means to be a gay man. Giovanni, however, wages an entirely different battle as he tries to retain his human dignity in the face of financial circumstances that force him to use his sexuality in order to survive.

David's sense of self is so intertwined with his nationality that even though he has moved to France to get away from the conventional morality of his own culture, he cannot entirely let go of his American-ness:

When Giovanni wanted me to know that he was displeased with me, he said I was a "*vrai américain*"; conversely, when he was delighted, he said that I was not an American at all; and on both occasions he was striking, deep in me, a nerve which did not throb in him. And I resented this: resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called not an American because it seemed to make me nothing. (89)

David can fit into Giovanni's world insofar as he can let go of his national sensibilities – being an American marks him as much too different (too privileged, at times) for Giovanni. In the end, home does prove an "irrevocable condition" for David, who, no matter where he is, cannot seem to belong to anywhere but America, and then again only marginally. It is in the shared Christian tradition that David can find a glimmer of hope and salvation from both his "troubling sex" (168) and his role in Giovanni's death. As he looks at the reflection of his body "trapped in [the] mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation," he realizes that though it may be "under sentence of death," "the key to [his] salvation, which cannot save [his] body, is hidden in [his] flesh" and he recites, in his mind, a verse from Corinthians:

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. (Corinthians, 13:11)

The verse is, quite appropriately, about growth and taking responsibility for your own faith formation in the church. David finally realizes that if he wants to be redeemed, he must grow up, and take responsibility for his own actions. The following verse (which Baldwin does not quote) is even more revealing: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (Corinthians, 13:12). The mirrors and glass reflections that David endlessly stare at throughout the novel come back now as a sign for his possible redemption – that the

reflection is dark and unclear now does not mean that it will be so forever. Considering Baldwin's past as a child preacher, I would argue that the only religious verse quoted in *Giovanni's Room* is highly significant. Aside from emphasizing a sense of growth and personal responsibility, the chapter it comes from is concerned very much with love. The original Greek word used by St. Paul in the chapter is *agape*, which connotes a giving love which does not expect anything in return, a sort of love that can be given even to the unlovable or the unappealing.²⁰ Despite having withheld his love from Giovanni, David now comes to realize that it is only through that same love that he can be redeemed, and that the key to that lies in the body. The novel, however, ends with the pieces of the torn letter from Jacques blowing back on David – Baldwin implies that that David cannot free himself from the guilt, and find redemption that easily.

Just as the spaces in *Giovanni's Room* serve as metaphors of the social positionalities of the characters, those positionalities may be interpreted as yet another layer of representation that explicates the black experience in America. Giovanni's body, through which the Frenchmen obtain their sexual and financial gains, becomes synonymous to the black body exploited sexually and financially through the dynamics of the American societal structures. While Giovanni's character serves as a way of elucidating the position of the racial and sexual other, Baldwin refuses to duplicate the orientalist binaries by presenting only the southern other as the subjugated and the oppressed persona of the novel. David is just as much of a metaphor for the black experience as Giovanni is – through his gradual breakdown and process of confronting his past, Baldwin creates a narrative that is just as intent on constructing David as an exiled other as it is on exposing the hypocrisy of David's constant othering of Giovanni by endlessly positioning him as a marked other both to his own culture and history, and to his own self. In the end, *Giovanni's Room* becomes a meditation on the fluidity and the instability of the self and the other narrative, and how each identity, whether at home or in a foreign country, is always already in exile.

²⁰ <http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/4613.htm> Last accessed: June 18, 2012.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Queer Literature and Orientalism: Subverting the Binaries

In this thesis I have attempted to analyze how the foreign locales the protagonists inhabit become spaces of self-discovery, sexual awakening and at times, reconciliation. The trajectory of my research explores the recurring orientalist dynamics in increasingly narrower geographical spaces: The self and the other binary is constructed in the Gide chapter through a confrontation between Europe and Northern Africa, in the Mann chapter through the internal orientalism within Europe as crystallized by the Germany versus Italy narrative, and finally in the Baldwin chapter through the multiple racial, socio-economical and cultural dynamics present in a single cosmopolitan European city. While it is certainly impossible to situate the intrapersonal tensions and struggles of these characters and their interactions with people around them entirely within an orientalist and colonialist framework, the carefully crafted eastern settings and images evoked by all three authors as well as the way the eastern element imbues the narratives merits consideration.

By way of conclusion, I would like to reiterate some of the shared themes and motifs utilized in these three works and specify the significance of their points of divergence from one another. As I have argued in the bulk of my thesis, the queer and the orientalist experiences converge in their inclination to employ narratives of travel, disease and nature versus culture. *The Immoralist* is perhaps the most explicit of the works analyzed in this thesis in incorporating these three motifs into a narrative of sexual awakening, as Michel fits the bill of the orientalist traveler *par excellence*. His scholarly background paves the way for a discourse of nature versus culture as he attempts to

reconcile his intellectual pursuits with his physical and emotional desires; and his journey to Northern Africa and his subsequent tuberculosis attack makes explicit the connection between exposure to foreign elements and his burgeoning homosexuality. Despite the blatantly orientalist setup of the novel underlined by Michel's positional superiority in the Northern Africa chapters, Gide ultimately succeeds in subverting the binaries he carefully employs in the first part of the novel. By shifting the setting to Paris, and then to southern France, and putting Michel in similar predicaments to the ones he faced abroad, Gide imports the binaries associated with the east versus the west divide into the heart of Europe, and exposes the hypocrisy of the way in which the east is othered. By repositioning the binaries of orientalist discourse to France, he implies that these seemingly rigid categories are in fact mere cultural constructions that cease to underpin the orientalist narrative once taken out of a racial and geographic context. Not only does Gide remind us that what is 'othered' and reviled in this projected image of the east is always already present in the west, but he also problematizes binaries within France by creating a queer narrative in both Paris and La Moriniere. The tropes he brings into the narrative – getting infected in the east, the sexual availability of the locals, the liberty to take advantage of the positionally inferior 'other' without repercussions – are one by one appropriated into a European context wherein the socio-economical dynamics of French society replicate the power dynamics that mark the interaction between France and North Africa, and ultimately imply that the attempts at confining certain sexual actions to the (geographical and social) margins are futile. To that end, in the final chapter of the novel, we see the queer character recount his story to his friends whom he has called to Tunis– not only has Gide brought the east into the west through the La Moriniere chapters, but he has also succeeded in bringing the west to the east, where the marginalized sexualities can, at last, speak.

In dealing with the same subject matter of sexual awakening, Mann takes a vastly different approach than Gide. *Death in Venice* is a more coded text than *The Immoralist*, and Aschenbach experiences his sexual awakening as a rising homosexual panic intertwined with the advent of cholera in the city and an intellectual crisis of vacillating between Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies. Aschenbach cannot resolve his intellectual dilemma as easily as Michel – who simply acknowledges a shift in his interests from history to bucolic poetry – but is tormented by his inability to reconcile his Apollonian and

Dionysian impulses. By formulating Aschenbach's sexual awakening in a discourse of Greek-model homosexuality, Mann attempts to position him vis-à-vis the Hellenistic tradition which constitutes the core of European culture, and despite its moral divergences, is beyond any serious reproach. Despite the morbid plotline of the novella, in which giving into the temptation of staying near the object of homosexual desire results in death, it would be far too naïve to assume that *Death in Venice* is merely a cautionary tale against homosexuality. Certainly, Mann does not use the narrative of disease as catalyst to rebirth and subsequent health as Gide does; but he does, nonetheless, ascribe a subversive role to the deathly influence from the east. While the cholera does kill Aschenbach in the end, it is by no means an insidious or unexpected death. Aschenbach is well aware of the risks of remaining in Venice, as are all the other inhabitants who attempt to keep the disease a secret. Mann uses the disease to bring forth a narrative of silent understanding and complicity in which the inhabitants of the city and Aschenbach take part, and by having the epidemic wreak havoc on the city and kill Aschenbach, he implies that no amount of silence or avoidance can make it simply go away. The disease, then, becomes an emblem of reality and inevitability of the force of nature; which can in turn be read as the destruction that can be caused by denying the existence of yet another reality of Mann's own life – his homosexuality. What Mann also inadvertently draws attention to, of course, is the proximity of the 'disease' western Europe fears – it is not in the Far East, or even in North Africa, but rather in Italy, as close to Europe as it can possibly be. In doing so, he also makes explicit the dynamic between northern Europe and the Mediterranean – a dynamic imbued with the very same self and other binary in orientalist discourse, and which becomes all the more apparent as the colonial era draws to an end. I must, however, note that Mann departs from Gide significantly in explicating homosexual desire – the desire in *Death in Venice* is spectatorial. While Aschenbach does have a very physically explicit dream, he never touches or comes close to Tadzio. He experiences his awakening entirely in his own mind, through imagined encounters, and ascribed meanings to chance encounters. This maneuver of carrying the sexual awakening entirely to a mental and intellectual sphere could potentially be read as a way of managing the homosexual desire and confining it to the private domain of Aschenbach's life. Perhaps we can then argue that Aschenbach's death becomes a commentary on the dangers of this closeted way of

experiencing one's sexuality, as well as a way of managing non-heterosexual desires in a morally conservative time and geography. I would argue, however, that either way the ending of the novel remains quite subversive to the more attentive reader – in Aschenbach's death, there is more a sense of a journey completed or an appeal to the reader to face his/her sexuality rather than a sense of punishment or moral judgment.

As geographically mobile as Gide and Mann may be, it is the only American author included in this thesis, James Baldwin, who brings the matter straight to the heart of Europe. By constructing an intricate web of cultural, racial and socio-economic differences, Baldwin refuses to adhere to any binary structures and instead creates characters that inhabit multiple positionalities within a single geographical space that is constantly being negotiated. While he takes up the motifs of travel and disease like Gide and Mann do, he reformulates them to reflect the multiple identities of his characters: Travel, in *Giovanni's Room*, turns into expatriation and exile, and ultimately is entirely subverted as Baldwin keeps reminding us that the physical location is of little importance. Disease manifests itself as the disorder and the mess in Giovanni's room – a mess, Baldwin is quick to point out, that is a natural part of life, desire and experiencing both honestly. Baldwin ends *Giovanni's Room* on a somber note – David's inability to accept and embrace his homosexuality results in Giovanni's death, and David must live with the guilt. Baldwin differs from Mann and Gide in terms of the message he sends to his readers. It is only through Giovanni's death that David can understand fully the consequences of his actions – a pattern that can be applied to the homosexual and the black experience alike. While Mann and Gide's novels focus on an attempt to negotiate the western European identity with a homosexual one, Baldwin, writing a couple decades after them in an era of a more variegated identity politics, pays attention also to the pangs of reconciling the American identity with its European roots and its history of racial violence, as well as class struggles between the privileged citizens of the nation-state and the immigrants and exiles trying to exist in the margins of the hegemonic and heterosexist order.

A transformation of the ways in which queer identity formation is depicted over the politically volatile and fast-changing decades of the 20th century is, of course, to be expected. As identity politics of various kinds come to the forefront with the (alleged) end of colonialism, the rise of the black civil rights movement and the increasing strength of the

gay rights movement as well as other social and political events that shape the landscape of how we construct our own identities and those of others; queer identity formation must also reposition itself vis-à-vis these new developments and find ways to negotiate the increasingly complex terrain of overlapping identifications that individuals choose or refuse to subscribe to. The arguments presented in this thesis are by no means exhaustive of the field of intersection between queer identity formation in literature and orientalism – or even exhaustive of all that can be said about the works in question – but they strive to take a stab at how orientalist discourse can set an influential backdrop for identity formation, and most importantly, how it can travel to non-oriental settings disguised as various other modes of exclusionary practice and marginalization.

To end with, I would like to take a step back from this very specific intersection of queer literature and orientalism that I have focused on, and to point out that consolidating multiple alterities and nonconformities of various levels of marginalization into a single narrative, in which the subversion of the ideology keeping one of them in the periphery might help empower the other, is in fact a method prevalent not just in literature but in a number of disciplines that deal with issues of identity. This propensity, which no doubt proves quite useful at times, manifests itself in the alliances struck between various civil and minority rights groups, through which one marginalized or oppressed group's struggle is intertwined with that of another. My aim, of course, is not to make a statement about the alliances between different social, ethnic, cultural or sexual minorities, but rather to suggest that the narrative structures, paradigm shifts and power dynamics that affect the characters in these novels very much have their equivalents and applications in real life and the analysis of the increasingly fragmented domain of identity politics and individual identity formation may in fact in due time reveal that we are all identities in exile.

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