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 **Aschenbach Crosses the Waters: Reading *Death in Venice* in America**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Aschenbach Crosses the Waters:
Reading *Death in Venice* in America**

Tobias Boes (bio)

The year 2012 marked the centenary of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*, one of the foremost examples of transnational literary modernism. The term "transnational" is admittedly much overused in contemporary criticism, but it applies perfectly in this case, for one of the great paradoxes of Thomas Mann's career is that although he was perhaps the most self-consciously "German" of all great modernist writers, he reached the height of his fame and influence only after he had been exiled from Hitler's Reich and had made a new name for himself in the United States.¹ Between 1933 and 1945, his books became increasingly difficult to obtain in his native country. At the same time, a new audience discovered his works in America, where the publisher Alfred A. Knopf advertised him as "the world's greatest living author," the Book of the Month Club distributed hundreds of thousands of his novels, and *Time* magazine put his image on the cover of its 11 June 1934 issue.² During these years, Mann arguably became the world's first author of what Rebecca Walkowitz has recently called "born translated fiction," stories written in the conscious knowledge that they would primarily be read in translation.³

Death in Venice of course predates this development; it was originally written in 1911 and first published in the pages of the *Neue Rundschau* in October and November 1912. Nevertheless, the novella played an instrumental role in building the American reputation of Thomas Mann, and a strong argument can be made that *Death in Venice*, if not "born translated," was at least "reborn translated" when Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter rendered it into English in 1928.⁴ Between 1930 and 1941, Knopf sold roughly 110,000 copies of Lowe-Porter's *Death in Venice*, most of them **[End Page 429]** as part of the anthology *Stories of Three Decades*. By contrast, Mann's German publisher S. Fischer had managed to move only about 80,000 copies of the novella during the two decades between 1912 and 1933.⁵ Nor did the influence of the Lowe-Porter edition wane after the end of the Second World War. At a time when Mann was still routinely vilified in his native country for his support of the American war

effort, *Death in Venice* made its way onto an increasing number of U.S. college syllabi. The work undoubtedly owed part of its initial popularity to the fact that its relative brevity and formal complexity made it ideal fodder for the text-immanent approaches pioneered by the New Critics, but its classicizing themes also meant that it transferred easily into the “Great Books” courses that became a common feature of college curricula during these decades.⁶ Starting in the late 1980s, a number of other translations of *Death in Venice* began to compete with the classic Lowe-Porter version, though they never quite displaced it. Astonishingly, there are currently no fewer than eight different English versions in print in the United States.⁷

This abundance of competing translations puts the lie to an argument that David Damrosch advances in *What is World Literature?:* namely, that Mann, unlike Kafka, is not particularly suited to be “reconsidered or retranslated” in order to accommodate changing audience expectations.⁸ It is certainly true that Mann, unlike Kafka, who ordered that his stories be burned after his death, began actively and successfully to shape his own reception from a very early age. But the success of the Lowe-Porter translation of *Death in Venice*, and especially the role that it played in advancing Mann’s career at a time when his fellow émigré modernists struggled against poverty and obscurity, suggests that “reconsiderations” and “retranslations” were a part of this process from the very beginning. Indeed, punning on the close linguistic relationship between the German verbs for “to translate” and “to ferry across” (they are heteronyms and share a common infinitive in *übersetzen*), we might point out that Aschenbach’s journey across the Venetian lagoon already is a voyage of self-translation: disembarking on the Lido, he is subtly yet profoundly altered...

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